



# O, Miami Poetry Festival Crosses Artistic Boundaries

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by Margery Gordon

Into every Miamian's life a little poetry must fall...if the organizers of the city's nascent biennial poetry festival meet their lofty goal of bringing verses to the masses. To that end, the debut of this celebration of National Poetry Month in April 2011 literally showered pedestrians with hundreds of poems dropped from a helicopter.

They also waved choice lines on banners strung up around the Everglades and trailed aerially above the beaches. They even tagged clothing in thrift stores with thought-provoking quotes surreptitiously stitched by rising local multimedia artist Agustina Woodgate.

"We did 46 events and 19 projects in 30 days in 2011," said P. Scott Cunningham, the executive director of O, Miami and a festival co-founder.

The 2013 edition was nearly as packed, with 37 events and 17 projects, some even more ambitious in scale, scope and sheer incongruity. O, Miami infiltrated sporting events, zoo visits, flash mobs and the city's infamous nightlife, the latter by printing poetry on drink coasters and club fliers.

"We're part of a movement to make poetry play well with others," Cunningham quipped. "Our M.O. for every single thing is: 'What audience is this reaching who wouldn't come to a poetry festival?'"



Typewriters waiting for poems to spring to life from tapping keys were part of the the kick off party for the 2013 O, Miami Poetry Festival at El palacio de los jugos.

The unexpected combinations that characterize these public interventions also distinguish the interdisciplinary events that arise from partnerships with a wide range of the city's cultural institutions. These include prominent mainstream presenters, like the New World Symphony and Miami City Ballet, to cultural outposts like the Little Haiti Cultural Center, and edgy hangouts such as Sweat Records.

"They're not just bringing high-quality poetry to Miami, but they're bringing it to new spaces and

new audiences, which is what is unique and special about it,” said visual artist Naomi Fisher. “O, Miami is presenting writing in a way that’s linked to other disciplines and bringing people to writing that might not otherwise be so into it.”

Fisher co-hosted the April 6 premiere of a dance-and-verse collaboration presented at the Bas Fisher Invitational. The BFI is an alternative space carved out of the downtown studio that Fisher shares with artist Jim Drain.

*TASTE* was choreographed by Merce Cunningham alums Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Riener, who executed the modern movements with a lyrical expressiveness. Brooklyn-based performing arts critic and poet Claudia La Rocco also became part of the performance, her physical presence accentuating her cultural commentary and creative wordplay.

The first scene in the dimly lit warehouse mimicked classical compositions as the pair posed coquettishly on a golden cloth set with a bowl of grapes, gaudy jewels protruding from their body stockings. La Rocco intoned her own musings on the subjectivity of aesthetic preference, referencing Brian Phillips’ 2007 essay “Poetry and the Problem of Taste” [[www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/180021](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/180021)], and then blared Brit Hume excerpts from a megaphone to bewildered passersby as she was chauffeured around the block.

The massive garage door, through which the black BMW dramatically entered and exited, became an industrial curtain as it slowly exposed a sunlit streetscape with Mitchell and Riener cavorting across a parking lot in hot-pink lace rompers.

As the symbiotic duo entered the ready-made frame, La Rocco returned to punctuate their sensual stretches by holding aloft signs like a round card girl at a prize fight. Only these cue cards were hand-lettered with “found text” such as “economy of judgment,” “stationary perversity” and “the body goes where the mind cannot.” La Rocco had culled some of these snippets from encounters during their weeklong residency at the BFI in late March.

“Miami is an interesting place for me because there are a lot of literary traditions that have snaked through here,” she noted.

It was the hope of reinvigorating those traditions—and drafting new ones—that motivated establishment of the nonprofit University of Wynwood in 2008. The University of Wynwood is an educational institution in name only—no classes are actually offered. Instead, the non-profit offers events scattered throughout the year to foster civic enlightenment. The culmination is the production of *O, Miami*.

The University of Wynwood also publishes the literary journal *Jai-Alai*. During *O, Miami*, other independent publishers were welcomed for “Small Press Night.” The gathering of authors and editors was held on April 20 at Lester’s, a multipurpose coffeehouse in the Wynwood Art District that carries *Jai-Alai* among an eclectic selection of arts and cultural magazines that are hard to find in the area.

“The best thing about *O, Miami* is it’s at a lot of different venues, so people get to move throughout the city and experience it in different ways,” remarked proprietor Daniel Milewski as he surveyed

the standing-room-only crowd held rapt by readers from South Florida and New York. “To do a poetry event on a Saturday night and get this many people is awesome.”



Key West native Nick Vagnoni reads at Lester’s in Miami, FL during O, Miami. Photo: Margery Gordon.

Before and after the reading, published poets and literary enthusiasts alike recalled quotes—from Shakespeare, rock lyrics, nursery rhymes, their own compositions—and even improvised new stanzas at the chalkboard propped up on an easel by visual artist Andrea Cote for the interactive performance entitled “Memorized.”

During “Memorized,” audience members approached the chalkboard and wrote a poetic line. Cote photographed each entry and then it was erased by the next contributor. The stream of lines created by multifarious voices was later linked in a slide show to create a “meta-poem.”

Some of the lines were themselves meta-narratives, such as “Don’t pay me/For poetry;/ I’m on the cross/Of the story.” Others were more mysterious: “Unless you’re the dead girl./And what a problem.”

One of the night’s first voluntary scribes, Jean Yzer, penned the enigmatic “Before the alarm,/ I call your name.” A former dancer turned physical therapist, Yzer confided, “I write my own little poems. I don’t do anything with them, but now I think I’m going to submit a poem I wrote about Wynwood.”

Yzer was so inspired by the reading, as well as a performance held the previous weekend that staged spoken word with ballet, that she resolved, “I think I’m going to start writing more poetry. It’s opened a floodgate in me.”



Jean Yzer writes on the chalkboard during Andrea Cote’s interactive performance piece “Memorized” held at Lester’s in Miami, FL. Photo: Margery Gordon.

**BASIC FACTS:** The O, Miami Poetry Festival took place during the month of April at various venues in Miami, FL.

**RELATED LINKS:** O, Miami: [www.omiami.org](http://www.omiami.org). The University of Wynwood: [www.universityofwynwood.org](http://www.universityofwynwood.org). *Jai-Alai*: [www.jai-alaimag.org](http://www.jai-alaimag.org). Basfisher Invitational:

[basfisherinvitational.com](http://basfisherinvitational.com). Lester's Miami: [lestersmiami.com](http://lestersmiami.com)

**HAMPTONS INSIDER:** Artist Andrea Cote of Flanders, NY presented her interactive performance "Memorized" at several venues during O, Miami. "Memorized" was also presented in May 2011 during East End Art's Community Mosaic Street Painting Festival held in Riverhead, NY.

**RELATED STORIES:**

[Visual Diary: Exhibition Exploration](#). Published June 2, 2011.

**RELATED LINKS FOR "MEMORIZED":**

"Memorized II" at Big Night in Little Haiti (April 19, 2013): [vimeo.com/64506000](http://vimeo.com/64506000)

"Memorized III" at Sweatstock (April 20th, 2013): [vimeo.com/64520866](http://vimeo.com/64520866)

Memorized IV" at Small Press Night at Lester's, (April 20, 2013) [vimeo.com/64553770](http://vimeo.com/64553770)

Slideshow on Flickr: [www.flickr.com/photos/andrea flicks/sets](http://www.flickr.com/photos/andrea flicks/sets)

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