

Interview

Anne Waldman

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Anne Waldman is the author of many books of poetry, including *Fast Speaking Woman*, *Journals and Dreams*, *Makeup on Empty Space*, and *Invention*. Her most recent books are *Sin Meat Bones*, and *The Romance Thing*. Her recent performance work includes experiments with music, dance and video. Her video "Uh-Oh Plutonium" won a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival in 1985. She is current Director of the year-round Department of Writing and Poetics at The Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. She has given readings and performances and taught workshops across the United States and in Europe. Ms. Waldman has taught at Stevens Institute of Technology, New College of San Francisco, York University in Toronto, the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico and is on the adjunct faculty of the University of Maine at Orono. She is a member of the Committee of International Poetry and visited India in 1985 as a guest of the Indian government to work with the Festival of India, which brought Indian poets to the United States in the Spring of 1986. She visited Nicaragua in 1987, as a member of the Nicaraguan Cultural Alliance.

by Dan Ritkes

RITKES: For a little background, I wanted to ask you about your involvement with the poetry project at St. Mark's.

WALDMAN: The poetry project began in 1966, at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery in New York City's Lower East

Side. A grant from the Johnson administration's Office of Economic Opportunity, was given to help administer an arts program that would benefit alienated youth in that neighborhood (the Lower East Side). There was a precedent in that artists and

poets, playwrights, jazz musicians (in fact Isadore Duncan danced at St. Mark's Church)...St. Mark's had always been an arena for the *avant garde* in experimental arts since the 1920's, and there had been theatre/film and poetry readings prior to this, so the grant didn't occur out of the blue. There was a lot of activity going on already, so for about two years the grant was able to fund poets, teaching, readings, a magazine, etc., and then after that, we had to seek funding. I had just graduated from Bennington College (in Vermont) in 1966. I had grown up and lived on McDougal Street in Greenwich Village.

I had been involved, at the age of 18, in a play at St. Mark's, and I knew some of the people who worked around there, and then applied when the project seemed to be getting off the ground, for an assistanceship job. Joel Oppenheimer was made the director and so I was one of his assistants for the first two years. The second year I became the official assistant director, and then the third year, I became the director, working there until 1978.

RITKES: You and Allen Ginsberg founded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics...

WALDMAN:

We were invited out here the first summer, 1974, along with Diane DePrima, invited to teach and read poetry. We met Truka Tchumpa

in New York. Actually, I had met him in 1970 at what was then called the Tail of the Tiger Meditation Center in Vermont, a small Buddhist Center, a farm house. I was very intrigued by his teaching style. I've been interested in Tibetan Buddhism for a number of years, since

high school, really. I went to Quaker high school in Manhattan and had quite an excellent religion teacher, and I've been very charged by some of the Buddhist ideas, some of the psychological ideas. So I started going to the Tail of the Tiger in 1970. Later, Allen [Ginsberg] met Chumpa. Diane DePrima, of course, had been a student of Suzuki Roche's, but also is now more of a Tibetan Buddhist student and practitioner. The three of us came as representatives of a kind of poetry, to occur with this situation, in 1974, the first summer [at Naropa]. Gregory Bateson was here, John Cage, Jackson McLowe, some other poets, and we met with Chumpa, who invited us to begin a school. Allen and I and Diane came out and we taught workshops and all gave readings. Ram Das was here, it was a very colorful summer. Quite energetic. The summer of 1974. So Diane, Allen and I started making copious lists, our vision for a poetic school. This quote from a John Ashbury poem kept sticking in my mind which is, "the academy of the future opening its doors to us," which I took as a kind of message about Naropa and we settled on the name the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied

Poetics. Allen had strong feelings about Jack Kerouac being the spiritual reference point because of his interest in

Buddhism and because of his wonderful spontaneous composition—especially evident in Mexico City Blues, and that being a foundation and inspiration of what we wanted to do. Spontaneity arising out of nothing in a way. Kerouac was both a poet and prose writer who

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the many younger poets that I was affiliated with around the St. Mark's Poetry Project could identify with. Then the following summer we invited a number of poets to come, including Diane again, John Ashbury, Gregory Corso, William Burroughs, Bill Merman and a number of others and peripheral people sensing a magnetism. Things kicked off quite nicely that next summer and became year-round in 1976. The poetics department and Naropa itself.

RITKES: I'm interested in your recent trip to Nicaragua. What brought that about?

WALDMAN: I was invited the year before but wasn't able to come to the

annual Reuben Barrio Festival which is held January 18th honoring their major poet, Rueben Barrio. He was a revolutionary and quite a beautiful lyric poet; quite elegant. So they have an annual poetry conference and festival which invites poets from all over the world. We were hosted very modestly but warmly. It's the Cultural Ministry that supports this yearly event and several poets came. There was a contingent from Maine, several former Naropa students: Joe Ritchie, Ethlynnne Sterns, and Elliot Greenspan all went. Some poets from Washington including Lamont Steptoe, a black writer who works with the Painted Bride Quarterly, the art center from Philadelphia and Sonia Sanchez, a black poet of great distinction and we gave some group readings. Some of our work had been translated into Spanish so we were able to communicate. So I was able to stay with a wonderful Nicaraguan woman poet in her forties; a revolutionary,

mother of five whose families came apart after the revolution and she was very active herself. Her husband wanted her to step back and become domesticated again, but she just couldn't give up the struggle and is very active working with the *Officina the Mujaras* which is an organization that educates women about their legal rights — property and marriage and so on. I was so impressed by the women I met. Iliana Rodrigues, who's the head of the *Bibliothec Nationale and Cardinale's* assistant. Terrific writers; very strong. I've never seen women liberated to such an extent. It's true they have this backdrop of revolution and

they're quite unified in that, but there was tremendous —

RITKES: Was the poetry festival a series of readings?

WALDMAN: Readings, some discussion of Nicaraguan literature, panels held in Spanish. Mostly at the *Bibliothec Nationale*. Some of the American poets gave readings in coffee houses.

RITKES: Are people in Latin America more interested in their poets?

WALDMAN: I'd say it's part of their culture. A very important part of their culture. In the opening event, *Comandante Thomas Borge* in his speech said that poetry would hurt the revolution. You don't hear that very often. And that it was important that people are as strong as poets.

RITKES: Is poetry accessible to people in Nicaragua?

WALDMAN: Yes, I'd say it is. There is a small publishing situation there. People know and memorize work that their

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own poets write. Their soldiers are encouraged to write poetry themselves. After a battle they'll join around a campfire and recite poetry. I haven't been to Russia, but there is a similar sense of the Russian poets being very important to the general populace. It's equivalent to pop music and song lyrics in this culture or following the lives of sports

heroes. If you said you're a poet in Nicaragua it actually meant something instead of a complete blank stare. A lot of people within the Sandanista government are themselves poets. The cultural attache is a poet; the Minister of Culture...a lot of the commandantes actually write poetry as well. It's something that a person of heart addresses himself or herself to.

RITKES: Is the poem you read the other night on *contras*, that chant poem, did that come out of your experience?

WALDMAN: I wrote that right before I went down there last summer. The *contra* chant is just a meditation on the word *contra*.

RITKES: How do you feel about poetry that has sort of political bent to it, or a poem that is involved with social issue. Is that something that you consciously try to do?

WALDMAN: Speaking for myself personally, it's a way for me to express my emotions and connections to certain issues. It's certainly not all I do, but it's one aspect. I find I can communicate something that way: whether it's rage or passion or a psychological state in which

these issues are very much alive. It's beyond a political point of view. I'm not allied with a fixed point of view or political party because those are constantly

shifting. My interest is in egoless points of view, where one's whole identity isn't at stake in terms of their point of view. So I'm very wary of those kinds of positions, yet I feel that some of

the work is expressing a human outrage. RITKES: Do you find in writing that there are any pitfalls or any difficulties in writing about social issues?

WALDMAN: If that's all one was doing, yes definitely. It gets very one-note or too strident, or isn't really effective the way a poet would want it to be. But there is also great political poetry. Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, all the poets I've known and admired have made certain kinds of political statements—political in the big sense. I think yes, of course, if you're just sort of complaining and writing out of a paranoia or putting down the so-called other side, there's a danger.

RITKES: Do you feel a certain responsibility as a poet to deal with social issues?

WALDMAN: Of course.

RITKES: A lot of writers don't. A lot of great writers don't.

WALDMAN: We'd have to talk about examples because I think a lot of writers do it in a bigger way, maybe. It's not addressing a local situation. My definition of what political poetry is, is quite broad. In a way it's witness, the

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poet as witness to whatever is going on. Telling things as they are without necessarily attitudinizing or projecting their own opinion onto you.

RITKES: It's ironic, but Allen [Ginsberg] would probably say that he would never start out writing a political poem, yet that is very often what he comes up with.

WALDMAN: There are things going on in poetry on a lot of levels. For me the play on the word "contra" then "contro" versus contumacious (sic), diction, contradiction, contratempo...there is a lot of play in a pure language level in that work. Then there is the whole meaning. I was exploring the meaning of that word.

RITKES: What interested you in the performance aspect?

WALDMAN: I just like to get up there...it's a ritual for me. Ecstatic often. I feel I can convey what I mean, or the

psychological state of emotion or the pure play of sound through my body and my voice. And, as I said in my lecture, the work is built into what the poet is potentially capable of. And the word "performance" has this sort of new meaning which is connected to performance art. It's much more organic. I don't even like to label it. It's true that many poets just get up and speak or read their work.

RITKES: Some don't even read it.

WALDMAN: Many don't. But for me the poem is still a kind of performance and experience and a process of enactment on the page.

RITKES: You sometime accompany your work with music. Almost like a song. Is that a distortion of what a poem is? I often think of a poem as something that's on a printed page. Is adding music getting away, or is it getting back to —

WALDMAN: It gets back to tradition. I enjoy working with music. I hear music. I have musical ideas with certain pieces. And I have tons of work that wouldn't lend itself to that kind of treatment and is better off on a page or is too long in the performance context. I don't write songs in the traditional sense. I'm not writing song- lyrics. I'm writing poems

that are very musical and lend themselves to musical accompaniment — or not. My voice is the primary instrument.

Frankly, I enjoy the collaboration. I've also worked with dancers. I've worked where the dance is a musical accompaniment;

just completely silent sometimes. I've worked images that way as well. The work has to stand on the page, first of all. For example the title poem of my book, *Skin-Meat-Bones*: that poem printed is a text for an oral performance more than any of the other poems in the book, and yet I think it works as text on the page. I have a note about the word "skin" being in a high register that the poem is meant to be sung or chanted. "Meat" in the middle register, and "bones" in a bass register. It's almost a transcription for a performance. Rothenberg's anthology, "Technicians of the Sacred" has a lot of native American pieces in there which have instructions

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for an event or performance or ritual enactment. Lyrics have their place and some will work better than others on the page, but there is an understanding they're meant or were composed or designed with sound in mind. That poem came to me in its sound. I woke to that. I heard that. That was the poem for me. It wasn't just words on a page. Some work demands to be expressed that way. I put off publishing that poem for many years for that reason, because it wasn't effective on the page. There is a long poem in the book, *Skin, Meat, Bones* entitled, "Science Times" which is in these very, very dense stanzas. I think it's 20 pages and is actually written for the page. It's a poem I've read very rarely. And then there's one collage work which is working with a number of voices and other words and text and is put together. I may overhear something and write it down or get some ideas out of a particular text or whatever, and incorporate some of that information and vocabulary. I work the way a filmmaker might by arrangement and bringing a disparate piece from here, arranging that over there, ordering it in a very different way. It's a different experience than the spontaneous poem that just arises. There are many ways of working. The work also demands its own way of being presented. I'm interested in a wide range of methods and constantly being available to the poem that arises through me, wherein I'm the instrument on which it's playing. I love working vocally on a stage environment, playing out certain musical ideas, collaborating with any number of different kinds of musicians from contemporary to classical to improvisational jazz to pop form. It's endless.

RITKES: How do you feel about the fact that a lot of musicians whose lyrics are

mediocre get all sorts of media attention and money, while poets who might have more cleverness in their work get very little media exposure and can't make a living strictly at writing?

WALDMAN: I agree that there's often more talent [among poets], except there is a whole realm, the whole rock music world that has its own reality and set of conditions and demands. You often have to be very single-minded. It's another way of working. People can dance to it. It has its own level. It's something that the general populace can relate to. It's not too high-brow. It's not necessarily challenging. It doesn't concern itself with big issues. It doesn't make you face your own death. There are exceptions, of course. We all know what those are. There have been incredible geniuses within that realm who have touched the lives of millions of people.

RITKES: Poetry does a lot of things music does.

WALDMAN: Well, maybe you just can't dance to it enough. I don't feel that's an ax I want to grind particularly. I've been able to work and travel...I've travelled with the Bob Dylan scene and met various figures whom I respect and have enjoyed their music. I've touched into certain members of the Rolling Stones and actually appreciated what they did musically. And the Beatles...certainly John Lennon was a tremendous genius and had to work within those mediums and forms and was able to really communicate on a lot of levels. I don't think every poet is capable of doing that. Allen [Ginsberg] has achieved a certain culture figure stature through his work and also who he is. William Burroughs. I consider cross-over kinds of artists like Laurie Anderson very important. I think of her more as a musician. I don't feel envious or cheated or like that's secretly my desire. Every young kid at some

point wants to do that and that, everybody can do that. I had one rock pop record, "Oh, Plutonium" — have you heard that? That actually worked with that form. And it was quite successful within a certain realm. I wasn't being produced by a major record company and so on and so forth, but it really got around and got a lot of response and reviews and yet took an incredible amount of time for a three-minute song. I worked on a video of that again. It took a phenomenal amount of the kind of time I occasionally have and want to play with. There is a demand for that form which requires that sort of attention. You work with multitracks, do this version and that version, take one and take 29 and take 50, and you're working with other musicians, you're working with your producer, you're working with their idea of market plays. "Oh, Plutonium" is an anti-nuke song, and I felt that if I'm going to work in this medium, I want it to be somewhat political; I mean I'm not interested in just scratching my head and crooning about the moon and stars. If I'm going to work with that which is a very powerful

medium, I want to work with some sort of communication of something that I would hope would wake people up a little further. It was very, very demanding. At this point, I'm running a poetic school, developing an MFA program, working on about three books

of my own simultaneously, just finished editing two anthologies, travelling around performing my work, working with dancers, musicians, etc. It's just one of many possibilities. If I were in that world more I would love to produce an anthology recording of poets breaking into those popular forms. That question comes up a lot. Sometimes there is a rut, because it seems unfair, but like many situations, it's unfair. You could go into the visual art world, how people get one product, one style going which they make money on and then they just keep repeating themselves and make a lot of money and have this Product. Whereas poets don't have a product. Because poetry is not marketable it keeps it somewhat purer. It keeps people's intentions clearer. You're doing it out of necessity. You're not doing it to get anywhere with it or to become rich and famous or to become the most popular thing since sliced bread. You're doing it

because you have to. If you have to be a doctor or insurance salesman or janitor, so what? I don't want to get too holy about it, or spiritual, but you have to honor the world as sacred. We're living in a version of reality where things are marketed. But

that's just a version. Poetry and music and great artists existed all the time in and out, serving needs or not serving needs or being indulgent shlock, or fad and fashion, or else surviving like little fragments of Sappho on Sarcophogus Papyrus that was used like newspaper

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to stuff...to be carnage for alligator mummies, or whatever. I don't feel I have less of a life because I'm not a rock star.

RITKES: What problems do you find with people's writing when they're just starting to write poetry?

WALDMAN: There is often a misconception about what poetry is, that it is dream, vague and general or else that you're the only person in the world who has had these experiences and you've lived to tell them, and you're constantly projecting this ego— which seems to get in the way. I've gone through student's poems that have the personal pronoun "I" a hundred times on one page. You can simply point that out and underline them in red and actually point out that you don't have to always be the reference point of your own poetry. Or taking out words like "past," "dream," "forever," "eternity" — weak language, basically, which doesn't further the image or the sound or the substance of the poem at all. I think a

tendency to write in abstractions, which is confused with poetry being an abstract realm. Dreamy, hazy or feeling good or feeling sad and actually when you start to write a poem describing everything in your room, or sketch that person's face sitting opposite you, or write down something you overheard, or go back to being seven years old and focus on memory. Or write a 20-page work which has ten epiphanies. Try to feel them, taste them, touch them. Use all your sense perceptions to literally describe. That's what we do here. Get people down to tangibles. You can always get back to the other feelings later. When I was very young I kept a journal, and my father said just write down the details, the tangibles, where you are, what you see, what you hear, rather than how you feel about it. I feel good today; I feel bad today. Once you get those specifics, you will remember how you were feeling. You don't always have to point to that emotional level.

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