

many arrows touch a circle

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I enter this conversation as a member of the Tangent editorial collective. Our particular small press effort might be described as quick-change artistry: we are small and flexible without wide and consistent distribution. We conceptualize our projects as tangents, arrows touching a circle at one point and then shooting off.

Our collective is mainly focused on getting a zine out twice yearly, although we occasionally re-invent that—once, as an insert to Boog City, thanks to David Kirschenbaum, and currently, as an audio issue, which, thankfully, Andrea Murray has stepped in to guest edit. But we also consider new ways to construct our “arrows,” both through the people involved and the projects conceived. Some of these projects are pamphlets, which can be quickly generated to serve various purposes (an interview with Winona LaDuke, a play by Tina Darragh). We’ve tried a radio show, which allows us to think differently about the artifact—sound waves rather than paper—as well as the audience, and possibilities of inadvertent audiences. And we also take on chapbooks: we just published Susana Gardner’s *to stand to sea*.

Through our design, we are happy to have people join our efforts, we attempt new projects, and the financial side could be described as makeshift. This energy of collective efforts spinning out new and sometimes rough artifacts—this quick-change artistry—complements the small presses that have more reach and reliability. Both approaches are important.

Right now, I am particularly interested in how culture work might be local and global at once. As I mentioned, we had a radio program in Walla Walla, Washington, that, due to the shape of the terrain, had a fairly wide frequency. Our little show reached college dorm rooms, Walla Walla Sweet onion farms, and the maximum-security penitentiary on the outskirts of Walla Walla. We could drive south through Milton-Freewater, Oregon, past Athena, Oregon, toward the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Reservation, and still hear the station. And yet, at the same time the radio waves moved through the golden hills of Southeast Washington and Northeast Oregon, our shows also occasionally sounded from computers in the early morning hours of England—thanks to the work of the college station we broadcasted on, KWCW, Whitman College, as well as our online archives, which we are still building.

This scale shifting allowed us a sense of location while exploding our idea of what audience could be at that location. For instance, we tried to dream up what a journal release party might look like for an online and international journal, the new :dusie:, edited by Susana Gardner out of Schaffhausen, Switzerland. We hosted the release party via **tangentradio** by broadcasting an interview with Susana from Switzerland, and readings from Tom Orange from Washington, DC, Sawako Nakayasu from Tokyo Japan, and Divya Victor, in Philadelphia.

We continue to consider how we might be *on location* and *many other places*—at once. Jules Boykoff and I have been dreaming up the Brooklyn-to-Brooklyn reading series, half jokingly, where we would have poets read in our house in the small neighborhood of Brooklyn in Portland, Oregon, from the various Brooklyns. Of course, we are playing off the fact that so many interesting poets live in Brooklyn, NY, but we're also interested in reconfiguring the way we might map the local. How might we be dispersed and cast a wide net, and yet build from actual events and human encounters? (While we haven't tried the Brooklyn-to-Brooklyn idea yet, we did launch an occasional reading series in Portland this spring, featuring David Buuck, Alicia Cohen, and Jane Sprague.)

My own culture work is tethered to a respect for how small presses have historically asserted poetic culture. That Walt Whitman self-published was not some quirky blip of literary history, but rather, a gesture exercised by many innovative poets. Especially in my teaching, I care very much about demystifying the role of small press, of do-it-yourself cultural work, rather than just promoting easy author-discovery stories. We can trace the role of self-publishing, little magazines, and other small press work in so many avant-garde movements—the Surrealists, the Dadaists, New York School, Language, what have you.

Take the Black Arts Movement. The fact that, at age 50, Gwendolyn Brooks chose to move her book from the established Harper & Row to Dudley Randall's Broadside Press—in order to support the publication of emerging African American poets—is worth celebrating again and again. And Broadside Press, which was launched by Randall publishing his own broadside, supported the first chapbooks of Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, Etheridge Knight; Diane DiPrima's Poets Press continued to support Audre Lorde. It is the insistence of the Broadside Presses, the Third Word Presses, the Poets Presses that widens what is poetically possible.

Juliana Spahr—who does so much important small press work—writes about how poetry is “currently the most anarchist of art forms in the United States” because it is “self-governing and decentralized.” She described this organizing pattern as “a series of locally grounded collectives that reflect various specific cultural, political, and aesthetic concerns, with many of these collectives distinctively combining several of these concerns at once.” We need not look to a Department of Poetry to centralize and standardize our art; we need not look at the capitalistic markets that honor profits better than they support poetic innovation and ethical conduct. Rather, as Spahr points out, anyone can pitch in, simply by making culture happen: edit a little magazine, print a broadside, curate a reading series, broadcast a radio show. Writers and artists are empowered when we take on the means of production and distribution, but likewise, culture is strengthened when power is shifting through the hands of many rather than consolidated in the hands of few. Power is seized and re-seized, it is dispersed and shifting—sustaining lithe and innovative poetic cultures.

Spahr, Juliana. "After Language." Earlier version was translated into Swedish for *OEI 7* (2001) 70. This version printed in Danish (translated by Mette Moestrup) in *Den Bla Port*, 2002. March 20, 2005
<<http://people.mills.edu/jspahr/afterl.htm>>

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