

PROJECT PAPERS

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The History/Pre-History of The Poetry Project¹

I want to welcome you all as the moderator of this session, although I don't think that moderation (in the sense of the safe or middle position) is what this quasi-institution has been (or should be) about. Chronologically—in terms of age—I'm in the middle position between Koch & Ginsberg (as my almost elders) and Sanders & Waldman (as my juniors). So much for chronology. I think we're otherwise in it together.

But the key word is *pre-history*. It is a knockout word & we're of course free to take it any way we want. I'll make a couple of suggestions (my five-minute presentation written down this morning) & pass them along.

As it might relate to the circumstances immediately leading to The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, I find myself the only one here who was part of the original/founding committee of the Saint Mark's readings circa 1965 & 1966 that preceded the Poetry Project as such. The dominant figure in that proto-Project was Paul Blackburn, who was not only a magnificent & influential poet but a tireless organizer of readings (at the Caffè Borgia, at the Tenth Street Coffee Shop, at the Deux Megots and Le Metro, at Saint Mark's Church, and after Saint Mark's at Doctor Generosity's and other venues north & south in Manhattan). Those early Saint Mark's readings (after a pitched battle broke things up at Le Metro around the corner) were done without funds and set up the pattern of Monday & Wednesday readings that has remained in place thereafter. Among the other committee members—if I remember right—were Carol Bergé, Allen Plantz, Carol Rubenstein, and Diane Wakoski. Ted Berrigan was invited too but couldn't yet make it.

It was in 1967 that those looser & unfunded readings became the Poetry Project, and as such the Project developed (particularly under Anne Waldman's directorship) into the closest thing we have to an ongoing, venerable center for poetry, run by poets & open foremost to the full range of visionary, revolutionary, language-centered, spirit-centered arts that poets have both invented & discovered in the newest & oldest possibilities of our human (& animal) natures. In that sense the pre-history is more than local, more than only of-this-place. It is what Ezra Pound called a vortex—the Poetry Project vortex: a point of concentration for accumulated human energies: past & present shaped by the place of its occurrence and the needs & yearnings of its participants. "All experience

¹Delivered as the opening remarks to "The History/Pre-History of The Poetry Project" panel discussion at the Poetry Project's 20th Year Symposium, May 6-10, 1987. The other panelists were Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, Kenneth Koch and Ed Sanders.

rushes into this vortex," Pound wrote in 1914. "All the energized past, all the past that is living and worthy to live. ALL MOMENTUM ..., instinct charging the PLACID, NON-ENERGIZED FUTURE. . . . All the past that is vital, all the past that is capable of living into the future, is present in the vortex, now." The Poetry Project as a vortex has drawn its energies from surrounding New York & the larger world, as also from each of us who has worked within it. The works & movements of poets & artists in the twentieth century created many new vortexes/configurations, many pasts & presents/energies old & new. The Poetry Project vortex circa 1967—to which I was witness—included Beat poets, New York School poets, San Francisco poets, Black Mountain poets, Deep Image poets, Midwest and Southwest regionals, Fluxus poets, Umbra poets, & so on. And from then on: African-American poets, Latino poets, feminist poets, Indian poets, Language poets, anti-Language poets, sound poets, silent poets, mumbling poets; even—in this usually most generous of vortexes—academic poets.

But the pre-history goes even further.

Gertrude Stein is of the Poetry Project vortex and has been from the start.

So are Pound & Williams and Wallace Stevens.

The Dada fathers are not forgotten here, & there is a lingering resonance of old Surrealists once in exile in New York.

Koch's New York School—transmitted through Berrigan, Padgett, Waldman, & others—brought in the energies of (American) painters from Abstract Expressionism to Pop to present manifesters.

Performance poetry & art grew naturally from the readings & were foregrounded some years ago through Ed Friedman's kindly efforts.

But PRE-HISTORY: this is something older still. Beyond Romantic and Metaphysical ghosts it summons up Provençal poets who came in early with Paul Blackburn; Chinese poets, the work of Pound but also Mac Low's and Cage's mining of the I Ching as a guide to poetry; Sumerian poets via Olson and Schwerner; Egyptian poets via Ed Sanders; American Indian shaman poets; Mayan and Aztec poets; ancient Hebrew poets; Sufi poets; and whole lineages & traditions of Buddhist poets—all of these are part of what we are.

It is a history/pre-history of poetry reaching back into paleolithic times: our true pre-history as human beings: in a configuration that has surfaced elsewhere—to be sure—but nowhere more tenaciously than here, more continuously than here. It is in these ways that the Poetry Project, now more than ever, is a dependable haven for a tradition of poem-making whose loss would incredibly diminish us. It is very much about pre-history and history, because it is very much about a present in which (Ezra Pound again) "all ages are contemporaneous in the mind."