Personal Statement on Infrastructure Poetics

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Abstract: This is a presentation delivered at the conference by focusing on the "infrastructure poetics" of the Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, Naropa University. This presentation explores its origin and its connections with "the New American Poetry," and illuminates its mission, poetic ideas and practices, performative tradition, and political commitment.

Key words: The New American Poetry　Infrastructure Poetics　the Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics　performative poetics

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标题:我的诗歌生存基础观

内容提要:本文是在拿若葩大学克鲁亚克非实体诗学学院关于诗歌生存基础的会议上宣读的论文,探讨了诗歌生存基础的起源、与美国新诗的关系,阐明了它的使命、史学观念与实践、表演传统与政治义务。

关键词:美国新诗　生存基础观　克鲁亚克非实体诗学学院　表演诗学

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I want to begin by giving some background into my own lineage and the specific communities I have been involved with, particularly the communities of the St. Mark's Poetry Project in New York and The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics housed within the Naropa University in Colorado. I have also been involved more recently with the pedagogical wing of the Bowery Poetry Club (founded by Bob Holman, a poet and performer with ties to the Poetry Project), which serves as a café, a bar, a bookstore, a performance venue (particularly the Study-Abroad-On-the-Bowery program founded in 2003), a panel and colloquia venue; the space itself is made available to many poetry presses and organizations in the city and beyond for minimal fees. The Poetry Is News collective (which I founded with Ammiel Alcalay) has also done events at the Poetry Project and the Bowery Poetry Club.

This presentation is rather "rhizomic"—from Deleuze & Guattari, a tuber system somewhat like Indra's Net or Pratitya Samutpada, a Sanskrit term referring to the in-

terconnectedness and co-emergence of phenomena in relation to one another. I would like to bring in some of the practices of the so-called New American Poetry and suggest the ways in which this poetics (which led to some of practices of the Language School) was a radical departure from mainstream English Lit-based and content-driven poetries, and shaped subsequent writers and thinkers. I would also like to highlight my connection to the Beat literary movement (particularly through my friendship with Allen Ginsberg and the founding of the Kerouac School) and my sense of performance as a way to exist in the world—"singing for my supper", which is an old troubadour trope.

The New American Poetry—coming on the heels of World War II—specifically refers to various communities and associated "schools" of writers who at that time thrived outside the literary mainstream and outside what one might call the controlling literary mafias of New York publishing and literary journalism. These individuals and communities fostered numerous small presses, engaged in major literary correspondences and debates with one another and benefited (some might disagree because there were also differences and rifts between some of these communities) from the famous Six Gallery reading in San Francisco on October 6, 1955, where Allen Ginsberg launched his poem "Howl" in 1958. A range of poets from these different loci convened on several historic occasions (Vancouver 1963 and Berkeley 1965, to name two) and a full number were represented in Donald Allen's now-classic defining anthology *The New American Poetry* published by Grove Press in 1960, a book of major import to young writers of my generation at the time.

The "The New American Poetry" cohered as a term around that important anthology and its collection of writers from distinct communities operating outside the academic mainstream. These consisted of the Black Mountain School poets (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn, Denise Levertov), the Beat Literary generation (Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Diane diPrima), the San Francisco Renaissance (Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer), and the New York School (Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler), with a nod to the Black Arts Movement and the writings of African-American poet LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. Again, this is post World War-II, post-Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and covers a time frame (that includes the 40-year Cold War, as well as the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam) in which a number of us picked up the strands of a strengthening counter-poetics (against the norms of the established English "great tradition," which was perceived as retrograde) and proceeded with experimentation along the lines of "Projective Verse" (Charles Olson), "composition by field" (Robert Duncan), the Whitmanic ethical concerns, the breath-lines of Ginsberg and others, the experimental strategies of indeterminacy and chance operation of John Cage, Frank O'Hara's "Personism" (where the poem is as immediate as a phone call), the cut-up methods of William Burroughs, Ted Berrigan and others, and the Oulipian strategies (*Tel Quel* magazine, Marcelin Pleynet) used by various French avant-gardists (which influenced members of the New York School—including John Ashbery and Harry Mathews—and which was picked up by Language Poetry practitioners). For the inheritors of these new traditions (the "second generation" of which I was a part)

there was a sense of hybridity; for example, some writers blended Beat and New York School aesthetics (Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Clark Coolidge, Bernadette Mayer and others). Some of us further cultivated spoken word arts and performance.

We developed our own "modal structures" (Waldman) and communal sites for poetic activity, such as the literary cultures of The Poetry Project at St. Mark's and later The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University (formerly "The Naropa Institute")—a Buddhist-inspired liberal arts college that became accredited in 1985 and now offers Master of Fine Arts degrees. These new institutions included projects for small-press publishing, correspondence with other writers, occasions for publishing and collaboration, oral performance, cultural activism (The Poetry Project was an active site during the American War in Vietnam), and the investigation and translation of the poetry and poetics of other cultures.

Naropa is now a fully-recognized academic institution, but the Writing & Poetics program still operates on a more bohemian and community-oriented mode; the program maintains its own "culture" and provides a lot of services gratis, including the long-standing tradition of placing writers in the public schools, in prisons, in community centers, and in many other contexts, to lead free writing workshops. There's a constant exchange of energy and "goods." Naropa's Summer Writing Program, out of which the full MFA developed, has provided the guiding pedagogy for the Department of Writing & Poetics. The SWP is a month-long "temporary autonomous zone" (a termed coined by Anarchist Hakim Bey—see his book *TAZ* published by Autonomedia) held each year, and out of many very particular summers a major literary archive has developed. Hundreds of hours are now provided free on the web by going to Archive. org and scrolling down to Naropa. Early recordings of Allen Ginsberg, John Cage, William Burroughs, RD Laing, Gregory Bateson, and others, are provided without charge. Naropa has spawned any number of books, small press magazines, and anthologies where authors donate their work and the editors work with little recompense.

It's a complicated and under-investigated culture and economy that would not have come about without the auspicious coincidence of the meeting of a Buddhist meditation master with the New American poetry and particularly the "Beat" wing. One of the most seminal and perhaps fortuitous occasions in the world of contemporary poetics and the world of Tibetan Buddhist psychology and meditation was the arrival of Chogyam Trungpa into a very particular environment in the United States, which included the New American Poetry. His primary contacts were with poets and writers associated with the Beats, a branch of the New American "tree." Trungpa, a re-incarnated tulku (meditation teacher or "rinpoche"—literally "precious one") in the Buddhist and Shambhala traditions, had been writing poetry in his own tradition and language for some time and had also composed masterful sadhanas (practice liturgies) that came from profound meditative states or mind-transmissions ("terma"). He was a master calligrapher as well and a catalyst for a prodigious range of projects which involved meditation centers, the Maitri programs, retreat sites, seminaries, a body of orally transmitted teachings, and the development of strong "sanghas" or spiritual communities in the USA and Nova Scotia.

Trungpa taught what is referred to as "dharma art" on many occasions at Naropa. As poet Reed Bye has written in an essay on these specific teachings, Dharma means something like form or "isness" and refers to the experience of things as they are, free from projections. 'Art' comes from an Indo-European verb root meaning "to fit together: Dharma Art then refers to anything perceived and put together from the unbiased openness of original mind. Meditation is the practice of gaining direct familiarity with this openness. [①] Trungpa was an indefatigable "activity demon" and a beloved spiritual leader until his untimely death in 1987. This unprecedented conjunction amounted to a meeting of two worlds—Trungpa's (as holder of an ancient wisdom tradition which included classical Sanskrit-based poetics) and the New American Poetry's (constituting a lineage which in addition to containing and honoring the larger "canons" of a world literature and prosody—Homer, Sappho, Dante, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Yeats—also proposed radical shifts of attention for literature after the Modernist period)—and fostered the Kerouac School.

These projects started with very little capital. For years we needed to raise modest amounts of money to sustain these community activities. The avant-garde, experimental poetry communities operating outside of well-funded institutions and the academic mainstream have always functioned along the lines of a "gift economy." I borrow the sense of this terms from French anthropologist and sociologist, Marcel Mauss (1872 – 1950), often considered the father of modern French anthropology. His most influential work is *Essai sur le Don*, translated as *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies.* We are far from archaic but I think some of the paradigm still holds. Mauss writes that the "giver does not merely give an object but gives part of himself, the object is indissolubly tied to the giver. The objects are never merely separated from the men who exchange them." Because of this bond between giver and gift, the act of giving creates a social bond with an obligation to reciprocate on the part of the recipient. He asks, "What power resides in the object that causes its recipient to pay it back?" There's also the notion of "inalienability." In a commodity economy there is a strong distinction between objects and persons through the notion of private property. Objects are sold, meaning that the ownership rights are transferred to the new owner. The object becomes "alienated" from its original owner. In a gift economy the objects are inalienable from the givers. They are loaned rather than sold and ceded. Gift exchange therefore leads to a mutual interdependence between giver and receiver. According to Mauss, the free gift that is not returned is a contradiction because it cannot create social ties. His argument is that solidarity is achieved through social bonds created by gift exchange. This has certainly been true of bohemian artist cultures (my own parents were part of such artistic "utopias").

There is, of course, deeper complexity in these considerations of an individual's intention, and the efficacy of one's creative work in the world. As Joan Retallack, the poet and John Cage scholar has observed:

> 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 our conscious framework of values, knowing that you can't predict the effect this will have on your audience, much less the world situation. (44 – 45)

One, as artist and cultural worker, cannot anticipate what the outcomes of one's work will be on another or on a community. The ethos is very individual. And yet, in my years of activity and in my close association with Allen Ginsberg and the project I have cited, I posit an impulse of intellectual honesty and generosity in the post-WWII experimental poetry communities.

The work that poets do is primarily non-income based. It's a spiritual, ethical inclination (Robert Creeley speaks of the "choicelessness" of writing poetry in his own life). The poem is not a commodity: you give it away and it carries part of you with it. Mid-century, rents were cheap. San Francisco was a "refuge city," as was New York. Artists such as Philip Guston, Larry Rivers, Jim Dine, James Rosenquist, Jane Freilicher, Joe Brainard, and George Schneeman were generous donating covers for small press publications. The makers of the work sought the means to maintain and fortify their independence. We empowered ourselves in the 1960s. Not waiting to be discovered by Random House or other big publishers. The coterie model, the salon model.

Are you motivated by greed and so on? These were basic questions for any sentient being, let alone the ambitious artist. Do artists require special pleading? Do you need the discursive mind that always comments on how you are doing. Do you need passion, ignorance and aggression to be an artist? Isn't William Burroughs' suspicion that the work can't be legitimate unless the art is as the only salvation for the artist too extreme? Isn't this, in fact, a time of grieving where as human beings we are being called upon to transcend Art or use it as upaya—skillful means—on a humanitarian path? Theodor Adorno asks in his famous question—can there be beauty—can there be art after Auschwitz? The compassionate answer would be we must never fall silent. We must struggle to create alternative realities—cultural interventions—in the samsaric world of passion, aggression, ignorance. To propagate sanity. To oppose war and torture and unmitigated violence. Whatever the means.

Trungpa clearly stated from the beginning of the visionary Naropa project that he hoped poets could make the meditators more articulate through original speech and mind, and that the poets might benefit by sitting meditation which would provide a greater grounding to their lives which would benefit others. And that there be no conflict between poetry and religion. Allen and I declared in our "mission statement" in 1974:

> Though not all the poetry teachers are Buddhist, nor is it required of the teachers and students in this secular school to follow any specific meditative path, it is the happy accident of this century's poetic history—especially since Gertrude Stein—that the quality of mind and mindfulness probed by Buddhist

> practice. There being no party line but mindfulness of thought and language itself, no conflict need arise between religion and poetry, and the marriage of two disciplines at Naropa is expected to flourish during the next hundred years. ("Sidebar: Tendrel" 165)

Allen also wrote in 1978: "Whatever the fate of The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, some climactic event has taken place in American poetry which will leave its imprint of frankness and wisdom on future American lyric thought" ("Sidebar: Tendrel" 165).

These activities of "poetry cultures" continue in the 21st century with an emphasis on the importance of "infrastructure poetics"—of finding sites to house activities, not only readings, panels, events, and even town meetings (as in the case of Poetry is News)—and with an urgent attention to protecting the language from euphemism, jingoism, ideology, and sustaining zones of poetic activity and discourse. But also with a realistic sense of urgency to "make a difference" in the face of serious climate change, the ongoing ravages of war (particularly in Iraq, exacerbated by the unresolved conflicts of Israel/Palestine), repressions elsewhere, the hegemony of the American Empire, displacement of individuals, racial and economic disparity, and so on. The practice and commitment to a public space for poetry continues within these sites in an attempt to "keep the world safe for poetry"—a kind of slogan for the Kerouac School at Naropa, which has an optimistic irony at its core. If the world were safe for poetry, it would also be safe for other forms of life and imagination. But there is also the very real sense of the poet being an "endangered species"; in the face of that condition, we at the Kerouac School are committed to providing an ongoing archive of audio and video recording and documents, as well as providing some of these materials on the world wide web.

This is also in keeping with Charles Olson's sense (as presented at the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference) that the reading is an "event", an enactment, a ritual, not merely the recitation from a book. Olson maintained that performance was a way to project into the psyche, which isn't to say that books don't do that powerfully. But they're a different modality. There is a sense of "I Is Another" (Arthur Rimbaud) in the empathy of performance and the notion of "dissipative structures": the idea of the writing as a "state of mind" that can shift and mutate in oral presentation, and the notion of being free of certain constraints of personal ego-bound identity were in the mix. Olson's "projective verse," with its notions of "one thought following instantly on the other" and the "kinetics of the thing," was again a precursor to a vision of a performative poetics. It's important to note the origin of the word performance—from parfornir, to "enact in front of a community"—as well as the importance of "ritual" as efficacy. Some of us also saw the possibilities of performance as a "cultural intervention." In "Feminafesto," I wrote:

> Perhaps women have the advantage of producing a radically disruptive and subversive kind of writing (and writing-in-performance) now because they are experiencing the current imbalances and power 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. (327)

The gathering of the "New American Poetry" has thus spawned further associations and further generations of writers in correspondence, often working in close proximity to one another in relations of mutual exchange and support. These, in this writer's experience, included the founding and ongoing lives of both the Poetry Project and The Jack Kerouac School at Naropa University, as previously noted, which has a contemplative, non-competitive backdrop in his pedagogical practices. One might refer to the notion of the "gift" citing the work of Marcel Mauss, in his book *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, as a way to reclaim or characterize the 'poethics' (Joan Retallack) of the recent past and new century. There is also a link re-established to the pre- and historical Modernists (such as Gertrude Stein) and a look toward other possibilities and traditions, as one finds in the Surrealists' attention to dream, shamanism, the exploration of mytho-poetics, as well as important "poetic" translation work of Ezra Pound (Troubadour and classical Chinese poetry, and more), and the later travels of the Beats to "Fellaheen" worlds (Jack Kerouac). This thrust continues with many new and exciting cross-cultural explorations, as well as the empowerment of women writers, writers of color, and writers taking on issues of gender. Attention is paid to cross-genre writing, hybridity, the explorations of L = A = N = G = U = A-G-E poetry, poetry/art/music and new media intersections and beyond. The sense now, in poet and anthologist Jerome Rothenberg's term, is the more appropriate and universal term "Post Bomb" or "Post Holocaust" (as opposed to "Postmodern"), which were world-shattering experiences that affected us all. A sense, too, of reclaiming the wisdom of the past with a look to the future as we move toward an inter-cultural poetics that breaks down borders and boundaries, keeping in mind the ever controversial yet powerful forces of worldwide "globalization."

【Notes】

① See Reed Bye, "No One Spoke Chogyam Trungpa's Teachings of Dharma Art," *Civil Disobediences: Poetics and Politics in Action*, ed. Anne Waldman and Lisa Birman (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2004)224 – 39.

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