Planning to Stay: a manifesto

Alan Filreis, University of Pennsylvania

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/afilreis/14/
MANIFESTO: PLANNING TO STAY

This talk was presented in response to a request for a manifesto to conclude a four-day conference on new writing practices. The conference took place in February 2010 at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta.

My dicta are four in total. In sum they are:

1) Writing isn’t the only thing that is changing or needs to change. 2) The other kinds of changes might demand an attention very different in kind from our usual. 3) Deep down, most of us do not really want these other changes to come. 4) The ideal site might be where things happen rather than get presented or taught.

Now I will elaborate a little on each:

1) If all this talk about true modal changes caused by (or aided by) writing in new media is going to be more than just talk, then we must also seek, or at least encourage, major changes in the institutions that were and are organized to assure the continuation of the old mode. Which is to say: if publishers and universities and art centers as organizations (with budgets, staff hierarchies, physical spaces, customs of credentialing) are set up assuming these binarisms:

I write/you read
I talk/you listen
I have/you want
I am/you aren’t yet
I have language/you need my language
I produce/you consume & purchase

--and if the relationship I write/you read is in the process of really changing (and indeed most of us here do our work on the assumption that it has already changed)--then all other aspects of the relationship must also be subject to that change. We cannot expect the traditional I write/you read binarism to disintegrate and then just hope that everything else in the writer/reader (and publisher/consumer, teacher/learner) relationship will similarly wither away, for there are actual forces maintaining it.

2) So the most obvious thing one can say is that the conversations we have been having this weekend are not just about writing. We should think every bit as innovatively about the institutions and organizations that rose up around the technology of the book as we have conceived the writing that goes on inside or near or astride these institutions. (Complete separation from them is a nice dream, but only as nice and dreamy as other separatisms.)

3) The honest truth is that most of us associated with such organizations - again I mostly mean universities and publishers and art centers, but also humanities institutes and foundations supporting artists – probably don't want the rest of the changes to follow
from the disintegration of *I write/*you read* exclusivity*. This is especially true of *I talk/*you listen*. (I make noise and you listen silently. I am producing something; you for the moment are unproductive.) Like the poetry reading, the lecture, the lecture being an ideology as well as an artifact of a certain phase of technology, is not something most people here are ready to give up. But I’m certain we will all be better off when we’ve put an end to the lecture; and anyway an alternative mode is among the main implications of what we do. So what is truly interactive? How many of us have been promised that such-and-such a gathering would be “interactive” only to find out that what people really want to give--but rarely to receive--is a series of monologues?

4) I do not believe what I’m saying is to come about virtually. It is very much a matter of physical design, of planning (and, incidentally, of *planning to stay*), of working with brick and mortar. We need to build spaces that are unconducive to what I’m doing right now.

Back in the mid-1970s, when he was promoting “oral poetry” as an alternative to the traditional presentation of writing, Jerome Rothenberg said the following: "As for poetry ‘belonging’ in the classroom, it's like the way they taught us sex in those old hygiene classes: not performance but semiotics. If I had taken Hygiene 71 seriously, I would have become a mon; & if I had taken college English seriously, I would have been an accountant." Yet Rothenberg *did* teach poetry in the classroom, and so admitted to a realization I very much admire and have myself used as a guiding principle: “the classroom [can] become a substitute for those places (coffee shop or kiva) where poetry actually happens & where it can be ‘learned’ (not ‘taught’) in action.”

As pre-digital as the metaphor of the kiva is, I still like it. I like it because it pushes the distinction between teaching and learning, and it imagines spaces where “poetry actually happens” rather than where it is presented as if it’s not there and thus must be talked about.