

Elizabeth-Jane Burnett

“The Poetic Economy”: Investigating Possibilities of No Return.

Gift/Exchange

At some junctions there may be more than one roundabout. Apply the normal roundabout rules at each one, but keep a special look-out for GIVE (A)WAY lines¹

- DRIVING, The Department of Transport Manual

Though utopian, the alternative to prevalent utilitarian ethics that gift theory offers poetry is not unworkable. Continuing structures of small press activity and performance from the sixties, the system we are terming “the poetic economy” is operational today; in institutions, publishers and venues nurturing, promoting and sustaining experimental poetics worldwide. Fundamental to an understanding of the type of economy in which innovative poetry functions today is a reconfiguration of theories of exchange. This extends the critical debate that follows the publication in 1969 of Mauss’s *The Gift, Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*².

Analysis of the type of economy in which contemporary innovative poetry functions can offer solutions to questions regarding its relevance and efficacy within an increasingly commodified society. In *Ugly Feelings*³, Sianne Ngai responds to Adorno’s⁴ analysis of the historical origins of aesthetic autonomy and the present day awareness of art’s inability to change the society it is outside of, by developing an aesthetics of negative emotions that explores these feelings of art’s separateness and ineffectuality. She asserts that:

¹ *DRIVING, The Department of Transport Manual*, Printed for Her Majesty’s Stationery Office by W. S. Cowell Ltd, Ipswich, 1979

² 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.

³ Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, England, 2005. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴ Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*, Minnesota Press, 1997.

The discussion of aesthetic autonomy in *Aesthetic Theory* suggests that literature may...be the ideal space to investigate ugly feelings that obviously ramify beyond the domain of the aesthetic proper, since the restricted agency from which all of them ensue is one that describes art's own position in a highly differentiated and totally commodified society.⁵

Poetry printed in little known publications with small print runs, performed to few in inconspicuous venues, marketed rather by word of mouth or specialist circulation lists than on television or billboards clearly lends itself to such criticisms of restricted agency. But if the methods of producing and distributing poetry can be viewed as not separate from the consumer society in which they function, but in fact operating along the same methods of exchange, the way is opened for art making within a commodified society that may be considered more skilful than restricted, hopeful than ugly. An awareness of this parity in methods of exchange allows us to view poetry not as the bastard of capitalism but rather the playful yet legitimate heir. This in turn produces a critical approach to poetry that refuses to relegate it to that of a culturally redundant art form, for the poetry we are addressing does not exist outside society, but continues to live, however fragile, within its capitalist core, producing change, when it does, from the inside, an inside job. What this approach provides therefore, is a way of seeing poetry not as separate, marginalized, disenfranchised from the market economy its makers and consumers live in, but operating along the very same methods of exchange. And yet this is not to condemn poetry as dirty goods, implicated within the same dichotomy of profit and loss promoting the mass production of the easily marketable, but rather to suggest that a closer investigation of the nature of the exchanges within a market economy might produce an understanding of the central placing of poetry within this system. We are looking at poetry that does not cower in the corner behind what Bowery Poetry Club proprietor Bob Holman terms “the big bully Goliath Corporate Capitalism”⁶ but hijacks the systems that it sees in operation and re-writes them to produce new returns.

Poetry as goods, or gifts, that elicit a return in terms of an audience or readership actively involved in the meaning making of the poem, and/or in

⁵ Ngai, p.2

⁶ Holman, Bob. “Imagine. The Poetic Economy vs. the Horrific Triumph of Capitalism: A Report from the Front”, unpublished.

facilitating the poem's means of production, can be viewed in terms of the standard norm of reciprocity familiar to theories of market economy. However, what is different about the reciprocal exchange when poetry is the gift, is the nature of the return. When we speak about reciprocity in the market place, we are considering goods exchanged for money, for economic profit. When poetry is the gift, although there may be a return, it does not necessarily come in terms of money or profit. As Shannon Maguire articulates in her essay in this section: "The first lesson I learned working in a bookstore is: poetry doesn't sell. People will pay money for prose fiction or to see music, theatre, film, burlesque, people fighting - even the pint of beer that lubricates a poetry reading - but for some unfathomable reason, people expect poetry to be free." Likewise Jena Osman's extract from *Financial District* in this section throws up the challenges of navigating the commercial routes of Wall Street poetically, while Amy Sara Carroll's *Pipedream* also addresses the unsettled and unsettling relationship between writing and economy: "Postscriptural economies: put that in your pipe and smoke it. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. All right. Put that in your purse and tote it." Rather than economic profit, the return in a poetic economy is an engagement with the work that allows the work to be read, processed, understood or misunderstood; felt or imagined; to cohere into or to oppose critical contexts; simply to live. This type of return not only requires an audience, but requires a certain type of audience; one more active than before. The development of new readerships and audiences for poetry, who *share* in the responsibility for producing the cultural work of the poem becomes necessary.

A New Audience

*It's a very volatile pond, filled with all sorts of creatures*⁷

- Kristin Prevallet, *From the poem to the performance of "Cruelty and Conquest"*

It is not enough to view the audience for contemporary innovative writing as an easily definable social network that understands and endorses the work it

⁷ Prevallet, Kristin. *From the poem to the performance of "Cruelty and Conquest"*, How2, vol. 3, issue 2

reads because it has (in part) been written with them in mind. As Caroline Bergvall observes in her keynote talk “What do we mean by Performance Writing,” given at Dartington:

practitioners which engage with a process of writing inevitably forward an intervention of language and of reading which destabilises and refocusses the processes of looking and/or of listening.⁸

Both writer and reader participate in the processes of looking and listening ‘anew’ to works of “performative” writing. The responsibility for “understanding” or accessing or producing new work is shared between writer and reader. As Kristin Prevallet has remarked, 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.⁹

David Emanuel’s account of Amina Cain and Jennifer Karmin’s experimental Red Rover reading series at which Prevallet has performed (published in this section) provides a practical demonstration of this sharing of cultural work between writer/performer and reader. Emanuel’s description of the poetry reading “as a language-based performance experiment with multiple collaborators”¹⁰ provides a useful way into work where poetry’s performance serves as an invitation to collaborate in meaning making. Peter Middleton identifies the new, active type of readership required to fit such a framework of reciprocal exchange in *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption*¹¹:

Reading the poem requires labours whose boundaries are not easily foretold. Poems have to be realized, rendered, performed, or as we ordinarily say, read, for their meaning to be produced.¹²

⁸ Bergvall, Caroline. *Keynote: What do we mean by Performance Writing?* Delivered at the opening of the first Symposium of Performance Writing, Dartington College of Arts, 12 April 1996

⁹ *The Poetic Gift Gestural Economy: Elizabeth-Jane Burnett in conversation with Kristin Prevallet London to Brooklyn, September 2007*, How2, vol. 3, issue 2

¹⁰ Emanuel, David. “Reading is (Not) a Performance”, The Red Rover Reading Series, Chicago, How2, vol. 3, issue 3

¹¹ Middleton, Peter. *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption*, Raleigh: Alabama University Press, 2004

¹² Middleton, p.x

And David Miller and Richard Price's *British Poetry Magazines 1914 – 2000: A History and Bibliography of "Little Magazines"*¹³ provides a fairly comprehensive survey of the kind of poetry produced for and by such a readership. One such example of small press activity that did not seek to make economic profit but instead operated along the premise of a different kind of return, one where a receptive and active readership for innovative poetry would be the profit gained, is that of Gael Turnbull and Michael Shayer's Migrant Press, set up in 1957. As Turnbull states to a contributor to Migrant:

I don't mean to ever "balance the books" on this. It is a personal effort. To anyone interested in the kind of things that you and I and Michael are interested in. Which may be many, or a few. It doesn't matter. What matters to me is the exchange, the contact, the kind of focus that it can bring about."¹⁴

With Migrant the exchange is not financial – subscription was by donation – but personal and aesthetic. As Price asserts:

its rhythm of appearance, its mixture of anonymous extracts from letters, poems, unplaceable prose, and reprinted material seems to have been not so much an attempt to publish as a means by which other writing might be allowed to happen.¹⁵

This use of publishing as a spur to creating other work, a means of artistic exchange, coincides with Fluxus mail art of the period, and illustrates how the foundations were set at this time for the type of "poetic economy" operating today. This is an economy based on artistic exchange within communities, and operating within a framework where the means of production are controlled by artists themselves, allowing greater creative freedom - albeit on a budget. Turnbull and Shayer both had their own poetry published in Migrant magazine – they were artists controlling their own means of production – and their method of production enabled them to keep costs down and to finance the project themselves. Migrant began with the lowest of start-up costs, simply by Turnbull buying up stock and stamping books with a

¹³ Eds. Miller, David and Price, Richard. *British Poetry Magazines 1914-2000: A History and Bibliography of "Little Magazines"*, British Library, UK, 2005. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹⁴ Gael Turnbull to Migrant contributor Wanda Donlin, 7 July 1959

¹⁵ Eds. Miller, David and Price, Richard

forwarding address reading “Migrant Books c/o National Provincial Bank, Worcester”. Low production costs signal that the exchange operating between reader and editor here is not primarily financial. The exchange here is artistic, aesthetic, and social. This is indicated by the press’s mailing list, which Turnbull received from W. Price Turner, editor of *The Poet*. Though this was a list of not much more than a hundred names, it was the nature of the readership that was important. Here was a previously established poetic community, interested in receiving contemporary innovative work. Turnbull was pitching his press to exactly the right kind of readership that could allow a poetic economy to function – the type of readership that would be open to the innovative work he was promoting, that would circulate his publications within poetic communities, and that in many cases would write as well as read the work, contributing their own poetry to the press. Migrant’s method of production scaled up with Turnbull’s acquisition of a rotary duplicator to print the magazine. Following this one-off cost however, production costs remained low, and though the magazine only ran for eight bi-monthly issues, books and pamphlets continued to be published under the Migrant imprint.

Migrant’s focus on the importance of the artistic exchange was echoed in much of the small press publishing of the period. Price discerns how:

the idea of what the literary journal’s expectations should be...(were)...reconfigured, with an increasing specialization of aesthetics and a sense of the little magazine more as a circular among like-minded practitioners than as a review for non-practicing readers.¹⁶

The work produced amongst the Fluxus community provides a further example from this period of networked practitioners placing onus on the engagement of the audience or readership with the work, to such a degree that boundaries between artist and audience communities could become blurred. While most active in the sixties, the Fluxus community continued to make work through subsequent decades, and Alison Knowles’ *October Suite* from the nineties is an interesting piece to view in the context of exchange. *October Suite* is a series of screen prints compiled into book form produced at De Montford University in 1998 as part of the conference *Rethinking the Avant-*

¹⁶ Eds. Miller, David and Price, Richard

Garde. Knowles dedicated *October Suite* to a number of artists: Nicholas Zurbrugg (who helped put the conference together), Richard Hamilton, Emmett Williams, Dick Higgins, George Brecht and Hermann Braun. The dedications in Knowles' work provide a sense of establishing communities, of making work for specific individuals who are artists and also friends. In addition to exploring the ways that this work produces return in terms of active audience response, we also consider how it functions within Mauss's schema of gifts as transactions to facilitate alliances, goods given not simply to pay for goods or services but as tribute. For as Mauss outlines, transactions: "are for the most part counterprestations made not solely in order to pay for goods or services, but also to maintain a profitable alliance."¹⁷ Knowles explains how:

Gifts for me are above all else a way to thank someone for something done for you: connections, love admiration, a rich idea, lots of things but personal.¹⁸

These elements of gift exchange can operate on a professional as well as personal level, as Knowles herself outlines:

I did the Leicester print for him...(Richard Hamilton)...to be grateful for connecting me and the Press to Marcel Duchamp... I sent Richard two prints, the dedicated one to him from the October series and the print I did of Coeurs Volants with Marcel. He responded to me with his own print *The Critic Smiles*.¹⁹

Here the exchange operates as both personal and professional alliance. The dedication to Emmett Williams provides another example of this function of gift exchange. Knowles writes:

The print dedicated to Emmett concerned our many performances of my event score by that name, *Nivea Cream*. The October suite shows the blue plastic jar with the white label that we all used for skin cream years ago...For many years Emmett worked as an editor of the *Something Else Press* in New York. He was and is a dear friend who gave me the insight that my artwork is a collection of insights into my own life. He influenced and helped me make the *Big Book* at my 22nd st. studio in 1967.²⁰

¹⁷ Mauss, p.70

¹⁸ "Alison Knowles and the Gift", Alison Knowles in conversation with Elizabeth-Jane Burnett September 2006, *Jacket* 33: July 2007. All subsequent references to AK interview are to this article.

¹⁹ AK interview, *Jacket*: 33

²⁰ AK interview, *Jacket*: 33

The dedication to Dick Higgins: “friend, collaborator and husband,”²¹ functioned in a similar way, paying tribute to a friend, but also to a professional colleague, who could further the artistic practice. Knowles cites Higgins’ role as editor of the Something Else Press as a significant factor in her career, describing how: “with Dick I really learned to read and through his Press I published several books. His concept of intermedia allowed me to do poetics, do sound works and do screen prints.”²² Personal and professional alliances appear to merge in these instances, where an artwork through its dedications refers both outwards to a network of professionals, and inwards to a social network that facilitates the artwork’s production through assistance given to the artist in the name of friendship.



- *Couers Volants (Flying Hearts) 1967*

Numerous pockets of similarly functioning small press activity have come and gone since (and alongside) Fluxus, moving us, the new audience, on to where we are today. It is not the purpose of this essay to document this activity, though we note Bob Cobbing, Eric Mottram and Allen Fisher’s work as publishers in the UK in particular, and Anne Waldman and Lee Hardward’s in the US. The recent V & A exhibition “Certain Trees: the Constructed Book,

²¹ AK interview, Jacket: 33

²² AK interview, Jacket: 33

Poem and Object, 1964-2008”, curated by Simon Cutts of Coracle Press also offers a helpful gathering of UK small press activity from this period, where communities of practitioners have worked together to form both writers and audiences for the work, while in January this year, the “Experimental book design and London’s little presses” exhibition at St. Bride’s Printing Library, London, showcased the book design and production practices of Fulcrum, Gaberbocchus, Keepsake, Trigram and Writers Forum. Notable present day activity in this area includes: in the UK, electronic journal and reading series Opened, Veer Books, Bad Press, yt communications; and across the Atlantic, the small press activity surrounding Naropa University, and Bowery Books, the publishing arm of the Bowery Poetry Club. The internet (as Opened explores) also offers new opportunities for the distribution of work and the creation of audiences. In *Digital Poetics*²³, Glazier outlines the web’s potential for the low cost dissemination of work, as the successor to numerous historical writing movements; various small press movements, mail art movements, the Mimeo Revolution, the photocopy press of the 1970s, the PageMaker Press of the 1980s and the Zine movement of the 1990s. As he states: “these are all traditions where the writer took control of the production and circulation of literature.”²⁴ The Cut out and Keep issue of How2 (vol.3, issue 1) showcased the current work of Dusie press in this area, and Christina Continelli’s essay *The DIY Literati* published within this section offers an account focusing on contemporary small press activity online, while How2 itself also flourishes as a model for publishing online.

Personal Transmission (“Hau”)

When poetry becomes personified through the use of the body in performance, the role of the audience in the functioning of the exchange requires attention. What kind of return can an audience offer off-the-page poetry, poetry personified in, and emanating from, bodily presence?

²³ Glazier, Loss Pequeno. *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002. All subsequent references are to this edition.

²⁴Glazier, p.29



- *Make a Salad* (1962)

In *Event Scores*²⁵, a series of performance pieces that became part of the Fluxus canon in the sixties, Knowles (and her performers) performs rituals such as preparing food (“Make a Salad”) and applying face cream (“Nivea Cream Piece”). Bodily presence in performance presents the gift as something alive, that the audience must engage with in order to participate in the exchange and to provide: “some equivalent to take its place,”²⁶ as Mauss claims is necessary in the functioning of a potlatch, and in accordance with the Maori spirit of “hau”. We have seen how an audience or readership can provide alliances and public recognition in exchange for gifts, in the way that Knowles’ dedications function in *October Suite*. Live performances also encourage these exchanges, as work is brought into direct contact with an audience, increasing public recognition through this contact and through subsequent reviews, criticism and documentation of events. Alliances can be made between the artist and audience members sympathetic to the work. Performances also encourage what Mauss terms “morphological” exchanges (those created by the converging of a community around a particular place, event or ritual) as communities converge to form the audience for a specific event, such as the Fluxus concerts where Knowles performed her *Event Scores*. Mauss has written how gifts “retain a magical and religious hold over the recipient.” In Knowles’ performative exchanges however, the hold is not

²⁵ Knowles, Alison. *Great Bear Pamphlet*, Something Else Press, 1965

²⁶ Mauss, p. 10

so much magical and religious as aesthetic and moral. The moral element present in the gift exchanges in performance is motivated by the obligation to repay the gift. The fact that the audience may not recognize this obligation, (and with something so subjective as audience response it would be difficult to ever accurately assess whether “they” as a whole, or even individuals within an audience did or not recognize this), should not however stand in the way of the artist putting in place the means for such an exchange to occur. Retallack stresses the importance of continuing with these exchanges in spite of the difficulty of predicting audience response, for:

when you get down to the level of individual agency, the effects of any one person’s actions or work, particularly from the partial and myopic perspective of that individual herself, are quite mysterious. This means, I think, that each person has to make decisions based on prescription rather than prediction...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...²⁷

The body in performance can personify the reciprocal obligation involved in gift exchanges, serving as both an obligation for the artist to engage with the social, and a call for the community to respond to the artist, or individual. Knowles’ daughter Hannah Higgins has observed how:

Fluxus artists place their living bodies between the material and mental worlds...(which)...negotiate degrees of human freedom in relations between the private and social worlds – directions that recall philosophical descriptions of the phenomenological character of the body as an instrument acting in the world.²⁸

This relationship between private and social worlds is acutely observed in Knowles’ second event scores, #2 *Proposition* (Make a salad) and #2a *Variation #1 on Proposition* (Make a soup). #2 *Proposition*, in which Knowles prepares a salad for each member of the audience, premiered on October 21, 1962, at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London and became part of the Fluxus canon, performed at numerous subsequent events and published by Higgins through his Something Else Press in 1965. Knowles recently performed this in London, as part of the Long Weekend, a Fluxus intervention at the Tate Modern, May 24-27, 2008 - an account of which can

²⁷ Retallack, Joan. *The Poethical Wager*, University of California, 2003, p. 46.

²⁸ Higgins, Hannah, “Fluxus Fortuna”, from *The Fluxus Reader*, ed. Ken Friedman, Academy Editions, 1998, p. 65

be found on the [artistorganizedart](http://www.artistorganizedart.org/commons/2008/05/alison-knowles-tate-modern-london-times.html) website, <http://www.artistorganizedart.org/commons/2008/05/alison-knowles-tate-modern-london-times.html>. *Variation #1 on Proposition*, for which she made soup instead of salad was performed in 1964 at Café au GoGo in New York. Sally Barnes describes how:

Knowles' act of feeding is a generous one, but it is also intimate. It overflows the boundaries of the stage and the performer's conventional physical isolation from the spectator. And it cements a human relationship between the performer and the spectator with a gesture of alimentary incorporation, opening the spectator's body to the performer.²⁹

The precise nature of this “human relationship” between performer and spectator is difficult to define. What makes the exchange between performer and spectator particularly “human”? Mauss's anthropological context in some way explains the human element of the exchange. In stressing the fact that the gift “comes morally, physically and spiritually from a person,”³⁰ Mauss foregrounds the human, showing how the functioning of these exchanges within the community rests foremost with individuals. Knowles' body in performance demonstrates the physical element of the gift, while her engagement with her audience, her poetic community, could demonstrate a moral (and possibly, though by no means necessarily, spiritual) standpoint. But this anthropological context for explaining the role of the human in performative gift exchanges needs enlarging to adequately explain the precise nature of the transmission at work when bodily presence conveys poetry to its audience. There is unquestionably an element of heightened awareness amongst the audience when confronted with bodily presence. As Kristin Prevallet has observed:

Even if a viewer hates it, the body in performance is arresting. Gaze stops, mind halts. Rivet into disgust, agreement, tears of recognition, horror of abjection, desecration.³¹

This subjective “awareness” is tricky to figure into objective critical frameworks but I tried to get a sense of the workings of this transmission

²⁹ Barnes, Sally. *Greenwich Village 1963*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1993.

³⁰ Mauss, p.10

³¹ Prevallet, Kristin. *From the poem to the performance of “Cruelty and Conquest”*, How2, vol. 3, issue 2

quality from Anne Waldman, who has made and facilitated so much work in this area, when I interviewed her at Naropa (interview published in the last issue of How2). Waldman pinpointed how:

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.



- Anne Waldman, *The Bull's Head Bookshop*

She continues:

I know that I've experienced "transmission" very personally, whether it's Ginsberg, Kenneth Koch, Barbara Guest, John Cage...these encounters probably changed my life. There was a transmission quality in the performance. I could feel parts of my mind light up. They expanded my consciousness. It seemed an ancient way that people had been coming together for centuries in public, communal space...I mean I'm speaking personally, I don't think everybody identifies in this same way...and 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.³²

And "speaking personally" is the point. The transmission from performer to audience and the ensuing subjective audience response is by its nature "personal". No body/mind/being experiences or responds in precisely the same way to a performance, but all are touched individually in some way, by the performing individual(s). And realising performance's potential to allow language to be vocalized in a political

³² *The Poetic Economy: Anne Waldman in conversation with Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, Naropa University, "temporary autonomous zone", How2, vol. 3, issue 2*

way is key to understanding how poetry, even within the small public space it occupies, can interact with the social.

Peggy Phelan speaks of the problems of performance having no capital return, outlining how:

Performance's independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength. But buffeted by the encroaching ideologies of capital and reproduction, it frequently devalues this strength. Writing about performance often, unwittingly, encourages this weakness and falls in behind the drive of the document/ary. Performance's challenge to writing is to discover a way for repeated words to become performative utterances, rather than, as Benviste warned, constative utterances.³³

Phelan's solution is to investigate how the "no return" of the loss, or withdrawal of the body after performance can lead to a new form of materiality in the act of writing about performance:

the possibility that something substantial can be made from the outline left after the body has disappeared. My hunch is that the affective outline of what we've lost might bring us closer to the bodies we want still to touch than the restored illustration can.³⁴

Could the remnants of the "outline" of past performance, the traces of body removed, function as inalienable possessions, as reminders of goods kept out of circulation?³⁵ So that rather than no return, performance could be viewed as having a *different kind* of return. While Phelan speaks of the body's disappearance after performance, and of the need to produce something "substantial" in its place, could we also not consider the body's disappearance in the context of no return, as something not necessarily to be replaced by any new kind of materiality (though it could be, this is, to paraphrase Anne Waldman³⁶, a theory of and/and, not either/or) but to be kept inalienable, a marker of the existence of those goods kept out of the exchange in order to regulate it? Performance thereby functions through exchanges where the

³³ Phelan, Peggy. p. 149

³⁴ Phelan, p.3

³⁵ Weiner, Annette. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While Giving*, University of California Press, 1992

³⁶ Waldman endorses discourse that includes a plurality of positions (and/and) rather than any standpoint that claims unique and universal value. This is a view presented in *Iovis: All is Full of Jove*, Coffee House Press, 1993

return is not necessarily monetary, nor based solely on reciprocity, so that what we are developing here, is a discourse of *difference in return*, where multiple kinds of return, including the possibility of no return, are accommodated. This is a possibility explored by Emily Carr in her essay in this section. Explaining her reading of Bervin's *Nets* and Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow*, she states:

I posit erasure poetics as performative because I want to trouble notions of clarity and to argue for a revival of writing that undermines commodifiable categories of "usefulness." Erasure poetics like Bervin's and Ruefle's necessarily exists on the margins of "useful" and thus fails within the framework of contemporary notions of productivity and commodification. Practically speaking, erasure poetics is not market-able nor is it mass-producible. Its appeal is not readily apparent; we must invest ourselves in living with rather than walking through such texts.³⁷

Where can the type of performance/exchange, open to the possibility of multiple, even unidentifiable (or no) audience response, happen? As Kristin Prevallet observes in an interview published in the last issue of *How2*:

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 Street Poetry project³⁸...is another good example...So there is no doubt but that in performance, many untangible effects are possible. (Including the possibility of the performance having absolutely no effect at all... or a diverted effect, which will never be documented.)³⁹

Karmin's street poetry project *Walking Poem* published in this section, navigates routes of gift exchange, with the free performance of poems to a passing audience. The range of spaces available for this type of exchange encourages a mixed media materiality which incorporates such diverse responses as Julia Lee Barclay's text for radio published in this section, Laylage Courie's part script, part score, part narrative/prose/poem and Bonnie Emerick's experiments with multiple voices in *Ventriloquy is the Mother Tongue*. And just as the spaces for performance are diverse: on page, screen, street, stage; so is audience response:

³⁷ Carr, Emily. *Writing out of the never Was and into the May never Be...A Reading of Mary Ruefle's A Little White Shadow and Jen Bervin's Nets*, published in this section of *How2*

³⁸ Karmin, Jennifer. *Walking Poem*, published in this section of *How2*

³⁹ *The Poetic Gift Gestural Economy: Elizabeth-Jane Burnett in conversation with Kristin Prevallet London to Brooklyn, September 2007*, *How2*, vol. 3, issue 2

The audience is not “the audience.” They (not “it”) is complex as a fractal and diverse as an ecosystem. Each body viewing the spectacle is in his or her own head, thinking. That’s a lot of Zen monkeys to tame, a lot of voices chattering. It’s a very volatile pond, filled with all sorts of creatures. And they’re either with you, or against you. But at the pinnacle of the performative moment, their attention is directed, there’s no doubt about that. ⁴⁰

Her Body: The City, like many of the other extracts from work published in this section, attempts to perform some of the difficulties of gauging/inviting/requiring audience response; allowing for diverted and unknown responses; presenting performance as gestural, not easily quantifiable.

Link to *Her Body: The City*

<http://www.mediaalive.co.uk/clnt/jane/herbodythecity3.htm>

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