Book Proposal (Overview & Contents):

Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art

Liz Kotz

Almost anyone with a passing knowledge of contemporary art-making knows that language in its many forms – as printed texts, painted signs, words on the wall, recorded speech, and more – has become a primary element of visual art. Under labels like Fluxus, Pop art, Conceptual art, text and image, and performance score, words have proliferated in art since the 1960s – often in a complex interchange with more cross-disciplinary literary and poetic experiments of the time, newly emerging activities of performance art, and the world of experimental music. Yet for all its importance and influence, this work has never been systematically examined by art historians or literary critics.

Words to be Looked At is a critical study of uses of language in 1960s art, focusing on projects carried out in and around New York City from 1958 – 1968. It is organized around two “bookends”: the c. 1958 “text score” for composer John Cage’s legendary “silent composition,” 4’33” (1952) and Andy’s Warhol’s notorious taped-and-transcribed book, a: a novel, published by Grove Press in 1968. The one uses sparse written instructions to direct a performer to remain silent during three arbitrarily-determined time brackets; the other records 24-hours of endless talk, programmatically retaining all the mistakes, misspellings, inconsistencies and informational “noise” entailed by transcription from tape to text. Using the two works to set up its theoretical matrix, Words to be Looked At argues that the turn to language in 1960s art occurs in the wake of new recording and transmission media, as words take on a new materiality and urgency in the face of magnetic sound, videotape and other emerging electronic technologies.

Drawing from fields of visual art, poetry, and experimental music, Words to be Looked At identifies a trajectory of language-based works that occurred across artistic media and movements. While some of these works present themselves as autonomous texts, others appear to have a chiefly instrumental or inscriptive function in relation to the performance, action or object that is seen as the actual work. The book moves in a roughly chronological way, with chapters organized around comparisons of 2 – 3 paradigmatic works. Beginning with a comparison of the three scores for 4’33” – the graphic score, text score and score in conventional “grand staff” notation – the book traces the emergence of instructional and proto-conceptual “word pieces” out of 1950s experiments with textual and graphic scores and compositional indeterminacy. Having established a performative and conceptual context derived from music, the book then moves to consider examples of more recognizably “poetic” practice, examining the chance-generated 1950s poems of John Ashbery and Jackson Mac Low, and the little-known 1960s visual poetry of artists Carl Andre, Vito Acconci and Dan Graham, whose works bridge the gaps between concrete poetry, minimal sculpture and conceptual art.
The final section of the book examines how these diverse uses of language manifest themselves in what came to be called “conceptual art,” under the increasingly insistent pressure of photography, film and video, and recorded sound. It traces the shift from the perceptual and participatory models of post-Cagean projects to the self-reflexive investigations of representational media by artists like Victor Burgin, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner. The book concludes with a reading of *a: a novel* that poses Warhol’s book as a kind of limit case of 1960s experimental poetics.

Needless to say, this is a vast study, since it brings works and practitioners from different artistic disciplines – poetry, performance, music, painting, sculpture, photography – together on a shared field. Yet this is precisely where they belong. One of the values of studying language as an artistic material is that it allows us to cut across categories of discipline, medium and movement to reconstruct 1960s art practice in a way that is, I believe, truer to its actual production and influence. As we move to understand the experimental and avantgarde practices of the 1960s, these language works are crucial to the reconceptualization of the artwork as repeatable, performable, subject to delegated fabrication and novel forms of reproduction and circulation.

2. Outstanding Features

The working title *Words to be Looked At* is adapted from the name of a legendary exhibition curated by Robert Smithson at the Dwan Gallery in 1967: “Language to be Looked at, and/or Things to be Read,” which helped galvanize awareness of this hybrid work. It is in the context of visual arts that this new attention to language as a material and medium became comprehensible and concrete. The book’s provisional title reflects the very slipperiness of this practice, since the materials I am working with don’t have any pre-existing neutral name or designation – “word pieces,” “word art,” “text-based art,” etc. – a fact which makes it particularly urgent to grasp them as a shared and coherent body of work.

Although arguably centered in New York City, the turn to language in 1960s art was indeed an international phenomenon, in which avantgarde practitioners increasingly made text-based work for printed matter and performance events as well as for gallery contexts. This turn to linguistic models and materials in the visual arts took place alongside, and roughly at the same time as, the much-recognized “linguistic turn” in philosophy and critical theory – yet the range and diversity of these artistic projects can only partially be assimilated to prevailing semiotic and structural models. Despite its tremendous importance for subsequent work, the post-Cagean moment of the early and mid 1960s remains little understood; paradoxically, the recent and much over-due attention to Conceptual Art often tends to occlude the vast array of linguistic, performative and proto-conceptual practices that directly preceded it.

*Words to be Looked At* systematically examines projects that are consistently seen as “early works” or foundational models by practitioners as well as by scholars and critics. The book draws on substantial original research and a rigorously interdisciplinary approach in order to reconstruct the cross-disciplinary contexts that gave rise to these practices. It brings critical, comparative and historical perspectives to the works it studies, reading them against the grain – of their maker’s accounts and conventional art historical analyses. For instance, while the book addresses some canonical figures (e.g. Warhol, Andre), it focuses on under-known and yet
important works by them (which is quite different from addressing “minor” or peripheral works by major artists). While it addresses figures that have been recognized as central to conceptual art, like Weiner and Kosuth, it provides a decidedly un-canonical comparison of this work to the Fluxus “event scores” and situates this work in a larger historical trajectory.

My goal for this book is that it be a vibrantly written account of this language-based work, proving a clear and compelling critical narrative that is deeply researched and theoretically informed. While addressing urgent critical questions, the text will foreground close readings and contextualization of key works, making these accessible not only to other scholars, but also to a wider interested audience. I want this book to be a necessary text for the young poet who has just discovered the Fluxus scores and only heard of Carl Andre’s early work, and for the artists and musicians who are using language in their work but want to known the history of this practice, as well as for the progressive art historians and literary historians who are my peers. I am also hoping that this book will appeal to literary theorists and even new media theorists, who are working with crucial critical models of language and reproduction but rarely apply them to these crucial postwar works. Ultimately, if it is not too bold to say so, I want this book to change how we look at contemporary art and contemporary poetry. By coherently and critically presenting crucial but under-known examples of language-based work, I want people to understand that this work is some of the most interesting and important visual art – and some of the most interesting and important “poetry” – of the postwar era.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This section establishes the scope of the book by introducing two very different works that will provide a set of “bookends”: the text score for John Cage’s legendary 4’33” (1952), a single page of typewritten instructions consisting of words and numbers, that was written around 1958 and published by C. F. Peters in 1960; and Andy Warhol’s a novel, an audi-taped and transcribed novel presenting 24-hours in the life of his superstar Ondine, that was actually recorded over a span of two to three years, and published by Grove Press in 1968.

The introduction sets the theoretical framework for the book, proposing the emergence, during the late 1950s and 1960s, or a constellation of artistic practices that explore the condition of language in the postwar era – a period when the relations between speech, writing and printed text underwent profound revision and reorganization under pressure from diverse new inscription and transmission media. Using Cage’s score and Warhol’s novel, the introduction lays out the crucial intersection between magnetic sound recording and typed text, and proposes that the structural properties and incompatibilities of these two “inscription media” will provide the material ground and theoretical matrix for the examination of diverse postwar works with language.
Chapter 1: Proliferating Scores and the Autonomy of Writing

One of the larger goals of the book is to show how uses of language associated with “conceptual art” and “experimental poetry” arose in part out of 1950s experimental music and the systematic exploration of new notational forms. As the score becomes reconfigured as an abstract “durational structure” in Cage’s works of the 1950s, language (which usually plays a subordinate role in musical notation) attains a new centrality as that which outlines the parameters of the work and instructs us how to perform it.

Chapter 1 compares the three scores for John Cage’s legendary “silent composition,” 4’33” (1952): a now-lost version in grand staff notation, with the three movements notated with rests, that was used in the debut performance; a graphic score comprising simple vertical lines on horizontal pages, made in 1953; and the typewritten score, apparently written around 1958, that is the piece’s most frequently circulated form. Using the plural scores of 4’33” to probe Cage’s relation to notation as an autonomous form of “writing,” the chapter considers the implications of a single “work” or “structure” inhabiting the notationally-distinct spaces of graphic, musical and linguistic/numerical inscription (a triangulation that prefigures composer La Monte Young’s series, Composition 1960 #7, Composition 1960 #9 and Composition 1960 #10, which renders the “same” piece as a musical chord, inscribed line, and textual instruction). Examining Cage’s practice of transcribing and translating from one notational system or inscriptive medium to another in order to compose individual works, the chapter outlines an immanent tension within his scores of the 1950s between a communicative, instrumental model exemplified by the text score for 4’33” and a fetishized, untranslatable visual uniqueness represented by the calligraphic beauty of Water Music (1952). The chapter concludes with a reading of 4’33” as neither a conceptual idea or unstructured perceptual experience, but a highly focused activation of a written inscription, whether musical, graphic or textual, that provided a compelling model for subsequent language-based works.

Chapter 2: Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the “Event” Score

Chapter 2 examines what happens when language enters the space of the musical score by reading the “word pieces” or “event scores” made in 1959-1961 by La Monte Young and George Brecht. Ephemeral and extraordinarily-compressed, these texts occupy a liminal place between poetry, performance and conceptual art. Brecht’s 1961 Word Event, which simply reads “• exit,” may exist as a small printed card or a sign on a wall, and by implication is performed everywhere exits are made. Like Young’s Composition 1960 #10, which reads “Draw a straight line and follow it,” it is inseparably words to be read and actions to be performed. Contextualizing these works in the trajectory of 1950s experimental music from which they emerged, the chapter shows how these influential “event scores” reflect the strange duality of language that is both autonomous text and an instruction to do something. Drawing on George Maciunas’ description of Brecht’s work as akin to “perceptual ready-mades,” the chapter concludes with a consideration of how the temporal and “performative” dimensions, which in early works were directed to external physical actions, increasingly inhabit the linguistic inscription itself through the operations of reading, designation and perception.
Chapter 3: The Poetics of Chance and Collage

Having established the framework of the post-Cagean score form, this chapter then moves slightly back in time to consider a pair of collage-based and partly chance-generated poems by Jackson Mac Low and John Ashbery. Avowedly inspired by Cage’s 1951 composition *Music of Changes*, both Ashbery’s “Europe” (1958) and Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems” (1954-55) draw words from an existing source, which they render as a series of physically-dispersed and syntactically disjunctive linguistic fragments. Unlike dadaist predecessors, however, they preserve the unit of the individual word, and explicitly retain marks of punctuation, typographic notation and placement to register traces of the prior printed text. In so doing, the chapter argues, their use of language as a kind of notational device introduce elements of process and quasi-indexical recording that partially aligns them with contemporaneous practices by artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, who were similarly negotiating the interface between gestural spontaneity and mechanical reproducibility. Using previously unpublished archival sources to unpack Mac Low’s trajectory, the chapter outlines how the two poets draw almost diametrically opposed “lessons” from their encounters with Cagean models: while Mac Low’s efforts to recreate an early twentieth-century fusion of “artistic, political and spiritual renewals,” (in critic Jerome Rothenberg’s words) leads him towards collective oral performance of the poems as a means to revitalize language, Ashbery’s cooler, more distanced engagement with avant-garde legacies embeds performative aspects within the play of pronouns and shifters within the poem itself.

Chapter 4: Poetry from Object to Action

Most accounts of the intersection between poetry and the visual arts in the 1960s pursue an older “painters and poets” model, tracing the adoption of a painterly aesthetics of gestural expression and bodily enactment by “New York School” and “Black Mountain” poets, or charting the myriad painter and poet collaborations of the 1960s. However valuable, such literary approaches fail to address the crucial art of the period, as it occurs in the interface between sculpture and emerging forms of performance and site-based art. Chapter 4 reads the 1960s poetry of artists Carl Andre and Vito Acconci in relation to emerging forms of minimal and post-minimal visual art. While neglected in most art historical accounts, for Andre and Acconci – and arguably, for Dan Graham as well – these artists’ sustained work with language throughout the 1960s was formative for their better known work in sculpture, performance and video.

This chapter looks at examples from Andre’s privately-published *Seven Books of Poetry* (1969) and at selected Acconci poems (as well as the influential magazine *0 to 9* [1967-1969] that he co-edited with poet Bernadette Meyer) to show how these influential but little-studied experiments with language as object, site and field of force help set the stage for subsequent, overtly conceptual projects. Although their work initially resembles some of Ashbery and Mac Low’s 1950s experiments with chance- and collage-procedures, both Andre and Acconci pursue very different projects exploring the materiality and operational dimensions of language. Treating “words as things,” Andre explores sculptural procedures of cutting, stacking, and displacing elements of prior texts; reading minimal sculpture as a challenge to use “words to cover a page, rather than words to uncover meaning,” Acconci plumbs the aggressive and confrontational dimensions of language, re-imagining the page as a “performance arena” and space of encounter.
Chapter 5: Language Between Performance and Photography

Chapter Five turns to the profusion of works with text and language produced in and around “conceptual art” in the mid- to late 1960s, proposing one trajectory through this art, in which uses of language either vector toward the conditions of “photography” or toward the conditions of “performance” – although these will not be so easily separable, as soon becomes clear. The chapter opens with a comparison between the tripartite structures of two oddly similar projects, George Brecht’s 1961 Three Chair Events and Joseph Kosuth’s 1965/66 One and Three Chairs, both of which explore the relationship between language and the object by playing it off a third term – in Brecht’s case, performance, in Kosuth’s, photography. Linking the performance notations of Cage and Fluxus with the fabrication instructions of minimal art, the chapter posits the emergence in the 1960s of a new model for artistic production, in which the “work” – be it object, image, performance or installation – is now a specific realization of general schema, and is seen to operate analogously to linguistic statements. It then compares late 1960s projects of Lawrence Weiner and Richard Serra that engage temporal and process dimensions repressed in more orthodox minimal and conceptual art, in order to trace the historical re-emergence and transformation of Cagean principles of indeterminacy.

Chapter 6: Text and Image: Re-Reading Conceptual Art

Chapter Six probes the ubiquitous pairing of photography and text in many “conceptual” projects of the 1960s that align language with photography in the communicative space of the modern mass media, or to treat language as a type of indexical recording apparatus – for instance, reducing language to the quasi-scientific documentation of procedures or attempting to suppress referentiality through tautological and self-reflexive systems. Through readings of works by Victor Burgin and Douglas Huebler, it traces a key shift from perceptual to semiotic models in Conceptual Art: in this shift to more information-based paradigms, the use of words moves from instruction, description and indexical record to a more conventional if also ambivalent status as caption.

Conclusion: An Aesthetics of the Index?

This concluding chapter considers Andy Warhol’s a: a novel as a monumental realization of the implications of Cage’s 4’33”, a shattered text which represents a compendium of almost all the language practices we have encountered so far. Durationally-structured according to the lengths of the audiotape cassettes used by the recording apparatus, the novel’s transcribed form records the unforeseen accidents and distortions caused by its own process of production. Strictly numerically ordered according to the number of cassettes, the 451-pages of transcribed speech replicate almost every formal device of twentieth-century avant-garde and experimental poetics from the fractured syntax and pulverized words of dada poetics to the numbered paragraphs, double columns, gaping holes and dysfunctioned punctuation of postwar poets like Ashbery and Mac Low. Comprised of found language generated by a found structure, a: a novel represents the logical extension, and perhaps the logical conclusion, of the readymade project.
CHAPTER 3: The Poetics of Chance & Collage

In a 1974 conversation in the journal *Boundary 2*, the poet, critic and anthologist Jerome Rothenberg proposed that a new model for American poetry had emerged after WWII: “since the 1950s ... we have been working increasingly with a performance model of the poem, for which the written versions serve as the notation of the score.” Rothenberg’s own interest lies in the poem as a vehicle for collective participatory ritual. Yet the notion of poetry as a notation – as language that is inseparably instruction, record, and activated inscription – introduces conceptual possibilities that are by no means bound to oral realization. Instead, some of the most innovative poetic experiments turned to experimental music as a model, seeking to redefine poetry as an “expanded field of sound.”

This expanded field of sound, it is important to remember, implied not only new materials and new structuring properties but a shift from the intentions of the composer towards the perceptual capacities of the listener. While twentieth-century composers from Charles Ives to George Antheil had incorporated everything from police sirens and bird calls to folk songs in an expanded modernist aesthetic, Cage went further than other composers in not simply incorporating non-musical sounds, but using them to dismantle the syntactic continuity and structural underpinnings of western compositional practice. His compositions of the 1930s and 1940s assembled clusters of unpitched percussive sounds and fragmented found materials, and increasingly suspended these in long stretches of silence. And by the early 1950s, Cage turned to chance-based procedures to open music up to a wider world of unforeseen and unintended sounds and a larger ethics of listening – “accepting that continuity that happens,” he proposed in “Lecture on Something,” rather than imposing a particular continuity that excludes all others.

In so doing, Cage’s work grappled with the deeper implications of collage strategies – implications that go far beyond the jarring effects of juxtaposed fragments of vernacular materials. In their structural openness to “found” and pre-existing materials, collage practices implicitly undermine the position of the author and erode distinctions between “writing” and “reading,” between production and reception. As we will see, this intuition will haunt even the most far-reaching poetic experiments with found materials.

As poetry came into contact with experimental music and other art forms in the postwar era, two distinct types of practice emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One model, discussed in chapter two, adopted from musical notation the format of the short, enigmatic instructional text. The condensed “event scores” or “word pieces” of artists like George Brecht, Simone Forti, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Yoko Ono, Mieko Shiomi and La Monte Young propose some kind of action or process or experience for the reader/performer. Their language is usually colloquial, even instrumental, consisting of deeply prosaic everyday statements comprised of short, simple vernacular words, often presented without syntactic disruption, temporal formalization, or other overtly “poetic” devices or effects.

The second strategy, most closely identified with the work of Jackson Mac Low, almost directly transfers into poetry a set of Cagean musical strategies: chance composition and indeterminate performance, juxtapositions and superimposition of pre-existing material, the
isolation of individual units in distended fields of time and space, and the generation of textual forms "activated" in performance. Echoing strategies used by Cage in talks like "Composition as Process," such work appears allied with the composer’s own understanding of poetry as "not prose ... simply because poetry is one way or another formalized. It is not poetry by virtue of its content or ambiguity, but by reason of allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words." But while Cage’s admittedly idiosyncratic lectures retained vital communicative functions despite his use of "rhythmic structures," Mac Low in particular used the musical score to relocate poetry as something akin to performed sound.

To understand these efforts to transpose Cagean musical strategies into language, we need to place Mac Low’s chance-composed poems of the 1950s in relation to the better-known and more loosely aleatory work of John Ashbery. Discussing these two poets side by side inevitably evokes a set of institutional polarities. Ashbery, winner of every major literary prize and widely regarded as "the most important living American poet," has successfully negotiated the transitions from Yale younger poet to avant-garde marginality to literary canonicity, as his fifty-year poetic output has spawned an ever-expanding industry of publication, criticism and scholarship. Mac Low, several years his senior, was the almost archetypical underground poet, whose early works received delayed publication in the most marginal of venues, and who, despite his fifty-year involvement in New York’s downtown art world, attained relative visibility only through the belated (and in some respects problematic) embrace of his work by the loose grouping of experimental writers referred to as "language poets."* In the 1950s, however, these institutional disparities were not yet evident, as both writers undertook a series of experiments with found materials and aleatory compositional strategies, significantly informed by contemporary art and music.

In a series of poems from the late 1950s published in his second book, The Tennis Court Oath, Ashbery famously employed improvisatory techniques to cull fragments of prior texts into fractured compositions understood in analogy to Abstract Expressionist painting as "a sort of record of its own coming-into-existence." A few years earlier, Mac Low had begun devising systematic methods for selecting and organizing fragments from published "source texts" in order to generate shattered poems designed for collaborative public performance and bodily enactment. The dominant critical receptions of both projects – the assimilation of Mac Low into a purely oral "performance poetry" and the emphatic inscription of Ashbery’s poems within a Western lyric tradition of agonistic self-discovery and displaced autobiography – privilege a quasi-atavistic "orality" or a highly-contrived poetic "voice," neither of which can account for their procedural reanimation of existing texts.

Instead, taken together, Ashbery and Mac Low’s 1950s experiments represent a crucial moment in the transformation of collage aesthetics into process-based models in postwar American literature. Both Mac Low’s 1954-55 “5 biblical poems” and Ashbery’s 1958 long-poem “Europe” borrow from existing texts to fragment sentences, fracture syntax, and isolate individual words in expanse of blank space, eroding “meaning” and poetic form to an extent rarely seen in American poetry. Despite their frequent dismissal as "inconsequential nonsense" and "meaningless banality," these works are by no means without signification. Through operations of selection, recombination and re-enactment, questions of subjectivity and historicity surface persistently in both poets’ works. Their poems require modes of analysis targeted at the apparently desubjectifying strategies employed – improvisatory and procedural generation of one text from another – that position the author as something other than the conventional "source" of the work or that bypass writing altogether.
One could, of course, argue that the programmatic samplings of Ashbery and Mac Low merely foreground operations of citationality and re-use inherent in all textuality. By its constitution as a collection of repeatable signs, language is already a found object. In Bakhtinian terms, the word always “belongs to another.” However, unlike the submerged citationality that inhabits and defines all language, Ashbery’s and Mac Low’s collage-based poems refuse to smooth the “joins” or re-produce the continuous utterances that would reconstitute the author as the apparent subject and origin of a continuous, coherent discourse. Instead, by retaining elements of punctuation, spacing and incomplete phrases from their sources, Ashbery and Mac Low present their borrowed words as disembodied from other texts, whose printed marks they retain and recirculate. The broken syntax, isolated words and aggressive spacings of their collage-based poems make no effort to erase the shattering effects of this dislodging.

This historical return to practices of collage and appropriation emerged as a radical challenge to then-dominant poetic models in the United States – models, as Marjorie Perloff has argued, of a highly conventionalized British and American lyric: the purified, unified “voice” of a distinct authorial subject, one which, if not no longer following distinctive structures of sound patterning, meter, and versification, nonetheless achieved, through codified forms of “free verse,” a structural coherence and mastery of tone and variation consistent with the lyric subject. Of course, these lyric conventions had already been questioned and even dismantled by, among others, the radically anti-syntactic and collage-based works of poets Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and Kurt Schwitters. Yet this alternative tradition remained repressed in a mainstream Anglo-American verse culture deeply invested in meaning, intention and personal expression – and averse to breaking down language, syntax and the very processes of meaning-production. As postwar American poets gradually re-engaged with Cubism, Dada and the historical legacies of early twentieth century avant-gardes, for many, these strategies were crucially reanimated by the experimental music.

Resonate Fragments

In a literary tempest that has long since become legend, Ashbery’s inclusion of “Europe” and similar poems in his 1962 volume *The Tennis Court Oath* set off a critical firestorm in the pages of mainstream venues including the *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor* and *Saturday Review*. Viewed in retrospect, the public controversy exhibits a ludicrous degree of hyperbole. In the *Hudson Review*, John Simon famously protested “Mr. Ashbery has perfected his verse to the point where it almost never deviates into – nothing so square as sense! – sensibility, sensuality, or sentences.” Harold Bloom famously termed “the long spiel called ‘Europe’” “a fearful disaster,” declaring that such linguistic fragments could not qualify as poetry: “Poems may be like pictures, or like music, or like what you will, but if they are paintings or musical works, they will not be poems. The Ashbery of *The Tennis Court Oath* may have been moved by De Kooning and Kline, Webern and Cage, but he was not moved to the writing of poems. Nor can I accept the notion that this was a necessary phase in the poet’s development, for who can hope to find any necessity in this calculated incoherence?”

In the decades since its publication, *The Tennis Court Oath* has acquired a legendary status, serving as the object of all-too-neatly polarized critical and aesthetic claims: dismissed by more traditional academic critics like Bloom and Helen Vendler, who prefer the later, more meditative Ashbery whose work continues in the line of lyrical American modernists like Wallace Stevens, the book’s more radical experiments have been enthusiastically embraced by
“language poets” and others in search of a more aggressively dissonant strain of American (post) modernism. It has become a critical doxa that it is not a question of reading Ashbery, but of which Ashbery one reads, “early” or “late.”

Given these stakes, how does one read a poem such as “Europe”? The 22-page text is aggressively cut into 111 numbered sections, comprised of mostly short, elliptic lines, as in these from the opening:

1.
To employ her
construction ball
Morning fed on the
light blue wood
of the mouth
cannot understand
feels deeply)

2.
A wave of nausea—
numerals

3.
a few berries

4.
the unseen claw
Babe asked today
The background of poles roped over
into star jolted them

5.
filthy or into backward drenched flung heaviness
lemons asleep pattern crying

(TCO, 64)

Yet such sequences alternate with, for instance, paragraphs of apparently intact prose:

8.
In the failing twilight of the wintry afternoon all looked dull and cheerless. The car stood outside with Ronald Pryor and Collins attending to some slight engine trouble – the fast, open car which Ronnie sometimes used to such advantage. It was covered with mud, after the long run from Suffolk, for they had started from Harbury long before daylight, and, until an hour ago, had been moving swiftly up the Great North Road, by way of Stafford, Grantham and Doncaster to York. There they had turned away to Ripon, where, for an hour, they had eaten and rested. In a basket the waiter had placed some cold food with some bread and a bottle of wine, and this had been duly transferred to the car.

All was now ready for the continuance of the journey. (TCO, 65)

And, typical of Ashbery, self-reflexive lines including:

10.
He had mistaken his book for garbage. (TCO, 65)
"Europe" was, in critic John Shoptaw's words, "scaffolded on a forgotten novel" – composed of sections taken from a WWI era British children's book, Beryl of the Biplane by William Le Queux, that Ashbery "picked up by accident" on a Paris quay. Direct comparisons with its source material, provided in Shoptaw's 1994 study On the Outside Looking Out, allow us to observe Ashbery's culling, cutting and re-ordering of snippets of text, typed up in his manuscript with capitalization, page placement, and punctuation largely intact. It is the poem's ordering devices – the numerical sequencing, division into stanzas, and carefully-spaced lineation – that impose a degree of formalization, of conventions of reading, onto what might initially appear as linguistic chaos.

The difficulty encountered in any attempt to mark the stresses of the more disjunctive lines, much less read them aloud, quickly confirms that Ashbery's poetics here is a poetics of the page – not of "voice," speech, or oral performance. His collage draws from explicitly printed sources, and is composed to be read, or scanned, visually, on the page. Yet despite the jagged edges and uneven lines, "Europe" has little of the dynamic, dispersive energy of literary precedents such as Mallarmé's Un Coup de Dés. Instead the shattered text feels immobilized, as if trapped by the implacable series of numbers. Uneven indentation, irregular spacing, and scraps of punctuation rendered dysfunctional by incompleteness reinforce this effect of textual "fixing," which is made explicit in the atypical gridded section near the end:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>blaze</th>
<th>aviators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>out</td>
<td>dastardly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(TCO, 82)

As we know from statements by Ashbery, the poem was composed in the fall of 1958 at the Paris home of Henry Mathews, the expatriate American experimental novelist, and publisher of Locus Solus, who helped found the Oulipo group in 1960. Traveling in Europe without a good grasp of French, Ashbery found both foreign and his "own" language rendered strangely impenetrable and inaccessible to him. In a 1976 interview, he recounts how, while writing other poems in The Tennis Court Oath, he used vernacular source materials as a spur for improvisation: "I remember writing it in this state of confusion about what I wanted to do. I would sit down and cover pages without really knowing what I had written. I'd get American magazines like Esquire, open the pages, get a phrase from it, and then start writing on my own. When I'd run out, I'd go back to the magazine. It was pure experimentation. I didn't really consider these to be poems."

Alongside other possible influences, models, and sources of permission for this project – from Gertrude Stein, Raymond Roussel, and Giorgio diChirico's Hebdromeros to postwar American painting – Ashbery singles out, on a number of occasions, the enormous impact of his encounter with the music of John Cage. In the 1976 interview, he recalls:

In the early fifties I went through a period of intense depression and doubt. I couldn't write for a couple of years. I don't know why. It did coincide with the beginnings of the Korean War, the Rosenbergs case, and McCarthyism. Though I
was not an intensely political person, it was impossible to be happy in that kind of
climate. It was a nadir.

I was jolted out of this by going with Frank O’Hara – I think it was New Year’s
Have you ever heard that piece? It hasn’t been recorded. It was a series of
dissonant chords, mostly loud, with irregular rhythm. It went on for over an hour
and seemed infinitely extendable. The feeling was an open determinism – that
what happened was meant to happen, no matter how random or rough or patchy it
seemed to be. I felt profoundly refreshed after listening to that. I started to write
again shortly afterwards. I felt that I could be as singular in my art as Cage was in
his.\footnote{\text{[Figure 3.3]}}

This account echoes an earlier recollection, in his introduction to O’Hara’s posthumous
Collected Poems, in which Ashbery describes Music for Changes as:

\begin{quote}
a piano work lasting over an hour and consisting, as I recall, entirely of
autonomous tone-clusters struck seemingly at random all over the keyboard. It
was aleatory music, written by throwing coins in a method adapted from the I
Ching. The actual mechanics of the method escaped me then as it does now: what
mattered was that chance elements could combine to produce so beautiful and
cogent a work. It was further, perhaps for us, ultimate proof not so much of
“Anything goes” but “Anything can come out.”\footnote{\text{17}}
\end{quote}

These last remarks alert us to certain aspects to Ashbery’s encounter with Cage: his
interest is in material and aesthetic effects, not in the compositional operations used to obtain
them, much less the philosophic rationale behind these – a difference underscored by Ashbery’s
use of improvisation rather than strict chance procedures, with their greater suppression of ego
and artistic control. In particular, Ashbery singles out the relative autonomy of sounds, their
temporal extension and syntactic independence, subsequently recounting: “I also got the idea
from Anton Webern to isolate a particular word, as you would isolate a particular note, in order
to feel it in a new way.”\footnote{\text{18}}

Ashbery’s comments suggest that, even if his effects momentarily resembled the chance-
derived structures of Cage, Mac Low and others, he was far from sharing their systematically
desubjectifying impulses. While Ashbery adopted improvisatory and chance-related practices to
interrupt habit, break his stasis, and getting writing going again, this was a step towards a larger
renovation and reconstruction of poetic practice. Regarding his early experiments, Ashbery
insists, “I didn’t want to write the poetry that was coming naturally to me then … and I succeeded
in writing something that wasn’t the poetry I didn’t want to write, and yet was not the poetry I
did want to write. For me, this was a period of examining my ideas about poetry – sort of tearing
it apart with the idea that I would put it back together.”\footnote{\text{19}}

Throughout the 1970s, when he was publishing the more accessible and discursive works
that would bring him a wider readership and public acclaim, Ashbery’s references to The Tennis
Court Oath verged on disavowal: “therapy,” “an accident,” “a transitional phase,” “made up
primarily of sketches and experiments,” \footnote{\text{20}} “a kind of experiment which I did not mean to be a
permanent thing,” \footnote{\text{21}} “sort of a throwaway when I was writing it,” \footnote{\text{22}} and “more in the line of
sketches I thought I would recycle into something more finished."23 Regarding the book’s publication – apparently made possible by the poet Donald Hall who was then serving on Wesleyan’s editorial committee – Ashbery claimed in 1980 that: “The opportunity came about very suddenly, and when it did, I simply sent what I had been doing. But I never expected these poems to see the light of day.”24 Thus it comes as a surprise to find Ashbery – in a 1985 interview conducted after preparing his Selected Poems – admit that he “hadn’t read most of the poems in The Tennis Court Oath—my second book, the one everybody throws up their hands over – in about twenty-five years. And some of them are a lot better than I thought… I was surprised at how really interesting they are, because I’d concluded that they probably weren’t very good.”25

What makes The Tennis Court Oath so difficult to assimilate into Ashbery’s own narrative, or into that of postwar American poetry more generally? As Andrew Ross reminds us, regardless of whether one assesses the book as a generative “transitional period” or as an “esthetic failure,” “the epistemological model for … these kinds of critical pronouncements is, of course, that of the unified, coherent field of the ‘author,’ replete with a recognizable career trajectory” – a notion of authorship the poems themselves put into question.26

At stake in poems such as “Europe” is the complex historical renegotiation of avant-garde legacies carried out amidst the postwar conditions of mass culture and reification – in which the shards and scraps of once-radical aesthetic projects quickly become absorbed into publicity, advertising, fashion, and the mass media. As Ross notes, Ashbery’s appropriation of collage strategies cannot be read merely as a matter of formal resemblance – the dominant discourse of even many sympathetic literary-critical accounts – but must be seen as one of historical citation and reconstruction carried out under the conditions of the modern mass media. The recycling of early twentieth-century poetic strategies occurs within a culture of mechanical reproduction that The Tennis Court Oath both participates in and actively resists. Working in the 1950s, both Ashbery and Mac Low inhabit this historical tension – between the operations of fragmentation and reproducibility that animated cubism and emerging forms of Pop Art, and the quasi-romantic gestural spontaneity promised by action painting, already complicated by an implicit indexicality. As we will see, both writers negotiate these conflicts by inverting conventional relations between orality and print, action and artifact.

Let us return, as it were, to “Europe.” Comprised of unevenly indented yet systematically numbered sections, with both words and punctuation scattered across the page, the poem resists reconstitution into the transparent self-disclosing voice of the lyric subject. Indeed, it presents what feel like remnants of a shattered manuscript, isolating individual words in highly elliptic but narratively resonant passages such as the following:

26.

water

thinking

a

27.

A notice:

28.

wishing you were a

the bottle really before the washed
handed over to her:
   hundreds
light over her
   hanging her
   you can remember

This precise spatial arrangement attests to Ashbery’s use of a typewriter to compose the poem—corroborated by Shoptaw’s reproduction of a page of the typed manuscript, with its minimal handwritten corrections. In their replication of punctuation, placement and spacing from the source text, Ashbery’s careful renderings register not only words but also gaps and absences as a kind of textual sign. Situated in 1950s poetic practice, the poem’s typewritten form inevitably calls to mind Charles Olson’s famous pronouncement, in his 1950 manifesto “Projective Verse,” that the typewriter will offer poets capacities for the notation of time and sound resembling those of the musical score: “It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions, even of part of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and bar a musician has had. For the first time, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech.”

Olson presents the typewriter as the recording medium of the spontaneous rhythms of poetic speech and kinetic experience: a mechanical device that paradoxically restores to the writer the somatic energies of language systematically purged by the industrial standardization of print culture. Against the “closed” academic verse, “that verse which print bred,” he calls for a new “composition by field” that will engage all the “projectile,” “percussive,” and “prospective” energies of human speech, breath and life. In Olson’s poetry, this pulsational, bodily dimension surfaces in a spatially-dispersed line whose discontinuities and disrupted syntax register the poet’s vital breath: “all parts of speech suddenly, in composition by field, are fresh for both sound and percussive use.” Yet as Michael Davidson reminds us, this oral imperative contributes to an idealized immediacy and “pervasive phonoentrism” that represses the discursive and technical infrastructure of experimental poetries. While Olson can acknowledge that the role of the machine (in the relatively anodyne form of the typewriter) in such notation, he cannot address the larger conditions of the mechanical recording, reproduction and transmission of speech: technologies of phonography and audiotape that are the precise historical conditions under which a poet can, “without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech.” Such reproductive media, Davidson notes, would seem “the very antithesis to any poetics of unmediated presence.”

Olson’s manifesto, of course, does not describe Ashbery’s project, which can hardly be said to entail recording “the listening he has done to his own speech.” Yet despite the obvious discrepancies, its terms illuminate crucial aspects of Ashbery’s work. The shifting, pulsing rhythms registered in “Europe” are not those of bodily breath or poetic voice, but the peculiar energies and intensities of print itself—what 1960s critical theorists will identify as the immanent generativity and structural iterability of all writing. In “Europe,” Ashbery employs the typewriter as a notational device, one that allows him to record these fragments of shattered text and re-orchestrate them through an arbitrarily imposed numerical schema. It is the numbers that provide the “notational” function, modulating the text’s pacing and visual dispersion. Asked about their “meaning,” Ashbery replies: “They’re just a way of breaking it up into short, discrete fragments, so that the poem wouldn’t be read as a continuous whole. I was aiming at making a
lot of splintered fragments, and collecting them all under a series of numbers. It is rather
discouraging to look ahead and see how many are still to come. This kind of discouragement –
which affects you, for instance, when you open a foreign grammar and see how many lessons are
ahead – is one thing that I wanted to get into it.\textsuperscript{33}

Rather than carrying semantic or hierarchical significance, the typed numbers are a pure
ordering principle, analogous to Cage's externally generated time brackets. Just as Cage's
subjection of sounds to mathematically generated "measures" served to dissociate structure and
materials, Ashbery's subjection of his "splintered fragments" to arbitrary numerical ordering
dislodges them from the conventional linearity of text. What makes this device compelling is that
it is generated from within the linguistic materials themselves, since the structure of the series, of
"one thing after another," is immanent to language.\textsuperscript{34} Overt serial ordering of these compiled
scraps activates inherent properties of dissociation, deferral and delay. As Ashbery's analogy to a
grammar book suggests, the numbers introduce into the poem a kind of durational measure that
disrupts readerly immersion – not unlike the experimental film viewer who looks back toward
the projector to see how much film has left to run.

It is this sense of the poem as an open container – a notational structure that permits any
number or kind of textual fragment or spacing – that may be Ashbery's true debt to Cage. Just as
Cagean principles of "non-continuity" propose that even when no order is imposed on sounds in
a temporal sequence, one will emerge anyway, Ashbery insists that "a bunch of words strung
together loosely" can carry meaning and affect.\textsuperscript{35} Let us recall Ashbery's description of Music of
Changes as "a series of dissonant chords, mostly loud, with irregular rhythm. It went on for over
an hour and seemed infinitely extendable. The feeling was an open determinism – that what
happened was meant to happen, no matter how rough or patchy it seemed to be." These words
provide a better description of "Europe" than almost any existing critical account.

What we encounter in "Europe" is the uneasy transition from an earlier collage aesthetics
of semiotic disruption and fragmentation to an emerging process-based or procedural model,
which understands the poem as the record of a process. Ashbery relates his quest for an "open
form," in which the process of writing poetry becomes the poem, to the example of Jackson
Pollock's paintings.\textsuperscript{36} A reading of Pollock's paintings, produced on the floor through
improvisatory movements, as a kind of indexical trace or record had emerged by 1950 with
Robert Rauschenberg's body prints on blueprint paper (made with Susan Weil) and in the
Automobile Tire Print executed with John Cage – and was popularized in critical accounts like
Allan Kaprow's 1956/58 essay "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock." Even when Ashbery dismisses
the poems as transitional experiments, he describes them as "preserved" in The Tennis Court
Oath. And indeed, "Europe" represents a kind of visual artifact, like a snapshot of the ceaseless
activity of textuality, an instantaneous recording of language made possible by the typewriter.

This precise inscription and reproduction of mechanically-reproduced words arguably
aligns Ashbery with emerging forms of proto-Pop art – particularly those of Rauschenberg and
Jasper Johns, which understood images, absences, and gestural processes as reproducible signs.\textsuperscript{37}
In a landscape already saturated with signs, actions of cutting and elimination would take on
particular significance – as Ashbery recounted his fascination with Rauschenberg's 1951 Erased
DeKooning Drawing: "Wouldn't there be enough left that there would be some thing? If so, how
much? Or if not, how much could be erased and still have the 'sense' of the original left?"\textsuperscript{38}

Through culling and radical ellipsis, "Europe" plays with the effects of such erasure:
despite its apparent dismantling, the feeling of the source text remains, as inchoate impressions
of paranoia and suspense hover amongst the ruins. However, Ashbery never pursues the
productivity of silence or negation to the degrees that Cage and Rauschenberg would, at least momentarily, attempt. Instead, in The Tennis Court Oath, he stages both the mark and its absence as signs, as conventions that can be activated, repeated, and manipulated. In so doing, Ashbery establishes as great a distance from Olson’s “projective verse” of bodily pulsation and breath as Rauschenberg and Johns do from the apparent gestural spontaneity of DeKooning or Pollock. While the speech-based New American Poetry embraced spontaneity, instantaneity and presence in the face of a larger culture of reproducibility and sign-exchange value, as Ross notes, “there is little in Ashbery’s work, early or late, that could be characterized in terms of an ‘instantist’ poetics.” Instead, it is the very citationality of Ashbery’s poetry – with its endless deft allusions and sinuous montaging of found materials and styles – that will paradoxically emerge as something like his signature style.

Yet the turn Ashbery’s work later took – fashioning an identifiable poetic “voice” from a collection of found fragments – tends to foreclose other possibilities contained in “Europe.” Just as pop artists like Warhol pursued the “transformation of photo-montage aesthetics,” in Benjamin Buchloh’s terms, from the intensive fragmentation and semiotic disruption of dada collage to the paratactic and serial accumulation of singularized images, “Europe” suspends single words or groupings of words within the serially organized numerical sequence. While other poems, like “America,” have numbered sections, these function more like conventional stanzas, simply demarcating parts. Only “Europe” generates real tension between the implacable seriality of the numbers, and the apparently chaotic scattering of snippets of texts. Yet to pursue these implicit serial or systems logics would arguably take one far from poetry. Despite Ashbery’s sense of a dialectic between meaning and randomness, ultimately, he is more interested in aesthetic effects than procedural operations.

“Europe” employs a variety of meters, lines, dictions and syntaxes to create an “open field” of dispersed fragments – snippets of texts whose narrative and mood shift and scatter. Yet although the strict numerical sequencing and severed phrases play with the arbitrariness and anonymity that haunts all language, the fragments are ultimately too resonant not to make sense – carefully providing enough pieces and clues to permit readers to assemble their own tantalizing narratives. Despite its apparent opacity, the poem yields perhaps all-too-easily to conventional techniques of close reading and textual analysis. For instance, by exhuming a buried narrative from once unintelligible fragments, Shoptaw’s “homotextual” reading ultimately suggests that, for all its associational syntax, spatial displacement, and dispersed, suggestive imagery, The Tennis Court Oath is a unified text, one employing Poundian devices of free-ranging collage which flirt with complete incoherence but eventually produce a relatively readable set of associations.

Against Syntax

Perhaps inevitably, readings of “Europe” that situate it within Ashbery’s larger poetic production tend to downplay precisely what makes it relevant here: the radically anti-syntactic elements that were taken up by experimental poets like Clark Coolidge and Vito Acconci in the mid-1960s, and by a multitude of “language poetries” in the 1970s and 1980s. While Ashbery has remarked on more than one occasion that his second book was the one he felt least close to, “Europe” provided a compelling text to a number of 1960s figures in search of alternatives to the speech-based poetics dominant at the time – including the young poet Acconci, who, in the early 1960s, sought models of “poetry as language and language play” rather than the narrative and
expressive practices more frequently associated with New York School poets and artists. Acconci, in fact, would claim Ashbery as “my first model... I read Tennis Court Oath and didn’t have any idea what it meant... Ashbery allowed words to remain words.” For Coolidge as well, it was not the suppressed “narrative ghost” that made “Europe” thrilling, but the sparse constellations of almost isolated words: “I thought, wow, he’s doing something with almost nothing!”

Acconci co-edited the magazine 0 to 9 with the poet Bernadette Mayer, producing six issues from 1967-1969. They published work by Mac Low and a host of disparate 1960s poets – Coolidge, Aram Saroyan, Hannah Weiner, and John Giorno – situating them alongside texts by conceptually oriented artworld figures like Dan Graham, Jasper Johns, Sol LeWitt, Adrian Piper, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Smithson, and Lawrence Weiner, and musicians Philip Corner and Morton Feldman. In retrospect, it is perhaps not surprising that anomalous poets of the 1960s such as Mac Low, Coolidge, and Mayer would later find themselves claimed as models of a more dissonant, disjunctive poetics by the practitioners and theorists of “Language poetry.” As poet and critic Bruce Andrews recalls, Mac Low in particular offered a model of “extremely jarring and disjunctive sequences of words ... not seen since Stein.” Already well-versed in early twentieth century avant-gardes, Mac Low turned to chance-based methods in the mid 1950s in order to explore their effects on language. Working at a time when radical Beat and Black Mountain poets aspired to complete creative freedom, Mac Low instead sought to suppress overt personal expression through procedural means. [Figure 3.4] [Figure 3.5]

Let us begin at this project’s inception, with the first and final stanzas of Mac Low’s first biblical poem, “7.11. 1.11.9.3!11.6.7!4., a biblical poem,” composed from the text of Genesis 1:1 – Numbers 34:22 on December 30th, 1954 – January 1st, 1955:

In/_____/_____/wherein the/_____/_____/made
/_____/_____/eat lest they/_____/and taken/_____/_____/the
eight
/_____/twenty/_____/_____/shal take waters the ark/_____/_____/_____/heart any/_____/_____/servant same sons/_____/_____/And and of
/_____/_____/_____/in/_____/thou against unto took/_____/_____/_____/of /_____/_____/Kadesh /_____/be that and /_____/and /_____/_____/_____/_____/_____/left
And /_____/_____/them to/_____/families:
of
/_____/_____/_____/_____/_____/_____/_____/_____/the daughter, /_____/_____/_____/_____/_____/_____/the
the
with /_____/_____/thou the /_____/_____/_____/And /_____/for
This /_____/_____/make kings /_____/_____/_____/_____/_____/_____/the /_____/
Although the poem was not published until 1968, archival records support Mac Low's dating of the composition, as he showed it to friends and enclosed copies of the first three "biblical poems" in letters sent to Cage and M.C. Richards on February 1, 1955. All the biblical poems were meant to be read aloud, and Mac Low would designate the "5th biblical poem," a "simultaneity," as "the first biblical play," to be performed through collaborative vocal enactment. The poems were initially envisioned to include piano tones, and although this idea was evidently dropped, they were conceived on a musical model as "time-structured chance-works for speaking voice." Yet these poems also exist as we first encounter them, as words, spaces and marks on a page.

How do we read such a poem? We are perhaps initially struck by the intrusive slashes — typographical notations that Mac Low terms "boxes" — /____/ that indicate "silent durations" during the oral delivery of the poem. On the page, these produce a kind of "Mad-lib" quality of fragmentation and removal of information. Yet despite this emptied out quality, unexpected continuities emerge and take on unexpected weight through what Mac Low terms "phrase accretion": "shall waters the ark," "servant same sons," "And and of," "Thou against unto took." Lacking conventional syntactic or semantic regularities that would generate meaning, interpretation quickly gravitates to the handful of substantives, which immediately establish the narrative context of the Old Testament: waters, ark, heart, servant, sons, Kadesh. Although intended as temporal markers for oral delivery, the "boxes" also read as blanks, suppressions, elisions — place-holders for words and phrases that have been removed or that we "read" silently in their place. We might see them as breaking-up the continuous drone of the biblical speaker, or as reminiscent of the kinds of gaps, tatters and fragments one finds in manuscripts of Sappho, with their holes a sign of history as ruin.

One is also struck by the profusion of shifters, articles and other connective words: thither, the, they, them, this, thou, that, there, and, of. The accumulation of articles without substantives, prepositions without objects, and piled-up conjunctions has strange effects. By isolating and dysfunctioning words which usually generate syntactic relationships, Mac Low's shattered syntax foregrounds the very linguistic functions they cannot serve: pointing, linking, subordinating, addressing, designating. Repetition heightens this effect. With the "of And of" of the final stanza echoing the "And and of" of the first, the most anonymous and flexible of words invite us to ponder their resonances: connection (this and that), accumulation, listing, the linking of people, objects and events; and then, location (of Jogli), lineage (son of), agency (hand of god), belonging, derivation. In such a context, "of And of" can generate meanings like "from and belonging to," "paternity and possession" — or any number of the most basic relationships between people and their world. Thus despite the poem's aggressive shattering of its "source text," it retains something of its core. Although Mac Low will later change his selection rules to eliminate such repetition, privileging words with what he terms "lexical weight," in everyday and biblical contexts these minor words carry enormous significance.

Of course, there is a certain irony in asking "how to read" these poems, since Mac Low, in his own lengthy and highly-detailed instructions, would appear to be only too happy to tell us.
For instance, his notes direct us: “all words must be audible and intelligible to everyone present. Readers must listen intently to their own voices ... and to those other readers, and to all ambient sounds audible during a reading, including those of the audience.... Words must be read soberly and seriously, but without fake solemnity or any other artificial type of delivery. Silences must never be hurried. In simultaneities, all must begin together.”

Rather than providing any kind of pointers for interpretation, for “reading” in the literary or hermeneutic sense, Mac Low’s explanatory texts are methods, instructions that tell us how to perform the works. In places, they echo Cage’s concern for “serious,” attentive performance, yet the linguistic – and specifically biblical – material, combined with the directive that “readers must listen intently to their own voices” compels other associations: with prayer, with litany, chanting – paradoxically, with much older poetic forms.

To tease out the implications of these compositional strategies, let us situate them in relation to some of Mac Low’s subsequent compositions. In “Night Walk,” Mac Low introduces chance-generated notational devices to regulate oral delivery. The poem was composed in February, 1960, from a list of 100 words, all “representing objects, actions, states of mind remembered as having figured in an actual situation. All of the words may function as nouns, i.e., be subjects, or objects of sentences.” A series of annotative letters and numbers prescribe tempo (from “Very Very Slow” – vvs – to “Very Very Rapid” – vr) and dynamics/loudness (from “ppp” – to be read “very very softly” – to “f” – for sections to be read “Loud”) – with a number at the end of each line “indicating the number of seconds of silence which shd follow that line.”

On the page, these notations impinge on the poem, as in the beginning of Section I of “Night Walk”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ms/xxx</th>
<th>standing flight</th>
<th>41</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vs/p</td>
<td>water woman silence</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s/ppp</td>
<td>two o’clock friends</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vr/ppp</td>
<td>cold hills</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vs/mp</td>
<td>twigs darkness talking</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mr/p</td>
<td>needing meaning memory</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m/mf</td>
<td>meaning finding</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r/mp</td>
<td>hair two o’clock</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ms/mp</td>
<td>man teeth revealing</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m/p</td>
<td>slipping learning finding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vvs/p</td>
<td>air fingers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r/p</td>
<td>touching freezing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vvr/ppp</td>
<td>trees sky hearing</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s/p</td>
<td>standing quiet</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the aggressive intrusion of the auxiliary notations, the poem has an oblique romanticism, with intonations of loss, betrayal, secrecy and abandonment. And within the indicated tempos and dynamics, the reader has tremendous latitude as to “readings,” by introducing pauses and verbal stresses to render arbitrary sequences into variously meaningful
phrases. Mac Low insists: “The lines of ‘Night Walk’ are unpunctuated in order that readers may freely group the words within them in any ways they see fit. The attempt shd be made, however, to group words, & not merely to read single words mechanically throughout the poem.” For all the pulverization of syntax and apparent fragmentation of language, the emotionally loaded snippets create resonant mental images – as if to demonstrate how the referential and associational dimensions of language persevere despite disordering. The text calls to mind Roman Jakobson’s research on aphasic disorders of speech, which preserve the metaphoric axis while severing the metonymic. When presented in oral performance, the fractured phrases take on a pulsational quality, of bodily palpitation, as vocal variations of sonority and pacing add expressivity to fleeting images.

Mac Low is perhaps best known for his invention of “reading through” compositions, which produce poems by using pre-chosen word sequences to “draw words” from an existing text, and arrange them into lines and stanzas. These devices, which he terms “index words” or “a seed phrases,” usually comprise a name, title, or selected phrase; each letter selects a word or word-string from the text that begins with the same letter. The number of letters in each word of the phrase then determines the length of lines and stanzas. The poem’s length simply depends on when the chosen methods run out of material in the selected text. The mechanism allowed Mac Low to get rid of the labor-intensive “chance procedures,” such as tossing dice, that he had used in composing the “5 biblical poems.” By using the title or a simple phrase, Mac Low notes, he could generate poems from “practically everything I happened to be reading from May thru October, 1960. In Mac Low’s book-length Stanzas for Iris Lezak, the “6 Gitanjali for Iris” reconstitute the “Gitanjali” (“Offerings”) of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore via the memorable acrostic, “My girl’s the greatest fuck in town, I love to fuck my girl”:

I

My you
Gain is rainy life
See
The Here end
Gain rainy end again the end see the
Feet. Utter. Cry know
Is Now,
The outside when Now,

(18 seconds of silence)

Is
Life outside void end
The outside
Feet. Utter. Cry know.
My you.
Gain is rainy life.

Culling words from Tagore’s text without eliminating repeated words, the procedures of “writing through” allows the musical repetition of phrases that Mac Low retains within each stanza; in subsequent stanzas, “g-i-r-l” will yield “Gifts is river, light,” “God is renew life,” and
“Ground is resting languidly.” The lyric effect is more apparent here. Even without the “seed phrase,” the words function as, in effect, a love poem – reflecting the nature of the source text.

Along with instructions for performing the poems as simultaneities, Mac Low’s “Notes on the Methods Used in Composing & Performing Stanzas for Iris Lezak” details diverse procedures used to compose the 396-page collection, which was not published in full until 1972. One can make a case, as poet and performer Ellen Zweig has, that such “writing through” poems, however initially opaque, can hold deeply personal resonances: we are, after all, reading Mac Low’s books with him while he selects the words. And these are never “strict” chance procedures, since Mac Low, like Cage, constantly makes and revises decisions about method, as regards source materials, repetition of words, word strings, etc – procedures developed, again much like Cage, via trial and error, in relation to how “interesting” he considered the results to be.

How do we account for such poems? Despite differences in compositional method and aesthetic result, all result from Mac Low’s 1954 adoption of nonintentional procedures that suppress conventional forms of authorship. Mac Low recalls his turn to “chance” methods with much of the sense of crisis and stagnation that characterize Ashbery’s references to “Europe”: “It was two days before New Years, 1955. I was very depressed. I’d been invited to a New Year’s party in Stony Point and had decided not to go, so I was sitting in my kitchen on Avenue C. For a year or so I’d been talking a lot to John Cage about chance music, as well as hearing his early chance-composed works, and I’d done several chance-generated piano pieces that I didn’t much like.”

Like Ashbery, Mac Low singles out Cage’s 1951 Music of Changes for its extraordinary aesthetic effects: “I became interested in the whole field because of the stunning use John Cage made of chance operations, notably, the magnificent ‘Music of Changes’ for solo piano.” However, unlike Ashbery’s collage poem “Europe,” whose semiotic indeterminacy as the textual “record” of a process nonetheless results in a text to be read on the page, the very object of analysis in Mac Low’s work is harder to specify. In all these poems, the instability of the interface between “source text,” compositional method, resulting text, and performed oral realization creates unexpected obstacles to analysis – since the question of where one locates the “work” resists determination. Barrett Watten, for instance, argues that Mac Low’s procedures effectively translate from a “source text” to “the final target form, the work’s performance.” Yet even Mac Low’s own accounts of why he began “to view performance as central and texts as primarily notations for performance (if only by a silent reader)” do not necessarily imply that such “notations for performance” must be approached only as scores for live performance, rather than in terms of the realization enacted by reading words on a page. As I have suggested in relation to the proto-Fluxus “event scores,” it is the implicit duality of the text as score – inseparably words on the page, and actions to be performed – that needs to be addressed.

While performance is key to Mac Low’s overall project, the emphasis on live enactment as Mac Low’s “target form” tends to overdetermine readings of the texts and close down possibilities inherent in this series of translations and transformations. To focus on the produced surface of the text – the poem as an artifact – rather than the procedures used to generate it may neglect procedural dimensions of Mac Low’s work. Yet to completely overlook this level risks transforming Mac Low into a designer of systems without considering their realization as words on a page. For it is in the interplay between his methods and their results that we can observe the complexity of the relation between structure and chance in Mac Low’s work. Rather than reducing the “poem-as-process” to a closed structure, we can read Mac Low’s
“5 biblical poems,” like “Europe,” as traces of operations, of readings and rewritings, that continue without end. While this potential may be foregrounded in certain types of texts, all language – continually reactivated in reading, writing, speaking and hearing – can be understood as a “real-time” structure, as a process that is happening.55 Looking back at the compositional and performance protocols of Mac Low’s “5 biblical poems,” we can view them as methods for radically decontextualizing and fragmenting any text, subjecting it to stanzic form, and aggressively inserting what Cage terms “musical elements (time, sound)” into the world of words. Indeed, we might perversely read Mac Low’s procedures as a machine for turning any text into a kind of poetry – an insight confirmed by Mac Low’s later introduction of “reading through” procedures that allowed him to compose poems while reading on the subway.56

What kind of poetry, though, could this possibly be? It is poetry without an intact “author,” without a coherent narrative or enunciative subject, although its words are paradoxically re-embodied through the performing voice or voices. It is emptied of conventional meaning, though not of rhythm, diction, and certain associative qualities. It is a poem in which once organic structures of vocalization and rhythm (as poetic extensions of bodily breath and sung rhythm) are now produced mechanistically, through an arbitrarily-imposed method: as Mac Low recalls, “using chance operations & similar means, using words as John & other composers ... were using sounds in the early 50s” and “systematically finding ways of getting sound events into compositions & performances without the composer making the choices” by inventing methods “to extract materials selected in some other way.”57

Mac Low’s experimentation with musical structures and linguistic materials systematically tests out the effects of translating from one medium to another. While he only acknowledges this in poems like Machault (1955) – composed by “translating the pitches of Guillaume Machaut’s motet Quant Theseus ... into a gamut of words” from a nineteenth-century children’s book58 – such “translation” operates in all of Mac Low’s poems that use numerical schemas to organize words into lines and stanzas. The brief sequences of “seed words” or “index words” used in Mac Low’s “reading through” poems are perhaps more important as counting devices (by establishing how many words each line and stanza contains, they determine form) than as selection devices, which determine precisely which words will be used.59

Oddly, Mac Low’s accounts often focus on the use of “chance” procedures to select individual elements – a relatively superficial operation – rather than on the architectural infrastructure that produces compositions as quantitatively structured “neutral containers” for a number of individual “events.” The numerical schemas that generate the lines and stanzas of the “5 biblical poems” employ techniques adopted from Cage’s use of externally generated time structures to organize compositions of autonomous materials. Composing the Music of Changes, Cage employed elaborate quantification schemas to produce complex clusters of sound divorced from any conventional syntax or musical continuity. For the “5 biblical poems,” Mac Low used dice to generate series of integers – integers he then used to construct schemas that dislodge words from their linguistic and textual underpinnings, and recorded in the title for each poem, e.g. “7.1.11.1.11.9.3!11.6.7!4., a biblical poem.”50

As Mac Low explains in “Methods for Reading the ‘5 biblical poems,’” “the numbers in the title refer to the stanzic structure of each poem, arrived at via strict chance procedures”: “the integers show how many events (single words or silences) occur in each line of a stanza.”51 Mac Low translates the Cagean “sound event,” which can incorporate both sound and silence, into a kind of “language event” that can either be a word or its absence. Although this terminology
quickly slides over to refer to the recursive and performative aspects of Mac Low’s poems – e.g. Steve McCaffery’s “self-generating language events” – it initially describes a quantificatory model derived from Cage’s “time structures” and use of tables to compile a set of unique sound materials. The “event” is an externally generated unit of measure that replaces conventional poetic measures of syllable, word, accent or metric beat.72

Yet unlike the pitch of sounds, which can be mathematically graphed as frequency, written language has no internal infrastructure susceptible to precise quantification. Like the stress marks used to determine poetic meter, properties of volume and rapidity occur only in vocalization and can be recorded on the page through some form of supplementary system – using methods like Cage’s space = time notation (which Mac low does not employ) or numerical annotations like those inserted in “Night Walk.” Applying Cagean structuring devices to words rather than sounds produces quite different effects, since resonance and association clings to the most minimal lexical fragment or sequence. Composed of conventionally defined units – letters, phonemes, words – written language can produce “nonsense” but not “noise.”73

While in later works, like his 1961 “Word Event for George Brecht,” Mac Low will pulverize language down to the level of the phoneme and letter, his poetry generally retains the word as an intact unit. An Mac low insists that “I never think of it as only sound – as long as you’ve got words, you’ve got meaning, inescapable. Whether it’s the lexical meaning of the single words or whole sentences. I never think of it in terms of pure sound.”73 Nonetheless, by their nature, such chance procedures wreck ordinary operations of signification. This partial emptying out of meaning, however, allows other things to come through – what Mac Low describes as his turn to “working in ways that ... emphasized the intrinsic qualities of language and sound aside from whatever works made with them might express or say.”74

Within Mac Low’s musically derived structure, all “events” are equalized: words and silences hold equal “weight.” Without syntax, reference and parts of speech are partly destabilized, and new continuities or possible “word strings” emerge. In his February 1, 1955 letter to Cage, Mac Low describes “writing—if one can call it writing—I don’t know what to call it—the biblical poems & a number of other different chance poems.” Given his desire to “reveal the poetry latent everywhere,” he notes, “Sometimes they just seem a passel of damn nonsense but at other times they seem truly poetry, tho hardly ‘my’ poetry in any sense.”75 We can see these ambivalences at work as Mac Low works out the realization of the “5 biblical poems” in his February 1, 1955 letter to M.C. Richards. He discusses possible methods for performing the work in great detail:

One is to take every word as a unit of equal duration temporally. So that one wd say that necessary wd be like 4 16th notes & one like one quarter-note. & the same for each silence.— I thought at first to use pulse beats ... Another possibility is not to use metronomic beat at all & have it read strictly like language. Faster & slower like you’d read language on paper in print I mean & both the silences & the words wd be unequal but all wd still exist somehow as signifying & nonsignifying units & the time of reading wd depend upon breathing convenience, rapidity of eye-movement & phrase-accretion, which is what I just decided to call it when several words seem to form mysteriously meaningful phrases & sometimes even whole sentences & many mottoes & exhortations (like ‘Bear up/ /mule/ /’). So either strict time or exact is a possible reading-way.76
The alternative methods for reading the poems concretely negotiate how best to adopt musical strategies to linguistic materials. The first option, which most overtly tries to conform words to musical measures, is soon rejected in favor of a greater flexibility accommodating the varying speeds and rhythms of speech — as well as the inevitable “effects of meaning” generated by the most random assortments of words. These “unintended effects” are an integral part of the compositional process, which entails “translating” a system or procedure from musical to textual notation.\(^7\)

The overt suppression of authorial agency in Mac Low’s compositional methods, however, leaves room for other, more otherworldly forces to intervene. Designed as “ways to let in other forces than oneself,”\(^8\) such chance procedures carry potential mystical overtones. While Mac Low’s letter to fellow-poet Richards details methods and procedures, his communication to Cage invokes explicitly spiritual dimensions (not cited here) as he describes how the texts worked to create unintended and yet provocative meanings:

Also the phenomenon I noticed often—of the words of the poem quite often seeming to have a direct relevance to what I was thinking as I made them although my method made any direct influence, except thru some sort of unknown ESP phenomenon, ... quite out of the question. On the other hand I’m neither egotistic enough nor trivial enough to believe that God is doing anything in the way of directly revealing something thru these. That is, anything other than reveal the poetry latent everywhere just everywhere, not just in the bible but everywhere, even the title page of a French dictionary may be a poem! (If translated properly---there are correspondences everywhere & I bet G de Nerval never thought of this possibility of finding them & revealing them).\(^9\)

Such an account seems unthinkable from Ashbery, whose activation of language has no room for the hand of god, even a protestant one. This mystical dimension extends to Mac Low’s emphasis on vocal bodily enactment of the texts, in which the word is yet again “made flesh.” The lingering sense of a hidden inscription buried beneath an existing text — mystical writings liberated by Mac Low’s “excavations” — carries biblical overtones.

By literally rather than figuratively producing a new text from the reading of an existing one, Mac Low does not overtly engage the palimpsestual procedures of manuscript cultures. Yet his poems convey a nearly exegetical zeal for revitalizing prior inscriptions — paradoxically conducted through arbitrary fragmentation and elision rather than scholarly reconstruction. Steve McCaffery proposes that Mac Low’s poems perform “a reading that is redoubled through a writing,” in effect excavating “a suppressed tendency within another text.”\(^9\) Mac Low’s consistent use of a single “source text” differentiates his found sources from those of Cage — whose *Imaginary Landscapes*, for instance, always draw on a wide assortment of materials. To restructure an entire “world of sounds,” which may include bars of Beethoven in its broadcast forms, is very different than rewriting a prior composition. Each of Mac Low’s poems results from a set of operations executed on a single source. Not unlike Ashbery’s “Europe,” Mac Low’s poems translate and preserve an existing text that they also shatter. While the obscurity of Ashbery’s pulp novel could not be further from the cultural authority and recognition of *Genesis*, each poem performs an overt re-writing that produces meaning in relation to a prior text or set of generic conventions.
Yet Mac Low’s poems are arguably not open to the kinds of readings performed on Ashbery’s work, operations of reconstructing a buried narrative, or buried subjectivity, via textual fragments. Unlike “Europe,” there is no sense of something hidden, no “crypt words” to exhume, no “shadow text” to reconstruct: everything is there, on the surface, with the sources plainly indicated. While gaping holes testify to systematic elision, this does not necessarily read as a secret or a symptom of “repression.” Thus unlike Shoptaw’s careful hermeneutic analysis of “Europe” and other poems, uncovering crossed out words in Ashbery’s original manuscripts, and identifying plausible “subjects” for otherwise-impervious passages, Mac Low’s poems do not lend themselves to a certain kind of “interpretation.” Instead, by restricting their vocabularies to a very limited set of terms, these poems explore the relationships that can be established within the most limited lexicon.

Perhaps the failure of a hermeneutic approach has led many of Mac Low’s supporters to ground his texts’ meaning in oral delivery and live performance. Such accounts of course echo Mac Low’s desire to reactivate community through collaborative performance, embracing historical avant-garde strategies, with all their collective political dimensions, as still fully credible in the postwar period. The peculiar crux of Mac Low’s project is this desire to return poetry to its ritual origins in oral performance through the vehicle of the printed word. Rather than using oral delivery to reanimate the codified rhythms and metric patterns of traditional verse, or the individualized rhythms and bodily breath of New American Poetry, Mac Low recirculates into oral delivery a fractured series of words that have been mechanically removed from any authorial or even textual source. Yet it is unclear what the effects of this recombination are: does oral performance further dismantle meaning by transforming shattered texts into performed sounds, or does it allow meaning to be contingently relocated in the body of a speaking subject?

Thus, although on the page Mac Low’s work appears similar to that of Ashbery in “Europe,” the two poets’ projects polarize precisely over the question of oral enactment, a mode that Ashbery rejects, preferring in later works to transfer speech into textuality than to reanimate texts via speech. Describing his own work, Ashbery states, “I enjoy reading it rather than hearing it read,” and elaborates: “On the one hand, the input for my poetry seems to come from colloquial talk and the inaccurate ways we present our ideas to other people and yet succeed in doing so despite our sloppiness. On the other hand, I don’t really like to hear it, I would rather see it. I can hear it better when I see it. I seldom go to poetry readings, and I don’t like performance poetry.” Citing a line in DeChirico’s Hebdomeros, “It made him flee like Orestes pursued by the Furies,” Ashbery quips: “The word ‘performance’ has that effect on me.”

For all his evident horror of oral delivery and collaborative spectacle, Ashbery’s work proposes a different type of enactment embedded within the text, one animated, as many commentators have noted, through Ashbery’s unusually slippery use of pronouns, which escape a stable reference. Shoptaw refers to this as Ashbery’s “postal or communication system,” in which the “you” constantly shifts functions. In his analysis, “This relational network requires a messenger (who may also be the sender), a message, and a receiver, to keep its terms in continual circulation. To those who have decried the ‘treachery’ of this flexible I, which tricks the reader by promising identifications it soon withdraws, Ashbery protests ‘But doesn’t this open up a book and make it more available?’  – which seems a fair question, indeed.

However different the strategies Ashbery and Mac Low propose, what both poets share is precisely their continued affirmation of an identity as poets, their affirmation of their work as poetry. However radical the formal strategies and, in Mac Low’s case, the political
commitments, both projects ultimately rein in the formal and aesthetic possibilities of "language in general" as much if not more than they expand it. By remaining within the orbit of poetry, anthologized alongside Olson or Pound or contemporary language poetry, even radical poetic practices tend to reaffirm a set of conventions that were elsewhere thrown into question. Just as Cage's work, in the words of George Brecht, "remained music," so too did these radical experiments of Ashbery and Mac Low "remain poetry." Instead, it was up to artists such as Carl Andre, Vito Acconci, On Kawara, Lawrence Weiner, and Andy Warhol, to follow through on the implications of these experiments.

2 "Lecture on Something" (c. 1951), Silence (Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 132.
3 Of course, even if these "event scores" were not usually considered poetry, they were not without poetic precedents — Ono and Young both wrote Haiku, and the artists affiliated with the Fluxus movement were aware of, for instance, Zen koans and Dadaist models such as Tristan Tzara's manifestos, Kurt Schwitters' sound poetry, and Duchamp's notebooks and writings.
5 Although informed by 1950s experimental music, Mac Low's work draws deeply from earlier Dadaist poetics and its politically-oriented project to pulverize syntax and foreground the materiality of the signifier at the cost of communicative signification. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, a variety of such "neo-dada" practices — of sound poetry, chance poetry, simultaneities and collage — would proliferate in downtown cafes, loft concerts and small magazines, particularly in visual art and performance-based contexts. These activities nonetheless remained invisible in mainstream American poetry.
6 The term "Language Poetry" describes an avowedly avant-garde group of American poets whose work first emerged around 1971 in the journal This (1971-1982), edited by Robert Grenier and Barrett Watten) and later became associated with the magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (1978-1981, edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein), whose title gave the movement its name. Poets affiliated with the movement were known for rebelling against the speech-based or oral poetics associated with Black Mountain and Beat poetics; instead, they followed the example of poets like Stein, Pound and Louis Zukofsky to reinvent an older modernist emphasis on procedure, process and the anti-referential opacity of language. A partial archive of early "Language" publications can be accessed online at Craig Dworkin's Eclipse website: http://www.princeton.edu/eclipse
16 Kostelanetz, “How to Be a Difficult Poet,” 93.
18 Kostelanetz, 96.
19 Kostelanetz, 97-98. Elsewhere he refers to this work as “a way of trying to obliterate the poetry that at the time was coming naturally to me, and which I didn’t like. It was an attempt to shuffle the cards before dealing them again … more of a therapy for me than anything that was meant to go into print” (Osti, 94).
21 Ibid.
26 Andrew Ross, “Taking the Tennis Court Oath,” in Schultz, ed., The Tribe of John, 201. Many of these arguments were developed in Ross’s earlier analysis of Ashbery in The Failure of Modernism (NY: Columbia University Press, 1987).
27 As he notes, “the preservation of published line-endings and random word-clusters gave ‘Europe’ and ‘Idaho’ an explicit textual appearance; the quoted material remained more or less ‘in quotes’” (95).
29 Olson, 147, 153.
30 Davidson, Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World, 196. Davidson notes, “Whereas the Pound/Williams generation used the typewriter to create a new visual aesthetic – the word as image or object – poets who followed them utilized that same technology in the service of an emerging oral impulse” (14).
31 Davidson, 197.
32 Ashbery was loosely affiliated with Tel Quel circles, via his friendship with Marcelin Pleynet – and Pleynet, Julia Kristeva, and Philippe Sollers were, like Ashbery, actively reading marginalized and dissident modernist authors like Rimbaud, Lautremont, Roussel, and Artaud.
33 In Osti, 94.
34 One thinks of the larger “poetics of the list” that emerges in the visual arts in the 1960s, evident in projects like Carl Andre’s poetry, Dan Graham’s 1966 Schema, Richard Serra’s 1967-68 Verb List, Lawrence Weiner’s early statements, and Robert Barry’s work.
35 Osti, 95. As Ashbery is aware, such non-continuity may be easier to accept in temporal forms like sound or film than in language: “The poetry is just what it says. It sets up a kind of imaginary field and
moves around in it, in an almost cinematic way... one might accept something in a movie just because one sees it unrolling: whereas, one might find it harder to accept something on a page because it doesn’t seem to go with what has gone on before. But I guess I don’t think that things go together in the sense that many critics do when they are analyzing a poem” (87).

36 Poulin, 250.

37 Shoptaw’s detailed historical account reports that “Ashbery saw Rauschenberg’s early collage work and the first exhibition of Jasper Johns’s paintings in New York during the winter of 1957-58” (359, note 35).


39 Ross, 196.

40 Other options suggested in “Europe” would be to pursue this serial or systems logic towards the list as a kind of self-generating structure (e.g. Dan Graham’s 1966 Schema) or as a device of nearly arbitrary accumulation (Ed Ruscha’s 1962 book Twenty-six Gasoline Stations). Or, alternately, to follow the logic of “words covering a page” toward what Vito Acconci termed “movement on a page, the page as a field for action ...” (Avalanche 6 [Fall, 1972] 4).

41 The critical turn, to read residues of subjectivity and identity in literary works that had previously been viewed (positively or negatively) as models of semiotic disruption and dispersal, echoes similar projects in art history to provide gendered or politicized readings of any number of crucial 1950s and 1960s projects – such as Cage’s 4’33”, Rauschenberg’s combines, or minimalist sculpture – that had historically been understood to operate precisely by blocking or refusing any such metaphoric or associative content. While such critical projects under certain levels of repression – the refusal to read the gay resonances of O’Hara’s or Hart Crane’s lyrics, or to understand Cage’s systematic use of desubjectifying strategies in relation to specific histories of repression – our rush to retrieve “meaning” from these once-opaque materials requires, in turn, a capacity to ignore or de-emphasize those elements that block or refuse meaning (or to read them reductively, for instance reducing Cagean “silence” to something like “the closet”). It also requires the reconsolidation of a set of authorial functions, as the subject in the world, the subject who writes, and the subject of enunciation once again fuse. See Anna Chave, “Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power,” Arts Magazine 64:5 (January, 1990); Carolyn Jones, “Finishing School: John Cage and The Abstract Expressionist Ego,” Critical Inquiry 19 (Summer 1993); and Kenneth Silver, “Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Ruse of Pop Art,” in Russell Ferguson, ed., Hand-Painted Pop (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993).

42 Vito Acconci, interview with the author, Brooklyn, October 25, 1995 – and passim.

43 In contrast, for example, to Acconci’s more hesitant attraction to Frank O’Hara’s poetry, which also offered “something concrete, but more at the level of the anecdote... You couldn’t get it down to words. You could play on the anecdote, but not on the level of the words themselves.”

44 In a 1977 talk, Coolidge recalls “Europe was absolutely the poem that turned me on and mystified me... All I saw were these constellations of words”; “Arrangement,” in Anne Waldman and Marilyn Webb, eds., Talking Poetics at the Naropa Institute: Annals of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics vol. 1 (Boulder, CO: Shambala Publications, 1978) 164.

45 Bruce Andrews, interview with author, September 4, 1998. While Mac Low’s concerns were focused on the implications of process, on how the works were constructed, the “Language” reception of Mac Low would focus more on aesthetics, on the highly syntactic and disruptive effects generated by chance procedures – and the challenge these offered to models of “colloquial language” and “speech” that had become calcified by the late 1960s. Andrew’s primary criticism of Mac Low hinged on his failure to account for the reader – in effect, his failure to edit his work – noting in particular that the problem with chance-generated and deterministic structures, after their initially liberating impact, is their capacity to generate endless material – especially once pursued with the aid of computer programs, as both Mac Low and Cage would eventually employ

Jackson Mac Low, letter to Mary Caroline Richards, dated February 1, 1955, with an undated letter to John Cage enclosed (presumably February 1, 1955), M.C. Richards Papers, Getty Research Library.

45 In a letter to Cage, Mac Low describes them as “works for speaking-voice and piano, separately & together – chance-poems-or-music – I find it difficult to separate one another as always.” Yet he adds “the piano part is not yet complete.” Jackson Mac Low, undated letter to John Cage (early January, 1955) Mandeville Special collections, UCSD. In a later interview, he states that “at the point I started using chance operations, the music and poetry came together, so the same works are very often music and poetry.”; “Craft Interview with Jackson Mac Low” [1972], in William Packard, ed., The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from New York Quarterly (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974) 227.

46 However unintentionally produced, the 1954-55 “biblical poems” even echo some of Mac Low’s 1946 series of “19 cubist poems,” all based on the irregular permutation of a small set of words: “& The” opens: “At tear the & when the & when the. / And. // At tear the & when the at tear the: // And the at, where, // At the”; in Representative Works, 12.

47 “Methods for Reading the ‘5 biblical poems,’” Representative Works, 17.

48 All details come from Mac Low’s “Night Walk: Reading Directions, Structure and Vocabulary,” Representative Works, 52-55; Mac Low’s abbreviations “shd,” “wd” and “cd,” and his use of ampersands, are, of course, marks of his allegiance to Pound.

49 In works with unorthodox notation, the texts’ unusual formats and semiotic depletion potentially inhibit interpretive freedom rather than expand it. Mac Low’s lengthy performance protocols have a compensatory quality that overdetermines the reading of the works. And his notational innovations have a contrived quality, as the “boxes,” numbers and time signatures clutter the texts. Yet like Cage’s arcane procedures and opaque, idiolectic scores, these obstructions reflect the difficulty of inventing practices for which no conventional symbolizations exist. Describing Mac Low’s efforts to “relocate poetry as performed sounds,” John Perreault notes that since poetry has “no performance notation” for aural presentation, Mac Low’s “insistence that poetry is a performance art has produced works in print that no doubt irritate and confound readers expecting poems as texts rather than poems as scripts or scores”; “The Language Performances of Jackson Mac Low,” Parnassus (1988) 210, 202.

50 Representative Works, 55.

51 Although Cage’s “writing through” poems may have become better known, it was Mac Low who originated the procedure in 1960.

52 Representative Works, 75.

53 “6 Gitinjali for Iris,” Stanzas for Iris Lezak, Representative Works, 86.


60 Tyrus Miller argues that critical emphasis on Mac Low’s poems as “bounded texts” tends to neglect their implication in compositional procedures and collaborative performances – just as procedural and performance-oriented approaches can downplay the poems’ formal and textual dimensions. Instead, these “self-generating language events” (as Steve McCaffery eloquently termed them) are, Miller argues, “encompassed in Mac Low’s work by two open-ended spaces of encounter, at once immanently referential and implicitly political; the spaces of composition and the spaces of performance.” See Miller, “Singular Examples: Exemplary Politics of the Neo-Avant-Garde” (manuscript, 2001) 194.

61 Citing Dick Higgins’ model of “matrix” or “blank form” works that generate their own particulars, Zweig proposes that “in this sort of art, the specifics are unimportant compared to the structure or set of rules designed to produce these specifics” (81). Yet in a review of Mac Low’s Asymmetries, Higgins
complains that he hears “a lot of nonsense about Mac Low not being the author so much of works as of processes” — before proceeding to note the poet’s “obsession with the act of writing”; “Driven by His Vision,” American Book Review (December/January, 1994) 18.

65 The poet and critic Charles Bernstein relates this to a Cagean model, proposing that “the Mac Lowian systematic poem foregrounds the sense of language speaking for itself, making its own sense rather than a sense imposed from outside. Words and their combinations are exhibited, just as ‘sound’ is exhibited in Cage, and allowed to find whatever sense ... they make in systems of organization decisively removed from standard syntactical and grammatical arrangements”; Content’s Dream: Essays 1975-1984 (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986) 253.

66 The mechanism — and mechanistic indifference — of these “reading through” procedures points toward Andy Warhol’s use of tape-recording as a way of producing writing in his 1968 a: a novel, and Mac Low’s later use of computer algorithms to compose poetry.


68 Written in January, 1955, the poem borrows Machault’s melody intact, replacing its notes with words; see Representative Works, 35-40.

69 As Mac Low notes “the words were there in the text waiting for me to find them”; such selection was “not a matter of ‘chance’ but of correctly carrying out a procedure whose results are unpredictable” (Mac Low, October 24, 1996 letter to Douglas Messerli).

70 In a letter to Cage, Mac Low explicitly positions the composition of the 5 biblical poems as an outgrowth of collage practice, noting that in the previous fall his “investigations mainly took the form of collages & constructions composed of found objects of all sorts” and also “treatments & mistreatments of surfaces,” before adding that, “Since Jan 1st ... I have been using a certain found object, a small red die ... which I wrenched from a collage” to compose the poems. Mac Low, undated letter to John Cage (early-January, 1955) Mandeville Special Collections, UCSD.

71 Mac Low, “Methods for Reading the 5 biblical poems,” 0 to 9 4 (1968) 65; (italics in original); reprinted (in a revised version) in Representative Works, pp.16-18.

72 Certain poetic structures are defined in purely quantitative terms: In “Night Walk,” “a line is defined as a group of 1 to 10 successive words followed by a silence of 1 – 10 seconds... A stanza is defined as a group of 1 to 10 lines followed by a silence from 11 to 70 seconds,” providing a chance-generated number to indicate the length of silence following each line/stanza. He later terms this practice “eventual verse,” meaning that in place of the foot or the syllable or other units used in traditional verse, one used the ‘event’— explaining that the die determined the number of events per line & the number of lines per stanza”; in Mac Low, “The Poetics of Chance and the Politics of Spontaneity,” 174.

73 “CRAFT Interview,” 232. In a provocative reading of Isadore Isou’s Lettrist poetry, Rosemarie Waldrop argues that experiments that break language down beyond the level of the word “leave literature” to become something else: “Isou’s poems have to be recited or seen. The experiment with phonetics leaves literature proper for a quasi-musical or quasi-theatrical performance. The experiments with letters, likewise, leads to a new mixed genre. In the extreme case it leads to pure graphic art which happens to use the shapes of letters as its elements”; Against Language (The Hague: Mouton, 1972) 70.

74 Philly Talks no. 12 (1998) 14; http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/levy/.

75 Mac Low, undated letter to John Cage (c. February 1, 1955) Getty Research Library, M. C. Richards Papers, 960036.

76 Jackson Mac Low, Letter to Mary Caroline Richards, February 1, 1955, Getty Research Library, M. C. Richards Papers, 960036.

77 Despite Mac Low’s later protests that there had been “too much pairing of John’s and my work,” Cage provided Mac Low with not only musical strategies but practical help for realizations: according to Mac Low, he, Cage and M.C. Richards gave “a private performance of the ‘5th biblical poem’” in the Spring of
1955 for the composer Henry Cowell, and Mac Low started regularly performing his work in Cage's New School class; "The Poetics of Chance and the Politics of Spontaneity," 178.
78 Ibid., 175.
79 Mac Low, undated letter to John Cage (circa February 1, 1955), Getty Research library, M. C. Richards Papers, 960036.
81 Bernstein and Watten respectively argue that performance "actualizes the possibilities inherent in the text by grounding it ... expressively and particularly in a sounding or voicing" (Bernstein, 255) and that "the ethical consequences of Mac Low's work are in how they are to be performed in real time" (Watten, 174).
82 Koethe, 185-186.
83 Shoptaw, 12.
poems by JOHN ASHBERTY

the tennis court oath

3.1
John Ashbery
The Tennis Court Oath (Wesleyan University Press, 1962) cover
© 1962 John Ashbery, reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press
1. To employ her construction half
2. Morning fed on the light blue wood
3. of the mouth
4. feels deeply
5. A wave of nausea--
numerals
6. a few berries
7. the unseen claw
8. Hope asked today
9. The background of poles roped over
10. into star jolted them
11. when or into backward drenching thing heanness
12. lemons asleep pattern crying
13. The mouth of elephant--
14. embroidery over where
15. all page sees.
16. What might have
17. children singing
18. the horses--
19. the seven
20. breaths under tree, fog
21. shaped--absolute, unthinking
22. menace to our way of life.
23. unearth more cloth
24. This could have been done--
25. This could not be done

3.2
First page of “Europe” from p. 64, The Tennis Court Oath
© 1962 John Ashbery, reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press
The Living Theatre presents a piano recital by David Tudor, January First, 1952, 8:00 P.M., in the Cherry Lane Theatre, 38 Commerce Street.

Program:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piece</th>
<th>Composer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2ème SONATE</td>
<td>Pierre Boulez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrêmement rapide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modéré, presque vif</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vif</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOR PREPARED PIANO</td>
<td>Christian Wolff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 pieces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERSECTION 2</td>
<td>Morton Feldman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUSIC OF CHANGES</td>
<td>John Cage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 parts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is the first performance of the intersection and the changes, and the first New York performance of the pieces by Christian Wolff.

3.3
The Living Theatre program, January First, 1952.
Courtesy of the Getty Research Library.
KENNETH BURKE IS -

inquestibly the most brilliant and suggestive critic now working in America.


KENNETH BURKE

Born 1897, attended Ohio State and Columbia Universities, has been a critic and lecturer at the University of Chicago, Harvard University, New School for Social Research and Blackstone College; received the Dial Award in 1938 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1935; author of "The White House," "Grammar of Motives," "Toward a Better Life," "Permanence and Change," "Attitudes Toward History," "The Philosophy of Literary Form."

What Reviewers Have Said About Burke's Previous Books

Hayakawa: "Mr. Burke teaches without teaching it."

Crowe Ransom: "Burke employs both figures and terms of honor, and his prose has literary distinction. He is perceptive and brilliantly original."

Lerner: "One of our most provocative thinkers in the study of ideas and symbols."

A Grammar of Motives

THE PROBLEMS OF MEANING IN DRAMATIC PERSPECTIVE

BURKE'S REAL INTEREST IS IN THINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO MAKE US WANT TO DISCERN THEM . . . I THINK HE MUST BEA TIAL AND DELIGHTFUL WO
In the garden

made

eat lest they shall taken one

eight

twenty shalt waters the ark

heart any servant same sons

And of

in thou against unto took

of Kadesh

be that and and left

them live lay he

closed Hagar this to thy Abraham this ran his

master's mother gathered he

looked with a and these thou went

that and beguiled because

thence in of