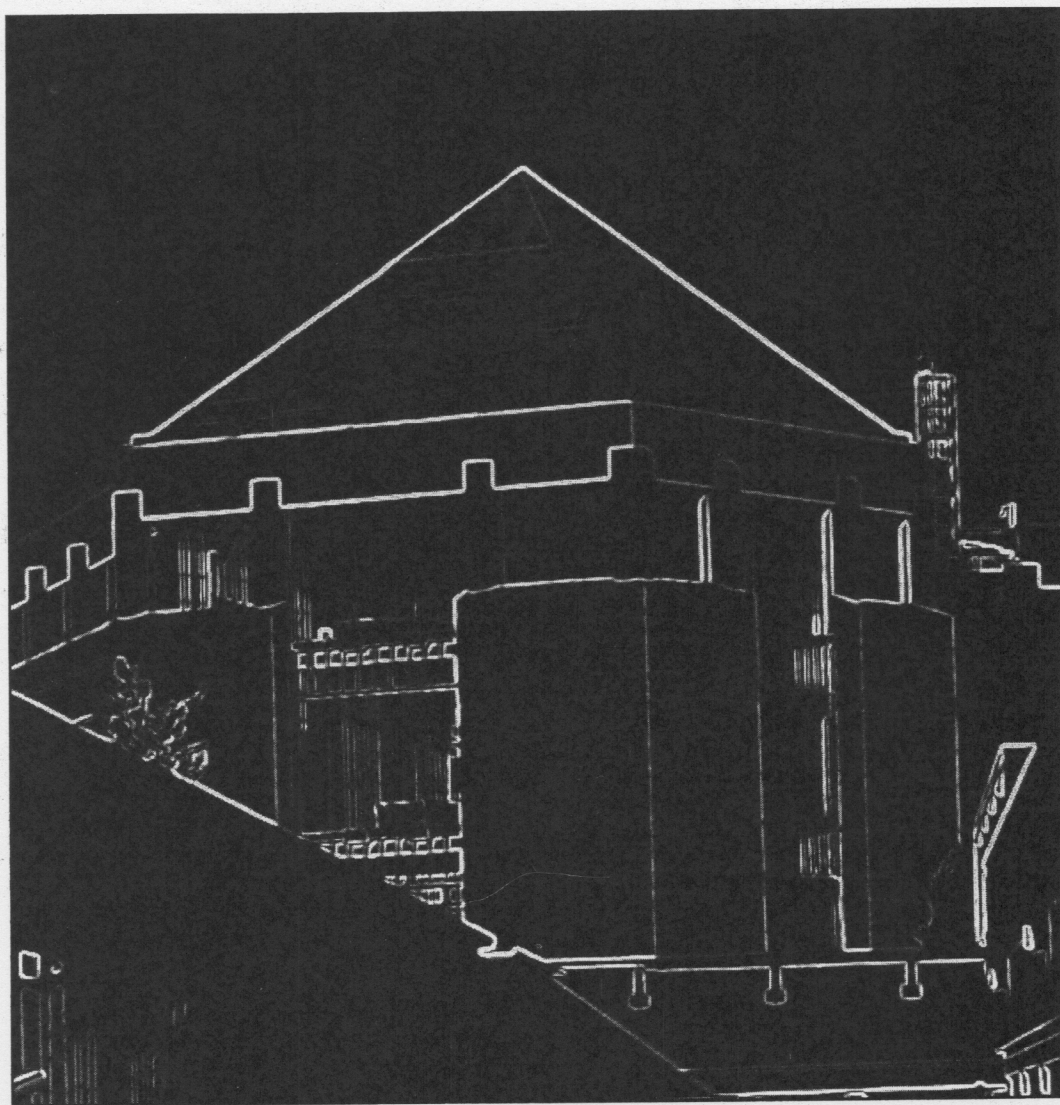


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# Interview: Kit Robinson and Rae Armantrout

*This interview followed a reading given by Rae Armantrout and Kit Robinson on October 8, 1992 in the Frank V. de Bellis Collection of the Leonard Library at San Francisco State University as part of California Writers Reading and In Conversation funded by the California Arts Council. The tape of the reading and interview is available for sale or rent and can also be borrowed from our tape library.*

**Laura Moriarty:** I have a lot of questions to ask, which I think will take longer than the time we have, which is good. And I think that what I'll do is skip to the second question and throw in part of the last one, right at the start. The second question was brought up again by your line, Rae, "die mommy scum," always one of my favorite lines. This is a question for both of you. A lot of the audience, of course, is writers, old ones and young ones, and for those of us who are old we already know the sad answer to this that the young ones have yet to discover, and the question is: How do you manage to balance your writing life with your working life, your earning-money life and having family responsibilities? Or is there a way to do that? The other part of that, the sort of non-practical part of that question which I saw in both of your work and which is kind of a giant question is: Is writing a way to figure out how to live? When you are working in writing are you finding out how you already live, or are you figuring it out, analyzing it? Is it all of those things, none of those things? Practically, "I get up at five and write for two hours every day," or, "I only write on the weekend," that kind of thing. And then the other larger thing. Maybe, Rae, you can start.

**Rae Armantrout:** Well, I teach at a university, which I enjoy while I am doing it, but it doesn't seem to feed into my work. What does feed into my work that I think you are referring to with the "die mommy scum" line, is the fact of having become a mother. I only have one son, but nonetheless, it has been intense. He is thirteen now, and frankly I was kind of reluctant to become a mother. I was ambivalent; I thought, this is going to eat up all my time, and I will now have no time to write, but I kept writing as much as before, which isn't a whole lot. I am a slow writer, but nonetheless, I think that the family dynamics have fed into my work in ways that interest me. Partially because having been a child, having been a daughter, and then turning that around and being a mother, you see our pain as human beings, our sickness, our vulnerability very strongly in that situation. And, we all kind of experience it with our parents, a lot of terrific ambivalences, and alienation. We try, when we are parents, to suppress our consciousness of it with our children, but I think it is still going on, so you get those resonances fed from both directions. It is wonderful and it is painful, and I think it is the painful part that makes you want to write. At least that is the case with me. That is almost traditional, that I think it is when something rubs me, when I am getting the blisters that I start writing. I don't want to say that I always write about my kid and this is going to sound like I am always writing about my kid, but I still think that in an interesting way it has kind of informed my work because it shows us where we are most vulnerable to each other.



Rae Armantrout

**Laura:** That sort of answers the second question in the sense that you are saying that it did take up all your time, but that it gave you material.

**Rae:** Yes, material, not subject matter, but material. It gave me something to think about. And not everything does, because like I said, my teaching, somehow, doesn't feed into my work. I am not saying it can't. I know people like, say, Michael Davidson, who is an academic, and he can manage to use the way he feels alienated from the academy. He has poems that have memo language for instance. So he uses his ironic distance and yet absorption in the academic institution as source material. Somehow that doesn't happen for me, but the family stuff does. I also use material that is not from work but is from daily life, certainly, like mass media, TV, popular songs, advertising, that kind of language that saturates the environment and, what the city looks like when I go outside. I live in San Diego, and southern California is sort of like motherhood; it is where everything gets intensified. Everything about America, this is where it really shows. Where the sickness shows, like I said about motherhood. In San Diego there is a combination of a sort of theme park land, surface banalities, happy face atmosphere, with a strong military presence. So you got a happy face on a tank. Again, it is sort of unpleasant, but then interesting after a while. That too, has informed my work.

**Kit Robinson:** I noticed a couple of gestures of naming in your poems, one of which was the use of cultural terms for naming institutions and social phenomena. And then also naming natural events or phenomena, such as plants or whatever, and an alternation of those two kinds of naming was something I noticed. Even the appropriation of the natural world seems to be loaded for you,

language as a site for a lot of duplicity. If people are convinced or persuaded, or lied to, or in some way manipulated by language, and that happens to us as a political action, then if it happens in a similar way in a poem, or if it is analyzed or displayed, in some way put out there, then that reflects back into a political realm. Do either of you agree with that, or is there some place beyond that where there is a political aspect to either of your works?

**Rae:** Well, I think that you have identified the aspect of politics that I am somehow most interested in. I am really interested in, as I guess most of us are interested in, the way that business and industry try to manipulate our attitudes in order to make a profit by means of the various media. That fascinates me and I like to see, and see through, ideology, but it is an infinite regress. I mean you see through one potential manipulation and then there is another one, and then there are your own, as you say. That is kind of an infinite regression.

**Laura:** Kit, the line that you have that was part of a version of that was, "verbal expression has no basis in fact." Was that something that was related in anyway to politics, or was it related to a personal sense of things?

**Kit:** No, that is a quote from the *Avatamaka Sutra*, an ancient Buddhist manuscript that I studied with Norman Fischer. That stanza is a quote from that. The rest of the poem describes a photograph that I saw in this show of surrealist photography after World War I and was the scene with the bricks coming down through the door and out into the street. It was this destroyed building. But no, I think it is a very political statement actually, but it doesn't come from the 20th century.

**Laura:** You weren't thinking about the vice president? Which leads me into the sense of Zen. . .

**Kit:** Just to answer the political question a little bit, I think one way politics comes into my work is the same way anything else does, in the sense of pulling things out of daily life. Whether it be language from my job, or something that happened, or "poetry is where you find it," that kind of thing. In *Counter Meditation*, I wrote this straight out political poem where I attacked President Bush and tried to insult him because I was so angry about the war, but that is a little different. I just tried to write a straight political poem which I thought was a little embarrassing actually, because it didn't do any of the things that Rae was describing, like trying to unmask language. In fact, it was just trying to brutally use language to express outrage.

**Laura:** One final really easy question which I think would simply be informative to people, that didn't get covered in the class. It is a question, of course, for both of you: Who would you say are the people you really read, or who you know of that are coming up in your work right now?



Kit Robinson

Also, related to that, right now I am reading a lot about the weather. I just really like the weather, I don't know what it is. So it is really non-poetic text that I am reading with interest that relates to my work. Is that something that both of you do? Or do you read a lot of novels? Is it contemporary writing or dead poets? What's the main emphasis?

**Kit:** I am reading *To the Lighthouse*, which I never read before, and I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* recently and I read critical magazine articles sometimes. I hardly ever read novels, actually. I read poems and poetry books when I have the time and the energy to concentrate on it.

**Laura:** Do you read in relation to writing?

**Kit:** I'm sure I do, but I don't think about it.

**Laura:** You don't set up a project and read a bunch of things about something?

**Kit:** Well, I have to admit that I am reading Virginia Woolf because I think she might be doing something I might be interested in exploring.

**Laura:** Yes, I could see that in the last piece you read.

**Kit:** I was thinking more in terms of the next piece that I am going to write.

**Laura:** Well, I saw it in the last one.

**Kit:** There is probably more continuity there than I realized.

**Laura:** Well, I mean there is, "how to be in life," and some large. . .

**Kit:** Yes, that was your other question about whether writing had to do with how to be in life. To me, in a way, it is a way to survive for that part of the mind and the spirit and imagination that doesn't seem to get engaged by a lot of the necessary things that I have to do. So, in that sense, it is a way to get along, but I don't know if how to live can be put into writing itself. Could I read something and learn from it? I think I do look for that actually, in reading as well. I say, "in reading," because I don't know that I look for it in writing. That might be too much to ask, but I probably do.

**Laura:** I have heard that in your work.

**Kit:** Sometimes in that work, but when I read the long one, I heard myself telling myself things to do.

**Laura:** How do you survive a forty hour a week job and do a lot of writing? If I want to know that, I might look at your work because I know you do that.

**Kit:** I don't know if you would find out the answer from reading it.

**Laura:** Do you have people that you read? Novels? Not novels?

PHOTO: ERICKA MCCONNELL

**Rae:** I enjoy novels. I don't think I have used them for my work though. When I want to get material for my work, I sometimes read things that I barely understand, like quantum physics or something. No kidding, like this poem, "The Creation," you would never have guessed it, and I know this is going to sound really obscure, but I read this book called *Quantum Reality*, which was just a popularization book, but it interested me. So this part here, "let us/move fast/enough in a small/enough space and/our travels/will take first/shape then substance." Somehow, I can't remember how, it is not a quote from the book, it came off of the book I was reading about quantum physics.

Right now I am reading a very abstract book of theology called, *God Without Being*, sort of for the same reason. It is by this French Catholic theologian and he is in some sort of argument with Heidegger. It is extremely abstract. I sort of understand it. Sometimes I go, "Oh! I see," and a lot of times I go, "Hm, say what?" But I like that, because when something is just on the verge of what I can understand, then I get ideas. Maybe they are not the ideas of the guy who wrote it, but since I am not taking a class, that doesn't matter. I can get little weird perceptions in a way that I like.

**Laura:** I could possibly throw it open to the audience for one or two questions. Does anyone have anything they want to bring up?

**Audience member:** I wanted to ask Kit about what he said earlier about the process of writing being the opposite of meditation.

**Kit:** Right, because in Zen meditation, which I have been studying, the idea is that you are supposed to just sit and allow all thoughts and feelings to come into your consciousness, which is very similar actually to the process of composition and writing poetry for me, but then you are supposed to let all thoughts evaporate and you are not supposed to be obsessively trying to remember what they were so you can write them down later. And so I realize that the process of writing is in some sense very much at odds with the act of meditation. Because in writing, you are solidifying thoughts and feelings and so forth into these graphic or typographical representations of language that just sit there and can be returned to and so forth. I felt that there was maybe a dialectic, or an opposition at play there.

**Audience member:** I was interested in your asking Rae if she gets her titles at the end or in the beginning. How do you get your titles?

**Kit:** Well, I try to avoid that by writing a long work, so you don't have as many titles that you have to come up with. For Example, *Counter Meditation* is composed of thirty-eight short poems with numbers instead of titles. Usually, I think I title my work somewhere in the middle.