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Esi Eshun:
Bad Poets

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Being not enough together...

>> An injury to taste, judgement, understanding, Bad poetry is Various naive, dull, derivative, overwrought or cackhanded,

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>> In embarrassing contrast to 'good poetry', which, as the epitome of a certain kind of literary humanism, situates the poet as lone genius possessed of a supposedly ineffable combination of instinct and intellect, affect and craft and an almost occult knowledge of technique.

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>> In contrast, The Bad Poets project, represented a refusal of such terms, and by extension, a resistance to many of the norms and values underlying them, instead positioning poetry as a social, pedagogical and therapeutic practice, both liberating and egalitarian in principle.

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>> An exercise in the value of the performative, the dialogic, the collaborative, experimental and experiential... the project intended to query poetry's relationship to ~~individualised aesthetic refinements, not by entirely eschewing the value of such a role, but rather, by aiming in part, to substantiate poetry's potential as an inclusive collective practice, embedded in improvisatory approaches emphasising process and play, error and imperfection, transience, spontaneity and interdisciplinarity.~~

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>> By honouring badness, the intention was not to rest complacently within a state of ineptitude, but to suggest that embracing imperfection, immediacy and the ensemble could effect minor personal and social transformations in participants' relations to themselves and others. Open to everybody, and situated within a notionally democratic space, the project aimed to present the work of shy, bedroom or inexperienced poets in the kind of social context they might normally avoid, where performance of some kind was key.

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>> That the Poets might choose to enter such a space was perhaps due to the armoury of approaches available, which, in privileging freedom from rules, and support from the ensemble, carried the promise of greater creative agency, and the chance to circumvent literary hierarchies demarcating Western/written poetry from most other forms.

And while experimentalism for its own sake was not the aim, it was, however, the inevitable result of a pluralistic perspective, where no fixed directions and outcomes were envisaged, and where the threat of anarchy, chaos, or several kinds of interesting beauty loomed large.

>> The name of the intended collective poem and the theme of the first Bad Poets workshop was Oikos, the Ancient Greek word meaning Home, Economy and Ecology. By allowing each person to interpret the title in their own way, without interference, it was hoped that a multivalent tapestry might emerge, composed of fragmented, tangential or partially intersecting layerings of an already heterogeneous theme –providing several insights, perhaps, into disjointed times.

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>> The structure of the workshop would take the following shape. After warm up exercises, participants would write four or more impressions of their past week before reading them out and then developing them into short poems based on their preferred Oikos theme. After an initial straight reading, each Poet would then find a way to present their poems performatively, before finally, joining the others to construct a collaborative work.

> Drawing on an eclectic range of sources, the Poets could borrow from elements of sound, found and concrete poetry, Burroughs' and Gysin style cut ups, prose poetry and spoken word. Conversely, they could address the emotional or affective register by privileging the voice, gesture or other embodied means of performance, incorporating drawing or other graphic elements to supplement or substitute words.

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>> Crucial to this process was the availability of a handful of noise making implements, musical instruments, home made devices, kitchen utensils and the human body, used to punctuate, underscore, rhythmically accentuate or replace the voice and its potential meanings and messages.

> In these ways, the Poets might extend, depart from or subvert conventions ... escaping constraints to de/intensify and de-sacralise the creative process, shifting the focal point from the perfectibility of the writing and composition process, to a more spontaneous, mutable, improvisatory mode, furnished with sonic and material elements.

Inevitably, the most challenging aspect of the workshop, was the task of combining disparate poems into a collective whole. Unlike many of the project's avant-garde predecessors whose work had sought to balance chance elements with some form of constraint - the Surrealist Exquisite Corpse game comes to mind - the Bad Poets would, initially at least, try to dispense with rules altogether.

John Cage, the best known proponent of the concept of indeterminacy, had used chance elements including the Chinese divination system, the I Ching to compose works such as Music of Change, while marrying them with careful guidelines for performance. Meanwhile, Cornelius Cardew's Scratch Orchestra, which, with its haphazard mix of trained and untrained musicians, perhaps best matched the make-up of the Bad Poets group, incorporated graphic scores for performers to interpret, while Fluxus events would often incorporate visual or written instructions, however open ended they might be, for performers and audience to interpret.

The Bad Poets project, however, took inspiration from the realm of jazz improvisation, envisaging free association, empathic listening between performers, and the requirement to respond to each other in the moment.

Ultimately, such plans would prove too ambitious for the one hour timescale offered for the workshop. The temptation to direct participants, to conduct them on ways to assemble and combine their pieces would prove too strong to avoid, giving rise to objections about restrictions to freedom.

Nonetheless, the hope was that an endlessly malleable collaborative work might result, boasting an emergent, internal coherence of its own.

>By divorcing words from their semantic context, Subjugating meaning to sound, treating sounds as material objects... stretching vowels, emphasising the rhythmic staccato of consonants, extracting individual words or phrases for repetition or vocal destruction, delving into the realm of chanting or incantations...

>By finding thematic or narrative resonances or antinomies, sharp paratactical juxtapositions and discontinuities, loops, repetitions, delays or rhythmic pulses, a strange and compelling work, constantly teetering on the edge of collapse might yet emerge...

In the end however, the workshop partially succeeded in simultaneously affirming individual authorial voices, while erasing the singularity of their authority, allowing participants to function, as music theorist Samuel A. Floyd would have it, as individuals within the aggregate, as members of an ensemble, intent on breaking rules in order to advocate for themselves, and in order to assert their places within society.

Notes on Performance

Each member of the group assembles a part of a collective poem
Small groups devise how to perform the parts as an ensemble work

Chorus: -

- Evoke atmosphere using external sound sources, voice, and other parts of the body
- Evoke sound effects using above
- Evoke prevailing psychological states and shifts
- Use sound and silence for dramatic effect, tension, suspension
- Explore repetitions, movements back and forth, call and response
- Experiment with tempo, rhythm, volume, pitch

Poets:-

- Discover intentionality behind poems
- Find a narrative point of view where appropriate
- Sing lines to discover cadences, internal melodies, rhythms
- Disinhibit selves and others by walking around room when initially performing
- Use noise
- Change, add or strip away text as desired
- Use texture where desired
- Use gesture where desired
- Memorise at least one line or phrase to repeat during a performance. Use as a motif if desired
- Perform sound and sense, or where there is minimal sense, perform sound as sense.







