

TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

POETRY IS DEAD, LONG LIVE POETRY!

Exposures, Ideas, exercises and provocations by Emma Hammond

WHEN DID POETRY BECOMING 'BORING' OR 'HARD WORK'?

Poems like 'The Rime of The Ancient Mariner' ARE fun, but I don't think kids will bother trying to find out why unless they are firstly introduced to poems that are relevant to them.

Digital art can often be more immediate and exciting. Artists such as [Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries](#) for example, who are playing with text in a new way, create something immersive and compelling that a younger audience would relate to. (Try 'Dakota'. Also, a good interview [here](#))

Why not cultivate an interest in poetry first? Philip Larkin in his essay '[The Pleasure Principle](#)' writes - 'The cash customers of poetry who used to put down their money in the sure and certain hope of enjoyment as if at a theatre or concert hall were quick to move elsewhere. Poetry was no longer a pleasure.'

Larkin goes on to say that poetry readers should ask themselves if they are reading for pleasure or self-improvement, and if it is the latter then they should probably not bother.

Like in comedy, we need movement and surprise in language to keep our interest. e e cummings said –

'At least my theory of technique, if I have one, is very far from original; nor is it complicated. I can express it in fifteen words, by quoting The Eternal Question And Immortal Answer of burlesk, viz. 'Would you hit a woman with a child? No, I'd hit her with a brick.' Like the burlesk comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement'.



mr cummings

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Goldsmith wrote the book *Day* (2003)—for which he retyped an entire edition of the *New York Times*, including all the ad copy, cover to cover. Goldsmith doesn't actually expect anyone to read *Day* or his recently completed American trilogy, *Weather* (2005), *Traffic* (2007), and *Sports* (2008)—transcriptions of, respectively, a year's worth of radio weather reports; a twenty-four-hour traffic cycle, and the radio broadcast of a long and dull Yankees game, ads included.

'You can't read these books,' he says, 'I can't read them. People tell me they do, but they're absolutely impossible.' He just wants us to think about them.

More Kenneth Goldsmith [here](#)

He imparts similar lessons in his Uncreative Writing class where students are directed to transcribe, plagiarize, thief, and appropriate, all in the name of learning to write. 'If we retyped Kerouac,' he says, 'we'd learn much more about Kerouac than by writing in the style of Kerouac.' Or maybe we'd learn much more about ourselves?

EXERCISE

Talk to the person next to you for 15 minutes about something that is really important to you at the moment. Listen to them also and then write a poem as *them*. Get rid of the ego.

CONSTRAINTS

Obviously there are other ways of getting rid of the ego - the [Oulipo](#) guys were interested in using constraints to trigger new ideas and to help you write outside of the self.



The Oulipoans

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Acquaint yourself with [Ross Sutherland](#) and his version of [Little Red Riding Hood](#).

MAGIC AND COMPUTER PROGRAMMING

These constraints seem to me like a type of magic, almost like a spell. Robert Anton Wilson in the book *Decadance* wrote -

'Poetry and magic ... are based on a belief that thought can create its own reality—which Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* called the theory of 'the omnipotence of thought'. It is no accident, then, that so many poems, from the *Odyssey* right up to Joyce's great prose-poem, *Finnegans Wake*, contain magical 'invocations'.'

For some reason spells make me think of computer programming and I think the following quote from Jamie Allen's [essay](#) sums this up -

'... computing languages are created in order to create certain kinds of action or manipulation of other codes (data). In this sense perhaps, software is always, and already, poetic. It is precise description, and pure syntax—the signifier and signified—clearly coincident in the machine.

Many of the constraints and styles of poetry we know have developed in order to allow words to express themselves, or show themselves as the mediation of a mental image.

Programming languages for computer hardware, no matter how 'high level' or abstract they are, are by necessity far less elaborate than traditional forms of writing and speech. But the structure and function of these new languages give them special advantage in clarity: These languages (syntax, sequence) and the results they produce (ideas, 'executables') are absolutely inseparable.'

This asks the question – what if poems are becoming more than words? What if they are beginning to take their shape from their context?

POEMS FORMED BY CONTEXT

I thought about some installations and visualisations that I've seen or read about recently.

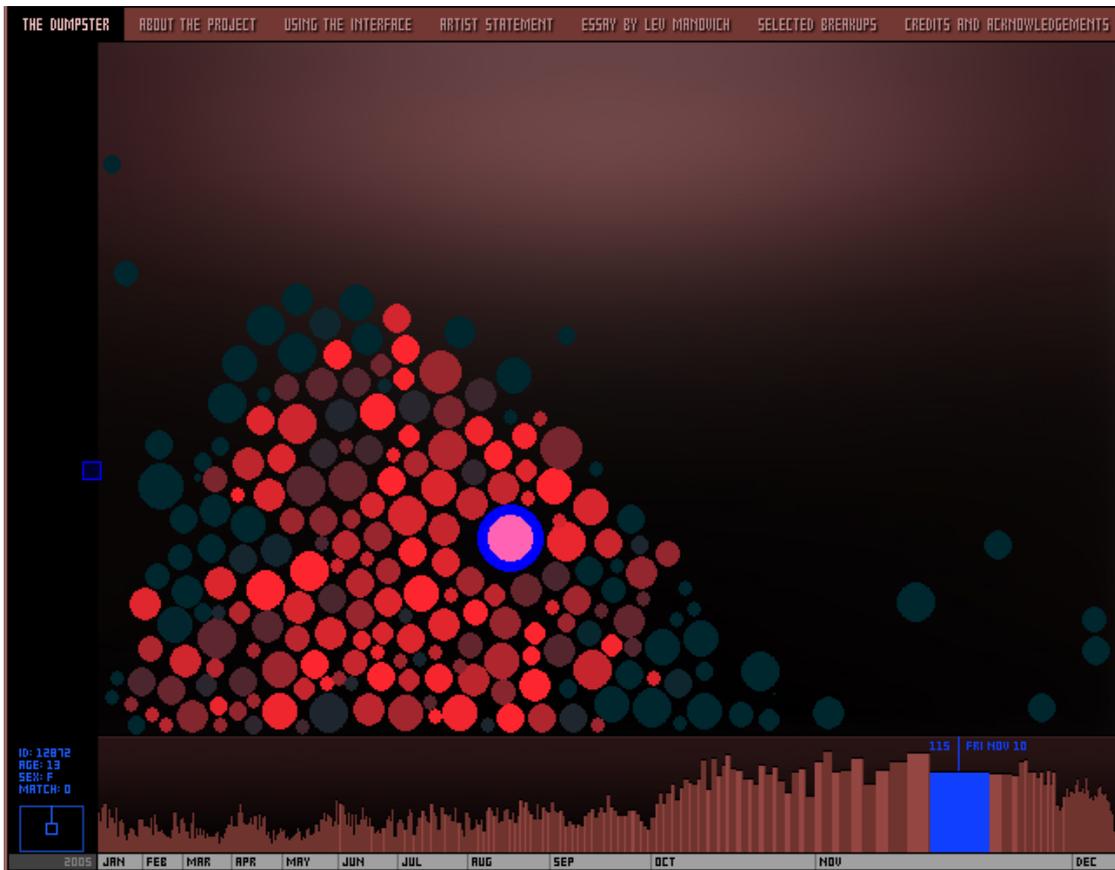
1. [Visualising Narratives](#)

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2. The Dumpster

The Dumpster is an interactive online visualization that attempts to depict a slice through the romantic lives of American teenagers. Using real postings extracted from millions of online blogs, visitors to the project can surf through tens of thousands of specific romantic relationships in which one person has 'dumped' another. The project's graphical tools reveal the astonishing similarities, unique differences, and underlying patterns of these failed relationships, providing both peculiarly analytic and sympathetically intimate perspectives onto the diversity of global romantic pain.

These forms of co-operative digital 'art' seem to be forming a constantly evolving portrait of human emotion. In this respect the human element is still there, yet the 'poem' is written automatically, without ego.

I believe and more poetry will become like these projects, a kind of pooling of emotion and hopefully this could be one way of revising our notions of poetry and how we consume it.

Acquaint yourself with [Tan Lin](#)
... and a good interview [here](#)

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Journal writing is a good way of creating something new and interesting.

EXERCISE

Try writing only at certain times, for example - a rain journal which you only write in it's raining. Or a public journal that is put up on the walls. Do this exercise alone or with a number of people. Come together, share your journals and as they are read out and take notes. Then write a poem based on all the different experiences and angles that the others came from to create a group artwork.

BORING POETRY READINGS

Is it poetry *readings* that are really [boring](#)? Like in art galleries, why is there a sense of reverence? The best thing you can do with this is subvert it: turn the experience of a poetry reading into a spectacle, using music and lighting.

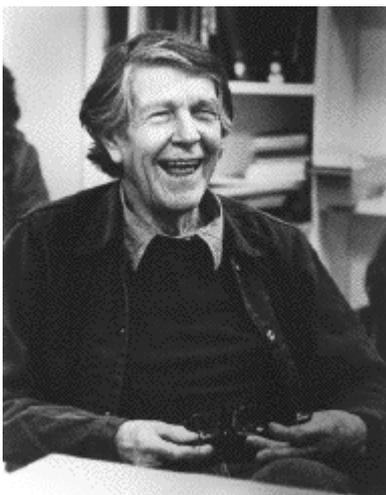
Acquaint yourself with [Nathan Jones](#) and the sorts of [readings](#) he produces. Also, check out [Mercy Arts and Literature Collective](#) that Nathan runs and whom I intern for.

ANTI-ART

With his composition 4'33 [John Cage](#) was making the point that all life is art. Is this statement actually 'anti-art' then in some respect?

'[Anti-art artworks](#) may articulate a disagreement with the generally supposed notion of there being a separation between art and life' ... though some may argue this is really 'HIGH ART' and has nothing to do with the masses or 'REAL LIFE' - more on this later.

'If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.' (John Cage)



Mr Cage

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Should there be a separation between art and life? Is elitism the thing people object to in poetry – the thing that makes it 'boring' for most people?

ANTI-POETRY

Here it is interesting to consider [Niconar Parra](#), the father of anti-poetry .

In anti-poetry, the most common objects -telephones, soda fountains, park benches, even the colloquial language in which the poems are written - although they are the ordinary artefacts of modern urban life, are charged with desperate significance. They become hostile furniture that stands in the way of the protagonists and prevents them from making any heroic gestures because their environment, habits and background render such gestures ludicrous -

I give no one the right.
I worship a piece of rag.
I transport coffins.
I transport coffins.
I give no one the right.
I look ridiculous
In the sunlight,
Scourge of the soda fountains
I am dying of fury

Parra says - 'I think that the poet should be a specialist in communication. Humor makes contact (with the reader) easier. Remember that it's when you lose your sense of humor that you begin to reach for your pistol'

The [technique](#) of anti-poetry.

EXERCISE

Write an 'anti-poem' using everyday language and experience, try not to use 'poetic language' or even 'poetical thinking'. Write as if you want every single person to understand it.

THE STUCKISTS

And then, what if we go one step further and consider a group like the [Stuckists](#) who are 'anti-anti art'?

The Stuckist [Manifesto](#)

[Billy Childish](#), a noted Stuckist, reads [The Noble Beast](#).

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Mr Childish

Have a look at some of his art too - it's gorgeous.

FINALLY, WHAT IS POETRY FOR?

I asked this question on Facebook to see what answers I could get - it is an interesting question which is harder to answer than you first think. This is what my friend the poet Niall O'Sullivan said -

'The utility of poetry shifts and changes depending on cultural and historical context. In oral cultures it was and still is a way of relaying cultural information through mnemonic means, often tied with myth and ritual as a means of strengthening group dynamics.

After the invention of the printing press it became a means for the aristocracy to emphasise the superiority of their noble private thoughts and experiences via their control over the means of production (a pastime whose fossil can be discerned in today's anglophone prize cultures where the gentry get together in function rooms, quaff wine and award each other for books that no-one else buys).

With the internet bringing an artificial democratisation to publication media (still owned by the same shady corporations) poetry has become a means for everybody to become an aristocrat, broadcasting their profound subjective epiphanies to a few billion other faux aristocrats who are also harping on about how they feel and stuff.

If a superior species looked down on our planet right now, that's all poetry would look like: a few billion souls bleating on about their precious feelings as the species tiptoes towards its inevitable extinction. If we're really lucky the whole sorry exercise would move the superior species to nudge a tentacle towards the planetary destruction death ray button and put us all out of our misery'.

John Berryman reading [Dream Song 14](#) (Life, friends, is boring')

FINIS

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