

**Anne Waldman:**

## In the Classroom Of a "Sorceress"



Poet and artist Ann Waldman, protege of Alan Ginsberg, read at the *Schule für Dichtung in Vienna* Photo: FVA

by Victoria Oscarsson

Anne Waldman arrives at *Die Schule für Dichtung* (Vienna Poetry Academy) office, or should one say "salon," off the Mariahilferstrasse in Vienna to read with her many voices as poet, performer, Distinguished Professor, New Yorker, and author of more than thirty books... oh, and co-founder, in 1974, with Allen Ginsberg of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics in Boulder, Colorado.

In the press, she has been referred to as Priestess.

Christian Ide Hintze, sound, and one-time street, poet in Vienna, is one of the founders in 1991 of *Die Schule für Dichtung* and some say, mind and soul of the institution. He introduces Waldman, offering deserved admiration.

"When she entered," he begins, "her energy changes the room." This is the essence of it. And the evolution of this center for poets owes a lot to its relationship with The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics that has served as the inspiration for such

an experimental place, ripe for its time coming out of Viennese Actionismus, the Wiener Gruppe, coffee house interaction among writers, musicians and philosophers, backboneed by a dark city still reeling from the aftermath of WWII and loss of soul when the empire collapsed.

Waldman, 62, is a vibrant performer, a youthful mirror for aspiring writers of all ages. Endowed by an enduring friendship with revered New York City "Beat" poet Allen Ginsberg, Waldman evolved into a feminist, a spokeswoman on political and environmental issues, with an unwavering commitment to peace, and a nurturer of generations of new talent, offering inspiration through performance and the written word.

Even as a younger figure among the Beat Generation, she was very much one of them, right along with Jack Kerouac, author of the mind-turning *On the Road*, with poet, publisher and bookshop owner Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who was the first to offer

Ginsberg a platform to read Howl; with Joanne Kyger, Gregory Corso and William Burroughs, that master of cut-up speech. This was the core group from the fifties and sixties that altered the attitude of writing and writer, as renegades for change. They were powerfully influenced by Buddhism, which became an anchor against the regime condoning the Vietnam war – freedom of expression became the voice for freedom itself.

A red silk scarf is draped around Waldman's shoulders, framing her long black waving hair. Power emanates gently from directness and humility. Words are strong. The "f- word" was not unknown to Ginsberg, though her use is quieter. Not a sound when Waldman begins, perhaps empowered by other sources. Her ability to use voice to create theater is nurtured by Buddhist ceremonies and the oral tradition and brings

emotion to the meaning of each word as a living presence in celebration of balance.

O n c e on stage, she takes a moment to smile across to former

students and friends in this city, now much known to her. Her scarf falls and wraps, playing games with the mood of the reading.

But Waldman is not just about spoken poetry, but about "a performative piece," a concept coming from "speech act therapy" and developed by philosopher and feminist theorist, Judith Butler, which can be guided by different parts of the body. Waldman's euphoria evolves when words swirl around her like whirling dirvishes. She reads from "The Writing Dance" and from "Marriage, a Sentence," an improvisational piece to composer John Cage; from "Pieces of an Hour," from her well known "Fast Speaking Woman", then a new work, almost a sonata, called "Ajanta Caves," inspired by a recent visit to India. Her voice rises and falls using animal sounds in rage and

gentleness, high note of pleading, low note of passing hell, as she reaches an epiphany.

Students are in the audience, she speaks of "associate links through time, intervention, interruption...fractions of sentences...stories... how chant can dictate the writing or writing becomes the chant..." She mentions the importance of "projective verse," a word coined by the Beat poet, Charles Olson from early days of The Poetry Project in New York at St. Mark's Church where she worked in early days. "Write like a filmmaker," she suggests. "Be the collector of images and interpretations."

A few days later Waldman performed at one of Vienna's leading jazz clubs, Porgy and Bess, in a collaboration developed by Vienna performance music artist Pia Palme, with recorders, bass, drums and a back up vocalist Gina Mattiello to Waldman texts, Colors

in the Mechanism of Concealment, based on yellow as enriching, red as magnetizing, green constructing, blue, pacifying – all translated into visual and liquid sound. Warbling bird voices, bells, frenzy, bleats of a goat, high breathing, more breathing, scratching with the oboe, like sanding an old boat,

felt like somebody moving furniture in their head to reach a crescendo, before falling into whispers, stillness, like the end of the world might be.

Waldman is conceptual, prophetic, a transfer zone and living icon for future generations, carrying on the Beat tradition, giving poetry a persona beyond the written word with the use of instruments, performers and voice. She evokes cutting-edge crossroads between spirits, mystics and intellects.

*"Language is a quill of desire", Waldman said. "My life is the classroom."*

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