Mandy Kahn on respecting process

November 2, 2017 – Mandy Kahn is the author of two poetry collections, *Glenn Gould's Chair* and *Math, Heaven, Time*. She frequently collaborates with composers to create new works that combine poetry and classical music and was a librettist for Yuval Sharon's acclaimed opera *Hopscotch*. Kahn is coauthor, with Aaron Rose, of the nonfiction book *Collage Culture*, which was also released as a record with a score by No Age. She's given readings at Cambridge University, London Review Bookshop and Shoreditch House in England, at Motto in Berlin, at Colette in Paris, at Printed Matter in New York, at Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco, and at many venues in Southern California, including the Craft and Folk Art Museum, Skylight Books and Art Center College of Design. Former Poet Laureate Ted Kooser featured Kahn's poem "At the Dorm" in his newspaper column American Life in Poetry. She lives in Los Angeles.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1350 words.

Tags: Poetry, Writing, Process, Inspiration.

In the spirit of process, we decided to do this interview in Gchat. You sent me some thoughts earlier and this seems like a good place to start: "I believe that when we let our process be our product—when we let our process feel like its own end—when we feel full from process—when a thing is complete to us because it was made, and because of our attention and our pleasure in the learning and the making—a work can become itself most exactly, and we can live most comfortably as makers."

Well, my love of process came as part of an interest in finding comfort in the body. When I concentrated on the end product—what I hoped it would be—the sort of pipe that brought new ideas to me would clench up. When I concentrated on the process, and what the exploration of the making would bring into my life, that pipe more than opened: it bloomed. And peace swung in. I realized that process can be a house that one lives inside—not just a corridor to another room, but a whole house in itself. And when I decorate that house, and love it, and celebrate it, I feel at peace. And the work arrives with its own right timing.

Do you feel satisfied with your "process" if a poem doesn't come out of it? For instance, if you begin work, and delve into the process of composition, and it ends up being a dead end? Was going to that dead end enough?

Absolutely. I honor all aspects of process, and I honor whatever work arrives. When I'm putting a manuscript together, I use a gentle discernment to gather the works that will be included. And as I edit, I use a gentle discernment, but its base is always an honoring. There are no dead ends. There are simply pieces that exist because making them was meant to exercise some part of my process; they will live with me. Sometimes a pianist runs scales, and sometimes she writes a piece to be shared with her friends, and sometimes she writes a piece to be shared in a larger way. Sometimes my work is running scales: there is always some reason to make it, and I am always grateful to it for arriving.

So you try to edit without thinking of the finished manuscript, but instead allow the edits to move you closer to what the work itself wants to be?

For me, the process of editing is also a process of creating. A first draft is a kind of newborn, and through the editing process, the child evolves organically. But the goal is that the child feels free to become most fully herself. And there is always a bedrock of honoring, and observing. I never think further than the single poem I'm working on when I'm working. I do know what the themes of the book will be before I begin, but no poem is expected to shoulder those themes. The poem arrives as it is. The themes are a general group of ideas that I'm exploring in a considered way during the year or years that I'm making the work.

So you can't move to a new poem without finishing the one you're working on? Does that end up being complicated or frustrating? Or you can work on a couple a time, but don't think of the others when you're with the one? I like the idea of each one being a step.

Oh, I absolutely can move to a new poem. Here's how it usually goes. I write a first draft, and immediately afterwards, I write several more drafts of the same poem—all during the same writing session, as part of a single gesture. Sometimes I am drawn to make more drafts that afternoon, or more drafts the next morning. But at that point, the poem—it might be fifth draft—goes into a notebook. The next day, or two days later, I might start a new poem, and perform the same process, and that poem, too, goes into the notebook, at about the same stage. And I'll continue to work on those poems until they feel finished. And that's simultaneous. I'll dip into that notebook and see which poem I'm drawn to work on. Some days I'm just opening that notebook and seeing which poem seems to want a new draft, or a tweak. And a couple of years later, when it's time to put a manuscript together, certain poems seem to step forward: they feel part of this group, and they feel finished. Many will never move past the notebook. But I'm just as grateful for them.

Do you think of poetry as a written or oral thing? Do you think of what the poem will sound like off the page? Is that part of the process?

I speak my poems out loud as I'm editing them. The oral part is important to me; I choose words that I can comfortably say. I value what happens when the words are said, and become a vibration, and enter a room, and encounter others.

Reading poetry aloud can be tricky. Do you want to animate the words? Or speak them plainly so they exist as they do on the page?

I want to speak them plainly and clearly. I do not choose to animate them. I simply become the instrument: I take the sheet music—the poem—and play it through the clarinet of my person. But it's a very straight-forward presentation.

Does a poem reach a point for you when you don't want to read it anymore, when it feels like it's done?

There are poems that feel like they correspond with an earlier version of me, and I tend not to read those aloud. I tend to read poems that feel like a match to the me of the moment.

That makes sense. Do you think of the final book as a container? A finished product? Or do poems live outside of those books, too.

I do think of a book as a kind of container, but I'll admit that I still dip into it and make changes. I made little tweaks to the last book between printings and even added a new poem, and also removed one. If I thought of everything as absolutely finalized, it would be hard for me to travel through the end of the publishing process. It feels much lighter to say, This feels finished now; if I can see later that there's another draft that wants to emerge, I will let it keep evolving. But I do try to honor what I think of as "first finished;" I'd like the work to correspond to the time that it was written, and the person who wrote it. The older person would approach the idea differently; the idea came to the person at a certain time, and I'd like to keep it within, say, a couple of year range of when it arrived. But sometimes it isn't that way.

I've thought about this with the dawn of e-books, etc. and how they could allow for endless revision, sort of in the way that Kanye West kept editing his last album after it was already on iTunes.

It's really a feeling that lets you know when something is finished. I make sure that feeling is coming from my heart. The head might want it to be something; the heart allows it to be the fullest version of itself. And that is always enough.

When Skylight Books Asked Which Five Titles I'd Like To Recommend To Their Shoppers On National Independent Bookstore Day, I Replied:

Learning by Heart: Teachings to Free the Creative Spirit, Corita Kent and Jan Steward

Words Without Music, Philip Glass

Delights and Shadows, Ted Kooser

Silence: Lectures and Writings, John Cage

A Creative Companion, SARK

Name
Mandy Kahn

Vocation
Poet

Fact

Mandy Kahn is the author of two poetry collections, *Glenn Gould's Chair* and *Math, Heaven, Time*. She frequently collaborates with composers to create new works that combine poetry and classical music and was a librettist for Yuval Sharon's acclaimed opera *Hopscotch*. Kahn is coauthor, with Aaron Rose, of the nonfiction book *Collage Culture*, which was also released as a record with a score by No Age. She's given readings at Cambridge University, London Review Bookshop and Shoreditch House in England, at Motto in Berlin, at Colette in Paris, at Printed Matter in New York, at Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco, and at many venues in Southern California, including the Craft and Folk Art Museum, Skylight Books and Art Center College of Design. Former Poet Laureate Ted Kooser featured Kahn's poem "At the Dorm" in his newspaper column American Life in Poetry. She lives in Los Angeles.

