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## ARTICLE

# *Projectivisms >> Symposium Way-making the Contemporary Projective, University of Cardiff, 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> May 2018*

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This is a report detailing the 'Projectivisms Symposium' which took place at the University of Cardiff from 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

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**Keywords:** Projective; Field; Olson; Poetry; Sea; Open; Poetics

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'Projectivisms', a two-day symposium at Cardiff University deftly organised by Wanda O'Connor (Cardiff University), was called to look at the 'structural inheritance of the projective' and to consider 'the impulse towards openness' in contemporary writing. As the two days unfolded it became apparent that Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse' manifesto was providing a gathering point for a variety of poets, performers and critics; it is tempting to turn this report into an open field poem because of the tensions, linkages and synergies between the various panels.

O'Connor began proceedings by pointing 'Towards a Post-Projective Poetics'. After a survey of recent writing on open field poetics, she suggested that this would consist of stuttering, hesitation, accumulation, glimpse, dwelling in-between the earth and sky, improvisation, shaking up, drift. These techniques and attitudes all attempt to capture Martin Heidegger's sense of being thrown into reality or as O'Connor put it 'I never stop coming into the world again and again' or 'I am 'drafted' to a place of dwelling'. The archive becomes important as a place to explore traces of presence and absence and the poem becomes a Walter Benjamin-inspired arrangement of fragments, think of Susan Howe. Her final suggestion positioned the

open field writer on a jetty moving – perhaps hesitatingly – from land into an open ocean of feeling, which perfectly set up what was to follow.

The next pair of presentations both engaged with poetry's relationship to digital technology. J. R. Carpenter's (Independent scholar) 'Straight Quotes, Square Brackets: Page-based Poetics Inflected with the Syntax and Grammar of Code Languages' looked at various versions of work from her latest book *An Ocean of Static*. The book mixes fragmented archive material relating to voyages into and across the North Atlantic since the fifteenth century to the present day with computer code language. Carpenter explored the book as a transitional object which gives a snapshot of the processes she uses as a digital artist to make everything seem on the cusp of being something else. She also explored the glitches that can occur when translating between different mediums; particularly from computer screen image with hidden code to paper based book or academic article. Marilyn Allen (University of Wales Trinity St Davids) followed with a performance of 'Conversation with a Digital Other'. The performance involved slides, computer generated voice, a human reader and a megaphone which advised we 'Mind the Gap' and detailed a hypertext journey whilst exposing parts of our web browsers we tend to try and ignore (those annoying pop-ups). Questions from the presentations included the relationship between the computer screen and the 'material world', the role of the glitch as a pause or interruption and whether the glitch could also be found within traditional archival material.

The discussion of the relationship between who is in charge in the interaction between a human being and digital technology was then exemplified by Mark Leahy's (Independent Scholar) "'The threshing floor of the dance" A performance of threaded insert'. Leahy appeared in white gloves and bow tie in the centre of the room. He then put in some ear-phones and began making statements, 'Agape, we perform', moving forward a set number of steps, changing direction, moving again, making statements, 'a portion of depressed hair', describing the room, spelling out words, walking forward, spelling out words accompanied by a basic sign language, walking out of the fire escape, re-appearing through a different door. The performance with variations and repetitions lasted for twenty minutes. It turns out that Leahy was

responding to various instructions played at random from MP3 files. All the contents derived from guides for 'proper' speech, conduct and bodily deportment. It made me think that Leahy was showing "what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out)".

Mandy Bloomfield's (University of Plymouth) keynote 'Ocean Field Poetics: at sea with Charles Olson' powerfully considered Olson as a sometimes dis-orientated creaturely body. Her talk was part of a project considering attitudes toward the sea in twentieth century poetry from the Americas and included her own research in the Olson archive at Buffalo. The most striking part of this excellent talk considered the sense in which Olson could be considered humble. Bloomfield argued that going out to sea humbled Olson as he found his own body made strange, making his place in the world feel uncanny. *The Maximus Poems* both express a sense of one's own body as other as well as asking for an embodied relationship to an alien society. She also explored the sense of 'off-shore' – that processes take place in the ocean beyond our horizon of sight – showing that Olson often registered traces of these frequently destructive activities in his poems. Questions considered the differences between land-based maps, sea-charts and other archives, forms of relationship toward the sea based upon different occupations, the sea as both connection and barrier, the sea and imperialism. Olson's contradictory ego was also discussed in relation to whether *The Maximus Poems* were 'actually any good'.

As if to exemplify Olson's contradictions Amalia Rodrigo's (University of Lancaster) 'The Mandala of Olson's Typewriter' brought us back from the uncanny shifting ocean to look at the potential structuring principle underlying Olson's open field. Rodrigo considered Olson's use of the typewriter's 'rigidity and spatial precision' to provide 'the stave and the bar' for a reader's breath. Drawing upon Olson's interest in Jung she described the mandala as a contemplative device to scaffold or clothe psychic energy and 'gently' enable the confrontation of opposites: framework for chaos, inside that becomes outside. Rodrigo uses the mandala in her own poetry as what she called a ground; often this will be a diagram or shape which describes an energy field and which is used to give the poem some structure. She shared an example poem which used shape and refrain to enact a spiralling or helix structure.

Ruth Stacey's (Northumbria University) 'Double ventriloquy in the construction of an imagined memoir' shared her poetry project which aims to construct a poetic memoir for Pamela Colman Smith. Colman Smith was a fin de-siecle painter most well-known for illustrating the widely used Waite-Smith divinatory tarot cards in 1909. Stacey has been working with archive materials but there is very little written record to give a sense of Colman Smith's voice or attitudes. This is both liberating for the imagination and also frustrating. Thrown back on limited materials, Stacey has been using graphology to study Colman Smith's handwriting in detail, including the flourishing curve that Colman uses on the capital letter 'I'. Her talk ended with a reading of some intriguing and formally varied poems that mixed imagery from the tarot cards, biographical material, and images of foxes and wolves.

Nia Davies' (University of Salford) performance of 'Oceanik' took us back "off-shore" and seemed to enact the type of poetry O'Connor had advocated. Davies appeared at the front of the room with a poem on an A4 sheet of paper which she ripped into pieces, scattered on the floor, then picked up and read; this action of scattering and gathering was repeated three times. Words seemed to have been gathered from the conference, alongside other material; movement and ritual activity also seemed to be important. The word play and dance elements reminded me of Maggie O'Sullivan. The final part of the piece consisted of Davies performing in front of a video which enabled a further layering of words.

With the foam from Davies' withdrawing words still tracing the room Colin Herd (University of Glasgow) delivered 'Soapbubbles: Foam, Feminism, Projectivism in the work of Kim Seung-Hee' to a background of a pair of hands lathering soap. His beautifully effervescent talk rubbed together the seemingly unlikely combination of Peter Sloterdijk and Eileen Myles to exfoliate the implications of South Korean poet Kim Seung-Hee's work. In 'speech coagulated from the corners of your mouth' soap bubbles were proposed as 'models of co-existence' perhaps challenging the seemingly self-contained monad of Olson's mandala. We were urged to welcome 'the queering of the bubbles'.

After dinner we were treated to a series of performances. First up Daniel Wyn Jones and Richard McReynolds introduced us to 'Text Scores'. These are works of

music that rely upon text-based instructions, developed by many musicians who had attended Black Mountain College when Olson was present. These works often encourage audience participation or involvement. There was harmony, dissonance, whispering, shouting; sometimes aggressive, sometimes soothing; all generated by short, often simple instructions. J R Carpenter's hybrid print/web based work 'The Gathering Cloud' used found text and algorithmically generated writing to "crash together two big things I can't grasp –cloud computing and actual clouds". Nia Davis performed some poems from *All Fours*, these were charming, amusing, kooky, tender, based on glitches and slips in translation between languages. Camilla Nelson's (Independent scholar) One day this glass will break combined the visual – photographs of broken lightbulbs with collaged writing – and sonic – words and part words performed from back stage – to hauntingly respond to the work of visual artist Cornelia Parker. All these performances picked up resonances from the day's discussions.

## Day 2

The second day began where we left off with Tilla Brading's (Independent scholar) 'Textualising the Visual', a survey of the integrations and tensions between the visual and verbal elements in a variety of work from the projective, performance and concrete poetry traditions. Brading began by showing an Olson performance and expressing some scepticism about whether his voicing followed the rules expressed in 'Projective Verse'. She then leapt across the Atlantic to consider Ian Hamilton Finlay's garden at Little Sparta and Bob Cobbing's sound poem – 'Are your children safe in the sea?'. She then moved to the multi-format, multi-lingual performance work of Caroline Bergvall and Scott Thurston's recent poetry collections which respond to radical dance and movement practices. This was followed by a group workshop session that encouraged us to apply some of the techniques discussed by creating a collective multi-voice sound and movement poem.

David Ashford's (Independent scholar) 'Excess and archival material in Projectivist poetry' traced the use of documentary material in the modernist long poem starting with Ezra Pound. His intriguing talk considered the long poem as a form of Epic by

unearthing the history of Homer's reception in the period when Olson was writing *The Maximus Poems*. *Maximus* is famous for including undigested archival material and at the time Olson was writing, archaeological evidence was suggesting that Homer's famous lists were pretty much the same thing. It made me consider how far Olson had escaped the "Western Box" just at the moment when Ashford produced his own wooden case containing a Greek lyre. Sadly, he couldn't be pressed into song but did give some intriguing details about his own long poem which was using the archive of the British East India Company. Ashford's ambitious aim is to create an epic poem containing history with a better sense of the ironies of economics than Pound managed to convey. By the sounds of it, it is a project of epic scope worth looking out for.

Whilst the epic is one model for the long poem it is also a genre which has a fraught relationship to the lyric I. My own talk "Scale far beyond any humanist tampering": Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Drafts and Climate Change* looked at the ethics of folding back as a response to projecting out and considered the use of palimpsest as a way of developing a posthumanist aesthetics that could respond to the various scales of environmental crisis. This was followed by Conrad Steel's (University of Cambridge) 'Alice Notley's Imaginary Geometry' which considered Projective verse's relationship to Projective Geometry. Projective Geometry is what facilitates perspective drawing by enabling the consideration of what remains invariant when a shape is projected onto another surface. Steel concentrated on what this invariance could be in poetry: what is carried across from writer to reader through the text. Questions revealed some discomfort in the matching of mathematics and poetry and considered Notley's conversations with the dead as being, as one questioner put it, 'bathed in loss' which was a nice folding back to DuPlessis' own aesthetic.

The sense of recall and loss was taken up in Rowan Evans' (University of Bristol) 'The Last Verses of Beccan'. Beccan was a seventh century Irish monk on Iona whose last verses were written in praise of St Columba and give a glimpse of monastic life. Evans has visited the Outer Hebrides and made field recordings, he has also been translating Beccan's work from Gaelic into English, which has involved learning

Gaelic. The resulting poems are linguistically hybrid, words scattering across the page and are especially powerful when layered in performance with the field sounds where they seem to appear in amongst the swirl of wind and sea.

Saturday afternoon was given over to workshop sessions. The first was led by Francis Presley (Independent scholar) who traced the influence of the influential experimental feminist poet Kathleen Fraser's use of Olson's Projective Verse manifesto to open up the use of page space. Presley considered two types of open form poem, particularly in the work of Anna Reckin and Harriet Tarlo. There are open form poems that could be considered organic, where a unique form is found for each poem, and open form poems based upon some type of grid structure. Presley also presented some poems written in collaboration with Tilla Brading based on the life of Ada Lovelace, Lord Byron's daughter and possibly the first computer programmer. These poems combined organic form, grid-based constraint and the use of mathematical techniques. This was followed by a place-based writing exercise based upon H.D.'s writing about her birthplace, Pennsylvania.

The relationship between mathematics and poetry was further explored in another workshop aimed to show techno-phobic poets how simple computer coding could create a useful text machine which would cut up, randomise and display found text incredibly quickly. Then the screens were left behind as we participated in Steven Hitchins' (Independent scholar) 'Canalchemistry Project'. Hitchins has been undertaking a series of collaborative walks tracing the 'deleted Glamorganshire canal'. Walks contain performances by participants on location and documentation includes video, sound, text and image collage. Our walk traced the canal's course through the Cardiff's shopping centre, under a railway bridge and into a housing estate. Various conference participants read work at selected locations and we all performed a collaborative round in the echoing railway tunnel. We didn't quite make it to the canal's final destination at Cardiff basin. It was particularly odd to try and imagine the canal whilst standing in the shopping centre. Hitchins told me about trying to balance participation and artistic vision and about the often spookily terrible weather his group had encountered en-route ('why did I mention Alchemy in



the title?'). Perhaps the jinx had continued for one person who had been involved in previous walks, 'Allen Fisher got to Cardiff Station but has had to turn around and go back home because they've cancelled all his trains.'

The symposium ended appropriately with a final poetry reading. Lila Matsumoto (University of Nottingham) performed work from her collection *Urn and Drum*. The poems are colourful, delightful, child-like, playful, philosophical, sad, working on a relationship between image and text whilst closely describing objects. Samantha Walton (Bath Spa University) performed poems which seemed to take up, use and argue with clichés of genre fiction that both fit and do not fit the body. Her long poem written with a sound artist for a cycle along what was the railway line between Bath and Bristol dwelt upon the feelings of a body under threat. Francis Presley closed the symposium, reading powerfully from her collection *Halse is for Hazel*. Presley's use of open form recalls Robert Duncan's distinction between open form and open field made in *The H D Book*: Presley's poetics of 'open form' offers a 'showing forth ... of a power – and hence toward a form – in the language' in contrast to the "showing off" of Olson's projective verse. It is to the organiser's credit that the symposium enabled us to trace the projective's mutations backwards, forwards and – however haltingly – ever onwards.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they were a delegate at the conference, but otherwise have no competing interests.

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