

Pressure to Experiment

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An Introduction:

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Reading from her ongoing poetic project, *The Reinvention of Truth*, Joan Retallack closed the first day of the 'Pressure to Experiment' conference. 'I'm led to rethink the role of poetry in a socio-politically troubled society' Retallack reflected, 'in a world full of catastrophe and despair. Did it really once seem to be the cure?' The need for, and the implications of, just such a rethinking were at the heart of the 'Pressure to Experiment' conference. It asked what purpose and meaning we might now attribute to experimentation; what kind of contemporary aesthetic, political and cultural pressures are there on innovative writing practices, and what might literary experimentation offer to a contemporary sense of political urgency? How can writing practices address pressing social and ethical issues facing us at the start of the twenty-first century? Is experimentation still necessary and what politics can be ascribed to it?

To encourage dialogue around these questions, the conference fostered a fusion of practice and critical discussion and brought together poets and academics from around the world. Keynote addresses from two internationally renowned poets and critics, Joan Retallack and Jena Osman considered the status of experimentation and its political potential not only within poetic texts, but within visual art and science. Themed panels featured papers on experimental fiction, on the New York School and 9/11, Canadian poets and post-Fordist economics, the poetics of emergency, the relationship between poetry and the critical essay, the importance of musical forms to the aesthetics of Nathaniel Mackey and Clark Coolidge, and Barbara Guest's engagement with experiments in music and visual art, to name but a few prominent topics. A distinctive characteristic of many of the papers turned out to be their movement between different genres, artforms and disciplines; Harriet Tarlo, for instance, who started the proceedings on the second day, fused criticism and practice and also different discourses: her paper

interspersed an analysis of the relationship between experimentalism and eco-criticism with extracts from her own radical landscape poetry. Questions and concerns raised in the daytime panel presentations were in many ways extended at the evening's poetry reading. Hosted at the John Hansard Art Gallery, this boasted a notable line-up, which brought together Redell Olsen, Caroline Bergvall and Maggie O'Sullivan with the conference's two U.S speakers, Joan Retallack and Jena Osman.

Organised by staff and postgraduates based at Southampton University's Centre for Contemporary Writing, the themes and approaches of the conference reflected the Centre's strong research interests in contemporary British and American avant-garde poetics, gender, literature and science, globalisation, and the history and theory of poetry performance. Over the last decade the English Department at Southampton has been host to a wide range of international readings from acclaimed novelists and poets, and has organised numerous conferences with an increasingly interdisciplinary appeal. The prominence awarded to the poetry readings in the schedule of 'Pressure to Experiment' also reflected the preoccupation of two online ventures hosted at Southampton – the British Electronic Poetry Centre, a reference guide to a parallel tradition of poets active today, and 'Off the Page', an historical audio collection of live poetry readings which documents some of the key moments in British poetry performance from the 1960s to the present day.

Recordings of four of the five poets who read at the 'Pressure to Experiment' poetry evening are made available here. All the poets read from their most recent, in some cases ongoing, poetic works. Redell Olsen's contribution to this collection takes the form of an alphabetic ballet, the first section of her soon to be published work *Punk Faun: a Bar Rock Pastel*. Caroline Bergvall read 'Fuses (after Carolee Schneemann)' and four 'Shorter Chaucer Tales', two of which, 'The Summer Tale (deus hic, 1)' and 'The Franker Tale (deus hic, 2)' are featured here. Maggie O'Sullivan's performance of *All Origins are Lonely* and *Murmur* were accompanied by slides of these highly visual texts, which were projected onto the wall of the gallery. The audio file of this performance is made available as part of this feature and extends the recent *How2* feature which published extracts from this text. Retallack's *The Reinvention of Truth*, 'A Thought Experiment Under Pressure', which acted as an extension of her keynote enquiry into

experimentation, appears in this selection in both audio and textual form. Jena Osman, whose work is featured in the workbook section of this edition of *How2*, also read sections and showed images from her hybrid photo-essay-poem 'Public Figures', a project centred on the gazes and public invisibility of figurative statues around Philadelphia.

In addition to the sound files, this feature includes two essays which frame the poetic performances within broader questions of gender and linguistic experimentation. Vincent Broqua discusses the centrality of linguistic alienation to the poetics of Rosmarie Waldrop and Caroline Bergvall. He considers how experimentation with this sense of the 'never-at-home' in language contributes to the destabilisation of fixed gender territories in the work of both poets. Retallack's theoretical investigation in 'The Experimental Feminine,' connects the 'complex realisms' of contemporary experimental arts to a 'Feminine dyslogic', using this as a way of reflecting on philosophical questions of experimentation. In every discipline, she argues, experimentation is born out of a critical dialogue with history, but also 'out of the radically unintelligible nature of the contemporary,' the need to 'reinvent the terms of engagement and move on.' This selection of critical and poetic material is suggestive of the key concerns of 'Pressure to Experiment'.

As more than one paper at the conference suggested, an endless preoccupation with the question of *whether* poetry matters might actually be a way of distracting from *how* poetry matters. The poetry readings in many ways complemented and developed the critical discussions of the conference, putting to the test claims about what literary experimentation can hope to achieve; the ethics or 'poethics' of innovative practices. But the evening of readings also raised further questions, about the role of performance in rethinking the contemporary nature of experimentation. Retallack's and Osman's readings, in particular, seemed concerned with encouraging a deepening of responsive capacities and the value of subtle shifts of attention, 'the discipline of more active noticing' as Retallack has previously put it.ⁱ Meanwhile, O'Sullivan's multi-media reading developed different modes of audience attention: from the memorable sounds of its highly visceral language to its intricately crafted visual effects, it combined a performance of the page with a process of 'sounding out' which developed the text's

semantics in new ways. In this respect, both O'Sullivan and Olsen were notable for their particularly distinctive and intensive reading styles. While Olsen maintained a more rapid pace, the emphatic, evenly stressed syllables of both poets' readings served to foreground sound patterns and associative meanings over syntax. In a different way, Bergvall frequently exploits the power of associative meanings across languages to create puns. The constant polylinguistic shifts in her take on *The Canterbury Tales* continued her poetry's enduring preoccupation with the crossing points of language, while at the same time, they updated a rich and humorous Chaucerian tradition of social observation for a twenty-first century commentary.

One of the most significant ways in which these readings extended the discussions initiated by the conference papers was by highlighting the need for a theoretical framework with which to analyse poetry performance. Such a framework would take into account the multiple sitings of poetry, the relationship between the printed and audio text, and the uses of the sounded voice as a technology of the text, giving it the attention that has hitherto been given to the materiality of language in poetry criticism.

Performance has been an important factor in changing understandings of the nature and scope of experimentation in recent years, while changing concepts of politics, ethics and democracy have altered understandings of the broader *function* of experimentation. The 'Pressure to Experiment' event demonstrated that although poetry might not prove to be the 'the cure' of a 'socio-politically troubled society', experiments in poetic thought and practice certainly can provide a fertile ground for exploring social, cultural, ethical and environmental issues at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

ⁱ Retallack, Joan, 'Poethics of a Complex Realism,' in Marjorie Perloff and Charles Bernstein eds., *John Cage: Composed in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 242-273, p. 267.