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Poets & Critics, a space for thinking and practicing poetics collectively

Vincent Broqua

Professor, Université Paris 8

vincent.broqua@univ-paris8.fr

Abigail Lang

Maître de conférences HDR, Université Paris Cité

abigail.Lang@u-paris.fr

Olivier Brossard

Maître de conférences HDR, Université Gustave Eiffel

olivier.brossard@univ-eiffel.fr

Abstract

This article seeks to delineate the origin and ambitions of Poets & Critics as a program designed to study and practice the question of alternative forms of criticism by looking into the critical and creative work of a given poet. After a contextual analysis of alternative forms of criticism and their potentiality in mainly US poetry, the article traces the history and the modus operandi of the Poets and Critics program. Initiated in Paris in 2010 and curated by Vincent Broqua, Olivier Brossard and Abigail Lang, the program is viewed as a research method: while bridging the gap between academic and poetic discussions, emphasizing poets' perspectives and exploring alternative forms of criticism, it also examines critical and creative work of English-speaking poets and critics through in-depth, collective discussions, challenging conventional formats and drawing inspiration from poets engaging in scholarly work. What is gained in the end is an intensive study of a given poet's work, the elaboration of a live critical discourse over two days, as well as a renewal of critical discourse in itself.

Keywords

English-language poetry, North American poetry, poetics, poetry, practice-based research, translation, creative writing, poetry readings

Since 2010, the Poets & Critics research program has been bringing together academics, literary scholars, writers, artists, and students for two-day symposia centering on the work of an English-speaking poet and critic, in their presence. The aim of the program has been to foster a generative cross-pollination between academic and poetic discourses. At a time when the research dimension of art as well as the heuristic value of artistic practises were being discussed in both philosophical and higher education contexts,¹ our local experience

1 We are thinking of Erin Manning and Brian Massumi's *Thought in the Act, Passages in the Ecology of Experience*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014) and of the impact of the Bologna Process for Higher Education on the hiring policies in French art schools.

was that the discourse of poets was rarely given full epistemological credit. Our conviction was that both academics and practitioners had much to gain from in-depth conversations and that these would provide occasions for thinking and practicing poetics collectively.

In what follows, we seek to delineate the origin and ambitions of Poets & Critics as a program designed to study, and practice, the question of alternative forms of criticism by looking into the critical and creative work of a given poet. We will then present its *modus operandi* before delineating some of the outputs and insights it afforded.

In this presentation, we also want to confront, if only briefly, some of the following questions: What is an alternative form of criticism? What is the value of an in-person encounter with the poet and of an embodied, sensitive encounter with poetry and poetics? Does it not run the risk of a return to the strictures of author-oriented criticism, intentionality and biographical reading that Barthes, after Proust, warned against in the “Death of the Author”? These are questions that we’ve been asked.

Poets & Critics: background and initial project

At the start of the Poets & Critics symposia was the realization that poets were largely invited to read or talk in French universities as part of “cultural events”. They were often the cherry on the cake in academic conferences. In most cases, their critical discourse was not viewed as having an epistemological value on a par with academic discourse. Conversely, many poets felt that the university was not a space for them because it was too scholastic, too serious, and risked sanitizing their idiosyncratic form of thinking.

a. Alternative critical forms

Our experience was different. We were keenly aware of poets carrying out scholarly work outside the precinct of academia and outside its preferred formats. Examples that come to mind include Susan Howe’s field-changing study on Emily Dickinson and her manuscripts, Jacques Roubaud’s establishment of a corpus of 45.000 French sonnets, Amiri Baraka’s work on the blues, or J. H. Prynne’s erudite book-length close-reading of a Shakespeare poem (Howe 1985; Roubaud 1990; Baraka 1963; Prynne 2001). The question of the format is key and has been extensively addressed in the US by poets associated with the Language movement, writers committed to investigating language as “the material form rationality takes” as Michael Davidson once defined them (Davidson 1993, 676). Charles Bernstein, for instance, has questioned the “frame-lock” and “tone-jam” afflicting much academic writing and warned against “the growing discrepancy between our most advanced theories and institutionally encoded proscriptions on our writing and teaching practices”: “Theory enacted into writing practice is suspect, demeaned as unprofessional” (Bernstein 1999, 90). On the contrary, he underlines $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ ’s “commitment to non-expository modes of discursive thinking; to new essay forms engaged with nonlinear thinking”, arguing that “essays, poetics [form] a crucial part of the work of poetry”. Against a backdrop of increasingly standardized and globalized academic prose, the critical works of many poet-critics stood out and we shared Marjorie Perloff’s enthusiasm for what she termed “theorypo” or “poessays”:

which is to say the writing, much of it very exciting, that, strictly speaking, is neither lyric poetry nor literary theory or cultural criticism but an inspired blend of all three, as is the case with Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birthmark*, Charles Bernstein’s *Content’s Dream* and *My Way*, Steve McCaffery and bpNichol’s *A Rational Geomancy*, or Johanna Drucker’s *A History of The/My Wor(l)d*. (Perloff 2004, 263)

To this list, we would like to add at least Nathaniel Mackey's *Discrepant Engagement* (Mackey 1993), Bob Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry* (Perelman 1996), and, more recently, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons* (Harney and Moten 2013). While we observed that alternative forms of critical theory proposed by poets were lively and numerous in the US, we also knew that academics – albeit in lesser numbers – also produced divergent forms of criticism as a way to revitalize literary criticism. To name only two examples:² In the US, the theoretician and textual scholar Jerome McGann put pressure on critical methods while redefining what textual criticism might mean for literary studies. *The Textual Condition* contains a dialogue as a critical form (McGann 1991, 153–176). He also created ARP (Applied Research in Patariticism) whose name says much about the alternative pataphysical poetics that went into the project. Finally, *The Point is to Change it* (McGann 2007) is an in-practice investigation of alternative forms of criticism: in it he distinguishes between erudition and criticism. To him, the former aims at structuring knowledge, while the function of the latter is not primarily to bring knowledge, but to think and prompt thinking. In France, Pierre Bayard has produced what he calls interventionist criticism, bordering on fictional criticism. His *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?* (Who killed Roger Ackroyd?) (Bayard 1998) begins with the assumption that Hercule Poirot got the wrong murderer. This apparently absurd start allows Bayard to explore our relation to truth in critical writing. In *Comment parler des livres qu'on n'a pas lus?* (*How to talk about books you haven't read?*) (Bayard 2006), he investigates the liminal spaces between apt reading and inept readings, arguing that this limit is sometimes very thin. In his playful, provoking and sometimes nonsensical projects, he thus is able to revisit extremely serious critical questions such as reader-response theory or how writers write from pre-existing material.

In the context of this contemporary rethinking of critical writing, we thus wanted to pursue our own inquiry into other modes of critical writing and thinking. To do so, we chose a very open form of seminars.

b. Alternative seminar formats

At a time when research seminars increasingly adopted the conference format in which a fully written paper is delivered followed by a Q&A session, we yearned for a more collective and exploratory format which would create the conditions for reading and thinking together. We had several models in mind: some we had read or heard about, imagining and fantasizing them, others we had experienced first hand. Among the former was the Talk series curated by Bob Perelman and enviably described by Lyn Hejinian as: “a forum for a public working out of ideas—a kind of workshop for poetics and literary theory”:

The Talks provoked a lot of discussion (and, often argument); they were demanding, excitatory, and enormously productive. As participants we taught ourselves and each other techniques for thinking about every conceivable aspect of poetry. We discovered terms, situated devices and intentions, and interwove the process of developing critical theories and techniques with the process of developing creative ones. It was, I believe, not an authoritative and detached poetics but an inherent and working poetics that we were engaged with. (Hejinian 2000, 174)

2 For further examples of alternative critical practices, see Vincent Broqua and Jean-Jacques Poucel (ed.), *Formes Critiques contemporaines, Formes Poétiques Contemporaines*, no 9 (2012). This issue of *Formes Poétiques Contemporaines* gathers 51 creative contributions by academics, poets and fiction writers in France and the USA. <https://doublechange.org/issues/fpc9/>

In the same line, we had also heard about the “Partly writing” seminars that Caroline Bergvall and Romana Huk organized at Dartington College and Oxford Brookes in 2001. Their idea was to bring together “an international group of poets, text-based practitioners, critics and arts organizations to think over the question of writing for public spaces and the various modes and cross-arts forms in which this takes place”.³ They were witnessing a change in artist conferences and academic seminars. These events for critical thinking were in the process of rigidifying and they felt that they needed to generate new conversations critical of the typical academic conference format: “At the core of these two complementary events lies the need to question the effectiveness of textual interventions for the regeneration of cultural spaces and poetic discourses.” They wanted to create thinking spaces in which participants would come fully prepared but would not give a paper.

Unlike Poets & Critics, Bergvall and Huk’s seminars did not center on the work of a given poet-critic, but on one or more notions: “specific discussions will start from a few headings to show up and push on from some of the approaches taken up by writers as a response to changing communication patterns: emerging and compound literacies, bilingual investment, collaborative developments, translation as a practice of localisation”. But they focused on “the extent to which innovative text practices function increasingly as a complex set of negotiations (cultural, linguistic, institutional, interpersonal) that both feed off and exceed specialist literary traditions and test out new modes of intervening with language and written text in a range of environments”.

The first seminar was open to a limited number of participants so as to allow for more fluid conversations. Material to read was sent in advance to all participants. They were supposed to be open to talking (and thus to thinking) collectively and to sharing their ideas without considering what is now known in academia as the *output*. Indeed, there are no traces of these seminars except the call for the seminar and the consequence they had for the development of the artists involved.

We also experienced a number of seminar formats first hand:

- The Royaumont translation seminars (1983–2000) where Emmanuel Hocquard brought together French poets to collaboratively translate recent work by a US poet, in their presence (Lang 2016, 145–163).
- The ODELA research group founded in 1997 by Marc Chénétier “to follow the evolution of the forms of literary imagination in the United States” (Chénétier 2000, 7)⁴ and which brought to France a great number of North American experimental fiction writers.
- At the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, under the aegis of poet and critic Jean-Marie Gleize (1999–2009), the Centre d’Etudes poétiques promoted poetry and contemporary creation among students by inviting poets and artists.⁵
- Last, also extremely important to us was The Yale Working Group in Contemporary Poetry and Poetics (2004–2016), led by Richard Deming, Nancy Kuhl and Jean-Jacques

3 For this and the next four quotes, see http://howeverhow2archive.lib.buffalo.edu/archive/online_archive/v1_5_2001/update.html (scroll down for the description of the two events).

4 For additional information, see Sophie Vallas and Nathalie Cochoy, “Marc Chénétier: découvrir et faire entendre ‘ce qui n’existait pas avant, pas comme ça’”, *E-rea* [online] (13.1, 2015). <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/4658>; <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.4658>

5 For additional information, see Vincent Broqua, “Circulations in the USA, France and the UK: Notes on Robert Creeley’s Teaching and the Poetics Program”, *Formes poétiques contemporaines*, ed. Jan Baetens, Gerald Prunelle, Jean-Jacques Thomas, no 12 (2015–2016): 97–112.

Poucel, which met on a weekly basis “to discuss problems and issues of contemporary poetry within international alternative and / or avant-garde traditions of lyric poetry”⁶. The work of the invited poet was circulated among participants before the session so that everyone could be fully prepared to engage in the conversation. A reading usually ended the day.

These seminars were important forerunners for P&C, but we also drew from our own previous experience as organizers in the poetry world.

c. Our own activities leading to Poets & Critics

Before creating the Poets & Critics program, the three of us had already, together or on our own, sought ways to distribute our activities between teaching, research and an engagement in the poetry world as translator, editor, curator, publisher and/or writer. Our long-standing collaboration is based on this shared vision of our commitment to poetry.

In 2000, we created the Double Change reading series, website and sound archive (www.doublechange.org) to bring French and (mostly) North-American poets in conversation. Each month, a French-speaking poet and an English-speaking poet are invited to read together, most often in Paris. We provide French translations of some of the poems of the English-speaking writer. For over twenty years, Double Change has offered a space to hear French and North-American poets in the modern/experimental/avant-garde tradition and to experience translation in performance.

In 2005, Olivier Brossard published the bilingual anthology of poems *Walt Whitman Hom(m)age*, co-edited with Eric Athenot, paving the way to the Collection américaine series at Joca Seria which published its 38th volume in 2022. After a sequence of books by New York School poets (Frank O’Hara, Bill Berkson, Anne Waldman, Ron Padgett, amongst others), the series has included titles by contemporary poets such as Carla Harryman, Kevin Killian, Tracie Morris, Ann Lauterbach, Eleni Sikelianos, Marcella Durand, Tonya Foster, Mónica de La Torre, amongst others. Joca Seria also publishes under-translated 20th century poets such as Langston Hughes. In 2008, Abigail Lang launched the Motion Method Memories series at Les presses du réel with a translation of David Antin’s *What It Means to Be Avant-Garde* by Broqua, Brossard and Lang.

In March-April 2010, Vincent Broqua invited Caroline Bergvall as guest professor at Université Paris 12 to lead workshops and collective seminars on plurilingual writing and poetic-critical writing. One of the first texts she sent us, entitled “Middling English – Action Plan”, opened with the following two lines: “Break into the building / Transparency and opacity. Screen and trajectories”. This encapsulates what we were going to try to “see” in the modes of literary criticism that constitute our objects of study: texts that unfold between transparency and opacity, critical rhetorics that play with the tension between transitivity (the object to which they point) and intransitivity (their own verbal matter).⁷

In October 2009, Abigail Lang invited Susan Howe to Paris for a reading at the Centre Pompidou, a talk on Dickinson at le Petit Palais and a one-day conference on her work organized with Antoine Cazé at l’Institut d’études anglophones of Université Paris VII-Denis

6 <https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/article/working-group-contemporary-poetry>; <https://wgcp.wordpress.com/>; <https://mailman.yale.edu/pipermail/wgcp-whc/>

7 Bergvall alludes to this tension at the beginning of “Middling English” when she links the notion of transit and habitation in the same sentence: “Imagine a heap of language: a pyramidal geological cut. Layering and cutting into the building-stacks of language. History and ground. Transit and living spaces.” “Middling English Action Plan” and “Middling English,”

Diderot. The three events brought into full view the myriad ways in which archival work, poetic creation and criticism interacted in Howe's work. They also enabled us to strengthen our links to Royal Holloway scholar and poet Redell Olsen and to make contact with Royal Holloway scholar Will Montgomery, who would become associated with Poets & Critics together with Robert Hampson. These four colleagues were already running an experimental research program at Royal Holloway, London: The Poetics Research Group, and an MA programme in Poetic Practice, as well as a seminar series on contemporary poetry, The TALKS series, led by Robert Hampson in collaboration with Birkbeck College.⁸ The preliminary exchanges with these colleagues, all of whom also have writing and artistic research practices, allowed us to lay the groundwork for the research program on "Practice-based criticism" that we submitted in 2010 to the Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée. In 2010, we won the three-year grant we had applied for. This incredible encouragement to our exploratory research also provided us with the necessary stability needed to such an experimental format of research. When that funding stopped, we applied for one-year programs from our universities for a few years, and then Olivier Brossard received a 5-year grant from the Institut Universitaire de France.

Poets & Critics symposia: a research-format

We launched the Poets & Critics symposium series on June 15, 2011 with poet, performer, and critic David Antin whose visit drew a group of colleagues, students, critics, writers, artists and translators, mostly from France.⁹ More than a decade after our first event, the Poets & Critics network is now more international than French, with a strong presence of European, British, and North-American colleagues, as well as European writers and artists. To date, the Poets & Critics network includes 330 members from Europe and the world. Since 2011, symposia have brought together an average of thirty participants, some of whom have become "regulars". They include: Laurence Bécél (Université du Mans), Barbara Beck (poet, Paris), Antoine Cazé (Université Paris Cité), Daniela Daniele (University of Udine), Natalie Haeusler (artist, Germany), Célia Galey (Université Gustave Eiffel), Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery (Royal Holloway University of London), Jeremy Hawkins (School of Architecture, Strasbourg), David Herd (University of Kent), Daniel Kane (University of Sussex), Daniel Katz and Jonathan Skinner (University of Warwick), Peter Middleton (University of Southampton), Anna Maria Orru (Konstfack University of Arts, Craft and Design, Sweden), Lisa Robertson (poet, critic), Martin Glaz Serup (University of Copenhagen), Zoë Skoulding (Bangor University), Morten Søndergaard (writer, artist, Denmark), Sabrina Soyer (artist, France), Cole Swensen (poet, Brown University), Chloé Thomas (Université d'Angers), Béatrice Trotignon (Université Paris Dauphine), Ann Vickery (Deakin University), Mia You (University of Utrecht).

In giving this extensive list, we mean to pay tribute to those who have helped shape the spirit of the Poets & Critics program. The discourse elaborated in each symposium is as much the responsibility of the participants and of the invited poet as of the organizers. More importantly, this list makes palpable the variety of disciplinary backgrounds, scholarly traditions and artistic practices brought around the table and which play a key role in

8 Royal Holloway also has a series of readings, performances and multimedia art events, POLYply, directed by Will Montgomery. On the Poetics Research Center, see <https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/research-and-teaching/departments-and-schools/english/research/poetics-research-centre/>, accessed July 20, 2022.

9 For organizational reasons, the symposium around David Antin lasted only one day; all the following symposia lasted two days. It is also one of the few symposia that was filmed. The videotapes were made public on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/user/PoetsCriticsParisEst>.

renewing the ways we approach issues: because we come from different backgrounds, the group is therefore able to discuss notions or specific points from totally different angles, and sometimes from divergent if not discrepant perspectives.

Poets & Critics symposia are two-day conversations on the work of a guest poet, in their presence. The principle of the symposia is to invert the ratio between talk and Q&A usually practiced at conferences: a Poets & Critics symposium is mostly, if not only, conversation. To leave as much time as possible to open-ended discussions, no formal talks or presentations are given. However, brief critical interventions, sometimes consisting in close readings or short position papers, may set the ball rolling or steer the conversation. Questions and comments do the rest. In the absence of a predefined program, the conversation follows a collective course meant to be as free and open as possible. We discuss the poet's poetry and poetics, their critical works and performance styles. We may ask about their poetic lineage and career, their view of the contemporary poetic scene and academic world, each of these paths leading to often unexpected places and prompting collective exchanges. Allowing for pauses and silences, or, on the contrary, moments of great intensity, the symposia are based on the idea that collective intellectual discourse and reflection need space and time to unfold; that such pace variations are possible is an essential trait of our research format, guaranteeing various possibilities of critical engagement from all participants. The format relies on the generosity of the participants, who give two days of their time without being able to report to their respective institutions (when applicable) that they have presented a proper conference paper.

Although there is no pre-established program for the two days, the symposia are prepared in advance of the meetings by the three hosts: We select and invite the poet, compile and circulate a bibliography and excerpts, define the format and venues, and sometimes facilitate the discussion. Each symposium follows the same set pattern: The first morning is a preliminary brainstorming session in the absence of the poet so that the members of the group can touch base, share topics of discussion, and sketch the directions they hope to see the discussion take. This is usually an extremely strong moment when critics and artists share and confront their in-depth reading of the poet's work, often pushing untested ideas, some of which they won't reiterate in front of the poet. Our poet guest then joins the group for lunch. Often, though not always, the first afternoon is devoted to questions of poetics and aesthetics. At the end of the afternoon, the participants have the opportunity to meet over coffee before the evening reading, most of the time held in a non-academic space.¹⁰ An essential part of the symposium, the reading provides the opportunity to listen to the author reading from their work and to engage with it differently. The second day often begins with a discussion of the reading, providing an occasion to look back at the texts and to discuss the performative dimension of the reading as well as questions of translation. Finally, the afternoon of the second day is typically devoted to collective close readings of texts suggested by the participants or the poet. Thanks to the long two-day sequence of the symposia, the group has time to actively engage with texts and address many points in detail.

At the outset of the program, we indicated that we wanted to establish a literary and critical corpus on contemporary poetry and the multiple rhetorical negotiations between experimental poetry and literary criticism. We (audio)recorded the twenty-four symposia held since 2011, making for an exceptional archive of contemporary poetry and poetics.

¹⁰ Most of our readings in the last decade were held either at Michael Woolworth's studio in Bastille, Paris or at the Maison de la poésie de Paris.

The recordings are being transcribed with the help of one of the group's members, artist Natalie Haeusler, so that the material might eventually be made available online for textual research. Since 2011, we have hosted 24 poets, mostly but not exclusively US poets; mostly but not exclusively poets who have a critical oeuvre; all poets in the modern/avant-garde/experimental tradition. The symposia were held in one of our Parisian universities and once abroad:

June 15, 2011, Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée: David Antin
 June 30, July 1, 2011, Université Paris Est Créteil: Caroline Bergvall
 September 29–30, 2011 Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée: Vanessa Place
 March 22–23, 2012, Université Paris Est Créteil: Charles Bernstein
 May 29–30, 2012, Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée: Peter Gizzi
 September 27–28, 2012, Université Paris Est Créteil: Redell Olsen
 December 13–14, 2012, Université Paris Est Créteil: Lisa Robertson
 April 11–12, 2013, Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée: Marjorie Welish
 September 26–27, 2013, Université Paris Est Créteil: Clark Coolidge
 December 11–12, 2013, Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée: Cole Swensen
 May 12–13, 2014, Université Paris Est Créteil: Anne Waldman
 December 15–16, 2014, Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée: Ann Lauterbach
 December 14–15, 2015, University of Paris 8 Vincennes-Saint Denis: Fred Moten
 February 4–5, 2016, Université Paris Cité: Eileen Myles
 June 2–3, 2016, Université Paris Cité: Johanna Drucker
 October 6–7, 2016, Université Paris Cité: Nathaniel Mackey
 March 7–8, 2017, Université Paris Cité: Ron Silliman
 July 10–11, 2017, Université Paris Cité: Ron Padgett
 December 18–19, 2017, Université Paris Cité: Kevin Killian
 February 15–16, 2018, Université Paris Cité: Carla Harryman
 October 12–13, 2018, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, USA: Susan Howe
 January 17–18, 2019, Université Paris Cité: Dawn Lundy Martin
 February 13–14, 2020, Université Paris Cité: Lyn Hejinian
 April 21–22, 2022, Université Gustave Eiffel (formerly U. Marne-La-Vallée): Alice Notley¹¹

We paused the symposium series during the pandemic, not wanting to switch to Zoom, as our research format depends on participants being in the same seminar room for two days. As poet and critic Mia You writes in “Put some there. Imagine the body. Eileen Myles amidst the Poets & Critics,”:

Three times a year Abigail Lang, Olivier Brossard and Vincent Broqua organize a two-day “Poets & Critics” symposium in Paris – during which they welcome a multinational and multilingual group of writers, scholars and artists to discuss the work of one English-language poet. The terrifying but exhilarating condition: the poet will also be there. The poet will talk back to you. You will talk back to the poet. Hopefully you will begin talking together. (You 2022)¹²

11 Although it was never planned this way, the symposia were divided almost equally among our three universities, one third being held at Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée (now Gustave Eiffel), one third at Vincent Broqua's university (UPEC and Université Paris 8) and a substantial third at the Université Paris Cité. For the presentation of the program on the website, see <https://www.poetscritics.org/poets-and-critics-program/>, accessed on July 21, 2022.

12 Accessed July 20, 2022, <https://jacket2.org/commentary/put-some-there-there-imagine-body>.

The conditions of the collective discussion of the symposium are thus temporal (two full days) and spatial, the possibility of sharing the same place or places (the university, the reading venue, and the many lunch, drinks and dinner places) during this time.

As useful as digital tools are, two years of pandemic life and academic research on platforms like Zoom have confirmed the necessity of collective physical presence for the format and success of our symposia. Their open format, the absence of a predetermined program, the mutual steering of the conversation; all of this makes it a collective construction based on sharing a space and time continuum with and around a poet and their work.

What is gained: outcomes

Some of the theoretical positions of Poets & Critics (as well as of Double Change) as regards the importance of interacting with a poet and of considering the poets' criticism can be adequately summed up by this quotation from Monique Wittig's *Le Chantier littéraire*:

Almost all the waves of modern literary criticism, as far as I know, tend to eliminate the authors' critical perspectives on the basis that they are not scientific, as if they were mired in their own intentionality. For me, however, it is a mistake to do away with them or, at best, treat them condescendingly. I do not think we can do without them... In effect, the practical work of the writer certainly precedes our being able to speak of the work as completed in criticism, that is, in the way we understand its coming into being. (Wittig 2010, 40–42)

We could also extend this to live interaction with the poet. Indeed, from the beginning it was our conviction that attending poetry readings was akin to doing research, that the epistemological and heuristic benefit of attending a reading compared with the benefit of immersing oneself in archives and delving into drafts and manuscripts: the researcher uncovers variants of texts and constructs an embodied relation to their object from innumerable material and sensual clues. Double Change or Poets & Critics can be thought of as an archive of the present: an embodied relation to the poetic practice of a given poet emerges in these live events.

Beyond the physical presence and vocal style of the author – i.e. the specific qualities of the performance itself –, the members of the audience hear the poem transported into the space of the venue; they get to confront the way(s) the poet thinks poetically in the act. For instance, when Kevin Killian read his poems on the first night of the Poets & Critics devoted to his work,¹³ we were struck to hear him change his poems ever so slightly in response to the context of the reading and to segue seamlessly from the presentation of the poem into the poem itself. While like Monique Wittig and many others, we do not think that the author is dead – Roland Barthes needed to make this bold move in his specific context to shift the critical perspective, but the absolutism of his proposition can no longer hold as such because it silences vast portions of what text is and how it is encountered – we take a public performance of a poem as one of the possible versions of that text. As scholars, we feel that excluding this approach, as Wittig says for the author's criticism, is to exclude one of the possible interpretations of the text.

The two-day symposiums offer an exceptional opportunity to understand how a given poet's mind works and to observe them in the process of thinking. The terms in which poets answer questions and discuss their poems provides exceptional insight into their relationship to language, writing and poetry. Some think through anecdotes (Killian, Padgett),

13 <https://doublechange.org/2017/12/04/18-12-17-dodie-bellamy-kevin-killian-esther-salmona/>

others work with critical, post-structural theory or philosophy (Drucker, Hejinian, Moten), others insist upon not being theoretical (Coolidge, Notley). While poets may start by rehearsing analyses or anecdotes they have expressed before, the intensity of the experience afforded by the format invariably produces new insights, including for the poet. In his sagacious account of a 2017 symposium, Peter Middleton notes how “the growing clarity of the mirror we present to [the poet’s] spoken thoughts enabl[es] a heightened self-consciousness of his poetics, that in turn enlightens us”.

Of course, symposiums also offer more quantifiable insights into the work or its context, as when Alice Notley revealed some of her recent work was in conversation with Racine’s theatre and *La Prise d’Orange*, a *chanson de geste*, or when Fred Moten stated that the background of the poetry conversation in the US in 2015 was the shooting of young black men. As revelatory as such comments may prove, our assumption has never been that the author will reveal secrets or provide answers to the issues raised by their work. Together with the poets’ answers and comments, the intellectual and conceptual stamina of the critics open the poem and the poet’s work to its futurity.

Indeed, talking with, through and within a poet’s critical discourse on him/herself is generative of ideas and critical discourses that move us beyond the confines of a given poet’s thinking and oeuvre. And to do so collectively brings more than just the poet’s thinking on his/her practice. Johanna Drucker, for instance, was extremely keen to move the focus from her work to larger issues such as editing, publishing, stochastic methods or e-literature. Fred Moten played music [Cecil Taylor?] opening the discussion to collective improvisation in Black music and in poetry. Equating the practice of poetry with the practice of social life—“how we get together, how we figure how to get together,” “how an ensemble gets together to improvise,” “how we improvise sociality”—Moten’s train of thoughts arrived at the term “social poeisis” which felt like a particularly apt descriptor of the symposia.

What is important to understand is that the structure of the symposium is such that it would be reductive to think of it as just a series of questions and answers to a poet-critic. For instance, critics will talk to each other without asking a question to the poet. They create a discussion involving the invited poet without asking a specific question to them. Sometimes an artist or a poet present in the room will share their thinking on a notion or on their practice, which will reverberate on the whole discussion as ways to regenerate it – this is what Lisa Robertson will sometimes do.

While the Poets & Critics program offers no immediate “deliverables” such as peer-reviewed articles or edited collections, they offer much in terms of long-term outcomes. First, the audio recordings of each symposium are a form of publication, in that they *make public* and readily available on the web two days of in-depth exploration of the work of a given poet and a study of poetic questions. Our website also makes accessible the bibliographical work we have carried out to prepare the symposium: this bibliographical work, often done in advance with the poet and with prominent critics of the poet’s work, allows us to disclose previously unknown resources. Nick Strum’s presence for the symposium with Alice Notley or Tom Orange’s participation in the Clark Coolidge symposium were immensely appreciated for their minute and extensive knowledge of the archives and the bibliography on and of the author.

Sometimes we invited poets whose work had received very little critical attention, and sometimes it was even the first symposium devoted to the work of a given author. As far as we know, such was the case for Dawn Lundy Martin, and although her oeuvre was already substantial, Dell Olsen had received little extensive critical attention by the time

we organized the symposium with her. Kevin Killian got his first translation into French published for his symposium. (Killian 2017).

Understudied aspects of the work of well-known poets suddenly appear. The symposium with Alice Notley scrutinized her presence on social networks (and particularly on how she posts her art on Instagram); the close reading of her poems revealed the extent to which she had read the Latin classics (Horace for instance), and how her poetry was structured by this. She explained her fascination with Racine, his alexandrines and their delivery at the Comédie française. The precision of her comments on her own poems' rhythm was, to many specialists of her work, a revelation.

Among other things, Poets & Critic symposia are like an intensive session of study of authors we may never have read as thoroughly without a symposium. The short temporality of the symposia, yet the ample space participants have to ask questions make for an intense thinking-space. The information you get, the readings you do, the shared (and sometimes divergent) critical perspectives you encounter are all conducive to doing more research, to publishing articles and books. Indeed, the symposium may lead participants to want to go further and publish a book on the poet-critic. Such was the case of Anthony Caleshu's collection of essays on Peter Gizzi, *In the Air: Essays on the Poetry of Peter Gizzi*: the first edited volume on Gizzi's work credits Poets & Critics for paving the way for this book (Caleshu 2017). Similarly, Olivier Brossard's article on Padgett's end-stopped lines comes out of the symposium. (Brossard 2017)¹⁴

For doctoral students, it may be the first time they participate in a symposium on a more horizontal model encouraging all participants, scholars and non-scholars alike, to talk and share their reading or their insights. Thanks to the symposia, a doctoral student under Vincent Broqua's supervision was able to carry out interviews with Cole Swensen, Lyn Hejinian and Ron Padgett; she was able to test out some of her ideas and run some of interpretations on *Argento series* by Kevin Killian's work (Killian 2001). The symposia also provide doctoral students opportunities to introduce themselves to international scholars they may not have had the chance to meet otherwise, and to discuss their research at length with them, in or outside the symposia.

Conclusion

We could characterize Poets & Critics like this: through a process of question and answers, and via dialogue between the members of the symposium a renewed sense of poetics emerges. If anything it is the politics of speaking and thinking together about poetics. The model has spread, in Scandinavia, of course, as this volume testifies, but also in Britain where Peter Middleton, David Herd, Robert Hampson and others have organized like-minded symposia. In France, similar symposia are beginning to appear in several universities and this is probably the best testimony to the generative force of this model of shared collective work. It seems to us that after so many years of organizing the symposia, we are looking forward to organizing more symposia, perhaps in a slightly different way, involving doctoral students more than we have done in the past. We have seen the benefits that younger scholars and artists derived from the Poets & Critics symposia, where friendships and work-relations were established (we're thinking of Sabrina Soyer and Lisa Robertson, for instance: as far as we know, Sabrina Soyer started to translate Lisa Robertson as a result of the symposium (Robertson 2021).

14 See <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8938>; <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.8938>

In France, the critical creative or *recherche-cr ation*, as we call it, is developing. In hindsight, it seems to us that the way Poets & Critics has thought about and practiced criticism is not far from the hands-on, exploratory and experiential aspects of *research-creation*.

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