

Andrew Levy / Jackson Mac Low
Nov. 5 1997—transcript/response

Kelly Writers House, 3805 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, 19104

Here is an edited transcript of the post-reading discussion which ensued between Andrew Levy and Jackson Mac Low, together with audience participation, as part of the “PhillyTalks” project of poets’ dialogues. Levy and Mac Low were each asked to respond to the other’s work in preparation for the event. Their responses were published as PhillyTalks 2: Jackson Mac Low closely read Andrew Levy’s poem, “Struggle Against Misery,” Levy, Mac Low’s Barnesbook. The newsletter was made available to readers prior to the live event. (Those who would like a copy of #2 to read alongside this transcript can have it at www.english.upenn.edu/~wh/phillytalks, or as hard copy either from lcabri@english.upenn.edu or from the address above.)

This issue also features a response to the Levy/Mac Low event by Alan Filreis. Note that some quotations Filreis attributes to Levy, Mac Low, and myself, will not be found in the transcript produced below. I supplied Filreis with a draft version of the transcript, together with a tape of the live discussion. I had transcribed almost all the live discussion, sending a printout of it, with my comments, to Levy and Mac Low for editing. Bits of the draft transcript and bytes from the original tape wonderfully re-emerge in Filreis’s response.

Also included this issue: post-event note from Levy to newsletter readers, and response to Levy’s note by Mac Low, as well as an excerpt from a letter by Levy to Mac Low.

—Louis Cabri

Oct. 16, 1999

Don Riggs: In response to the grammatical awareness—which you both share—of the way sentence structure is disrupted, I’m wondering if, right now, with the widespread mechanical reproduction of words, “our culture” at large is using a fine-tuned grammatical awareness of “structure” to break structure down, and if we’re not clearing the way for a new kind of grammar. We built up this grammatical scaffolding over centuries; this gave us armor to move in; now we’re breaking it down.

Andrew Levy: Scaffolding . . . do you mean that this is something you’re hearing recently, in contemporary poetry?

Riggs: I’m wondering if it’s happening in the culture at large.

Jackson Mac Low: It was already happening around the time of the First World War, in the works of Stein, Joyce, Schwitters, and others. It’s done more, now, of course, in quite different ways.

Levy: I heard something within your question . . . as if this is going to liberate us, raise consciousness. . . .

Riggs: Not raise consciousness. It strikes me that with the old paradigm—Matthew Arnold British public school Latin-based grammatically-complete verbalizations—breaking down with the old political order, alternative layers of language have been emerging at least since Mark Twain, into printed texts, and from there onto advertisement, which more people read: incomplete sentences,—

Levy: And words, presented as isolated design features, and/or made fractured, incomplete, in a lot of contemporary advertising. Maybe that's a new grammar, as you suggested. Perhaps popular and commercial culture are at present technically contiguous if not completely continuous with poetry and art. . . .

I think in terms of vocabularies—like the first pieces I read tonight, from “White Science,” and then “Elephant Surveillance To Thought,” where I’m playing and riffing-off the rhetoric of liberal individualism, i.e., the metaphysics of presence. I wanted to see if I could fuck that up as much as possible from the inside, how far I could stretch it, and still let you hear the kernel of authority coming with that syntax . . . that even with the meat in the kernel having been altered, the shell still echoes its code, the DNA you can hear, so to speak.

I’ll use everything. If there’s a new grammar, then that’s it. A poetic agon, with jarring dialectical discords, let’s say, resolved in previously unheard harmonies. I don’t feel there’s anything that falls out-of-poetry’s-bounds. I think uses can become outmoded, but vocabularies, dictions, and forms in themselves don’t necessarily have to be. Depends on how you use, recontextualize them. As Richard Rorty has pointed out, this idea of “endless diversity,” is present in Whitman and Hegel. Maybe the choice of how to make use, how to make and modify during making, as Jackson pointed out to me on another occasion, always presents the potential for a new grammar. . . .

In “Struggle Against Misery,” and in Louis’s introduction,¹ it appears that I’m interested in the technical capacity of my medium in expressing those objects. I’m not very interested in the self-expression of the writer rendered seamless while informing the reader, “I’m upset.”

Ron Silliman: Both of your talks address in one form or another the function of reproduction, the use of quotation: Marx and Benjamin in Andy’s case, a little of *Ulysses* in *Barnesbook*, and so on. I’m curious as to how that use of appropriation differs in your projects.

Mac Low: I don’t really perceive any direct appropriation in Andy’s work. There are indirect references, I think, but relatively few direct quotes.

Levy: Ron, you didn’t mean, necessarily, the actual use or practice of appropriation, but more its conceptual or theoretical consideration?

¹ Introduction to Levy’s reading:

A page from Andrew Levy’s *Curve* reads: “Is the knowledge which you have of yourself a direct perception of yourself by yourself, or do you get it from something else? It reminds me of something I’m in.” Levy insistently pushes the self within quotation marks. It’s a process—somewhat governable, by ‘you’, or ‘I’, as in this quotation, but not always—of social framing that links his poetry to what might be called an infinitely adjusting proceduralism of, and for, the non-literary. It’s Levy’s insistence, almost poetic imperative, to push our haunted inheritance of the lyrical stance into a moving (in both senses) social arena of conflicted discourses and powers, locating a political—as in socially organized, or as in, at least, socially sentient—value for that which is opaque in the non-lyrical aspects of the poetry. Levy’s poetry is the opaque lyric of social registers and addresses, as in his book title, *Democracy Assemblages*, where it’s not democracy, capital d, but rather, assemblages, the art of assembling that, as poems, personify procedures of social framing—so that a line of a poem lyrically, self-reflexively acknowledged as owned by a self is submitted to, as well as overthrown by, an ongoing responsive proceduralism of, and for, the nonliterary, that in its next line acknowledges its ‘owner’. Property relations of the world, look and listen. This is Andrew Levy’s poetry speaking, through the language we share of Urthona, this owned earth.

Silliman: You were talking, Andy, about identifying the rhetoric and, in your terms, fucking it up, which might be a way of rearranging it, and at the same time making it intelligible, in the way that Djuna Barnes is in some way intelligible here as well, as a result of Jackson's *Barnesbook*.

Levy: It's like when I ask¹ if that sentence by Jackson, in *Barnesbook*, had been written by Barnes—how to discern the differences. What has Jackson done with these sentences to allow for an effect of semblance to, or repetition of Barnes's style? Is what Spicer does with Lorca appropriation?

Mac Low: I'm not sure about how Spicer used Lorca's words. I used Barnes's words strictly as material; they are appropriated in a general way. I did not even appropriate whole phrases, much less sentences. This strips the words of their identity in Barnes's sentences and pushes them into lists with other words from other books by Barnes. As shown in the poems' endnotes, I made a different word list for each poem by means of chance operations.

Levy: It strips the words of their identity in Barnes's sentences—but you kept proper names, fictional characters, which is interesting.

Mac Low: Well, those names are words that came into the poems where they did because certain random-digit triplets came up at those points in the making of the poems.

Michael Magee: Andy, you seem to be thinking of Jackson's *Barnesbook* as a kind of model of reading Barnes; while not a "normative" reading by any means, it can still be configured as "an engagement" with, a reading of, her text.

Levy: Yeah.

Mac Low: Only insofar as the very words of the text, somehow, when taken apart from their contexts, embody something of Barnes. That may be the case. Except that *Barnesbook* is based on four collections of disparate words from different places in eight of Barnes's books. I wasn't thinking of her text as anything more than material. On the other hand, in making new poems from words in her works, I was in this case, writing love poems to her. It was "love at work." However, this has not always or even often been the case when I've used source texts. I should point out that I didn't begin using literary works as sources before the middle 1970s. Before writing *The Virginia Woolf Poems* in 1976-77, I almost always used nonliterary sources—unless one calls the Hebrew Scriptures, the source of my first chance-operationally constructed works, the "5 biblical poems" (September 1954 - January 1955), "literary works"—from the end of 1954 to August 1976—very often "whatever I happened to be reading."

Holly Johnson: Why choose Barnes and not the newspaper?

Mac Low: Because I wanted to.

¹ See *PhillyTalks 2*. —Ed.

Johnson: And she chooses to use certain words.

Mac Low: She had the sensibility that produces those kinds of sentences that use those kinds of words, sure.

Levy: That's why in my reading of *Barnesbook*, I highlighted "fortitude," "immunity," "innocence," "provocation." They are there, very strong words, that through their repetition lend a constancy of tone to the work as a whole. Other words, that again circulate several times in Jackson's book, are "lamentation," "death," "mercy," and "niggard."

Mac Low: I think what Kocik says is right, that what those are are the "persons" of those poems.² Those poems aren't expressing either Barnes or me. Editing them wasn't in terms of trying to express myself. But more importantly, the poems as wholes are themselves persons that I was letting be.

Levy: Maybe that's what appropriation allows one to discover. In *Elephant Surveillance To Thought*, I've attended to certain kinds of rhetoric, their grammar and syntax, and tried to pull the contents out from under them to better hear the force and authority that these forms convey. Through intervention by the writer and reader, their devices can be amplified. The irony is that no matter how I pushed it, I think you can hear the formula even better than before.

The elephant poems do make use of appropriation from other texts. They started within a conversation I was having with Bob Harrison. He had access to the internet, and was paying a lot of attention through different sites to the plight of the Zapatistas. At the time, due to financial constraints, I had no internet connection. He downloaded their stuff and sent it to me. The Zapatistas and their supporters were making use of the internet to spread their message of liberation, and to alert others sympathetic to their cause to the Mexican government's military crackdown on their peoples. Through the use of the internet they had succeeded in drawing international attention to the situation in Chiapas; this pragmatic use of the www was in fact helping them to survive. Bob also forwarded files from right-wing thinktanks, e.g., The Rand Corporation, advising the CIA and the managerial staff of other quasi-military governmental agencies that it was time to pay very serious attention to the internet, because that was where the next war was going to take place. The basic argument for increasing surveillance was that increasing numbers of people (i.e., citizens) were going to use it, and that "we," agencies of the federal government such as the CIA, were not going to be able to control the groups and alliances people on the internet might form—for example, Zapatistas. The Rand guys are calling World War III, that they believe to be inevitable, "cyber war"; it's not science fiction. It's not far off, however, from the sci-fi dystopia imagined by William Gibson. The thinktank consultants are getting paid a lot of money to put together their "researched" arguments that we are already engaged in complete ideological warfare, and therefore economic warfare via this new electronic commons.

² "[T]he poet's place is at the point of pure research in any materialization. That . . . poems have *beings* of their own . . . possess the full status of personhood"(qtd. by Levy, *PhillyTalks* 2).—Ed.

Mac Low: How long do you think it'll be before they'll start controlling the internet and the Web?

Levy: They are already dividing it up. For example, look at the Lycos-Tripod site, and the Geocities online community and how their users' "habits" are being collected and collated by companies like the CMG Information Services system, known as Engage. These are sophisticated surveillance techniques, like we've never experienced before. So perhaps, without the explicit consent of the user, it's already controlled. I got a little angry at some people participating in the UB Poetics discussion group concerning the subject of "community and uncommunity," back in 1994. They were, I thought, naïvely making the argument that the internet and email are great democratic instruments with which to liberate the world. 80% of the people in the world don't even have telephones! You're talking about a very small global elite that has email access; how are all the other people going to have themselves represented in that space? How are you going to meet them? Then, to see that the Zapatistas managed to get online and have North Americans, Europeans, and others writing to people who might have the power to help improve their situation, while at the same time First World elites are advising their customer base to pay better attention to the internet for the purpose of dampening and censoring, if not completely controlling any and all political and economic manifestations that might be perceived as contesting the "public" interest. . . .

So I began the elephant poems while reading all these materials, simultaneous with having obtained my first email account and feeling the alienation-effect the initial experience of this virtual community offers. Those pieces came out of trying to address these different languages and to "fuck em up," or do something, tend to my business.

Silliman: A lot of irony in that last word.

Levy: Business?

Mac Low: Yes, that is a terrific sentence after what you've been saying about business. [laughter] Tend to your business; blow it up!

Matt Hart: Jackson, I was interested in rhythm as you read from *Forties*. I noticed like a hook from a song that gets in your head, a particular rhythm, which kept on turning up, especially with multisyllabic words—"cibachrome encounter," "rapid transit matchstrip." Is that something which arises in your reading and editing of the poem?

Mac Low: What I do in revising is that I keep changing the tunes. When one works on it one sees what the poem is trying to be. I didn't know this about Robert Kocik, whom Andy quotes, but I too have this feeling—very strongly—that a work of art is a person. If there's any point in making art, it's to make the artworks come to be. I always wondered whether that's what they meant by "art for art's sake." (I once felt bad that it might be the same thing! I don't any more.) But I really feel this. If you keep listening to them, tapping them here and there, you find out what they're trying to be. Each of the three successive poems I made based on Andy's poem, "Struggle Against Misery," namely, "Struggle Thoughts," "Themselves an Elegance That Just Exists," and "Thoughts Machatention Through," is more and more edited diastic. In the last one,

“Thoughts Machatention Through,” the sentences got moved around once they got into being themselves, even though I had used as my initially generating procedures, two runs through Hugh Kenner and Joseph O’Rourke’s program TRAVESTY, which kept repeating the sentences.

There are really two different phases of the ways I work these days with procedures in which I make decisions. The first is choosing such-and-such to be the source of a poem, and determining the method by which I produce a preliminary text from that source. The second phase comes after I’ve produced a preliminary text by using the chosen text(s) and procedure(s): I edit that preliminary text. This editing involves a number of varying freedoms and constraints.

Levy: About the poem as being, as person, in *Continuous Discontinuous*, one of the sections is called “Song From My Family,” a single long poem. I believe something similar is addressed in this poem:

Because I am everywhere at this hour
there is something personal
about it throughout
and I come to think of this piece
not as a scene, but as a person
that “expression” is “action”
toward change, plagiarism
the skulls that spades disturbed
utilization of culturally
imbued symbols vigorously debated
there is no longer any shape.

Preceding this quote is a brief passage of war imagery, being shelled, having defenses.

Louis Cabri: That sounds very different from saying “let the poem come to be,” very different from saying that the poem itself is a person, negotiating a first person singular “I” as an organizing point for the world.

Levy: I don’t think that phrase, or the passage I read means that the poem-as-person is static, arrived, or finished.

Cabri: No. . . .

Mac Low: Letting it come to be is the process of composing.

Cabri: Then who are the literary precedents for you, Andy, in thinking about the poem as a “person.” Spicer?

Levy: I love Jack Spicer’s work. I think he has beings in his poems.

Mac Low: They’re supposed to be dictated from outside.

Levy: Well, there's that also.

Mac Low: They're being beamed down.

Levy: I've always gone back to Williams's idea of the embodiment of knowledge. Ron's work is a fully embodied—personed—world for me, and Jackson's. I think that was what I was trying to intimate in my attempt to read *Barnesbook* without knowing the source materials, that there is this dialogue with another person which creates itself. Lots of writers. Kafka, Jabès . . . Whitman.

Unknown: Mayakovky's "Trousers."

Levy: Right.

Heather Starr: Isn't it a modernist notion generally? Rothko in one of his essays writes about how he sees the different shapes in his paintings as people interrelating, that the shapes' edges are blurred to indicate relationship between people.

Levy: Where does one thing end, and another begin. The other name that comes to mind is Jalladin Rumi. In *Values Chauffeur You*, I have the poem, "The Rumi Improvisations." I remember, when I first discovered his odes, paying attention to how he talks about the subject and agency. It was incredible. Who needs postmodern theory? He's a Sufi poet and teacher who deconstructed the metaphysics of presence in the thirteenth century! Or Basho, and some of the other medieval Japanese and Chinese haiku poetry, and their travel-journal writing. All that has been important to me, although, Louis, in answering your question, I realize I've never put it together quite this way before.

Mac Low: About the process of doing these things: occasionally I come up with this kabbalistic idea of "saving the sparks." Saving the sparks is saving the creator spirit's spirit—or whatever you want to call it—that was in shells, broken and scattered across the earth. When people somehow rescue these sparks of spirit—a word I never use, and here I'm using it in public!—I feel something like that is happening when one uses a book that was composed for some horrible reason. I've used The Rand Corporation's table *A Million Random Digits and 100,000 Normal Deviates*, a book that was originally made, as all the Rand work was then, for the Navy Department. The Rand Corporation, under the mad Secretary of the Navy, and later of Defense, James Forrestal—he was literally mad, paranoiac and extremely depressive, and ended up by throwing himself from the window of a mental hospital—The Rand Corporation in the late 40s had two main projects. One was to put up an earth satellite, and this as we know was done; the other was to change the poles of the earth! (As far as I know, they dropped this project.) I have often felt that when I used that random-digit book, I was somehow saving sparks; you know, these people were good mathematicians, yet they were putting their spirit into these military projects. (And Forrestal's satellite was NOT for space exploration!) I also felt the same thing when I used debauched sources, such as ads. In my first acrostic text-selection poems, *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*, written in 1960, I used as sources everything that I happened to be reading at the time—and that often happened to be newspaper articles, the *National Enquirer*—anything. When

you do this you're saving the sparks and making artworks, that is to say, persons, out of them. This is awfully spooky! I don't usually talk about such things. When I used Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, I felt I was saving them in some way, saving their sparks. I even used the Italian cantos, which are the most fascist of them all. By turning them into other artwork persons, one saves, somehow, Pound's better self. Much of it is wonderful poetry, even some of the worst fascist parts. I can imagine someone saying, "And what do you mean by that, Jackson?" For instance, Bob Perelman certainly wouldn't agree that poetry, even when it is being fascist, can still be wonderful. Do you, Ron?

Silliman: I think poetry is one of those things that's morally neutral, and I have been for all kinds of things.

I think, actually, that some of the most fascist work in the *Cantos* are the Van Buren cantos. That is where I think the pathology erupts in this bizarre kind of way.

You're sort of suggesting that the poem is a Golem.

Mac Low: Not at all! The Golem isn't a person, in that sense. It doesn't have enough spirit.

Levy: That's why it's a Golem.

Mac Low: They started the Golem off, and then the Golem just does it, and then they say, "Well, don't do it, that's not a good idea," and the Golem says [Speaks in robotlike "Golem" voice], "Well I'm doing it, I'm going to do it anyway!" [laughter]

Levy: The Golem's got too much missing.

Mac Low: It's a bad deal, that Golem.

Levy: It's, rather, just keeping something alive, like Barnes's language, which is here within, despite, and on account of, Jackson's rearrangements. It's a beautiful book. Like I was trying to say, the last section I find incredibly sensual and very erotic.

” ” ” ” ”

Alan Filreis

A Reponse to Jackson Mac Low and Andrew Levy

August 1998

“Spirit—A Word I Never Use”

“Who needs poststructuralism? He’s so beyond that analysis it’s not funny!”

—Andrew Levy

Where else but at a *PhillyTalks* session—the post-reading discussion veering, digressing, everyone hearing their own stomachs, half-attending to the redolence of vegetarian lasagna in the Writers House kitchen—could Andrew Levy say he likes Jack Spicer because, of all things, there are “beings in his poems”? This was remarkable in itself. But then, what’s more, he got away with it, and, still more, he and others and then Jackson Mac Low himself, extended the idea.

Mac Low had already offered his commentary on Levy in verse, by making his “Diastic Derived from Andrew Levy’s Poem ‘Struggle Against Misery,’” a non-intentional response to what Mac Low recognized was a very personal poem.¹ In the diastic derivation one cannot help but read Levy’s original pronouns, personal in the poem about love (“my,” “yourself”—lovers’ I and you), as transposed to the relational space experimentally occupied by Levy and Mac Low. For example, the triad

My would yourself barely pull word

I jump ““outside”

something “desperation”?

(“Diastic Derived from Andrew Levy’s Poem...”)

would seem now to be available as part of the dialogue between the two poets—indeed, as an aspect of the usual *PhillyTalks* convergence.

Now, with Jackson Mac Low sitting next to him, Levy seemed ready to move the conversation toward an idea of personhood in the poetic work of appropriation. Mac Low offered an instant admonition. “[T]hese,” he said (presumably he meant Jack Spicer’s words and phrases), are “dictated from outside”—they’re “beamed down” not be’d. Louis Cabri is right to think Mac Low was here half-punning (being, beamed), but he was also of course quoting a bit of mass sci fi pop-cultural phrasing, the equivalent of “coming from nowhere.” In any event, Levy pressed on, some in attendance joining him, making an impromptu case for a kind of personal being pertinent to the radically disjunctive poetics both these writers practice. And then, with Mac Low’s final improvised commentary on “spirit” (“a word I never use,” he said—whereupon we knew this was a significant occasion) we arrived at a grammatical politics of “saving,” a gesture taking its meaning at least temporarily from the religious analogue.

Of course this is a notion of salvation that comes out the far side of the randomly constructed. By no means was this *PhillyTalks* event some rearguard action against the

¹ Mac Low’s prose commentary on Levy’s poem, which he read aloud at the *PhillyTalks* 2 event, makes this perception clear. [Editor’s note: Mac Low’s “Diastic Derived from Andrew Levy’s Poem ‘Struggle Against Misery’” will be published as the poem ““Struggle Thoughts”” by hole chapbooks this fall. The chapbook, *Struggle Through*, will include two additional Mac Low poems “derived” from Levy’s poem. For a copy, send \$6 to 529B-19th Ave S.W., Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2S 0E3.]

radicalism of Mac Low or of Ron Silliman (who briefly joined the conversation), or even against the well-developed anti-ego psychology in the poetry of Bob Perelman. Perelman, though absent, was passingly invoked by Mac Low this night as the guy, or at least the sort of guy, who would remind us that Pound was a fascist and therefore *The Pisan Cantos* can't be beautiful. (Silliman dodged Mac Low's attempt to bring him into this shrewdly obvious point, by contending that, well, the Van Buren cantos were politically worse. Perelman's *The Trouble with Genius* [1994], in any event, contends otherwise about Pound.) MacLow's mention of what Perelman might say to someone taking seriously "Pound's better self" was a self-parodic yet helpful bit of adherence to what no one in the room would have called political correctness.

How had we gotten to this point? I offer a pointed summary.

At first one heard some of the usual talk about whether "the culture" (at large) is "continuous with what's going on in poetry and art." In an aside he probably felt would lead nowhere, Levy noted that he is "still interested" in "self." Not, to be sure, the self of psychic or emotional (read: "lyric") personal expression. In his *PhillyTalks 2* piece, his commentary on Mac Low's *Barnesbook: four poems derived from sentences by Djuna Barnes* (1996), Levy had observed in Mac Low's rendering of Barnes the "recontextualizings of fortitude" and other personal qualities; "innocence" was another. Here then, in the live discussion, Levy was rehearsing a persistent concern, only more generally. In response Mac Low insisted that in his *Barnesbook* he uses Djuna Barnes's words "strictly as material," a process by which he strips the words of Barnes's sentence-to-sentence and intra-sentence identity. Levy's question was: What is left of Barnes in this work? Levy was attempting to turn a corner, hoping more rather than less of Barnes has been "kept," observing that Mac Low did after all "keep" something from or, perhaps, of Barnes. (This is a key of, I would say, because it is an abstract idiomatic term of appropriation more from Stevens than from Pound or Williams. I am reminded of Marjorie Perloff's deliberately overstated but still acute consideration of whose era it was—Pound's or Stevens's.² "The era" is generally Pound's, to be sure—but Stevens I think silently supports Levy here, with his post-romantic, post-psychological language of "of"—obscuring yet broadening the concept of accompaniment.³ Mac Low's rejoinder insisted again that even names (proper names, fictional characters, etc.) "kept" or "saved" from Barnes's books in *Barnesbook* have come only by way of "certain" random-digit triplets⁴—by virtue of an unvaried machine-made pattern used to construct the new work.

I take it that the only reason a minor disagreement here produced a new and more interesting agreement—Mac Low's idea of remnant spirit as an element of resistant politics—was because of the social-aesthetic compact implicit in the design of the PhillyTalks series itself. In the PhillyTalks series at The Writers House, somewhat unlikely pairs of "more senior" and

² Marjorie Perloff, "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" *New Literary History* 13:3 (Spring 1982): 485. The title obviously responds to Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (1971), and to counterclaims made against Kenner's presumption.

³ Stevens used "of" repeatedly to signify distinctions between inherence and about-ness. For instance, "The poem is the cry of its occasion," not about ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"). Levy's phrase-by-phrase rhetorical debt to Stevens is worth, I think, some examination in itself. I'd contend that Stevens is surprisingly quite vocal in Levy's poetry, for example in this stanza from "Struggle Against Misery": "An immaculate image / must be a fiction. It is / time to choose. The lights burning out / pull down the shades. Not metaphor." Quoting these lines in his *PhillyTalks 2* piece about Levy's poem, Mac Low keenly noted: "Here 'fiction' means mere fiction," himself appropriating the Stevensesan phrase, modest diction in an immodest claim.

⁴ See *Barnesbook: four poems derived from sentences by Djuna Barnes* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1996), p. 501, for Mac Low's description of the process.

“more junior” experimental writers are brought together to produce a new if only momentary combination. Levy’s modest resistance to Mac Low— “but you kept” something of Barnes—had to be more than politely accommodated. Nonetheless, this disposition induced Mac Low to recall the cold-war languages of the 1940s and 50s, while at the same time it seemed to take him to a new approach to an old question. Just as these two writers were talking about Mac Low’s appropriation of Barnes, and of Spicer’s of Lorca, they had of course come to Philadelphia to work through Mac Low’s of Levy. So where was Levy in all this? “Diastic Derived from Andrew Levy’s Poem ‘Struggle Against Misery’” and the two “travesties” of that very diastic, vintage performative Mac Low, “kept” less of Levy than apparently Levy now felt was apt. For Levy of Mac Low there is only an inside, not even the “outside” Mac Low claims to know in his use of the phrase “beamed up.” He beamed up Levy as he had beamed up Barnes—and then what? PhillyTalks—especially during the collaborative chat after the double reading—stages the social compact more forgivingly than diastic or other mutual appropriations that precede the day. Mac Low’s mild rebuke (“Well,” he said, “those names are words that came into the poems where they did because certain random-digit triplets...”) didn’t get the last word. Cabri and Mike Magee come to the aid. Is the singular “I” an organizing point? Can one come to see the Barnes piece as having some of the qualities of personality? And implicitly: Is what is “kept” of Levy in the diastic derivation analogous to a kind of person? They and others were doubtless thinking of Mac Low’s relationship with Barnes as described in the Afterword to *Barnesbook*: “it is only a dialogue by courtesy,” that “only” being somewhat haunting in its impersonality.⁵) Levy could now comment on the “poem-as-person” as developing, always never-quite-arrived. Aided again by Cabri, Levy then offered his disarming assertion that there are beings in Jack Spicer’s poems. Mac Low stole the show for a moment by talking about “beaming down,” as noted earlier. But Levy only reasserted that appropriations are occasions that are dialogues with the source materials, likened to a “dialogue with another person.” Heather Starr then anchored the point with a footnote, citing the claim that in some modern painting a shape interacts with another shape on the model of relationships between people. Levy then felt the need to predate postmodernism by many centuries, citing Basho among others, in a gesture meant to be a small ironic victory over all the gloating about the special achievements of contemporary writing. A stage was set for the “saving”—in the earlier, milder term, for the “keeping”—of the politically good via the syntactically disjunctive.

By the time Mac Low came finally back, offering a long statement near the end of the evening, he was prepared to re-describe his process in a political language that I take to be a significant interpretive tool in the work of understanding Mac Low’s sensibility in relation to the cold war, and the origins, in the 1950s, of his radically appropriative manner.

Mac Low said he believes he is “saving the sparks” of the creator’s “spirit” when he works from inside “a book that was composed for some horrible reason.” In this respect Mac Low was bearing witness to the formation of an internally resistant, self-consciously radical political logic that postdated modernism but predated the new left. He and his method came of age, in the late 1940s and ’50s, when the Rand Corporation invented, among other texts, its random-digit book to achieve “mad” military objectives. Who were the authors? “Good mathematicians,” he reminded us, whose relationship with the Navy’s cold-war leader, James Forrestal, was in this special sense textual.

⁵ *Barnesbook*, p. 53. Levy himself, in his *PhillyTalks* 2 piece, quoted this phrase.

How does one read that relationship, or unread it? Mac Low told us about Forrestal (1892-1949), correctly pointing out that the Secretary was “literally mad, paranoid and extremely depressive, and ended up by throwing himself from the window of a mental hospital.”⁶ This capsule cold-war biography had an essential but partly hidden purpose in the Mac Low-Levy transaction. It was a sage chiding, and also an invitation. It has become too easy just to assert that (without saying specifically how) disjunctive poetics enabled avant-gardists in a time of anti-radicalism, in that period when old left was disintegrating and new left hadn’t been born, to refuse belief in cold-war rhetoric at the level of the paragraph, or even of the sentence or phrase—to show how they got behind the very syntax or structure of the way things were being meant and accepted as meaningful.⁷

Mac Low is reminding us that in a sense the making of his own disjunctive style entailed something like the salvation of good mathematicians as creators of literal doomsday language machines. That he so completely apologized for such talk (“spirit” is a word “I never use, and here I’m using it in public!”; “This is awfully spooky! I don’t usually talk about such things”) makes this vital testimony to the idea of looking back to the political origins of the urgent need to dislocate the poetic “being” from or from within the state—to avoid the textual fate of the “good mathematicians.” When Mac Low teaches us about “this kabbalistic idea of ‘saving the sparks,’” he is not the least bit contradicting himself in response to Andrew Levy’s sensible ethical desire for a modestly more personal or “conservative” concept of the self in contemporary writing—to “keep” something of Barnes when appropriating her. Jackson Mac Low is consistently contending that the main work is not in the whole thing itself (“the project,” we like to say), but, sometimes, in the chips and bits that fall from the workbench of Rand’s and other shops’ projects. In these bits, which can be assembled, are something like the vestiges of people. “When you do this,” Mac Low told us, “you’re . . . making artworks, that is to say, persons out of them.”

Mac Low provides the terms of his own saving as well. As Levy points out, via Robert Kocik, “The poet’s place is at the point of pure research in any materialization.”⁸ Mac Low’s cold-war anecdote about the Rand/Navy work serves to warn us of the risks of “pure research” in this sense. After all, such abstractions can be taken in right or left directions.

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⁶ Forrestal had become Secretary of the Navy in 1944, and, after the army and navy were merged, served as the first Secretary of Defense. Depressed by, among other things, what he regarded as unfair criticisms of his handling of the air force, he entered the Navy hospital to be treated for what was publicly called “nervous exhaustion”; in May 1949, though he appeared to be recovering, he leaped from a high window in the hospital.

⁷ It is somewhat similarly insufficient, I think, to praise the political-historiographical acuity in Robert Lowell’s use of John Foster Dulles’s euphemistic phrase “agonizing reappraisal” in a poem, referring to aggressive diplomatic fibbing about U.S. first-strike nuclear policy, as merely having a relation to the relaxing of Lowell’s poetic line in *Life Studies*.

⁸ Kocik is being quoted from memory by Levy in his (Levy’s) *PhillyTalks 2* piece.

Andrew Levy

Post-event note

August 25, 1998

Some further thoughts about the things I said in the talk with Jackson, that I don't think I emphasized as I'd wish to, and wished I had that evening.

Ramble and nonsense and aimlessness all attributes of my sources and their subjects were made use of in the Elephant poems (and left to stand as poetic 'qualities' as against shaping a refined, smoother integration of materials into more conventionally "unified" poems), placed alongside a humor of critical thought, and I'd stress humor as the way these poems represent & offer a poetics of hope. The current debate between the various poetics of pleasure vs disgust¹ I find too narrowly theoretical, and either side even more so. But believe there's room for their co-existence as aspects of a more pluralistic, democratic, inclusive poetics of hope. A poetry of hope more promising of what we haven't yet imagined to be possible.

If we prefer, we can intervene.

” ” ” ” ”

Excerpt from a letter by Levy to Mac Low, Sept. 29 (1996)

. . . .But you've asked another question I think very difficult to answer. Why people nowadays think politics is more worthy of discussion than esthetics. Many people seem in possession of little to no patience with the facts of their lives. To a certain degree, I believe that may be the motivating force that drives critics of ideology and culture to see "the world" (they often assume the reader has the same idea of the world they do) as consumed by capitalism to the extent no free spaces for the reflective soul any longer exist at all. Every step one takes is already mediated by the drive for the consumption of commercial goods ad nauseum. How can anyone exercise patience when "everything" tells you it isn't a value or aspect of character worth nurturing. In fact, you'll end up a "loser" if you do. Why did the artworld market rise and fall catastrophically at the end of the 80's in sync with the Gulf War? This impatience is intertwined with a cynicism that seems, at present, ubiquitous, to permeate high, low, and middle-brow culture—it lays like a thick coating of mucous over so much art production, fine art or pop movies, and I find that to be unbearable. There's panic and anxiety about unemployment—a future of complete uncertainty my peers talk about all the time. If we live in a participatory democracy, what does that mean when choice comes down to Dole vs. Clinton? And half the voting population doesn't vote, hasn't for a long time. Impatience, cynicism, desperation & the honest well-thought out interrogation by the few capable of addressing the complexity of the zeitgeist has made politics, or some such version of what politics has meant, ascend over that of the esthetic—I remember several years ago visiting San Francisco and going for a drive with Steve Benson to visit Norman

¹ See Sianne Ngai's "Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust" in Jeff Derksen's guest edited "poetics of disgust" issue of *Open Letter* (Winter 1998). See also *PhillyTalks* 3 (Derksen/Silliman).—Ed.

Fischer at Green Gulch Zen center. We were talking about poetry and art and I used the word “beauty” to describe what I thought and felt about work I found most pleasurable. Steve, at least at that time, seemed surprised by my use of this word. It wasn’t something one said at that time within the heavily politicized language scene in the Bay area. He questioned me about it. We came to an accommodation where he could accept the word without thinking it a nostalgia or humanist cop-out. For that to happen I had to articulate some connection between the esthetic, the social, hence political in the vocabulary of language poetics, and the body—its presence in play and pleasure, its emotions. Going to the New Hampshire conference¹ I guessed I’d be faced with a similar language environment (and I was right), so sought a way to bridge my reflections concerning the philosophical and esthetic to the political without losing the idea of beauty, pleasure, the body in making its artifacts, along the way. You have reminded me that one might instead go on to emphasize words & other linguistic units esthetically in regard to their beauty, something we know the best writers always do in the writing, regardless of their “ideas” about the purpose, role, political efficacy of their work. So yes, a return to an attention on the construction of poems and the criteria affecting “their making & modification during making” should be the next step. You ask if I’ve read anything dealing directly with this idea of construction—not much, it’s true. However, I believe Peter Quartermain is one of the few critics of contemporary poetry who does make a solid attempt in this direction in sections of his book, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*.

” ” ” ” ”

Jackson Mac Low

Response to Levy’s post-event note

August 1998

I think many of us romantically exaggerate today’s greater degree of domination by the corporate-political complex in comparison with the pervasiveness of domination by similar formations in past eras. Poets and other artists have always had to cope with such political economic situations in their societies. However we critique or otherwise “deal with” those situations within which we live and make our works, I see no reason for us to turn our attention away from the intrinsic qualities of the materials and forms of our artworks and the way they affect those who perceive them—those things to which you were attending when you (Andy) used the word “beauty” when speaking with Steve.

I began in 1954 to pursue workingways that (as I saw them) emphasized the intrinsic qualities of language and sound aside from whatever works made with them might express or say. When I first came across the term “language writing” as used by various friends, correspondents, and others, I thought this was what it meant. I did not realize until later the degree of emphasis upon engagement with the social context (to use shorthand) that was tacitly

¹ “Assembling Alternatives: An International Poetry Conference,” Durham, NH, Aug. 1996.—Ed.

implied. Some language-writer friends have objected to my belief that the artist should feel free to engage that context, directly, indirectly, or at most “liminally” in any particular work.

I have always been politically active in one way or another, and have sometimes been so in my poems in ways that have seemed too direct or unmediated to some friends, but I feel the concern with such qualities as beauty and, in the case of poetry, words and language per se are my central concerns as an artist. To make works that embody this central concern is itself an act of resistance to the all-but-stifling context and its mocking manipulators of domination.

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PhillyTalks are on the web thanks to Aaron Levy. #s 1, 2, 3, & 6 are currently available at www.english.upenn.edu/~wh/phillytalks. For hard copies, please email Louis Cabri at lcabri@dept.english.upenn.edu, or write to 529B - 19th Ave. S.W., Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2S 0E3. PhillyTalks is a project funded by the Kelly Writers House at University of Pennsylvania. Copyright © reverts to authors on publication.

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UPCOMING . . .

Rachel Blau DuPlessis / Barrett Watten
Nov. 15 (1999) 6pm

Dan Farrell / Peter Inman
Nov. 29 (1999) 6pm

Newsletter will be available one week prior to each event.

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