

Donato Mancini interviews Peter Quartermain in 2006.

DM: When did you start attending KSW events?

PQ: I haven't the faintest idea, but it has to have been in 1984. So it wasn't at the very beginning, because the beginning was at DTUC. When it comes here it shifts because, for a start, it becomes urban-centred rather than being Kootenay-centred. And I think that makes something in the difference, because of the population-base you can draw on in Nelson, even though quite a few people came down, like when Colin came down. And Colin was the one who brought it here, and Colin was the one who kept it going as I understand it anyway.

At that time it was doing three things, basically. One was running *Writing* magazine, the other was courses and workshops, but there was also the Blue Pencil Café. It was a drop-in café if you wanted somebody to look at your writing, because you didn't know what the hell you were doing, you'd drop in at the Blue Pencil Café and you got somebody to go over it with you. It was usually just one writer. It was one-on-one tutorials, really, with whoever was there. I know Colin was there, and there were others, but I can't remember who. And I don't know how successful it was. Sometimes nobody would show up and sometimes four or five people would show up. But there were always the evening workshops, from the very beginning, courses or workshops of one kind or another. I gave one in Autumn 1986, a six-week course on Zukovsky. It was back when the KSW met in a small room right above Black Top Taxicabs. It was a crummy little pair of rooms. Worse than what you have now, it was a real tumbledown. Colin sat in on it.

I remember one thing that was quite spectacular, and this tells you something about where KSW was. I don't know if you know Hillary Peach. Well Hillary Peach at that time was taking freshman English at UBC, and she was a total refugee from the institution because she hated her course so much. And she was a poet, she was a writer, and she used to go to the Blue Pencil Café among other things, and she sat in on the Zukovsky course, which had about 6 people altogether. It was gorgeous. It wasn't really a class, we'd just sit and talk about various poems. I'd bring them in and talk about them. It was very successful. They were people who were not strictly speaking members of the collective, they were people from outside, as well as from inside. That was in 1986 and then in 1991 I gave a 12-week workshop on Gertrude Stein that had a totally floating kind of population. But there were some stable members. Lissa Wolsak was there at every meeting, Lisa Robertson came to every meeting, Judy Radul came to about half of them, there was a filmmaker whose name I totally forget, but there were about 9 people who came regularly but not all at the same time. I think Catriona was there too. And that was one

where I set up readings for the first 6 weeks or so and then everybody just brought what they wanted, and we even talked about doing a public reading of one of Stein's plays, which we read together, which was an absolute gas, we had an absolutely wonderful time with it. And of course the reading never came off but the course itself was very vigorous. I mean, we all learned a hell of a lot. We spent four hours talking about *Stanzas in Meditation*, going through it. And there were so many different perspectives, right, but at that time, which as 1991, there quite a distinctly Language poetry air to the whole of the KSW.

How did I first hear about KSW becomes the next question, right? Well, I don't know, but I knew Fred and Pauline, and I knew Colin Browne so it would be through them. I'd known Colin years ago when he applied to go to grad school at UBC. And I was the one who interviewed him and persuaded him not to go. I explained to him what he'd have to do and I thought it was a very bad idea. And he agreed. But it seems to me that if you look at the editing of *Writing* as a magazine the first years up through 1989 are what I would think of as the Colin Browne period. It's split between the opening up from 1980-83 to when it moves to Vancouver in 84 and the character of the place changed a little bit, but always in that period it seemed to me the basic interest was pretty eclectic. Let's say that the doors were open to almost anybody, provided in some way or another they could write. So you had people who don't appear in KSW anymore, that's for sure, like August Kleinzhaler. I mean, my god, young August Kleinzhaler. I can't stand August. I've known August since 1971 but whatever August Kleinzhaler's poetic is it's very different from what you now associate with the Kootenay School. And you could say the same of Tom Wayman, and of a large number of other people. Peggy Atwood, also appeared in those early issues. Brian Fawcett, Phyllis Webb. It was a general fostering of poetry, of local writing.

I think the organisation was quite eclectic, as the magazine was. It was open to anybody who wanted to come. It's unfortunately true that for whatever reason the KSW has never attracted so-called people of colour, and I remember various AGMs and Board meetings in which we tried to figure out ways to attract people, and it's always been very very hard. Roy Miki tried to get people to come, but basically it still remained a little white boys club, or a white boys and girls club. And later it became an exclusively boys club, too, but that's another stage of the history. I'd say late 90s. [The Roger, Aaron, and Reg phase] They did a lot of great programming, but they never gave any women a voice. Every woman who tried to get into the collective was eventually driven out, because they were never listened to, whatever they proposed was never followed up, and so on and so on. It was a very sexist organisation for a while.

DM: Seems to me that there have been a number of moments in the KSW's history when various people tried to take it over. It is possible that in the late 90s they tried to turn it into something they imagined it originally was, but may never in fact have been.

PQ: That's right. When it moved to Vancouver it remained pretty eclectic but the range of writing, particularly the geographical range, changed, because of the magazine and because the school started getting more people from out of country, from the states and from England. In those days on the collective if you wanted to bring in say Maggie O'Sullivan you did it. Everybody on the collective would say sure, why not? But you were personally responsible for arranging the whole thing. That's the way it should operate. There is no governing determining intelligence that runs the place, and I think that openness is necessary to keep various voices going. One of the problems with all collectives, all voluntary organisations have a problem, in maintaining some kind of energy particularly if one presiding intelligence is energizing it, keeping records, making sure the rent's paid, etc. And I think Colin did that a lot, but I think he energised people too. I mean he's a great organiser. He got the energy moving in that way. But of course sooner or later Colin got a job at Simon Fraser and what happens in the academic world is what happens in the academic world. You don't have time anymore if you want to survive. So that for example I didn't know a lot of the things you mentioned – I thought what, when was that, when did that happen?

DM: So, ok, the next major shift was the New Poetics Colloquium?

PQ: [In that period] I was at every single meeting, and Fred was standing at the back recording everything and Colin was working it out. I was particularly interested in it because in 1982 I taught a graduate seminar in Language writing, and I'd been corresponding with all those people for years, so that when the conference came along it was just great to meet them all. The only one I'd met was Charles Bernstein, because I went to NY at some point. It was held at Emily Carr. It was a hell of a roster of people.

I think – this is me talking, not the KSW of course – I think first that Language poetry occupies a place in the development of 20th century poetics very closely analogous to the place of Imagism in the early years of the century, because it simply opened up a whole new series of doors and techniques and so on which everybody had started using, whether they thought they were a Language poet or not. And so the conference the NPC had just as great an impact on the Vancouver literary scene as the 1963 conference at UBC. And there were some strange little undercurrents in that 1985 colloquium because Warren Tallman, for example, really didn't understand what was going on at all. It just did not work in terms of his poetics. Warren at some

point could not follow what was going on. He went to some of the colloquium but he didn't like it. I can remember him having fierce arguments with Nicole Brossard, mainly because he couldn't understand what the hell Nicole was doing. And he kept talking about the "mother tongue" and "mother language" and moving all those gendered assumptions into the discourse, which did not please Nicole very much, as you can imagine.

But the colloquium itself was just fantastic, and it went from dawn until way past dusk, and Meredith and I in 1980 had bought a house. We just simply made sure that every evening when everything was over people could come to our house. So we were sort of the rest centre, right, so very often people would come out, we'd all eat together. Then one evening we moved all the indoor lamps with stands into the garden and Steve McCaffery read the Communist Manifesto in Yorkshire to everybody. And that broke a lot of ice, but the dynamic of the language conference was... I mean it was a very tense and fraught event, because there were the boys against the girls, and the Yanks against the Canadians, you know. But in effect I think that anybody who wanted to get in on the colloquium could get in on the colloquium, because the KSW was open in that way. Obviously the pride of place was given to the visitors because you don't get to see them more than once, right. And the Quebec writers got a good showcase as well as the New York writers and San Francisco-Berkeley writers. I mean it was a hell of a range of people who came. The local readings turned out not to be as interesting as the visitors' readings, but that's not too surprising because the local readings as poets and people you'd heard before whereas the visitors were new – and it was just mind blowing, absolutely great.

But even then *Writing* magazine, and the collective itself, although it clearly began to favour Language writers, nevertheless the doors were still open to a variety of writers. And it was only when Jeff took over *Writing* magazine that it moved, more or less exclusively, into Language-oriented writing. It was the fall of 1988 or 1989 and that's when Colin stopped coming to KSW events. It wasn't a fight or anything it was just that Colin's energy was running out and he was trying to make movies. And making movies is expensive and time-consuming. Money-raising is a nightmare, and so on, and he was teaching, had to get tenure, had to do all the other stuff you have to do. Jeff had the energy and the desire and the will to take over. In a very important sense there was never any actual manipulation of events where people jockeyed for power. Even when Jeff moved in I don't think there was. There were squabbles and quarrels later on, some of which I don't know the details of some of which I do – such as the split between Lisa and Catriona and between Lisa and Jeff.

Then you see with Aaron I'm not sure where he came from, but he was doing a Masters in library sciences at UBC, and he showed up at a seminar – and of course this is really late – on

Language poetry. And that was about the time when he started getting really involved in the KSW, as I recall. And that's when the nature of the collective began to narrow down, right, and to be much less energetic and open than it used to be. But that was also a time of huge financial problems, it was also a time when Ted Byrne, who was the other great presiding intelligence at KSW, just simply said ok we're going to keep this thing alive so you do what you are going to do and he would not intervene. He'd intervene in terms of things he'd like to get done but also in trying to make sure the forms are filled out etc, but he can't do all the work either, given the kind of job he has. And Ted has a very strong trade union connection in his life and inevitably that's going to leak over into the activities of the KSW in one form or another, in ways that it might not have done had he not been there. I don't think that there's a clearly political element in all the stuff that went on the early years, I do not think that the KSW was at all "political" except in the most immediate of political necessities, in that you know: DTUC mustn't be closed, get rid of that damned government in bc, etc etc. And also of course in the sense that any writing is going to have its political repercussions, but there was never any KSW party line of any kind, which it seemed to me it certainly got in the second or third stage. It didn't last very long, however. And there were times when we thought that the KSW was moribund, because nobody wanted to do anything. And strange things happened, I mean at the AGM one year it was decided that there would be no more courses and no more readers from out of town, because it was too much work. But it also meant that somebody didn't want to organise any of the readings or any of the courses.

And then there was a time, a very brief time, when it got to be pretty heavily academic. It went from being structured around informal discussions to being just like going to classes, which was a major mistake. And then other things happened, like Lisa Robertson gave writing courses, and so she had a very clear agenda in terms of the writing courses, but they were very open in terms of how you wrote and what you wanted to write about. They were fantastic, Meredith took it one year and I took it the following year.

So, the first big change was when it moved to Vancouver, and the next big change was when Colin Browne couldn't do it anymore, and then when Jeff took it over – although "took it over" is the wrong phrase – but he became the presiding energy. It was interesting because he was the editor and Nancy Shaw was the co-editor of writing and it was only the very final issue that they were joint editors; in issue 28 it was "edited by Jeff Derksen and Nancy Shaw". So there were funny little pecking orders going on in there at some point, I think. But then you see there's another hidden thing that's going on here, which is mentioned but which I know nothing about, which is Susan Clark's role in all this. She was running Raddle Moon and briefly when she was in financial difficulty, and so was the KSW, Raddle Moon became the journal of the KSW.

DM: How do you think the KSW (early on, especially) changed, revised, reformed, extended or sustained the US Language poetry project in a Canadian context?

PQ: I have no idea how to answer that question, except that it was in those years, which would be about 84-85 – and the colloquium had a lot to do with it – that the KSW became a force in North American writing, so that I would talk to various people like Peter Nichols in England, for example, knew that there were 3 centres of writing in North America: San Francisco, NY and Vancouver. And a lot of people thought that way and I think it was true. Marjorie Perloff thought that way, you know. And it was and that was partly because one way or another that they managed to get people in like Tom Wayman and people like Maggie O’Sullivan, as well as Bruce Andrews came in and gave a workshop, and so did Susan Howe. So that seems to me to be the great crucial thing about the KSW and that it brought into the local scene and, thereby, into the Canadian scene, a large number of foreign writers who would otherwise not have been heard, which means it was bringing new blood into the writing scene. I mean it wasn’t the only thing that was doing that. Roy Miki was doing very similar kinds of work editing West Coast Line, with those wonderful issues on colour and so forth and that brought a lot of people in who wouldn’t otherwise have known about it. Vancouver then became a very interesting kind of place in which there was a lot going on. There seems to be less going on nowadays, but these things go in waves and cycles anyway, so that’s not a critical remark but just an observation. And it will no doubt come back again, just as KSW has its waves and cycles of activity. I mean one of the things that changed the character of KSW I think was Colin Smith leaving town, because he was an absolute workhorse. And one of the things that revitalised KSW in the last couple of years was Fred Wah coming back into town with Pauline, and Colin coming back. And meanwhile you have the influence other people moving in. Take Margot Butler, for example, who toughed out the guys, whereas a number of other people did not tough out the guys. And eventually the guys left, and thank god, I mean it was just awful, I couldn’t stand it. I can’t stand those guys, and their writing.

DM: What was the perception (early on, especially) of the KSW around your English department?

PQ: I’m not the right person to ask because... Well, there are two things to say here. First that most of my colleagues feared and despised what I was doing in the classroom. Right, they mainly despised it and thought that what I was doing was wasting everybody’s time and corrupting students by teaching this rubbish. When I started teaching at the KSW, I was teaching Zukovsky, they thought now well who the fuck wants to read Zukovsky? Why don’t you teach

some real literature? They thought it was just simply some stupid little institution for people who don't know any better than to do whatever it is they're doing. The second part is that UBC was, and no longer is in quite the same way, punishingly conservative. Really straight-laced. I mean I got into trouble when we had a memorial service for Warren Tallman and I stood up and gave one of the talks about Warren – I think actually I was the second person to speak, first or second to speak – and I just simply said well he worked for all those years and never got promoted. It is true, he got tenure but he never got promoted – and nobody paid any attention to him, they thought of him as somebody we really should have got rid of years ago, right. But he was the one person who put the English Department on the map for God's sake. Only it wasn't the kind of map they wanted to be on. And I said simply that I could not think of any institution in this province, or quite possibly in North America, that was so unremittingly hostile towards the arts, that is to say the *language arts*. And I still think that was true, and I still think that to be true, and that Warren Tallman was really quite heroic in doing what he did, because he's the man who managed to get things like the Vancouver poetry conference in 1963 off the ground. Well, how did he do it? Well he tricked the English Department into hiring Bob Creeley in the first place, and in the second place he went outside the department – they didn't know who he was so he told them all kinds of stuff about him and we tried to get Ed Dorn here the same way later on – but when I came to Vancouver Creeley was the only new member of the department... it was just amazing. And anyway Warren did all this and he did it by going *outside* the department – to fine arts, music, dance, the Koerner Foundation, the Canada Council etc, to finance it, and the English Departemnt resisted it. For years and years and years they wouldn't allow courses on people like Charles Olson, and it wasn't until 1964 that they actually had a course in modern American poetry, which is incredible. There was a lot hostility.

So that when Hilary Peach turned up in 1986 in my Zukovsky class that was a clear example of the difference between the two places. And she was taking this freshman English course from one of the most obnoxious people in the English Department, I mean he was an absolutely appalling man. She was an absolutely brilliant student, she was a brilliant writer, and she wrote three papers and she got a flat F, F, and F- on them. F was the highest grade. He hated it so much because she was writing highly perceptive – not especially grammatical, but who cares, you can pick that up later – but if she said something he wanted to know if it was true or not, right, which I suppose is fair enough. right, except that when he was inspecting Meredith's teaching and she talked about Prometheus as being the man of forethought and he said That's ridiculous, and he thought this was absolutely wrong, misrepresenting Greek mythology, completely misreading Birneys' poem, gave he her an absolutely appalling reference, said she

was a terrible teacher, misinforming all the students. Well poor old Hilary Peach, who's doing her homework and working all this stuff out, and saying well you know this poem in its sound and the ear and the things that it does is very like Creeley and Olson, and she's writing about Thomas Wyatt or something, he said Who are these people this is rubbish! And here's this guy who very early got tenure and all the other stuff, right. I mean they loved him. Eventually they learned not to love him, I'm happy to say, but still.

There was ignorance or outright hostility. And then there was the terror of being wrong. I mean Warren Tallman once gave a talk on Charles Olson's "proprioception" – it was one of the very early pieces ever written about proprioception, because the essay had only just come out – and as I walked out one of my colleagues – who was by no means a slouch, and was certainly fairly open – says God that was brilliant, but what if he's wrong? And the whole focus was on being *right*. You had to make correct judgements about the world, which is to say it was totally out of touch with anything that had happened since 1950.

The academic world is I think moving back into that kind of space, in a lot of ways. I mean you have various notions of political correctness, and you have various notions of interdisciplinary studies so that certain kinds of activities are worthwhile and certain other kinds of activity are not worthwhile. Unfortunately now if you want to edit somebody's letters you try to get a grant to do so, forget it. the only way you can do so is if it's going to take 25 years, involved a team of 16 people and will fill shelves and will train god knows how many future scholars. And then you can get the grant. And you'd better be asking for at least \$200,000. SHRRC will not look at a budget of less than \$200,000. But that's insane. I mean somebody who wanted to do a nice little edition of Mallarmé's [[Egiturs????]] and asked for something like \$5,000 was refused. The project was too small. And the encouragement is to do the big stuff, the financing is for that.

DM: Did you pay close attention to Tsunami Editions?

PQ: When I heard about them! Nobody heard about them until 6 months to a year after the event, or you'd meet someone and they'd say have you seen so-and-so and you'd say what's that and they'd say it came out from Tsunami a year ago. And I'd think o god, really? Thing is the net should change that. In pre-net days it was very difficult. I mean Mona Firtig, when she was very young, ran The Literary Storefront. She got a grant from the youth opportunities program or whatever it was called. And she got a grant and she hired a storefront and she set up, and rented a storefront I think for a year, and she used to run readings and all sorts of stuff. It was a place she could have quiet to do her own writing and she set up the literary storefront newsletter, and it

came out every two weeks, and it was a cheapo little thing I mean it was nothing, and it gave news of all the readings and new publications in town, so you could keep track. And I subscribed to it, a lot of people subscribed to it, it was cheap enough, like 20\$ for a year or something like that, barely paid her postage, and it kept people on top of things. But then it went bust, as these things do, and then she left town, as people do. And nothing actually took its place, though everybody wanted something like that. Just as there were no local reviewers worth listening to. I mean one reason why Roy Miki founded line was because there was no local review. There was no BC Bookworld, you know, and Alan Twigg is actually an extremely conservative temperament. Like Alma Lee, I mean it's amazing that anybody ever got anything reviewed, like the miracle of George Bowering becoming the Poet Laureate. Who would've thought it? [...]

Fred has this great dream of KSW getting hold of some premises, but where the hell are they going to get a hold of any premises? I mean you can rent a room for what 500 a month? Buy a garage. Artspeak managed to do it, but the thing is art galleries carry a certain glamour, particularly if they've got a history of survival, that enables it to happen. But writers? {sarcastically} All you need is a pen or pencil and a piece of paper. I mean, we've got a public library, get a room there. It's like old style teachers saying all you need to teach is a piece of chalk and a blackboard. Try it sometime, see how many of them have gone to sleep within 5 minutes.

DM: What kind of effect did the death of bpNichol have?

PQ: I don't know. I mean, how do you describe the effect of a hole? It was a gap, and there is a gap. But I think a far greater effect in terms of this town was the death of Charles Watts, because Charles knew absolutely everybody. We weren't close, but Charles was an absolutely dedicated reader and he did what I did, only he did it much more, which was a very simple thing, which I learned from Guy Davenport. It's very simple: if you like a writer's work, write him a letter, and it doesn't even matter what you say other than I've read your book. And not only that if they don't reply you've just lost 6 cents in those days, what's it now 52 cents? And if they do reply you may have made a lifelong friend, and I've made a lot of friends that way. And of course Charles did that, and every summer rather he went down to the States when he was on holiday and he'd go to all the readings and meet all the people. I'm shy so I don't do that but I do go see those I already know, Charles would go see people he didn't know. The only time I did that was in NY when I went to meet Charles Bernstein, and then Bruce Andrews, cos I wanted to know about them. And I was very impressed with Bernstein, but as a general rule I've not done that without writing to them first. But Charles I think was simply driven by his total love of good

writing, and his complete enthusiasm. I mean Charles was a complete romantic, Shelley and Melville were his great writers. But he was totally into the new writing. I mean the books you didn't get for the KSW were just the most incredible collection, edition after edition after edition of really rare contemporary writings. I mean if I wanted to read say less well known work by Fiona Templeton I'd just call Charles. He was also a very good friend of Robin Blaser's. When he died he was doing a PhD with Blaser, on Shelley. But Charles was a resource for people because he would know about everything that was going on in the world he could tell you what was going on he could introduce you to people and he could say so and so is coming into town. And for a while when I was still at UBC I'd get letters from people announcing that they'd be in town and then I'd write back and say do you want to do a reading and they'd say yes or no. But Charles would get about 4 a week. In a very interesting way he was a shaker and a mover without being in the least bit assertive about it. And he knew everyone, and he'd think nothing of popping down to Seattle to hear someone read.

DM: A lot of the programming may have come through his contacts.

PQ: I would think quite possibly, though I don't think that would necessarily be sung by anybody or even known by anybody. You'd have to talk to people to find out. Colin Smith will be a real source for that.