Archive of the Now
Andrea Brady in conversation with Rosheen Brennan

Rosheen Brennan: What motivated you to create this website? Where do you see the archive positioning itself within pre-existing poetry sites?

Andrea Brady: The original motivation, actually, was being given money by Brunel University for a project on new poetry. In a very practical sense, it was about redistributing wealth among the poets, even a small amount, to pay for their time and recognise their contributions to contemporary writing. But that's kind of off the record. The other motivation was realising that there are a great number of sites in America which offer records of this kind of writing. They help to distribute poetry which may seem inaccessible when it's on the page, through voice or through video files. But there are very few sites of that kind in the UK. As a consequence, if you're researching poetry on the web and you are not clued into the narrow networks of distribution for innovative British poetry, you might think that there is very little of it, or that what there is is not very diverse. My idea was that in making a site like this we could convey the full diversity of poetic practices in the UK, to a wider audience both nationally and internationally. Compared to a site like 'The Poetry Archive' which has lots of investment from arts organisations and other government bodies, the *Archive of the Now* is a rather fly-by-night operation. There have even been imputations that it's not as 'professional' in its recording standards and presentations as it should be! But, importantly, it's free. People can download files, put them on their iPods, and go off and listen to them in their own environments. It is not really about hocking CD's, but about giving access to a huge range of poetry, and allowing the user to choose when and how they want to experience the reading 'event'.

R: Through the *Archive of the Now* what specific space do you wish to create? What boundary devices does this require the implementation of?

A: I would have to say that the boundaries are still evolving. I don't want it to become my personal photo album commemorating innovative poetry being written in the UK. But, as the only person running it, it's down to my judgement about what fits into this

category of 'the innovative' which I have established. That's very uncomfortable in some ways.

R: What do you define as innovative?

A: Innovative seems like the most innocuous word to describe this poetry. I've got problems with the terms 'experimental', or 'late modernist' or 'postmodernist' or 'avant-garde'…all these terms are very fraught with other ideological implications. To be 'experimental' implies that there is some kind of final truth that the poetry is seeking to establish, some hypothesis which it is trying to substantiate to which the practice in itself is secondary. And 'avant-garde' is obviously written into the long history of European movements which confront bourgeois norms, and which work together collectively to drive art history forward: that's not a wholly accurate description of much of this poetry either. To use the term 'innovative' is also problematic, because it is a word favoured by the Labour Party and smacks of media and technical government-speak, demanding we constantly drive forward change for the sake of change. I'm kind of uncomfortable with that too. But the term 'innovative' also implies a modernist interest in the new, a turn away from lyric traditions of the past and from conservativism in artistic or political terms. To me it implies a responsiveness to the present – an interest in using new forms, linguistic invention, or the information that arises in the present to respond to our environment. Anyway, I had to choose something as short-hand for marking out, as you say, the boundaries of the site! But this may change.

R: As you have said you are currently the only person running the site and it necessarily has a specific editorial policy. In 'about us' you say that through 'a dynamic response' you will be able to take 'pressure off that critical judgment'. What forms will this dynamic take?

A: I have an advisory board: Simon Smith at the Poetry Library, Lucy Sheerman who works for the Arts Council, Chris Goode who comes from a theatrical background, and Peter Manson who is very clued in about poetry and the use of the internet in its dissemination. They are people who can nominate other poets for inclusion on the site, and who I periodically ask for advice about the development of the site,

publicity, funding sources and so on. That's one kind of check on my own megalomania. I have also attempted, as far as I am able, not to enforce my own idea of what counts as innovative poetry in selecting poets to participate. I take recommendations from the public: you can nominate poets or offer other kinds of feedback through the site. I also rely on poets and advisors to recommend poets outside of the London or Cambridge centres which I'm personally familiar with. It would be absurd not to use the geographical decentredness of the Internet to give a view of the full range of practices throughout the UK. Finally, simply because it is a web-based project, there will never be a final, immovable version of the 'anthology': it will continue to adapt. As new poets are added, new associations, links through publishers or social networks will reveal further new poets; and the site will evolve to accommodate them.

So in those ways, the site will be dynamic. But also, I hope that the changes it goes through can help chart the different critical approaches we can take to the idea of non-mainstream poetry. The poetry on the site itself works as a moving, sometimes fugitive definition of what 'innovative' writing can be. I'd like the reader, the user to decide from the texts, rather than from some pre-existing demagogic statement of mine, what that definition is, who fits into it, and whether it's of any use to us at all.

R: How do you balance *supporting* the non-mainstream with the *inclusiveness* of a 'full range of poetic activity'? Do you see Women as an aspect of 'the non-mainstream' that require support?

A: As far as the first question goes, I would say in my defence there are already quite a few resources in place to support more mainstream writers. It already has its modes of distribution which are working quite nicely for them, whatever people like Don Patterson might say. What those of us working in the margins need are more creative forms of distribution that can subvert the paranoid strangle-hold of the mainstream on readers' attention – what few readers there are for poetry, that is. We can't cave in to the idea that commercial success is the indicator of a poet's status as a public writer. So the *Archive of the Now* site might be one kind of shelter, or clearinghouse, for poets who don't fit into these constricted networks of publicly-recognised poetry; but

it's their work which calls into question the material, social and political sources of this divide between the 'mainstream' and the 'experimental'.

As for where women fit: it is very important to me as a writer, critic and publisher to represent honestly and fully the poetry now being written by women in the UK. This means I'd like to secure an equal (or, as close as possible to an equal) distribution of male and female writers on the site. However, I cannot manufacture women writers out of nowhere if they don't exist. There are historical problems in this country which have resulted in significantly fewer women writers working in the non-mainstream context than men, and that inequality is especially striking when you compare British poetry to French, American or Canadian (the poetic traditions I know most about). There are a variety of reasons for this absence of women, for their alienation from forms of publication, readings and events in the past, and many women who've been around longer than me on the UK 'scene' will have thoughts about this. But it's hugely encouraging to look around now, and realise that many more women are now involved in writing, publishing and giving critical support to poetry. I do hope that through a site like this we can start to restore some sense of balance, and accommodate alternative kinds of practice which previously might not have not made their way into the public networks for poetry. We have to recognise that women, like men, are working in many genres and challenging divisions between art forms or traditional modes of distributing work.

R: What are your attitudes to updating? How do you perceive the site will progress from this initial form?

A: It remains to be seen. I update it regularly, and have been adding poets on a weekly basis for the past couple of years. I'm not sure if I can keep that rate up forever though! There is a list of new acquisitions on the site so you can see what has been added recently. By the way, there is no hierarchy implied by the order of who was recorded first or last: there are no dregs of the *Archive of the Now*!

I am hoping eventually that the Archive itself will enter into collaborations with other sites which specialise in digital art, hypertext compositions, or video of performances. For example, we have worked with Justin Katko's Meshworks site, based at the

Miami University of Ohio, to host video files of the Cambridge Experimental Women's Poetry conference that was held last October in Cambridge.

We're also looking at hosting some videos of performances. I am interested in how the site might help to erode the divide between live art and poetry. Modes of performances in poetry are constantly evolving, but it has to be said that not all poets are particularly interested in the ethics and aesthetics of the live reading. That's fine, of course: they may regard the vocal performance as a duty, or an inconvenience, or simply a limited form of publishing what the page can convey with a lot more specificity or grace. In my own practice, I guess I also view the page as the fixed point from which the performance departs. For me, the vagaries of the performance are tethered to the text, and so hearing the work first, you must try to reconstruct the mise-en-page, which can lead to some revealing surprises. But I do think that, in terms of developing audiences and interesting new readers in this work, we should be thinking about performance a bit more carefully. I hope that by bringing performance and live art into closer contact with poetry readings, that we will perhaps start to change the way we think about our responsibilities as actors when we are performing our work. For reasons I've already given, I also want to be able to include figures such as Fiona Templeton, whose work defies standard categorisations as poetry or theatre. It is a failing of our creativity and administrative openness as publishers if we don't have sites which can accommodate such boundary-crossing work.

R: Glazier says of the Internet that 'its only unchangeable fact is that it will change'[1]. This seems to align with the title of the site with the idea of the contemporary preserved. What is this site's relation to temporality, how is it specific to its web-based form?

A: The site should be able to include emerging writers alongside established figures. So the 'now' also describes those events and texts which emerge from the beginning of people's poetic development, the new movements which build among younger generations' talents and interests and anxieties, and the new directions that people are taking this community. It would really be a shame if all we had room for was an

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[1] Loss Pequeño Glazier, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), p. 51.

anthology of established laureate figures, and if younger or recently-interested poets felt they had to 'earn' recognition through years of misery and exclusion. Who would bother with that?

Those of us who teach or publish or edit poetry share the recognition that, when you encounter new writers – people you teach, meet or correspond with, people who work in different media like live art, book art or improvisational music – you want to be able to tell them that there are places where their work can live. We have long suffered in the UK from a lack of homes for the work, homes that would be welcoming, places where people would want to stay and invite other guests and entertain each other. The few reading series that did exist were generally haunted by old regulars, and had a slightly ecclesiastical air about them. The presses were strapped for cash and unwilling to take chances on newer writers. That's begun to change a bit, because of all the great work that is being done amongst the students at Royal Holloway for example, and by other new innovative presses like Bad Press (run by Jow Lindsay, Marianne Morris and Jonathan Stevenson); there are also new events such as Steven Willey's Openned reading series, the Poetry Summits and reading series in Cambridge put together by Sam Ladkin and others; and the brilliant Cambridge Women's Experimental Poetry Festival that Emily Critchley organised in 2006. Those presses and events have a completely different feeling about them. There is a sense of fresh air blowing through the poetry corridors: people are using innovative forms of production to develop new audiences for the work. The events feel welcoming, vibrant and exciting; they seem like the beginning of something rather than the end. I want the *Archive of the Now* to tap into that energy, and help it to reach a wider audience, including people who might not be able to attend events in the metropolitan centres.

R: How have your experiences of publishing in print and on the web informed each other?

A: Frankly, as an impoverished publisher it seemed important that the poets' bibliographies should be linked to their previous publishers, so people who are interested can easily find and even buy the books. Times are very hard for small presses, so the more business we can throw their way the better! I suppose that I'd

include myself among those poets whose imagination is quite fixed to the page, to the material of paper, binding and glue and ink, rather than to performance or digital media. Perhaps that makes me more old-fashioned than I ought to be in conceptualising the site and how it presents the information! So that is another area where I welcome other people's expertise and input.

R: It is quite interesting comparing the two 'about us' sections from Barque Press and *Archive of the Now*, because there is more of an ideological manifesto on the archive, whereas the press is based on what you have published and what is being produced, it seems to show the difference between the freedom of the web and the monetary constraints of producing books.

A: Yes, definitely! The difference is ironic, because I think of Barque as a much more stiff and regimented approach to publishing, whose selection criteria are much less inclusive than the Archive. Keston Sutherland and I won't publish everything with Barque, we need in effect to agree with it, because our resources are limited and we're interested in preserving the coherence of our list. The poets Barque publishes are writing in a particular nexus, with shared political, aesthetic and social concerns and resources. Nonetheless, the 'about us' section of the Barque site is less ideological than the Archive, which is undoubtedly more inclusive. I guess I felt that the Archive has a different set of responsibilities in relation to the poetic community it is trying to represent, and that if it was likely to be challenged by readers, the challenges would come at this crux of the definition of what 'innovative' poetry is. I wanted to pre-empt those challenges a little, by engaging in an argument about how the non-mainstream poetic community is already formed, and how it might be improved. Plus, I just get so sick of these tired old debates about the 'poetry wars' that happened before half of us were even born. Those debates sap the energy we could be using to build solidarity, to take action in the world around us in the 'now', and they (quite rightly) turn people off to this tedious, sectarian, fractious bunch of old curmudgeons still slugging it out about a meeting above a pub in 1969. I mean, who cares! There's an element of this kind of grudge-bearing in some of the critiques lobbed at innovative poetry by mainstream writers like Neil Astley, Robert Crawford or Don Paterson. If they took the time to listen to the writers on this site, to consider the myriad forms of publication the poets have invented or used, maybe they'd be

forced to revise their assaults on this work as being exclusive, obscure, academical, or unmusical. I guess in the Archive 'about us' page, which amounts to a kind of manifesto, I'm attacking the ideology of the anti-modernists!

R: The web provides unprecedented instant access to resources, countering the often-difficult access to poetic texts in book or pamphlet form. I have found that the web for me often becomes my central source of information on a particular poet. Do you ever as an archive director and poet submitting your own work to the web think about this?

A: It's interesting question but one I leave firmly on the shoulders of the individual poets. It is very much up to them how they want to represent themselves over time. Hopefully, though, the site in general conveys this sense of openness, diversity, and resourcefulness, and so challenges the stereotype that non-mainstream poetry is difficult to access semantically – and as the links give access to publishers, and another page announces readings and workshops, the site facilitates other kinds of access to the texts and events as well.

R: What about with your work?

A: I've recently been working on a project which is designed specifically for the web. It's called 'Wildfire: a verse essay on obscurity and illumination', and it's being published on dispatx.com, an art and poetry collective's website. There, I have included all the source material alongside the poem, with links between the two. I set the poem up in this way for specific political reasons, because I intend the poem to be a materialist exercise in uncovering the consistencies within the histories of technology, weapons manufacture, chemistry, and warfare, and their implications for artistic 'illumination' and obscurity in poetry. So that's one project where I'm specifically using sources and images culled from the web, and using hyperlinks to open the poem back up to the sources, hopefully encouraging people to engage with the extended history from which the poem is derived.

But I think you're right that the majority of this poetry is really hard to get hold of. Unfortunately, unless you know about it in the first instance, you know the names of the publishers, or have access to what is essentially a social of network of people who

are producing it and writing it, you may miss it entirely. I have this fantasy that the *Archive of the Now* is one place where people interested in poetry, but confused by the doggerel of the mainstream, could happen upon an inspiring and even earth-shattering new writer. It's like a spider's web (well, hopefully not a place where readers become entrapped, have their heads bitten off and their blood sucked dry!), a node in a network which takes ambitious readers in all different directions, which offers an alternative worldview of contemporary poetry wholly different from anything you might suspect if your whole idea of poetry was the shortlist of the T. S. Eliot Prize.

R: What has the creation of this website revealed to you about contemporary poetics? Were you surprised by what you found? The form your debates took?

A: That's an interesting question. I haven't thought very much about it, but it strikes me first of all that the poets I have approached are generally pleased to be asked to contribute: and pleased in ways that suggest that they feel their work is not generally valued. They're surprised that institutions are interested in collecting their work. Perhaps there is a general lack of self-esteem amongst poets in this field! But working on the Archive has confirmed for me the generosity of the poetic community. Poets are really eager to enter into conversations with each other and with each other's work, to make their work accessible to readers and listeners. I think that belies the imputations of back biting, infighting and negativity which are often attributed to this kind of avant-garde community. It also confirmed for me the huge and inspiring diversity of what might be called 'innovative' poetry. I myself have had to expand my definition of what innovation might entail through my contacts with this work. And listening to all these private readings, week after week, could have been dreadful – but it has been surprisingly fun and exciting! It has undoubtedly inspired me in my own work as a poet, though I must admit I go to a lot fewer public readings now than I used to.

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