

POETRY IN AN EXPENDING FIELD: JACKSON MAC LOW

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Abstract: *The attention of this text is focussed on the works of Fluxus poet Jackson Mac Low whose work in that field expanded the very field. Mac Low used chance generated methods to make poems, accompanying them with instructions, in which he explained his method and gives instructions for performers. He questioned the field of poetry by questioning the intentionality of the author, developing the complex procedures that generated complex text and considered poetry a field of the performing arts.*

Keywords: *chance generating texts, nonintentionality, intentionality, performance, poetry*

Jackson Mac Low (1922–2004) belonged to New York's interdisciplinary neo-avant-garde scene, which under the influence of John Cage's (1912–1992) ideas and practices, worked on expanding the field of music and a sense of media.¹ In this context, several models of artistic practices were developed, such as *multimedia works* (introduction of one media into the other, or performing the effects of one media within some other), *intermedia*² works (facing different media and their effects in one artwork, transferring the effects of one media into the other medium), *mixedmedia* (roughly, syntactically, semantically or topographically joining the effects or elements of different origins into a heterogeneous artwork), artworks realized in the form of *textual* or *diagram instruction* for its performance.³ Among the artists in this circle close to Mac Low, we might mention La Mont Young (1935), George Maciunas (1931–1978), Henry Flint (1940), Yoko Ono (1933), George Brecht (1926–2008), Dick Higgins (1938–1998), and many others whose work was collected in the 1960 *An Anthology*, edited by Young and Mac Low, who later would be known as Fluxus artists.

Mac Low has an ambiguous status within the canon of American experimental poetry. This ambiguity can be seen in the fact that Donald Allen didn't include him in his famous 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry* which reshaped the

1 Liz Kotz: *Words to be looked at: Language in 1960s*. Cambridge: The MIT Press 2007, p. 61.

2 Patric F. Durgin: "Becomming literature: Jackson Mac Low and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E of Intermedia", <http://thoughtmesh.net/publish/printable.php?id=60> (15.03.2017) refers to his early work as intermedia.

3 Miško Šuvaković: *Pojmovnik teorije umetnosti*, Belgrade: Orion Art, 2011, p. 267.

canon of American poetry. But in 1973 Allen and Warren Tallman included his work in the collection of *The Poetics of The New American Poetry*. Trained as a composer, Mac Low considered himself to be a poet as well. His work transcends the boundaries of various arts, which made difficult to approach. As a Fluxus artist, John Cage's student and friend, he moved through and inhabited the spaces in-between poetry, music, dance, and performance, so that his work was not easy to pin down. This unstable and unstabilizing fluid artistic position rendered him relatively unrecognizable until the formation of the language poets in 1970s in accordance to their "putative overthrow of conventional literary values"⁴ pointed to him and his work as an important precursor. Mac Low questioned the nature of poetry and did so more than most American poets had.⁵ In dealing with these kinds of experimental poems, we are forced to reconsider the meaning and function of poetry, and of the process of making very specific, poetic sense, which Mac Low's work severely questions. Therefore, I will focus my attention on three important aspects of his work: non-intentionality and the questioning of the subject in poetry, the complex mechanics of the text of his poems, and the relation between the text and performance.

QUESTIONING THE INTENTIONAL SUBJECT IN POETRY

Jackson Mac Low is well known for his aleatory-determined poems, or chance-operational poetry. At the core of this method is his critique of the "self-expression" of the author, and in using these methods, he tried, as he claimed, to "evade the ego".⁶ On several occasions he emphasized that this idea came from his interest in Buddhism, and especially important was the influence of Daisetz Suzuki who taught Zen and Kegon in the 1940s and 1950s at Columbia University, which he attended with John Cage,⁷ but this influence also came through Cage's own work in music. Cage was the figure whose influence on many artists, including Mac Low, was crucial because of his early questioning of the artistic ego and expressivism as a pivotal characteristic of artistic endeavor. He advocated a kind of creative anarchism, and valued procedural approaches in making art, chance procedures, and usage of "found materials". But Mac Low was the first who applied chance

4 Patric F. Durgin: "Becomming literature".

5 Armand Schwerner: "On the usefulness of Mac Low's work", in: *Paper Air* 2/3 (1980), pp. 48–50, here 48.

6 Gill Ott: "Interviews and correspondence: Jackson Mac Low and Gill Ott", in: *ibid.*, pp. 18–29, here p. 20.

7 Jackson Mac Low: "Responses to Piombino", <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/maclow/piombino.html> (15.03.2017).

procedures to textual materials and who developed his own unique version of this method.⁸ As he wrote:

They taught me to look at each phenomenon (e.g. each sound, word, or word string) as being worthy of full attention, and thus of being presented in such a way as to elicit the full attention of spectator, audience, or reader, quite aside from its “expressing” the thoughts, feelings, sensations of the artist. Any phenomenon, we are taught when given full attention, can reveal its Buddha nature [...] Zen taught me both to try to minimize the expression of the ego during the act of composition and to let each word, etc., “speak for itself”.⁹

Mac Low’s approach to artistic production can also be recognized as a critical attitude toward the underlying ideology of Western writing,¹⁰ which he shared with so many artists of his generation. The consequence of this approach is, according to Steve McCaffery, an “historical shift in poetry from the endless interiority of lyrical self to the hesitant emergence of a post-ontological poetics”.¹¹ This meant the de-ontologization of poetry by the decentralization of the writer as the creative source of the writing, so that at the center comes not the writer himself/herself, but the total “sum of the writing”.¹² In other words, Mac Low emphasized the *non-intentionality* of his chance-generated poems, because this method, like a writing machine “opens up the scriptive practice to an infinite semiosis”.¹³ The ideas, forms, and contexts became fluid and dynamic categories,¹⁴ and the language itself gained the agency¹⁵ so that it could be said that in his work language speaks for itself, making its own sense, destroying any discursive and expressivist mode we usually find in poetry.¹⁶ In his work Mac Low offers the writing position of “a

8 See Tyrus Milleer, *Singular examples: Artistic politics and the neo-avant-garde*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009, pp. 43–44 and Nancy Perloff, “Sound poetry and the musical avant-garde: A musicologist’s perspective”, in: *The sound of poetry/ The poetry of sound*, eds. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 115.

9 Quoted in McCaffery, *Prior to meaning: The protosemantic and poetics*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001, p. 188.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

12 Ron Silliman: “While some are being flies, others are having examples”, in: *Paper Air 2/3* (1980), pp. 39–40, see p. 40.

13 Steve McCaffery: *North of intention: Critical writings 1973–1986*. New York: Roof Books, 2000, p. 222.

14 Silliman: “While some are being flies”, p. 39.

15 Barrett Watten: *The constructivist moment: From material text to cultural poetics*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003, p. 3.

16 Charles Bernstein, *Content’s dream: Essays 1975–1984*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986, p. 253.

subject beyond expression".¹⁷ This meant that in his systematically generated poems it is not possible to identify a "self" incarnated in a voice, persona, or sensibility which needs to be expressed and could be revealed in each poem. His poems are usually considered to be "abstract", and by privileging "chance" over "choice" in making the poems, he rejected the "projection of personality usually associated with 'the poet'".¹⁸ Poems are usually strongly associated with the "voice of the poet", equating the language of poetry with the language of the poet's subjectivity that guarantees the authenticity of his/her work. Mac Low's poems demonstrate that the voice is actually always a *technical construct*, it is never simple and never precedes technical intervention. The equation of subjectivity and authenticity hides the fact that "subjectivity is simply the most acutely engineered of all our technologies".¹⁹ Eliminating the authorial conscious intention, Mac Low removes the writer as a subject who writes the text, so that the subject becomes absent from the process of meaning production. This radical questioning of the subject in the language of poetry deprives the subject of its supposedly sovereign and externally privileged position. The subject is not considered to have the crucial role in the process of creating a text, but is constructed more as a witness of the productive moment of a text by a specific procedure. In Mac Low's words:

Yes, the Zen Buddhist motive for use of chance (&c) means was to be able to generate a series of "dharma's" (phenomena/events, such as sounds, words, colored shapes) relatively "uncontaminated" by the composer's "ego" (taste, constitutional predilections, opinions, current or chronic emotions). It was such a relief to stop making artworks carry that burden of "expression"!²⁰

Later, Mac Low will claim that over the years, "[w]hat ego is and what it isn't gets more and more problematic"²¹ to him, and that "[y]ou realize that a chance system is as egoic, in some ways, or even as emotional, as writing a poem spontaneously".²² In other words, he is critical of certain kinds of subjectivity incarnated in the reified "self". Instead, by using "poetic experiments in the graphemic, musical, gestural, and discursive border-zones of language",²³ in his work he suggested that

17 McCaffery: *North of intention*, p. 224.

18 Jerome Rothenberg: "Preface", in: Jackson Mac Low, *Representative works: 1938–1985*. New York: Roof Books, 1986, p. v.

19 Jed Rasula: *The American poetry wax museum: Reality effects, 1940–1990*. Urbana: The National Council of Teachers of English, 1996, pp. 49–50.

20 Jackson Mac Low: "Museletter", in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, eds. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein. Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1984, p. 26.

21 Ott: "Interviews and correspondence", p. 20.

22 Miller: *Singular examples*, p. 48.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

selfhood should be seen and understood as an extremely complex entity.

In relation to this discussion, I will emphasize another aspect of Mac Low's work that was particularly attractive for language writers: his focus "on the transgressive potential of the signified".²⁴ This meant that experimental writing detached itself from the intention of producing unitary meanings. The language is exteriorized, which means that it does not function as transparent medium in which we find the depicted pre-existing reality.²⁵ That is why McCaffery wrote that this kind of writing could be described as one which offers us "an experience *in* language rather than a representation *through* language".²⁶ In this regard, Mac Low belongs to the poets who consider language to be material for the construction of poetry and not the transparent medium for communion with preexisting meanings,²⁷ whether it be feelings, experiences, events or different environments.

MECHANICS OF THE TEXTUAL PRODUCTION

In considering Mac Low's texts, it is necessary to think of the complex procedures by which they are generated, as well as their relation to other media, such as dance, music, performance, theatre, video.²⁸ Along with John Cage, Mac Low was the most important artist who included systematic chance operations into poetry and musical practice.²⁹ The crucial element of the procedural form is that it "consists of predetermined and arbitrary constraints that are relied upon to generate the context and direction of the poem during composition".³⁰

If we compare Mac Low's writing procedures, it becomes obvious that unlike most writers whose writing operated in a similar way, he never submitted borrowed fragments to the coherent narrative unity, which is dominant mode of literary organization. He was not the first writer who, as Ron Silliman wrote, "cannibalize other writing"³¹ transforming them into a source texts of his works. He chooses his source writings for its social content, because he thought of his work as deeply social and political. Considering himself to be an anarchist and pacifist, Mac Low wrote:

24 Durgin: "Becoming literature".

25 Bernstein: *Content's dream*, p. 252.

26 McCaffery: *Prior to meaning*, p. 194.

27 Watten: *The constructivist moment*, p. 2.

28 Silliman: "While some are being flies", p. 39.

29 Rothenberg: "Preface", p. v.

30 Joseph M. Conte: *Unending design: The forms of postmodern poetry*. London: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 3.

31 Silliman: "While some are being flies", p. 40.

How better to embody such ideas in microcosm than to create works wherein both other human beings & their environments & the world “in general” (as represented by such objectively hazardous means as random digits) are all able to act within the general framework & set of “rules” [...] The poet creates a *situation* wherein he invites other persons & the world in general to be co-creators with him! He does not wish to be a dictator but a loyal co-initiator of action within the free society of equals which he hopes his work will help to bring about.³²

In the European context, there were many avant-garde poets who made poems from linguistic materials, validating the very materiality of words. As an example, the Dadaist Tristan Tzara could be mentioned with his cut-up technique of making the poems which resemble the non-intentionality of the author. Mac Low’s method of asymmetries might also be compared with collage in which we find the devices of recycling and citation. But unlike the use of citation found in Ezra Pound, Charles Olson or Robert Johnson, Mac Low did not organize them into new constellations of meanings. Instead, he destroyed the difference of the annexed discursive forms to the level of unrecognizability.³³ Barrett Watten claimed that Anglo-American modernism from Gertrude Stein, the Harlem Renaissance to Objectivism had shifted the formal paradigm of language to constructivist goals that would lead to the possibility of making poetry out of preexisting vocabularies, a project later taken up in the chance-generated work of Jackson Mac Low and the work of the Language School.³⁴

Watten described the complexity of Mac Low’s production, which could be presented in this way:

various texts = source texts → target form of the printed text
target form of the printed text = source text → second target form of its
performance.³⁵

In other words, everything that Mac Low reads at the time of writing could be transformed in and used as a source text. For example, as source texts for writing *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* he used books on botany, Buddhism, politics, Marquis de Sade, pacifist flyers, religious pamphlets.³⁶ Source texts were used in making the poems (in Watten’s term, *target form of the printed text*) by aleatoric, chance-driven means

32 Jackson Mac Low: “Statement”, in: *The poetics of the new American poetry*, eds. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1973, pp. 384–385.

33 Idem.

34 Watten: *The constructivist moment*, p. 12.

35 Ibid., pp. 32–33.

36 Ott: “Interviews and correspondence”, p.19.

or non-intentional procedures. The first target form of the printed text is further transformed into a source text for the *second target form*, which is *performance*, and the performances are also in different ways products of chance operations, with which we will deal later in the text.

Discussing the mechanics of Mac Low's generated texts, two divergent equally operative logic or orders of meaning can be recognized. The first one is, according to McCaffery, the conventional logic of the linear ordering of subject-verb-object, whose function is to secure coherent meaning, through "a conventionally articulated semantic order declaring itself through a syntactic chain of discrete, detectable units".³⁷ The second one McCaffery calls "para-logical drive", which results in "saturated, cryptonyme meaning, transphenomenal in nature, and hidden as a latent signification within other word configurations – errant and hidden and resistant to an *immediately* legible proportion".³⁸ The second logic takes place through the usage of specific reading-writing procedures, those which intervene into the conventional functional and communicative function of language, preventing the intentionalist imperative of writing. The phrase "reading-writing" procedures refers to the chance operations which transform source text into the material for making new texts.

Jackson Mac Low formulated the following systematization of his poetry: "purely" chance-operational poetry like "5 biblical poems", "deterministic" or "algorithmic" nonintentional poetry, which were made by "acrostic reading-through text-selection procedures", like *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*, and *Asymmetries*, and the diastic reading-through text selection method, like *The Pronouns-40 Dances – For the Dancers*, and "translation" methods in which "the notes of musical notations were 'translated' into words from source texts, [...] or vice versa, i.e., the words of source texts were translated into music".³⁹ In other words, Mac Low use the word *translation* for the transformation of one medium into another or one mode into another.⁴⁰

In generating poems, Mac Low developed several approaches. In 1961 he created a generic form called "A Word Event" in which he gives instructions for dealing with sound materials of this a-semantic poem:

A man utters any word, preferably one without expletive connotations, he then proceeds to analyse it,

37 McCaffery: *Prior to meaning*, p. 191.

38 Idem.

39 Mac Low, "Responses to Piombino".

40 Hélène Aji: "Impossible reversibilities: Jackson Mac Low", in: *The sound of poetry/ The Poetry of sound*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, p. 157.

1st, into its successive phonemes; 2nd into a series of phonemes representable by its successive individual letters, whether or not this series coincides with the 1st series.

After repeating each of these series alternately a few times, He begins to permute the member of each series.⁴¹

Another procedural method, by which his work *The Pronouns-40 Dances – For the Dancers*, is made, is what he called *working from nuclei*, or the *nuclei method*, in which “certain pivotal words or phrases are given by some ‘objective’ system – usually one involving chance in some sense of the word”.⁴² This method

involves obtaining “nucleus words” or phrases by chance operations, random selection, “translation”, reading-through, or other non-intentional methods and then connecting them with more or less freely chosen structural (and sometimes lexical) words to form normatively syntactical sentences.⁴³

One more interesting method is that which Mac Low called *diastic*. In this method, “the placement of the letter in the title word determines the number of words in a line or in a verse stanza, while the number of words in the title determines the number of lines or of stanzas”.⁴⁴

PERFORMING THE TEXT

Jackson Mac Low is a performance artist, which means that we should consider his printed works “not only as a text but as a score & manual”.⁴⁵ That is why Charles Bernstein emphasized that

his texts are scores whose primary realization comes in performance [...] Performance actualizing the possibilities inherent in the text by grounding it (embodying it) expressively and particularly in a sounding or voicing. So that the text only comes alive in an active reading of it (in a performance, or, silently, by a reader).⁴⁶

41 Mac Low: *Representative work*, p. 134.

42 Ott: “Interviews and correspondence”, p.18.

43 Miller: *Singular examples*, p. 34.

44 Ibid., p. 37.

45 Rothenberg: “Preface”, p. x.

46 Bernstein: *Content’s dream*, p. 255.

Emphasizing that text functions as a score, foregrounds the idea that poetry is a notation and is in the function of a poet's oral interpretations of his or her poems. In the case of the projectivist poetry of Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, or the Beat poets, text is a score aimed at a model of intensifying ordinary speech. In Rothenberg's ethnopoetics, orality had a function in collective participatory rituals. Contrary to these examples, when Mac Low's texts function as scores they are tools and are meant to be performed and altered in different directions, from pace, pitch, duration or volume.⁴⁷ Here it should be pointed out that one stream of innovative poetic, in which Mac Low's work is the most important example, turned to experimental music as a model. In this tendency, poets wanted "to redefine poetry as an expanded field of language analogous to composer John Cage's redefinition of music as an expanded field of sound".⁴⁸ According to Liz Kotz, Mac Low's poetry transferred the following set of Cagean musical strategies into poetry of

chance composition and indeterminate performance, juxtapositions and superimpositions of preexisting material, the isolation of individual units in distended fields of time and space, and the generation of textual forms "activated" in performance.⁴⁹

It is obvious that Mac Low's aleatoric poetry is in tight relation to specific kinds of music and performance, and that they became an important part of it, so that it is in the performance that we experience the language and sound.⁵⁰ His work may be understood within the phenomenon of *sound poetry* which was connected to avant-garde music, and in which poets are also performers who work with the complex relations of sound and sense, elaborating virtuosic vocal techniques.⁵¹

According to Mac Low, constitutive units of line in his poems are not feet, but that what he calls *events*, which include words, word-strings and silences. This term points to his understanding of poetry as a series of events, which emphasizes the importance of poetry as a process. The poem, writes George Hartley, is understood "as a potential meaning-event",⁵² and events should be realized through the actions of reading, and/or performing. That is why it can be said that his works have unstable positions, constantly moving between and at

47 Silliman: "While some are being flies, p. 40.

48 Kotz: *Words to be looked at*, p. 99.

49 Ibid., p. 100.

50 Schwarner: "On the usefulness", p. 49.

51 Perloff: "Sound poetry and the musical avant-garde", p. 117.

52 George Hartley, "'Listen' and 'relate': Notes towards a reading of Jackson Mac Low", in: *Sulfur* 23 (Fall 1988), <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/hartley/maclow/maclow1.html> (15.3.2017).

the same time inhabiting textual, visual and musical fields. In H el ene Aji words, the visual aspect of his work may be seen as “stabilizing on the page and visual as enactment on the stage or in the video [...] In the same vein, one might take sound as either voice or instrumental sound (or both) [...]”.⁵³ This interpreter explained the complex relations of text and performance in Mac Low’s work *The Pronouns*, which he understood as poems as well as dances in the following words:

In “The Pronouns: 40 Dances for the Dancers” (1964 [...]), Jackson Mac Low elaborates a theater in which the genesis of the poem is to be staged: each of the poems and each of the micro-plays in the sequences of “The Pronouns” are made of a series of instructions that agents or actors have successively drawn from a collection of cards. The cards system was first elaborated in a homage to Simone Forti in which the cards were called “nuceli”, the atomic cores from which the poetic events could radiate. The cards ordered by the selection process can produce different types of work; pantomimes in which the actors play out the instructions on the cards (or their interpretation of them); sound events in which they read aloud the instructions or utter spontaneous associations triggered by the instructions; texts shaped like poems and forming a poetic sequence (as on the manuscript page of “The Pronouns”).⁵⁴

Visualization of sounds in Mac Low’s poetry is performed by visual cues, and graphically. But accompanying instructions have a special function in printed as well as in performed realizations of his poems. One important function of instruction is to carefully and in detail explain the way the text of the poem was generated. Instructions also “denounce the text”,⁵⁵ pointing to all aspects of his poetry, of which none can be isolated for separate consideration: source texts, generating procedures which enable production of the texts, the instructions for performers. Mac Low’s poems are usually realized in serial form, in which every poem is marked by a number. Serial poetry implies an open-ended form with a limitless set of relations, and which is characterized by discontinuity and radical incompleteness.⁵⁶ This form is even more complicated in Mac Low’s case, because most of the serial poems are complex structures in themselves. For example, in *Representative Work* we find extracts from his work *Asymmetries*, which consists of “Methods for Reading and Performing Asymmetries”; “Basic Method” which consists of “Method 1: Words and Silences”; “Other Methods” which consists of

53 Aji: “Impossible reversibilities”, p. 150.

54 Ibid., p.152.

55 Silliman: “While some are being flies”, p. 40.

56 Conte: *Unending design*, p. 15.

“Method 2: Words Only”, “Method 3: Silences Only”, “Method 4: Words, Tones, and Silences”, “Method 5: One Tone Only”, “Method 6: Tones and Silences”, “Method 7: Words and Tones”, “Method 8: Spoken and Whispered Words”, “Method 9: Phonic Prolongations and Repetitions” and “Method 10: Words and Indeterminate Silences”. After this, we find the parts titled “Performances Including All Ten Methods”, and “What to Keep in Mind During Performances and How to Start and Stop Them”. Last, we find the selection of *Asymmetries*, many of which have their own accompanying notes.⁵⁷ The poet is a self-conscious artist who explains the process of making his poems, which are also dances, and gives instructions for their performance, expanding textually and performatively the field of poetry.

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After decades of invisibility, Jackson Mac Lows work as a poet and performing artist have become more and more important within the expanded field of poetry. As a trained composer who focused his productive attention on poetry and its sound/dance/musical performance, he questioned this field more than other American poets. Under the influence of John Cage, Mac Low questioned the artist’s intentionality, which is at the core of art production. In his complex textual practice, he made his work by applying elaborated chance generated methods, which he described in the instructions accompanying the poems have a structure that often looks odd from the perspective of what we think poetry should be. He also questioned the production of expected meaning in poetry, pointing out that the expanded field of poetry is complex and one which transcends the printed page, reaching into other fields of various arts and receiving its full realization in the act of performance.

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57 Mac Low, *Representative work*, pp. 106–127.

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