How do contemporary poets engage their multiple audiences? What is the function of experiment in writing as a social act? How should we map the cultural dimensions of eco-poetics, identity politics or non-normative behaviours? Seven speakers address these and other questions in a series of interactive panels and a public reading hosted by the NZ Electronic Poetry Centre (nzepc) in conjunction with Australian poet Pam Brown’s Distinguished Visitor Award at the University of Auckland.

PROGRAMME

THURSDAY 26 SEPTEMBER


FRIDAY 27 SEPTEMBER

9.00 am Welcome and coffee Venue: Arts 2, Pat Hanan Room. Cnr Symonds St and Grafton Rd

10.00-11.30 am Session 1 Venue: Arts 2, Pat Hanan Room. Chair: Lisa Samuels

Adam Aitken. From Windchimes to Social Action: An Asian Australian Poets Anthology
Ann Vickery. Embracing A Sweet Future?: Constituting Gay and Lesbian Poetry in New Zealand
Ya-Wen Ho. Poetry as Social Action: An Experiment

12 noon Lunch break. Campus cafes (Slurp, Strata, Relax, Asian foodcourt and Old Government House).

1.00-2.00 pm Session 2 Venue: Arts 2, Pat Hanan Room. Chair: Jack Ross

Jen Crawford. Human-Plant Society in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s Hello, the Roses
Ali Alizadeh. The People of the Poem

2.00-3.00 pm Session 3 Venue: Arts 2, Pat Hanan Room. Chair: Murray Edmond
David Howard. Thank You for Thinking of Me: Language as the History of Being Human
Susan Schultz. Alzheimer's, Aliens, and the Cure of the Avant-garde

3.00 pm Coffee break
3.30-4.30 pm Plenary
Venue: Level 5, Arts 1 Common Room. Chair: Michele Leggott

All speakers and audience

5.30-7.00 pm WORD AND WORLD reading with Adam Aitken, Ali Alizadeh, Pam Brown, Jen Crawford, Ya-Wen Ho, David Howard, Susan Schultz and Ann Vickery.
MC: Pam Brown

Venue: Whare wananga and atrium, second floor, Auckland Central City Library, 44-46 Lorne St, Auckland CBD

Poets' books at the symposium

Titus Books has agreed to sell poets' books during the symposium, Friday 27 September 3-5 pm. If you have books to sell, please bring them to Alex Jespersen at the book table, clearly marked with prices rounded to $5 or $10 multiples, and with a list of the titles and number of copies you are selling. We are set up for cash sales only. Proceeds and any unsold books will be ready to collect at 5 pm.

Baking as Social Action

Locals please consider bringing along some baking for Bronwyn Lloyd who is coordinating our morning and afternoon tea.

REGISTRATION

This is a free event, sponsored by the NZ Electronic Poetry Centre (nzepc), and supported by the Department of English and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Auckland. Information: Michele Leggott (m.leggott@auckland.ac.nz)

SPEAKERS

Adam Aitken. From Windchimes to Social Action: An Asian Australian Poets Anthology

I will talk about a recent groundbreaking anthology of Asian Australian poets I have co-edited, and in general discuss the issue of how such ethnically framed collections can be read as gestures and strategies of social action. The book is conceived as a space in which Asian Australian poets are in fact writing with, against, and to each other, with conservative and radical poetics represented in equal measure. I will discuss the three introductory essays by the co-editors, myself, Kim Cheng Boey and Michelle Cahill. I am interested in the vexed question of the power and limits of such categorisation and curatorship, and how this collection may create new
readers of Australian poetry. More specifically, I want to look closely at some of the poems and ask if they can be framed as forms of critical intervention in the dominant discourse of ‘Australia in Asia’, and will compare the range of speaking positions gathered in the collection. In brief the question is: who and what in Australia and the region does this anthology speak back to?

Adam Aitken was born in London and spent his early childhood in Malaysia and Thailand, before settling in Sydney. He holds a PhD in creative writing from the University of Technology, Sydney. In 2010 he was the Visiting Distinguished Writer at the University of Hawai`i, Manoa. His poetry includes the *Avenue of Nations* commemorative sculpture at Centennial Park, Sydney. His most recent books are *Eighth Habitation*, which was shortlisted for the Adelaide Festival Award, *Tonto’s Revenge*, (Tinfish Press, Hawai`i) and *November Already*, a Vagabond chap book. He is also co-editor of *Contemporary Asian Australian Poets* (Puncher and Wattmann). In 2012 he was resident at the Australia Council’s Keesing Studio, Paris, and in Southern France, where he spent six months learning French and completing new work. He is now a teaching and learning advisor at UTS.

**Ali Alizadeh. The People of the Poem**

Any contemporary discussion of an artistic practice as social action must, in addition to examining the nexus between aesthetics and politics, consider the contemporary conceptions of ‘the social’ and of ‘action’. In my view, these terms have been greatly reconfigured by contemporary/late capitalist ideology – ‘the social’ has been obscured by ‘the global’, ‘the communal’ and so on, and ‘action’ by ‘negotiation’, ‘interaction’ and so on – resulting in paralyses both in articulations and applications of a radical politics and also in proposals for radical artistic theory and practice. To address these challenges, and by drawing on the ideas of philosophers Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, I wish to define social action as a rupture or disjunction that produces ‘the people’ from an existing population. I would then like to explore the possibilities of such a production as a new idea immanent and singular to select works of poetry – in which, according to Badiou, ‘art destines the real it encounters to all people, negating the influence of particularity’ (*Polemics* 142) – produced during the period identified as the aesthetic regime of art, a milieu in which, as Rancière would have it, ‘art exists when one can make a people, a society, an age, taken at a certain moment in the development of its collective life, its subject’ (*Aisthesis* 14).


**Jen Crawford. Human-Plant Society in Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge’s Hello, the Roses**

Person and violet with so little in common my voice reveals as a resonance of unmanifest identity.

The violet, looking back, loses objectivity and enters the expansion of recognized things.
You could say our identities reach out to encompass the forest environment, like telepathy; a moment opens space by rendering it transparent in intensified consciousness. (‘Glitter’)

The poems of Mei-mei Berrsenbrugge’s collection Hello, the Roses (New Directions, 2013) imagine a social ecosystem of relations between plants, humans and (less frequently) other animals. In this society, ‘Different species communicate and energies of environment and its inhabitants merge’ (‘Winter Whites’). Social action within this system is founded on the communicative acts of emanation and perception, but also includes the ‘transfer of data to systems in which symbols come alive’ – transfers which take the form of dreaming, imagining, reading, and the ‘holographic’ (whole writing) work of ‘metaphoric intuition’. The descriptive focus of the poems, while oriented on acts of communication, rarely lights on writing itself, yet Berrsenbrugge’s poetics seem specifically designed to foster and extend the communicative patterns the poems describe. This paper approaches the poems as emanations, considering their formal properties in relation to their place in the human-plant society they describe.

Jen Crawford is a New Zealander who currently coordinates the creative writing programme at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. She holds a PhD from the University of Wollongong, Australia, and has taught at the University of Auckland and Massey University. Her poetry collections include Bad Appendix (Titus Books) and the chapbooks Napoleon Swings (Soapbox Press) and Pop Riveter (Pania Press).

Ya-Wen Ho. Poetry as Social Action: An Experiment

I propose an experiment, and for the symposium presentation to be a report of the experiences.

The experiment:

I will select a short phrase, line or poem to replace a commonly used expression in everyday speech. For example, a haiku for every time I would usually say ‘thanks’. The replaced and the replacement will aurally fold into each other, the way my long poems do. The experiment will run for the month of August.

Each day, I will select a new expression to be replaced by a new piece of poetic text. These experiments will occur in spoken speech, except in conversations between me and my family. If people enquire, I will engage in conversation with them. I will encourage participation and a sharing of experiences. Participants determine their own duration and texts. I will set up a Facebook page where people can: Learn about the experiment. Opt-in to participate in the experiment. Propose pieces of replacement text. Propose expressions to be replaced. Share their experience – how other people responded, what happened, how they felt. I will create a take-away token printed with the Facebook URL to give to people who I end up having conversations with. I plan to keep written records of notable encounters, any ephemeral material that may arise, and the Facebook page as documentation of this experiment. It will be from these sources that I draw material for the symposium presentation.

I came to these premises because I think all language is social action. How we speak and write reveal our socio-political-economical identities and affiliations. Poetry is often perceived to
occupy a privileged position in the hierarchy of language acts and I would like to attempt to
dislocate this position by removing the contextual indicators of ‘here are poets, hear them read’: I
am not introduced by an MC, I stand behind no podium, the audience is not aware they are an
audience. I hope this may give the poetic words an opportunity to mix with all the other words in
my day-to-day speech, in the realm of where social acts happen.

I chose a low-level but broad-spectrum language intervention because of Claire Bishop’s criticisms
of relational aesthetics. Relational aesthetics was the art world’s experiment with art as social
action: it sought to create communities, foster relationships, foreground context and cultural
relativity – all the things I desire a poetic social act to achieve. But Bishop critiques the kinds of
relationships created by relational aesthetics:

the relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic, as Bourriaud
suggests, since they rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as whole and of
community as immanent togetherness. There is [...] no inherent friction since the situation is what
Bourriaud calls ‘microtopian’: it produces a community whose members identify with each other,
because they have something in common.

Thus, I was keenly aware that the experiment must be designed carefully – the experiences would
be more interesting with friction, and this friction would come from a language intervention that
reached beyond people familiar with poetry.

Ya-Wen Ho graduated from the University of Auckland with a BA/BFA(Hons) in 2011 and has been
looking for viable ways to re-occupy and work within that intersection between art, design,
critical research and language ever since. Her current solution is undertaking the Diploma in
Publishing at Whitireia, Wellington, where she is learning how to publish and circulate great
books. Her first collection of poetry, last edited [insert time here], was published by TinFish Press
in 2012. She continues to collaborate on independent publishing projects, such as lea phs, and
participates in the Wellington zine community as both a zine-maker and a Zinefest committee
member.

David Howard. Thank You for Thinking of Me: Language as the History of Being Human

Even if a writer restricts his conception of the reader to those who speak
the same language I still believe it is impossible to reach let alone satisfy
an undifferentiated mass. 'I write for the people' is meaningless, whereas 'I
write for the person' means a good deal. Like many others I attempt to
make sense of the senseless, to move with purpose through the arbitrary,
to learn. Because language is social then I necessarily have a social vision –
it's not coherent but it is motivating.

And I do publish books so I must have a conception of a committed
readership, one that is warmed if not fired up by my words.

Because language is the history of being human
A cannibal is somebody who eats his words
As if they were fire.

In my presentation I will follow the poem ‘Always Almost, Never Quite’ from its genesis as a
commission for the Going West Festival 2012 to its discussion by Claire Beynon, Maryllin Kelly,
Orchid Tierney, Renee Liang and Susan T. Landry in Tuesday's Poem (January 29, 2013).

Going West is an intimate festival where it is possible to talk with all the presenters, to be
genuinely and respectfully social. But in the monotonoverse of larger literary festivals, which are
peppered with touring almost-celebrities, what most presenters ‘know is special/Pleading’.
Discussion is in the service of admiration rather than discovery.

And then, when there is no (more) applause? A poem goes beyond its occasion because, to be worth reading, a poem has to. In Tuesday’s Poem Claire, Marylinn, Orchid, Renee and Susan took ‘Always Almost, Never Quite’ and held different parts of it up to the light. They required me to engage in the process of a public dialogue when I had already signed off on an artefact, the published poem. Their questions intensified my sense of the poem’s dependence on the shared history that is language: my word, their word, your word. Whether or not we eat our words, we dine together.

A slow learner, David Howard devoted thirty-five years to compiling one book: *The Incomplete Poems* (Cold Hub Press, 2011). He then collaborated with artist Peter Ransom on *you’re so pretty when you’re unfaithful to me* (Holloway Press, 2012). David has won the Gordon & Gotch Poetry Award, the NZ Poetry Society Competition, the NZSA Mid-Career Writers Award and the University of the South Pacific Press Poetry Prize. He currently holds the Robert Burns Fellowship at the University of Otago.

Susan Schultz. *Alzheimer’s, Aliens, and the Cure of the Avant-garde*

*In What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, philosopher Catherine Malabou argues that ‘any vision of the brain is necessarily political’ (52). She distinguishes between ‘flexibility’ and ‘plasticity,’ between an identity favored by capitalism (think ‘flex-time,’ ‘flexible labor’) and one that resists such flexibility by way of ‘plasticity.’ According to Malabou, ‘plasticity’ (from the French ‘plastique,’ or explosive) is creative, even when it emerges from destruction. ‘An Alzheimer’s patient,’ she writes, ‘is the nemesis of connectionist society, the counter-model of flexibility. He is presented as a disaffiliated person: errant, without memory, asocial, without recourse.’ As such, he can be compared to the homeless, illegal immigrants, or unemployed persons. All of these persons are wanderers, border-crossers, and are considered threats to stable notions of national or individual identity. I will discuss the ways in which Malabou’s comparison works, in particular how the word ‘alien’ comes to identify, and connect, the world of Alzheimer’s with that of science fiction and contemporary American politics.

I will argue that experimental writing both describes the ‘flexible’ world and in some ways intervenes in it, proposing a ‘plastic’ alternative. By doing critical readings of B.S. Johnson’s *House Mother Normal* and other experimental texts on Alzheimer’s, as well as of projects that bring art into Alzheimer’s homes, I will show how experimental boundary-crossings not only describe the world of the Alzheimer’s sufferer, but permit entry to the ‘home’ by those not privy to the key, or the combination to open the doors themselves. The Alzheimer’s home’s ‘flexibility’ (many are owned and operated by large corporations) can thus be resisted by the ‘plasticity’ of art. The Alzheimer’s patient’s perceived rigidity can, then, be seen as (at least) an opening to social plasticity, to a sense of identities as plastic, fluid, wandered unattached to notions of the self that demand its ‘flexibility.’

Some texts to engage:

B.S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal.*


The Outer Limits: Paradise (season 2, #17, 1996).

Susan M. Schultz, *Dementia Blog* and ‘She’s Welcome to Her Disease’: Dementia Blog, Volume 2.

Michael Snediker, ‘Lucy Church, Amiably.’ EOAGH: Dementia Feature.
Susan Schultz is author and editor of several books of criticism, poetry and poetic prose, most recently, *Dementia Blog* (2008), *Memory Cards: 2010-2011 Series* (2011) and ‘She’s Welcome to Her Disease’: *Dementia Blog, Volume Two* (2013), all from Singing Horse Press. She edits Tinfish Press, writes on Tinfish Editor’s blog, and teaches in the English department at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.


This paper considers the role of the poetry anthology as an act of representation or representativeness of the state of New Zealand, that is, it institutionalises a particular social or cultural mapping as much as an aesthetic one. *Private Gardens: An Anthology of New Zealand Women Poets* (1977) closely followed the rights movement. In her introduction, Riemke Ensing identified a systemic problem among the contributors ‘which had to do with the condition of being a woman — of being a wife and mother first, a poet second. For those poets who were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ), however, the systemic condition might be seen as reversed, of being considered a poet first, and having a sexuality second. In the 1990s, Jonathan Fisher noted: ‘I seemed to be the only gay poet that was writing or being published in this country. I thought how wonderful it would be if there was a collection of New Zealand gay poetry that I could feel kinship to.’ 1999 saw the publication of twin volumes, *Eat These Sweet Words: The New Zealand Anthology of Lesbian and Gay Poetry* and *When Two Men Embrace: The New Zealand Anthology of Gay and Lesbian Poetry*. While they received attention by the mainstream and gay and lesbian communities at the time, there has been little critical reception of the anthologies. This paper considers the significance of these two anthologies and the significance of anthologisation in the constitution of contemporary New Zealand poetry. It also considers alternative cartographies of community and sexuality in New Zealand poetry that may question the necessity of institutionalising within a national imaginary.

Ann Vickery is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies at Deakin University. This paper emerges out of research into Australian little magazines and anthologies focused on gay and lesbian poetries. Her books include *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing* (Wesleyan, 2000) and *Stressing the Modern: Cultural Politics of Australian Women’s Poetry* (Salt, 2007). She has also co-authored *The Intimate Archive: Journeys through Private Papers* (National Library of Australia, 2009) with Maryanne Dever and Sally Newman, and *Manifesting Australian Literary Feminisms: Drafts and Faultlines* (Australian Literary Studies, 2009) with Margaret Henderson.