

*Robert Kelly*  
**Collaborations**  
& experiments in translation

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*with*

*Brigitte Mahlknecht*

*Friedrich Hölderlin*

*Birgit Kempker*

*P. B. Shelley*

*Schuldt*

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SPECIAL EDITIONS

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On three occasions in recent years McPherson & Company has been invited by international counterparts to “co-edition” special publications by Robert Kelly. With the third of these books—*Shame*, which we are announcing here—it became evident to us the true extent of Kelly’s project, as well as the need to reveal it through a special catalogue. The fact is that the range and scope of these books together constitute a remarkable project, which may be seen as an answer to and extension of similar projects carried out by three precursors, Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, and Paul Blackburn. Each made a central feature of his poetics an attempt to counteract the static provincialism that dominates so much of American poetry—Pound by incorporating the Chinese ideogram, Zukofsky through homeophonic translation of Catullus, Blackburn with brilliant translations of Provençal poetry into American vernacular. Kelly’s approach has been equally international, but has involved more active collaboration with living artists, even to the extent of redefining and extending some of the boundaries of cross-genre collaboration, inasmuch as his poetics has more to do with transmitting to the reader a process or event than with projecting a correlative object or linguistic iconography. If Kelly’s poetry is the journey, not the destination, it is a following-through that is complexly intimate, involving by extension the full collaboration of the reader.

Robert Kelly’s book collaborations explore new forms of poetry and intertextuality while challenging ideas of authorship and originality. They began some years ago when Kelly wrote ‘into’ or ‘through’ poems or stanzas by Shelley, Whitman, and Crane. (The long poem *Mont Blanc*, based on Shelley’s poem, was published in 1994 by OtherWind Press.) Soon afterward he rendered Hölderlin’s long poem “Am Quell der Donau” into homeophonic English (translating the music not the sense à la Zukofsky), but then inviting the German literary provocateur Schuldt into a “co-elaboration” of the text which became *Unquell the Dawn Now*. For *The Garden of Distances* he collaborated with a visual artist, Brigitte Mahlknecht, to create a book intended to be “one text in two genres.”

Kelly's new book is an "epistolary" text created with the German poet Birgit Kempker: a series of exchanges which attempt to bridge barriers of language, gender, age, nationality, and otherness. What's more, *Shame* lays bare levels of personal identity which language seems almost to have been invented to conceal. It may be the most challenging of Kelly's collaborations to date; in any case, the form it assumes as a book is beautifully complex and intriguing.

This catalogue coincidentally allows us to celebrate Robert Kelly's 70th year, but rather than simply provide our own descriptions and the usual encomia of these very unusual books, we have invited the poet to relate his thoughts on collaboration generally and these collaborations specifically. The result is a group of short texts being published here for the first time which provide at least a glimpse of his working methods and intentions. In addition, several of his peers and colleagues remark on these books.

We extend our grateful appreciation to the originating publishers—Steidl in Germany, Per Procura in Austria and Italy, Urs Engeler in Switzerland, as well as to OtherWind Press in Ann Arbor, which has made it possible for us to offer *Mont Blanc* as a gift to customers. We also deeply thank Robert Kelly's partners in collaboration—Brigitte Mahlknecht, Birgit Kempker, and Schuld.

—Bruce McPherson, October 2005

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*Shame* explores a feeling both hidden and revealed by language. The book is a correspondence chronicling the slow reddening as shame flushes through us: a feeling, a past, a denial . . . seduction by revelation

we take on color from what we feel

we are ashamed, we try to be chameleons, to hide in the other.

These letters are like strange love letters between people who don't know each other at all—

trying to explore the other by exploring the self,

each author takes turns in risking, to dig up undisclosed spaces of description, provocation and whimsy, to hide in the other person's language,

*Shame* tries to say what can only be said in nobody's language.

This book is an encyclopedia of mistakes, an opportunity to speak about not speaking, an anthology of excuses.

How to understand not understanding, the language we live in.

The running monologues on shame turn alternately toward, then away, from each other.

Maybe they are ashamed of their ideas, of their realizations, wrongdoings, achievements, desires and denials,

but always trying to do right by the other person's words,

defining the feeling of not wanting to feel, not wanting to remember,

hiding in translation,

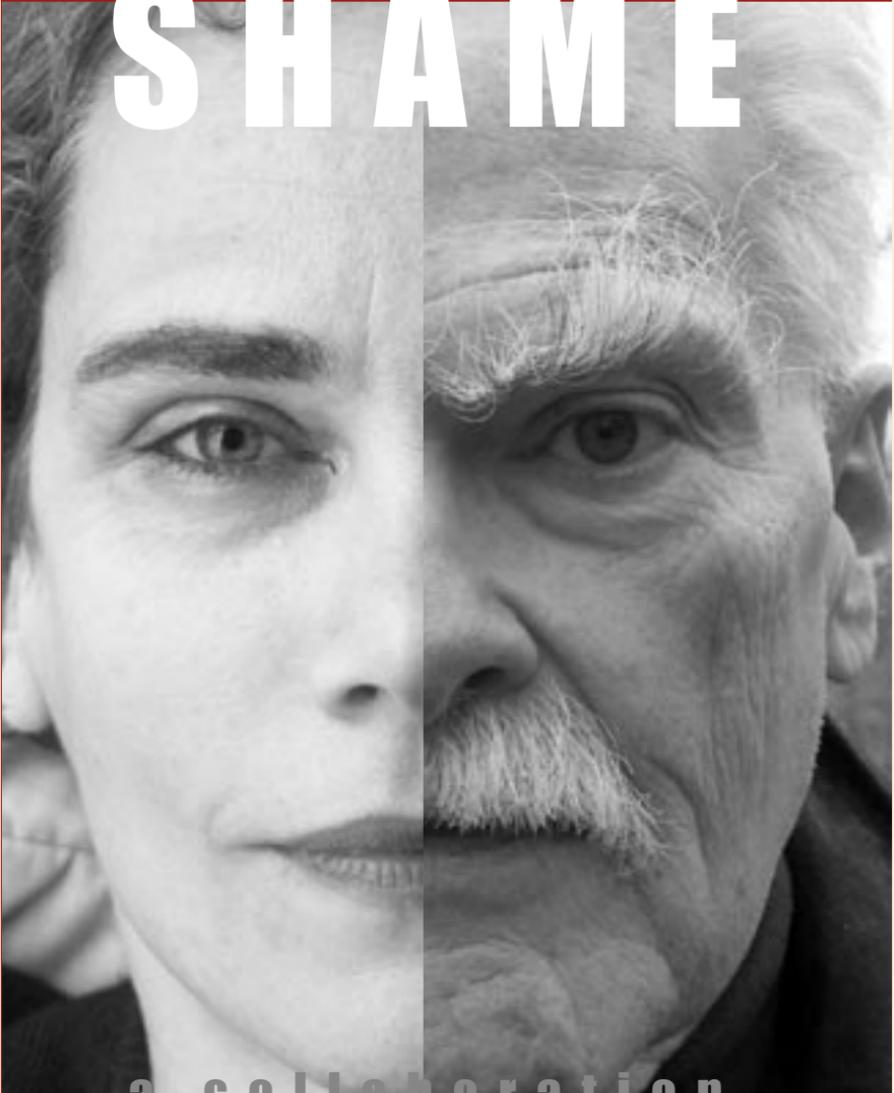
hiding in one's own language while reaching out to another.

[RK, 2005]

**Birgit Kempker**

**Robert Kelly**

# SHAME



a collaboration

# Shame / Scham

Robert Kelly / Birgit Kempker

*Shame* may be the most perdurably uncategorizable and daring book Robert Kelly has yet published during a career containing more than sixty sui generis volumes. It is a psychological exposé, a purloined correspondence, an investigatory improvisation, an apologia, a desideratum, a profundity, and jazz.

*“Reading is the study of other people’s shame.”*

When Birgit Kempker—a brilliant German writer living in Basel—invited Kelly to create a work together, neither knew the other except by reputation. They proceeded, over the course of two years, to communicate by e-mail through sixteen exchanges, and the subject was *shame*, shame at its most personal and prosaic and intimate, sometimes even fetching, and at its most generic and couched, poetic and hallucinatory. The barrier between them was not simply that of not knowing one another while risking the limits of naked trust, but of surmounting age, gender, nationality and language. Birgit Kempker wrote in German, and Robert Kelly in English. *Shame* is a love story between strangers. A tale of two tongues.

*“I am ashamed of writing. Writing is betrayal, since writing is love.”*

But *Shame* is not a story of love lost and love newly found or love claimed and love rebuked. *Shame* is a book spoken between two lovers who will never be lovers, a book of the unabashed and prised apart secret intimacy that can be laid bare against all constraint by ghostly lovers—virtual, exemplarily, psychic guides to one another and all of the rest of us.

*“When I love somebody, it is the person I’m going to lose next.”*

How do we speak to each other? What can we say to release the shame we bury within ourselves?

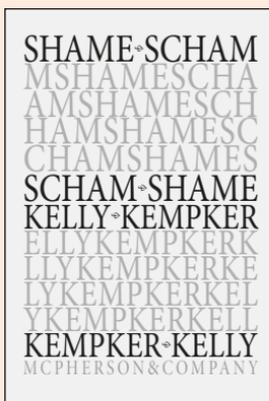
*“I try to stumble toward some door I confuse with saying something.  
I feel I have to know the right words to open it.”*

Shame is our desire expressed, shame is everything we mean to say and have meant to be.

*“Shame is the code word for will—bewildered, gagged, impotent, buried in itself, unholy, never ending, delirious, unconscious, satanic, godless, fruitless, barbaric, desperate, surrendered to itself, split up in itself.”*

*Shame* is a sometimes shocking, sometimes painful, oftentimes exhilarating expression of what can be said between two people.

*Shame* is presented with both texts side-by-side, English and German fully translated (Kelly and Kempker translated each other's texts). The text may be read entirely in English, entirely in German, entirely in the original texts, or entirely in translation. The book has been produced in an exceptionally beautiful edition.



Titlepage

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“*Shame* is a radical text of the ‘third mind’ collaborative genre, multivalent and operational. What is our shame? What is our ambivalence of imagination, confession, sexuality, history? Who takes responsibility, who notices, apologizes or hides? Kelly and Kempker’s bilingually enfolded meditation revolves, pivots, torques, litanizes in stunning American German language space. These poets face the shameful world before them (gegenüber / literally ‘facing opposite’) with passion, erudition, brilliance. There’s nothing like this stretching out there. ‘Haut plappert’ / ‘Skin chatters’. ‘Shame is waiting.’”—ANNE WALDMAN

“Miraculous epistolary transformations of that painful pleasurable emotion alchemically into sheer lucidity.”

—HAKIM BEY (author of *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*)

# The Garden of Distances

Robert Kelly / Brigitte Mahlknecht

When through a friend I first met Mahlknecht, I was struck instantly by a freshness of presence and generosity in her work, and in her way with it. Her paintings came at me in unexpected ways and set off flares in odd caverns. On a lark (a small bird that flies high around the mind, always trying to get back to the real world), I proposed collaboration to her, and with a grace equal to my rashness, she accepted. What happened was that she faxed me a drawing. I took one look and started to write it out loud, in words.

So what was happening is that the usual relation between image and word was reversed. She was not illustrating my poems, my poems were 'illustrating' her painted texts. This was an experiment in reading, and it overwhelmed me while it was going on. There was so much to read.



Mahlknecht's work, to begin with, played on three different registers very important to me, and that I'd never seen played on all at once before: the aerial views of cities (which are my breathtaking swoon dream images, I mean real dream, Paris from two thousand feet before I ever flew); iconic manipulations of repetitive quasi-alphabetic, quasi-pictographic forms (think of the archaic rock paintings in the Camonica Valley, not so far from Mahlknecht's home in South Tyrol);

and a crowded eventful page (text and commentary intermarginating each other—crowded as Japanese comix, as a page in the Torah). I loved her work, and had to answer it.

So for almost a year we went at it: all by fax, never meeting again in person until the whole project was done. A fax would come from Vienna or Bolzano, I would set to work reading these dense texts, goofy-glad as some amateur archeologist spelunking in the Dordogne. I was reading them—that's the point I'm making. And to be honest, I feel that even my most successful responses read maybe only ten or twenty percent of what is in these marvelous palimpsestical overgenerous 'texts.'



When we sensed that we were finished, whatever that means, we met in Vienna, and spent some days in a studio, all the works spread out on the big floor, and put the book together, keeping pretty closely to the order of composition, revising, choosing among variant readings, etc. We were finished in time for the millennium. The first public presentation was in Italy in 1999, marking the Viennese publication of the European edition of this book. Now it's available in America. Look your fill, and help me read. [RK 2005]

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“Collaborations are often reflected and suggestive rather than direct responses—allusive rather than confrontational. *The Garden of Distances* is remarkable for its call-and-response marriage of images to text... Like good jazz improvisation, the collaboration between poet and artist takes the reader on a magical trip...”—MICHAEL PERKINS

“The poet writes from his feelings about the drawing, sends his verses to the artist, who, guided by her feelings about the poetry, makes the next drawing, and so on. The accomplishment is formidable on both sides... Mählknecht's powerfully conceived and rugged drawings ring resonances from shorthand copy to scribbling to cartography to cityscape, and Kelly draws from their density his heavily atmospheric poems...”—THOMAS McEVILLEY

Edition limited to 250 numbered copies signed by Robert Kelly  
\$40.00 clothbound with marker ribbon, 205 pages, 6 x 8 3/4"  
48 drawings (two in color), 0-929701-62-3

# All Writing is Collaboration

*Every language is a second language.*

That's where I started. (Where we all start.)

Language as an allergic response to the silence in which sensations are received, the roaring synesthesias of silent childhood. Something like that. Slowly one learns to word these feelings, then sentence them. Sentence them to life? Sentence them to other people. Not a word alone, but words in cahoots, yielding from the silence of my excited body some cry woven—to give the minimal, to banish inquiry, to give just enough. But why give?

To answer the other person. The other party. In fear or desire, something in me stirs to address the other person. I don't want to put it in words, I want to put it in doing. *Im Anfang war die Tat*, says Faust, and the word, logos or Christos, came after.

Since language is the first-born of silence, since language is a translation of skin and bone, of eye and ear and belly, of hunger and want, since language is all of what it is for no other reason than to inveigle itself into the awareness and presence of the other,

all speech is collaboration.

I take that as the road. *M'introduire dans ton histoire*, says Mallarmé, to work myself into your story. That is what a poem is always about. To introduce these words (which are the spill and tools and spokes and speaking of the mum me of *m'introduire*) into you.

And hear you in turn.

All writing is collaboration: all the words I use have been used before, and even the wordless sounds I try to wield or make sound from the page by grunts of the alphabet, all those sounds too have been in your mouth first, you and the birds and the tigers.

All writing is collaboration in that it responds—every sonnet is a response to the formal rustling hush of all the sonnets before, every letter answers a letter, every text answers a previous text. Reading comes before writing—in human history as in the development of the child, how could it be otherwise—so every writing is response.

Writing is trying to answer.

In my case I set out with the noble dead: Hölderlin and Shelley, to talk with them, supply my side of the long-pending dialogue. It is brave to talk with the dead. Then I risked working with the noble living: two German-speakers, Mahlknecht and Kempker, painter and poet. I had to be really brave to work with the living.

Work = being conscious of the collaboration. Letting the other know. Letting the other answer.

Whirlpool of answering. The vortex.

In *The Garden of Distances*, I wanted there to be one text in two genres. So that the reader would, as I had, begin by reading (carefully, detailedly) the picture, then read the ensuing text, then the ensuing picture, and so on, just as you would read a book in verse and in prose, or in ordinary type and italics, just keep reading. Each text reads the one before it.

What I set myself as a task with Shelley's "Mont Blanc," or a stanza from Hart Crane, or a poem by Whitman was this: to preserve all the words of the 'original' in the exact order of the original, but with intrusions—at any moment, and for any stretch of word time seemed needed—of my 'own' words.

I wrote into their text, so their text following my intrusions would become response to them—to which I would respond in turn with my next intrusions, and so on until we had finished what we had to say.

Interesting contrast that makes between 'original' and 'own'. Simpler to say: mine and yours.

But there was another aspect of the task: the resultant poem, though it seems to conceal the original words (where do you hide a leaf? in the forest) in all the 'own' words added, should in some obvious way 'feel' like the original in important respects: tone, register, ambition, scheme.

So collaborations with the dead (which I sometimes think of as Impregnations of the other's text, or as Reincarnations of the other's text) require strict attention to the actual words of the other in their vital 'original' order. The dead are quick (their words prompt to my need) and slow (it's so hard to budge them from their stated positions). The words of the dead are profoundly honest—or we must make them so, as they make us.

Collaboration with the living: two people tell lies to each other that turn into truth. [RK 2005]

“German conceptualist poet and chief mischief maker Schuldts and the unstoppable Robert Kelly enraptured an unsuspecting populace in a dervish of poetry at the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church (New York City), with their homeophonic destruction of Friedrich Hölderlin’s ‘Am Quell der Donau.’”—BOB HOLMAN

“*Unquell the Dawn Now* features Robert Kelly’s magnificent homeophonic translation.... At a translation conference at Barnard several years back, Kelly noted that he wanted to do a completely non-comic homeophonic translation, partly to show that this approach to translation doesn’t need to be comic. He has succeeded not only brilliantly but with an aural richness that approaches the sublime.”

—CHARLES BERNSTEIN



# Unquell the Dawn Now

## *A Poem Cycle*

Robert Kelly / Friedrich Hölderlin / Schuldt

*The soul of a poem is its sound. But music is the first casualty of translation...*

For this collaboration Robert Kelly translated the music of the great 18th-century German poet Hölderlin's "symphonic" masterpiece, "Am Quell der Donau"—(literally, "At the source of the Danube")—into an entirely new poem in English, "Unquell the Dawn Now," obsessing the soul of the original. The poet Schuldt, Kelly's friend and expert translator of his fiction into German, joined in this method to follow Kelly's "Hölderlin" to its logical, if dizzying, conclusion. This unique book + text for performance + CD recording combines serial homeophonic and literal translations back and forth between English and German, in a formally complex publication:

1. Seven accordion-folded sheets (in a red wrap-around cover) containing the individual stanzas of Hölderlin's poem with four alternating English and German translations. The English translations are homeophonic, the Germans literal. Each is printed in a different color, making these pages suitable for performance.

2. An 80-page book bound in blue paper wraps, containing the poem cycle in all five voices interlineated by 5-color printing. The book also contains a radio-play, "Schallgeschwister" ("Sound Siblings"), constructed from the poem cycle, along with an afterword describing the realization of this publication.

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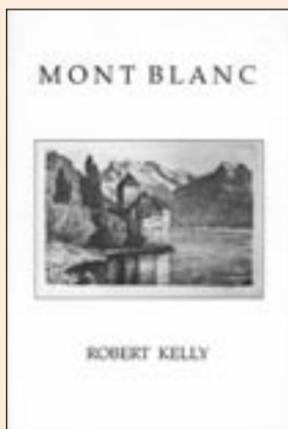
Note: To provide American readers an equal footing with Germans, Susan Gillespie provides a superb literal translation of Hölderlin's poem, exclusively for our edition. Produced by Steidl Verlag in Göttingen, Germany, our edition is published for the North American market in two sets totaling 176 copies.

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Deluxe. Twenty copies slipcased in marbled papers, signed by Kelly and Schuldt, numbered, and with a holograph poem by Kelly. \$200. #UDN2

## About this *Mont Blanc*

**I**N July 1816, Shelley got his first glimpse of Mont Blanc from a bridge in the valley of the Arve, near Chamounix. His poem, “Mont Blanc,” evidently begun almost at once, is terse and complex, full of profound cosmography and subtle psychology. While I had glimpsed Europe’s highest mountain from the air once or twice, my first sight of it from the ground was in the summer of



1992, from midway up the valley of the Dranse—one of the three streams in the Chablais that bear that ancient name, specifically the Dranse de Morzine, the one that flows into Lake Geneva at Thonon. My wife Charlotte and I spent that summer in the Savoy, the latest part of France to join the Republic, a land steeply climbing up from the shores of Lake Geneva into the high Alps, a land of ravines and valleys, each with its own dialect.

Throughout the year that followed our summer in the Haute Savoie, I had an odd, quiet feeling from time to time that I had to “do something” about Shelley. Little by little, that something came to connect with his poem “Mont Blanc,” which was at the time very dimly recollected. Finally, a year later, flying from one place to another that had

nothing to do with Shelley, it suddenly became clear that I had to write into his poem.

The result is a poem of mine that happens to preserve intact, in one form or another, all the words of Shelley’s poem, in their original order, but with intrusions and incursions and extrusions of my own. The poem swells from his six pages to my forty. The subjects change, the persons vary, the concerns develop in their own way, and a different stream flows—north where his flowed west—down to the same sea.

Any decent poem has room in it for all of us. The process of “writing into” someone else’s poem is an act of reading, of listening, talking. Though formally my poem is an act of trespass, a transgression, and may strike the reader as an arrogance, or an irrelevance to the sweet original design, in fact this writing-into turns the act of reading into an act of conversation.

So Shelley’s poem is the landscape through which I could move, and meet France again, and the Alps, and the summer and the quick downrush of those streams. The poem I have written in his spaces pleases me, and seems to be a poem that speaks my mind more clearly than the fortunes of language usually allow. In the text itself, I have not especially foregrounded the strategy or methods of in-reading; it is simply there, letting me go on. [RK 2005]

Edition produced by OtherWind Press, Ann Arbor. \$10 paper, 1994, 51 pages.

**A copy will be included gratis with every order of *Shame, The Garden of Distances*, and/or *Unquell the Dawn Now*, while supplies last.**

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Robert Kelly



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