BENJAMIN S. LERNER (1979 -)

Ben Lerner, from Topeka, pursued academic study of poetry at Brown University. His writing is grounded in the 21st century—with all its nesting boxes of realities and simulations. In one poem he writes about a man watching himself on TV: "He watches the image of his watching the image on his portable TV on his portable TV." The occurrence of wordplay like this unifies Lerner's writings. Lerner creates highly populated mappings of urban throughways. These include quick trackings of lifetime trajectories, like Ronald Reagan's biography, for example. Such a person's identity in this poetry-scape is reduced to an icon—the movie star president—and so human experience is easily commodified. Lerner told a *Jacket* magazine interviewer that he is concerned with "commercialization of public space and speech."

Another of Lerner's concerns is extended poems with variations on a theme, such as his first book, *The Lichtenberg Figures*. This interest extends to prose poem sections of *Angle of Yaw,* a 2007 Kansas Notable Book*.* Here, Lerner also shows interest in technologically expanded sight. The term "angle of yaw" is a physics term for the tiny sideways shiftings of an object like a bullet or airplane as it moves forward through its line of travel. This only can be observed from perspective of great distance, possible through optical aids. The poet, then, becomes a voyeur with infinite personal interactions to sort. He lives in not the classical age of art nor the modern nor postmodern. His is a land of fast, flattened social interactions, a hyper-industrial age where any human experience, not just labor, can be sold on E-bay.

This prose poem objectively classifies contemporary art forms. Like a wheel stuck in snow, the narrator defines art in relationship to its public context. The poem progresses from static images, painting and sculpture, to more dynamic ones. The dictionary-like tone reinforces the theme of art's removal from spiritual experience.

From *ANGLE OF YAW*

If it hangs from the wall, it's a painting. If it rests on the floor, it's a sculpture. If it's very big or very small, it's conceptual. If it forms part of the wall, if it forms part of the floor, it's architecture. If you have to buy a ticket, it's modern. If you are already inside it and you have to pay to get out of it, it's more modern. If you can be inside it without paying, it's a trap. If it moves, it's outmoded. If you have to look up, it's religious. If you have to look down, it's realistic. If it's been sold, it's site-specific. If, in order to see it, you have to pass through a metal detector, it's public.

Education: Ben Lerner was born in Topeka, where he graduated from Topeka High School in 1997. At Brown University he earned a BA in Political Theory (2001) and an MFA in Poetry (2003).
Career: Lerner has published two books of poetry from Copper Canyon Press: *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004, Hayden Carruth Prize) and *Angle of Yaw* (2006), which was nominated for a National Book Award. He has taught at California College of the Arts, Oakland, and now a professor at the University of Pittsburgh writing program. Since 2003, he has co-published *No: A Journal of the Arts*, a semiannual magazine of poetry, art and criticism. He also edits poetry for *Critical Quarterly*.