

Caroline Bergvall in conversation with Sophie Robinson

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Sophie Robinson: From 1995, you developed the Performance Writing programme at Dartington College of Arts, and I was wondering, in the context of the work you have done since, how you would define Performance Writing in 2007?

Caroline Bergvall: Educationally, I would still define it in the same way. A way of looking at writing within broader textual environments than solely literature, wanting to see literature as a particular point in the history of writing, rather than considering everything to do with writing to be a part of the literary. I think it's really about considering writing as part of a broader issue to do with memory and inscription, primarily but not exclusively verbal inscription. A lot of poets are working audiovisually and yet they really get validated only once they start publishing books. We're still at that breaking point, a transit culture, when it comes to really accepting the validity of forms of the production and dissemination of writing that are not only inscribed by the literary, the book. We are moving slowly towards a broader, and perhaps less book-based, understanding of what writing is, what poetry is. I must add that Performance Writing was initially taught in a performing arts college, so it was immediately clear that we wouldn't just deal with the books and the literary, but also with manifestations of writing and language arts which are connected to other methods and to performance (mark making, live readings, installed texts, book objects as well as textual and literary influences).

S.R.: In your 1996 keynote 'What do We Mean by Performance Writing?', you talk about the possibilities for Performance Writing to reveal and play with 'oppressive...models for representation' in language. I was thinking about

this in relation to the concerns of your work, and, in particular, concepts of queering and plurilingualism. How do you feel that the political/social body in performance can work as a kind of interference in language to reveal these 'oppressive' structures?

C.B.: When we look at the social body, the physical body, the textual body – there are different rules or laws which are applied to each, so there are different ways in which one is imprisoned or contracted, socially, with one's body and language(s). I would see any attempt at opening up what that might mean, or understanding how you could function once you become aware of the codes that are ruling you and start to play with them, as part of the performative. As coming to a particular kind of awareness. One can think about psychoanalysis, activist politics, environmentalism as different strands that can be applied to the reading of these different social bodies that you are a part of in one way or another. In *Goan Atom*, the body is also metaphor, allegory. I used Hans Bellmer's concept of the doll, and, thinking about the joints, used it as a working metaphor to address lots of issues to do with the body, especially issues of sexuality. I also used other artists that work explicitly with the body, for example Cindy Sherman. I used the doll to facilitate a disjointed writing about the body. In other pieces, such as a number of those contained in *FIG*, my own body's history is involved, for example in 'GONG'. In 'Say: Parsley', it's the body of listeners that I was interested in and I developed the piece with this in mind: how to explicate processes of listening, what prejudices or assumptions operate when we listen.

S.R.: I was also thinking about the way you set up your performances so that 'bodies' are in conflict through meshing times and spaces, and therefore question the nature of themselves. In 'About Face', for example, 'bodies' of text and voices conflict and come out with this stuttering, perhaps like Giles Deleuze's concept of 'stuttering in one's own language'.

C.B.: Absolutely. It's about lack of fluency. Part of your body can set up an obstruction. Most of the way in which we see or understand things is obstructed, or *about* obstruction, anyway. I've always been interested in lack

of fluency, and perhaps that is because I come to English through a lack of fluency. That immediately sets up stutterings or complications in the way you view yourself as a social body, and the way you view the language that you speak. If one considers that performativity is about the awareness of mediation and obstruction, then so many of my actions as an artist and poet have to do with that.

S.R.: Your “Shorter Chaucer Tales” ‘The Franker Tale’ also seems to work dynamically with translations of Chaucer – you seem to work between translation of language, form and conceptual concerns. Could you talk about your process here, and the relationship of the work to contemporary culture?

C.B.: I was interested in the way that Chaucer decides to explore the use of English, and also the way he parodies his own time, his own culture. *The Canterbury Tales* is such a funny and, at the same time, such a powerful text. I was interested in both his treatment of moral values and his enjoyment of language. You see the assumptions of his time and the way he plays with them through his characters. Because he is so satirical and so concerned with giving comment, I took it on to do the same; to discuss some of the social things which were preoccupying me. Two of the four pieces I wrote are to do with gender, and particularly gendered violence, and the role of religion, here Catholicism, in this, the way it blocks and oppresses female bodies, especially in relation to sexual health. We are moving again into such conservative times when it comes to issues such as abortion, family planning. This project was the perfect platform for me to express my anger and outrage. Abortion, now, in this country, is again suddenly being highlighted as something we need to discuss, and the radical increase of wars and genocides that use mass rape as a war tool is devastating. There’s a profound sense that the female body is in a final instance still very much owned by the state and by religion. This project was an opportunity to vent openly, but also satirically.

S.R. : *The body is also very interesting in live performance, when reading this kind of work. The kind of writing you are doing - as with many of the writers in How2 - plays with identity, always working from the outside. From doing that*

in language, it might sometimes be problematic to get up and put one voice and one body to this text. I was wondering how you felt about that?

C.B. : Well there's a thing about the identity, especially one that's working against the status-quo. Women are still in this position where, as soon as you put *yourself* there, it is somehow a part of the reading of the work. It's not necessarily prejudicial, but it has certain kinds of conditions. Perhaps that's why, in some of my performances, I'm not in them. In 'About Face', for example, my voice is there but it's continually being interrupted. There's a disruption of the fluent assumptions of the "one voice - one body".

S.R.: Could you talk about your relationship to representations of women in art history in Goan Atom and Fig?

C.B. : In the whole of art history? Sure...!

S.R. : Well, I suppose I'm talking specifically about your references to Hans Bellmer and Magritte, amongst others, in your work. Also, I read Drew Milne's review of Goan Atom, and he uses the term 'queer poetics' in relation to your work, so I wonder how that idea of 'queering' relates to your treatments of the female body in (male-produced) art.

C.B.: Well, there were several starting points for that. One was the impossibility of imagining myself simply as a classical whole. When I wanted to use the allegory of the female form, I found it very difficult to use this classical shape or image. I found the perversions of Bellmer's doll really usable. My starting point was fragmentation, then, and being able to rethink the body completely. Also, he was working with sculpture but exhibiting it as photography, so there were delays, transformations, no 3D trace, really. The sculpture is not made available in that way. It's interesting for thinking about, queerness as a minority sexuality, a minority body, a body overloaded with negative or passive connotations. It worked quite well to acknowledge queer poetics as something that is a part of this new body. I didn't feel the need to do a New Eve or something, it didn't have to be something that was finished. I was happy for it

to be an incomplete structure, limping away, half-finished, half-French, you know? *[laughter]* I don't have a kind of complete, ideal body in mind. It was more, you know, 'what bits can I take away and change?', so that the bits I put back in are ones that I feel address my use of language, my interest in bilingualism and translations, my interest in female body forms, sexuality, femininity, all of that. My treatment queers politically because of my own sexuality, but also because of the pastiche or parodying of existing forms.

S.R.: Your refiguring of the work of others, for example Hans Bellmer or Chaucer, seems to play with elements of the work which may seem oppressive or exploitative, gender-wise. How do you see your relationship to the works you translate and write through, in terms of where meaning is shifted to through the practice?

C.B.: Part of the way I see my participation in culture is through the past. It's almost a banal thing to say, but it explains in some way why my writing openly plays with other models. Sometimes, as with Bellmer, it is to comment and take it back for another function, and sometimes, like in Chaucer, I create a multi-lingual commentary. When it comes to the Dante piece, it was about structuring questions to do with translation, the impossible original of translation. I'm asking different questions of the textual activity through using these models. These models also provide ways of thinking about representation and poetic structuring. So I'm using it both as process and as a working through of the thoughts that those artists had about the body and such. Sometimes, as with the Bellmer, I'm very critical: I look for anything I can use to answer my own questions about what a body is, how I speak, how much I am able to speak, what interrupts me.

S.R.: There's also a question there about the ethics of representation. The naked female body is such a laden image, so overworked in a way. How do you represent that without being exploitative? How do you write female sexuality without relying on past forms which might end up putting you in the position of misogynist or oppressor through this representation?

C.B.: That's right. You are already read by the model, somehow. And that has to be a practice of translation as well. Duchamp, for example, is really interesting, you have all his puns. They are simultaneously funny, extremely sexualised, and very banal in their misogyny. So I had to find ways of translating that, through a form of writing which was explicitly sexual, but which attempts to represent a different kind of sexuality, so that we don't always find ourselves with this fairly misogynistic sexual poetics recreated in my work. I try and keep a feminist background in the way in which I approach these models, to make sure I don't get caught up in the material and end up confirming stereotypes. Certainly, at the beginning of the 21st Century in the West, we have had a great number of strong critical and deconstructive models, transgressive models of sexuality in art and society. All of this informs the way I can imagine representations, as perhaps incomplete and therefore opened up to the future. I certainly feel that I'm always in the middle of thinking. I haven't been able to settle for any model of representation, but I have a critically aware way of thinking about a textualised body.

S.R.: What is your attitude to humour and play in writing/performance?

C.B.: Well, there's always been a lot of that in my work. It's a way of looking over your shoulder, or over the shoulder of language. It's also a means of protection, and a means of moving forward. It protects you because there's laughter in between, therefore it's not sincerity in the way that sincerity might force you to inhabit only the position you're speaking from. In that context I'm quite comfortable with ridiculing aspects of myself, my accent or whatever, and to use that playfully and with a broader notion of comedy as a kind of critical practice or a commentary practice. Kathy Acker works with this, in that she'll take you through this anger, these rants, and then there will be an extremely funny moment in the middle of her gory, perverse universe. Aspects of *Goan Atom* are quite ridiculous, and it's very freeing to me somehow.

S.R.: Finally, why do you write?

C.B.: Initially, I wrote because I needed to appear, to find a way of appearing in the world. It was a very private basis. It was to give myself a place that I thought I could be in charge of, and that could somehow solidify me a bit. Out of that were built various layers of identity, of interests, of experience. The core of it was very much a question to myself: How do you exist? That's still very much there, how do I exist and how do *we* exist, collectively? What separates us? It's still an important part of the work. It's also, increasingly, about wanting to be a part of a broader commentary, a cultural commentary. It's both about creating a place for myself, and also using myself and my poetics as part of a commentary.

S.R.: I think that's a part of why your work is so exciting. Each project seems to define its own practice on new ground. In asking that question, they seem to carve out a place for themselves.

C.B.: I really hope so!