

## **Emily Critchley**

### **A Conference Overview**

This feature brings together a selection of the poetry and papers presented at the Contemporary Experimental Women's Poetry Festival, which took place in the Judith E. Wilson drama studio of the English faculty, Cambridge University (UK). It ran from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2006, with poetry workshops given by Leslie Scalapino and Kathleen Fraser on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> respectively. The festival was organised by myself with invaluable help from Catherine Brown, technical support from Jonathan Styles and Justin Katko, and sponsorship from Barque Press, the Judith E. Wilson Trust, and Trinity and St John's Colleges.

CEWPF was intended to highlight and celebrate past and present Cambridge talent, as well as the extraordinary depth and range of experimental work currently being produced by women around the world (writers came from the US, France, Switzerland, New Zealand, Hawaii, and from all over the UK). The aim was to introduce students and the public to the impressive number of women writing today, as well as to establish a network of exchange and support between younger and more established poets, and those writing in different parts of the world. It was especially important to me that the festival be practice-based and community-focused, rather than purely academic, to also celebrate the large number of women writers that are not university-based, and whose writing is self-funded.

CEWPF also happily coincided with the ten-year anniversary of *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (1996), edited by Maggie O' Sullivan and published by Ken Edwards of Reality Street. This publication was a crucial discovery for me, one in which I came across several of my favourite writers for the first time, especially Leslie Scalapino, Rosmarie Waldrop and Kathleen Fraser. The anthology also alerted me to the fact that women were writing as 'radically' or 'experimentally' and prolifically as men, in contrast to the predominant perceptions of many academic institutions in the UK - including Cambridge University - and, moreover, that they had been doing so for some time. As part of CEWPF, Maggie O'Sullivan and Wendy Mulford each performed some of their work, and Ken Edwards gave a talk on the publication of *Out of Everywhere*, sparking an animated Q&A session in which the difficulties of canon-making and exclusiveness involved in assembling any anthology emerged as key themes.

To illustrate the vast range of talents of those present as well as the necessary overlaps in the work of many of the writers between poetry, poetics, visual art, digital processing, internet technology, architecture, and so on, I aimed to make the festival as inclusive of multi-generic work as possible. Readings / performances were given by Andrea Brady, Lisa Samuels, Kathleen Fraser, Africa Wayne, Susan Schultz, Susana Gardner, Geraldine Monk, Redell Olsen, Carol Mirakove, Marianne Morris, Tom Raworth, Catherine Wagner, Coupons?Coupons (Justin Katko and Camille PB), Camille PB, Kai Fierle-Hedrick, Tim Atkins, Caroline Bergvall, Kaia Sand and Leslie Scalapino. Films were shown by Justin Katko and

Keith Tuma. Stunning visual projections revealed some of the various methodologies of the work of Lisa Samuels, Kathleen Fraser, Maggie O' Sullivan and Kai Fierle-Hedrick, including cut-up techniques, collaborations with visual artists, and in Kai's case, hypertext, which completely transforms the surface and direction of her poem *Pantoume* (a collaboration with Morris) with each new reading. Artwork by Emily Critchley, Kai Fierle-Hedrick and Marianne Morris was displayed over the weekend on the walls of the studio. We also heard worked responses, as well as more traditional papers, on the theme of women's writing and its attendant politics; these were given by Susan Schultz, Rod Mengham, Peter Middleton, Carol Mirakove, Kristen Kreider, Ken Edwards, Peter Manson and Lucy Sheerman.

Some of the work featured at CEWPF is published here in *How2* via texts, while others, thanks to the generosity of [Meshworks](#), appear via video-recordings of the readings/performances they gave at the festival. Also presented is a collaborative project by poet Kathleen Fraser and artist Hermine Ford, as well as links to further web-based projects by CEWPF contributors Andrea Brady, Kai Fierle-Hedrick, Marianne Morris and Susana Gardner.

I introduced the weekend's events with a paper (published as part of this *How2* feature) which briefly examines the troubled history of modern experimental women's writing in the US and the UK, and raises more general questions regarding the nature of poetry performances and academic conferences. Are we, for instance, doing all we can to make these occasions generous, nurturing and inclusive, rather than aggressively competitive to the point of

inhibiting and stifling public discussion? Catherine Brown concluded CEWPF on Sunday night with some astute remarks on the link between artistic communities and the necessity of self-recognition, noting how avant-garde artistic groups have always been, to some extent, self-reliant and self-perpetuating.

Other issues addressed over the weekend, in talks and by the poetry and papers presented, ranged across gender politics, poetics and community (especially in the paper given by Sheerman); eugenics (Sand); optimism regarding social change and Latin American revolution (Mirakove); the shift in science from nuclear physics to molecular biology or genetics - and its ramifications for literary criticism (Middleton); adoption as the new 'performance' or 'translation' (Schultz); violence against women, and the gulf between languages of personal experience and public policy (Fierle-Hedrick); parenthood (Wagner, Atkins and Schultz); anthologising and editing (Edwards); and the fluidity of the demarcations between making, printing and reading poetry (Kreider talked about the 'facsimiles' of Emily Dickinson, poems written on loose scraps of paper, envelopes, and Manson examined the physical processes involved in making and reading Maggie O'Sullivan's work). War was also a recurrent concern, raised in the work of Brady, Scalapino, Wayne, Morris and others.

Lively debates on these and other topics developed throughout the weekend, one of which importantly interrogated the current climate for women writing experimentally: how does this differ from place to place? How easy or difficult is it to write, perform, publish and/or be recognised, from within or outside academia?

And has the situation improved in the last ten years, e.g. since *Out of Everywhere* underlined the achievements of the female avant-garde for a UK audience? I thank everyone who took part in CEWPF and I encourage readers to extend and develop these discussions by posting responses to this feature on the Contemporary Experimental Women's Poetry Festival in [How2's postcard section](#).

### **Contributors to CEWPF**

Africa Wayne

Andrea Brady

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Carol Mirakove

Caroline Bergvall

Catherine Wagner

Eleni Sikelianos

Emily Critchley

Geraldine Monk

Justin Katko

Kai Fierle Hedrick

Kaia Sand

Kathleen Fraser

Keith Tuma

Ken Edwards

Kristen Kreider

Leslie Scalapino

Lisa Samuels

Lucy Sheerman

Maggie O'Sullivan

Marianne Morris

Peter Manson

Peter Middleton

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Rod Mengham

Susan M. Schultz

Susana Gardner

Tim Atkins

Tom Raworth

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