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THE POLITICS OF POETRY

(This double issue began with the desire to focus attention on political dimensions of current writing. To make some of those aspects and concerns more explicit, and to encourage further discussion, we've asked a number of writers to give their view of what qualities writing has or could have that contribute to an understanding or critique of society, seen as a capitalist system. Below, in alphabetical order, the responses of Kathy Acker, Barbara Barg, Bruce Boone, David Bromige, Don Byrd, Chris Cheek & Kirby Malone & Marshall Reese, Mark Chincer, Michael Davidson, Alan Davies, Terry Eagleton, Larry Eigner, Brian Fawcett, P. Inman, Michael Lally, John Leo, Chris Mason, Steve McCaffery, Michael Palmer, Robert Rakoff, Jed Rasula, Peter Seaton, James Sherry, Ron Silliman, Alan Sondheim, Lorenzo Thomas, Barrett Watten, Hannah Weiner, as well as our own.)

KATHY ACKER :

NOTES ON WRITING -- from THE LIFE OF BAUDELAIRE

In the beginning Baudelaire wrote his poems in order to discover his own image in them.

After a while self-absorption is boring because one sees thoughts are only thoughts and one wants freedom.

So one gets involved with the process of creating thoughts, with creation which is superfluous and gratuitous.

To avoid this superfluity and gratuity which every great artist knows, pain, Baudelaire asserts himself, for no reason at all, a natural rebel, against the world he knows. There's no other world. He needs a world he can fight or else he'll be back in uneasiness.

One has to exist in pain.

Because Baudelaire kept running from pain, he had no friends and few intimates among derelicts.

The difference between a writer and its world gives the reason for writing. All mental existence is an expression, a measure of distance.

There's another way of saying this. Consciousness just exists: no reason: it is useless. There is no meaning in the world. Consciousness creates meaning.

Let's start again. A human being's life starts when two humans called parents for no reason in the world stick that kid into the world. Then the parents turn against the kid and tell the kid it has to do such-and-such and become SOMEBODY or else they'll kick it out or else the parents just turn against the kid and say YOU STINK. The kid realizes it was once part of a warm perfect hole whole not apart and *now* it has an existence: It is separate. It is itself. It has no meaning. The great cry is against no meaning cause that's scary and boring and painful.

The kid can't go back. Rather than remaining in pain, the kid says I'm not nothing pain, because I am separate. Fuck you. My separate-ness is fuck you is total hatred is and will always be against you against everything that exists. I am a natural rebel.

The poet knows how ridiculous any action is cause it's actually nothing, so he makes sure his poetry and everything else he does is as stupid as possible.

About method of writing: There's no such thing as real action. What we mean by *action* is creation. Because there's no meaning. Creation is pure freedom: before it there's nothing; it begins by creating its own principles. First and foremost it invents its own goal and in that way it partakes of the gratuitousness of consciousness. This explains camp.

I don't want any ethic. I don't want to say anything is right. I have no desire to tell anyone what to do and I just take teaching gigs for the money. I don't say this is how you write. I keep saying I don't know anyway of writing. I WANT TO SAY NO TO WHAT IS I WANT TO GO OVER: I DON'T WANT ANY CONTENT I JUST WANT EXTREMISM.

Once a human's grasped this truth: that there's no other end in this life except the one it's chosen, it no longer feels any desire to look for one. But suppose we don't care what we choose?

What I feel is lousy, immense discouragement, a heaviness of unbearable isolation...absence of desires, impossibility of finding any sort of amusement. I call this my laziness.

So I do things suddenly, when I don't think! anything! I seem to other people active, impulsive, destructive, a person who acts and doesn't care VIOLENT. This is the only way I can act. This is the only way I can write. Bad. Obviously I don't believe in anything I'm doing the minute I'm doing long enough for self-consciousness to arise I stop what I'm doing.

A poet a person has no morality.

I need your boringness your self-righteousness your hatred of me my paranoia just cause of who I am this loneliness solitude pain inside

my head everything coming from the poverty I choose to keep flagellating myself to go over.

One needs laws, the laws of writing, so one can hate them.

BRUCE ANDREWS :

WRITING SOCIAL WORK & POLITICAL PRACTICE

"Language is practical consciousness" (The German Ideology). Mainstream criticism still fails to raise or demand an answer to key questions about *the nature of the medium*-- which remains the modernist project for an art form. So, talking about writing, we have different ways to characterize its medium, different ways that medium's distinguishing qualities can be acted upon. Different political practices & epistemologies are implied.

ONE

One mode of writing tips its hat to assumptions of reference, representation, transparency, clarity, description, reproduction, positivism. Words are mere windows, substitutes, proper names, haloed or subjugated by the things to which they seem to point. 'Communication' resembles an exchange of prepackaged commodities. Here, active signifying is subordinated, transitive. Its continuing *constitution* of the world is ignored. So are the materiality of words & the conventions by which they get generated. Words are mistaken for tools (if only they could disappear to make way for meanings that sit outside language). Our concepts or mental pictures are confused with referents & referents are attributed a secure identity that precedes their delivery into thought & words (the conventional nature of that relation is also ignored). An illusionism, the taken-for-granted, *the fetish*. An imagined 'oppositional' poetics stemming from this perspective would still be reductionist, naturalism (a breakdown theory, reformism, 'socialist' 'realism'). Or else poetry becomes complacent literature, ornamental reinforcement of the status quo.

TWO

An alternative structuralist view. Here the medium of writing is *language*, understood as a system. *The structure of the sign* determines that medium's intrinsic & distinguishing characteristics: the division of the sign into a signifier (material form) & a signified (concept or mental representation), the former related arbitrarily/conventionally to the latter. Word matter is not dissolved by reference but exists relationally within an overall sign system. Signification occurs negatively, through *difference* & opposition-- terms signify by being differentiated from all other terms, not intrinsically or transparently.

Just as representational literature (dominant form) rests on an implicit definition of words as largely transparent tools of reference, other kinds of writing practice correspond to this second, relational