

The Poetic Economy: Anne Waldman in conversation with Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, Naropa University, “temporary autonomous zone”, July 2007

Elizabeth-Jane Burnett: I first encountered the term: “the poetic economy” at the Bowery Poetry Club, on the Study Abroad at the Bowery program in 2005. Bob Holman used it to speak generally about the way his club functioned; as a café, bar, bookshop, performance venue, school, but primarily as a living, working poetry project. How would you explain the term?

Anne Waldman: I think Bob was more tied to the term: “poetic economy”, I tend to use “exchange”... and champion the ‘gift’ model, so many of the poetry communities have survived this way, by individual poets and artists helping one another out with their time, as in organizing events, publishing magazines, anthologies and the like. Bob is an infrastructure champion, has done institutional things by necessity...created boards...in a legal way...he’s worked with many arts organizations, has experience in what it takes and has hired accountants, lawyers, advisors. So I would say his model, while the view and the content and the myriad manifestations of the Bowery Club are alternative, radical, experimental, the literal economy is working within an established system of money exchange, as Naropa University now is. It’s about survival within the capitalist system. Yes the roots of these two organizations are bohemian and we never got into this for the money, or a career and we keep our activism going which at times is “transgressive” in the best sense. It’s a human universe at these places. And countless folk have volunteered energy and vision for decades. But also Bob’s right, these are LIVING systems, open systems, not fixed, or institutionalized and they leave a lot of room for improvisation and spontaneity and individual artistic collaboration and contribution. I have been able to create events at the Club without a lot of hassle. There’s trust in my capabilities.

The Poetry Project structures have shifted...certainly the structures there are a bit different, and by contrast The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics

within Naropa is a real accredited degree-granting program with all the issues and standards that go along with that. Students need the credentials to survive. You buy your credit but of course we do so much more than that at Naropa. There's a whole subculture embedded in this zone. And the Kerouac school, while it still remains a kind of subculture within the larger Naropa university, we have to be part of this larger mandala and do our part and pay for the light bulbs in the library or the administrative offices. There are three campuses now you know...

EJB: Yes I've not been to them, just this one...

AW: Yes, well this is basically where year-round poetics and the Summer Writing Program is housed and it's the ur-campus. I think there are serious issues with the University's survival because we don't have a really strong endowment as yet. We are very much tuition driven which is a huge burden on students and all that has been harder under the current administration moving into this next century. And yet the school grows and flourishes. There's no other place quite like it. Founded by a Tibetan Buddhist meditation teacher, a poetics school co-founded by Allen Ginsberg. We once ran an ad: Come study with people who have been jailed for their beliefs...Some people come having broken with their families because parents don't see a degree in poetics as a good investment.

EJB: So how do you see the project of Naropa being different now to how it was when you started out? Particularly with reference to what you're saying about it being a fee-paying kind of structure?

AW: There were very few other writing programs when we started...so it wasn't about being just another writing program. The only writing program I knew was at Iowa and I studied their catalogue and realized we wanted to do very different kinds of things. We wanted to create an outreach program – have students work in prisons, homeless shelters, with children in grade-school and high schools, with AIDS patients, and so on. We wanted to give something back to the community. There was a kind of spiritual basis in non-

competitive education and in trying to create a more lasting community where people would really stay in touch after graduating, and continue to collaborate and work together. Also the Summer Program was centered in many ways in cultural activism. We are also coming out of what I call the Outrider tradition - a historic gift economy operating outside the academic “official verse culture” (in Charles Bernstein’s phrase) realm. The radical experimentation of the New American Poetry, Black Arts movement, projective Verse of Charles Olson, Ethno-poetics, Performance, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry etc. We have reading – and the emphasis I would say is on the reading - and writing classes. It’s about building a community of active readers and writers who carry the lineage in their genes. We also have translation workshops, an in-house print shop, and the meditative backdrop students may touch in with. Classes are offered in Sanskrit. We investigate gender, identity, race – consider all the so-called “boundaries”.

Everybody’s underpaid, and often work other jobs. But everybody is giving blood, sweat and tears all to this interesting occasion and experiment. So teaching here is a gift on the part of the teachers. And the students are generous too, realizing it’s not a typical situation all the time. I would say that’s a basic tension – the stress of the 21st century capital economy up against a more utopian model. The “zen zone” (Ed Sanders calls it) where you are in a safe place, a meditative space, and anything can manifest from your creativity. But given the struggles, there’s some joy, camaraderie, dedication, and vision. I also feel that I am a student. The exchange goes that way too. And I am also inspired by the Buddhist practice of “tonglen” – literally, “exchanging oneself with others”, a breathing and visualization practice that’s part of the Bodhisattva vow.

EJB: I am fairly comfortable when viewing the poetic economy in terms of some of the structures you’ve outlined - poets teaching for minimal pay, your paying for the light bulbs in the admin buildings and so on – and I would add to these examples the widespread practice of asking for voluntary contributions for chapbooks and at readings, and of downloading work free

from the web etc; visible exchanges that operate on a clearly counter-corporate level. But I struggle to figure the role of performance in this.

As an ephemeral practice for which there is no commodity, I can see that performance fits into the poetic economy model, but there is something more than this at work here too isn't there? Something less immediately tangible? Something inscribed in the history of performing poetry? To do with the voice/the body/presence?

I am thinking of what Kristin Prevallet touches on in "The Gestural Economy of Poetic Practice,"¹ where she outlines the history of the oral tradition in poetry. 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?

AW: There is something about oral transmission...I think this is where performance comes in...and I respect your question because it is a bit of a stretch...but this sense of lineage, transmission, of actually 'being' with the work in a public space is crucial. There is an intellectual/imaginative exchange going on in palpable moments, in public space not mediated by "control". I love the skillful means of the Internet but it was developed by the military. That's why when we designed the low residency program I was very insistent that students had to come here and be part of this community for at least two summers...I know that I've experienced "transmission" very personally, whether it's Ginsberg, Kenneth Koch, Barbara Guest, John Cage, even my brief meetings with O'Hara... and going out to the Berkeley poetry conference and encountering Olson in a raggedy and over-the-top "performance" which was more of an event. These encounters probably changed my life. There was a transmission quality in the performance. I could feel parts of my mind light

¹ Kristin Prevallet, "The Gestural Economy of Poetic Practice" delivered as a talk at Naropa University, July 2004.

up. They expanded my consciousness. It seemed an ancient way that people had been coming together for centuries in public, communal space. And that struck me so powerfully at Berkeley when I was twenty years old, that this is what it's about, I mean I'm speaking personally, I don't think everybody identifies in this same way. Talking to Bruce Andrews last night (at Naropa)...he did not grow up in NYC or an urban centre...he started getting things through the mail – we didn't have internet then. A little poetry magazine was a link to a much larger world and then of course...once you'd come to the city then the scene – the conversation - the readings - the performances - became more accessible... it was possible to encounter that kind of mind-to-mind transmission. And Bruce performs extensively himself. So...in speaking of performance there's the political sense of vocalizing - the roots, the sounds, the phones and phonemes of the word project outward to people listening, witnessing. You don't perform alone.

I do also think there's an older model, whether it's the apprenticeship of the shaman, I mean not to say that poets are necessarily shamans, but there is this wonderful rich sense of... “the technician of the sacred”, the prophet, the oracle which certain individuals have carried, particularly in more heroic times. When I was coming of age there were all these male figures: Olson, Duncan, John Ashbery (when he would read his “Litany” poem in duet with another voice), Jackson MacLow, Ginsberg, Burroughs, Spicer, Ted Berrigan, Ed Sanders. Creeley was less performative but no less public, I mean Bob didn't “project” as much but his quietude was a kind of performance, and you could hear the syllables in ways you didn't hear them when you read him on the page. And I certainly have seen women coming much more into this...particularly women of my generation – such as Alice Notley, who reads with great passion and intensity - and subsequent generations, being committed to taking a stand in public space. Helen Adam, the Scots balladeer was a fabulous anomaly of her generation. And then these venues continue to open up, I mean I would say the Poetry Project was oral at its core, with workshops and everything else, the publishing - and I see publishing and collaboration as a kind of performance as well - you know any interaction with the public space. And so much of the cultural and political work is

performance based. I am very involved with creating “modal structures” in my own work. And I work collaboratively with my son Ambrose Bye, a musician and composer who creates soundscapes around the poetry. There’s a generosity in performance – it’s intense, often a heightened “energy construct”. It requires my whole body, breath, voice and the sub-vocal as well. The movement of the language in my head often comes through in an altered frequency.

EJB: To touch on what you say about women entering more into this performance arena, what would you say is the role that gender plays within a poetic economy? I am particularly thinking of that part in your “Femanifestos” where you claim that:

Perhaps 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...²

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?

You also present Civil Disobediences,³ 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 “capital” and the agendas of the rich and powerful cartels of the world.⁴

Is there a feminist agenda in this?

² “Femanifestos,” *Civil Disobediences, Poetics and Politics in Action*. Anne Waldman and Lisa Birmin, eds. Coffee House Press, 2004, .p.327

³ *Civil Disobediences, Poetics and Politics in Action*. Anne Waldman and Lisa Birmin, eds. Coffee House Press, 2004. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴ *Civil Disobediences*, p.4

AW: I think the notion of the “unsung” is important and relevant here. It’s as if the repression of female imagination, the polyvalent body, the absence of women from the war sphere and in many cases the economic, cultivated a whole secret performance lineage, an ethical stream of awareness – a kind of enlightenment principle - that has remained hidden, under wraps, at least in this time frame/world system a good many years. Women are known for nurturing, providing, giving. Yet needing to find the right time to spring forth, sing forth, ring forth, and be actual cultural interventions. Take power and then empower. I have an old performance piece with the line “I’m coming up out of the tomb, men of war, just when you thought you had me down, in place hidden/ I’m coming up/ Can you hear the ground rumble under my feet/...and at the end: I’m coming out of the box/ Boo.” I try to be as scary and as funny as possible.

EJB: (Laughter) What a great place to end!