

The Poetic Gift Gestural Economy: Elizabeth-Jane Burnett in conversation with Kristin Prevallet
London to Brooklyn, September 2007

Elizabeth-Jane Burnett: How would you explain the term “poetic economy”; its origins, and what it means to your work?

Kristin Prevallet: For me, the origins of the concept “Poetic Economy” come from Olson, who I first read in earnest in Robert Creeley’s seminar on Olson at the University of Buffalo. I remember that some of the other students were impatient with Creeley because, after all, we were in graduate school and so had diligently spent hours upon hours reading the great density of *The Maximus Poems*. We wanted to talk about it, analyze it, dig into it. Leave with some insight into the text. What did we get? A lot of anecdotes. Not much direct references to the text itself. A lot of talking around the text, as if some overall purpose was being conveyed – not the words, in and of themselves.

Olson wrote many volumes of words – you can literally pick up anywhere and find what you need at any moment. This, I understood from Creeley, was the gold. It wasn’t through some deep analysis, some unfolding of truth that Olson could be understood. It was through an engagement in the conversation at play in his work.

I’m opening my old, spine-crumbling copy of *Selected Writings* (ed. Creeley, 1966. Bought used at Moe’s in San Francisco for \$4.00). Here’s what I get: a Mayan Letter about Pound’s *Cantos*: “that the substances of history now useful lie outside, under, right here, anywhere but in the direct continuum of society as we have had it (of the State, same, of the Economy, same, of the Politicks... (84). On a previous page: “I keep thinking, it comes to this: culture displacing the state” (83).

What it means to my work is this: that poetry as an activity and practice is written on the fault line of society – meaning, at the point where it is cracking, on the verge of splitting, contradicting itself, laying bare it's underbelly. Poetic language – whether it uses or usurps propaganda, whether it refers or disrupts references to politics, whether it appeals to economic flow or is sold by no one, read by no one, collected by no one but the writer – exists to displace the state. The state could be a state of mind, so the poetic disruption that occurs is psychological (an epiphany, for example, that moves a person's mental state, even temporarily.) The state could be a state of propaganda, so the poetic disruption that occurs is to use language not to sell people stupid (or useful) things and political platforms, but to perceive how language works in this capacity. The state could be a state of economy, so the poetic disruption that occurs is to produce objects with no use-value outside of the poem's capacity to be read, heard, discussed, understood, translated or mistranslated.

Again, it's conversation that (to me) is the key to reading Olson (and any work of difficult language). This is work that therefore puts the social assumptions of language (that the writer or speaker has ultimate authority, and if you don't get what he is saying, then you're stupid) into question. It's not about "getting it." It's about getting what you can out of it – and coming at it with whatever you've got. Including the starting point: I don't understand.

EJB: It's surprising to me that you relate this back to Olson. Using Olson to talk about displacing authority when to me he's such an authority figure himself – and Dell Olsen's Minimaus¹ poems come to mind for example, as texts working against that authority. What you say about students being frustrated with Creeley's anecdotal approach to Olson also has resonance for me, with my experience at Naropa on the Summer Writing Program. There was a lot of that anecdotal approach there, and that's not so much part of the pedagogy in the

¹ Redell Olsen, *Secure Portable Space*. Hastings: Reality Street, 2004

UK, so I was a little frustrated with that. But conversation as a way to question authority in discourse (and I think of the title of Bobbie Louise Hawkin's forthcoming book that she read from at Naropa - Gossip: A Memoir!) is so necessary... so I can see how conversation could be usefully figured into the circuit board for poetic economy.

KP: I don't think Olson is an authority figure – I think he assumed an authorship of his life and worldview. And all of his work is very discursive – passionate, but not totalitarian. And very anecdotal. The anecdote is important because oral accounts are how literary history gets transmitted... central to the mission of the Bowery Poetry Club, for example, is that poetry is ALIVE and exists in many forms, all of them equal.

EJB: Right, I suppose also when I speak of Olson as an authority figure, I'm thinking of how Anne Waldman describes him at readings for example: "encountering Olson in a raggedy and over-the-top performance...probably changed my life,"² - that powerful presence that he had. Does presence confer authority? Let's talk more about the role of performance here. It follows I think, that as an ephemeral practice with no commodity, performance might fit into the poetic economy model, but is there something more than this at work here too? Something less immediately tangible, inscribed in the history of performing poetry, and concerning the voice/the body/presence?

KP: The performance of poetry through body and space can happen on a stage, at a bookstore, on the street. Kaia Sand and Jules Boykoff have done a lot of work testing the public space and experimenting with how far a poem can go once it jumps off the page. Jennifer Karmin's ["Walking Poem" project](#) is another good example. And I love Jack Collum's chapbook, "In the Wind" in which he documents his experiment with "busking poetry" – that is, the spontaneous writing of it, with and without people. He sat himself down in an outdoor mall in

² Interview with Anne Waldman

Boulder, CO, and collaborated with passers-by. So there is no doubt that performance activates intangible effects. (Including the possibility that the performance will have absolutely no effect at all... or a diverted effect on a passer-by, who didn't stop to listen to Jennifer's poem, or participate in Jack's "busk" but who had a fleeting thought, that then became another thought, that then became an action, which catalyzed a whole chain of effects. These effects could be visible, or invisible; useful, or meaningless. Because once the language is out there, who knows how it will be received?

EJB: I am thinking of what you touch on in "The Gestural Economy of Poetic Practice," where you outline the history of the oral tradition in poetry.³ This oral tradition seems to be a thread running through the practice that comes out of institutions operating along the poetic economy model (the BPC and Naropa) - can you tell me what exactly this has to do with money? In other words, how is poetry's oral tradition relevant to theories of poetic economy; and more widely; what is the role that poetry's performance plays within the poetic economy?

KP: To get at your question about the intangible economics of performance: I'm thinking about a definition of economics that we can then apply to poetry and performance, if even as a metaphor. 1) Management of a house. 2) The administration of the concerns and resources of any community with a view to orderly conduct and productiveness. 3) Careful management of resources, so as to make them go as far as possible. 4) The structure, arrangement, or proportion of parts, of any product of human design. (OED)

So, any product of human design that is arranged and put into form is an economy. I like this definition, don't you? The oral tradition has many branches, depending who you're talking to. Suheir Hammad or Beau Sia or any other Def Jamm poet is going to speak about a very different lineage than Carolee Schneemann or Karen Finley. My sense of performance is organized and

³ Kristin Prevallet, "The Gestural Economy of Poetic Practice" delivered as a talk at Naropa University, July 2004.

presented around the rather asynchronous convergence of l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e Poetry, the PS122 performance space in the early 1990s, ballads, Surrealism, and the Beats. But I have created my own economy in assembling these divergent influences.

The voice/the body/presence are all abstractions until they come together in the economy of a performance. So I guess I'm asking that you perhaps think about economy as a structural paradigm, and not restrict yourself to thinking solely about it in terms of money. Money is a product of human design that is organized to maximize productivity. Poetry is a product of human design that is organized around productivity (the production of a chapbook that reaches 10 people or the production of a performance that reaches 1000 – different end results, but all an economy.)

EJB: Yes – I have been looking at the household model maybe as having a transferable infrastructure for the poetic economy. In Earth House Hold,⁴ Snyder applies the household infrastructure to poetry and outlines the type of household that might promote artistic practice. He covers a range of community infrastructures and approaches them historically but I guess I part from Snyder when he foregrounds Buddhist practice, and his grand vision:

“if we are lucky we may eventually arrive at a totally integrated world culture with matrilineal descent, free-form marriage, natural-credit communist economy, less industry, far less population and lots more national parks.”⁵

Well, maybe it's a generational thing, but I do find that a bit beat generation hippy! Not to negate the spiritual entirely, but I'd be concerned if this was considered integral to poetic economy, would you?

⁴ Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, 'Technical Notes and Queries To Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries'. New Directions Books, New York, 1969. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁵ Snyder, p.93

KP: Oh dear this does sound rather chaotic – and completely unfeasible except for in super small, utopian communities. Which are good experiments, but many failed. There is something a bit too Lord of the Flies that is innate to human nature – and this keeps coming out and ruining leftist, utopian visions of total equality.

EJB: I also think it's helpful to look at contemporary models for community in terms of arts practice – Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics⁶ for example. Bourriaud delineates a: "culture of interactivity," in contemporary art, and the creation of: "models of sociability." This social function is, for Bourriaud, the artist's creation of a: "micro-utopia" that attempts to: "fill in the cracks in the social bond." He asserts that:

These days, utopia is being lived on a subjective everyday basis, in the real time of concrete and intentionally fragmentary experiments. The artwork is presented as a social interstice within which these experiments and these new "life possibilities" appear to be possible. It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows.⁷

So Bourriaud's position is that though we cannot change culture through art we can make it a nicer place in the short term. But you'd suggest that poetry can go further? As you stated earlier: "the writer...exists to displace the state..."

KP: Oh no! It would be silly to think that poetry can displace the state. Did I say that? Here's what I think I mean (your questions are challenging me to make theoretical connections that I haven't articulated before - it's difficult!) No war

⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, les presses du reel, 1998. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁷ Bourriaud

will ever be stopped by a poem, no politician will enact legislation that incorporates poetic language. (But how great would that be if, for example, Anne Waldman's "Marriage: A Sentence" were incorporated into the amendment to legalize gay marriage?) What I mean by "disrupt the state" is that poetic thinking -- which is separate from the poem itself -- involves a group of people who are entertained by serious inquiry, alert to the propaganda façade, and able to see the universe in a molecule... it's activating and enlarging a mind that can connect patterns of experience with systems of meaning. This means that a lot of people embody poetic thinking, but don't necessarily bare their thought in a poem. It's these people, aware of the matrix while still living within its illusion, that disrupt the state. Disrupt at the level of psychic revolt. I love Kristeva's work on revolt: "Revolt, as I understand it -- psychic revolt, analytic revolt, artistic revolt -- refers to a permanent state of questioning, of transformations, an endless probing of appearances."⁸ That's what I'm talking about.

So when you're quoting Bourriaud's "life possibilities" and cultural change through art, I'm thinking about more thought-based, interior changes that actually do effect external realities. But ultimately, they point towards similar enactments of meaning. In an interview Bourriaud said that "Culture is a box of tools." In that box of tools is an economy of exchange – new objects and ideas come in from all over the place, from many different schools and traditions.⁹ There is no singular "poetics."

EJB: So does the writer exist to tailor rather than displace the state? I think there's something about the poetic economy that implies a working with the state rather than seeking to displace it entirely. Like the way the BPC funds itself through the bar and café and Bob Holman's premise that the poets drink enough to pay for the space. I like this approach of using the infrastructure you have already but to promote your own poetic systems – what Anne Waldman calls 'upaya' – using 'skillful means' to harness established power systems.

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*. Semiotext(e), 2002.

⁹ Simpson, Bennett. "Interview with Nicolas Bourriaud." *Artforum*, April 2001.

KP: I definitely agree with this. I'm an anarchist in thought but not in practice. In practice, I'm an old fashioned European Democratic Socialist. The problem is that there is no political theory which works as an organizing system for all of the contradictions in human nature.

EJB: And just a note to recognize that earlier shift from "household" to "community." I'm reminded of your "Gestural Economy" talk when you slightly problematised the word "community" saying: "I'm using the word economy instead of the word community: community implies cohesion and cooperation, which isn't always the case in poetry; economy implies diversity, multifarious exchange that doesn't need to cohere across different communities". That's a really interesting distinction, and we'll talk more about communities in relation to performance I hope, but yes, economy as multifarious exchange that doesn't need to cohere across communities, but that could just be your own particular aesthetics for example, that's a helpful paradigm.

KP: Thanks - once when I was helping to curate a conference, I asked Dodie Bellamy to be on a panel on "Poetry and Community" or something like that. She wrote back and said she didn't believe in community... and this really sparked a paradigm shift. We need the contentious objectors to keep the discourse alive!

EJB: Marcel Mauss writes:

Much of our everyday morality is concerned with the question of obligation and spontaneity in the gift. It is our good fortune that all is not yet couched in terms of purchase and sale. Things have values which are emotional as well as material; indeed in some cases the

values are entirely emotional. Our morality is not solely commercial.¹⁰

How have anthropological studies of gift cultures shaped your concept of the poetic economy? Do you see Marcel Mauss's seminal text on the gift¹¹ as having much relevance to your work in this area?

KP: I read Mauss many years ago, but haven't thought about him for a long time. I do remember having many good conversations about *The Gift*, along with *The Coming Community* by Giorgio Agamben, with fellow poets who were in Buffalo in the 1990s - especially Pam Rhem, Lew Daly, and Alan Gilbert. Those conversations, which gave me the framework for poetic thinking, were of great value.

*EJB: I am particularly interested in how dedications in work can function in the context of gift exchange for example. You inscribe *Perturbation, My Sister*¹² "For Alan." In fact, the copy I read in the British Library even had a handwritten dedication from you too - "Jan Eck - always, Kristin." Are dedications a useful component in the poetic economy?*

KP: Ah, now I know that Eck Finlay gave away his inscribed copy of *Perturbation, My Sister!* That's funny. And also very useful, the sort of trace of the gift that gets left in a dedication. Whose hands did it pass through? I dedicated the book to Alan Gilbert because he is the one who introduced me to Ernst's work. So that was a gift that then got transformed into another gift, given back to the giver of the first gift. So much for that!

¹⁰ Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift, Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1969. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹¹ Mauss

¹² Prevallet, Kristin. *Perturbation, My Sister*, First Intensity Press, Lawrence, Kansas, 1997.

EJB: I also like that fourth definition for economy you stated earlier in this interview: any product of human design that is arranged and put into form is an economy. I have been thinking of economy as a structural paradigm (not just in terms of money) as you suggest and drawing diagrams¹³ actually, to try and visualize the structure. And then you know I'm really struck by your phrase: "I have created my own economy" in relation to that. What an empowering phrase. I think this leads me onto my next question about the role of gender within a poetic economy.

Anne Waldman asserts that:

women have the advantage of producing a radically disruptive and subversive kind of writing right now because they are experiencing the current imbalances and contradictions that drive them to it...She – the practitioner – wishes to explore and dance with everything in the culture which is unsung, mute, and controversial so that she may subvert the existing systems...¹⁴

As a model for an alternative to the dominant cultural model of consumerism, the poetic economy subverts existing systems. But how much is this subversion a gendered issue?

Waldman also presents Civil Disobediences,¹⁵ a collection of texts from the Summer Writing program at Naropa, in its introduction as:

“civil” – polite, dignified, conscientious, decentralized thinking – “disobediences”, poetic acts that need to be outside the strictures of repression, censorship, war, that are in disagreement with the going

¹³ Forthcoming, yt communication

¹⁴ “Femanifestos,” *Civil Disobediences, Poetics and Politics in Action*. Anne Waldman and Lisa Birmin, eds. Coffee House Press, 2004, p.327

¹⁵ *Civil Disobediences, Poetics and Politics in Action*. Anne Waldman and Lisa Birmin, eds. Coffee House Press, 2004. All subsequent references are to this edition.

“capital” and the agendas of the rich and powerful cartels of the world.¹⁶

Is there a feminist agenda in this?

KP: I come from the generation that grew up thinking that the feminist agenda was about equality and autonomy – the assertion of a woman’s authority and logic, and her ability to act and effect change in the world. That was an economic agenda because it all started with equal pay for equal work, as well as the ability to divorce abusive husbands and fight for legislation making rape a criminal offence that cops would actually take seriously. Feminism now has a lot of different definitions – the psychoanalytic revolt that Julia Kristeva writes about doesn’t pertain only to the struggles of women. I suppose the subversion of systems that you’re talking about is akin to this more interior kind of revolt.

When I say I have created my own economy I mean that after 20 years of practicing poetry as a daily occupation, I now create work that is of my own logic and design – [and invent my own forms \(including performance\) to collide with it](#). The struggle to find my logos and voice has been one of finding and asserting gynocentric authority – definitely every word I write is feminist. Now I’m struggling just to assume authorship over my time, household, and relationships with x-husband, boyfriend, daughter, family ...working full time, writing ... juggling health concerns and money ...

EJB: And is this struggling also something that you would factor into the poetic economic circuitry? That element of sacrifice almost, if that’s not too grandiose...or of epic adventure (clearly too grandiose!) - the feeling that motivates Anne Waldman to make a Vow to Poetry, or Joan Retallack’s Wager –‘we are embarked!’ - the sacrifices we all make to produce poems not products...I think this is what you mean by ‘gestural economy’ – making poetic

¹⁶ *Civil Disobediences*, p.4

gestures that may never circle back to you in terms of return. I'd like to factor this element into the circuitry, with a kind of trip-switch to ignite humour and collaboration that stops me being so earnest about everything, what do you think?!

KP: Oh sure - I'm a poet even when I'm making dinner. The household, my relationships, my chaos, my health - it's all part of the framework, the bigger picture, the system that I'm trying to hold together.

EJB: It's also helpful to consider the communities operating within a poetic economy in this context I think. To me it seems that there are two communities in play – the artistic community that clearly operates within a field of artistic exchanges, and the reader/audience, which may not be part of that same artistic community. Joan Retallack's Poethical Wager comes to mind here too, for example when she states that:

You might prescribe, in an aesthetic context, that your own action will be based on your conscious framework of values, knowing that you can't predict the effect this will have on your audience, much less the world situation...¹⁷

We as poets can set up this economic system that makes sense to us the practitioners (the poetic economy is our wager), but how can we gauge "use"fulness in terms of the other communities that encounter this economy and also those who don't? Is that a worthwhile question or do we just get on with it!

¹⁷ Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*. University of California, 2003. p46.

In any case, can you talk a little more about the nature of the exchanges involved in this type of economy in relation to the audience community? What is the role of the audience within a poetic economy?

KP: It is such a useful and important question, and I tried to answer it in [the explanation I wrote for my “Cruelty and Conquest” performance at Naropa](#). And thank you for asking me to enlarge my thinking around these issues.

EJB: That’s a great way to respond. Thanks Kristin.

**