

The Evening Bulletin

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POETRY

Building The Archives

PENN PROFESSORS BUILD A DIGITAL ARCHIVE OF POETRY PERFORMANCES AND READINGS

Bernstein Hopes People Will Rethink Role Of Live Readings

By NICHOLAS GILEWICZ
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Elite universities have a reputation, often deserved, of disengaging from the communities that surround them. Poetry often has a similar reputation for being obtuse and disconnected. So, combining the two might seem ill-advised.

But the University of Pennsylvania's new project, PENNSound, has managed to engage the poetry community on a global scale. Launched in January of this year after eighteen months of planning, PENNSound provides MP3 files of poetry, all free, all fully downloadable and shareable, provided that they are used exclusively for personal or noncommercial use.

Under the direction of Penn professors Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis, the project has assembled over half a terabyte of material on its servers — or in iPod terms, the equivalent of about 125,000 songs. Like music files, the live recordings are broken down by poem into "singles," so it isn't necessary to download an entire 40-minute performance to sample a poet's work. PENNSound's technical director Chris Mustazza says that people are downloading about 13 gigabytes of poetry every day — enough poetry to fill the new high-end iPod Nano more than three times over. "Although weirdly, our peak use is Fridays at 3 a.m.," he laughs. "Nobody can figure out why."

Digital rights of course are a concern — but PENNSound has permission from every writer, estate, or publisher for each poem archived on the site. Bernstein says that although he believes "[the major] publishers don't act in the interest of poetry or the public," there haven't been any major issues with rights. In stark contrast to digital music, the lack of a commercial market for poetry recordings, and poetry in general for that matter, is precisely what lets PENNSound exist. Filreis says "It's a wonderful rejoinder to the proprietary values that music people have." And it's surprising what you can get when you ask: PENNSound has just posted a live performance of "Helen in Egypt" by Hilda Doolittle, who is better known by her famous modernist moniker H.D.

Bernstein, perhaps best known for his involvement with poetry's L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement (and for co-founding and editing the eponymous magazine), has a reputation as something of an obscurantist in the artistic sense. But he says that both his own work and his interest in the intersection of poetry and technology evolve from looking at poetry as mate-



ELIZABETH TROST/University of Pennsylvania

Poet Charles Bernstein, co-founder and executive editor of Buffalo's Electronic Poetry Center, came to Philadelphia to teach at the University of Pennsylvania. Along with fellow professor Al Filreis, he is editor of PENNSound, a large archive of poetry readings and performances available for free on the Internet.

rial culture — that is to say poetry is of our times, not outside of them. "I'm interested in poetry as a material medium and how it operates culturally. And so far, people have mostly neglected the performance of poetry — not 'performance poetry,' but the live reading of poems — as primary text."

The claim that live readings are as important an aspect of the poem as the written version is one that some poets would hotly contest, yet at PENNSound, many of the performances do something all too rare in poetry readings: enhance the written word, and make the poems feel more complete. Charles Olson's "Maximus Poems," for example, are regarded as dense, tough reads. But his virile 1957 performance of selections from "Maximus" gives the poems a clarity they don't necessarily possess on the page.

Fed by live reading series and donated recordings from around the country, Bernstein's own vast archive (in his office, one wall is nearly covered with audio recordings), and the regular readings at the Kelly Writers House on Penn's campus, PENNSound has a remarkable diversity of work, including work by well known poets like Kenneth Koch, June Jordan, Robert Creeley, Yusef Komunyakaa and others. Listening to Ted Berrigan's first performance of his "Sonnets" — experimental takes on the form — is a rewarding experience as well, both for the poems and the marginalia of Berrigan's commentary as he wends his way through his work.

Younger poets get a fair shake on PENNSound too, which isn't always the case in the poetry community. Susan Brennan's "Poetic Brooklyn," one of the contributed reading series, fea-

tures some excellent young writers like Steve Dalachinsky, Brendan Downing and Jordan Davis.

While many Penn students work at the project through work-study programs, Mustazza says that the sheer volume of material they have is daunting. "It's not so much like there's a flow of material. It's more like a mountain that keeps growing, even though we're always chipping away at it." The amount of recordings forces Bernstein and Filreis to be discriminating in what they post. They look at a box of tapes, and quickly label them I (for making them available ASAP), II (for loading on the server and getting the rights and the recording live when I is done), and III (to store until I and II are done). "It's a practical way of testing what we value," Filreis asserts.

"Universities generally treat writing as visual and textual — PENNSound adds sound" to the mix, says Filreis. And in fact, he sees PENNSound as an outgrowth of the ideas behind the Kelly Writers House, where programs are free and open to the public. "The Writers House was founded outside of the curriculum, using university resources to make programs available to both the university and community and the community at large, which is why I think it has been successful as an educational tool and community resource. I'm interested in an open pedagogy. And what Writers House does for Philadelphia, PENNSound does for everyone."

PENNSound is located at <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>. The Kelly Writers House is located at 3805 Locust Walk. For more information about PENNSound, or the Kelly Writers House, please call 215-573-WRIT.