

“ex / Creme / ental / eaT / ing”

An Interview with Caroline Bergvall

by Marjorie PERLOFF

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Marjorie Perloff is Sadie D. Patek Professor (emerita) of Humanities at Stanford University. Her books include *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*; *Wittgenstein's ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*; and, most recently, *21st-Century Poetry: The "New" Poetics*. The interview began on a Sunday afternoon in April 2001 at the small London hotel "22 Jermyn St" where I was staying while attending a conference on *Wittgenstein and/in Poetry* at the University of London, and was continued, with a number of interruptions, for the next few months by e-mail.

Caroline Bergvall was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1962 to a Norwegian father and French mother. She had an international childhood, moving between Geneva, Oslo, New York, Paris, and Strasbourg. She received her Licence ès Lettres from the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris in 1984 and, having moved to England, her M.Phil from the University of Warwick in 1993. She has recently been awarded her Doctorate from Dartington College of Arts. Between 1994 and 2000, she was the Director of the program Performance Writing, a degree course which emphasizes cross-media approaches to writing, at Dartington College. She is currently an Associate Fellow there.

In the late 80s, Bergvall began to perform her text-based work on radio, video and at conferences and international festivals and began to publish poetic pieces. Bergvall's writing has appeared in avant-garde journals like *Raddle Moon*, *Angel Exhaust*, *Big Allis*, *PULP Faction*, *Object Performance*, and the online *Jacket*, *HOW(2)* as well as in the important

anthologies *Out of Everywhere: linguistically innovative poetry by women in North America & in the UK*, ed. Maggie O'Sullivan (London: Reality Studios, 1996), *Conductors of Chaos*, ed. Iain Sinclair (London: Picador, 1996), and the new *Oxford Anthology of Twentieth-Century British & Irish Poetry*, ed. Keith Tuma (New York: Oxford, 2001).

Bergvall's book publications include *Strange Passage: A Choral Poem* (Equipage, 1993), *ECLAT: sites 1-10* (Sound & Language, 1996); and *Goan Atom* (Krupskaya, 2001). An early version of this book was published as *Jets-poupee* (an allusion to Hans Bellmer's *Les Jeux de la poupée*) by Rem Press (Cambridge) in 1999. In an essay on *Goan Atom* called "A Veritable Dollmine" (*Jacket*: July 2000), the poet Drew Milne remarks that "An imperative—"go on at 'em"—lurks in the title's folds to embrace the helpless pun-lover," that the title further plays on the political geography of Goa and an-atom-y, even as the text's "Dolly" seems to allude to Dolly the sheep, "the unfortunate victim of boys with toys let loose on genetic material."

Bergvall's performance and installation pieces include an animated text for the web, *Ambient Fish* which is available, along with other Bergvall works, on the Electronic Poetry Center website. She has collaborated with a number of artists including the poet John Cayley, has organized cross-disciplinary conferences in the UK, and has edited the recent "New Writing Feature: 'Postings from Britain'" for the internet journal *How 2* (2001).

Because not all of her work is text-based, it can be hard to track down, but her internet and discography archive is steadily growing.

The Interview



How and when did you start producing your hybrid artworks?

This term hybrid is interesting because it goes beyond ideas of interdisciplinary work. It implicitly addresses the new literacies which are being created by electronic communications and which are irremediably going to affect the development of the "literary" and of what is considered text, be it poetic or otherwise. It also emphasises interdependency rather than autonomy, and calls the author singularly or collaboratively back into the work. It is also a term which has been much used, if not over-used, around notions of the post-colonial at the heart of contemporary ideas about identity. These are all concerns which are at the root of my work.

I started getting involved as a poet in performances and installations in the late 80s, which is more or less the time when some of my first texts in English also came out in magazines. I have kept this parallel going ever since. Although my starting-point is always and has always been writing, I do have a tendency to approach the publishing of my texts as only one of the environments which poets can make use of and explore, rather than it being the only one or the main one. I am interested in the event of reading and in the many contexts, including the book, that this can be made manifest in. My interest performances, installations, interventions are profoundly and inherently text-based in their approach to materials. By this I mean that they include the siting of poetry as an extension of its discursive practices. This in turn impacts on how, and perhaps why, I write. In this sense there is a clear traffic between what I write to publish and the work that I do as part of mixed media collaborations. This aspect of my work is connected to some of the ideas forwarded rather diversely by visual artists such as Robert Smithson, Krystof Wodiczko, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sophie Calle, regarding the use of non-gallery spaces and the emphasis on event-based arts practices. The poet cris cheek's current collaborative project as Things Not Worth Keeping asks similar questions.

There are other reasons why I am interested in thinking of writing along these lines. It's also a long-term reaction to the dreariness of the much derided poetry reading. Poets such as Charles Bernstein, Steve

McCaffery or cris cheek have insistently argued, and generations of “sound poets” have since Dada and Schwitters’ *Ursonate* reminded us, that the poetry reading is an event (whether live or mediated) which displaces the written text. Neither form cancels the other one out. I would also suggest that the written version shouldn’t systematically take precedence over the performed version. One could perhaps instead think of these as variations, interdependent productions which each explore different situations, different conditions for making and presenting text. They also attract different audiences/readerships. As a poet, as someone who comes out of the very specific formal and to an extent social conditions which define poets, I have been critical of the exclusive and specialist focus both poetry and the poetry reading are frequently imbued with. In this sense I’ve also been very influenced by the plunderings of independent rock culture. Post-punk and New Wave bands of the late 70s and early to mid-80s were an important scene when I started in performance and poetry. It would provide a sense of pleasure and identification and an attitude of self-reliance which I found exciting. The explicit gender bending attitudes and fashion games that accompanied a lot of this were essential too. Women were suddenly very much part of the rock and pop scene in public and vocal ways and that was inspiring, Madonna, Lydia Lunch, Annie Anxiety, Diamanda Galas, and of course Laurie Anderson and Patti Smith. More recently, the 1990s’ independent visual arts and performance scene with its blend of personal activism, awareness of mass media and minimalist aesthetics made for art projects that mix and blend according to need and necessity. All this has had an impact on my way of thinking about writing and about the persona and role of the writer. In a way, it’s about timeliness rather than timelessness.

Timeliness rather than timelessness: that’s so well put! In the U.S., however, you are probably best known for your relationship to various Language poets and Language projects. And here is a conundrum. The Language poets—for example Joan Retallack to whom I know you’re close—have generally positioned themselves in resistance to pop culture and have frequently written against it. Charles Bernstein has repeatedly criticized mass art in his essays. And Joan Retallack has said she is not interested in jazz ; her discourse radius is that of John Cage, Wittgenstein, Gertrude Stein, John Dewey, etc. In other words, the Language poets primarily attack pop culture and want to resist it in the Adorno sense of resistance. So where do you stand in this regard?

Adorno’s sense that popular culture or rather the culture industries necessarily create a repressive dumbing down and that avant-garde art is by definition revolutionary has long seemed questionable and I don’t know that Language poets actually agree with it either. But there is an impasse in

late twentieth-century arts innovative practice in that it does end up duplicating its own status quos. Writers who take some of their cues from popular culture and an awareness of mass media are as likely, if not more likely, to produce cultural spanners and politically effective work as those writing through more rarefied and purist environments. My interest in the Language poets that you mention and a few others comes from their intellectual consistency, their language games, and, for some like Retallack, or Howe, the way they handle the page. Their work touches on questions of reading habits and reading histories and this ironically also meets the concerns of more performance-oriented or increasingly media-based poets. The way Language poets have managed to influence academia and are shaping critical debates in the US is another point of interest to me. But the reliance on critical knowledge and intertextual fertilisation offered up by LANGUAGE didn't take enough into account the implication of interdisciplinarity and interdisciplinary collaborations. For this reason, it seems to me that aspects of it fell short of developing a more integrated and positive investment into questions of social and cultural difference.

It strikes me that what gives your work its very particular tone is its multilingualism, its ability especially to draw on your strong French roots. It triangulates what is already a complex relationship between UK and U.S. aesthetic in your work. How, to begin with, do our two nations compare as working environments for your particular projects?

Being born and bred bilingual as I have been puts a particular and at times peculiar strain on the very idea of a monolingual and/or monocultural identity. The notion of writing in one language yet retaining strong cultural roots in another is one way of actively responding to the sense of cultural doubling-up which I have always experienced. This split or double (depending on your point of view) condition is shared by a great number of people today and it is affecting the ways in which bilingual or bicultural writers are developing their work. Gomez-Pena's "borderlanguage" work taps into both Mexican and American communities and unnerves them both. Anne Tardos' complicated background finds its way into her multi-language and multi-media writing. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's traumatised Korean-American history makes for her extraordinary *Dictee*. The French-based Lebanese novelist Amin Maalouf's candid piece around identity opens with anecdotes on the double-take of his own situation. And so on. My curiosity for the US is in a sense predicated on my interest in its ongoing language disputes and mixed cultural make-up and the ways this affects poetic practice. Reading the work of poets in the US, being aware of their role in academic and scholarly circles, becoming aware of presses such as O Books, Roof, Sun & Moon and magazines such

as *Raddle Moon*, *Open Letter in Canada*, *Temblor*, *Aerial*, or *Poetic Journal* really did change my perception of poetry as a culturally invisible and isolated, if not alienated, artform. The flurry of activities by many North American poets on the web these last few years has further confirmed it as an environment that could be conducive to dialogue. The interest poets there show in my work is also very encouraging.

As a female writer, I also find the insistence with which US female artists/critics have kept on rethinking some of the feminist theories and attitudes generated by French feminists in the 60s and 70s very important. It has allowed for a deepening and broadening of its political and cultural range. This is clear from the great diversity of female artists/writers and post-colonial critics that are today actively engaged in making work which keeps on examining questions of social identity and cultural formation. The fact that some of this also relies on a combination of activist and artistic work, such as the artists around ACT UP, has been rarer in Continental Europe and doesn't seem to be taken as seriously. The question is not so much to represent as it is to conceptualise identities that are not socially or culturally "presentable." For instance, the work done by North-American writers such as Nicole Brossard, the French Monique Wittig or more recently Pam Lu is to allow for the whole of language-use to be coloured by homosexuality and its residues of unnameability. Such an agenda is as conceptual as it is political. It's set up as a posture of writing and works against the social paralysis of representation. It isn't so much about the figuration or representation of a body type, but rather about language behaviour in relation to censored realities and the way this in turn creates body types. This is very freeing to my own project.

In Britain, this kind of attitude to language and body has been more to the fore in performance and live art scenes and this is one of the pleasures I've had in living here. When I arrived in Britain in the late '80s, there was still a lot of excitement and energy in making and in thinking up financially low-key work and in sharing festivals and performance events across art forms. The advantages here have been to do with being part of small-scale performance scenes, small infrastructures, which facilitates mobile and quick setting up of events, a strong sense of pop and street styles in friendly rapport with the visual arts, excellent club-scenes and music scenes. For a while, I was circulating both in live art scenes and in poetry scenes. One constancy throughout though, many experimental poets were self-publishing or publishing one another and there was very little public money or interest pumped into experimental writing or innovative textual forms. Poetry readings kept their specialist audience.

Yes, that brings me to the issue of British poetry audiences. Whatever the club and performance scene, it seems to me that in England there's a much wider gap between Establishment poetry and its underground or

avant-garde other than in the U.S. How has this dichotomy affected your work?

It's largely true that in England, there is very little cross-over. The public's and media's ideas about poetry and poetry publishing are largely along the lines of formal work, and the interest for the kind of exploratory work that many of us do remains mostly invisible here. Exceptions are anthologies such as *Conductors of Chaos* which generated a lot of sneering from the press but is still one of the few books widely available that attempts to chart a living history of this kind of poetry. The same can be said of Keith Tuma's recent and ambitious Oxford anthology which again attempted to join these missing dots and again was sneered at in Britain. J. H. Prynne's recently published collected poems by Bloodaxe was initially put together by a small press and this book too is now readily available. So in the UK there is probably less desire to want to be Establishment and this is certainly also why a few of us have kept a foot in performance, where ideas of alternative and official cultures are less pronounced and blend more readily with the visual and mixed-media arts.

In this respect, running the Performance Writing course at Dartington during its first years of operations became the opportunity to shape a curriculum as I and others needed it and to correlate pedagogical frames and academic demands with practice-based criteria that tapped into a breadth of textual practice. Inevitably, it was coloured by my French continental lit-crit background, the diversity and excitement still felt from the US Language Poetry scene and the performance and cross-arts scenes of Britain which most of us involved in teaching were one way or another part of. I also invited some North American poets like Joan Retallack, Erin Moure, Lisa Robertson. It all seemed to fit at the right time.

Let's talk about performance. Do you ever worry about the ephemerality of internet products? Right now on your EPC author site, only two of the seven works listed are actually available. The others have evidently been removed. I notice that a Buffalo student, Christina Dietzman, who was doing her thesis on your work, expressed frustration about this (unexplained) removal. In the performance or internet context, do works just disappear?

I wasn't aware that these pieces had gone missing from my page. Addresses change and this cancels out the links. But from the point of view of the web as an archive for work which is difficult to get hold of otherwise, this is certainly an irritating if frequent occurrence. I am currently getting my own homepage built in order to keep track more easily. Nevertheless, I don't worry about the ephemerality of work placed on the net. Due to the nature of the beast, work is likely to disappear. In fact, more and more

artists present temporary projects on the net which are up only for a particular amount of time and then get removed. This interest in duration as a dynamic form of publishing is certainly connected to performance. I develop my pieces across a range of environments, some less ephemeral than others, but they're still all culturally rather precarious, so my basic understanding has always been that work disappears after a brief delay. This is shaping the way I consider the so-called permanence of print and the way I play with it.

Have you seen any versions of it you would consider misrepresentations?

Well, recordings, videos, and journals allow for different kinds of accidents.

Does it bother you when there are misprints?

Not necessarily. Not all of one's work can be kept and fetishized. Some of it is expendable. That's part of the dialogue. But it is different with books. What I like about books is that they can last a little longer, they can be lost and found differently. This enables another approach. In books like *Eclat* or the Krupskaya book, published in San Francisco as *Goan Atom Part I*, (2001), the part called *The Doll*, I've been very picky and detailed. Here exactitude matters and it is the advantage of the print environment. At other times, the work is a product of a particular conversation or leads to other conversations which are recorded and presented unedited as part of a piece.

I am curious to know how the print version of Ambient Fish relates to the electronic text. On the screen, as I understand it, the viewer is presented with two green buttons. Click on these and they turn red and become breasts: click on the nipples and four rows of four of the same buttons appear. Each button gives way to a word, while the voiceover (your very elegant, calm, and evenly pitched voice) pronounces "Ambient fish fuckflowers bloom in your mouth," the text then permutating into such phrases as "Alien fuck fish . . . suck your oubli away," culminating in the refrain ". . . will choke your troubles away." It's a riveting performance. So what is it you wanted to get "absolutely right" in the Goan Atom 1 (pp. 72-73) printing? And what, in turn, is lost?

Ambient Fish started out as a text-sound installation commissioned by a festival of mixed media in England. The particular refrain you refer to was used as a drone in the piece. I wanted to keep this element and circulate it on the web. I thought that the humorous and crude animation would amuse as well as focus the reading. It was also an allusion to the work done on *The Doll* where the refrain features. The first green nipple or

button which you have to click on replicates Bellmer's drawing of a finger clicking on a breast to reveal other sexual worlds, which was the starting-point for his Poupée projects. In print, it seemed important to retain the sense of spectacle and viewing pleasure of the animation. This is why the heavy, bolded, sans-serifed typeface was used here for the whole text and why it was laid-out as facing pages. The 2 pages seem to stick out from the rest of the book and call on the reader in a confrontational way. What is "lost" (if this is the right word) is the casual humour, the games on the French, the interrupted recordings of the voice. This makes the sense of menace also starker in the printed version.

Could you say a little more about the new Bride vis-à-vis Doll?

Both sections are part of my ongoing project *Goan Atom* which I have been working on since approximately 1999. It is a project which comprises many sections and facets and events. It uses representations of the female body as a pretext to explore issues of figuration, iconography and language-use. It also does so by developing bilingual methodologies and games. *The Doll* for instance was developed as an installation collaboration, a net animation piece, a variety of readings, three published long-texts, two connected essays. The Krupskaya book is its final instalment and traces back as a text aspects of the earlier pieces. *The Doll* exploits the literary tradition of the anagram and the body as anagram, especially as explored by the Surrealists, notably Hans Bellmer. It plays on linguistic and textual morphings, paratextual activities on the book to look into the body in anatomical history, female genital and pregenital sexualities, and sexual games. It does this by tapping into models of a morphing body such as found in Gertrude Stein or Mary Shelley or Kathy Acker or Bataille, and contemporary artists such as Cindy Sherman, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober... It is also fundamentally and playfully bilingual, travels between French and English. It is a comment on transformation.

The Bride is the second section and I've been working on this for a bit more than a year. Here too it is dependent on many projects and events and none of this has so far been published. *The Bride* as a motif for making work deals with another stereotypical female body-role, one which immediately calls up ideas of relationality, differential twinning. It also relates to Duchamp's Large Glass and as such it looks into the detail of process. As a social and cultural term, the bride is also profoundly caught up in questions of repression and in traditions of mystical and co-dependent pairings. This takes me to ideas of foreignness and belonging, naming and figuring and speaking/not-speaking as means both of participation and as ways of being kept paralysed in a situation. *The Bride's* opening projects so far have been three different performances, one of

which, "About Face," is a text which emphasises questions of delay, untranslatability, seeing-being seen, hearing-being heard, not seeing, not hearing. I have also just completed a text-sound installation in collaboration with a composer, "Say: parsley," which was very much dealing in spatialised ways with questions of speech, mispronouncement, mishearings. It also reconsiders the nature of reading.

Your texts/performances are incredibly funny, Ambient Fish for one, and your argot is great. Any thoughts about the comic? In Goan Atom, for instance? After all your models like Butler and Wittig and Irigaray are the opposite of funny!

The comic is always about resistance, relativisation, a pinpointing of power-structures. I'm a great fan of Bunuel's films, the satires of Aristophanes, the ludism of Perec, the mordant yet compassionate humour of Martin Creed's neon signs. I also take pleasure in the ridiculous, in the absurdist, the displaying of the unfit and unfitting, John Walters, the blow up sculptures of Charles Long, the leather-pouches of Cathy de Monchaux, the videos of Piporetto Rist. Laughter lets through the unacceptable and it highlights it. It gives it room. It makes the living bearable, believable. Butler is no humorist but the way she handles the implications of hate-speech and therefore hate-laughter, strikes me as the flip side of comic laughter. Its menace and its unease.

Do you feel your work has changed significantly? Where do you see it going next?

My work has become more specific in its acknowledgement of ephemerality, incompleteness and in the complex relations entertained between performance, new media and writing. And I suppose my approach to English has become less monolingual. I'm interested in the sense of the foreigner bringing other elements into the language. My work is perhaps also a little more meditative, a little less humorous than previously. Or perhaps, I'm using it slightly differently.

The question of the archive leads me to a more personal (though not necessarily autobiographical) question. You seem to be unusually upbeat, to exude a good deal of confidence; one rarely sees this in poets or artists today, at least not in the U.S. What gives you that confidence?

[laughter] Well, it's true that I don't have a writer's block but I do sometimes despair because you give your life to this and the scene is so small, so marginalized! Sometimes I think we're so small, we have no impact on the broader environment. If I walk into Waterstone's [large chain

bookstore], for example, I despair. The audience seems to be bigger in the U.S.

Well, yes, but Borders wouldn't be a better venue than Waterstone's for the new poetics.

I suppose not. The lack of funding here, in any case, means that art schools as well as art scenes are an important environment where you can meet and work with peers.

To get a feel for that dissociation of presence, I'd like to conclude with a snatch from Goan Atom I just to give readers a feel of your amazing multilingualism, multivocalism, and the visual materialisation of your reinvention of local argots:

*Enter DOLLY
Entered enters
Enters entered
Enter entre
En train en trail
En trav Ail Aïe
La bour La bour La bour
Wears god on a strap
Shares mickey with all your friends*

*Sgot
A wifes lit
down the lily
sgot avide slot
donne a lolly to a head
less cin
dy slots in*

to lie

The linguistic virtuosity exhibited in these line breaks and transforms surely takes years of training. And your amazing learning shows at every turn. A remarkable combination of qualities!



Excerpt from "About Face" [Goan Atom, part 2]

At which pt to face begins
a total part of what cannot be backtracked
points rto impact at the enckline neckline
beyond the imp
ligated body limit
 where face-corporeal signals a bulk
a corpus a conglomeration of means
Ng in relation to, what phase might be at arms length

Found as of
Sht at t time
The way it was procesd, was that a lasting relation to
Large face-markets exacerbate the need, mm
First a marker then a collection, mm
Face-medallion fly on the coiffe, mm
Ccollect small figures figurines

This is not a face
A face is like a rose
A face is like a red rose-like
Likely to a pear likely to disappear
mm woo p ump I was
Face-like
Envisage brings on more

Like day would, gn, you take your basically in yr hands what do you feel
 actually takes not like w
Take my face in my hands I feel warm d..k

More insidious more penetrating than likeness. The Photograph sometimes
makes appear what we never see in a real face (or in a face reflected in a
mirror): a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes
from some ancestors... the photograph gives a little truth, on condition that it
parcels out the body. Unquote, p. 103

Sss I mean, plotting
A face is pulled off from bark
-in language proudly

Ceci n'est pas une bride
 A face is not a horse!
yet horse-like fits decried
 This fac is a natural extension of the grid.

One face is pulled off by eating much fig
(eating much fig choking on face)
Veg erot, think about, -gnize, another would have it, the, mm

Figure prepares
 faceload a face-like a red red rose

Parting-like a raised-like
this is not

Why ox en g eng oul'dn't err twiny

Like like like like

Unlike unlike unlike unlike

Ly

Meet

A face encountered at first sight is not adored
adored aface exacerbates motifs of recognition
Saffaisse encountered is not adored at first sight yet syncopates
Provokes faceload

Turn about face

Adored is a pulse

Shudder face face adored adored

Shudder syncopate faceless faceless

Yet when adored delight at this profound absenting

Yet when unadorned makes faceless

Horror at the absented, don wan

Don noeud

Another would have it here in a way foreseeable

at surface & the others are diff, this is a, you know, layers

no not,

Pt of surface.

Still portray degrees of face acc. to degrees of nearness

Remove degrees of face acc. to degrees of resistance

When faced a pt of nearness strikes a precarious balance of stillness

Then arousal

But its at to beat at to nodonen

vocab, pain sound

I mean jewel s bri if had that

Comment down, mm, spoke peaks, very inters

em bien you have to look at it

face and that's it

N way!

You show your Face-bride in yr grows a grid or plant-like

Unlike made likely and the likeness of flies

Unlike made likely

Unlikely kept

Unlikely

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