

Opened Podcast #2 Transcript

Francesca Lisette & Timothy Thornton

This is a transcript of an interview with Francesca Lisette and Timothy Thornton by Alex Davies and Stephen Willey. Unfortunately the sound quality of the recording is too poor to make available. Alex Davies took part in the interview via the internet - his typed questions are presented in italics.

Steve: Francesca, perhaps you could say something about Chlorine Reading Series, what it is and how it got started.

Francesca: Chlorine is a regular reading series which happens at the Hope in central Brighton. We've had as many as four performers and as few as two. Lately I've been feeling less is more, it gives the poets room to stretch out. It happens whenever the poets are available. I've had readings which are two weeks apart and readings which are two months apart. I aim for breadth, so I've had musicians and theatre performers as well as poets. The poets I've had come from a diverse range of practices - we've had multimedia and text performances, for instance.

Steve: Timothy, how did your involvement start with Grasp Press?

Timothy: I got involved with it fairly late on, but before it became a proper press. Grasp was a reading series in autumn 2007, which Josh Stanley and Luke Roberts, who ran it then, invited me to read at. We got chatting about producing some printed materials, and it sprung from there. We're still settling into what Grasp is and isn't.

Steve: Perhaps we could try and talk about that, about what Chlorine is and isn't, and about what Grasp is and isn't, and if at any point you've tried to define what those are.

Francesca: I should say that Chlorine started about a year ago as a result of Timothy wanting to read in Brighton.

Timothy: Did it?

Francesca: Yeah! He wanted a venue and needed a space to be hired, so I hired it and it became a Grasp Press showcase, and that's how it started. I don't think Chlorine would exist without Grasp.

Steve: So was that the principle reason - a reading series to publicise a press? What interested you about being involved in publishing poets, Timothy?

Timothy: I suppose - well, I love the poetry. The idea of being involved in it in some way other than trying to write it. It just seemed fun, an interesting, fun thing to do. Josh and Luke seemed to think so too. It's a really satisfying, engaging thing to do, trying to fit a physical object to words.

Steve: I'd like to talk more about that, but maybe have a wider conversation about the details of how you tried to get the actual poem into a physical document, i.e. what made you choose the colour of the card, for instance, and equally, Francesca, what makes you

choose particular poets to fit your space, and do you have to ever reshape the space in any way to fit in the poets or have you set up such a flexible space you can put any poet inside it?

Francesca: No, definitely we do change the space. We hired a projector on one occasion and that was very expensive so we couldn't pay the poets much so we decided not to do that. Subsequently I was loaned one for Stephen Rodefer's reading and that was very useful because that was actually very last minute - he decided he wanted to read poems from a Mac which he'd brought with him. It was great to have that kind of flexibility. It's a mostly stable space - I think because the upstairs room at the Hope is actually a gig venue, it's a little bit more professional than the average upstairs room at a pub.

Steve: And what about the press, Timothy? When you were talking with Josh Stanley and Luke Roberts about certain books, what kind of questions were you asking?

Timothy: To begin with it would be throwing around different ideas, very simple decision like how big it is, what shape it is, what format, the colour of the card.

Alex: There's been a lot of talk about the feel of the venues and the look of the book, the feel of the pages, and he was wondering how that ties in with or clashes with the social or political implications of being an active poet with an active set of concerns - I guess more broadly political and aesthetic concerns - and any pragmatic considerations you might have as a publisher or an organiser. I guess I'm wondering how being a publisher and having a very physical relationship with books and materials, and Francesca working with people and spaces - whether that's changed your practice as poets at all?

Francesca: I think for me it makes me more aware of the contradictions involved in doing any sort of art performatively. I like how theatrical the space is. It was actually giving readings that made me realise the need for a performative urgency in my own work and I started to write in order to pay attention to that. But I think that had already happened before I started doing the reading series. I'm very conscious of wanting to please the audience and give them a memorable performance, so that's quite different to someone like Brecht with alienation effect, with wanting people to leave, with being more conscious of their bourgeois desire for art to sit in a certain compartmentalised relation to their lives. But I've never found presenting the poetry performances in that way prevents discussion about them afterwards. Actually it's a very critique friendly environment - people continue to talk about what they've just heard.

Timothy: Keston Sutherland said something along the line of, today poetry has to occupy the spot of disenfranchisement. Does that fit with the desire of pleasing an audience, which is a completely valid one as well?

Francesca: I think that disenfranchisement is a useful concept in terms of thinking about how these poets might feel having not been asked to be involved in reading series. So it gives a space for them to not be disenfranchised, I suppose.

Timothy: So you think it's a writerly notion, not just one that the reader might feel.

Francesca: I think so. Certainly we've had people come along who don't know anything about the background of the poets or people involved at all. We've started to see a real expansion and change in our audience, and a lot of the time those people don't know the political context of the writing, and that's where superficial style comes into play, and if it

hooks their interest they might research it and read enough to find out more about that context. I feel that's a necessary aspect of a reading series, to draw attention to this poetry and find a way to get people to think about all these political and ideological aspects that underlie it.

Steve: It strikes me as interesting that when you first started answering Timothy's question you answered it saying that the reading series is for the poets, because it's a space where they can be re-enfranchised, but then that also does relate to the experience you're wanting the audience to have, because part of that re-enfranchisement is to get an attentive audience who are going to be responsive to the poets and that very much relies on the kind of space you set up in previous readings. There's a dialogue between the space you're setting up for the poets and how you're wanting to kind of rescue them from any disenfranchisement they might feel in wider culture and the type of relationship they're going to have with the audience once they're in the room which is beyond their control to some extent.

Francesca: It is and it's beyond my control too. I've basically publicised the readings through the channels which are easily available to me, which are blogs, university and poetry mailing lists. In a sense, that's keeping it within the realm of people who already know about this stuff. But the reading that Rodefer and Sutherland did was advertised in the student newspaper and we got around 80 people in addition to the norm. When people knew about it they just came. Some people didn't know either of these poets but they'd heard about it through various sources. Just having it out there even in the university newspaper, there were so many more people who came, not just students, it was really astonishing. Having said that, I found the one time a poster was produced for the first reading, I put that up on campus and that didn't really affect the attendance. In a way I suppose it's about spreading the word.

Timothy: What you're saying about the channels that are readily available, it doesn't mean keeping it exclusive - I do think it's useful to have a core of people who do know about it and are interested even if you don't get fantastic numbers of people.

Francesca: Also I wanted to enable conversations to happen around this poetry. That was a major idea of what I wanted to do. I would try to choose poets who would contrast and set each other off in interesting ways.

Steve: I was wondering, Timothy, I don't know how you feel the relationship between a press should be with its audience and whether you've found Grasp books getting to odd spaces or unknown people.

Timothy: Some of the names and institutions you send to, you recognise, and when something first comes out there's a flurry of activity. But the really interesting time is when you find the audience you never knew you had, which you can't find any way of explaining. How did they find it? They're the ones that come through after the initial rush. There is - what's that amazing phrase on the Bad Press website? - an archipelago of coteries, where you expect where orders might come from - but there are loads of surprises. People from the OED will buy them, they just love the poetry but are very quiet on the lists. That's exciting.

Steve: Would be great to see a map of individual publications graphically represented, where they've gone to and how many were Grasp publications, and to see how many

people and where they've come from to get to Chlorine readings, and then have two contrasting maps.

Timothy: At least with a reading when someone has attended, they have attended. But with the audience a printing press has you don't really get any feedback at all. But with a reading series I imagine you do.

Francesca: Yeah you do, people calling up feeling it's their duty to tell you 'I had a great night' or 'Hmm'. You rarely hear criticisms but sometimes you do, and that's valuable.

Steve: There's a point where the community can cause you problems?

Francesca: There's a point where you can find yourself doing things for other people because you know them. Maybe you like that individual's poetry but you don't really like that particular idea.

Timothy: In terms of Grasp - I can't speak for Josh and Luke - there's always been a concern that once you start a press we wanted to publish stuff that was immediately available. For a long time that was the work of the three of us. We all find the notion of vanity presses a troubling thing. That's a big difference too between a press and a reading series - you know what you're going to publish with a press, but if you invite a poet to read they might well read something entirely new, something that you don't know.

Francesca: Yeah and also I've put on poets whose work I don't know particularly well but who's work I'm interested in and who are visiting. There's a degree to which I don't know what they're going to do and I don't know if it will be the thing which I have in mind for the reading series as a whole.

Alex: Going back to the idea of an audience or even poets, their expectations and reactions as causing potential problems, is it actually beneficial to establish some kind of explicit manifesto for the press or series to avoid confusion between yourself as a poet or yourself as a publisher or organiser, or is there something to be said for that confusion? Can there even be a separation?

Steve: Have you been tempted to have a manifesto?

Timothy: Absolutely not. Because I think there *is* doubt about the project we're running, and it would be dishonest to deny. Grasp is changing because it's three people who get on but are pulling, I think, in quite different directions. Grasp is the meeting in the middle.

Francesca: People will just come along to the reading series and assume it's open mic, and want to read, or just say 'Can I read?'. Sometimes it will be in a context when I know it won't be appropriate because they won't be writing poetry that is interesting to the audience that will be coming, or poetry that I want to see advancing or want to be showcasing. There's a conflict of interest. Also, there are plenty of reading series' like that, so there's an assumption you might be like that. I think Chlorine, in terms of having a manifesto - it doesn't have one, in teleological terms - it doesn't have a final endpoint where x objective will be achieved, but it does have an idea of what it wants to showcase and support.

Steve: Another way of asking Alex's question would be, to take Bob Cobbing as an example, if you were to look at the way he published and the range of publications, it

would be very hard to distinguish between his own poetry, the way he put together his own poetry, and the way he published other people. There's a fluid relationship between his practice as a poet and his practice as a publisher and organiser. Would it be wrong, say, for me to give a close reading of *Tar Orchid* or *Now, Vulgate* alongside a close reading of Chlorine and Grasp Press? Would I get anything which would work from that? Or are they essentially different? It seems to me from what you're saying Francesca that there is some drive and vision to the reading series, but does that correspond to the drive and vision of your poetry?

Francesca: I think it's difficult because a poem is essentially a fixed object and a reading series isn't. There's that level of unpredictability and outside influence. In a way the reading series is useful to me and to what I would spuriously term the 'poetic community' that comes to watch the poets in that it's exploring and it's trying to find out what's out there.

Steve: It strikes me that your work's not closed.

Francesca: That's true - there was a year that elapsed between me writing *Tar Orchid* and setting up Chlorine, so I wonder to what extent my own tastes and aesthetic project might have changed in that time.

Steve: What about you Timothy? Would you be happy with me looking at the Grasp Press list of publications, or even the handmade nature of the books you produce, and set that alongside a reading of the politics and aesthetic of your own work?

Timothy: It's tricky. I've done a lot of the design work for Grasp. I'm always proudest designing for someone else's pamphlet when my presence is least felt, when it's closest to what they want. But in terms of designing around my own work to make it the way I want it to be, if the physical object reflects on the reading of the poem I wouldn't mind, I might feel differently about it now, but in terms of not outsourcing to print on demand, it's very important to me as a writer that everything is exactly how I want it to be. In relation to the press it's very important to me that as the publisher of someone else's work it's exactly how they want it to be. I don't know if that concern is too heavy or not, but it's always a useful thing to work with.

Alex: Timothy, do you consider the production of the books as part of the writing process? Are you finishing the books by making them?

Timothy: I couldn't speak for the other writers. Usually when I design for Grasp it comes through as a document that is finished and we then talk about how it should look, how it should feel. Speaking for me and the things I've published through Grasp, it does feel finished on publication because there's a relationship between it and some other people, and it's thrown into the wild where it can fend for itself now.

Steve: What about you, Francesca? Do you feel publishing your poems through Grasp compared to any other press changes the poems in some way?

Francesca: I do regret saying my poetry is a closed object, because *Tar Orchid* really felt like more than the word document it is initially was, because once I saw the published version it really felt like something that had been read and understood.

Timothy: One of the things I want to change most about Grasp is to get artists to design cover images for a series of 'folds', which is just a folded piece of card. Matthew Drage, who has recently started Holly White Magazine, did this beautiful painting, and it does give something to it. It's a strange thing, getting people to do some art - you wonder whether the cover's always necessary, whether it can add anything to it. In this case it did. I want to develop the series to see what does and doesn't.

Steve: It's interesting to hear that connection to Holly White magazine. One thing you really feel with that magazine is there is a community of artists and poets who know each other's work. I recently did a reading at the Slade and it was the first time I got to show artists some of my visual poetry. I didn't get a chance for much response but I really wonder what artists made of the visual quality of the work or the quality of the poetry I put in front of them... I don't want to say 'art for', because that makes it sound instrumental, it's more of a collaboration. It's the entrance point for a book - it's quite a significant place to put an artist.

Timothy: The best I can come up with is 'it feels right'. Just something which once you've got to know the poem might reflect back on the image.

Steve: Maybe we could now talk about future plans. It sounds like there's a new book in production, what are the future plans for Grasp and Chlorine?

Francesca: Chlorine should hopefully have at least another two readings, bringing the total to ten. I'll be finishing my dissertation at Sussex. After that I don't know if I'll be in Brighton. It's been suggested after that Chlorine carry on without me. I don't know how that would work because I feel it does have a very personal aspect to it. Anthony Barnett recently e-mailed me to ask me about the name Chlorine, and I realised in describing what that meant just how selective it is and how much it's tied up with what I want poetry to be, and I don't know if the stewardship of that is immediately transferable. There's also another reading series in Brighton which showcases what you might term 'experimental, innovative, avant-garde or other' poetry which is Desperate For Love. So I'm unsure as to what will happen in the future. I think in terms of activities as a poet I'd just like to keep doing new things and exploring different types of media and their interaction, and I think much of that has come from giving readings and hosting them.

Steve: What is the meaning of Chlorine?

Francesca: I know if I brought that up I was going to have to expand on it! I don't know if there's a meaning as such, but it just seemed like a really apt opposition to the sea, which is seen as this pure and natural thing, which is also commodified as a tourist attraction, and 'chlorine' seemed to have this stringency to it, this hygienic and impure aspect, and I thought that touched on ideas of complicity and arts' role in society. It's what a lot of the poets I was reading seemed to be concerned with and dealt directly with in their work. It seemed really apt, but it also seemed like something you couldn't fix to a concept, which I liked.

Steve: What about you Timothy, what are your future plans for Grasp, and do you know why Grasp is called Grasp?

Timothy: It was called that when I got onboard, but I think other names have been thrown around. For a while it was going to be called Gun Press which has now come through in Josh's magazine *Hot Gun!* I don't particularly know why that was there either. Grasp

occurred as a name and stuck - I'm the wrong person to ask. In terms of future plans, if I can I want to get this series of 'folds' started, Luke is going to *AXOLOTL* and Josh is going to continue with *Hot Gun!* so we have our own projects continuing.