

thINKingDANCE

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Photo: Melissa Buzzeo

Rituals, Poetry and Performance: CA Conrad

By Lauren Samblanet

CA Conrad is poet who has created what he terms “(soma)tic exercises” – ritualistic full body experiences that are meant to be moments of presence. As a poet who is also interested in dance, CA’s work has been vital in thinking about how poetry and the body can play and build off of one another. He is the author of eight books of poetry and essays. The latest, ECODEVIANCE: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness (Wave Books) is the winner of the 2015 Believer Magazine Book Award. The following interview was conducted via email; CA’s answers have been left as he wrote them.

Lauren Samblanet: (Soma)tics help poets find poems through awareness that springs up from new ways of experiencing. Would repeating these exercises remove that newness and render less-aware poems?

CA Conrad: Different rituals have different requirements. The newness is in the day and place. Some take an afternoon or a few hours, some take years. A large ritual I am writing through at the moment is called “Resurrect Extinct Vibration.” We have lost 52% of all the wild animals of Earth in the past four decades. More than half of ALL the wild animals, in fact there are now more incarcerated animals than wild ones, animals in zoos, in factory farms, in farms in general, many billions of them that we use to harvest flesh, wool, eggs, milk. It is horrifying to think about the deadening wildness.

I have a mash of field recordings of extinct animals that I listen to. I travel all across the United States and wherever I go I lie on the ground and listen to these animals, first with headphones at my feet, then moving UP, saturating my entire body with their sounds. I was prepared to become depressed doing this ritual, but instead I feel rejuvenated and I am always excited to do it.

I think of ECOPOETICS as more than just a focus on degraded soil, air and water, meaning that I am thinking of it as also vibrational absence. When a species becomes extinct they take their vibration with them. And of course we humans are filling in those wild sounds with our own sounds, of machines, of guns, of bombs, the United States is currently killing people in six different nations for instance.

I was born in 1966, which means that my body was formed on the organic vibrational patterns of these creatures in real time in 1966. I believe I feel so great after filling myself with the animal sounds because I am replenishing my body with familiar wavelength patterns that I readily absorb, hungry for the returning sounds. But this is a ritual I do over and over and it's new each time. And I sleep in my car in WalMart parking lots. When I wake I go into the WalMart listening to the recording of the animals, walking the entire perimeter of the store then working my way in, walking a spiral through the store into the center. WalMart has 9,000 locations in the lower 48 states and resonates as the epitome of the results of Manifest Destiny. A century after the United States's campaign to exterminate Native people and destroy, conquer and divide land and animals has culminated in WalMart. The grotesque nature of all of these things is part of the ritual and part of the notes I am taking for the poems.

LS: How did you come to use crystals and which crystals are most helpful for you?

CA: Oh I LOVE this question. Black Tourmaline is excellent I love it and have a piece with me to ward off Haters. It's perfect for protecting us from people who become jealous and envious and act out. Bloodstone, rose quartz, amethyst, citrine I work with often. I had a boyfriend named Earth who was brutally raped and murdered in Tennessee and he gave me a crystal. The film trailer for the new documentary about my life covers a little of this, which can be seen at this link: <http://caconradmp3.blogspot.com>

But it was the clear quartz crystal Earth gave me that helped me deal with my depression resulting from his murder, from missing him, and frankly from dealing with the police who were completely unpleasant to talk with. The sheriff called me Faggot on the phone like it was my name. But I meditated with the crystal Earth gave me and also swallowed a smaller, round clear quartz crystal each day. I would fish it out of the toilet, sterilize it then eat it again. The structure of crystals has been known for many centuries and is even used in science today with such studies as piezoelectricity and other quartz crystal technologies for cell phones, computers, etc.

LS: What is the difference between a poetry performance and a poetry reading?

CA: People are very busy. When they take the time to come to our readings we should honor their time by giving them EVERYTHING we can. I value my time and the time of others very much. I do not take this for granted and am always grateful.

One of the ways I take this seriously is that I trained my voice. At first I wanted to take voice lessons but they are ridiculously expensive so I found ways online. I was able to locate my range and exploit the sounds I can make with my vocal chords, and I score the poems to know WHERE and HOW to modulate. I am NOT interested in giving one of the billions of monotone poetry readings available, it's important to me to honor my work, to honor myself, to honor my audience all at once. Poetry deserves our full attention. Poetry deserves everything we can give it if we expect people to show up on our behalf and give us their time and their ears, themselves.

CA Conrad is a 2015 Headlands Art Fellow, and has also received fellowships from Lannan Foundation, MacDowell Colony, Banff, Ucross, RADAR, and the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. He conducts workshops on (Soma)tic Poetry and Ecopoetics. His essay, "Poetry & Ritual," about the magic, or Magickal practice of creating art with ritual is [here](http://CAConrad.blogspot.com). <http://CAConrad.blogspot.com>

Link for reference: <http://bit.ly/1PoMIUM>

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