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Jackson Mac Low

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Brief orientation

Born in Chicago in 1922 and based in New York City from 1943 to 2004, Jackson Mac Low was an American poet, visual artist, performance artist, and composer. He is a central figure within experimental performances across the fields of theater, dance, poetry, and art. His work is shaped by his anarcho-pacifism and his engagement in Zen Buddhism. His common association with John Cage stems from the strong influence they had upon each other.

Mac Low is most famous for his collaborative performance practices, as well as for his use of indeterminate notation and of chance operations from 1954 onwards (he turned to computer algorithms to automatize randomization in 1989). He sought to avoid imposing meaning and structure onto his poems and performances, which became integral to his multimedia production and had artistic, spiritual, and political implications. Prior to the 1980s, the collaborative performances of his texts enact an ideal community shaped by his political and spiritual yearning for a collective “ruled” by mutual listening and respect, and without ego (a principle he called “egolessness”). His prefatory remarks consistently and extensively develop his compositional methods, his notation systems, and his own inimitable ethos which the performance of his texts demanded. These were all constitutive parts of his work: poetic composition was a performance in its own right and performance a form of writing.

Mac Low’s work blends various media – language, music, drawing and painting, theater, dance, performance, and film. By his own admission, he was more of a “latter-day modernist” than a postmodernist. Instead of going beyond pure art forms and exploring the “intermedium” to blend art with life, his work activates what Rosalind Krauss calls “differential specificity”, maintaining the medial distinction between the two realms which nonetheless mutually determine one another. His activism and his avoidance of any group affiliation is made manifest in the literal, aesthetic, and political resistance of his work.

Developments

Jackson Mac Low, a poet, composer, visual and performance artist, was a central figure of New York's experimental scene from the 1950s to the 1980s. Even his illegible poem-drawings ("Drawing Asymmetries"), abstruse "dance-instruction-poems" (*The Pronouns*), crossword-poems ("Gathas"), drawing-poems ("Vocabularies", "Drawing-Asymmetries"), and graphic pieces ("A Piece for Sari Dienes") from this period were performance scores. These complex textual apparatuses require a substantial investment of time in order to prepare each performance. From the 1980s through to 2004, his poetic writing became more strictly literary and he performed his poetry almost exclusively with Anne Tardos, his wife. His poems, whether on or off the page, whether structurally indeterminate or linear, seldom "make sense" in the usual way. Meaning rather happens through synchronous associations made by the performer, the reader, and the listener between words, sounds, thoughts, and memories.

Mac Low was most famous for the ingenuity of his compositional methods. Many of his poems "write through" existing literary and non-literary texts (including his own earlier work), drawing words from them. He sampled words from a chosen source by using chance operations ranging from the throw of a die or other *ad hoc* rules, through to the *I Ching, or Book of Changes*. Many of his methods consisted in using a "seed text" – namely, a number of sentences that could be spelled out acrostically or "diastically" (a word and writing technique of his coinage) in order to determine the word selection from the source. By contrast with the acrostic principle, each word of a diastic poem has the letters of the seed text in corresponding places: the first word starts with the first letter of the seed; the second letter of the second word of the poem corresponds to the second letter of the first word in the seed, and so on.

Whereas Mac Low is most famous for his use of systematic chance, he also composed poems spontaneously. For instance, he composed *Twenties* in 1989 and *20 Forties* (from 1990 to 1999) in a liminal state of consciousness, noting down any words that would cross his mind or reach his ears from his direct environment. He also "freely" composed *Odes to Iris* (in 1970-1971) and the first of his *Pieces o' Six* (in 1983). Moreover, he sometimes used several writing methods within a given series. Some of the "Light Poems" for instance were written spontaneously, while others were composed thanks to chance operations and the *I Ching*. This diversity was reflected by Mac Low's editorial choices. He published *22 Light Poems*, *54th Light Poem for Ian Tyson*, and *36th Light Poem in Memoriam Buster Keaton* separately, in contrast to the comprehensive edition of *The Light Poems* (2015), which was published posthumously. His poetics is marked more by an effort to evade intentional writing and meaning than by the issue of chance versus choice or arbitrariness versus intention, two philosophical binaries Mac Low deemed false. Despite their being two radically opposed strategies from a technical perspective, he embraced both systematic chance (not randomness) and intuitive writing for their ability to undermine conscious control over the outcome, to let language "speak for itself" (Mac Low 2001), and to find the self "from the outside in" (Bernstein 2001). The tremendously varied results of this quest make it impossible to fit his production into a single label, artistic category or movement, genre, medium, or *modus operandi*.

The publications of Mac Low's performance scores (which formed the gist of his work till the 1980s) are scarce, as Language poet Ron Silliman noted in 1980. Before the 1980s, Mac Low's poetry was widely accessible in print in only four volumes: *22 Light Poems* (1968), *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (1971), *22 Matched Asymmetries* (1978), and *The Pronouns – A Collection of Forty Dances for the Dancers* (first mimeographed in 1964, then published by Station Hill Press in 1979). At this time, *The Pronouns* alone reflected Mac Low's engagement in performance. It was shortly followed by *Asymmetries 1-260* in 1980, one of his landmark collections of poetic scores. One may add to Silliman's list the little accessible plays (published by small presses) *The Twin Plays: Port-au-Prince & Adams County Illinois* (1966) published with Something Else Press (founded by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins) and *Verdurous Sanguinaria* (1967); as well as his *August Light Poems* (1967), *Four Trains...* (1974), *21 Matched Asymmetries* (1978), which were intended for the page as their final site.

Mac Low's creativity in the field of performance was astounding, as highlighted by the two anthologies he edited in the 1980s and early 2000s, *Representative Works: 1938-1985* (Roof Books, 1986) and *Doings* (published posthumously in 2005). The latter volume looks like a visual art catalogue but actually collects handwritten and typed poetic scores of a striking visual diversity. Poems in this volume are either typed or written by hand with pens or paintbrushes of different thicknesses; laid out in all directions or on horizontal, sometimes unusually spaced lines; letters are at times superimposed (becoming at times illegible); distributed in grids (one letter per square, as in crosswords); or mingled with musical staves and notes, as became the general rule in the last three decades of Mac Low's activities. A third anthology was edited by his widow Anne Tardos: *Thing of Beauty* (2008).

The bulk of Mac Low's published poetry emerged in the period after 1980. His writing practices, albeit experimental, became more strictly literary and suitable to the printed format: *From Pearl Harbor Day to FDR's Birthday* (1982), *Bloomsday* (1984), *The Virginia Woolf Poems* (1985), *Words and Ends From Ez and French Sonnets* (1989), *100 Twenties* (1991), *Pieces o' Six* (1992), *42 Merzgedichte in Memoriam Kurt Schwitters* (1994), *Barnesbook* (1996), *125 Postcard Poems* (1996), and *20 Forties* (1999). Over this period of intense publishing activity, Mac Low used software programs to automatize his deterministic writing methods. In June and August 1989, Charles O'Hartman respectively wrote the DIATEST and DIATEST4 computer programs with which the artist could run his diastic method following two different rules for the choice of the seed text. Hugh Kenner and Joseph O'Rourke also wrote TRAVESTY to generate "pseudo-texts", which were syntactically correct and in keeping with the style of the source text, yet semantically nonsensical. From then on, Mac Low would run his material through the software programs, sometimes combining the three as he did for *42 Merzgedichte in Memoriam Kurt Schwitters*.

Few of Mac Low's poems are as impersonal as they seem at first glance. Because he chose the texts he wrote through from his own readings, his poetry offered the experimental version of a reading journal and allows an intimate glance into his reading life (Zweig 1982). Even love poems are common, and the voluminous *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* itself is akin to an offering that expresses the poet's absolute devotion to the dedicatee (his first wife and mother of their children Mordecai-Mark and Clarinda) by encompassing and sharing everything his eyes would cross. Mac Low's poems and collections consistently pay tribute to those he felt indebted to: Paul Blackburn, with whom he performed "21.21.29., the 5th biblical poem" in 1964 and to whom he dedicated his "32nd Light Poem: *In Memoriam Paul Blackburn*" in 1971; Peter Innisfree Moore, the photographer who documented experimental performances (amongst which Meredith Monk's direction of *The Pronouns* for the 3rd Annual New York Avant Garde Festival in 1965), for whom he dedicated the visual performance poem "Vocabulary for Peter Innisfree Moore" in 1974; to Diane Wakoski in his "2nd Light Poem", who introduced him to the Lower East Side poetic community; and to John Cage his 7th, ... Indeed, compiling a comprehensive list of his dedications would map his personal and artistic social network at large.

Mac Low came to compositional procedures through experimental music. In the early 1950s, he attended the first New York performances of the musical works by John Cage, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff. Through their work he discovered chance as a compositional method and indeterminacy as a structuring principle whereby works greatly differ from one performance to the next. Despite initially resisting Cage's musical use of chance, Mac Low's correspondence and personal acquaintance with the composer, which started in 1953, led him to start using chance operations in his poetry in December 1954 and January 1955. For his first poetic experiment, the *I Ching* and a die determined the line and stanza pattern for his "5 biblical poems". They were drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures and interspersed with "boxes" of silence, the performed duration of which had to be consistent with the performer's chosen tempo. The structure and matter of the performance were still highly determined by the written lines.

In 1958-60, John Cage's class of experimental music at the New School for Social Research welcomed Mac Low as a regular guest participant. The participatory class gave him the opportunity to experiment with collective performance with artists from all fields, among whom he often mentions composers Toshi Ichiyanagi and Richard Maxfield; painters George Brecht (also an "event composer"), Al Hansen (also a sculptor), Allan Kaprow (the inventor of *happenings*); and poet Dick Higgins. These experiments decisively opened Mac Low's hitherto strictly individual poetic writing to other artistic media and connected his art to his political views through collaborative performances.

The 1960s were a turning point for Mac Low's approach to performance. The political views he shared with Julian Beck and Judith Malina may have contributed to his frequent involvement with the Living Theatre in the 1950s and early 1960s. In the early 1950s, he composed the music for their productions of *The Heroes* by John Ashbery and *The Age of Anxiety* by W.H. Auden; he acted in Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* and was one of the planted actors in Luigi Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise*. The same theater company hosted a performance of Mac Low's poetry collection *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* in August 1960 and produced his non-dramatic, poetic-musical play *The Marrying Maiden: A Play of Changes*, which was performed once a week for an entire year in 1960-61. For the latter production, Judith Malina designed an "action pack" of 1200 filing cards and John Cage composed the musical score based on recorded rehearsals. Along with Richard Maxfield, he derived 6 tapes by directly cutting up the tape recordings. During the performances, a dice-player determined which actions to perform and when to play the tapes.

With the production of *The Marrying Maiden* at the Living Theatre, Mac Low turned to indeterminate notation and collaborative performance. He subsequently shared this practice with the alternative poetry reading community. He was one of the few to have participated in the Poetry Project from what he called its "prehistory". After being interrupted and expelled by Howard Ant during his first performance at the Tenth Street Coffeehouse, in the Fall of 1960, he became a regular attendant and performer in the readings that gathered in the Lower East Side cafés (the Tenth Street Coffeehouse, Les Deux Mégots, and Le Metro) before the Poetry Project was launched at St Marks Church (see Daniel Kane's *All Poets Welcome: the Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*). Instead of reading his own poems single-voiced, Mac Low would consistently show up with scores to perform with other people. The choice of Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse" (which conceived the written poem as a score of the poet's breath) as a manifest for the alternative poetry scene accounts for the inclusion of Mac Low in this circle.

Definitely not a poets' poet in the first three decades of his experimental poetic practice, Mac Low was also close to postmodern dancers and the Judson Dance Workshop. His ventures in choreography started with his discovery of Simone Forti's choreographic instructions, performed at Yoko Ono's loft in 1961. In June 1961, he composed *Nuclei for Simone Forti*. The "nuclei" on the set of filing cards (1-10 words typed in small print followed by 1-5 verbs in capital letters) provided terse "instructions" that were the basis for dance improvisations. A few weeks later, the *Nuclei* were performed twice at George Maciunas's AG Gallery – first by the dedicatee herself, then by a group of people. During the Yam Day Festival organized by George Brecht and Robert Watts at the Hardware Poets Playhouse in 1963, Trisha Brown improvised from the *Nuclei* before heading to California with the set. As a result, when Fred Herko (then associated with the Judson Dance Workshop) subsequently wanted to perform the work, Mac Low could not hand him the cards and composed *The Pronouns – A Collection of Forty Dances for the Dancers* instead. The nuclei provided the text material for each dance-instruction. Forty phrases were formed and provided the titles of each poem-dance; each poem was then generated by diastically writing through the title, still drawing words from the nuclei. The Judson Dance Workshop provided Mac Low with all the paper and ink he needed to mimeograph *The Pronouns* in 1964. Its informal circulation led to the inclusion of several of the poem-dances in Paris Leary and Robert Kelly's *A Controversy of Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (1965).

This brief genealogy of Mac Low's trajectory towards intermedia poetry testifies to the diversity of styles, visual and musical patterns, textures, moods, and media that may be found in his oeuvre. From the 1980s onwards, Mac Low's poetry became increasingly literary, as reflected in his change of terminology: in his preface to *Twenties*, he called his then typical long spaces – which were superficially similar to the notational boxes of silence in “5 biblical poems” and long blank spaces of *Asymmetries 1-260* – “caesurae”, a term that is specifically poetic. Scores then became extrinsic to the poems. They were devised in private and shared with a restricted group of performers formed by close friends or limited to his life partner, Anne Tardos. As is illustrated in the final part of *Doings*, which is devoted to the last three decades of his life, his scores were by this point only destined to his musical compositions and exclusively relied on traditional musical notation.

Avant-Garde Strategies

The overall structure of Mac Low's oeuvre is political in its anarchic dimension, insofar as it disrupts any ordering principles and hierarchic organization. The titles of his collections and poems, which seem to map consistent genres (albeit idiosyncratic ones) and to encompass all poems of a given type, are in fact incredibly misleading. The very boundaries of his apparently cohesive eponymous collections are unstable. For instance, *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* contains several poems entitled “Asymmetry”. The eponymous collections (*Asymmetries 1-260*, the first volume of his “Numbered Asymmetries” that amount to 501 in total, and *21 Matched Asymmetries*) therefore fail to contain them all. Although the “Drawing-Asymmetries” series refers to the same subgenre, they have little in common. Their letters were traced with a paintbrush and are often superimposed. Some look like calligraphic attempts, others like blotches of black ink. Similar examples of collections and subgenres interpenetrating one another abound, such as the thirty-second prose poem in *Pieces o' Six*, which is the verbatim copy of the first “Merzgedicht” from *42 Merzgedichte in Memoriam Kurt Schwitters*. The “54th Light Poem for Ian Tyson” (1978) appropriates the characteristic grid of the “Gathas”, with each square containing a letter, but its structure and linear text is not particularly meant to be performed. While the “Gathas” require the performers to follow the serpentine, arbitrary path of their choosing (provided they move along adjacent squares), here, the *détournement* of the “Gatha” subgenre serves to celebrate Ian Tyson's typical square and rectangular shapes featured in the Tetrad Press publications of “23rd Light Poem for Larry Eigner” (1969) and *The Pronouns* (1971).

The infinite variety and absence of an overarching system, which makes Mac Low's production so difficult to map, mirrors the diversity of performances that sought to orally and collaboratively rewrite his indeterminate poetic scores. Indeed, as with sound poetry, the text is not what is read on the page but what is performed (Bobillot 2012). Mac Low devised many *ad hoc* performance methods and encryptions. His encryptions served to translate the entire alphabet into musical notes, should the performers choose to perform the texts vocally or on musical instruments. These letter-note equivalences changed within a single series, so no system may ever be inferred or applied to all poems. This was the case for each of the “Gathas” and “Vocabularies”. The indeterminacy of the principle is definitely neo-avant-garde, despite encryptions picking up on a tradition that harks back to the Renaissance and the “soggetto cavato”. Moreover, the superimposed voices and actions in Mac Low's “simultaneities” render the words at times impossible to understand, bringing the collective poem that includes sounds and actions to the forefront, at the expense of the linguistic text.

The non-representative relationship between genres, encryption systems, and forms pertains to the anticipatory and provisional exemplarity which Tyrus Miller identifies as typical of the neo-avant-garde in *Singular Examples* (2009). As Miller develops, the singular exemplarity of neo-avant-garde artworks was a safeguard against the authoritarianism and dogmatism that modernist avant-gardes drifted towards. Mac Low's oeuvre is a case in point. The introduction to his first anthology *Representative Works*, which reflects on the issue of representativity, may be considered a manifesto for this anarchist rejection of genericity and hierarchy. He explains that he did not select specific poems from a series based on their superior quality, but because they "are good examples of their kind – each adequately represents its 'genre'". Of other forms that do not belong to any series, he says they are *sui generis* – a phrase that epitomizes the conflation of singularity with exemplarity. The squares of his "Gathas" or his "Light Poem for Ian Tyson" epitomize such neo-avant-garde politics and aesthetics by seemingly echoing the Modernist praise of objectivity, industrial standardization and technological advances while at the same time encouraging disruptive processes that make them changeable and porous. The same could be said of the apparently rigorous organization of his first anthology's table of contents, which is disrupted by Mac Low's porous genres. His compositional, performance, and editorial strategies present all systems as necessarily provisional.

Contents

Although Mac Low's poetry is not based on themes, one may identify defining traits and habits. He usually dedicated poems or poetry books to loved ones (such as the diptych *Odes for Iris* and *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*, among other examples like "Vocabulary for Sharon Belle Mattlin", or "Vocabulary for Annie Brigitte Gilles Tardos") and paid tribute to fellow artists or poets with whom he identified a poetic collaboration – whether in person or not. Many of his poems and poetry collections explicitly mention the names of the dedicatee or include a clear reference to them in their titles. The following poetry collections explicitly underline his indebtedness to Modernists: *Bloomsday* (1984), with the clear cultural reference to James Joyce; *The Virginia Woolf Poems* (1985); *Words nd Ends from Ez* (1989); *Barnesbook: Four Poems Derived from Sentences by Djuna Barnes* (1996); *42 Merzgedichte in Memoriam Kurt Schwitters* (1994) plays on the same variations of typography and layout as Dadaists' verbicovisual poetry; last, but not least, his unpublished *Steins 1-161*, composed from 1998 to 2002, pays tribute to the poet who had a lasting influence on his poetry since at least 1945 (see his early "Cubist Poems").

The specific method of writing through that Mac Low chose to diastically spell Ezra Pound's name through the latter's *Drafts & Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII* enacts his political distancing from the poet with whom he stopped corresponding in 1954. The refusal to impose meaning and syntax onto sentences – which is typical of the "disposition to the paragram [...] that always escape conventional reading habits" (McCaffery 1986) of the writing through method – is reinforced by the decomposition of word syllables into bits and pieces. Therefore, this collection not only "demilitarizes syntax"; it also consists of a *démontage* of the Poundian epic. The title *Words nd Ends from Ez* (instead of "for Ez") tellingly erases what could have been praise for the poet and his ideology, and brings the poetic fragmentation of language, text, and name to the forefront.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Mac Low's anarchism, libertarianism, and pacifism conflicted with Fluxus and the violent strategies Maciunas's revolutionary socialism called for. In July 1961, Chester Anderson (editor of "Beatitude magazine") asked minimalist composer La Monte Young to launch *Beatitude East*. To that end, the latter collected pieces by Earle Brown, John Cage, Henry Flynt, Walter de Maria, Yoko Ono, Terry Jennings, Ray Johnson, Robert Morris and Simone (Forti) Morris, Nam June Paik, Terry Riley, Emmett Williams, and Christian Wolff. The project was abandoned and Maciunas wanted to publish these pieces in an anthology but had to close down the AG Gallery and leave for Europe at the end of the summer. The compendium *An Anthology of Chance Operations* that indirectly spawned the creation of Fluxus was finally co-published by Mac Low and La Monte Young in 1963. The printed form of this landmark publication stabilized the intermedia, interdisciplinary, and collaborative experimental art practices that were taking place in the New York performance scene (Forde, 247). It also publicized the performance score that became central to Fluxus performances such as George Brecht's and Alison Knowles's "Events".

Before circulating the "Fluxus Manifesto" in 1962, Maciunas launched a series of anthologies based on a hierarchic structure within which he was the self-proclaimed editor in chief and other artists were in charge of sub-categories (Mac Low was literary editor) – without discussing the project with any of them prior to bringing the revolutionary artistic movement into existence. In a letter from April 1963, Maciunas proposed sabotage actions that ran counter to Mac Low's pacifism, especially in the context of his early activism against American intervention in Vietnam. Mac Low strongly disagreed with these thoughts about art and politics, leading him to break from Fluxus in 1963. Although Mac Low's poetry appears in Fluxus publication and his first European performances took place in the context of Fluxus festivals, and while he exhibited two painting/poems in the Fluxus pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 1990, his association with Fluxus – as with any artistic movement – was only occasional. About the works exhibited at the Venice Biennale, he wrote in a 1991 letter to composer Brian Ferneyhough that they had "no relation to Fluxus and its anti-cultural ideology". Mac Low's resistance to being appropriated by Fluxus was in character: in the aforementioned letter, he acknowledges that he has "never been a 'good' (ie, exclusive) member of any group".

Mac Low's indeterminate notation, collective performances, and compositional procedures are driven by his pacifist-anarchist politics and his spiritual practice of Zen Buddhism. His diverse writing and performance strategies first and foremost aimed at de-emphasizing the ego. He read Taoist writings in the 1940s before turning to D.T. Suzuki's texts and attending the latter's conferences on the Zen, Kegon, and Pure Land schools in the 1950s. In his correspondence and lectures, he repeatedly brought up his intention to create and write poetry from the "no-mind" (his translation for the Taoist development of "Wu-Wei", a principle he conflated with the mental state it contributes to reach, "Mushin"). Politically speaking, he was initially a Democratic Socialist in high school (1936-43) and then got involved in a pacifist anarchist community, becoming one of the editors in chief of *Why?*, an anarchist journal that later became *resistance*. His political activism as such became less prominent in 1954 when he wrote his first chance-composed performance poems, the "5 biblical poems", except during the anti-Vietnam war protests.

Mac Low's politics of performance was informed by his education. In the early 1940s through to 1943, he majored in philosophy at the University of Chicago, studying the Chicago Aristotelian formal criticism with Richard McKeon, Ronald S. Crane, and Paul Goodman. From 1955 to 1958, he resumed his studies in Ancient Greek at Brooklyn College from which he graduated *cum laude*. This may account for his personal interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which comes across clearly in his definition of the poet as a "maker of plots" in "Reflections on the Occasion of the DANCE SCOPE ISSUE" (*The Pronouns*). By "plot", Mac Low did not mean Aristotle's fictions, but actual performances that initiate heterotopian social practices shaped by a specifically Mac Lowian ethos that required participants to "listen and relate". These performances are, as Miller puts it, "tentative forays into the field of *possible experience*" (Miller, 7).

Conclusion

By virtue of his versatility and inclusive anarchism, Mac Low contributed to many neo-avant-garde art movements without ever restricting his activities to any exclusive group. Mac Low's multi-faceted production lends itself to a diversity of readings. One entry point is its intermedia dimension, which led to its appropriation by Fluxus. But his artistic practice resists the democratization of performance art through everyday events that is epitomized, among other examples, by Alison Knowles's "Make a Salad" (1962). His performance practices were at once original, complex, and diverse. It is necessary to read his long framing paratexts before performing his work, even though they are tedious and resistant. *The Pronouns* epitomizes the specifically Mac Lowian variation on post-dramatic, "non-matrixed", and "deskilled" (Kirby, 1965) performances based on operational instructions. Unlike the fairly straightforward instructions of minimalist composer La Monte Young, choreographer Simone Forti, or conceptual painter Sol LeWitt, the "Pronouns" are semantically indeterminate and obscure poems. Each line consequently requires substantial interpretive action in order to be performed. In the same category and at the other end of the spectrum, Mac Low's instructions for "Tree* Movie" (1961) are easy to understand. They call for an extended static shot, the star in the title indicating that any inanimate object may replace the tree as the subject of the movie. This piece may arguably be considered the invention of static film several years before Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964), even though it is unlikely the latter came across Mac Low's "Tree* Movie" (which was first published in Fluxus magazine *ccVTRE* in January 1964). Another important Mac Low invention was the diastic method from which John Cage derived his mesostics for his own poetry. Last but not least, Mac Low revisited the Dada principle of "simultaneities" to explore unusual processes of meaning-making rather than to perpetuate their undermining of meaning. Due to the indeterminacy of Mac Low's scores, their ephemeral polyphonic vocalization and musical interpretation welcomes nonintentional, musical, and synchronous connections between all levels of meaning. Beyond a strictly poetic context, Mac Low was undeniably an explorer of forms. Illustrating his use of found material in his poetry, his painting (exhibited in 2012 in Paris at the Galerie 1900-2000) brings to mind Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbild*, with its inclusion of everyday objects. Mac Low may be considered a neo-avant-garde avatar of the nonconformist Dada artist whose work illustrates the cover of his first anthology *Representative Works* and to whom he devoted an entire poetry collection (*42 Merzgedichte*).

From a literary theory perspective, Mac Low's performance poetics challenges the narrow view of poetry as a strictly textual format that calls for close readings, in an era that was dominated by New Criticism. Nowadays, the reception of Mac Low's work tends to relocate it within clearly delineated categories: on the one hand, his visual poem-scores (like the "Drawing Asymmetries") are treated and exhibited as drawings, as was the case with the 2017 exhibit "Jackson Mac Low: Lines-Letters-Words" at The Drawing Center, New York; on the other hand, the dominant perspective on his poetry is increasingly logocentric, focusing on his invention of compositional rules and on his syntactically and semantically disjunctive poetics. For instance, the Language Poets (who were welcomed by the Poetry Project in the 1970s) saw him as one of their pioneers, which accounts for his inclusion by Ron Silliman in the 1986 anthology *In the American Tree* as a representative (along with Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky) of "a latent tradition of a poetics not centered on speech" that the younger generation of poets further activated. Mac Low's treatment of language as matter laid bare the "artifice of absorption" (Bernstein, 1987), opening a new field of possibilities beyond its usual treatment as a "natural" and (purportedly) transparent tool for communication and expression. Like the Language Poets and unlike the Oulipians to whom Mac Low could be hastily compared, he did not use constraints to enhance literary virtuosity. The implications of his treatment of language were neither strictly literary nor formal – they were philosophical and political. His anarchist perspective, however, differed from the Marxist analytical grid of many Language poets who saw a belief in the communicative transparency of language as the equivalent of commodity fetishism. Lastly, Mac Low's writing through technique led Kenneth Goldsmith to consider him the "boring" father of conceptual poetry, a compliment from Goldsmith's perspective.

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