

A POETICS

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We talk to each other.

We began this project on 10/12/06, after reading Berkson and Mayer's What's Your Idea of a Good Time? (Tuumba Press), and our conversation continues. The following is a selection. Each of us chose from the other's responses what to share with the readers of ON.

Dear _____, even though we said this was to be a during-the-work-day project, here it is 5:30pm, I am still at work, and still working even. . .

What's your sense of the use of "I" in your own work and/or poetry at large?

I do not identify with the "I" that appears in my work. I think of that "I" as a plurality or an Other, which maybe is not to say that the "I" does not identify with ME. Sometimes my autobiography even still. In all other poetries I think it depends. There are many writers, Stacy Doris would be one, where the "I" rarely appears and yet the work is presently articulated through a single authorial identity, or so I feel. In other places, Martin Corless-Smith is an example for me right now, everywhere the "I" is denied textually instead feels like a slipping, feinting denial of a forceful authority of authorship – this in neither case is a criticism, not exactly.

When was the last time you took a bath?

It was the day I took the Tramadol and had a terrible drug-addled anxiety reaction to it, and S____ and L____ had to take care of me all day while I freaked out as if on a bad acid trip. Towards the late afternoon, they made me drink a beer and take an epsom-salt bath. It helped. That was sometime in the summer I think.

Your strongest sensory memory of growing up in the San Fernando Valley, what is it?

Summer. The hot concrete in my backyard, swimming all day, celery and peanut butter, ice-cream, wasps, the hot insides of cars, playing horse with my brother, naps in the late afternoon in my bedroom with the blinds shut, the light late into evening, night swimming ("deserves a quiet night")

. . . I find myself thinking a lot about our questions and answers. Especially the question

of “unified essential subject” as it does or does not appear in the “I” in my/your/our work. And your question to yourself about what do you do with the “I” when it appears to you “authentic,” i.e., attached to your own history, experience, concerns. I experience my “I,” when it appears, as diffuse in most circumstance, and sometimes I wonder if I shouldn’t be making the obverse of the action you are describing, I mean I often ask myself if I shouldn’t land more squarely on myself as a speaking, experiencing, expressive voice in my work. Land squarely on the front side. For me in almost all cases the appearing “I” is all the characters of a piece of writing at once, all of its character, or it takes all the characters at different moments. It stands in for. Or something. But then this weekend I was working on a poem I was writing for S_____ [and here’s another thing, how much of your work is written towards some one? I often think mine is directed nowhere but I lie to myself because I think almost all of it is directed towards one. Or is generated from one insurrectionary source outside myself? I mean, someone I know. This is very confused.] Anyway I was writing this thing for S_____, and it appeared that the I there was so DEFINITELY myself. And I don’t want to problematize it, but I feel ashamed or guilty of letting it stand. Who am “I” to speak “I-ly” thus?

How do you feel about a poet self-publishing (her own work)?

I like a poetry that works outside of our economic machine, and I think to self-publish is one form of rejection of that machine. I have self-published my own work and I did it because I had this thing that needed to be contained in a certain shape at a certain time, and I wanted to give it away. I think anything borne of necessity is good (maybe even violence. See below). I wanted to do it right away, myself, and I never thought for a minute of sending it to someone else to publish, and no one was asking to publish it. There isn’t much in the way of big-house publishing of poetry, and even the tiniest presses are necessarily limited in their scope. I think it can be a sign of generosity or of assault, the self-publishing, depending, and it’s easy to tell which is which. I like the subpoetics “self-publish or perish” motto. Sometimes that’s all there is.

Do you think poetry can or should change the world?

I’ve thought a lot about this one, on my own, and now that you’ve asked it. My sense of your work and our friendship particularly colors my response. If I tend to think of the question within a limited political frame, my answer is more discouraged. It seems true that not very many non-poets read poetry, and so inevitably any world-changing capacities poetry might have are severely limited. Popular television and film and direct political action, which occur outside the realm of the “high arts,” seem to enact more immediate (or at least the semblance of) change.

But there is also another sense of “changing the world” which I like to remind myself to consider. At a physical and psychic level, the psychosurgical procedure does effect change. It seems so obvious now, but it took me awhile to get past my analytic training and accept that spiritual/psychic entities do have a real effect in the world. And how embedded we are in language, how we are nothing but language, and any directed use of this language is political and does make change. We exist, and make ripples. They’re small, and often intangible, but real.

Do you love me, and what do you mean when you say that you do?

“I love you” seems like a placeholder for an inexpressible, a lacuna between this gigantic breadth of emotion and history and socio-personal relations and the ability to express oneself in language. Sometimes, a strong hug seems much more expressive than “I love you.” But I am (in) language, and I do feel that strong feeling, whatever it is, that makes the utterance true and worthwhile.

Do you think, as Berkson and Mayer keep discussing between them, that this project is a narcissistic one? Do you think that narcissism is still a useful form of relationality?

An epistolary, interview-based relationship seems to me no more narcissistic than any other relationship between people. Isn't there always – in strong relationships, at least – that inquisitiveness? And you learn about yourself along the way, which is a good thing. If not for an other, how would we represent ourselves to ourselves? At what point do we label a relationship “narcissistic”? (www.m-w.com: egoism: 1a: a doctrine that individual self-interest is the actual motive of all conscious action; b: a doctrine that individual self-interest is the valid end of all actions; 2: excessive concern for oneself with or without exaggerated feelings of self-importance). I'm not sure there's really such a relationship at all. Maybe we shouldn't call it a relationship, but two egoists exchanging self-interests.

What does it mean, “to correspond?”

Co-respond Jointly Re-volving Attention. Co-partnership of Company. A Re-ply Fulfills a Lack. Re-cognition. Re-thinking Addressing Re-thinking.

Also, the internet says “an engaged pillar supporting an arch or closing a colonnade or arcade.”

How do you feel about yourself generally, as a person?

Oh, to have had this one turned back to me. I started to respond to this on April 6 and now it is April 20 and I'm returning to it. I wonder if I feel about myself “as a person” at all? There's the habitual part of my own thinking which is that I like to believe I am a kind person, and on reflection [this moment] I know that I am invested in an idea of myself as being “kind” and that the idea of wishing to be kind to others affects how I do in fact treat others, which is I think often but not always, with “kindness.” I think this means sometimes “patience” which even belies “kindness.” I want “to be” “good.” “I” “wants” “to care.” I make a lot of mistakes, I fail at being what I think is the “right” sort of citizen, for example I don't read the papers much or follow the news much which seems like a terrible badness of personhood and citizenry and a total failure of a certain kind of social responsibility, which I am not sure I understand/believe, which would be the responsibility to understand, interrogate, articulate a sort of citizen's participation in the social world. I don't understand money, I think that implicates failure on my part. I don't read enough or do enough, I don't like how I look, I am afraid my work fails to address what it ought really to address, I can't understand the world very well, I don't speak as well as I would wish to, I don't see you enough, these all seem like failures of personhood to me somehow.

Are you competitive? How do you feel about competitiveness?

Yes, I am. I was surprised to find this was part of my nature, and I discovered it when I started _____. I'm also envious, jealous, and suspicious. I feel that the envy, jealousy, and suspiciousness are a correlative of my competitiveness, and that my feelings of competitiveness are located in my not having yet and perhaps never having possibility of reaching the kind of formal, emotional, temperamental, structural achievement of an altogether realized and effective poetic. Against whom am I competing? if I ask it this way, no one.

I'm trying to begin working on a new project/book, and my desire is to have an idea about the form, my materials, the Idea of the work before I begin (which (because?) is not something I've done before). So this question emerges selfishly, but also because I really am tremendously curious about your process. I mean, do you usually start writing with an idea of what you want the work to be, what it will be “about”, what texts you will use? If so, can you offer any advice on HOW to begin to do this?

This is a question I wish I knew how to answer properly. Each project – I think there are projects – seems to arise in its own way. One way is I wake up in the middle of the night knowing what is supposed to come next. Another way is someone asks me to fulfill a promise, like give a reading, and I observe the problems inherent in the usual frame of the promise and work against them. Sometimes I want to give myself a form to work inside of, so I spell something out, like, these are the titles of the chapters. Then I pretty much ignore all of that. When it comes to materials, I think you are meaning “outside” sources, I have handfuls or stacks of things that seem to be adjacent to my concerns, and I keep them nearby, or I imagine, hey I’ll read that book on how to frame a house, but mostly I just think about the idea that I would like to know how to frame a house and I never open the text. I’m sorry. This doesn’t seem helpful. I guess I could say that I wish to god in heaven I could do what B_____ does, which is, set a form, know the road, so to speak, and then go about traveling it, which of course is always an unforeseeable adventure of its own.

What is humility?

Humidity is vapor in the air of a person when speaking and acting in the world with others. One of the most variable characteristics of the atmosphere, humidity is an important factor in social exchange and artistic action: it regulates air temperature by absorbing thermal radiation both from the Angry and the Dominant; it is directly proportional to the latent energy available for a generation of poets; and it is the ultimate source of all forms of condensation and precipitation in poetic works. Humidity varies because the water-holding capacity of poets is determined by disposition. When a volume of air at a given temperature holds the maximum amount of care possible, the air is said to be saturated. Saturated air has a relative humidity of 100%; near the Bay Area the relative humidity rarely falls below 30%.

Would you call yourself a hopeful person?

No. I’m pessimistic and cynical, it is very bad for me to read the news.

Tonight you didn’t come to the poetry reading at T_____’s house, and I was so disappointed, because one reason I went was for the chance to see you. But I understand the not going to poetry readings. How do you feel about the calendar of readings generally and how do you feel about ‘the poetry reading’ as a form specifically?

O, I love that this “tonight” has a completely different referent now, months later. . .

Anyway, the calendar. It’s hard to complain. I feel privileged to live in an area with so many events, and energy, and opportunities for the community to interact. That is one of the main reasons I moved here after all. Lately though I’ve had the experience of feeling obligated to attend readings, and I don’t like that feeling at all. You know how it is, the community is so small, we’re our own audience, there’s a give and take and a constant shuffling of energy. But my plan is to make a concerted effort to go to a reading only if I really have a desire to hear the work. It shouldn’t be like going to church.

As for the form? That’s more difficult. We all lead such busy lives and don’t often have a chance to read each other’s work. The reading is a convenient and sometimes exciting way to share recent poems with your community. It can spur new work (for both the reader and the audience), and create dialogue. And yet, that is something that is lacking – dialogue. I want more dialogue about the work, around, in and after readings. I think different ways of performing, outside of “the reading,” are more productive of those kinds of discussions. I like what the Nonsite Collective is doing, for example. I like talks and the intimate party atmosphere of events held in homes and apartments. I like reading groups. I like

what you do when you're asked to give a reading. And there is something to be said for keeping things interesting and trying to cast our nets wider than the same old audience. Of trying to bring non-poets to events (gasp). Maybe the way to do this is to go beyond "the reading."

Can I read something you're working on now?

The poem I mentioned earlier, the one I've just finished, is the first poem I've written since _____. As I always complain to you, I'm a very slow writer – the work comes not in spurts but in feeble dribbles. And I've learned to be patient, but I never fail to freak out when a dry spell is pushing three or four months. That's when I get nervous, I'll never write again, I'm not a "real poet," etc. Anyway, all a way of saying I don't have anything to share with you. I would if I could but I can't.

How do you feel about making books of poetry? What is the "value of" a book of poetry? What goes in to a book "of poetry"?

Many times we've had the conversation in which I complain that I can't write a book. About my insecurities around that, especially living in the Bay Area and how it seems very much to be the form our community writes towards. I find myself wanting to proceed formally towards a book. I think a book brings poetry closer to the kinds of conceptual work one finds in the art world. Which I often (jealously) find wildly more successful than poetry. What do I mean by "success"?

Spicer is a model for me – structure, series, and process. There is that appreciation of the form, of my desire to write a book, and then my frustration at constantly failing. The book is almost the complete opposite of how poetry actually comes to me. It's a much more visceral process for me. So if work does turn out to become a book – that shape will have been tacked on, or formed after the work is already generated. And so I do not achieve what I set out to, I fail.

Alice Notley said she never tried to be anything other than a poet. What does that statement elicit in you?

It's funny, this question, immediately following the one above. Lately I've been reading Notley's early poems in the Selected. For the first time. (Wow). Those poems are just so massively intimate and strange and fucked. In the best ways possible. They are very much Notley being a poet and writing poems.

I don't know what to do with this statement though. Is it an artistic stance or a cultural one? It seems anti-academic, which I understand, but also find problematic. Does it aim to limit the kind of work a poet "should" write? The more interesting interpretation for me is to take Notley's statement as a sort of socio-economic stance. In American culture. Does the poet stand against capital and useful production necessarily?

Tell me some of your thoughts about our performance at _____. Were you happy with how we proceeded through it? The responses received? Did you have any expectations? Were they fulfilled?

Now it seems infinitely long ago, but it was June 2. My only real regret about that evening was not being able to stay grounded enough to properly perform it, to stay in touch with it and not be swayed or undone by my projections about the audience's experience, and then to have become so unmoored by those many feelings as to be unable to properly articulate responses to the many criticisms afterwards, to properly stand up for the work and the attempt, which has real value. I do think it was too long – or at any rate, lots of

people felt it was “too long,” and so I have to wonder about that. As B_____ said to me in an email later, if you’re going to work against people’s expectations about what a reading is, you’ve got to be prepared for the backlash, you can’t expect to get the love. Some of the responses were disappointing to me, but illuminating. The question which was addressed to me multiple times was, “Did you do this because you’re not writing?” And also, “Are you afraid to read your own writing?” Those questions are so reductive, and so blind to the question which was being presented, which is, where IS poetry in fact? I mean, where is that which is poetry? It reminded me, or made clear to me, how terribly conservative some many poets are or can be in their thinking about what is poetry. In a world of practice that includes something like Flarf for example, or conceptual art or performance art, how could the question here be so I have to say IDIOTICALLY reduced to “Are you afraid to read your poems?” That’s just a lazy personal projection of the person who asks it, and again, it is illuminating about what many people desire from “poetry,” which is, to experience themselves, to be mirrored, or to find ways to mirror themselves in their listening. I don’t know that I exempt myself from that accusation. I’m “just saying.”

On the other hand, many people wanted to ask questions and talk about it later and for a long time and I had lots of conversations that night, so I got back what one so rarely ‘gets back’ after a reading, which is, direct and immediate engagement, as a group. That’s an amazing thing to have been able to generate, even if I had to feel uncomfortable throughout.

Your question about expectations is a difficult one. I wish I’d thought ahead of time how to stand up for the work, to articulate that what we were reading/demonstrating WAS/IS poetry, it IS writing, and to be better able to have the conversation about why it is or is not writing. But you know, X was sitting in the _____ row, and I’d had sex with X the month before, and it had been awkward, and X had kind of blown me off, or, would weirdly contact me but not try to see me, and we hadn’t seen each other at all since having sex, and we had had no conversations about closure or continuance, and I was feeling both desired and rejected, and feeling both desire and repulsion, and also feeling tremendously uncertain, and it was very discomfiting and difficult to hold ground under that circumstance, which is the circumstance of life and being fragile and human and vulnerable. And afterwards X told me I was rude to my audience and that if people were nice to me or said positive or engaged things it was because they were my “allies” (not friends, not people who might have come out because they were interested in my work), and X also said X didn’t understand what I was doing, and couldn’t follow it, and it was too long, and X felt that because X didn’t know who the artists were who were speaking for us, or know their work, X was shut out of the possibility of understanding what was happening/being said. So that colored my feelings about it for a little while, and pre-empted my ability to wonder what my expectations had been and pre-empted my ability to know what it was that had actually taken place. It was valuable to recognize that lots of people were going to feel the way X did, that it wasn’t poetry and that it was rude, but then I also felt personally wounded, that someone I liked well enough to have sex with could be that ungenerous with me, and assume not that I was a person deeply invested in thinking through all problems of poetry, with a deep love for language, and poetry, and what together they could do, and with deep love of and respect for other people thinking about poetry themselves, and being engaged, completely, in a life of poetry, and with a fantastic desire to communicate for and with the audience who so generously came to hear us, but instead that person assumed that I was lazy and withholding and ashamed or afraid to read “real” poetry. That was a very painful but educative experience.

“Love is form,” Charles Olson. “Love is form,” Robin Blaser. “All we love is form,” Stacy Doris. What do you think this means? (I asked this one before. You had an excel spreadsheet to attend to and begged off for now.)

I just finished a poem today which is a new form for me, and also is about form. It seems to

be about transit and commerce and language and the face. It was generated on BART and revised while at work. So it is also about the Bay Area and labor. More and more it seems to me that my work is mostly form. I haven't been generating any content lately but form has been there. And the two bleed together. What was it that Creeley said? "Form is never more than an extension of content."

I'm more inclined to say yes to Doris' mutation on the phrase than Blaser's or Olson's. Stacy's phrasing for me takes the emphasis off "love" and onto form. Not that love shouldn't be emphasized, of course, but I have a hard time imagining what the boys mean here. Are they referring to poetry, or to actual human love? I think this is why I begged off the question originally. A love relationship has formal characteristics certainly, even to the extent that it is just that, form, but what does this mean? What does it mean that poets are saying this? . . . Thinking now of the performance Steven Benson gave at the Unitarian Center a few years back. . . in which he basically performed a phrase. I can't remember the original phrase he began from – can you? – but one of the mutations was "when we love each other the war ends." War is form. The face is form. One hopes that there is love in the face.

I did not answer the question as I wanted. But I don't know how to. It could go on for years.