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## How We Came Into Performance: A Personal Accounting (2005)

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By sometime in the 1970s it had become clear to me that poetry, as we in my generation knew and practiced it, had either discovered or invented its origins in performance. More precisely the discovery or invention was *ours*, first on our own grounds and then, as our awareness developed, in the practice of our predecessors, both those from the near past and others in remote or distant times and places. I can think back to a time when none of this was clear or pressing for me and for the poets I grew up with, as well as to a time, only a few years later, when performance / orality / improvisation became the central issue for many of us – myself, at various times, included.

The relation of poetry to performance had long been implicit. The words we were given to speak about it shared a vocabulary with music, so that John Cage – a poet in his own way as well as a musician – could define poetry in the simplest terms “not ... by reason of its content or ambiguity but by reason of its allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words.” Traditional formulas, even in ages dominated by writing, spoke of the poet as a singer and the poem as a song – a rhythmic flow of words transmitted by the voice or the breath – by the voice *and* the breath. There was, in other words, a fiction of performance long after poetry had come to be read in silence as a form, primarily, of writing – or, put another way, there was a memory of origins, of a time prior to writing, when the poem was truly carried by the voice and *only* by the voice.

When I was first coming into poetry – more than fifty years ago by now – the opportunities for readings, much less “performances,” were very few. That isn’t to say that poetry was never read or performed in public – in traditional verse plays and early modernist theater, in readings by actors, in *lieder* and operas and other musical settings, and sometimes (but not then so often) by established poets on what was still a limited lecture circuit, with readings few and far between. What changed, as we then entered into it, were the venues and the participation of increasingly large numbers of poets as readers (later, for some, as performers) of their own work. Once readings could exist and find an audience – as they did – in non-institutional settings, the possibility of readings opened for poets of all ages and with or without established reputations. (I take readings as such to be a modest but primary form of performance.) At the same time more poets began to compose their poems with performance in mind, some of it close to the older ways of “reading [from] writing” but others with a new freedom to open to unprecedented mixtures and fusions.

The new arenas for poetry performance – like those for simultaneously emerging performance art in the form of “events” and “happenings” – were outside of familiar and restricted institutional settings, a fact that in itself allowed the entry of the alternative, the unrecognized, and the largely unfunded. I remember readings from that time taking place (famously) in coffee shops, but also in bars, in art galleries and artists’ lofts, in church basements, in book stores, in public parks, in little theaters that were themselves living a vagabond or gypsy existence. Surprisingly too (at least I

remember my own surprise) there was an audience for the alternative readers and performers, expanded further in the context of the great be-ins and love-ins of the 1960s, and a few years later in the anti-war rallies of the 1970s.

Once the opening to perform and the desire to perform were there, new forms of performing (a step and more beyond the solo reading) began to appear. From the vantage point of what was called the "new American poetry" – and this was where I was perched as well – the first extensions of performance came for most of us through poetry and jazz. I took it at first hearing as a kind of parody of classical *lieder* or of the kitschy reading of sentimental poetry (still occasionally heard) to a background of sentimental (pop classical) music. That was in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the poets who stood out were mostly white (Rexroth, Patchen, Kerouac, Ferlinghetti the ones I most remember); the better situated black poets would enter later. I also took a shot at it, most memorably an evening or two of "medieval poetry and jazz" with Paul Blackburn, Armand Schwerner, Robert Kelly, as the other poets in the mix.

It was the solo reading, however, that remained the principal performance mode for the New American Poetry. At the same time there were still other, more complex forms of language-based performance taking shape on both sides of the Atlantic (and beyond) – performances to which we soon had access (particularly those of us in larger cities) and in which we could often play a part. These I thought had their roots largely in Dada, by then a half century or so in the past, and the name that I've come to use for

them in retrospect is Fluxus, although Fluxus as an actual name and movement was only a part of what was happening. (World War One Dada was in fact slim pickings when compared to post-World War Two performance.) In all of this the boundary between poetry and the other arts "blurred" – was intentionally "blurred" or "erased," in a well-known slogan of that time -- and yet there were those, poets and others, for whom language (even language *qua* poetry) was a principal vehicle for the work (or play) at hand.

For me – for many of us – the decisive linking figure was Jackson Mac Low, a poet and sometime musician, who like John Cage brought systematic chance and randomization into the composition and performance of poetry, along with a strong sense of intermedia (Dick Higgins' word), simultaneity, the use of conventional and unconventional instrumentation, and early explorations of computerized and digitalized technologies. With Mac Low and on my own I came to know a number of Fluxus poets and artists who were either living in or passing through New York – Dick Higgins, already mentioned, who would be my publisher for two or three books and pamphlets through his Something Else Press, but also Emmett Williams, Alison Knowles, Philip Corner, Cage himself, and others with whom my connection was more fleeting but always of interest and with performance among the key elements holding things together. Allan Kaprow, whose name was then synonymous with Happenings, was increasingly available, and Carolee Schneemann made an extraordinary entry into New York in the early 60s. As I recollect it now, in fact, the amount and level of avant-garde performance activity seems both incredible and early enough into it so that any performer, any artist, might

have the illusion of being a first discoverer of the work at hand. (I take it that this is a marked difference between *then* and *now*.)

I would like to pause here and mention some of the others who were into forms of performance that involved poetry or the manipulation of language in ways resembling poetry. In doing so, I will largely limit myself to the 1960s and 1970s (with some spillover into the 1980s), while realizing, even so, that I only scratch the surface.

-- In theater, Julian Beck's and Judith Malina's Living Theater was rooted in poetry from its early repertory days to epic or monumental works like *Frankenstein* and *Paradise Now*, and a similar poetic presence informed groups like Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater and Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater. Also a number of poets close to us – Michael McClure, Rochelle Owens, Amiri Baraka – were for a number of years as much known for their theater work as for their poetry.

– Language-centered musical works, as a near approach to poetry, were composed by musicians such as Cage, Charles Amirkhanian, Robert Ashley, Steve Reich, and Charlie Morrow. Later jazz- and jazz-related poetry came from poets like Amiri Baraka and Jayne Cortez, and still later rock and pop crossovers included Patti Smith and Jim Carroll, supplementing in that sense those like Bob Dylan and Tom Waits, whose lyrics, taken as poetry, came from outside the poetry nexus *as such*.

– Others who were near and available to me include, in no particular order, poetry ensemble performers such as The Four Horsemen and The Fugs, or

solo performers such as Allen Ginsberg, John Giorno, Richard Kostelanetz, Armand Schwerner, or Anne Waldman, whose performances went beyond solo performance as such.

– Finally, it should be remembered that the 1960s and 70s saw the beginnings of a network of international poetry gatherings, many of them given over to performance or to experimental/avant-garde categories such as sound poetry or textsound. Situated in cities like London, Paris, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Toronto, as well as New York and San Francisco, these offered the chance of exchange and collaboration with poets such as Henri Chopin, Bob Cobbing, Bernard Heidsieck, Ernst Jandl, Gerhard Rühm, Sten Hanson, Julien Blaine, and Franco Beltrammetti.

The opportunities for performance were thus immense, and for poets like me they opened into an exploration of what our poetry could be – what we could make it be – as an art of sound and gesture. By the early 1960s I came to my own first realizations with music, generally with musician-composers who were looking in turn for new ways to bring music and language back together. My most sustained efforts – from then till now – were with Charlie Morrow, who composed works for and with me and with whom I often performed in close collaboration, and Bertram Turetzky, who accompanied me on contrabass and on a number of digitally enhanced sound works. The Fluxus composer Philip Corner provided music for a group performance I directed at the Judson Church (Judson Dance Theater) in New York, and composer Pauline Oliveros was part of a klezmer ensemble I put together – some years before the klezmer revival – as part of a multimedia

performance of *Poland/1931*. Some years later The Living Theater would also do a (staged) performance of *Poland/1931*. and an offshoot of theirs (the Center for Theater Science and Research, directed by Luke Theodore Morrison) staged a version of *That Dada Strain*, in which I performed with Turetzky and other musicians and actors. (I also directed, with the assistance of Klaus Schöning, a radio version of *That Dada Strain* [*DerDada Ton*] for Westdeutscher Rundfunk in Cologne.)

This omnipresence of performance, as I came to think of it, colored my presentation of the tribal and oral in *Technicians of the Sacred* and other gatherings of traditional poetries – and of avant-garde poetry as well. Some of what I found I incorporated into my own practice, and both there and elsewhere I began to write about performance and orality wherever and whenever I found them. I also lived for two years at a Seneca Indian (Iroquois) reservation, where I became a part of the local Indian “singing society” – a performance art work in itself, if I had ever thought of framing it as such. It was in this way – in all these ways – that performance came to represent for me both the oldest and the newest ways of making poetry.

My own strongest statement along these lines – a kind of manifesto at the time toward both a poetics of performance and a new *ethnopoetics* – came in 1977 in a short essay called “New Models, New Visions.” I would like to return to that now and to see, with your help, if it still holds true in the present. On my own grounds since then, I have had to open up anew – or with renewed emphasis – to the force of writing and the visual word in my

work and in that of others,<sup>1</sup> but I remain imbedded still in the domain of body and breath, voice and gesture, time and place, as I tried to express it in what follows.

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August 1977 [condensed from "New Models, New Visions"]<sup>2</sup>

*The fact of performance now runs through all our arts, and the arts themselves begin to merge and lose their distinctions, till it's apparent that we're no longer where we were to start with. The Renaissance is over or it begins again with us. Yet the origins we seek – the frame that bounds our past, that's set against an open-ended future – are no longer Greek, nor even Indo-European, but take in all times and places. ... The model – or better, the vision – has shifted, away from a "great tradition" centered in a single stream of art and literature in the West, to a greater tradition that includes, sometimes as its central fact, preliterate and oral cultures throughout the world, with a sense of their connection to subterranean but literate traditions in civilizations, both East and West. "Thought is made in the mouth," said Tristan Tzara, and Edmond Jabès: "The book is as old as fire and water" – and both, we know, are right." ...*

*When Tzara, as arch Dadaist, called circa 1917, for "a great negative work of destruction" against a late, overly textualized derivation from the Renaissance paradigm of culture and history ... the other side of [his] work –*

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<sup>1</sup> My principal contribution here is *A Book of the Book: Some Works & Projections About the Book & Writing*, a large anthology co-edited with Steven Clay and published by Granary Books, New York, in 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Originally published in Jerome Rothenberg, *Pre-Faces & Other Writings*, New Directions, New York, 1981.

*and increasingly that of other artists within the several avant-gardes, the different, often conflicted sides of "modernism" – was, we now see clearly, a great positive work of construction/synthesis. ... [Ninety years] after Dada, a wide range of artists has been making deliberate and increasing use of ritual models for performance, has swept up arts like painting, sculpture, poetry (if those terms still apply) long separated from their origins in performance. ... The performance/ritual impulse seems clear throughout: in "happenings" and related event pieces (particularly those that involve participatory performance), in meditative works (often on an explicitly mantric model), in earthworks (derived from monumental American Indian structures), in dreamworks that play off trance and ecstasy, in bodyworks (including acts of self-mutilation and endurance that seem to test the model), in a range of healing events as literal explorations of the shamanistic premise, in animal language pieces related to the new ethology, etc.*

*While a likely characteristic of the new paradigm is an overt disdain for paradigms per se, it seems altogether possible to state a number of going assumptions as these relate to performance. ...*

*(1) There is a strong sense of continuities, already alluded to, within the total range of human cultures and arts, and a sense as well that the drive toward performance goes back to our pre-human biological inheritance – that performance and culture, even language, precede the actual emergence of the species: hence an ethological continuity as well. ...*

*(2) There is an unquestionable and far-reaching breakdown of boundaries and genres: between "art" and "life" (Cage, Kaprow), between*

*various conventionally defined arts (intermedia and performance art, concrete poetry) and between arts and non-arts (musique concrete, found art, etc.). The consequences here are immense, and I'll only give a few, perhaps too obvious, examples ... :*

- that social conflicts are a form of theater (V. Turner) and that organized theater may be an arena for the projection and/or stimulation of social conflict;*

- that art has again recognized itself as visionary, and that there may be no useful distinction between vision-as-vision and vision-as-art (thus, too, the idea in common between Freud and the Surrealists, that the dream is a dream-work, i.e., a work-of-art);*

- that there is a continuum, rather than a barrier, between music and noise; between poetry and prose; ... between dance and normal locomotion (walking, running, jumping, etc.);*

- that there is no hierarchy of media in the visual arts, no hierarchy of instrumentation in music, and that qualitative distinctions between high and low genres and modes (opera and vaudeville, high rhetoric and slang) are no longer operational;*

- that neither advanced technology (electronically produced sound and image, etc.) nor hypothetically primitive devices (pulse and breath, the sound of rock on rock, of hand on water) are closed to the artist willing to employ them. ...*

(3) *There is a move away from the idea of "masterpiece" to one of the transientness and self-obsolescence of the poem or art-work as performed. The work past its moment becomes a document (mere history), and the artist [the poet in particular] becomes, increasingly, the surviving non-specialist in an age of technocracy.*

(4) *From this there follows a new sense of function in art, in which the value of a work isn't inherent in its formal or aesthetic characteristics – its shape or its complexity or simplicity as an object – but in what it does, or what the artist/poet or his surrogate does with it, how he or she performs it in a given context. ...*

(5) *There follows further, in the contemporary instance, a stress on action and/or process. Accordingly the performance or ritual model includes the act of composition itself. ... Signs of the artist's or poet's presence are demanded in the published work, and in our own time this has come increasingly to take the form of his or her performance of that work, unfolding it or testifying to it in a public place. ...*

(6) *Along with the artist, the audience enters the performance arena as participant – or, the audience "disappears" as the distinction between doer and viewer, like the other distinctions just mentioned, begins to blur. For this the tribal/oral is a particularly clear model, often referred to by the creators of 1960s happenings and the theatrical pieces that invited, even coerced, audience participation toward an ultimate democratizing of the arts.*

...

*(7) There is an increasing use of real time, extended time, etc., and/or a blurring of the distinction between those and theatrical time, in line with the transformative view of the "work" as a process that's really happening. ...*

*For all of this recognition of the cultural origins and particularities [as I try to show it in greater detail in the uncut version of this text], the crunch, the paradox, is that the place, if not the stance of the poet and artist is increasingly beyond culture – a characteristic, inevitably, of biospheric [global] societies. Imperialistic in their earlier forms and based on a paradigm of "the dominant culture" (principally the noble/imperial myths of "Western civilization" and of "progress," etc. on a Western or European model), these have in their avant-garde phase been turning to the "symposium of the whole" projected by Robert Duncan. More strongly felt in the industrial and capitalist west, this may be the last move of its kind still to be initiated by the Euro-Americans: a recognition of the new/old order in which the whole is equal to but no greater than the works of all its parts.*

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That was in 1977, and now that we're nearly thirty years beyond it, there are a few things I would like to add.

That much of this has been brought into question in the new century – today – in a time of renewed ethnic and religious conflicts, calls perhaps for a still greater effort toward what poetry and art – as our experimental ground – may allow to happen, as the new model / new vision for a world still far beyond our reach. It is no easier now than it was then, and the very success, however tentative, of some of what I've been describing may make

it more difficult to assert its alterity, its difference from what we once set out to overturn. For myself I can only hope, as always, to begin again, or failing that, to encourage others into a new beginning. A wise poet from the time in question – though one who spoke out memorably “against wisdom as such” – wrote that “what does not change / is the will to change.” It’s not for me to decide whether what Charles Olson asserted then still holds at present, but I can only act and urge you to act as if it does.