

# Philly Talk 4

Feb. 18, 7pm

Kelly Writers House, 3805 Locust Walk, Phila.

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Jena Osman

*from* “The Periodic Table as Assembled by Dr. Zhivago, Oculist”

## **\*Lag (I lag) Series**

*The northerly strip comprises a family of remarkably similar metals known as the rare earths or, more formally, the lanthanides... The lanthanides are so similar to one another that until recently they could be separated only with great difficulty. Indeed, the near uniformity of their features suggests that it is not really worth making the considerable effort to separate them. Nature has seemingly no use for the lanthanides in its contriving of life, and humanity has only recently found certain sporadic uses for these regions.*

- P.W. Atkins, *Periodic Kingdom*

cell	pry	nod	pam	sum	euro	gad	tub	dye	hot	err	time	yob	luff
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Ceres in prison  
found on the beaches and river sands  
as in a honeycomb  
the inner level  
and various organelles  
small, humble abode  
likely to ignite  
if scratched with a knife

green twin inquisitor  
isolated a new earth  
a snoop  
gave salts of different colors  
a lever, a crow bar  
a cigarette lighter  
carbon arc in a welder's eye  
pry a welder's eye

neo-twin agrees quickly  
extracted from a rose  
fractionation of sleep  
sways, droops, flowers in the wind  
lapse of light flint  
to express and summon  
silvery double

Prometheus stole fire  
the jack of clubs and highest trump  
workers at Ohio State confirmed it  
abbreviated treatise  
completely missing from the earth's crust  
partisan writer  
captures light in pale blue or greenish glow  
little yet known

silvery luster stable in air  
adding numbers in long half-lives  
used to dope crystal, the central idea  
the gist of lasers  
excited in the infrared  
condensed coercive forms  
ignite in air

Europe is a deposit on the walls  
identified in the sun and certain stars  
countries of doped plastic and color tv  
abducted to Crete in the form of a bull

fast burnout rate for son of Jacob  
roams and roves as alpha form  
this film which spalls off  
with little purpose  
like a spike in dry air  
body-centered, close-packed  
wandering garnets

the coal car left the mine  
with grams of rare earth  
in a tantalum crucible  
dark as the moon  
wider than it was deep  
the masses lapped against the sides  
"handle with care"  
or the vessel will break  
or the phosphor will fall

imparting color  
hard to get at  
readily attacked  
dissolved  
evolved  
with hydrogen  
calcium  
color imparted  
neutron bombardment

hot Stockholm  
burning chemists  
announced the existence of “element X”  
few uses for the acute toxic  
fiery radioactive higher than normal  
violent raging recently stolen  
hot and bothered hot to trot  
hot under the collar  
hot making it hot for  
unusual magnetic properties  
only a few uses have been found for

in 1860, terbia was known as erbia  
after 1877, erbia became terbia  
the usage panel was split on the matter  
56% preferred *ur*  
in the potassium vapor  
violation of pronunciation  
and ion-exchange  
deflates the moral standard  
isolated sin in enamel glaze

time was the earliest name for Scandinavia  
was discovered in 1879  
was the least abundant of the rare earth elements  
only a few years ago, time was not obtainable  
at any cost  
time was silver-gray, soft, malleable  
and could be cut with a knife  
now a bomb, a capsule, a card  
a clock and a deposit

hooligan, face-centered  
keep it in a closed container  
throw the word backwards  
so the ruffian reacts slowly with water  
electrical resistance increases ten-fold  
when it becomes a boy  
a destructive youth spelled backwards

a catalyst in cracking  
sailing closer into the wind  
to steer Paris  
closer into the wind  
sails flapping  
most costly  
sails

**+Acid (I) Series**

the	past	use	nap	put	amo	can	balk	café	east	film	mad	not	lear
-----	------	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	------	------	------	------	-----	-----	------

[the past upends neptune  
pulls army camera books  
*cf:* estates from mad northern lear]

**Tina Darragh**

mashed lit crit dream

for Jena Osman

I was in an auditorium waiting for the program to begin. There was a big aisle down the center and clumps of seats on either side. I was expecting the usual work-related program, but then a group of women dressed in Eastern European garb walked down the aisle singing folk songs in tandem – first one group would sing something, then the others would respond. I got up to go home, but I was having a hard time getting all my things together – my purse, my water bottle, my lunch bag – when our neighbor Doretha said she'd help. Everyone else was gone except us and a woman in a babuska walking a little girl in a stroller. She left the stroller at the door and went out into the street, cupping her hands in puddles and drinking the water. The little girl got out of the stroller and started to do the same. Then the woman began wandering around in the middle of traffic, talking to herself and gesturing with her hands. I said I would walk up to the little girl's house and tell her parents about this. We reached their porch as the woman brought the little girl back. The father was David Ogden Stiers from M\*A\*S\*H\*. I told him that I had something to tell him, but I couldn't do so in front of his child and her babysitter. He didn't seem to care. I was very "official" in the way I was talking, but he said "Well, can my wife call you tonight – she's the one who deals with all this and she's not home yet." I was worried that we'd have to leave the phone plugged in, and that his wife would call after we were in bed, but the matter was serious so I agreed. He went to a table where he was working to get a pencil and paper. The paper already had my name on it and part of the cover from "Pi in the Skye". I said "I'm Tina Darragh – are you reading my work?" He said no, that he was reading criticism of it by a woman I'd never heard of. He showed me a hierarchically-structured chart – like a family tree – where the critic had taken various diagrams from my work and from the works of others to show how they didn't go together. Actually, she was saying that we didn't prove our point, that the data was bad. I looked at it and said "Well, this is ridiculous – that's not what's going on at all. We didn't survey people – we were taking things from the dictionary."

-er] : one  
 , envious,  
 at ENVY]  
 - feeling

UIC  
 taxi wit  
 envious  
 jealousie  
 ous noti  
 friends -  
 "ENVY \"

[Empty box]

[Faded text box]

vt **enwound**; **enwind** (v.)]: to wind  
 FOLD (his legs *enwo*  
 n- + *womb* (n.)) **1 o**  
 nb **2** : to bury, hide  
 f something (you may

[Empty box]

**1 a** : to wrap  
 shabby overcoat  
 ury items —*Mode*

[Empty box]

s]  
 vi-

packet *enwrapped* in a faded yellow e...  
**b** : to enfold in or closely surround with any phy  
 material substance or condition : ENVELOP (only the c.  
 of the empty house *enwrapped* her —Edith Sitwell) (a  
*enwrapped* in flowers) **2 a** : to wrap in or surround  
 thing immerial (as a mood atmosphere) (sat  
 in a : len defiance) (sile e *enwrapped* the slee  
 ifold in a trance, imber, or deep thou  
 orb mentally (en pped in fond dreams

[Empty box]

n+ \ vt [ˈen- + w  
 INWROUGHT

-] : WREATH, ENVELO.  
 - 7 ]

[Empty box]

*from adv.fans – the 1968 series (Buffalo: Leave Books, n.d.)*

voice 1 – over the phone:

“I’m going to come over there and lick some little pussy.  
And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

on the playground afterwards:

“He signs our paychecks &  
we’re all living paycheck to paycheck  
& what *can* we do about it?”

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voice 2 – the warm hand

I want the warm hand  
the warm hand doesn’t call me by name  
I want \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ is wrong  
the warm hand is screaming

*YOU* want finger pointing  
*YOU* want fingers close up  
*YOU* pounding-no *YOU* pounding-go  
*YOU* pounding-never

\_\_\_\_\_ goes away

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1968 – “survivor syndrome” – defined as a set of clinical characteristics exhibited by someone subjected to terror during a military action.

1968 – “survivor” and “W.A.R.” (World of Abnormal Rearing) are incorporated into family therapy terminology regarding domestic violence.

1971 – use of term “survivor” in literature to describe anyone who addresses adversity.

1992 – The Reader’s Guide to Popular Literature lists 258 instances of “survivor” in article titles.

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“survivors” – as formerly occupied territories  
who have been set free  
and by virtue of invasion  
are owed \_\_\_\_\_  
due eventually

survivor-pedestal  
one voice that oversees:

“We are where the words ferred  
when the warm fist made them flee.”

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What, if anything, happens to the present tense when language acquisition and corporal punishment occur simultaneously?

The expression I associate with the dissolution of communal or alternative living experiences circa 1968 is “I’m a *survivor*”. The problem at hand would be one of generic territoriality (regarding such things as toilet paper or milk), secondary to a general inequality based on earning capacity and worldly status. A slight of milk would evoke a “survivor” statement, a seemingly melodramatic response but one which indicated that all future negotiations already had been settled in favor of those who were actively experiencing pain – the uniform code of trauma. The difficult issues of the economic differences of those living there and their effect on slice-of-life inequalities couldn’t be addressed. The living experiments failed. For lack of long-term financial backing, the political experiments were of such short duration that our arguments regarding why they failed are based more on conjecture than observation.

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My sister Mimi works in an “employment program” for the “mentally ill”. One of the members often would pace, his hands up to his temples, opening and closing his fists, his fingers so many exclamation points in the air. Mim would ask “What are the voices saying?” He’d reply: “It’s the class struggle going on in here.”

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one voice needed for daily functioning, multiple voices needed to change our functioning

layer hand over fist  
opens fist under hand  
f and h st f an fan

shot line - 1968, A P Bolder. *Comp Man Skin Diving*  
 XIII 248. A shot line should be used from a boat when  
 diving in bad visibility

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flat-topped iceberg

Also,  
 |<  
 copal]  
*imor*, tasset.  
 clasp. Also, tach.  
*Survey*: tachym-  
*tachios*. gen.

quality of being reserved  
 2. *Sw* "TH" a form  
 thro' *effec* unduly long  
 [GIMCR] *taciturni*  
 1. the *thir* *taciturn*  
 bet. 2. the *tes*, *n*.  
 by this letter -c 12  
*gimel*, lit., camel  
*n. l. a sm*  
 end an  
 with a *ktai* broad he

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tele-player - 1968. *Daily Telegraph* 12 Dec 25/3.  
 The tele-player will cost about £ 200 and each  
 tele-cartridge £ 20.

ASH - 1968, *Christian Science Monitor*, 1/30,5.  
 Most recently there is the formation of the brand  
 new Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) to act as  
 a legal arm of the antismoking forces.

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an *faluc(c)u*, from obsolete  
 ped or fined rather  
 r doesn't present sev  
 6. to go about on tity  
 as a ghost to belli s  
 tool. pointer. or p  
 de. slip. or move m  
 r the like A faces  
 hen variate to  
 members of this sex. 4.  
 an organ, such as a pist  
 ; seeds or spores after fe  
 mens: *female flowers*.  
 art, such as a slot or r  
 ventary male part, such  
 inate; weak. — See  
 F., fem. 1. A membe pon  
 ang. 2. Anything s by  
 distinguished fro s by  
 ily pistillate flo o walk  
 lkd ou

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hostess apron - 1968, *Wanganui (N.Z.) Chronicle*,  
 15 Nov. 8/3. (*winner of competition*) Hostess  
 apron: Mrs. S 1, Mrs. A.J.M. 2.

**Tina Darragh:** Right off the bat, the thing that strikes me about “The Periodic Table as Assembled by Dr. Zhivago, Oculist” is that you are addressing the difficult issue of thinking critically about sight. I love the isolation of the phrase “here are the elements that contribute to sight”!<sup>1</sup> We’re taught to be critical of data (or maybe we aren’t, but there is that illusion in undergrad), but not of pictures. And part of the problem IS that you can analyze data “in a straight line” but pictures aren’t sequential texts. The modular texts rising out of the grid are so dramatic and drastic and perfect in “catching one’s eye”. The other thing I like is that you are taking a “system of management” for one discipline (chemistry, right???!<sup>1</sup>) and using it as a way to challenge visually what we think “seeing” is.

**Jena Osman:** That piece comes out of a number of interests/obsessions. First off, from a concern about a vitreal detachment in my eye. I was on a bicycle going down a mountain and hit a pothole. For days afterwards my vision was clouded by floaters. They finally cleared up except for this one speck that still remains in my left eye . . . not that such autobiographical details add anything to the poem but a method of “access,” which is what this poem might be about. I want the poem to be completely interactive (and maybe we could talk about the (im)possibility of “complete interactivity”) where a reader can follow chemical elements (which have been translated into words) to short poems which then provide materials for “reactions” that the reader sets in motion. Right now it’s in a very rough state because I need to learn some programming to get it to really work. I’m also creating this piece in response to my discontent with a lot of hypertext poetry and fiction that I’ve seen. Although hypertext is fun, it doesn’t always seem completely necessary. I mean, why not just let the reader’s eye jump randomly over pages in a book? Why institute and solidify that randomness within a hypertext? I want to create a piece where the form really has something to do with the content of the piece. And now that I

mention it, this is why I’m so drawn to your work and the work of Joan Retallack. Your procedures always seem intimately engaged with the content that you’re working with. I’m a big fan of your poem *adv. fans: 1968 series*<sup>2</sup> because it includes both a classifiable cultural history (i.e. a system of classification as found through etymologies), and a random response we have to such “data” that arrives in distinctly non-classifiable forms. The classifiable form (the verb?) allows for the modifier (the adverb) and the adverb, in turn, changes the verb. The grammar represents some kind of poethical<sup>3</sup> utopia where data continues to transform through interaction/reaction (chemical reaction?). Maybe you could say some more about that particular work? The process of its construction? Will there be other parts of the series using etymological origination points from other years? And maybe your response will lead us back to your question about the challenge of “visualizing” what we really see through poetry. . . .

**Tina:** I think you did tell me about your biking accident before, and it is admirable (I don’t use that word lightly) that instead of retrenching (bad pun??) and imposing controls to regain “normal vision”, you take interacting with “the ground” to new levels!!! Plus, the poem as a “chemical reaction” involving the reader deep-sixes the dialectic nicely by expanding the poet vs. reader to include environmental conditions. (I’ll write more later!)

Anyway, you know about my current obsession with multiple environments, and I think your Periodic Table would be a perfect project for a more elaborate WEB interface where the reader’s input could change the existing text + generate some other possibilities and/or eliminate some. Maybe those “chemical reactions” could change the Table at the head of the page. I have not learned HTML or any of the other languages yet. I have to this semester for the most basic librarian things which now have to be on the WEB. So I have no idea how difficult that would be to carry off. But I think it’s great, as it is, to have the table and then the

tiny, individual element identifiers enlarged as poetic elements that can be read in any order. I know what you mean about the limits of hypertext. How is being able to choose the order of the segments displayed any different than jumping ahead in a book to read the dirty bits first? Or reading the end first because you are afraid you'll fall asleep and not know what happened when you wake up! As a librarian, there are some good things to hypertext links – letting you go directly to the full-text of a cited reference, etc. Actually, I find that often the hypertext links obscure the basic information that you wanted to find initially, and it is FRUSTRATING to try to figure out the WEB's "train of thought" to get to it!! Some would say that's a "design" issue, but actually it's one person's meat vs. another's potatoes. When someone brings up "access" issues with the WEB, I think of being able to get on without a browser at all. It's still not like TV in that there are LOADS of people who can't get on even though libraries are being equipped for them to do so. They close the branch libraries to pay for the technology. But, while we're on this topic, I don't think there is anything wrong with having straight text on the WEB right now because it is sort of the "mimeo" of the '90s. It's an extremely cheap way to get work out there – for now. The departmental charge-backs and pricing wars haven't hit yet in most places. I heard one news report that people would start getting hit with big WEB charges as soon as later this year, but I think that's probably too soon – they want to let the market expand some more. So, it's cheap publishing, but you'd also have to do the equivalent of a "mimeo" to have at Small Press Distribution both for those who don't have access and for your "archival copy". THEN, you'd have the fun task of trying to recreate on paper the experience of the online "chemical reaction" – like pop-up books with a twist!

More on form/content later – probably tomorrow. Hope this piecemeal response to your part is OK – don't want to delay when I have a few minutes here and there.

\* \* \*

Well, on to form/content. I think with my earlier work it was clear that the experiments, like the ambiguous figures, were there to critique the narrative, the I-in-error. And that's true for the other projects, too, although since they don't have error-tracking narratives like in *Striking Resemblance*,<sup>4</sup> it is harder to tell what's going on – modular as muddy! Joan's projects don't have that drawback. I'm thinking of *Afferrimages* and the poems in there as an example, where the reader can see where the fragments come from given the design of the page, and experience the beauty of that. This is an aside, but did you see the *Midwife's Tale* when it was on TV recently? It was part docu-drama and part historian talking-head re: the diary of a midwife in Maine around the time of the Revolutionary War. My favorite part was listening to the historian talk about the diary while watching her make charts and graphs of the entries. To build a narrative, she had to "picture" it. The stories came out of the indexing she did. I thought of your Periodic Table, actually, when I was watching this, the narratives arising out of a chart. For the historian in the midwife's case, the charts became maps as she recorded more data, and it was only after she had done reams of these charts that the significance of certain statements jumped out at her, visually. With the *adv. fan* piece, I think I WANTED the juxtaposition of the dictionary definitions and the torn fan transcriptions to reveal something significant, but they didn't, at least for me. Maybe the commercial content of the '68 definitions is highlighted, but we knew late capitalism was marching on so that's no revelation. But I wanted to do something with my gut feeling that language acquisition is not innocent, it is not a Garden of Eden activity, it is a mess! And there are lots of things going on, not only, or not just, or maybe not at all the big NO that takes us into the world since we can't have the mirror comforts. So, it is very kind of you to use the term "transform" about the *adv. fans*, but I don't make such claims for them. It's more like the typo that kept reappearing – multiple – instead of multiple

– I wanted to do a multipile of words. I will send a couple of them to Louis for the newsletter, and I'll read the piece with some *dream rims*, especially since it's dedicated to Hannah and it doesn't look like there's going to be a memorial service for her.

**Jena:** There's so much to ask you, that I'm not quite sure how to organize it. Could you say more about "multiple environments"?

You have described your work as "turning to words and the directions they suggested to me" ("Error Message," *a(gain)<sup>2</sup>st the odds*). Last week at the Writers House, Ron Silliman stated that language poetry arose out of (and against) the very particular social circumstance of the Vietnam War and the draft. I'm wondering what you think of that, of how turning to words is a response to social circumstance.

Your procedures seem to result from that space where language and ideology blatantly collide (in dictionary definitions, in psychiatric tests of perception, in puns . . .). In this way, you produce a poetry that follows Silliman's description of a politically activated poetics. However, your poetry also allows for what you call the "I-in-error," which, as I understand it, refers to the space which is not available for narrative logics, the space within language that we always try (and fail) to pressure into sense/critique/story. In this way, language is in fact a "multiple environment," revealing two very distinct types of semantic performances: that of the surface text and then the text beneath (which shows up only as an "error message" in the world of conventional logic).

Could you explain more specifically what you mean by "error tracking devices"? What would be a specific example of one from *Striking Resemblance* and how does it work?

Do you consider *adv. fans* a failed project? It sounds as if you saw the piece as putting two language worlds together that then failed to react. I find the piece effective because it situates the narrative drive of language next to (and framing) what you call "the blank" (that which resists nar-

ative). The piece incorporates error; introduces error as a new semantics. The center collage sections remind me very much of Cage's approach to ambience: they're an opportunity for us to see what our usual methods of language-perception censor out and prevent from occurring. And visually it's really stunning. I think we are both drawn to using the page visually. Are there other writers in this visual poetry area that you're particularly interested in?

But back to this idea of using the poetic field as a place to play out what we normally censor (or pressure into familiar linear forms): I think this relates to your *dream rim* poems as well (although I've only seen the one we published in *Chain 4*). In the note to your "Bill Clinton Plane Ride Dream" you say "We do these dreams a disservice by declining them as fares to the unconscious." In this project you seem to be arguing against all the familiar forms of dream analysis, trying to obliterate the concept of dreams as something to decode: "Instead see dreams as cell relief, dreams as arrangements of information with no justification for the juxtapositions, each dream its own procedure skewing localities and uncollecting compunctions." Could you say more about the *dream rim* project?

As for recreating the Periodic Table piece on paper, I like the idea of a pop-up book (or perhaps it should be a kit, replete with test tubes and bunsen burner). The problem I'm dealing with is how can we manifest the non-linear, non-narrative, non-semantic "blank" and its relationship to its semantic opposite in a way that it can be "used"? I think you get to the center of the problem in your essay "The Best of Intentions" [*a(gain)<sup>2</sup>st the odds*], when you ask:

When I remove the aspect of 'fixed point' from our notion of the definition of a word, am I removing as well the reader's ability to focus on the work in a relaxed way? If I challenge the concept of etymology as a linear progression and claim instead the right for words to act as open forms, moving in and out of their historical contexts, am I

disrupting the reader's sense of order to such an extent that she/he is unable to reflect on her life without needing an 'other' to tie things together? In my attempts to think of words on their own terms, have I created a fascistic form?

You wrote that essay in 1983. Can you talk a little about how these questions and your attempts to address them inform your current projects?

**Tina:** Yes, I agree with Silliman that the protests against the Vietnam War made me want to change EVERYTHING, including poetry. But I was taught growing up that to try to change things would only make the world worse – would reinforce totalitarianism, not end it. The Enlightenment was the beginning of secularism which, for conservative Catholics, meant that it was the road to godless communism, and that's fascism with a different vocabulary. Mix that up with the Eve rap – woman wanting knowledge destroys the world – and you can see why the claim that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is really fascism gone underground doesn't just roll off my back. "The Best of Intentions" is really a very upbeat piece because I make the claim that people have the cognitive flexibility to read non-linear literature and not become fascists as a consequence of their exposure to indeterminacy!! That essay is focused on the individual reader, and suggests that, even without Enlightenment norms as guides, the individual is capable of being active in the world. But the flip side is, what about the world? One of the points made about chaos theory is that, if a small action can make big changes, it can make big BAD changes as well as good ones. This is why I'm struggling to understand the concept of "multiple environments." I'm hoping to figure out a way to contain the terror inherent in being active in the world without a roadmap that says "Yes, if you do x, you will get y, and y will be OK." I think what I want is a way to say that, if you do something in the world that has an unforeseen consequence, and it's a BAD consequence, then that harm is limited. I'll do more tomorrow on the *adv. fans* as failures – I

want to find this thing Joan wrote on identity – there's a good quote in there that would be nice to have in this.

**Jena:** I want to go back a minute to your concept of "error tracking devices" and "multiple environments." Am I understanding you correctly – that your earlier work contained tracking devices which sought to look at language as elements in an experiment that could be charted and mapped? (I.e. if x procedure is mixed with y language site, z will occur.) And that since that time you have discarded the idea of error tracking in favor of a language world that is more in line with the shapes of chaos and/or fractal sense? And that this shift allows for your poems to be even more open to multiple linguistic sources?

You mention Joan's commentary on identity. I think she's an interesting thinker to bring up because in her essay "Re:Thinking:Literary:Feminism"<sup>5</sup> she talks about how identity in poetry is often restricted to a very narrow (and conventional) form of articulation. She proposes that more "feminine" forms (such as can be found in Stein, Pound, Joyce and more contemporary experimentalists like yourself) should also be considered as expressions of identity in that they allow for a multi-lingual experience that is more attuned to our experience of language (and therefore selfhood) in the world. I hope I'm not butchering her point here, but I think it provides a useful segue into a discussion of the place of women writers in the contemporary experimental scene.

At the last poet talk event with Silliman and Derksen, there was a great deal of talk about how current poetics is moving from the "crystallization" of writers that could be found in the Language group of the 70s to a more community and dialogue oriented approach. Jeff Derksen called this new move "a coalition of articulated linkages between communities." I'm wondering how you would describe the writing community (not necessarily the local D.C. one; but the community as it was defined by publication, etc.) as you exper-

rienced it in the 70s-80s and if you see any change in that community now. What do you think about this idea of “articulated linkages,” particularly as it suggests the possibility of women staking a larger space in the scene.

**Tina:** Going first to Joan’s essay – yes! That’s the one I was thinking of! She makes the point that to be in the world, to get one’s “foot in the door,” women writers have had to be solidly traditional to prove that they are serious/smart/capable, etc. But since this traditional writing is closely bound to concepts of one’s identity as a woman, activism is limited to trying to figure out what that would be across the boards. We don’t get beyond the “essential discussion”! (Have to go to the library now – will continue over there.)

\* \* \*

Anyway, I’ve never seen anything other than this essay of Joan’s that has addressed the double bind of being an experimental woman writer in quite that way. It’s a subtle form of discrimination, but no less destructive.

The contemporary women writers . . . have followed Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath from a uniquely anguished “I” to an instructively, communally victimized “We” – re/presenting a solidarity of defiant images, which unfortunately remain unresolvable - and therefore inactive – in the alien chemistry of patriarchal language. (Is it because what has in the past been characterized as feminine language has not been authoritative, i.e., respected by men?) This leaves the structural trap of the “phallogocentric” language intact. Since images created by women do not impress what are still seen as male linguistic arbiters, these images cannot really enter, much less transform the language. (354)

And I think it’s a good companion piece to what Silliman and Derksen have written about community/dialogue. Traditionally, dialogue can occur only if the individuals involved are fully autonomous → have intact identities; otherwise, the parties who are more “together” would control the process and it wouldn’t be a dialogue. But to have an intact identity is impossible, so Joan makes the

point that increasing the forms that “acceptable” languages take also increases the probability that people can communicate beyond conversations about themselves and “who they are”.

Going back to your question about error tracking and multiple environments, I see error tracking as just one of the many ways that an individual can resist the trap of identity. Usually, I have dictionary transcriptions in various forms to break up the narrative – like the ambiguous figures in “Scale Sliding” (*Striking Resemblances*). So, is narrative the same thing as identity? For me, identity is a narrative, but I don’t know if all narratives necessarily build identity (even if you don’t want one!).

So, going back to the Derksen/Silliman exchange, let’s say that we have lots of “articulated linkages” going and, as a consequence, community projects/protests arise. In our pluralistic society, we don’t have the Enlightenment line of credit to back these up – no straightforward concept of justice, for example. We can’t validate our activism with the simplistic maxim that, whatever we do, progress is being made. We don’t believe in progress. So, our articulated linkages could create a real mess. It’s at this point that I’m comforting myself with the notion of multiple environments, because it limits the damage that can be done when we operate without the safety net of the Enlightenment.

More on *dream rims* after I close down at 5.

\* \* \*

*adv fans/dream rims*

That’s a good question – do I feel that the *adv fans* project failed? Not in terms of the fans themselves, and the emptiness of the 1968 definitions. I think that the play of the definitions bordering the dictionary fragments is OK in and of itself. What bothers me is whether I have disobeyed Wittgenstein and tried to utter the unutterable, thereby further obscuring things. I mean, really, language acquisition – that’s the UNutterable!! That’s why I have that Chomsky quote at the beginning, sort of as permission to continue!!<sup>6</sup> Also, I have no idea if it is part of something else,

a bigger project. I had thought that I would look at the Spanish Civil War – which means I’d have to learn Spanish, which is something I’d like to make myself do. Well, we’ll see.

You are right about the *dream rims* – it is a project about resisting the desire to translate codes perfectly. Also, have you ever delved into the Barbara Marie Stafford book *Body Criticism*? It’s MIT ’91. She’s looking at the subjugation of visual knowledge by using images to “prove” points in medical diagnosis, etc. I’ve always felt that way about dreams - that they are not limited to Freudian analysis.

So, tomorrow I’ll ask you more questions about your work and Cage, and talk more about women writers, etc. Bye for now!

**Jena:** I’d like to bring up an unpublished piece of yours called “Case in—> Point —>” which addresses the concerns mentioned above with a slightly different vocabulary. In this piece you equate “neologisms” with a “poetry of witness,” a witnessing of that other which our normal language practices censor out. You demand that the “real world” in all of its duality/multiplicity/twinness be allowed to exist without excuses:

‘Double blasphemy!’ say those who are over-the-top with talk of the decentered subject made passive by fragmentation. If the environment is decentered as well, then action in the world is impossible. This is where neologisms can be both a comfort and a challenge. They embody the strength and beauty of multiple, simultaneous measurements. In their existence, they help brace us to face the terror of knowing that to fight tyranny sometimes fortifies totalitarianism. The dreadful weight of ‘It was ever thus,’ a weight that crushes activism when the world is viewed as a unified environment, can be rearranged a different way, not as a retreat or as a false hope, but as a case in point.

The idea of language as performing the act of witness is an important one. Witnessing in poetry has been reduced in the mainstream to confessional poetics. The most blatant example of the semantic and syntactic reduction of witnessing and sight

that I can think of off hand is Carolyn Forché’s anthology *Against Forgetting*. Even the most experimental writers that she includes (such as Stein and Khlebnikov) have been edited so as to appear tame, linear, monolingual. This anthology is an example of how the unified voice inhibits and censors reader activity. I’m currently working on a piece called “The Shadows of Equivocation and the Press Scrutiny Board” that I hope will address the current “defiance” of neologisms in a “political” poetry (I mean something very specific by political here: poetry that interacts with the recognizably topical). I would also like this project to disrupt/call attention to how censorship of the “multiple environment” occurs on the visual level as well.

My favorite example of repressive singularities in the face of multiple possibility (and one that I’ve brought up before when discussing your work) is that of Saussure’s anagram project. In order to justify the errors he found in classical verses, he constructed a conspiracy theory of sorts which assumed that poets had planted the names of the gods anagrammatically throughout the poems. He produced notebooks upon notebooks, trying to pressure the system to function 100% of the time. It functioned some of the time, but not all. Finally he dropped the project.<sup>7</sup> I see your work as almost the exact reverse of his, because you take systems of analysis (of singularity production) and peel away the layers of control so that the multiple substance beneath can be revealed.

**Tina:** That project of yours sounds great! You’ll probably like *Body Criticism* for that one, too, since she’s into the censorship of visual information.

I was so happy when I saw that you and Juliana were going to do a *Chain* issue on different languages, because I’ve always wanted to write something about Peter’s work [P. Inman], and that’s the way I see it – as a poetry of witness among many poetries of witness. I think we’re all worried about what happens when being a wit-

ness is limited to being a victim, and it is hard to read an anthology like Forché's in the midst of a talk show culture and not have the work in it be heard as part of that culture. Silliman talked about "habit" in his Philly Talk, media monsters that we wear as habits so we can be good, unquestioning soldiers of fortune/fascism. But I think that the word "censor" might be misunderstood here primarily because it is a verb so closely associated with identity/uniqueness being crushed by anonymous power/conspiracy, and it really is hard to SEE that the media monsters that shore up our notions of the steady existence of rugged individualism are really all the same monster. I think I read an essay on this by Harryette Mullen once, where Ronald Reagan and Michael Jackson were the SAME media monster!!! What other verbs can we use for this? Another reason I'm uncomfortable with "censor" is that it could be used against projects like Forché's by right-wing types who have a vested interest in saying that such stories are fabricated whining – they aren't telling the REAL story, there is no horror, these people are just deranged. Let's say that your project finds itself becoming an anthology of a range of the poetics of witness. What are some of the ways it could be arranged, visually, so that none of the texts would be subjugated?

Even in your early work, like *Twelve Parts of Her*<sup>8</sup> and *underwater dive: version one*<sup>9</sup> you like to interrupt the text with images. With Cage, I think of him as being very strict about chance operations, but with a very good reason – employing pure chance means eliminating "good intentions" that only contribute to the world's woes (as with his *Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)*). The Internet is a perfect environment for pure chance! Would you like to talk about what draws you to Cage (pun intended!). Also, please correct what I just said. I love reading Joan's interviews with Cage, but what I remember are the references to food, cooking, etc.<sup>10</sup>

**Jena:** Just a point of clarification: *Twelve Parts*

*of Her* is formed according to various rules of interruption (i.e. there are three types of text blocks on each page), but there are no images per se. The page itself is an image. *underwater dive* is really a long continuous piece and the editor decided to intersperse a drawing between each page of text. Maybe he thought the text was too dense (or too short) otherwise. I had no idea this was being done until the book was out. This is not to say that I'm not interested in text-image combinations, just that while writing that particular piece, I wasn't thinking about it much. Recent projects have tended much more toward the visual I think. In fact, last semester I taught a class in visual poetry. This subject has been a very hot topic on the Buffalo poetics list recently. There seems to be some opinion that certain types of visual poetry are in fact just "langpo" with a twist. Some visual poets interpret their work as deflating words of their conventional semantic content, leaving only the material trace of signification (and thus, that trace can be renovated/regenerated?). In my mind, visual poems are those which create a multiple performative relation between reader and text. They perform both as conventionally meaningful sign-carriers and as empty material shells that we fill up/in. They are the "theatrical inanimate" (a phrase I'm stealing from the Henson International Puppet Festival people). Your work absolutely falls into this category.

I initially came to Cage's work, because I was writing about your work and Joan Retallack's. I was trying to determine why I felt that you and Joan – although procedurally directed – created work that seemed so much different than that of someone like Cage or Mac Low. So it wasn't that I was "drawn" to Cage, but that your work took me there. Cage's work is a way of letting in multiple languages that we often don't let ourselves attend to; often these are languages in conflict. However, one of the languages that he seems not to include, is that of "self-expression." His works can be seen as stripped of "identity" (except for his subjective choices of source texts). I think that your work (and Joan's) allows for "ex-

pression”; it is not considered something to be avoided the way Cage thought it was. In fact, it is a political necessity: in a world that fails to give voice to certain subjectivities (those of women or minorities, for instance), it is not acceptable to simply eradicate the “intentional” or “quasi-intentional” voice of the author (although certainly there’s room for intentionality’s critique). Such an eradication would mirror the social error that the “poethical” work hopes to counter aesthetically. You do not efface your identity as a subject (gendered) coming into contact with the world’s materials (also gendered). In a way, your procedures are a means for communicating identity and show how neither the production nor the reception of language can be separated from identity. It is a given in your work that there is no such thing as a “pure” chance operation. Your work doesn’t avoid subjective voice, but incorporates it into the mix.

Some editorial notes

<sup>1</sup>For the poem, see <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/osman>.

<sup>2</sup>Buffalo: Leave Books, n.d.

<sup>3</sup>See Joan Retallack’s “Poethics of a Complex Realism,” *John Cage: Composed in America*, eds. Marjorie Perloff & Charles Junkerman (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1994).

<sup>4</sup>Providence: Burning Deck, 1989.

<sup>5</sup>“Re:Thinking:Literary:Feminism: (three essays onto shaky grounds),” *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory*. Lynn Keller & Cristanne Miller, eds. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

<sup>6</sup>“Among the problems are these: What kinds of cognitive structures are developed by humans on the basis of their experience, specifically, in the case of acquisition of language?” *Reflections on Language*, p. 137.”

<sup>7</sup>See *Words Upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, ed. Jean Starobinski, trans. Olivia Emmet (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979).

<sup>8</sup>Providence: Burning Deck, 1989.

<sup>9</sup>Providence: paradigm press, 1990.

<sup>10</sup>See, e.g., Retallack’s interview with Cage, and Cage’s piece on macrobiotic cooking, in *Aerial 6/7*; see also Retallack’s interview with Darragh in *Aerial 5* (Washington: Edge Books, 1991).