

Radiant Nina

David E. James, 2026 vii 8

For me, the mid-1970s were a revelation. Threatened as I was by the US immigration, my wisest course of action would have been to hole up in my job at a university in the desert and turn my dissertation into a book so that I would get tenure and then the university would assist my bureaucratic struggles. Instead, I moved to Venice Beach. I reasoned to myself, "If I'm going to be sent back to England next year, would I rather spend my U.S. time in Venice or in an air-conditioned library?" "While living in Venice, I did many things, none of them well. Along with the continually-postponed Blake book and a full teaching load, I was trying to be a poet, a filmmaker, an art critic, and a connoisseur of Los Angeles.

The seed of my wandering interests had been planted in a library sale at the University of Pennsylvania, just days before I left. Standing in line to buy a remaindered copy of Lyman Beson's *The Native Cacti of California* (Stanford University Press; Stanford, CA, 1969). I spotted another reduced book: *Nine Swimming Pools*. Idly glancing through it, I found that, while most of its sixty-odd pages were blank, nine of them were in fact occupied by artless photos of backyard swimming pools; but a few pages before the end, there was another photo, the pieces of a broken drinking glass apparently laying on the floor of a deep blue swimming pool. I was astounded. Despite my Ph.D. in English, neither William Blake nor Matthew Arnold had equipped me for this. I bought the book and a few days later began to drive my VW bus to the coast.

That same summer a special edition of *Art News* introduced me to recent innovations of the LA art world, including of course Ed Ruscha who, I very soon realized, had plotted my cosmic confusion much better than I. On one of my first Sundays in LA, I took the VW bus to Ladd & Kelsey's iconic Pasadena Art Museum, soon to be renovated and transformed into the Norton Simon. In the book shop there, I bought several other Ed Ruscha photo books and soon after kick-started my own career as a photographer by making a mounted and framed set of ten photographs, "The Interiors of Some Los Angeles Restaurants and Books by Ed Ruscha." The Googie architecture and the Ruscha books seemed to be happy together, at least as happy as the swimming pools and the broken glass. Then one day, along with John McCracken's gleaming red planks, they all spoke summarily to me via a Chinese restaurant fortune cookie: "Art Is Your Fate, Don't Debate." I didn't debate and began to seek my destiny by writing short reviews of artists' video. That's what brought me to Nina.

Around 1973, Nina Sobell was living with her partner of the time, John Sturgeon, at 7 Dudley Avenue in Venice, once the Venice West Café famed in Los Angeles poetry lore. They had both been art students at Cornell and, after graduating, they'd found their way LA, living in the rear of the storefront and each using its space on alternate days in creating videos. An upstart journal, *Art and Cinema*, began paying me a few dollars for short descriptions of video art works, and introduced me to them. I immediately realized that, like the Ruscha and the Finish Fetish sculptors, they were on the edge of new visual thoughts.

Geography was fundamental. Nina and John's studio was one of a block of four storefronts that ran from Speedway to the beach. After my apartment inland was burned out, I managed to find a place a few blocks from Nina and John and wrote in my journal, "For a while at least, I'm living on the edge." I made a poem about it,

“Good Friday Driving Westwards,” a list of the names of all the freeway exits from Riverside to “Lincoln Blvd Last Santa Monica Exit.” I was delighted that Nina and John thought it worthwhile to make a video of me chanting this, not least because they paid particular attention to my stomping the rhythm showcasing my high-heeled snakeskin platform shoes. Several years later when I did finally get my Green Card, John very kindly made me a celebratory drawing which did indeed show Dudley Avenue, Venice on the world’s western edge. Beyond the beach lay only ten thousand miles of Pacific Ocean. In the evening people would congregate to watch the sun go down and sometimes in the night, we swam naked in the moonlight.

By then my life had gotten even better. For some time, Nina had been befriending her neighbor, who occupied the storefront next door to theirs, 9 Dudley Avenue; it was announced by a magnificent shingle adorned by a single massive red shoe and the inscription, “Norm’s Shoe Repairing.” (Later I bought another pair of platform shoes and dyed them red.) Knowing that Norm would soon retire and hoping to inherit his space, Nina had been cultivating him; but when he did abandon his shoes, Nina offered his place to me. What an incredible gift! I can see her now, a lilting smile on her face, radiant in her generosity. All I had to do was phone the mafia contact in Las Vegas and send them \$120.00 a month. I moved into a dirty cobwebbed grey cube, divided by a bank of obsolete shoe-repairing equipment into a rear stacked high with the cardboard cores of toilet paper rolls and a front full of unclaimed shoes. I managed to sell the equipment and the old shoes and John Sturgeon showed me how to make it livable. I stayed there for five magical years. I began to publish my poetry, first in small magazines and then in chapbooks, that I designated as “Norm’s Shoe Repair Books.”

Both Nina and John continued to do performances and make videos, some of which I wrote about. Through my writing and their friendship, I met several other

wonderful Dudley edge-dwellers. Joan Logue was a pioneering video-artist; she had been a still-photographer but found her vocation in making video portraits including one of me and my lover, Joann. Having honed her skills with portraits of locals, she moved to New York and then to Paris, making video portraits of Nam Jun Paik, Jacques Derrida and many other luminaries. Two painters, Lance Gravett and Cheryl Peterson often stayed in my place while I was away at work. Across the street Jack Dugganne, a master-printer lived with Chris who spent each livelong day joyously drawing. She illustrated a poem I wrote about watching the end on the US invasion of Viet Nam on television and she played Patty Hearst in a short film I made about the slaughter of the Symbionese Liberation Army.

Then Brian Routh appeared. He was half of the artist pair, The Kipper Kids, who did outrageous performances invoking UK working-class rituals. Stomping around in jockstraps and huge boots made for blast-furnace workers, they would drink beer, get naked and beat themselves virtually insensible. Out of character Brian was gentle and gifted and soon he captured Nina's heart. I remember hearing with awe how, to get to know each other, they had rented a room, sealed the windows and the door, communing for several days only with each other. At one Kipper Kids performance, Nina cried out in horror, "Harry! No!" as he drunkenly pummeled his own bloodied face. By that time John had moved to 11 Dudley; he had been enchanted by Ayesha, a sorceress astrologer from up the street, who got very angry one night and tried to drive her VW bus into his studio.

Life on the short block of Dudley just at the edge! I wrote a poem about it, "on Dudley it cdnt have been more perfect":

in & out: always they came, they wd

be over & say: come on in
or out: on the street: it cd be relied on, a can
of beer or a number: in & out
on the street: in & out

Illuminating us all was Nina. Nationally and internationally known, by the middle of the decade Nina's interest in the interfaces of art, technology and consciousness had led her to scientists who could reproduce an individual's brain waves as oscillating lines on a video screen. Nina's inspiration was to hook up two people together simultaneously, so that their mental interaction would be projected visually as a continuously vibrating and shifting irregular closed curve. One day to my delight she invited me to participate with her. We drove way out to the valley where her collaborators had their set up. We were attached to the machines, our brains were linked, we closed our eyes and went into deep meditation. Coming out of it and looking at the results, I discovered that the shifting lines of the brainwaves on Nina's axis commandeered mine. John volunteered that indeed she had a stronger personality than I. But I was happy just to have shared her radiation.