

An Interview with Caroline Bergvall

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Figure 1. Caroline Bergvall

On her extensive Web site and in her recently published *Meddle English*, cross-disciplinary writer Caroline Bergvall includes images of collaged pages that she developed, drawing, in part, upon the Surrealist Hans Bellmer's 1930s photographs of life-size dolls that he built to then take apart and reconstruct in unsettling ways (*Meddle* 60–61). Visually, the collaged pages physically layer bodies of words, visual markings, and textures of language and parchment, suggesting the page and its language as material, textual bodies, subject to assembly, disassembly, and reassembly. Staging collage in the virtual space of Bergvall's site, this set of pages emphasizes the writing process and the environment of language as visceral, elusive, and material, all

the while performing an awareness of itself as text and inter-text. Exploiting technology's promise of access, the private act of writing opens into the public sphere, and the visual mark of the word merges with its sonic dimensions throughout her Web site, as Bergvall reads and performs the layered polysemantics of myriad compositions. A multiplicity and sense of transit (across arts, time, and languages) are suggested by these collaged pages and are insistently explored in the other text-based interactions with diverse media and spaces that distinguish Caroline Bergvall as a poet/artist/critic who, in the words of Charles Bernstein, "has emerged over the past decade as one of the most brilliantly inventive poets of our time."

Bergvall's engagement with linguistic sites generates complex intersections of theoretical, historical, sonic, performative, spatial, and visual dimensions. Her texts, experienced cognitively and viscerally at once – through pronounced appeals to the intellect, eye, and ear – produce encounters with language as an infinitely flexible, layered, and multidimensional medium, in terms of time, space, and form. Her varied projects include books, audio pieces, performances, and language installations. The installation work, often created collaboratively with practitioners in other media, situates language within environments more typically associated with visual or sound productions. Her work has been presented internationally, at Dia Arts Foundation and MoMA in New York City, The Serpentine Gallery and Tate Modern in London, and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. During the past decade, her books include *Goan Atom (I.Doll)* of 2001, *Fig (Goan Atom, 2)* of 2005, and *Cropper* of 2008. Her newest book, *Meddle English: New and Selected Texts*, appeared in the spring of 2011 and gathers important work from the past decade, including critical prose and her work around Chaucerian English, while also including the out-of-print *Goan Atom*.

Bergvall was born in 1962 to French and Norwegian parents and, after having lived primarily in Switzerland, France, and Norway, has spent most of her adult life in Britain, where she is currently based in London. She earned her *Licence-es-Lettres* from the *Université de Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle* in 1983, her MPhil in English from Warwick University in 1993, and her PhD by Publication in Performance Writing from Plymouth University/Dartington College of Arts in 2000, where she also served as Director of Performance Writing from 1994 to 2000. Growing up in a multilingual household, she understood and experienced language as a movement across and between different lexicons, a polyglot space animated by unexpected connections, resonances, and transits. This sense of language permeates all of her work in various media, linking her since the early 1990s with "experimental or exploratory writing" in Britain and internationally and with "visual arts and performance circuits," emphasizing what she calls "text practices" that "work as a mode of investigation" (Bergvall, "New Writing").

Especially in its concern with language's relation to the socio-politics of gender construction, Bergvall's work has always claimed a feminist perspective, deeply informed by contemporary theories of language, subjectivity, and power. Producing what Marjorie Perloff has called "hybrid work" of "complex assemblages," Bergvall strives to interrogate what Perloff terms "issues of representation," through unfixing

stable uses of language, aiming to “explore . . . areas of our conceptual approaches to female (and feminine) representation as well as the power structures within which these sexualities must function” (38). Bergvall herself notes that her “motivation has been very much to do with” using “language to construct or de-structure assumptions about gender, about sexuality, about female gender,” without falling “into a kind of identity-based writing, or identity-based art, but so that the whole question of identity becomes questioned” (“Speaking in Tongues”).

Writing, critical inquiry, and teaching are symbiotic for Bergvall. Her pedagogical attentiveness to language, speech, body, and subjectivity have informed her work in teaching residencies and directorial positions at Dartington College of Arts, Bard College (where she was co-chair of the MFA Writing Program for three summers), and Temple University, and as a Fellow of the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, in the Creative and Performing Arts. In crossing boundaries of media and discipline, Bergvall has also focused on theorizing “performance writing” as both a field of practice and an academic discipline. Building on the British Revival – a resurgence of modernist-informed poetry in the 1960s and 1970 – and formations of poet-performers that include Bob Cobbing, Maggie O’Sullivan, cris cheek [sic], and Paula Claire, Bergvall helped initiate the Performance Writing degree program at Dartington, an experimental arts college in Devon, England, contributing early on to the theorization of a poetics of performance writing. Speaking at the Performance Writing Symposium at Dartington in 1996, Bergvall contended that a theoretically informed practice of performance writing “explores relationships between textual and text-based work when developed in conjunction with other media and discourses,” while opening “the investigation of formal and ideological strategies which writers and artists develop textually in response or in reaction to their own time and their own fields” (quoted in Allsopp 76).

During the 1990s, Bergvall’s innovative treatments of language, form, and the visual page received increasing recognition among British and North American readers interested in a language-based poetics. In Britain, the dominance of an accessible, lyric poetry of the personal voice had, since the 1950s, overshadowed a lineage of modernist experimentation that nonetheless persisted through figures like Basil Bunting, J. H. Prynne, Veronica Forrest Thompson, Tom Raworth, Wendy Mulford, and Denise Riley, and through the small press community. Within women’s poetry, particularly given the mainstream feminist movement’s embrace of the self-expressive lyric, the work of contemporary women writing within more experimental modes and language practices often suffered invisibility. In her 1993 essay, “No Margins to This Page: Female Experimental Poetry and the Legacy of Modernism,” Bergvall articulates a feminist tradition of experimental practice, alive and well – even if ignored – among current writers. Without dismissing the significance of the lyric voice of self-expression, accessibility, and authenticity, Bergvall argues for the recognition of feminist practices explored by modernist and contemporary women poets as ways of expressing gendered subjectivity outside of standard lyrical practice.

Intervening in divisions particular to poetic discussions of the time, which opposed standard lyric “expressive poetry” (often labeled as “mainstream”) to language-based practices deemed “experimental,” Bergvall’s point is to argue for a broader understanding of feminist poetics and greater attention to women poets whose work unsettles the standard lyric while refusing to evacuate the self (as advocated by certain discourses of postmodernism); indeed, in language-based poetic work, Bergvall and others have argued, the ideologically gendered construction of the self and systems of identity can be explored and transformed.

A series of anthologies appeared in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s that focused upon contemporary practitioners of this modernist or avant-garde lineage; however, the relative exclusion of women from these anthologies and from critical discussions of experimental British poets prompted challenges (like Bergvall’s 1993 essay) from women poets. One such challenge appeared in 1996, when Wendy Mulford and Ken Edwards’s press, Street Editions, published *Out of Everywhere*, an anthology edited by Maggie O’Sullivan that brought together thirty British and North American women poets described by Mulford and Edwards as “women who, broadly speaking, were working with language – disordering and deconstructive techniques, at the leading edge of new poetics” (Edwards 252). Bergvall’s inclusion in the anthology, along with nine British poets whose work spanned the 1970s through the 1990s, connected her with an experimental feminism seeking to explore issues and ideologies of subjectivity and power embedded within operations of language. O’Sullivan’s introductory remarks praised all of the selected poets’ “brave insistence [on] and engagement in explorative, formally progressive language practices” and their commitment to “excavating language in all its multiple voices and tongues, known and unknown” (O’Sullivan 9–10).

A few years later, lending her editorial energies to the emerging project of making such poets visible, Bergvall curated a special section on British women poets for the online journal *HOW2* in 2001, entitled “New Writing Feature: Introduction to ‘Postings from Britain.’” Introducing the poets, she reiterates that “issues of psycho-social identity as related to body configurations such as gendering or genderedness . . . are only rarely explicitly acknowledged as viable methodological concerns in approaching the writing projects produced with the British experimental poetry scene” (“New”). Helping to bring such issues into view, Bergvall notes that the women included in the issue insist upon the “pertinence of poetic work as a mode of investigation which has a part to play in public discourses on art” and “issues of representation” (“New”). These comments introduce a group of poets intervening in such a scene, creating text-based works that cross lines of visual, performance, and page formats to comment upon formations of “psycho-social identity as related to body configuration” (“New”). Recent works by Maggie O’Sullivan and Denise Riley are joined by poets and artists from a then-emerging generation, including Tertia Longmere, Karlian van den Beukel, Shelby Matthews, and Redell Olsen. Performative, visual dimensions, difficult to capture in print form, are made available through the online format. A later issue of *HOW2*, appearing in 2009, devoted a special section

to Bergvall's work, galvanizing important critical discussions of her work over a twenty-year span.

Bergvall's projects often involve source texts that provide ways to investigate language, speech, and representation as historically embedded and mediated operations. This engagement invites a hybrid reading practice, attentive to a layered performativity of simultaneous texts and media. Part of the performative aspect of Bergvall's texts manifests itself through the visual arrangement of the words and the page, the sonic resonances of utterance, and a heightened attention to the physical words themselves, prompted by unexpected word combinations, unconventional typography, disjointed lineation, breakage, punning, linguistic switching, and multilingualism. For example, in *Goan Atom* (from which an excerpt is drawn in the interview), the manipulation of linguistic material emphasizes the visual space of the page and foregrounds the singular mark of the letter and its circulation through multiple structures of meaning-making. Many pages contain single letters, or small groups of letters, sometimes in columns of different type size, sometimes sitting on the edge of the page, or placed so that the white space of the page surrounds them. The letters coalesce into syllables or word fragments, radically severed by enjambment. As longer lines and phrases appear, they are often torqued by punning and phonemic breakage, while laden with pieces of found material, multiple language fragments, and extra-literary references that may point toward primary sources. Such sources for the series include Hans Bellmer's doll photographs from the 1930s; Cindy Sherman's 1980s photographic series, entitled *Sex*, of plastic mannequins; and media representations of the cloned sheep, Dolly, in the 1990s, all of which are used to confound naturalized notions of a heterosexualized female body, enforced through social and ideological pressures. Recent critical discussions, including Bergvall's own, comment, as well, upon her engagement with queer theory and poetics, as a lesbian and a multiethnic speaker who is historically and culturally located within systems of power that silence or marginalize these positions.

Engaging these systems to expose their operative force leads Bergvall to explore prior texts. In works like *Goan Atom*, *Via*, or the new *Meddle English*, textual collusions with sources like Bellmer's photographs, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Dante's *Inferno*, and Duchamp's Dada texts develop out of processes of research that also inform Bergvall's installation projects. A number of the installations are textually rendered in *Fig*, accompanied by installation notes and photographs. For example, "Say: 'Parsley,'" which draws upon the 1937 massacre of Creole Haitians in the Dominican Republic during the dictatorship of Trujillo, includes photographs of the installation (which changed in different sites and times) and notes about the project's concentration on the coercive politicization of "speaking patterns" as a basis for oppression (*Fig* 50). In her installation work, Bergvall collaborates extensively across multiple fields that "[encompass] architecture, graphic design, composition and sound engineering" (Foster 7). Her most recent site-production, "Caroline Bergvall: Middling English," at the John Hansard Gallery in 2010, foregrounded connections between eighteenth-century broadsides and contemporary flyers to, as Imogen Stidworthy observes,

“animate different timeframes, as well as different cultural and linguistic frames” (Bergvall, “Interview” 60). The installation, incorporating walls of broadsides, hanging plumb lines, weighted wire structures, architectural space, and sound recordings, created a space that Bergvall describes as “a show of multi-media writings, where each element of text, site, sound, and materials is mixed and arranged into one viewing/strolling/listening environment. . . . *Middling English* traverses language: from sci-fi/horror and city lingo to dark humour, unexplained objects, Chaucerian glossary, and quotes, via bilingual code switchings and texting” (*Middling English* 18).

Introducing the installation, Stephen Foster, director of the John Hansard Gallery, comments that Bergvall’s “practice is rooted in the exploration of language, particularly its geographical, historical, and political permutations, and its expression through the printed word and beyond” (6). For Bergvall, the act of crossing boundaries and enforced borders is a necessary act for the writer/artist, to manifest how “dialogue as encounter is necessarily a meddling of boundary” crucial to countering ideologically powerful boundaries – nationalistic, corporate, linguistic, sexual – that enforce silence and exclusion (*Meddle English* 19). “To meddle with English is to be in the flux that abounds,” to draw on everything around us, and “to excavate” both past and present (Bergvall, *Caroline* 18). For the poet/artist/writer to address and help transform conditions of the contemporary, conformist world,



Figure 2. Broadsides from *Middling English* exhibition, John Hansard Gallery. Photo by Steve Shrimpton.

“imagination must rip rule again!” and fearlessly cross over into points beyond familiar comprehension (Bergvall, *Caroline* 9).

The original interview with Caroline Bergvall took place at the conference Contemporary Women’s Writing: New Texts, Approaches, and Technologies, held in San Diego, July 7–9, 2010. It was substantially revised and developed through ongoing e-mail exchanges over the following months and conversations during Bergvall’s visit to Duquesne University under the cloudy skies of Pittsburgh in February, 2011. Emily Rutter’s work as a graduate assistant was invaluable to this collaborative process, in researching material for the interview, transcribing the original conversation, and engaging in further conversations with Caroline Bergvall and me.

Q: Let’s start with a general question to introduce your work and to broaden people’s understanding of your work. Could you talk a bit about where your writing began and what types of influences have shaped your approaches to writing?

A: I would say that writing began, in all seriousness, when I started writing in English, when I moved from my own languages of French and Norwegian to working in my third language, English. In that transition, in that choice, I situate some of the motifs of my practice as well – the consciousness of speaking, the acquisition of languages, the confusion of origins, the fact that everything is thrown into transit, that a language can be a passage to something else or from something else. In contemporary culture, I am very influenced by texts and artworks in which such passages take place or can be gleaned, pieces that emerge from a sort of cultural restlessness or that struggle with a lack of proper placing or legitimacy, and how this might influence the writer’s or artist’s own biographical tracing. So it’s not a genre or a specific form of writing so much as its performative aspect that really captivates me.

Q: Your work often is marked by multilingualism and punning. Do such instances point to a “lack of proper placing,” and, if so, how might that be distinguished from a use of linguistic disruption, which is one way your work with language has been characterized?

A: The beauty of working with language is to find oneself in a very flexible and variable environment, one that is also architectonically deep and complex. And, of course, endlessly expansive. It is also a dangerous, a lethal environment, one of the most infiltrated areas through which power structures regulate, censor, and shape the social body or the individuated body. As a writer, I try to use this vast range and its multifarious histories as much as possible. On the light side, language being a permutational structure, it is open to all sorts of mishaps and games and mistakes; and semantic sense, of course, is a representational device prone to misunderstandings. For example, comedy of manners may be full of identity masks, which all mainly start and end with verbal confusions and tricks; but these comedic narratives can easily be used for far more serious and disruptive ends.

Q: How does a multilinguistic practice inform this thinking?

A: Poetically, multilingual work can provide all sorts of avenues into questions of complex belongings, accents, and idiolects, questions of cultural translation or non-translation. It carries an explicit politicization around language use and cultural exchange. Instead of ease of access, it can be lack of understanding we are faced with. Like when trying to read Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's multi-genre, multilingual *Dictee*, if one doesn't know Korean, or French, or Korean recent history, or Greek mythology. This creates a text in which cross-linguistic methods are part of the narrative itself. We can think about this exposition of several languages as a reflection on a lack of transparency between cultures, on relations of dominance that take place in cross-linguistic traffic. So the games, the puns, that I play in many of my pieces are actually there to block, to create obstacles as much as they are there to facilitate or invent connections: like obstacle games between languages and narratives; like something one doesn't know and is suddenly faced with. Kamau Brathwaite explains how he wants his strongly graphic and visual poetry to blind the reader to force up another kind of reading, of comprehension. This is a useful metaphor for much current multilingual writing.

Q: On the other hand, you do create certain structures of access, for example in all of the contexts and links about your work provided on your extensive Web site. Another example of a structure of access shows up in your 2005 book *Fig*, a collection of twelve pieces that includes prefatory notes for each. The notes provide a context for understanding the various projects and practices that make up *Fig*. What prompted the decision to provide this kind of apparatus, which actually encourages a bit more access to the projects?

A: All the pieces in *Fig*, in one way or another, come from different environments than the page. They all come from production environments, through which I had to develop writing processes that were slightly different than if I'd written the whole book and each piece for the page. It was difficult to place such processes in a book. I wanted to frame this. Also, since part of my approach to writing is not confined to the page, it felt to me important to present those other production environments and how they had affected the written composition of the pieces. In composing the notes, there was the sense of engaging in a sort of presentational prose, in which the pieces are all written in a similar type of descriptive sentence structure. It is these explicatory notes that provide the stylistic and conceptual continuity of the book.

Q: They remind me of the "working notes" included in the online journal *HOW2* and its earlier print incarnation *However*. The working notes became an important way of bringing both the site of production and the process into our reading of the work. I was attracted to the similar way in which your notes work in *Fig*.

A: There is also definitely, for me, a linkage to the framing poetics of instructional performance, as in the multidisciplinary work of artists and musicians of the Fluxus network, and in the process notes of John Cage and Jackson MacLow or Alison Knowles, or in the word experiments of writers associated with the Oulipo group that was founded in France in the 1960s. Process notes are additional or parallel ways through which one gets to access the work.

Q: Let's shift now to talk about women writing experimentally. You've written on the production and the reception of women's experimental writing, in particular, and how we even think about the term "experimental." Your early 1990s essay, "No Margins to This Page: Female Experimental Poetry and the Legacy of Modernism," provided one of the initial feminist discussions of the terms "experimental" and "expressive" poetics, during a period of general debate and conflict over the lyric and formal language innovation. Part of the essay's point was to call attention to the neglect of women poets who worked out of more language-based (rather than lyric-based) practices and to try to open up wider communities of readership to such work. In your editorial efforts – for example, editing special sections of *HOW2*, the online journal devoted to women's writing and language innovation – and other kinds of community building, you've helped bring the work of experimental British women into greater visibility. Can you talk a little bit about the development of writing and reading communities for this kind of work?

A: The whole notion of experimentalism and community in Britain is very difficult – it's often been very closed. When I started out, I was actually relieved that I was doing so much performance work that had nothing to do with this poetry environment! It was still difficult for women in the circle of experimental poetry scenes in Britain in the early 1990s. But these circumstances have changed drastically these past few years. A good number of female poets are emerging who are also curators or editors. Emily Critchley and Carol Watts, for instance, are, as we speak, putting together a second international festival of female poets. Carrie Etter and Harriet Tarlo are both editing anthologies. Zoe Skoulding in Wales has renewed the scope of the quarterly *Poetry Wales*. There are also a good number of younger and dynamic poets such as Sophie Robinson, Kristin Kreider, Frances Kruk, Sascha Akhtar, and Amy D'Eath. The social and cultural politics have been able to rise to the surface in this previously fairly rarefied scene, and a range of identifications can now be explored formally, poetically. The work being produced is quite varied, which is also a healthy sign. In Britain, the so-called experimental or avant-garde scene has been very much held in check by small groups of masculinist poets, who have held small but influential courts, letting one or two women in at a time. So it's a delight to see that this is exploding through sheer numbers and a frequent investment in very different intellectual and performative practices. The interest in performance among poets of all kinds has definitely helped open up the makeup of this scene.

On a larger scale, it is endemic to the literary scene and mainstream poetics scene in England that there is a deep distrust of what is called “experimental.” The term doesn’t mean anything anymore and it is more of an artificial irritant; but it has allowed mainstream publishers and organizers and journalists to cut out from public view work to which they don’t like to relate. I’m not so concerned about these issues anymore; they’re so tedious. I don’t know that any of this is answering your question.

Q: No, this all helps. When I think about reading communities in Britain, speaking as someone in America, it feels difficult to get a handle on some of the things that you’re talking about, because of the lack of continuity of discussions, the lack of archives, the feeling of distance from immediate activity. The effort to piece together some sort of critical history or awareness of women working experimentally in Britain, especially in the years since the 1960s, feels very tentative. So, I’m interested in the social aspects and the social reasons for that difficulty, too.

A: Interestingly, the connection between avant-garde practices and poetry in Britain, especially via sonic and visual works, is starting to generate an effort to create archives and critical work. The Bob Cobbing archives are now at the British Library and the boxes and reels are in the process of being exhumed, through the painstaking research of a small number of poets. There was a celebration commemorating the work of Anna Mendelssohn the other day that was very much signaling that her estate will be taken care of. Veronica Forrest-Thomson has had a resurgence of critical interest recently. I also think that more established women poets, alongside male counterparts, are starting to show support for a large body of work – people such as Maggie O’Sullivan, Geraldine Monk, and Denise Riley; and this female presence is definitely having an impact on the scene as a whole.

Q: A certain amount of an institutional framework is needed to accomplish such work. As an example of a new development in that regard, I’m thinking about the recent appearance of the *Journal of British and Irish Experimental Poetry*.

A: Institutional or cultural framework is needed for any work, whether this is acknowledged or not. The journal is an initiative launched by Robert Sheppard at Edge Hill. Elsewhere, Carol Watts and Will Rowe at Birkbeck College have been setting up reading seminars with invited poets, Web site journals, and collaborations between students called Voiceworks; Redell Olsen and Robert Hampson at Royal Holloway College run a longstanding talk series and the informal Runnymede festival; Emily Critchley and Cherry Smyth are at the University of Greenwich, where two festivals of poets and cross-arts writing are taking place; and Andrea Brady at Queen Mary College is in charge of the archives of the *HOW2* Web site. Also, Sara Crangle at the University of Sussex is setting up a festival with Keston Sutherland and he is still running Barque Press with Andrea Brady; then there were my own institutionally nomadic series, the four Partly Writing roundtables, and more recently the

Translated Acts roundtables, the latter co-chaired with Claire MacDonald and Carol Watts. All these are run by poets who have an understanding of modernist and postmodernist poetic practice, as well as questions of identitarian and methodological framing.

Q: In connecting poetic practice and “identitarian framing,” especially around questions of gender, how do you think about something called the “experimental feminine” right now?

A: It’s a tautology. The feminine of course comes in as a conceptualized notion of gender and has very much to do with reframing the material politics in the work, or the body, or language through psychoanalytic processes. It ensures that questions about the semiotic in relation to gender and genders are being raised. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, some years ago, argued in *The Pink Guitar* for a very synthetic way of thinking through the formal excitement yet blatant misogyny of early modernism. I think the whole notion of the experimental feminine could be to remember that poetic experiment does not *per se* mean revolutionizing identity. But it does demand an understanding of language as something both extremely fixed and potentially volatile and liberatory.

Q: You seem to be speaking to the necessity of maintaining the category of the feminine without evacuating gender. I’m thinking about early arguments over Kristeva’s use of Joyce to exemplify “the feminine” even though his practice did not radicalize gender structures. Where do you now locate the feminist politics in your work, which is part of what you’re talking about here?

A: Kristeva’s ideas on the semiotic are extremely useful. But of course from the point of literature, she only applies them to white, male, European, and canonized authors, so there is also a strong missing link to do with applications of social and cultural history. The demands of feminism are not all intellectual and linguistic. There are social impediments to access, which keep the strongest hold with the status quo. One has to work on the ground too, as it were. I’ve recently been revisiting a phrase by an old favorite of mine, Kathy Acker. In her essay “Seeing Gender,” she writes: “I was unspeakable so I ran into the language of others” (80). I find this phrase really wonderful regarding language politics in relation to female subjection. She uses the abject, the repulsive to justify her practice as a writer: her citational methods, her blatant plagiarizing. She makes a whole new point about the motivation for intertextuality by connecting it both to feminine and identitarian poetics. She strategizes literary plagiarism into identity mimicry and uses one of the tenets of French feminist philosophy around the impossibility to inhabit language as a woman, to do so. Her female characters might all be socially dejected, despised, completely dysfunctional. More importantly, any autonomous or utopian or revolutionary language use is disallowed them. I used to find her overall anger, her sexualized revolt, her loud cursing, her brusque, unobtrusive,

nearly cartoon-like narratives very satisfying. In a way, they also did sum up the way I thought about writing and feminist or queer poetics for a time – how can I push and even curse my way into making workable language? How can I set up the connections that ensure that what I do does not cancel me out, that other types of bodies and imaginaries are brought into our understandings of language, of history?

Fundamentally, I think that, for the past few years, my feminist politics have become very much embedded in my work around bilingualism. I have embedded the question of gender, and that of sexuality, in questions of bilingual practice. I've been creating work thinking a lot about questions of cultural hybridity or mixed linguistic work, not as a utopian bypassing of identity into an idealized babel patchwork, but rather as punctual, productive ruptures from the monolingual citizen or the monolingual text or its nationalist demands. I have been developing what I call "accented" practices, and the phrase that Luce Irigaray uses as a title for one of her books, "I love to you," has been really revelatory to me. Again, such a phrase is a very synthetic way of handling very complex material. It indicates a process of relativity, of transitivity and self-awareness; it displaces the centrality of the "I" in the encounter. The preposition is literally in the way; it makes for a syntactically incorrect phrase. This can show up the opaqueness of any encounter, it can set up a sense of movement, of direction, by also acknowledging lack of fluency as a positive value. By extension, the postcolonial theorist Sara Ahmed uses a similar prepositional directionality to discuss the notions of "orientation" and of "opaqueness" in relation to queer sexuality. Sexuality becomes a relative ever-changing process (1–24). This can be used to alter the fixed nature of relations between gendered or sexuated subjects. One needs to find ways of applying this to one's practice, to one's social and political being too. Misogyny and gender roles are major paradigms of course, but far from the only ones. Superiority, normalization, fluency, access, lineage: these are notions that constrain everything too. Your question reminds me that a regeneration of cultural values still has much to learn from the recent histories of feminism's commitment to change. Paul Gilroy opens his book *Postcolonial Melancholia* by making reference to the ongoing strong impact of feminist methods on his own cultural project. From the point of view of art and literature, how to affect what constitutes influence and lineage and what makes for "good writing" and "good English" are live questions that always connect back to certain identification standards.

Gayatri Spivak's notion of a "transnational literacy" and Edouard Glissant's "relational poetics" are two complementary approaches that I have been referring to increasingly. They each rethink questions of hierarchies between cultures and languages. They each emphasize and propose forms of cultural training and a circulation of knowledge that seek to dismantle the western paradigm of dominance and change the perspective one has on world history or the idea of any world language. They do this through the notion of "translation," in Spivak's case, and "translocality," in Glissant's. They each propose a relation to language that is plural and non-monolingual, and deeply historically informed. As a multilingual, white, queer,

female, European writer, with good teeth, thick hair, and an intensely troubled sense of what it means to belong, to identify, it has been important to me that I try and keep the connections alive between problematizing gendered identity and understanding the dynamics of language use and cultural assumptions.

Q: This might be a good time to connect up your work in performance. In performance work, you go to places where you are not, or cannot be, assuming authority and control over the process. Your performance writing has been collaborative at times, and it's involved installations, physical performance, and an emphasis on textuality. Also, your work has been very interdisciplinary, engaged with different forms of media. Your work's modes and processes and practices have pushed voice and body in some interesting ways. Can you talk about how issues of voice and body are foregrounded in performance writing as you practice it?

A: The notion of the voice, of course, is a very loaded term. What is the voice? In literature, the voice is concomitant with the idea of the writer's style. It is also a metaphor for the poetic act. More broadly, it stands for the individual act of uttering, and even for collective sounding. In fact, the voice is nowhere in the physiological body. The Canadian poet Erin Moure writes somewhere about having lungs instead of having a voice. It points to the breath trajectory of her love poetry. Technology transforms this voice, this voicing by extraction from the speaker's body. As we have seen throughout the twentieth century, this is extraordinary and unsettling. I am fascinated by the many uses of audio recordings of text. A recording is an inscription, so it allows the live voice, the speaking, to survive itself and its own liveness. It is editable and recyclable. It can also be a social document of a slice of audio life. It is a form of writing, even if it demands different tools and approaches to writing as it moves us from reading to listening, from the page to the audio and oral environments. I love all this as activities that are part of me as a writer, in the same way that I take immense pleasure in rehearsing my performances and in giving live readings. There can be such a direct charge of energy that takes place in live performance, in the contact with the audience through the reading, performing voice, that it sometimes feels extremely sexual, extremely connective, and trancelike.

Also, the idea of voice and body in performance is at the heart of the question of transit or passage or conduit. It is all to do with utterance and mediation. For me, the mediation of recording or of an installation space is really an exploration of a contemporary way of living, of being with language and of accessing language. The displacements and relocations enabled by a recorded text, an audiographic text, are loaded with all sorts of knowledges that are not necessarily literary, that emerge from the performing arts' connection to the body or to space and to duration.

These questions inevitably move the writing process toward types of “locative” or “operatic” works, that are interdisciplinary, collaborative, multivocal, allographic. We live in a very audiovisual socio-cultural time and I’m interested in the way that the textual is making its own inroads into that, by resorting to newer cross-media visual arts techniques and also by remembering long-established, complex vocal and performative art forms, in which the writing has been crucial as one of many elements. My installations, my audioworks are in an open traffic with my writing. They inform one another. To install language in a space inevitably opens up the piece to very different questions around perception, readerliness, immersion, obstacles etc. And yes, the work is set up and the audience, the viewers, or listeners then find their own way through it. It is definitely not like turning the pages of a book. Unless that book is Cortazar’s *Hopscotch*!

Q: You mentioned the importance of these concepts to your teaching. Can you talk a little bit about teaching, about pedagogies of writing?

A: I teach both in universities and in arts colleges. I am especially keen to be in environments where I can teach practice and where theory and critical work are attached to the development of practice and the development of writers and artists as language explorers – environments in which the nature of writing and the familiarity one might feel toward one’s culture, one’s art form, one’s language is radically opened for discussion, for research. This can mean close reading of, or close listening to, works by others. It also means exploring writing as a set of methods and attitudes. This can be in studio, on site, in front of a screen or a page or a paragraph of ink, as long as it makes students realize the range of different material approaches to writing and to responding that they can actually occupy. The emphasis is always on the writing, not on the writer, on what writing can be about, not what on writers think they are saying. I teach practice as a combination of material and critical tools – like providing an awareness of the changing history of what constitutes authorship, for instance, or literariness, or the use of citation in literature, or what translation means; also, within one language, discursive layerings, connections between text and image. These are all crucial for a writer to think about. There is a lot of resistance, as you can imagine, initially to this kind of approach, because younger students are often still very attached to the Romantic idea of the poet’s intensely individualistic or autonomous creativity and they just want to write out of their own bubble. They don’t want to think or to read into the terms of their own creative need. It is important to historicize this and to examine it, so that uninformed, essentialized claims about creativity and the writer can be channeled into skillful and powerful ways of making and, more importantly, of sustaining work. I really enjoy teaching writing practice as a combination of critical tools and intense process-led methods, to make the writer less isolated, more free to practice, while also thinking of the changing aspects of writing culture, to enhance pleasure at detailed practice while developing an open awareness. That’s ideal.

Q: As you're talking, I'm thinking about a phrase that cris cheek [sic] uses on the *HOW2* Web site to describe your work. He writes that your work "exemplifies an ethic of articulated practice-theory/theory-practice throughout." What has it meant for you as a poet to practice this kind of engagement with theory?

A: Making sure that I am pushing bounds, that I am made aware, that I am excited: that's what theory has done for me as an artist. It's really there to give me knowledge and to broaden my scope, my understanding of art and writing's role in contemporary culture, but also to awaken me to my own blind-spots and loosen up my flexibility, my curiosity. It's a way of thinking through the work's application. The writers I most admire in this respect often engage in complex research processes, to free up ways of telling a story, of documenting the past or an event and revitalizing it – writers such as W.G. Sebald, Susan Howe, Kamau Brathwaite, Georges Perec, and Erin Moure. Most of my projects are research-led, but not all this has to do with contemporary criticism.

Q: Can you give an example?

A: At the moment, I'm doing a lot of work on what I have called Middling English, because of my work with Chaucerian tales and language, and I've found myself having to do a lot of research on historical broadside ballads in London, on Middle English syntax and vocabulary, on historic clothing and trade, on historic and contemporary financial dealings. It's a kind of applied historical knowledge that emerges from one's materials.

Q: It's interesting to think about Chaucer's work as what you have earlier called a kind of *transit* involving oral and written cultures.

A: Chaucer has become one of the main tropes of my recent work. Most of the work I've written these past few years has involved thinking about historical and contemporary forms of English one way or another. Chaucer helped shape the use of Modern English in literature, when it was still very much influenced by Latin and French, and intensely split regional forms. We're now very much witnessing the spread of English out into other languages, through global business and postcolonial linguistic realities. So it is politically and culturally a very rich and complex time to be working in English, and it seems very fruitful to be thinking about the future through the past.

Furthermore, most of my projects deal with a kind of performative and "oralized" literature. They tie in with the past and the early years of the dissemination of literacy. They also tie in with the future. The fact that we're experiencing a widespread interest in reading-listening, through podcasts and audiobooks, will revolutionize the way we approach, and even teach, texts, in the future – witness the increasing pedagogic investment in a site such as PennSound, out of the University of Pennsylvania. So all in all, working through Chaucer is helping me be a writer today.

Linguistically, I have taken my cue from contemporary slang as much as historical English and explicit Chaucerian vocabulary or syntax. This kind of bilingual invention is, of course, politically and culturally very important for a lot of today's writers who have a mixed or complex cultural makeup, and I feel very connected to these issues. On a more playful note, being French and Norwegian but having lived in the UK for most of my adult life, I sometimes say that Chaucer's English is the closest to my own language and to my own way of speaking. In fact, when I do readings of some of my Chaucer pieces in Scandinavia, the surprise at some of the linguistic proximities is one of the major pleasures for the audience. We all become linguists for the duration of the piece. My new collection is called *Meddle English* and it includes some of my critical pieces around this subject, as well as most of my Chaucer-inspired texts, alongside other pieces. It also contains one long work of mine that has been out of print for a while, *Goan Atom*. *Meddle English* is my first book in six years and I am very pleased with it. The publishers have done a great job.

Q: *Goan Atom* revisited the 1930s photographs of Surrealist Hans Bellmer, a series of images of dolls he made and then would take apart and rearrange in various settings. You have developed a number of projects that re-traverse prior texts – Dante's *Inferno*, Bellmer's art, various visual/verbal texts, and now Chaucer and Duchamp. In that process of moving back into a text or an artwork, what are some of the approaches that you've taken?

A: In a sense, each project proposes different narrative or conceptual methods. I've discussed the Chaucer pieces. With the Dante, in my "Via: 48 Dante Translations" in *Fig*, I brought out the question of the historicity of translation. The opening tercet of the *Inferno* is about total initiatory loss. My text incorporates 48 different published translations of the opening lines, exploring how we are faced with the historical reality of each translation. So narratively, my piece is about being completely stuck and yet endlessly, imperceptibly, unreliably different. Methodologically, a lot of my intertextual and transhistoric pieces are about finding a trick, a key, getting to a minimal point of maximal pressure through which a project can happen.

Q: Can you talk about your work with Hans Bellmer's photographs in *Goan Atom*?

A: Bellmer created a sculptural doll that he blatantly called a "mineure articulée," and he took very staged photos of her in various states of disjointedness. Everything was taken apart into a libidinal fantasy of violent reassembly. He was also very influenced by his partner Unica Zürn's work on anagrams. He uses the principle of the anagrams to describe what he calls the anatomy of the image, which is very sexual, very co-penetrative. In Zürn's case, in order to make the elements of the anagram fit, it all becomes a process of absolute personal denial, perhaps to the point of her suicide. There's a famous photo of her body tied up with ropes, and the body is

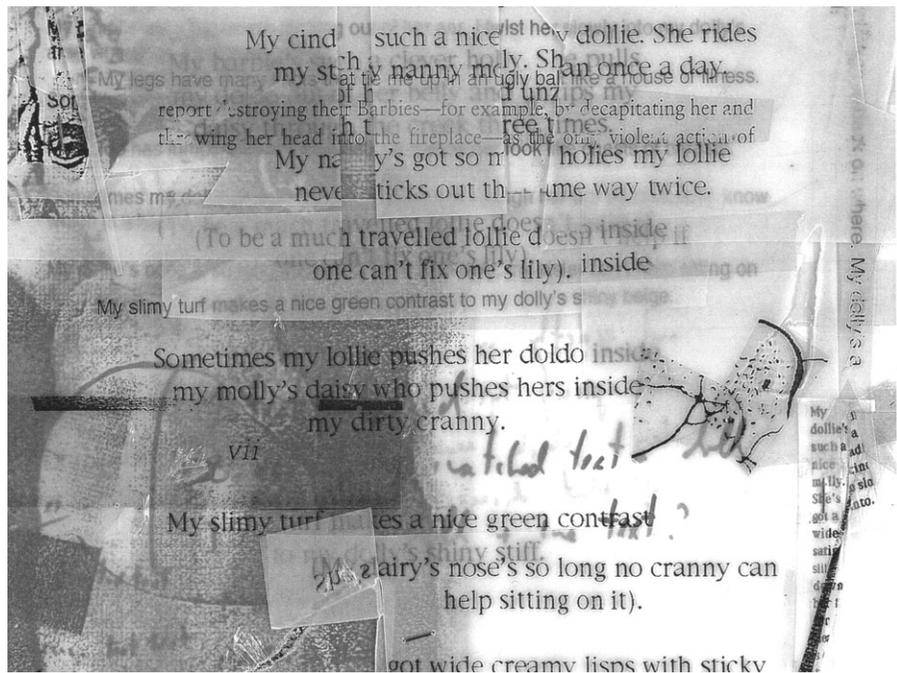


Figure 3. *Goodolly, I* (Meddle English 60).

completely dehumanized and is just a morbidly fascinating mass of flesh. Theirs was a violent and traumatized partnership. So I was thinking about her anagrams, which are about language-constraint and fit, and his grammar of the body, which is based on anagrammatic imagination, and I just sort of started recreating these bilingually into my story of the doll. I used the idea of joints to create the bilingual jumps that make up the text. The whole first part (“Cogs”) of *Goan Atom* is literally 15 textual recreations of Bellmer’s staged doll.

And then the piece develops in parts two (“Fats”) and three (“Gas”) into a wider exploration of the female as disarticulated doll, and of language as its exploratory tool of perversion, of sexual puns etc. I was trying to explore the points of textual imagination around the body that might not only reinforce but also start wildly escaping this narrative of total control. When *Goan Atom* enters into parts two and three, which reference a lot of female artists and writers, then we enter a very different environment where female artists are themselves exploring the consequences of this de-structuring and re-composition of anatomy. The quote from Mary Shelley’s author’s introduction to her *Frankenstein* is one of my favorite ones: “invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos” (xxiv). In *Goan Atom* it becomes part of the narrative in this way:

quote **MITTED** invention does not consist
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rooms unquote (*Meddle English* 101)

Q: *Goan Atom* is reminiscent of Cindy Sherman's photographs.

A: I use one of her staged photos in "Cindy Untied #250," which is in *Goan Atom*. Cindy Sherman definitely was very powerful for me in that respect. She and others provide a context to organize my thinking and language use, if you like, around ideas of the body.

Q: Cindy Sherman's photographs of mannequins deliberately de-aestheticize the female body and image. I see that kind of push to de-aestheticize in your work, also. Why is that important?

A: Well, that is really about questions around experiment and social gendering, I think, because aesthetics have also carried their own strictures and their own regulations about what is beauty and what is not beauty, and what is aesthetic pleasure. The female muse quickly becomes the abject, the perverse when manipulated in radical ways. It is significant that the question of aesthetics was one of the questions that twentieth-century artists did ask persistently, just as female artists were also finally allowed some room to play.

Q: One of the remarkable things about your work on Hans Bellmer is that it calls attention to the way in which his photographs are so beautiful. Looking at his photos, we are in an aesthetic space that we feel drawn to and simultaneously repulsed by, and I've been trying to figure out what your work is doing with that kind of space.

A: I think in Bellmer's case, he was an extremely skilled draftsman and made extraordinary drawings. His use of sculpture and then photography and then the coloring – all of this continues his interest in form; it continues his interest in the line. These photos are flattening the doll sculpture, and that sort of creates a space where he can also continue working formally. But I do find his coloring sort of nasty, I mean it's extremely nasty, it's as nasty as the narrative he's in fact telling. But the repulsive can be formal. The repulsive can be part of the form without addressing the politics of the object relations.

Cindy Sherman explores this space but as an aesthetics of disgust. Her series *Vomit* couldn't be clearer. The vomit, the molding, the close-ups of waste, like a generalized waste of culture, the waste of bodies, and everything else – these very raw, yet

complex images seem unfinished; their borders are not clear. Everything has become a sort of unstoppable effluvia.

Q: Yes, there is a way in which her photographs really challenge our formal aesthetic notions of what composition might be.

A: Absolutely, in stark contrast to her early film stills and her later more light-hearted Renaissance portraits. They don't have . . . they are all very beautifully framed.

Q: Before we close, can we talk about your current directions?

A: I'm wanting to rewrite or write beyond my piece *Alyson Singes*, my version of the *Wife of Bath*. It came out as a chapbook in 2008 and, as it is completely out of print, I now want to push it on and transform it into a book-length project. I've already been doing a lot of new research for it, including some visual research into the history of fashion, for instance, but I haven't had the time or opportunity to start composing the writing. I want a section of this new work to be produced as a performance or a theatrical event, and I am starting discussions with collaborators to make this happen within the next two years. I also have pieces that are being hired by galleries and museums for group shows in the coming year. Finally, I am putting the finishing touches on a collection of essays. This has been long in the making, and I hope to get it out very soon.

Q: Thank you so much for this wide-ranging conversation.

A: Thank you.

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A brief excerpt from this interview, videotaped by Sherry Shopoff, may be found at *CWW online*. A brief excerpt from Caroline Bergvall's keynote address at the July 2010 CWWA/San Diego State University conference *Contemporary Women's Writing: New Texts, Approaches, and Technologies*, videotaped by Sherry Shopoff, may be found at *CWW online*.

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