

Tender Buttons (1914), by Gertrude Stein, is and isn't about tender buttons. In her poems, words simply constitute moments in time that are meant to be experienced, not named and understood.

Stein works to disconnect English from its own authority, from its own memory, and from its own dictionary. Her syntax is that of parataxis, placing dissimilar fragments alongside each other and allowing her readers to connect the dots. She uses language as aural bits of tangible time that are always in a state of activity—always in a continuous present.

Words are materials, just like paint, marble, or musical notes. When placed next to each other, words try to turn into sentences, but those, too, are simply organized materials. In the end, language is nothing but an exhibition of textures and rhythms. Yes, just an exhibition of textures and rhythms.

B.F. Skinner once wondered whether Gertrude Stein had a secret. But there is no use in decoding *Tender Buttons*. Charles Bernstein, on the other hand, once said that he prefers the scent of secrets to real secrets. Now *that's* more like it.

“There’s nothing up my sleevelessness,” said Charles Bernstein.

“I go line dancing on parables,” said Paolo Javier.

The poets Charles Bernstein (b. 1950) and Paolo Javier (b. 1974) are both interested in words as a social medium—words as things the public can touch, effect, distort, and replenish. They're curious about how English, when let loose into the world, inevitably accumulates Englishes. Their poems move in and out of English and Englishes.

Let's read some poems, hear some poems, and act within some poems. Charles Bernstein and Paolo Javier read from their past and recent work on January 7th, 2012.

Organized by Emmy Cathedral and Aimee Bonamie.