

NORMAN MAILER AND PROVINCETOWN ARTS

C H R I S T O P H E R B U S A

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2008: NORMAN MAILER'S FINAL TAKE ON PROVINCETOWN

In the last year of his life, Mailer was moved to write an introduction to *Blue Nights: Photographs by George Hirose*, published by Provincetown Arts Press in 2008.¹ Mailer was enchanted by the ability of Hirose's camera to see color at night—by extending the time the lens is open to record the image. Long exposures can also steady fleeting glimpses, such as the blurred track of the moon across the arc of twenty minutes. In the dark, car headlights can become a pair of yellow parallel lines curving around a turn, the car invisible. Long exposures concentrate flashes of small illumination into a subtle sense of duration, an image comprising the record of long moments of looking, and somehow retaining the sensation of being in the moment, not looking after. Color, invisible to the naked eye in darkness, appears surreally before you in Hirose's photographs

Hirose and I spent various sessions with Mailer looking at photographs spread across the glassy surface of his large dining room table. Daylight poured in from the bumped-out bay windows fronting the waterfront. We moved large-format prints of the photographs around, discussing how pairings spoke to each other. Through sequencing and clustering, different moments in history could be evoked. Mailer remarked how “the blue of night spans past and present.” As the pages of the book grew, Mailer would suggest additional locales—a graveyard, a boat yard, a backyard, a dune shack isolated on the Back Shore. Both Mailer and Hirose were aware of the fa-

mous color photographs of Joel Meyerowitz, especially his classic *Cape Light*, capturing the hugeness of the Cape's irradiated daylight. Hirose wanted to reveal an equally large realm in darkness. The human eye cannot see color at night, but the camera, with minutes-long exposures, can. Mailer began his introduction:

I had an agreeable return of memory when I looked at these photographs. They brought back an exceptional walk on a night in Provincetown during my first visit in June of 1943, an occasion that was right after I finished senior year at Harvard. Having heard now and again about a unique village of fishermen at the tip of Cape Cod, I decided to celebrate there for a weekend. (v)

Mailer writes in some detail about the blackout that the war had imposed on the town. If the nights are darker without electricity, then a little light can reveal enormities. This preternatural "spookiness" provided Mailer with the scenic lighting he needed to highlight his gothic inclination toward drama. A gibbous moon is in the phase of its orbit when we see more than half the moon, neither full nor fading. In the last year of his life, Mailer recalled the altered darkness he experienced on a walk along Commercial Street: "That faint glow lay on the parchment of the window shades in those houses not completely unlit within. What prominence that gave to the pale illumination overhead. I do not know that I have ever been more aware of the presence of the moon. One's sense of time now seemed more sensitive to the past, so much so, indeed, that one could suppose oneself returned in some small measure to events gone long before one had entered one's own life" (v).

Mailer described how his hour-long reverie had at last become a Proustian memory, releasing floods of imaginative access, across geography and time. Mailer said he felt "endowed with a close intimation of what it might be like to live in New England then. I had received a gift. I now had some living idea of that colonial era when the roots of my country were first readying themselves for a mighty future" (v).

Indeed, the historicity of Provincetown possessed a special pedigree. It was not for nothing that Mailer once owned the house next door to John Dos Passos, where the author of the *USA Trilogy* had lived for thirty-five years, returning from trips abroad to write his books. In Provincetown, Mailer always sought to rent large homes, needing ample space to accom-

moderate his ever-expanding family. (Mike Lennon, Mailer's biographer, has counted thirty houses Mailer had occupied during his decades in Provincetown.) As the husband of six wives, Mailer was the father of even more offspring. His summer houses tended to cluster in the East End. Here, the leading artists and writers congregated, beginning in 1915 with Eugene O'Neill and the circle of the Provincetown Players. The town accustomed itself to many crossovers between playwrights, performers, painters, set designers, poets, reporters, and novelists. Summer after summer, Mailer came to Provincetown to write, foremost, but also engage in vivid social encounters that stimulated much excitement.

1999: AN INTERVIEW REVISITED

On a winter afternoon in 1999, the sun giving off wan light and little heat, Norman and I were strolling down Commercial Street talking about what we would talk about during the interview we would do the next day. We passed my family house, where my mother still lived, and I got a glimpse of my father's old studio, behind the house, which I helped build, and which, for summers in the sixties, Norman rented from my mother, where he wrote several books, including *Cannibals and Christians* and *A Fire on the Moon*.

Apropos of our forthcoming interview, just as we were about to climb a small incline, Norman cautioned me, "Just remember, I don't want to push a Cadillac up a hill." I knew he was needling me as an inexperienced "chauffeur," who may lack the "driving skills" needed to drive his "fine vehicle." But I simply said, "Oh Norman, don't worry. This interview is going to be about who loves Provincetown more—me or you."

I wanted to hear about Mailer's original interest in Provincetown, where he produced a great deal of his writing over his lifetime. Over the years, *Provincetown Arts* had run articles concerning his stay in the summer of 1946, after the war, when he rented a cottage on Beach Point, Truro, and wrote portions of the *Naked and the Dead*, using the detailed letters he had posted during the war from his platoon in the Philippines to his wife Beatrice Silverman. But, before the war, following graduation from Harvard in June, 1943, he had taken the ferry from Boston to Provincetown with Bea. The experience implanted in Mailer's imagination an idea for the mythic use of Provincetown as the first landing place of the Pilgrims, which he oddly converted from British refugees to American frontiersmen, renaming the town as the "Wild West of the East."²

The significance of this 1943 visit is that Mailer retained it in his imagination, returning to its memory by misremembering details, which he disclosed with such seemingly authentic detail that I did not catch until I had to check dates in writing this article. In the interview we did together for the 1999 issue, Mailer describes a train trip he took to Provincetown in 1942. Later, he describes a ferry trip he took in 1943. I could find no source for the supposed 1942 visit, so I wrote to Mike Lennon:

From Norman's own words in the '99 interview, he first came to Provincetown after his junior year in June 1942 with Bea for three days. They took a train from Boston, staying at a rooming house on Standish Street, near the railroad station. The next year, in July 1943, he came with Bea for a week. You write on page 56 of *Double Life*: "Two weeks after his graduation, Mailer and Bea took a ferry to Provincetown."

Lennon replied by email:

Norman and Bea came to P-Town in 1943, and then not again until after the war. He misremembers when he tells you in the interview that he came in 1942. I have his June 1943 postmarked postcard to his parents as proof (See *Selected Letters*, p. 14), and discussed it with him. And he took the ferry, as he states in a later letter to Bea. Not the train. Yes, I know there was a blackout; he mentions it in several interviews. The gibbous moon is correct. I checked the weather and phase of the moon.

My suspicion is that Mailer, who would prove to be a master of deception, was concerned that he was not married to Bea at the time they stayed together in the Provincetown rooming house. Yet Mailer, an advocate of free love, let it be an open secret that he was sleeping with Bea before marriage. Mike Lennon noted that Bea's mother talked about it. So by "deception," I mean rather to suggest the malleability of memory in Mailer's imagination, where autobiographical details function as "crystals"² of pure being that can be accessed repeatedly with new discoveries. Mailer's memory of two visits in one is a demonstration of his unconscious creative process. The link is Mailer's association of the town with sexual freedom and an escape from

ensorious scrutiny. He declares in our interview, “To have sexual freedom has always been terribly important to artists” (25). No doubt Mailer also associated Provincetown with the seaside resorts in New Jersey that he knew in his youth, where he would quietly escape to a room in his aunt’s hotel to write.

We did our interview under the apex of the attic on the third floor of the house. The roof slanted sharply over the desk. A large picture window, facing west, gave a panoramic view of the town—the houses along the harbor, the wharves, church steeples, and the Pilgrim Monument, which, in particular, Mailer uses in *Tough Guys* as a stone phallus, inspiring one character to attempt to scale it foot-and-hand up the granite blocks on the outside, before he is rescued by the fire department just below the gargoyles along the parapet that are blocking his ascent. Mailer’s use of the mountain in *Naked and the Dead* was a similar physical feature that became the literal symbol of Mailer’s metaphor. Mailer shows his genius for embedding metaphor with action to the degree that what one thing stands for is eerily identical to the thing it represents.

To one side of the desk was a ping pong table, minus the net, scattered with stacks of books, manuals, and photographs. On the other side was a mattress placed on the floor, bedding ruffled, as if, between bouts of writing, the author took time for vigorous dreaming. The sun was setting, and would have been blinding if Mailer had not pinned a thick drape over the window.

We talked knee to knee for two hours, Mailer’s mind working so fast that his answers came in a succession of 300-word paragraphs. From my years as a tennis player and Norman’s years learning the psychology of boxing, I knew that Norman and I were batting a verbal ball around, seeking to score verbal points, winning by playing, and losing by winning.¹

WRITING ABOUT ART

I was always curious why Mailer never seemed to get involved with issues of painting with painters. He lived next door to Robert Motherwell, yet never had a serious conversation with him about art. Mailer’s wife Adele was an artist, as was Norris later. For an exhibition of paintings by Norris Church at the Berta Walker Gallery in 1998, Mailer wrote admiringly of her painting *Leaving California* (1962), depicting a middle-aged tourist, fully clothed, wearing sunglasses and an optimistic smile, seemingly “bewildered” beside a highway running by a beach with a glimpse of the ocean beyond. We pub-

lished Norman's tribute to Norris and her depiction of the "bewildered" woman in our 1999 issue:

Fixed in all the interred time of a family snapshot . . . wholly unaware of the faint shadow of the sinister that rides along that outgoing American highway down which we travel for the rest of our lives, off on vacation, full of snapshots for which we posed that never told us where we were, and what the shadows had to say of that other highway, which winds beyond our means to the mortal mystery of our ends. (25)

Mailer's own forays into visual thinking were instructive to me. I had recently reviewed his "interpretative biography" *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*,ⁱ trying to fathom how Mailer looked at visual art. He recalled in his book how Picasso, as a schoolboy, had terrible confusions over the meaning of letters and numbers—how, for example, the letter "L," to Picasso, could seem to mean a man sitting and leaning against a tree. Mailer picked this up as the creative principle behind his soon-to-be-published collection of drawings *Modest Gifts*. Mailer forms faces using numbers for their features. A "5" could as easily serve to structure a man wearing a beret as well as the shape of a single ear.³

The crucial link for Mailer between the verbal and the visual are the very initial steps in mark making by both the visual artist and the author. This unconscious inclination gave a point of attack for entry into the personal originality that a doodle reveals as you make marks on a pad while talking on the telephone. Later, you can look at the doodle and understand what the conversation was all about. This is the fulcrum of Mailer's insight into Picasso:

One can ponder the concept. An artist's line in a drawing can be the equivalent of a spoken word or two. The bend of the fingers can prove equal to a 'dejected hand,' or the outline of the upper leg muscles speak of an 'assertive thigh.' No matter how one chooses to phrase it, artists, for centuries, have been painting specific objects, only to discover that they also look like something else. (59)

Mailer's exploration of Picasso began in the sixties when he signed a contract to write a book on the artist. The book never materialized; portions of long

self-dialogues between body and soul on the nature of the creative process were published in *Cannibals and Christians* (1981). The Picasso book appeared in 1996, immensely amplified in scholarly value by Mailer's own translation of the diaries of Fernande Oliver, Picasso's first serious mistress.

Mailer was fascinated by Cubism and its revolutionary power to alter perspective by collapsing time into conditions of simultaneity. If Henri Bergson is correct in saying that time is what keeps everything from happening all at once, perhaps spatial configurations can show multiple moments in a single glimpse. Mailer develops the idea that the Cubist search for universal form may have been driven by a desire to transcend sex. "Not all love affairs are carnal," Mailer writes. The four-subject portrait that is *Les Femmes d'Alger* was never resolved by Picasso. The artist could not satisfy himself. One feels in the dichotomies of the painting the tortured blending of the rock-like manliness of Gertrude Stein and the witch-like femininity of Fernande Oliver. Mailer's meditation on form thus leads him to a meditation on gender, inspired by Gertrude Stein, whom he says represents "the most monumental crossover in gender" that Picasso had ever encountered. With Fernande,

Picasso had entered the essential ambiguity of deep sex, where one's masculinity and femininity is forever turning into its opposite, so that a phallus, once emplaced within a vagina, can become more aware of the vagina than its own phallitude—that is to say, one is, at the moment, a vagina as much as a phallus, or for a woman, vice-versa, a phallus just as much as a vagina. At such moments, no matter one's physical appearance, one has, in the depth of sex, crossed over into androgyny. (207)

Mailer believed that writing about visual art did not lend itself to critical language, as writing about writing can. He told me in 1999,

To this day, I find most writing about art to be poetic explorations that depart very quickly from the experience of looking at the painting. The writer goes off on some inner collaboration with his or her own experience. The painting becomes like a distant object from which one is receding at a great rate in one's vehicle of metaphor. (30)

The vehicular metaphor no doubt is inspired by his knowledge of the rockets that recently took the astronauts to the moon.

**1987: LOOKING BACK—NORMAN MAILER AS
INAUGURAL ARTS COVER BOY**

Provincetown Arts, founded in 1985 by my partner Raymond Elman and myself, changed from a multi-season tabloid to a perfect-bound glossy annual in 1987.³ This inaugural year of our mature form featured Norman Mailer on the cover. Along his waist, like a belt, we printed his oracular words in gold script: “This is a town you could see yourself digging in and fighting for.” I used this for the title of an essay I wrote in 2008 for the *Mailer Review*, and what I offer here is a companion to that earlier piece.³

Provincetown Arts was born out of a desire to document creative activity in what has become recognized as the oldest art colony in America. Our first issue was published the month before my father died. He was an artist and person that I greatly admired and learned from. Keenly, I saw a role for the new generation in struggling to preserve what they value in the passing generation. Concentrating on art, writing, and performance, our publications blend cross-cultural dialogue between practitioners in related branches of the arts. Artists and writers featured in past issues include: Robert Motherwell, Annie Dillard, Stanley Kunitz, Mark Doty, Mary Oliver, John Waters, Eileen Myles, Alan Dugan, Sebastian Junger, Gail Mazur, Michael Cunningham, Nick Flynn, Robert Jay Lifton, Helen Miranda Wilson, Robert Pinsky, John Yau, and Jhumpa Lahiri, among others. Mailer is the only figure to have appeared twice.⁵

The 1987 cover photograph of Mailer was taken by Joel Meyerowitz, then a neighbor, summering over various years in houses on the water in the East End, the neighborhood also favored by Mailer. In 1979, Meyerowitz had published his seminal book of color photographs, *Cape Light*, using an antique eight-by-ten inch Deardorff camera, built in 1940, important to the photographer because that was the year he himself was born. Mahogany and brass, the contraption required a strong tripod to steady its bulky weight. The photographer was obliged to crouch behind the camera under a dark cloth to focus the lens in which the subject appeared upside down, inverted. If mirrors reverse things from left to right, lenses flip the bottom for the top. The large format and slow shutter speed absorbed great detail, creating an arresting image in rich, saturated color.

The day of the shoot was dense with gray fog, a moody day of the kind so well evoked in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Mailer's novel about Provincetown and the movie version's vistas of the bleak beauty of the Cape in the off-season, when all the tourists have left. Summer frenzy dissipates and autumn chills seep in. The streets are deserted and the bars, Mailer wrote in the novel, "put together people who might not necessarily associate with one another." Mailer, everywhere in his writing, found ways to put available extremes into intimate contact.

Standing outside on his deck for the photograph, Mailer placed his chin slightly above the camera lens, his head framed against a fog-filled sky ever so lighter in tone than the darker gray of the water. As if playing a part in his own movie, Mailer assumed his "tough guy" stance, arms crossed, and a kind of Clint-Eastwood squint in his mien.

Truly, the glimpse of his blue eyes were intensified in color, sharpened and piercing. The gray fog in the background took on a faint inflection of bluishness, an aura given off by Mailer's blue parka. For that reason, gray, a neutral, is called a "vampire color," adopting a ghost-like tint of an adjacent hue. The author seemed to emerge into clarity out of an engulfing cloud, manifesting primal force. Printed under the photograph on the cover, we quoted Mailer—"This is a town you could see yourself digging in and fighting for"—as if his words were the echo of our mission statement. The photograph, minus the quote, became one of Norman's favorites; an enlarged print hung in his Provincetown living room in the last years of his life and during the early meetings at Larry Shiller's Mailer Center. The *Boston Globe* praised our fledgling issue as a boost for the arts on the Cape; the copies we printed sold out before the summer was over. A stellar essay in the issue, "Dreaming in Public" by Susan Mitchell, voicing an eloquent aspect of the Provincetown aesthetic she shared with Mailer, was selected by Annie Dillard for *Best American Essays* (1988).

I first knew Mailer as a young boy growing up in Provincetown, the son of an artist, Peter Busa, who was friendly with Norman. When Mailer was married to Adele, who was an artist, the two had visited my father's studio. Later, Norman had bought a small painting that he gave to his new wife Beverly. I remember how pleased I felt to attend my father's retrospective exhibition at the Chrysler Art Museum in Provincetown in the late fifties when I was in my early teens. Norman came in with a few of his children, made introductions, and took time to look at details in the paintings. I wondered

what he would say about what he saw; it was dawning on me that one could learn to read a painting as one leaned to read a book. Mailer's manifest presence in Provincetown, blending easily with many dissimilar clusters of people, mixed with all levels of society. He was a familiar figure in the bars, at parties, and he nodded to neighbors while walking to pick up his morning copy of the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, or the *Washington Post*. He greeted passersby by name. All his life, the robust writer marched with a little lurch, even after hip surgery—maintaining a curiously graceful gait. The second time Mailer appeared on the cover in 1999 in a photograph taken by Renate Ponsold Motherwell, Mailer's neighbor, he was pictured traversing a tightrope strung across the waterside deck of that summer's rental.

In our inaugural issue, we had, against our will and sincere desire, deeply offended Norman. We published an interview with Peter Manso. Knowing of the Manso/Mailer fracas, my partner and I sat down at Manso's kitchen table in Truro to interview Manso, not as Mailer's enemy, but as Mailer's biographer. I felt rather like a referee between Ray Elman and Manso, since they were old friends, and Ray, like Peter's father Leo Manso, was an artist who circulated at local art events. Frankly, I did not feel that even the worst things Manso might say could damage Mailer, simply because Manso's theatrical hyperbole was so self-revealing of his identification with Mailer; his rants often erupted in our laughter. Unfortunately, I could not steer the interview into a discussion of Mailer's writing, so I declined to take a credit in the byline, and the piece "Tough Talk: A Conversation with Peter Manso," was published as edited by Raymond Elman.

Manso had been thinking of writing a biography of Mailer after serving in Mailer's campaign for mayor of New York and after editing *Running Against the Machine*, a collection of Mailer's position papers and speeches published in 1969. Manso also began to mimic Mailer's mannerisms, such so that Joe Flaherty, in his book about the campaign, describes Manso as "Mini-Mailer." Manso had also taught in the English Department at Rutgers University, having been fired the year before I arrived as a graduate student, for instigating a revolt among undergraduates, which failed to succeed. At Rutgers, I pursued a PhD in English, writing, but not revising, a dissertation on D. H. Lawrence. My advisor was Richard Poirier, who had just published his acclaimed monograph on Norman Mailer for the Viking Press. Our history was rather entwined.

Manso first met Mailer in the summer of 1958 when he was seventeen, he told us in the interview. Manso zeroed in on class differences, evident in Mailer's writing about saints and psychopaths, but also socialites with no writing credentials, such as Oscar de la Renta, Donald Trump, and the bizarre financial support of Roy Cohn. Over years, Manso amassed interviews with over 200 individuals who had known Mailer, including his mother and sister. Manso chose not to focus on Mailer's books, but on his bluster, as if his public persona was a superior creation than the words produced sitting at his desk. "This is not a book about a man who sits at a desk," Manso said, "because this guy's always engaged—an existential phenomenon, not a bookish writer" (24).

Mailer's family and Manso and his partner had been cohabitating in the big brick house at 627 Commercial Street. That domestic arrangement ended abruptly upon publication of Manso's book—an abrupt, most bitter end. Wounding insults flew in all directions, amplified as a raucous laughter that echoed for weeks in the bars. *Provincetown Arts* was caught in the firestorm. So we were profoundly shocked when Mailer said in a newspaper article that he had "lost all respect for us" by publishing the Manso interview. Not only did Manso and Mailer no longer sleep under the same roof, but they had become, as Mailer said in a letter to the local newspaper, "confirmed enemies." To seal the coffin, a new edition of Manso's biography came out in 2008, with a preposterously long afterword written by Manso. I reviewed it for Amazon.com:

I read Manso's oral biography when it first came out in 1985, smitten by the matrix of competing testimony that somehow balanced out the extremes, and made Mailer seem alive, animated with ambiguity, endearing in his flaws, and audacious in his ambition. Now, in this new edition, Manso has added an afterword, detailing the breakup of their friendship and working partnership. He has lost all sight of Mailer as a subject of biography. In sixty pages of unfocused anger, he attacks the very people who were crucial to Mailer's life since Manso's account ended. He gives us a picture of the great author as a desperate to keep his name before the public with a series of what Manso calls "non-books," ignoring the accomplishments of key books written after their breakup, including *Gospel According to the Son* and

Castle in the Forest. He badmouths Mailer's biography of Picasso as a plagiarism of John Richardson. His screed is especially mean-spirited toward the very people Mailer drew around him in his last years: Larry Schiller, J. M. Lennon, and his wife. Toward Norris, he is most poisonous, willfully distorting each positive attribute into a hideous caricature. I felt a flush of shame pass across my face, shame that Manso should fall so low as to rage against the man he so admired. In the afterword, Manso also belittles *Provincetown Arts*, the magazine I edit, saying that I rejected an excerpt for his 2002 book *Ptown: Art, Sex, and Money on the Outer Cape*. Indeed, I did, but not, as Manso said, because I wanted to make cuts unacceptable to him, but rather because Manso came over to my house and demanded that I put his name in a banner across the logo on the magazine's cover, saying that *Vanity Fair* did so when his Marlon Brando biography came out. The cover feature that year was Sebastian Junger, author of the *Perfect Storm*, and Manso said, "I'm as famous as Junger—I want equal billing!" Mailer's egotism possesses charm, Manso's arid self subsists on its own festering bile.

In structuring his oral biography, Manso refused to act as an intermediary in deciphering the sense of scenes depicted, letting contradictions stand side by side. He pursued a philosophy, he said, perfected by the CIA, in taking the lies of three spies and locating the truth somewhere equidistant from the artful deceptions of each. The eminent biographer of Henry James, Leon Edel, discussed the value of oral biographies, such as Manso's and George Plimpton's oral biography of Edie Sedgwick, in an interview in the *Paris Review*: "They are like film documentaries or collages. They are distinctly cinematic and vivid, but the evaluating eye of the biographer, screening the testimony, is absent." Meaningful words can offer explanations and nuance, only implicit in pictures that suggest a thousand unwritten words.

Before we published our interview, Ray and I attended a party at the Provincetown home of Lewis Bergman, who then was the editor of the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Present were writers, artists, gourmet cooks, magazine models, and tennis players. Stanley Kunitz and Jack Tworokov were immediate neighbors and were present with their wives. So was E. J. Kahn Jr., staff writer for the *New Yorker* and Truro summer resident. He wrote about

an incident at the party in his book *Year of Change: More about the New Yorker and Me*:

At the Lewis Bergman cocktail party, I complimented Renate Ponsold on a striking-looking black object pinned to her breast, which I take to be some kind of exotic jewelry. No, she says, it is a device—not unlike, perhaps, Hopi’s pulsating flea collar—to repel mosquitoes. Chris Busa takes Stanley Kunitz and me aside, out of Norman Mailer’s earshot, to ask if we think Chris and Ray should let Norman see proofs of a Peter Manso interview with Mailer they’re about to run in their *Provincetown Arts*. We both urge them not to; Mailer is, has made himself, a public character and has given evidence over and over that he can take care of himself when offended. If Chris and Ray checked for libel—they have—that would seem enough. (158)

In time, Mailer’s anger abated, and he said to me, “We don’t have to talk about it.” Certainly, if all the cells in the human body completely renew every seven years, then Mailer had renewed himself several times since we so innocently offended him in 1987.

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