The Steve McCaffery Archive

The Archive offers a distinct opportunity for rich scholarly exploration into concrete, sound, and language poetry through published and unpublished manuscripts, correspondence, drawings, journals, sketchbooks, audio/video recordings and ephemera.

“Though he would be among the first people to point out the inherent problems with the terminology, poet and scholar Steve McCaffery is one of the major architects of postmodern Canadian literature and was a major player in the Canadian avant-garde of the 1970s. With fellow poet bpNichol, he formed the Toronto Research Group in 1973. With Nichol, Paul Dutton and Rafael Barreto-Rivera, McCaffery also formed the highly influential sound poetry collective, The Four Horsemen.

McCaffery’s writing, both creative and critical, is concerned to some extent with going beyond the sentence and the word, beyond syntax.”

Steve McCaffery (1947–)

Poet and scholar Steve McCaffery was born in Sheffield, England. He received his B.A. from Hull University, his M.A. from York University, and his Ph.D. from the program in poetics, English, and comparative literature at SUNY Buffalo. He is a scholar, poet, and performer whose wide-ranging influence is especially present in concrete and sound poetry.


Among his many rewards and acknowledgements, McCaffery has twice received the Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative North American Poetry and been nominated twice for Canada’s Governor General’s Award. He is currently the David Gray Chair of Poetry and Letters at SUNY Buffalo.

The archive is housed at Granary Books in New York City. The archive is available; please contact sclay@granarybooks.com to inquire.

Selected Highlights from the Collection
Manuscripts

4 pages from a 110-page binder containing “Carnival” originals, notes on panels, and other “early related typestracts,” ca. 1970s.

Steve McCaffery kept 3-ring binders with originals of his concrete and visual poetry. Most of the poems are unique with an assortment of collage elements, colored and black pen drawings, and assorted typewriter (typestract) and type treatments.

McCaffery’s notes in the binder explain: “These three related texts grew out of the earlier experiment of Mural Text. They were initially conceived as ‘kinetic ideogrammes.’ Version III, as well as newspaper clippings, incorporates an earlier tissue text Triple Random C Field. Like Mural Text, these three versions of Ego exist only in this present ‘duplicated’ original. All original elements were deliberately destroyed.”


Front and back page from an approximately 52-page 3-ring binder labelled “Semiotic Poems and Prototype Semiotic Novel.”
Journals/Sketchbooks

Title page from journal/sketchbook from August 23, 1979–February 12, 1980.

“A Name Game for Dick Higgins” from McCaffery’s journal/sketchbook from August 23, 1979–February 12, 1980.

A spread from Steve McCaffery’s March 5–September 10, 1980 journal/sketchbook.
Poem/Objects

The first foot of Steve McCaffery’s “The Ari Tape,” November 1969. This early scroll poem is created on a very long roll of adding machine tape.

The archive includes five of McCaffery’s poem/objects including two original unpublished scroll texts.
An original unbound page from Anemic Envelope, a magazine started by Steve McCaffery but never released.

Contributors included Earle Birney, Brian Craig, Steve McCaffery, bpNichol.

The archive includes 7 original unbound pages.

Legend

Proof of an early version, on photographic paper, of the cover of Legend by Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Ray DiPalma, Steve McCaffery, and Ron Silliman (L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, 1980).
Typescript instructions for *Legend* on back of stationery for Parachute Center for Cultural Affairs, Calgary.

“LEGEND is not to be read but rather ‘done’; if it works, then you work. For the diminishment [sic] of referentiality [sic] in the language permits the replacement of a reading by a performance.

“LEGEND, too, is not a structure as such, but a network of relations; it is unfixed yet potentially volatile and its movement depends upon the framework of connotations, associations and paradigms that a reader single (performer) brings to it.”

Bruce Andrews, front and back of postcard with original collage to Steve McCaffery, December 4, 1976.

“got Ron’s piece, or a draft thereof; works from Charles [Bernstein], & from Ray [diPalma] = fantastic energy, on both the theoretical & Language-centered planes!!”
Charles Bernstein, first of two page TLS, typed on the back of *In Solidarity* (the newsletter of the Friends of the Council New York City Unemployed and Welfare Council), to Steve McCaffery, February 2, 1977.

“enclosed is part 2 of my diad with ron [Silliman], of wch there’ll be more. the collab seems to be going in an exciting way, liked yr wrk [diPalma] very much. once again, you manage a very beautiful movement, here a sort of lightness to the step.”

Ray DiPalma, front (shown left) and back (shown below) of TLS to Steve McCaffery, February 3, 1977 (Gertrude Stein’s Birthday).

“Bruce [Andrews] and I appear on cable tv talk show on Monday & read this piece I wrote in Dec for two voices. Inspired by a chapter in Rabelais. Shd be a giggle/

“Part of my nervous continent series of drawings on the reverse of this—with ditzy interloper.”
Ron Silliman, TLS to Steve McCaffery, November 22, 1976.

“on a title - I think we shld go slow on this until a consensus is had on something. / to date, my mail as suggested 3: Legend, n chotomies, and five pointed star in a three dimensional space. / of those, my bias is toward Legend / 3 of wch have occurred to me are / Cell / Cadre / & a nonverbal one: [a blue 5-pointed star].”

Assorted Correspondence

Alison Knowles, TLS, December 23, 1986.

“Dear Stebhaan mqq quapherie, / an exquisite mailing regarding grapes and beans and such like commodities / but upon the Altar, really!”

Barrett Watten, TLS with holograph note on bottom to Steve McCaffery, August 2, 1984.

“The next issue of Poetics Journal will be ‘Non-Narrative,’ which doesn’t necessarily exclude discussions of narrative forms and which, I think, will end up as a discussion of the value of narrative as one of several temporal possibilities.”
Bob Cobbing, ALS to Steve McCaffery, October 13, 1990.

“Unexpectedly printed your The Entritt for a Writers Forum launch last weekend...It makes a nice little book. I read it at the launch and it went down well with the audience. Because I did it in a hurry, I didn’t check for errors, apart from correcting the ones you already marked — there are a few, I think, so I’ll ask you to do a proof read and let me know what to correct, in time for the second edition.”

bpNichol, ALS to Steve McCaffery, April 27, 1977.

“worth noting in regard to the CONTINUITY QUESTION is our long discussions about whether to put out an album (i.e. frozen state when what we deal with is shifting — our preference then for LIVE IN THE WEST as more obviously documentary of an occasion & time) & our ongoing discussion of electronic elements as it relates to this question of energy interface, i.e. its human energy not electric we’re dealing with[.]”
"what we have here is the first issue of a hopefully monthly in-house journal/newsletter devoted to the long poem, the large poetic structure, in poetry. in-house advisedly because i want it to be something that serves as a link between writers & is concerned with process & not a magazine where the polished final piece appears. thus i'm using xerox as the print medium & distributing Y.E.R. to the following fourteen writers: Steve McCaffery, George Bowering, Gary Geddes, Sheila Watson, Daphne Marlatt, Doug Barbour, Tom Marshall, Wayne Clifford, Mike Ondaatje, Stephen Scobie, Louis Dudek, Frank Davey & bpNichol."

Jackson Mac Low, 2 page TLS, January 7–8, 1986.

This is one of several long letters from Mac Low that aim to correct McCaffery's understanding of his work.

"The reader of an Asymmetry has exactly the same freedom (as a reader of a poem by Creeley) to experience time—AND MUST EXERCISE THIS FREEDOM WHEN PUBLICLY PERFORMING IT, since profoundly experiencing the aural situation (i.e., time as perceived through the ears) is essential to the performance of such pieces."

“Your writing I have indeed seen from time to time, and the ins and outs of double=hyphens through the credentials of text production. I suppose it will come as no large surprise if I say that the crossweave of theoretic debate and innovative performance has looked nothing like so intimate to me, from this outstation, as contention from within the fray has assumed; perhaps to clear the air I may say also that a fair amount of the writing I have seen contradict directly in my experience of it exactly the claims made on behalf of its sponsorship of productive activity.”

jw curry, TLS to Steve McCaffery, [2008].

Letter sent with curry’s reprint of A Little Nastiness by the Four Horsemen, originally published by bpNichol as Ganglia 5c Mini Mimeo #57.
Johanna Drucker, TLS to Steve McCaffery, December 6, 1992.

“Well, I am glad to finally have your address as well. Funny, isn’t it— I have often had things/thoughts I wanted to exchange with you and have never quite managed to overcome the small obstacle of not having your ‘coordinates.’”

Marjorie Perloff, 3-page TLS to Steve McCaffery and Karen Mac Cormack, September 17, 1993.

“Well....I declare, all those big letters. What a pleasure to get both your letters. Letters, not letters, as in abc. I can’t wait to see Karen’s novel. I can’t imagine what it will be like. As for Steve’s teaching, that sounds quite fun and I’m glad you’re so gung ho.”

Lyn Hejinian, TLS to Steve McCaffery, September 2, 1985.

“[T]he rhetoric of presentation seems to be a lively issue, and that it should be so depressing. (I am thinking of social life, not of performance; the way one person can invite (or seduce) attention to the work and another person can repel (or repudiate) attention—and what is depressing is that the attention becomes the issue, not the work.) At this point, I believe that the history factor is very central and very lasting, both in our culture and in our lives.”

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“It was wonderful to meet you. Bruce [Andrews?] seemed to want to make of it an historic event, but that is simply a matter of putting a face to words; or words to a face — I suppose that is closer to the nature of the historic.”
Robert Filliou, APCS to Steve McCaffery, September 2, 1978.

"Greetings from Iceland, Steve. Thank you for your last letter. Your definitions of FUTILITY & UTILITY show a way out of the dilemma of gay vs dismal science (utility & freedom, that's poetical economy)."
Robert Filliou [?], original collage, ca. late 1970s.

An original collage with one of the elements consisting of a photograph of Filliou and Steve McCaffery pasted on a photographer's paper photo folder, with a second collage on the inside. One of the elements consists of a photograph of Filliou and Steve McCaffery. (In personal conversation, McCaffery does not recall if the collage was a creation of Filliou, himself, or a collaboration between the two. He does date it to the late 1970s.)

Dick Higgins, TLS to Steve McCaffery, April 17, 1976.

“So few sound poets on this continent! I’m in touch with some of the European ones, but besides Nichol I don’t like any in North America. Seems to [sic] often to affect a false naivety [sic] (Bissett, Lurie, the Harlemans, etc.).”

Dick Higgins, 4-page TLS to Steve McCaffery, November 5, 1977.

“Your letter is so full of thoughts and connections that are, I think, quite correct, that I don’t know where to begin. I know Peirce via Packard only, but your remark intrigues me. Does one have to go so far afield (from my point of view, though) as Peirce (not Pierce, by the way)?-- since just that kind of referent is the subject of my Allusive Referential process. ‘Indexality’ I’ve never discussed, but it’s a useful idea - - isn’t it awfully close to the term the musicians use-- ‘matricalization/matrix-making’?”
11th International Festival of Sound Poetry

Steve McCaffery, Sean O’Huigin, and Steven Ross Smith were festival coordinators for the 11th International Festival of Sound Poetry held in Toronto in October 1978. Festival participants included Henri Chopin, Jerome Rothenberg, Jackson Mac Low, Dick Higgins, Charles Morrow, Raoul Duguay, Bob Cobbing, bpNichol, bill bissett, John Oswald, and Maurizio Nannucci, among many others. The archive contains both print and audio documentation of the festival.

According to Pauline Butling and Susan Rudy’s *Writing in Our Time: Canada’s Radical Poetry in English (1957–2003)* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), this was one of the first literary festivals of the times that acted to “disturb the social/literary norms. This was the first time the festival was held in North America; it was also the first time a significant body of collaborative performance poetry was presented.”

Reel-to-reel audio tapes documenting the festival.

The archive contains complete audio documentation of the festival on 22 reel-to-reel audio tapes.

“thanks for your letter from the 14 of March. Of cause [sic], I accepte [sic] your invitation for your festival in October 1978, for two reasons: 1) I never seen the Canada, and 2) your festival will be probably important.”


Rothenberg’s acceptance to the festival along with recommendations of other poets from the New York scene.
Audio and Video

A small sample of the over 490 audio and video items in the archive.

Many are unique recordings and are in a wide assortment of formats, including reel-to-reel audio tapes, cassette audio tapes, vinyl records, CD-Rs, 8mm film, VHS video tapes, U-Matic video cassettes, and mini digital video cassettes. Many of the recordings are unique or rare. Included is documentation of live events, performances, interviews, radio programs, seminars, readings, class recordings, musical performances, master tapes, commercially produced recordings, dubs of recordings, and other recordings. The earliest recordings appear to be reel-to-reel recordings of bpNichol in 1966.


Four Horsemen

Flyer for a performance by the Horsemen at Forest City Gallery, January 17, [1989], London, Ontario, Canada.
Page from “Memory” by Filoden Kolenz part of the Slow Dust manuscript.

Crossed out is the manuscript’s title Slow Dust and authors the Four Horsemen along with “second draft of section bpNichol complete to end of chapter four.”

The archive contains over 500 pages of typescript and holograph drafts and notes for the unpublished Four Horsemen (bpNichol, Paul Dutton, Rafael Barreto-Rivera, and Steve McCaffery) collaborative novel Slow Dust.

“Three Poems” text by the Four Horsemen, arranged by bpNichol, February 28, 1981, 6 pages with cover.

Found among the Four Horsemen Slow Dust items.
Poster for a performance by the Four Horsemen at Erindale College, University of Toronto, March 6, [ca. 1973].

The Four Horsemen performance at Erindale College was in support of the release of their Canadadada LP (Griffin House, 1973).

Poster for two performances of the Horsemen, Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Canada, February 20 and Music Room at Campion College, University of Regina, February 21, [no year].


Steve McCaffery and the Horsemen presented a sound performance. Other participants included Jerome Rothenberg, Charles Amirkhanian, Laurie Anderson, and Pauline Oliveros among many others.
Flyers

Flyer for Wild Sound, an evening of sound poetry with O(we)jn So(u)nd, Paul Dutton, Steve McCaffery, John Jessup, and Shant Basmajian at Bloor Street United Church, Toronto, February 2, [no year].


Flyer mounted on cardboard for “The Cloud of Uncertainty” exhibition with a concert of improvised music featuring David Lee, Steve McCaffery, Bill Smith, and Susan Ferrer, Studio 620, Toronto, August 18, [1984].

Flyer for Steve McCaffery presenting film, music, and performance with bpNichol, Vic d’Or (Victor Coleman), and the Marquis de Sade, Gallery Nine, Toronto, December 20, [no year].


Participants included Julien Blaine, Jean-François Bory, Jean Jacques Lebel, Dick Higgins, and the Four Horsemen among others.
Summary of the Steve McCaffery Archive

Correspondence

The archive contains expansive correspondence with more than 500 people. Primary correspondents include: Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein, Colin Browne, Michael Davidson, Alan Davies, Ray DiPalma, Johanna Drucker, Jean Dupuy, Fred Garber, David UU (Harris), George Hartley, Lyn Hejinian, Dick Higgins (1/2 box), Stephen Joyce, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, David Lee, Jerome McGann, Roy Miki, Opal L. Nations, Marjorie Perloff, Peter Quartermain, Tom Raworth, Jed Rasula, Jerome Rothenberg, James Sherry, Ron Silliman, Steven Smith, Barrett Watten, and Karl Young. (7 bankers boxes)

Manuscripts

The archive contains both unpublished and published manuscripts of books, essays, concrete/visual poetry, notes/jottings, and other work. In addition to items in folders (27 bankers boxes) there are 8 binders (approx. 930 pages) with many originals of McCaffery’s concrete/visual poetry. Most of the poems are unique with an assortment of collage elements, colored and black pen drawings, and assorted typewriter (typestracts) and type treatments. Included are all drafts, abandoned sections, and some production masks of his internationally acclaimed Carnival. (31 bankers boxes)

Miscellaneous

These files contain a wide variety of items, including manuscripts by others, photocopies of articles, and grant applications, among other items. (4 bankers boxes)

Journals/Sketchbooks, Account Books, Address Books, and Calendars

There are 49 journals/sketchbooks from 1959–2010, 3 address books, 10 account books from 1981–88, and 37 calendar/appointment books from 1976–2013. (3 bankers boxes)

Audio and Video

The archive contains extensive audio and video. Many of the recordings are unique or rare. Included is documentation of live events, performances, interviews, radio programs, seminars, readings, class recordings, musical performances, master tapes, commercially produced recordings, dubs of recordings, and other recordings. Also included is complete audio documentation of the 11th International Sound Poetry Festival held in Toronto in October 1978 (McCaffery was a festival coordinator). The earliest recordings appear to be reel-to-reel recordings of bpNichol in 1966. (more than 490 items in 10 bankers boxes)

Conferences and Festivals

In addition to one box of print documentation of the 11th International Sound Poetry Festival there is one box of documentation and notes for conferences and festivals in which McCaffery participated. (2 bankers boxes)

Teaching and Academics

Included are lecture and teaching notes, and other items related to McCaffery’s teaching career, especially at York University and the University at Buffalo. (2 bankers boxes)
Assorted

Included are flyers, programs, and ephemera for conferences, readings, and other activities in which McCaffery participated. Also included are 5 of McCaffery's poem/objects, including 2 original scroll texts. (2 boxes)

The Steve McCaffery archive comprises approx. 61 boxes (approx. 81 linear feet) and is housed at Granary Books in New York.

For complete inventory and price, please contact Steve Clay.