

## **“The contextualizing capacity of the writing itself”: a Bruce Andrews interview**

Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich

**Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich:** Many thanks, Bruce, for inviting me and taking the time to do this interview. So, let’s jump right in. Before going into the more theoretically-inclined questions, would you mind giving us a short rundown of how you got involved with the Downtown New York art scene and became a driving force of so-called “Language Poetry” in the 1970s?

**Bruce Andrews:** That’s a huge autobiographical question. But ... a couple of short things. I had some connection with that scene before I moved to New York, when I was in graduate school in the early 70s. Some of that is represented in my editing of the special issue of *Toothpick, Lisbon, and the Orcas Islands* in 1973 — and that is up on the web now as part of Craig Dworkin’s [Eclipse](#) site, so you can take a look at some of what I was interested in, in 1973. I came to New York City in 1975. I started writing in 1969, and began to be in touch with some of the people that, later in the 1970s, came to be called the “Language Poets” — I was in correspondence with them in the early 70s. So, in the early 70s I’m going to grad school, I’m fascinated by avant-garde art activities in a variety of fields, and I’m starting to write and publish, and I’m in touch now with people that would form this phenomenon a little bit later. So I come to New York in 1975, partly a coincidence (that that was the only professorial job that I got, it wasn’t like many people of my ... / at that age I wasn’t just moving to New York in order to be in New York). It was just a stroke of incredible luck for me that I got a teaching job here in Political Science. So, I moved to town still with this fascination about what was going on in music in a variety of genres, what’s going on in theatre, what’s going on in dance, what’s going on in the visual arts ... and dropped right in a hotbed of incredible activity in all those fields. And that interest in those other fields shaped my conception — as you can see a little bit in the *Toothpick* issue — of what would be a relevant kind of literary writing.

I’ve said this before in interviews, but when what we were calling, in our correspondence, “Language-centered Writing” started to become known outside of the immediate participants it came to be known as “Language *Poetry*”. And I have said before that, to me, it was the P-part of that rather than the L-part that I thought was a problem. I wasn’t really thinking that we were helping to create a new sub-genre of poetry, but that we were creating a new formulation or

articulation of a type of arts activity that would have some parallels with what was going on in these other art fields. And for a while in New York, in the late 70s and early 80s, it seemed possible to sustain a community of people in the literary world that were also in touch with — in close, intimate touch with — what was going on with people of the same age in these other art forms and that we could form a kind of multi-arts community. So, you know, a few of us were closer in touch with things going on in the music world, in the dance world, in the theater world, etc., and those people came to our readings and were interested in our texts to some extent. But that was hard to sustain, it didn't really last, and after a while it became clear that whatever interest some of us had, or that I had, for instance, in these other fields, was not going to result in our work getting any kind of outreach. The outreach was likely to come from the poetry world.

So the literary activity became more ensconced or territorialized as poetry, and then beyond that I got more involved in the downtown art scene, partly through collaborations in the dance world with Sally Silvers — who became my romantic partner in the late 1970s and who I started to compose music for; I became involved in the “free improv” music world, became involved in the experimental theatre world to some extent — Sally and I, with Tom Cora started a performance group called BARKING<sup>1</sup> in the very early 1980s and we did small scale and a few very large scale multi-media performance pieces on political topics. So, in a sense, right around the time that ‘Language Writing’ became an item in the literary world, I started to extend my own text-based efforts out into these other fields. So my involvement with the downtown arts scene, in a weird way, occurs right as the Language Writing community solidifies itself and becomes more and more intensively literary. And then I start to move out a little bit and continue my involvement with those communities — excitedly, because I'm in New York City. I mean, this wouldn't have been possible if I had gotten a job at, say, the University of Oklahoma, or if I had gone out in the Midwest somewhere. There were really only a few places that had lively enough scenes in these other fields that could have sustained that kind of activity, and not just have it be ‘in the mail’. The thing about the in-the-mail, correspondence-based quality of the Language Writing in the 70s was that you could then do it anywhere. You could be involved with these other poets without having to be in a town or a city in which there were lots of other lively things going on. I mean, the other two major places where the so-called Language Poets collected were in NYC and the Bay Area in California. And, I think, the thing that was striking about NYC was

that it really was the only place that I would venture to say in the US, at the time, where all of the art forms that were operating were at a cutting edge, and had a national scope of interest.

**DB:** Would you say that your then dislike for the P-word as opposed to the L-word stems from your sense of poetry as an institution and the fact that there had been a disconnect from these other fields of art?

**BA:** Well, I don't know whether it being an institution was as much the problem as the second thing you mention — the disconnection with other fields. It was more that it was isolationist rather than it was institutionalized. And not only that it was isolated from other art forms but that it was the most reactionary, perhaps, of them all. Most people wouldn't even have considered it an art form in the same way they would these others. But it was maybe the only art form where you could continue to be acclaimed for doing work that could easily have been done 50 years before. That would have been unheard of in theatre, in music, in dance, or in the visual arts, for sure. So it was a uniquely conservative, or, reactionary field, I would say. And that was the problem for some of us.

**DB:** In 2006, you made an appearance on Fox News's [The O'Reilly Factor](#), under the rubric "Outrage of the Week," and Bill O'Reilly basically charged you with indoctrination of undergraduates at Fordham University. Now, was that your first appearance as a "far left guy" in the US corporate media? And, given the fact that you were not invited as a poet, would you say that there is a connection, still, between what you do as a political scientists — teaching "International Politics" at Fordham — and your critical poetics?

**BA:** Okay. In late 2006 when I was asked on this right-wing talk show, the O'Reilly Factor, yes, that was the first time I've been on national television, in fact. I was being baited as a critic of American foreign policy, I think, partly because I am teaching at a Jesuit University and the show's host, Bill O'Reilly, is a right-wing Catholic, so he takes particular 'responsibility' almost for what goes on in the Catholic college system. In other words, if I had been teaching at Columbia, the New School, or NYU, I don't think ... it would have been more predictable for him and he wouldn't have been surprised that some secular progressive was out there teaching works critical of American imperialism, and it was partly [because] I assigned the book *The Five Biggest Lies that George W. Bush Told Us About Iraq* in my classes and that it was required

reading. And he was also trying to get me to, in a sense, come out on national television as a far-left person, which I declined to do. And his staff hadn't informed him that I was also much better known as a poet even though apparently one of my former students was an intern, I think, at Fox News and basically turned me in, hoping to get on the show and attack me for being a horrible, as you say, "indoctrinator" of innocent youth. But the book that I assigned, as I explained on the show – oh, by the way the show, as a video, is up on [YouTube](#), and I transcribed the interview for a transcription journal that a couple of young poet-scholars were putting out, and that transcript is up [online](#) also.

Anyway, the book that I was using I used to try to investigate the rhetoric and, as I put it on the show, the justificatory efforts of government at trying to sell its policies and inspire what I've later come to call national security judgment on the part of the public. So I wasn't assigning the book as a way to help the students explain why the policy was the way it was. It wasn't a normative issue for me, I wasn't trying to convince people that the war was bad and that therefore they should have a different view about the war. I was trying to get them to understand the way the government explained itself. Now, the connection between that, the specifics of that, and what you're asking about as my critical poetics are *a little* complicated. My efforts in school, and as a scholar, from the early 1970s on, when I started graduate school, were focused on the explanation of aggressive foreign policy by the United States. So I did my doctoral dissertation on alternative explanations of the US escalation of the war in Vietnam and its refusal to withdraw in the 1960s. Most of my scholarly work was on *why* the government did what it did; it was about the explanation of policy. That later shifted, especially in the classroom, to getting more and more interested in the role of the public and the role of public opinion as an enabling factor. So there was a slight shift from explanation to issues about preconditions, because I'm interested in what would need to be changed before the policy could change. Before I thought of that mostly in terms of structural change at the level of the political economy but then, as I got more interested in the facilitating role of both the media and the public, I started to focus on the government's rhetoric and not so much on what was actually driving it, or motivating it.

So, the parallel with my thinking about poetics, I think, is also *oddly* apparent, which is a shift from thinking about issues of production, which are closer to questions about explanation, in let's say so-called Language Writing. So, the texts in my first big collection of essays, *Paradise & Method: Poetics & Praxis*, mostly deal with matters of production — to try to differentiate or

discuss what's distinctive about this experimental or radical poetry. But mostly, when I'm saying production, I mean from the point of view of the author in a sense — what is driving and motivating it, and that's a little bit closer to talking about, with regard to government, what would explain government policy. So when I shift in talking about foreign policy more toward public opinion, I shift also in my thinking about poetics toward thinking more about the reader – and the whole notion of reception. If I have a prescription, then, for the writing, it would be a prescription that points to a different possible role for the reader — and that is what has been occupying my thinking in the last couple of years. So there is this odd parallel, I think, between those two things, that has always been there, but now it's a little more pointed.

**DB:** You mentioned your collection of essays, *Paradise & Method: Poetics & Praxis*, so ... you conceive of your poetry as “praxis,” right? In the particular Marxian sense of practical-critical, “human sensuous activity” that is in one way or another directed towards “revolutionary change?” Can you tell us in how far your notion of praxis differs from what is frequently called a ‘vulgar Marxist’ position? And how significant is the role played by neo-Marxist theorists like Adorno and Debord, and post/structuralist thinkers such as (the late) Barthes, or Baudrillard, for instance, to the development of your notion of “poetry as praxis”?<sup>2</sup>

**BA:** Well, if I think of the creation of this writing as sensuous, that's hard to avoid. If you think of it as practical in terms of being based on action, then, that's hard to avoid. If you think of “critical” as theoretically securely grounded, then, that's probably going too far. If you think of critical as self-reflective, skeptical, suspicious, operating on some meta-level, then, yeah, I think of it as critical in that sense. But then, most poetry writing might be. So if I'm trying to think of what poetry, or what literature, wouldn't be a praxis, then: it's not things that wouldn't be critical-practical and sensuous, it would be things that wouldn't be directed toward revolutionary change. I think that, in some people's eyes, the relationship to theory *and* the relationship to hopes of revolutionary change would differentiate what some of us were trying to do. But I don't know if they're right! Because to say that we, or that I am, dedicated in my writing to push things toward revolutionary change ... it's pretty difficult in my life time to even *imagine* what revolutionary change would look like in an advanced capitalist society. So if any of us, or me, said that that's what we are driving toward, I think, people would just laugh, you know, they

would say “Who are you kidding? What possible way could your work create revolutionary change?” So that ends up being, I think, *complicated*.

The other part, the *theory* part ... now maybe this has some interest. One of the ways that the so-called Language Writers were condemned by people who weren't interested in our work was by them using the claim that our work was simply derived from our theories, that we came into the literary realm with a set of literary, or worse, political theories about how things should be and that we just did the work that followed directly from those theories. And I don't remember anybody who that would be a decent description of. Some of us, especially during the mid-70s onward, were involved in essay writing and giving talks and presentations that involved fairly hifalutin theoretical investments. But the poetry writing came first, and came earlier. In a sense the theorizing was a way for us to understand what we were doing and what we all were involved with, and how it fit into existing frameworks of thought. But it wasn't as though the frameworks of thought came first, and then we squeezed the poetry out of that.

**DB:** That is pretty much how I understand the notion of a ‘theory-praxis’ dialectic.

**BA:** There would be theorizing after the action, and the theory might then inform some future modifications of the action. Yes, I mean, some of that would be going on. Though, I guess, I'm wondering whether theorizing about political and social matters would turn around later and directly affect the writing. I'm not sure. That may be too big a claim. Now, a couple of other things that you asked about ... How my notion of praxis would differ from ... and, I think, two things are different here. One, how it would differ from let us say a “vulgar Marxist” position, and also how it might differ from what typically gets called “political art”, or political poetry. On the first one, the vulgar Marxist view, I think there is an intertwinement with the old debate about the base and the superstructure.

**DB:** Different models of mediation —

**BA:** Yeah. The vulgar Marxist model might be ... I'm not sure exactly since that is a polemical term. In other words, I'm not sure anybody would admit to being a vulgar Marxist — maybe Žižek from time to time might, but it's fairly rare these days. It would be used by people who thought they were beyond that by saying “Oh these vulgar Marxist they just think about change operating at the workplace.” Which would mean there has to be structural change in the nature of the economic order, and then everything else would follow from that. That would give certain kinds of tasks to the poets — that their real focus should be on transforming the capitalist system

rather than just focusing on some cultural or superstructural matters. I think the later, more sophisticated Western Marxist positions assume that the base and the superstructure are intertwined, that they have a reciprocal effect on each other — and as soon as you say that, then working *in* the superstructure all of a sudden becomes a possibility, becomes okay, becomes a way to contribute to social change, and it is not just about trying to encourage strikers at the point of production or something. So, I think, that move away from vulgar Marxism did allow cultural work to go on that didn't always have to be subordinated to the party or to some worker faction, or interest group, let's say.

Now, the “political art” issue ... there, I think, the standard lines that we were all getting surrounded by in the 1970s — at least when the so-called Language Writers who were mostly ‘baby boomers’ born in the first decade after WWII, which meant that we came of age as functioning artists in the early to mid-1970s, in our mid-20s — that when we were, in a sense, hitting the scene, or, coming into some kind of early maturity, we were essentially being told that to be political in your writing meant either to mobilize an existing community, or, to try to create a constituency by means of identification. And we didn't accept that. We thought of the existing constituencies as a problem, in a sense, and we thought of the existing network of identities as a problem. In that sense, we didn't want to just create the converted, or preach to the converted — as you ask about later in your questions. So that sort of put us in this box: on the one hand, we were willing to operate in a marginally superstructural way, but we also wanted to get beyond those existing identity structures. Now, then you asked about what you call “neo-Marxist theorists like Adorno and Debord.” Well, Adorno and Debord, I think, would both acknowledge, like most of the European Marxist tradition, the importance of the superstructure as being a crucial feature in the reproduction of capital, so they would be differentiated from this vulgar Marxist position pretty clearly. And that would also be true of people like Barthes, who I am more familiar with, Baudrillard I don't really want to say anything much about.

The other issue, I think, both Adorno and Debord also would focus on and be dissatisfied with is the existing political structure of identities, in the conjuncture we are in. They both would have a problem with the more traditional sense of political art — where you are either relying on existing identities, or you are trying to firm them up so that they would be repositionable. I think they both realized that the existing identity structure that you might in an old-fashioned political art be trying to appeal to was, in fact, the problem, and that you had to figure out a way to get

around that. So that part of Adorno and Debord, I think, would be relevant to my interest. Debord was somebody that had a huge influence on me right around the time that I was starting to write — reading him in the wake of Paris 68, where I got a little dose of that from being in Paris during that period. So he was somebody I was interested in all along. Adorno I have come to more recently.

**DB:** You differentiate between the thematic and formal politics of writing, calling for a poetry not about, but as politics. And you have repeatedly described your work, to the surprise of some, as coming out of a Brechtian tradition of ‘targeting the audience’ and adapting Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* to avant-garde writing — which at times you underline by such self-referential comments on method as: “Stake thru heart kills most vampirish tendencies of audience.” Do you still assert that the politics of a poem, or literary text, hinge on how it positions its readers vis-à-vis the writer, the social, and language itself?

**BA:** Yes [laughs], I would assert that. A couple of interesting questions here. When you talk about the difference between thematic and formal politics of writing, “calling for a poetry not about, but as politics” — *these* days I am rethinking all of that in terms of the relationship of the text to the *reader*. So, a thematic emphasis in the writing: I’m going to then wonder, well, what does that do for the reader? And the same thing when you are talking about form: the formal aspects of a work — if we think of “formal” in a broader sense to involve process and the operations of it — then I think that’s even easier to immediately see it in relationship to the reader. The reader is, in other words, almost automatically enmeshed in the operations of the writing, whereas the reader’s relationship to the thematic, the thematics of the writing, is not automatic in that sense. It was always possible for writers to claim that their work was political because it touched on political themes. But it was never clear to me that those political themes had any relevant impact on the reader. And, if you think of form, of the formal work of the text, then you have the same problem. I think people will often be inordinately proud of, for instance, the formal innovations of their textual work. It’s not clear to me that ... well, what is clear to me is that *some* formally innovative aspects of the writing *would* directly implicate the reader, others would *not*. That is why I think we need to think about not so much an opposition between



thematic and formal as an opposition between thematic and almost *relational*, or operational, application-oriented qualities of the process that goes into the text.

**DB:** So when you are writing or composing do you use yourself as a ‘surrogate’ for the reader?

**BA:** I have to, in a sense. I mean, as I have said before in interviews, I am the first reader of my texts and I think of writing significantly in terms of editing rather than transcribing my emotional epiphanies of vision, of spirit, or whatever. If I think of them as editing, then I need criteria to decide when something is right or not, when it is working or not, what it needs extra or what it needs less of, when I’m doing that and I’m editing as a reader. It’s not as though I’m saying, “Oh I appreciate this phrase but I am going to imagine myself as someone else and try to decide what that someone else would appreciate.” It’s very tough to do that. And it may be that my unwillingness to do that means that I’m still much more locked into authorial expressivity than I usually think I am. So, yeah, I do start out as the surrogate, or as a version of ‘an’ ideal reader, or the reader that I’m able to imagine.

The other thing in your question — the “Brechtian tradition of *targeting* the audience” — you know, “targeting” is a troubling word. And I’m wondering if it is a synonym for a broader range of words or in what kind of way you mean targeting — what ... I got a gun and it is aimed at you ... in that sense. Like “targeting” instead of what?

**DB:** Well, instead of ... offering a narrative discourse, a narrative proposition, probably?

**BA:** Right, now, I am agreeing with this general line here. It is just that I was worrying over these terms —

**DB:** *targeting* —

**BA:** Yes, targeting. Again, it is a little bit like “avant-garde”, you know, it has this military connotation —

**DB:** Metaphors of war —

**BA:** Yes. And the same thing with even “how the language positions its reader” ... I think we are talking about an *invitation* here, rather than an assault! I think that is the case. There is a specific invitation to the reader that is wrapped up with more than just the thematics, and more than just the reference system of the poem, that is wrapped up with how the work actually functions when it is being read. So that, I would agree, it has this politics embedded in it.

**DB:** I like the notion of invitation. As a reader, I feel very much “invited,” although sometimes I have to decline the offer, obviously, due to lack of time or capacity ... but I am picking the texts up again and again, and return.

**BA:** But I think you’re right, even the notion of invitation would have to be made very much more specific. Because anybody, any writer could say that. But, I think, it’s the specifics of the invitation. What kind of a party are we getting invited to?

**DB:** In a highly influential essay of yours, you talk about a “V-Effect to combat the obvious” — oh, metaphors of war, again — and how this “points to a look at language as medium [...]”<sup>3</sup> Can you talk a bit about the process and potential difficulties of adapting Brechtian poetics from theatre to avant-garde writing?

**BA:** Again, a very big set of issues there. The question about language as medium I am curious about. Because I don’t think language *is* “a medium.” But what better term for it –

**DB:** Practical consciousness? —

**BA:** — we could come up with, I’m not really sure. In other words, it seems too osmotically infiltrating to have the quality of a medium, something that is separate from us, that operates like some kind of filtering system, some mediating device. We are much more embedded in it, on the one hand. And to me that brings up these issues about the reader. You cannot create some structural wonder, some innovative structure out of language, and then simply expect that to be enough. If you think of it not as a medium but as a landscape or plane on which the reader and the writer are both interacting — or more like city planning, or architecture — then you are re-envisioning something that includes both parts of the equation, of reader and writer. So it is the *obvious* elements of the *interaction* that would have to be exposed and combated, not so much just having the writer off on her own, tinkering with the language, and then presenting that to a reader as a transform of the medium that is somehow supposed to ... where the text is doing all the work. I think that the work is done in this interrelationship between the reader and the writer. That is where the work is happening. And the text is basically setting up that ... setting the stage for that. The writing is a kind of *mise-en-scène* for this drama to unfold, when the drama is taking place between the stage and the audience, not just up on stage.

What I think about Brecht? If you go back and look at his essays on the theatre from the 20s and 30s — and by the way, I use this book [*Brecht on Theatre*] in class, I have used it for decades now in courses on Politics and Communication, the John Willett edition of Brecht's essays<sup>4</sup> — now, my suspicion is that there is a ton of other essay material by Brecht that's never been translated and that we do not really have access to here in the US, and I think this is a pretty good selection of Brecht's major works in the essay/talk format, but I'm not even sure of that. So I do not want to make any huge pronouncements about Brecht — plus, for instance, I don't have any German. Or, as perhaps it should be put: “I don't have any German so I gotta shut up” and not make any big pronouncements about Brecht beyond what is in that one fairly decent sized collection of essays. When I use that book in class, one thing that I do notice, or my students notice, too, is how much Brecht has bought into this now largely discredited, or considered old-fashioned view about science, and about manipulative control, and about mechanism. And some of that, I think, is closer to a more narrow formalist view of the text. As if the writer is a kind of scientific engineer, able to create these structures, and to control everything that happens as a result — as if in some kind of controlled experiment. That image of science, partly because of what happens in WW2, gets discredited, and then some of that — and then gender politics plays into this, too — so, Brecht has this macho, scientific, Leninist view about politics and ... *some* of that bleeds into his theories about the theatre, which, I think, I probably before I started to so strenuously, or so ostentatiously, foreground the position of the reader, I probably would have been more accepting of than I am now. Some of that ... the same thing that I mentioned in your notion about “targeting” — there's an element of that in Brecht.

**DB:** So, the *Lehrstücke*, for instance, probably for you would go too far, be too didactic, leave a limited space for the reader? —

**BA:** — Well, didactics is an interesting issue, I think.

**DB:** What type of didactics, or didacticism?

**BA:** There is some spectrum between “didactic” and “preaching to the converted,” both of which I find unsatisfying because they are dealing with fairly fixed entities that they somehow think that they can control, where the issue then becomes control. When I think about control, in the Brechtian sense, the first other theorist that quickly comes to mind would be Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, and, I think, the game that we are in now is much closer to the invitation to discipline and self-discipline than it is to the early part of *Discipline and Punish*, which I just

assigned to my classes this week and which starts out with this image of a person being executed and having their limbs torn off them. So, if that's the issue, if that's the paradigm for the reader, then I'm really nervous, right?! To me that's *real* "targeting," you know, where you tear the limbs off and kill them and then burn them up, etc.

**DB:** That's targeting?

**BA:** [laughs] That would be the *bad* kind of targeting!

**DB:** Bruce, you have a reputation for being "difficult" — a writer who produces "difficult" texts. Thinking of your writing from the early 70s, I see a textual politics at work in the writing that aspires — correct me if I'm wrong — to re-aestheticize the word by suspending or frustrating reference and opening up the text for alternative ways of creating meaning. To me as a reader those texts are very challenging but at the same time they are offering great pleasure. As a theorist who is sympathetic towards a certain aesthetico-political paradigm from the start, I end up writing things like "Andrews's is a genuinely materialistic and performative poetics that uses intransitivity as a means to direct our attention to the body as the site of language production, use, and reception. Such awareness might very well be the precondition for any critical re-meaning, i.e. an alternative semanticizing critically aware of and resisting the dominant modes of reality formatting in and through language. Or rather, by means of a specific use of language that like capital actively erases all traces of its material production and pretends to exist independently of and unaffected by human bodies." I know this is a bold claim, of course. What do you think?

**BA:** Having a "reputation for being difficult" ... well, one thing I should mention: I have over the years, especially in the 70s and 80s, also acquired a reputation for being difficult as a person — pissing people off, generally being intransigent, hard-ass, and troublesome, and, you know, in some way insensitive to various underlying social texts, etc. —

**DB:** no —

**BA:** — yeah, maybe I've mellowed a little bit over the years. Anyway, what about "producing difficult texts?" I mean, ... that interests me, the notion of difficult, because I think a lot of what seems difficult to people in so-called poetry are texts that divert so drastically from the familiar literary traditions. I always notice that if I'm giving readings, let's say, in a school or college, or high school or graduate school, that the more training people have in the poetry tradition, and the

normative mainstream heritage of poetry, the more difficult they find the work that I do. The less so, the less: if there's an audience of people who haven't already been trained and socialized to think about poetry in a certain way, who will be able to see that the language I'm using, the vocabulary I'm using, the lexicons I'm working with, and the methods of putting words together, the syntactical relationships, the lack of identifiable narrative, or the lack of identifiable author position that's stable, all of that they are *completely* familiar with from the street, from the cultural landscape that they're all involved in now, in a postmodern world. The difficulty appears differently from different institutional vantage points for people when they're coming at this as a reader. Again, for me to then make big, universal, sweeping generalizations about the reader is clearly stupid because it ignores the need to do that finely grained contextualizing, which, in some ways, I haven't gotten around to yet, in my theorizing. And this goes back again to what I was saying about so-called Language Writing, and about genre. Difficulty is often defined in a relationship to an existing genre — like *that* artwork is difficult because it doesn't fit the traditions of easel painting, let's say, or some piece of installation art does not fit the traditions of sculpture as we are used to it, etc. So that those things then *don't fit*.

When you talk about “re-aestheticizing the word” ... again, that's an interesting phrase, because it really is about, to me, opening up the capacity of the reader. That is one of my pet terms these days — *capacitation* for the reader. That is something I'm interested in and that often involves re-aestheticizing, so that “re-aestheticizing the word” means taking it out of its familiar institutional contexts, not letting it be sublated in that way — the term you were using before.

**DB:** So that it becomes more than just a trigger, or signal — like, look at the feel and smell, almost, of it?

**BA:** Yes. It is a way of upholding the particularity, of the word, of language, and that *is* a kind of aestheticizing in the classical sense. Instead of letting it be imprinted or interpellated by literary institutions. I think of Althusser, who was interesting to me in my political science theorizing, as theorizing about what's in the way of social change — his whole notion of structural ... mobile, flexible structuring of capital. But here, if I'm talking about trying to protect the particularities of language and not let them be simply steamrollered by the institutional framework, that steamrollering is close to what Althusser is talking about as interpellation. The hailing process, you know — the example I always use in class is: you're walking down the street, you hear from behind you somebody say “Hey, fuckhead! Yo! Fuckhead!” ... and you turn around. And it's the

moment of turning around where you are being interpellated. That, I think, is what “re-aestheticizing” works against. And, again, my emphasis on the reader, and on capacitating the reader, is also absolutely related to a notion of pleasure. The capacitation of the reader creates pleasure, pleasure comes through that increasing capacity. That’s one thing Brecht talks about, you know, that what creates pleasure is the experience of the work being made, is the making of the work — it’s the learning that’s pleasurable, not so much the piling up of thematic information. So, all those things you’re saying make sense to me.

When you are talking about a materialistic and performative poetics ... well, the performative part would come directly out of this emphasis on the role, or the position, of the reader. The materialistic part would come from my emphasis, in thinking about time and space, on matter, on noise, on what’s in the way of ... for instance, how the atomized, or the atomic level, the micro-scale level of language, is what’s in the way — acting as a kind of material noise or obstruction to normative grammar. I think about, let’s say, the sound and visual appearance of text — the so-called material signifier — as being the matter that is in the way of transparent reference. So if it is materialistic as different from transparently referential, normatively grammatical work, then yeah, I think, that’s actually what is going on. Poetry always prides itself *in general* on its attention to less rigidly normative grammatical phraseology and its attention to the sound and the look of the text. But I think the kind of poetry that I’ve been involved with goes even further in trying to push that pretty far out — but not all the way. And this is another distinction I’ve made before: You could completely ignore any syntax whatsoever, and you could completely ignore any reference at all. But then, I think, you are not really able to engage in a certain kind of negotiating process for the reader. In other words, if the reader doesn’t even have a chance to deal with the semantic level, or doesn’t really have a chance to deal with anything that coordinates and organizes time through connections between words in a temporal horizon, or temporal spectrum, then you’re missing opportunities for re-capacitating the reader, along those lines. So I *am* interested in those things ...

When you’re talking about intransitivity, there I’m not sure what you mean.

**DB:** Craig Dworkin was using the term in his encyclopedia article. And I think it comes straight from Barthes, who in “To Write: An Intransitive Verb” (1966) conceives of writing as an intransitive act, a condition in which the writing subject disperses into an irretrievable contemporaneity with their practice and the work of signification is refigured as a kind of *spasm*

that convulses the surface of language and affects the reader in turn, rather than asking to be decoded and thus reinstate the “transitive” dimension of the message. In other words: a kind of writing that needs no object and would thus aid this process of re-aestheticizing language.

**BA:** That phrase might be interesting to work on, seriously, as a way to think through some of these things, because it might mean ... you are creating attention to the text; *you* talk about creating attention to the *body* as the site of language production. Do you mean the body of the reader, or the body of the text?

**DB:** I was thinking of the body of the reader.

**BA:** Well, as long as “intransitivity” doesn’t imply the text closed off on its own, that somehow, would not allow for this operation in the reader, then I’m interested in it, then it’s closer to something that creates what Kant talks about as lingering, this lingering possibility. But it’s a lingering possibility for the reader. That it’s there to work your way through, which then makes the attention to the body go both ways — it’s the body of the text as well as the body of the reader. And “body” as in the fully flowering capacities of the reader, the possibilities for the reader.

**DB:** I was also thinking about the simple fact that without human bodies there is no language.

**BA:** Right. On the big scale that would be true. So you were talking about an “alternative semanticizing” ... that seems straight ahead, a pretty accurate comment. “Resisting the dominant modes of reality formatting in and through language” ... yeah, I can see myself interested in those things in terms of the reader’s capacity. One thing you cut from your earlier question which I didn’t understand at first, but then I could see a way of ... where you said “by means of a specific use of language that like Capital actively erases all traces of its material production and pretends to exist independently of and unaffected by human bodies” ... it seems to me that *that* specific use of language is the dominant mode of reality!

**DB:** Exactly.

**BA:** Yeah, and I think that really captures the precise opposite of what I’m interested in doing. If I’m interested in uncreasing the traces of material production then I’m interested in undercutting any pretension to be able to exist independently of and unaffected by human *readers*. So I think that part of your question you could have left in. Bring it back in.

**DB:** I will! I was just afraid of the question getting too long, of me talking too much.

**BA:** Look, I mean, the larger backdrop of some of your questions is what “Capital with a capital C” is doing. I mean, I have been, as a scholar, interested in and influenced by the so-called ‘capital-logic’ school coming out of Germany — German scholars — that had been interested in trying to trace out the broad reproduction requirements of capital accumulation on a world scale, you know, and trying to figure out “what would the logic of Capital normally point to?” And if I think about it in terms of a kind of allegory of the reader then, yeah, what you’re saying makes perfect sense. Those are quite helpful comments.

**DB:** It is often said that the central idea of a language-centered poetics has been to foreground the production of meaning by means of experimental writing that stresses the ‘materiality of the signifier’ and explores the ‘politics of the referent.’ Now, to alter consciousness by disrupting language has always been the dream of a politicized avant-garde. So maybe you can go a bit into how your approach differs from avant-garde precursors such as surrealism, or Russian futurism and constructivism? I am thinking, in particular, of the “concentric circles” model you put forth in “Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis”; of confronting language both in terms of a system of signs and as discourse/ideology in your writing.

**BA:** It’s probably unfair to say this phrase “the central idea of a language-centered poetics.” I don’t think you would get an agreement on what *the* central idea is. But anyway, part of the project was, as we said, to foreground the production of meaning. As I just said before, I’m more thinking of the production of meaning as a team effort that involves the reader, and also involves the unproduction, in a sense, or the challenging of certain types of meanings and then foregrounding other types of meanings which might be left once those other meanings are cancelled, or attacked, or targeted, as you put it before. So that means the production of meaning becomes more complicated. There’s no longer the relay model — author knows what she means and is transmitting that to the reader. It’s clear that the text is actually producing the meaning, the meaning wasn’t there beforehand. But it is also true that it’s not just the text that’s producing it, it’s also the reader’s involvement, too. So, if I always stress the materiality of the signifier, or the politics of the referent, as you’re putting it, then *now* I would think of that as related to opening up some negotiating possibilities for the reader. *That’s* what’s interesting about the materiality of the signifier. Not just the fact that you have opaque texts, or beautiful, or fascinating looking



texts, or fascinating sounding texts. It's having some relationship to the experience of the reader. And the same with, if you think about the politics of the referent, if you think about the referent being politicizable, that would suggest, again, showing how it's constructed, showing what's missing, showing what's excluded, showing how the references of language are distributed, you know, in Rancièrian terms, etc. so all that, I think, makes sense.

When you say "to alter consciousness by disrupting language" – yeah! But whose consciousness? For me it's the writer/reader combine, you know, it's not just "I'm gonna alter my *own* consciousness" by disrupting language — there are probably easier pharmaceutical methods for that, or, since we were both at the Merzbow concert last night, you know, some kind of sound amplification might be easier than having a language at all! Talking about avant-garde precursors – I think it's interesting in regard to the so-called Language Writers and not just me. Because one of the things we did take credit for, and got credit for, was introducing various avant-garde traditions of literature into the contemporary poetry scene, where some of those, especially European traditions of the most radical sort, Dada and the Russians in particular, really had been neglected. They were just historical museum pieces, really, that weren't part of what people thought poetics might do. Same thing with our interest in sound poetry, our interest in visual poetry, concrete poetry, all that was, in a way, part of what was available to us coming of age in the early 1970s. And all that stuff was now much more widely available than it had been even ten years before. There were tremendous advantages that people in my age bracket had when we started writing. So the people that are now, say, ten years older than us, that are now in their early seventies, let's say, or their mid-70s, *they didn't* have that when they were in their twenties, trying to gather together their possibilities. So, we had that available to us and because most of us weren't coming out of creative writing programs, or graduate literary programs, we didn't have any reason to reject those as lively possibilities to put in the mix.

Specifically about the Russian Futurists and Constructivists, I mean, the Russian Futurists — Khlebnikov and a few others who we were able to read in translation at that point — I think had influenced mostly — and I'd say this later about Cage and his circle as well — mostly had an influence on us, I'd say, or maybe just for myself, because of the *results*. I don't think many of us, maybe Barry Watten might be an exception, but I don't think many of us had a full grounding in the theoretical basis for what the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian writers were doing, but the concrete results of it were striking and easily attractive to us. The Surrealists are a slightly

different issue here. And I think, there was a sense that ... I mean, I'm very interested and invested in thinking about time and space as spectra — as spectra of openness and closure. So I'm interested in how, for instance, grammatical normative syntax will perform a closure on time, in the same way that narrative does, so that a narrative you could even think of as a giant grammar of temporal closure. Neither of those were things that I wanted to sign on to, sign up with — the commitments to normative grammar, or the commitments to narrative on the time spectrum. On the spatial spectrum, then, we're talking about referentiality, at the micro-level, and on the expressivity of the author, and the representational pull away from the text, the focus on things that aren't present — as with the creation of illusion or fiction — as closure on the vertical or spatial spectrum at a macro level. If I look at the Surrealists, *there is* a rejection of spatial closure because of their commitment to drastic juxtapositions of representational materials. But it's still fairly mechanical, in some respects. And on the time line, the time spectrum, it's much more conservative. They're using traditional grammatical structures to give you some disruption of the spatial plane ... but even that gets mechanical. So that never really went as far as a number of us wanted it to go. Well, there were a couple of people in the Language group that had some prior background in being influenced by the Surrealists, but I wasn't one of them.

Now, on the concentric circle model you mention ... what I just was saying about time and space ... my current way of sizing this up is to think about it in micro and macro terms. If I think of, let's say, grammar being the micro/horizontal part, I think of narrative, maybe, or anything that would create a single point — simultaneity, I think, narrative is a curious approximation of — would be the macro version of temporal closure. On the spatial plane, micro closure would have to do with transparent referentiality. On the larger plane it would have to do with, as I was saying before, the representation pulling the reader out to a clearly deposited representational schema, or to pull it out into the illusionistic space of the author. That's how I *lately* have been thinking about this ... where the micro dimensions are the raw materials of the text, and the macro dimensions have to do with the product, have to do *in particular* with the product as it affects the *reader*, as it affects *subjectivity*, the creation of a subject position, or the reinforcement of a subject position. So, now when I look back at these concentric circles, the models from that piece, which is from a long time ago — I was thinking of the inner circle as being the sign system, and the outer circle as being discourse and ideology — that has some affinity to this micro/macro distinction ... so that the sign system might be related to the micro dimension, and

discourse and ideology, *as they affect the reader* or the creation of the subject, would have to do with this macro dimension. If I get around to getting these current ideas a little bit more laid out that'll probably be clearer ... then you can see how this micro/macro distinction is what I had previously talked about as a series of concentric circles.

**DB:** In the 1980s the units of composition in your poems began to include larger, more syntactically coherent phrases as well as the kind of confrontational samples of social discourse that would characterize *Give Em Enough Rope* and *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up*, where the disjunctive and irreconcilable contexts of the phrases — that we are all somehow familiar with — very much “underscore,” as Dworkin writes, “the forms of psychosocial constructions that language enables and enacts.” Would you say that you are working to increase the performativity of the text and to project social antagonisms into the reading experience?

**BA:** Yes. I'd say that. But let me go back to a few things that you've said ...

The units of composition of my poems beginning to get larger, more syntactically coherent, and to incorporate these samplings from social discourse — that begins in the late 1970s. And it's pretty coincident with me coming to NYC, becoming part of a poetry community, and starting to give readings in public, which I had not done before. And to have that starting to influence what I chose to first select to read, at these readings, and then, second, that began to influence what I wrote. So some of that is a situationally based thing, and maybe it also had to do with changes in the culture. Plenty of things were happening in the late 70s here in NYC that would have pointed me in that direction anyways if I wanted to engage social materials. So it started a little bit earlier than the 1980s even though the work may have been published in the 80s mostly; I mean, *Give Em Enough Rope* is from 78 to 82, I think, *I Don't Have Any Paper* was written in 83 and edited in the beginning of 84, even though it didn't come out in book form until many years later. The phrase “more syntactically coherent” ... I might say “syntactically imaginable.” Because I think many people would doubt how syntactically coherent these things are. One thing I got interested in was to create a phrase-like or sentence-like linkage of words that *wouldn't* have any familiar syntax to it but partly because of the voice trajectory of it, especially when spoken, it would carry that charge — that would seem as though you could put it into some imaginable grammar or syntax but it wasn't copying or relying on one that preexisted it. Second, this notion about

incorporating confrontational and controversial “samples” of social discourse: the sampling issue is interesting. Sampling, for instance, in the music world, in the hip hop scene, for instance, was also beginning to be a major issue right around that time. And a lot of my work from that period looks much more, sounds much more, like it is involved with sampling, and appropriation, whereas in fact a lot of it isn’t. There is a quality of appropriated language that I liked and was drawn toward, and I often wanted to replicate it without actually sampling anything. So rather than what, say, the Flarf collective does with doing Google appropriations and samplings from Google searches and things, it was more as if I was seeing things that deserved to have that treatment and then came up with my own slightly different versions. Most of the time. There’s a few things which clearly are just, you know, beyond the level of vocabulary, to come directly out of something I might have heard and I just wrote down — like the title of my new book *You Can’t Have Everything ... Where Would You Put It!*: that’s a classic bumper sticker/t-shirt phrase, it’s not one that I came up with myself. But a lot of the earlier work had that quality to it. So the impression may be “this is sampling,” “this is transcription,” “this is ...” — and it may *not* be.

Now, this last thing you’re asking about — “disjunctive and irreconcilable contexts” — *that* interests me as a way of wording it because I feel like when it comes to the context of phrases, or even the contexts of vocabulary choices, that that’s often ignored, or presupposed, or involved with some hegemonic determination, or delimitation, of what the appropriate context is. So, I wanna challenge that ignoring of context, I wanna challenge that presupposing of context, and I wanna challenge that hegemonic control over context. And one way I found that that can happen is through *challenging* those *norms*. If I’m putting things together that are irreconcilable and disjunctive — it will make it harder to ignore, harder to presuppose, harder just to embrace the hegemonic form of contextualization. So I think that was an interesting way you put that, or Craig put it. And that would then ... if you’re making people, writer and reader, more aware of the actual, no longer ignored, no longer presupposed, no longer complicit *contexts* then — if you actually get to the *real* contexts of this language — it *is* contested, and it *does* embody social antagonism, so that you would be able to *project* social antagonisms in the text work precisely by playing with the way that the language is contextualized.

**DB:** Dworkin also notes that your “turn from the micro-text level of the sign towards the macro-text level of discourse” was accompanied by significant changes in your compositional method as well. Can you give us a broad idea of how you actually compose, or edit, texts today?

**BA:** At some point in the late 70s — as I’ve said to many people and on interviews before<sup>5</sup> — I bought a paper cutter, which was the major technological shift in my work, much more significant than word processors, for instance. All my work since ... yeah, basically in the last 30 years now, has been composed on small pieces of paper — 8.5/11" sheets of paper cut into 6. Everything I write, pretty much — essays, shopping lists, phone numbers, things I need to do, as well as poetry that I collect and create — is all done on that size. Which in terms of Craig’s point, I think, has some interest. When he’s talking about the shift from this more atomized, microscopically investigative, small bits of material to working with phrases, working with longer units ... it has some resonance with this partly because the thing that working with small pieces of paper, and doing all my composing on this, and then storing them, basically, and then pulling boxes out — these are all stored in wine case boxes here in the house — which I fill up maybe one a year with, you know, thousands of these cards ... as I’ve also said in interviews before, this separates the reading and the writing, or the writing and the editing of this work, sometimes *by years*. I’ll often be editing words that I composed, or a couple of words, on thousands of little pieces of paper — years before. So I don’t have any relationship with my prior state of mind, when I wrote these things, and I don’t remember the epiphany that led to some vision or something, like poets often feel, and I can be much more mobile and flexible in editing.

I’ve talked about all these things before but now what I notice, in relation to the question the way Craig quoted it: there’s something about operating at the micro-text level of the sign that is something you could produce at the moment, there’s something that lends itself to sitting down and generating things at this micro level, and having all the possibilities more readily available to you. And I don’t think that’s true with discourse. If you’re operating with discursive material I don’t think discursive materials of the variety, of the complexity, of the vividness that you want to end up with, are all generateable in the moment. But, what I discovered was that they’re *collectable*. So the difference to me ... the micro materials, these raw materials, are things that you could produce on the spot without any fear that you’re being way too limited, you know, that you could imagine all the possibilities of the alphabet, and the combinations of the letters and

sounds, and things and you could work through those ... with discourse you *can't* — *but* it lends itself to a kind of gradual accumulation in the same way that collecting does. And I'm also kind of an obsessive collector of books, of print material, of music records, and things like that, you know, Mexican and Puerto Rican graphs and masks, and a whole bunch of other things that you see around the house here. And that becomes my relationship to discursive materials — not that I'm expected to sit down at the typewriter and come up with my personalized version of discursive materials, which is what then becomes a poem, but that I can work with editing a *vast* body of material that I accumulate and collect *over time* that I wouldn't have otherwise been able to do. Just as a thought, based on that helpful question and based on Craig's astute observation.

**DB:** I am fascinated by the fact that your compositional method enables you to improvise texts in real-time. You frequently perform this specific type of editing “live” in the context of collective multi-media performances, working alongside improvising musicians and dancers, highlighting and exploring the interrelationship between the textual and the performative, writing and sound, semiotics and aesthetics. Can you talk a bit about your experience as a performance artist? How that experience impacts your writing and what it feels like to actually share the performance space with an audience — the corporeality of it all?

**BA:** Okay. This relates a little bit to the previous question about methodology because when I started collaborating with people in the free improvisation music community, which is very elaborately developed here in NYC, and also with movement artists and dancers, in particular Sally Silvers, the choreographer, during this period of the early 1980s, I was not only starting to make music but to do collage live-mixing of tape materials that I would come up with to perform with other musicians, and with dancers. In other words, I became a musician and a sound designer partly by just transferring the existing aesthetic I had into sound. And so I felt that the way I had already begun to work with text materials in the late 70s — somewhat inspired by film maker friend [Henry Hills](#), who was working with film stock in that same way, and also with people in the Chadbourne, Zorn, Cora, etc. free improv community who were working with sound in a somewhat similar way ... that I started to, again, wanting to play some role in these now multimedia performance possibilities, I started to make sound and make music, but, after *that* I realized that what I was doing with sound I can also do back again with text *in performance*

by doing the editing that I normally do at home on stage — *live*. The way I wrote got translated into the way I could make music, and then the way I made music could translate back into the way I would be able to edit live in performance — just from the experiences I had as a musician then, performing with other musicians and dancers. In other words, I was able to see by noticing what kind of sound materials worked best to allow free improvisation between musicians and dancers, I could then see “Oh, okay. There’s a possibility for text here which nobody else is doing, or, nobody else is really fully exploring here!” And that’s what I started to do. Since I had already developed this way of editing in a highly modular form — where I’d sit on my sofa, and I’d have piles of cards, and I’d create phrases and little word clusters and then collage those together and make things that had some stability or shape to them, timewise — then I could do that same thing live and be influenced in my choices not only by what the words were, in a sense, telling me was possible but by making my editing choices bounce off of what the other musicians and dancers were doing. That’s basically what I started to do. I would sit and perform with dancers and musicians who had to be improvising.

In other words, this wasn’t something that you could do with composed music, and it wasn’t something that you could do with fully choreographed dance which already had a kind of fixed quality to it. And you couldn’t do it with already fixed texts – you couldn’t just go in and try to read a short story in the midst of a performance — although people *do* that, and it’s hideous, it’s deadly — or read their poems as accompaniment to a dance. No, all of that seemed disastrous to me. But this seemed possible: that you could weave your way through textual raw materials and make something in direct reverberating relationship to music and dance. All that, again, was made possible by the highly modular quality of the materials I was generating and also by the freely improvised nature of what these musicians and dancers were doing, again, pretty uniquely in New York. There were other places where free improv music and dance were happening but there really were *communities* of people here that were doing that. And that really lent itself terrifically to me getting a chance to try these things out.

**DB:** In an essay called “[Praxis: A Political Economy of Noise and Informalism](#)” you firmly suggest to synthesize an Adornian ‘informalism’ with a decidedly constructivist, Brechtian or Benjaminian, production aesthetic. Not in order to resolve tensions, but “to make progressively more appropriate the subjectively recharged material: by contextualizing it. To heal this polar

opposition of material and subject in a praxis of sound: by a constructivist resocializing and ‘opening out’ of the material, and a constructivist contextualizing of the subject. Such informalist noise refuses any projective resolution of social contradiction. It performs this failure, eliciting a contrast with social openness. Indexed by internal contradictoriness, it offers a social model of surprise and the unforeseen, of unconstrained freedom and self-reflexivity and conceivable coherence. In sound — among other arenas — equipped with an unrepressive intersubjectivity, to bring the tensions to a head.”<sup>6</sup> What kind of artistic practice are you thinking of? Could you give us some example? I mean, you gave us some already, but ...

**BA:** The things that I was interested in, in Adorno, at this point, was not what Adorno’s most known for — it wasn’t his *Aesthetic Theory*, it wasn’t his *Negative Dialectics*, it wasn’t his view about art praxis needing to be distanced and Olympian in its positioning — it was his work trying to confront avant-garde classical music in the 1950s, 1960s, which he talks about in his essay “Towards an Informal Music,” and he had in mind people like Stockhausen, or Luigi Nono, in particular. Now, Nono was somebody that both Sally Silvers and I did a very large project on. We did a new version of Luigi Nono’s opera about revolution, and that was one of the things that Adorno interested me in thinking about/in relationship to a poetic process. So he’s talking about informalism as — there’s also some links to some visual art that was happening at that point that I’m not as familiar with as I should be — so, I was trying to think about this as something that didn’t put forward or project a prior forming, a prior form, so that you wouldn’t as a listener — or, in my thinking, a reader — you wouldn’t be presented with the finished form. You would be presented with something closer to these raw materials — that you would be presented with a kind of non grid-like landscape of possible links and connections, almost like things that we’re more familiar with now in the digital domain, where you’re online and you could see what, in a cornball kind of way, hypertext was involved with.

So there’s something about that notion of links, of moving outward in a centrifugal direction, that forms, or potential forms, or virtual forms would be made possible but wouldn’t be fixed ahead of time. That wouldn’t be the thing you were supposed to be decoding, or getting a grip on, as a reader, but that you would be involved with in a constructivist exercise yourself. So, in this quote, which I haven’t seen for a while, and I’m always curious to figure out what I might have meant ... if I use the phrase “to make progressively more appropriate” the material “by



contextualizing it” — the word “appropriate” would be a way of talking about what the relationship of an item is to its context. Even in my work as a political scientist, my whole position was always to try to see how, let’s say, a foreign policy seemed to be following the social rules emanating out of a particular context. If it followed those rules, rule-following then would be a way of talking about appropriate action in relationship to a context — so that you’d be trying to see how it got regularized, how it got normalized, how it got to ward off possibilities of dysfunction, how it got to ward off, or eliminate, the inappropriate. By “appropriate” I want to think about the modes of appropriateness of some material in relationship to various contexts. Then what I’m talking about in this second phrase here, “to heal this [...] opposition of material and subject,” this goes back to what I was saying a minute ago about the micro and macro levels. The micro level would be the raw material, the macro level would be the subject that ‘gets produced.’ And I’m interested — in both cases — in recontextualizing the material— what I called “constructivist resocializing of the material” — to see where else it could lead to beyond what it normally does. And the same, then, with the subject, you know, whether you’d see normally where the subject would get *policed*, and you could then see how a different reading of its context could open up new possibilities for putting the reader *in motion*, for putting the subject in motion, which is how I tend to think about this now.

Now, the thing I wasn’t sure about even in this phrase of mine when I talk about “perform[ing] this failure, eliciting a contrast with social openness” ... if I’m saying that “informalist noise refuses any projective resolution of social contradiction” — *that’s* the “failure.” You’re showing how this doesn’t ‘add up’ in some finished, formalist, closed-off, or centripetal text. And that will then elicit a contrast with what could otherwise be possible. So, that’s what I’m trying to get at as “social openness,” which *does* have to do with newer types of coherence that are conceivable that we haven’t gotten to yet.

**DB:** Which strikes, or so I think, a familiar chord with, or reminds me, at least a little bit, of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* and also his *Aesthetic Theory* in terms of ... well, that artworks —

**BA:** — *Negative Dialectics*, that’s a book of Adorno’s I haven’t even read. I’m not a scholar of any of these people, really, for whatever my enthusiasms might be.

**DB:** Alright, well, what I was reminded of was the idea that artworks must not resolve those tensions but, basically, testify to them ... to social antagonisms, bearing witness to suffering, etc. Now, you’re not interested so much, I think, in art “testifying” to anything, but rather opting for a constructivist approach. Therefore I was interested in how much of Adorno would be important for your artistic

practice.

**BA:** Well, like I said ... Adorno in these late essays on music really does go beyond what he had been saying before about early Schoenberg, or Schoenberg and Berg, who he was a student of — Sally [Silvers] and I also did a giant recasting of Berg's *Lulu*, you know, those are the two big opera-type pieces that we did as giant spectacles, with dozens and dozens of performers ... and Adorno talking about *pre-twelve-tone*, the atonal period of Schoenberg and early Berg —

**DB:** — before it gets *mechanized*.

**BA:** yes, before it gets mechanized — as close to what he later gets interested in, and still skeptical, still a little nervous about, in people like Stockhausen and in Cage, even, and Nono, and Bouleze, and three or four other people, in the 60s. It's that late rethinking of Adorno that I saw, when it comes to music, at least, and sound, and the sound dimension of literature, that I was most interested in, rather than the more mandarin moves of his *Aesthetic Theory*.

**DB:** Some of your performance texts have been published in a book called *Ex Why Zee: Performance texts, Collaborations, Word Maps, Bricolage & Improvisations* (1995). You obviously embrace free ensemble improvisation, real-time editing of raw material, radical parataxis and collage aesthetics, while being critical of artworks solely derived from chance operations — what you have called “procedural (even aleatory) fetishism”. What makes this distinction an important one?

**BA:** Okay, I've talked about this in other places<sup>7</sup> and maybe I don't need to say much more now, but just a couple of little things ... One: The notion of “free” improvisation I'd like to stress. The thing that made it different from other activities, for instance, in the music world, where the term gets defined by Derek Bailey in his book on improvisation, was that by “free” improvisation he means non-idiomatic, or non-genre-based, improvisation. Jazz musicians improvise, for instance, but when jazz musicians improvise it's still hearable as *jazz*, it seems to be located within that genre. The free improvisation movement, which pretty much begins in England in the early to mid-60s with people like Derek Bailey and Evan Parker, and some others — and also pretty much around the same time in Germany with the people that were doing FMP records, etc. — those people were influenced by free jazz but they were also influenced by contemporary classical music, and to *some* degree tried to put those two things together, so that you had a level

of *extremity* in the playing, in the organization of the sound, that was maybe reminiscent of either avant-garde classical music or free jazz but didn't sound recognizable as either one. It then opened up any kind of possibilities for sound making without having it fit into any prior box.

And — going back to what I was saying about “Language Poetry” — that was a huge issue for me, that was what was attractive about free improvisation: the critique of genre. When it came to writing that was involved with ensemble-like playing with others then the question was, “what kind of writing works best in that situation?” Whether it was edited in real-time, or whether it was assembled out of prior editing of very disjunct, modular material. That's what seemed to work best in that situation. Radical parataxis, or collage-aesthetic-based work seemed to work best in a free improv situation, whereas if I'd been just playing, for instance, with folk musicians, or rock musicians, or classical musicians, or jazz musicians, then something *less* drastic in its parataxis, something less free from thematic centeredness, would have probably worked better. So that the more extreme versions of collage, and parataxis, and ‘getting away from genre,’ really fit the kind of collaborative context that I was very interested in, or invested in.

Now, the final thing, about the ‘aleatory thing’ ... again, that goes back to my, I think, always present but more recently *intensively thought through* emphasis on the reader. What I've said before was that, for some of us, looking at these chance-generated works in the 60s — Dick Higgins's work, or the things that Cage was doing himself, or some other people around the Cage circle in New York, like Jackson Mac Low, in particular, the major poet of that tendency — that we were just fascinated, blown away, by the results of those procedures but didn't really care that much about the procedure itself. There wasn't anything specific about that procedure that attracted us. In fact, it seemed to close itself off a little bit from the possibility of exploring the semantic trajectory, or horizon, of the material, which they weren't as interested in. And I think of procedural fetishism as a sub-category of fetishizing the production, of the writer, rather than doing anything directly relevant to the reader's experience. So it was always trying to shake things up in light of the reader's experience that led me onto the path that I'm on, and made me both attracted to the results, and unattracted to the emphasis on the procedure, in that work.

**DB:** Unlike many political artists and writers today, you have a radical aversion to identity politics. And a piece which very much exemplifies this is “Mistaken Identity”, which you edited live in performance with Vernon Reid in the late 1990s. Like many of your texts, that piece is a

*tour de force* through the obscene underside of American consumerism, liberal pluralism, and multinational capitalism and a sarcastic account of how ideology subjects us. What's the problem with identity in your opinion? And what's it all got to do with a critical poetics?

**BA:** Okay, another huge question. Identity politics as a political phenomenon I'm not gonna jump right in to. I was just reading Gadamer today ... he's quoting some early hermeneutic philosophers who talked about identifying, "to identify" was defined as "producing sameness," which, I think, is similar to the way Adorno talks about identification. Well, that's pretty much the heart of my radical aversion to identity politics as it seems to be about "you're committed to that, you're committed to identity, you're committed to identification, you're committed to reproduction of some kind of sameness, even if it's the sameness of a niche, the sameness of a faction, the sameness of an ethnic group, or a racial group, the sameness of a territorial group, etc." That's a closure which I am unhappy with. Identity operates as a filter, it operates to make less flexible the experience of some potential reader. So, there I'm more interested in the flexibility, or the hybridity, of a reader — their ability to operate with a broader toolkit, you know, with more irons in the fire, in a sense, their ability to shift around, their ability to be the opposite of the same, their ability to not have all their experience filtered through somebody else's identity.

Actually I talked about this in my essay on Michael Lally's work — about some of the dangers of a narcissism in the writing creating this identification structure in the reader, which is very much a Brechtian theme as well. And you mentioned the "sarcastic account of how ideology subjects us" ... again, there, ideology subjects us *by* creating identifiable subjects. And it's not just ideology that does that, it's also the whole material shape of everyday life and of the structures of Capital, and other things ... patriarchy, etc. etc. So it's the subjection process that I'm interested in. And I'm interested in it because I think of it as needing an alternative, needing a chance, needing a prescription, and I think some of the sarcasm in that account is sarcasm about the claim that these things — multinational Capital, liberal pluralism, American consumerism — that they are enough! The claim that they are sufficient, that they are all you need. And I am asking: "Enough for who?" They may be enough for a very rigidly delimited type of identity, certain types of identity. They're not enough for an open-ended notion of what a person or a subject could be. So that's why I think of identity politics not as a solution but as part of the

problem, in a sense. How the things that I'm unhappy with in the world sustain themselves very nicely.

**DB:** In an essay called “Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust”<sup>8</sup> Sianne Ngai engages your writing in *Shut Up* in terms of a poetics of disgust as opposed to a poetics of “desire production”. Theories, poetics, and hermeneutics of “desire” abound, as she notes, while disgust has no well-known paradigms associated with it and has largely remained outside any theoretical zone, even though in the social and material world of global capitalism potential objects of disgust abound. Is disgust the dialectical other of desire — a negativity that is harder to co-opt? What makes disgust an important force in contemporary experimental writing engaged with ideological concerns?

**BA:** Okay, just a couple of little things. If I hear you talk about desire, I feel as if a lot of the theorizing about desire, again, is focused around the author, or focused around something lacking in the reader, that by identifying with the author position they can somehow fill that *lack*. And, since I'm more trying to think about this in the reader's terms, that desire seems misplaced. In other words, to the extent I focus on the reader, I'm often focused on what's in the way of a more wide-ranging possibility for the reader. And what's in the way are things that are troubling, and even likely to occasion disgust. In your original formulation of this, that you sent me, you mentioned “corporate ideology, bigotry, geopolitical wars, forms of institutionalized inequality.” Again, those things are objects of disgust, and it's not just *my* disgust. I mean, these are things that are generally lacking, or that need to be overcome, in some way. But it *is* also *my* disgust, you know: as an *author* I am entangled in this. For instance, when I'm giving public readings of *Shut Up*, which I've done a bunch of times over the years, of parts of that piece, *that* material is very difficult for *me* to handle, even as a reader. So I think it is a way of talking about things that are not *lacking* but that are *too much*, in a sense, that overwhelm you with excess. So that, in a way, highlighting disgust is a way of challenging pluralism, which is usually seen as the answer to what we don't have enough of. Whereas if the problem is that we have too much of certain things, then pluralism is not gonna be sufficient.

**DB:** In the 1970s it was probably you, and other Language Poets, and Amiri Baraka, who most harshly criticized the political *naïveté* of the New American Poetry, though in differing ways, and

relentlessly politicized poetry in the US at a time of conservative backlash that would hibernate the Carter years, experience its peak in the Reagan-Bush era, and return forcefully with the Bush II Administration. Now, my impression is that while dissecting what both of you considered the political failure of the New Left in the face of multinational capitalism and geopolitical wars, dominant modes of poetics were brought under similar scrutiny. Would you agree?

**BA:** The issue with the New American Poetry that a number of us felt was most pressing was, again, the ego-centered quality of it, from the author's valorized standpoint. So, the political *naïveté* as a sub-category of that — emphasis on the writer, on the ego of the writer — would be that the author can't really just be celebrating her own politics. In some ways, the political *naïveté* is related to this excessive valorizing of the central position of the writer. If that's what's generally been celebrated, then that automatically looks politically naïve because it looks too isolationist. It doesn't have this centrifugal push outward, toward others. The issue that we're operating at this time of conservative backlash ... I wanted to just caution people when they try to put someone's work in a time line ... is just to realize that, I mean, for a lot of us starting to do this kind of radical work in the 1970s that would come into print in the mid-70s, late 70s, or 80s ... that it doesn't necessarily represent an immediate response to what was going on right then. There's this backlog that occurs, where you're being shaped by prior impulses in the art world, in art communities, in art practice, that might have come out in response to an earlier phase. So that we're being influenced by radical work from the 60s that's inspiring us, and we're continuing to push that work forward during a time when the social and political landscape has changed drastically, where we're in the Nixon years or we're in the Carter years, and we're in a time of conservative backlash, or we're not. So I just wanted to complicate the time line by reminding us that all our work is, and myself included ... in some ways, disabled from being directly responsive to what's going on because we have some back catalogue, in a sense, we have some backlog, we have some *baggage* that has already shaped us. That we're not a blank slate, where we can just respond flexibly to whatever is happening.

And the other thing was ... what allows these radical heritages from the 60s, for instance, to continue on influencing work in the 70s, or in the 80s, when things shift *way* to the Right and become much more conservative, is the existence of a *community*. And that was one of the accomplishments, I think, of the so-called Language Writers. Not just that, in isolation, they

produced a bunch of drastic and crazy texts but that they also created a community, a sense of community, institutions coming out of that community and sense of community, that allowed those earlier impulses and the practice based on them to survive in increasingly uncongenial circumstances.

There's also one thing you're asking — maybe you've asked Baraka this too — about “the political failure of the New Left” ... I mean, I just had to laugh. The idea that the New Left somehow had a sizeable enough constituency at any point in my lifetime to even be accused of political failure, I mean, that is like saying “you failed because your group of three people didn't become a group of three million people” ... Well, I agree, that was a failure there. But, I think, from a European context, you have to realize how pathetically dinky the actual Left has always been in the United States — if it's not a specific opposition to the degradations of racists against the Civil Rights movement, or the degradations created by imperialist war in relation to the anti-war movement. If you get to the number of people that go beyond the civil rights or an anti-war position into a fully ideologized left-wing view of the world, that's just a virtual handful of folks, in a certain sense, in the US, unlike Europe.

**DB:** Reading your work *vis-à-vis* Amiri Baraka's, I was reminded of some of the conflicting ideas within the tradition of critical theory — esp. between so-called “Western” and so-called “Third World” Marxism, but also within the former, e.g. between Lukacs and Brecht, Brecht and Adorno, maybe Adorno and Baudrillard. I saw some of those conflicting theoretical positions being reflected in your respective aesthetico-political strategies, and I came to think of that as a contemporary recasting of a dialectical tension at the heart of avant-garde aesthetics: a tension between negation and affirmation, Adornian negativity and Brechtian/Benjaminian constructivist impulses. Although the coordinates of this conflict have certainly been altered by several theoretical paradigm shifts since the 1930s, it still hinges on the complex nexus between forms of aesthetic experience and political subjectivity. How do you approach this problem in your writing as well as in a performance context?

**BA:** As somebody that teaches International Political Economy, one thing that I'm struck by in the discussions about Third World Marxism is how significantly they focus on the role of the state as an authority, and as something that needs strengthening by radical forces. And something

that then is involved with mobilizing forces. So it's something that either mobilizes the existing forces through strengthening the state, or that it somehow projects a certain type of citizen that it then wants to create. And there's something about that emphasis on the "strong state" — which is, of course, valorized in the whole Leninist tradition, Stalinist tradition, and may be something that Baraka talked about since his past theorizing certainly looked like he was much more sympathetic to that than most people are today, for instance, thinking about the "strong state" tradition. Something about the analogy with the author pops into my head. That there's something about the willingness to have an authoritarian state, and the willingness to have a very controlling, directive author, a little bit like some of those things I said about Brecht and the scientific control tradition, that might be relevant. And, I think, anybody that wants to really valorize the position of the reader would end up taking a somewhat more libertarian, or —

**DB:** anarchist? —

**BA:** — democratic, anarchist ... Situationist position that would go against some of the things that I associate with the Leninist heritage, which, by the way, among the Language Writers (so-called) never had much play. I think Siliman might have been the closest to that, to flirting with that tradition, closer than the rest of us.

When you mention "Adornian negativity" ... now, there I'm wondering whether the negativity is about, or could be interpreted in the same light as, a kind of libertarian impulse: where you're keeping your distance from established structures — maybe in a protective, defensive crouch, but at least there's a distance — and that that does then cut against any way of glamorizing authoritarian control — whether it's coming from the consumer market place, the power of corporations, or whether it's coming from a post-revolutionary state. In that way the "Brechtian/Benjaminian constructivist impulse" might still [...] and you can see this in Brecht, certainly, and you could see it at certain periods of Benjamin's writing too, that little flirtation with authoritarian politics. For me it may have to do with: if I wanna have something be recognizable in the work, it may not be the recognition of any kind of pre-set template that could be provided by an authoritative author, "slash," state, "slash," revolutionary party, or elite — but the recognition of a possible future. There's something about this negativity, this opening up of a space outside of the state's sphere, which you don't want to just become free market fetishism, but I also don't want it to become a closed-off or prescribed future that's given to me by the text, or by the author, or by the government. So somehow I do negotiate the intricacies of what we



used to think of as anarcho-communism that become quite interesting here. Like how much emphasis you want on each side of that?

**DB:** Oh yes.

**BA:** Which, by the way, I remember having debates about with Jackson McLow — somebody with a long commitment, and radical commitment, to anarchism. But the problem, and I think at least people that theorize Third World Marxism were very clear that in the context of neoliberal globalization, that the only hope of survival of a different future for a progressive society in the Third World was to develop a fairly powerful state apparatus. That was the *only* way to *negotiate* with globalizing forces, and that meant that you couldn't go all the way with this complete openness of anarchism, or, the complete openness of aleatory technique, but that you wanna have some guides, some reference point, some willingness to engage the semantic dimension, just like you wanna have some willingness to engage with the state, engage with what the state can do.

**DB:** Post-Marxist political thinker Jacques Rancière contends that the politics of aesthetics operates in the unresolved tension between two opposed forms of politics, or rather, meta-politics: that of transforming art into forms of collective life, and that of preserving from all forms of militant or commercial compromise the autonomy that makes it a promise of emancipation.<sup>9</sup> For Rancière, this tension sheds some light on the paradoxes of critical art and its dialectical transformations. Let's assume Bürger's famous diagnosis of the neo-avant-garde's flawed strategy of repeating under late-capitalist conditions the meta-political project of the historical avant-garde ('the sublation of art into the praxis of life') is prompted by ignoring that constitutive tension — these two rather familiar polar opposites in avant-garde aesthetics: the (neo-)Dadas' and (neo-)Constructivists' 'art into life!' versus (qua Adorno) 'the necessity of art's relative autonomy to maintain its emancipatory promise.' Moreover, having rendered visible the effects of a false sublation of autonomy, one might say that the avant-garde, in any case, helped redefine the aesthetico-political project of the avant-garde: to make conceivable new forms of subjectivity through art without sublating the institution of art. Now, as a Marxist political scientist and avant-garde experimental poet, do you think that is possible without "touching" the material basis? Or: if we think about social reality in terms of its "discursive formation" — who has access to what type of discourse in the first place?

**BA:** When you talk about this distinction of transforming art into forms of collective life, on the one hand, and, on the other, that of preserving a kind of autonomy that offers a promise of emancipation ... well, okay ... transforming art into a form of life to me sounds too reminiscent of creating a closed-off text, so I would have a problem with that part of the binary. And the idea of trying to preserve autonomy from any kind of “militant or commercial compromise” ... that, I think, suggests too much emptying out of the literary work of any kind of content. In other words, that the autonomy for the reader which would need to be preserved for there to be a promise of emancipation — I could use the things that I’ve been thinking lately about the reader to make that sound pretty compatible with what I’m doing — but the idea that somehow there’s this protected sphere that has to keep everything at a distance, in this Adorno-like way, that doesn’t seem attractive. To me it’s not autonomy that needs to be preserved, but it’s the possibility of an expanding capacity. So that you can[’t] have that expanded capacity without confronting the reader or without inviting the reader into some new possibilities — and those new possibilities might involve things that Adorno, or someone else, would sniff or turn up their nose at and find to be all hideous compromise with mass culture, things like that. To me the issue is not whether some part of the mass culture looks disagreeable or not, or doesn’t look like what you wanna be surrounded by — you’d rather sit around listening to Mozart string quartets or something — but no, it’s whether it’s useful and challenging your existing capacity and opening it up. And I always have felt that it does! So, therefore I don’t see any need to be so protectionist. But I also don’t feel the need just to fold everything into the existing everyday life the way Bürger was talking about what the neo-avant-garde’s doing.

Now, the last thing you were saying is about “making conceivable new forms of subjectivity through art,” which I think is one of the projects that I’m fascinated by and interested in, “without subverting the institution of art.” Now, here, one spectrum that I would end up focusing on would be between aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. I don’t care so much about ‘dissolving’ the institution of art, but I do care about subverting, or dissolving, or transcending, or leaving in the dust, aesthetics. Because, I think, even what Kant and classical aestheticians, aesthetic philosophers, talked about as aesthetic does — in a less formalist way of understanding them, which is what I’m interested in — show the positive possibilities of aesthetic experience. That it isn’t just something we need to leave behind. It is something that opens up the possibility of capacitation for the reader, in certain ways.

The other thing you mention, whether this making conceivable of new forms of subjectivity is possible without “touching” the material base ... Well, here, if we think of the material base as processes, then I think it does involve touching the material base. If we think of the material base as thematics, or as economic or corporate structures, then you’re not really gonna be touching upon them, or opening them up, or eliminating them. So, that’s a distinction that I make about the material base — a little bit like the base/superstructure distinction I talked about earlier. And the final thing you asked about — “or: if we think about social realities in terms of their ‘discursive formation’ — who has access to what type of discourse in the first place?” Now, here’s something very challenging, very interesting — I don’t have a good response to it – Rancière, who I’ve been just now reading (I’m behind in my Rancière-ism), does highlight, and so did Bourdieu, in a different way. So, that question of access I haven’t really come to terms with yet. It may be I’m making too many assumptions about what kind of discourse people need to have defamiliarized, you know. If I’m interested in defamiliarizing social discourse and not just defamiliarizing literary tradition, if I’m interested in what has been called a kind of *social modernism*, where the defamiliarizing effort points toward the social order and not just toward artistic heritages, then I still have to accept that some kinds of discourse about society will not even be accessible to certain people. And so then you might have to say, “Oh, you’re defamiliarizing something that’s over their heads anyway.” That’s a problem I haven’t really come up with anything about yet.

**DB:** But you’re also a professor, and a teacher. So that, for me, that goes hand in hand in terms of what kind of audience would be willing to deal with that. So, the question of education, obviously, is crucial, always.

**BA:** Right. And there we could, you know, if I knew more about the implications of Schiller, whom I’m also just now reading, we could probably talk about that too ... about aesthetic education. Maybe next year ... I’ll be right on that one.

**DB:** Much of your work, I believe, critiques the hegemony of liberal pluralism as a form of repressive tolerance that shuts radical critique down and requires the exclusion of Marxisms from the political arena to maintain its liberal guise. How important do you think a systematic critique of liberal pluralism is today?

**BA:** Okay. A couple of things ... It isn't just Marxisms that are being excluded from the political arena in order for it to maintain its liberal guise; it's almost any kind of radical thought, whether it's coming from the Marxist tradition, the feminist tradition, from queer theory, from postcolonial theorizing, etc. etc. So, I think, the hegemony of liberal pluralism in the political realm *is* a kind of repressive tolerance that *does tend* to shut radical critique down. And it's quite parallel to view's that I've expressed about pluralism in the poetry community, in the poetry tradition, which is this: that a lot of people have come to appreciate various kinds of experimental writing, and so-called language writing, but have not been willing to give up their attachment to everything that preceded it. So it's as if we get added on to the smorgasbord or to the buffet at the end, as an extra, like "here's a little desert" or "here's something to have with your coffee," at the end, after you had your beefy meal of narrative fiction, author-centered lyric poetry, etc. My feeling — and I've been criticized for this before, for the 'progressivism' of it, for the 'Hegelianism' of it, you know, for the arrogance of it — that I've criticized what I consider more conservative kinds of writing because I really think — and this is partly in terms of the canon, the formation of the canon, in terms of what people read or what's on required reading lists or what people think they need to know — that it's the appreciation for past monuments and past forms of excellence that are very often *in the way* of the kind of writing that I'm interested in having its full effect, which is that of shaking things up. And if it's gonna do that, one of the things that it might hopefully do is just to make people bored with some of the shit that went down in the past.

My model for this was often what happens in the avant music world. So that as a new type of sound, a new wrinkle in jazz history, for instance, which had been hugely formative for me in high school, in college, long before I became a poet, in thinking about artistic tradition — maybe the main art form that I was paying attention to — that one of the things that avant-garde jazz, in different eras, did — starting with bebop in the 40s, some of the progressive things that were happening in the 50s, and in free jazz in the 60s — was that it made people bored with previous eras' highly valued work, you know, and that it was the boredom and the impatience with those earlier styles that made a space for this new stuff to come and get its full measure of excitement and respect and admiration and popularity. That was one of the effects of it, and that's one of the effects that it had on me — all of a sudden a lot of the older stuff just seemed corny, sentimental ... just background music. It no longer had any kind of charge to it. And that boredom and that impatience wouldn't have happened without that radicalizing work. So, pluralism ... I'm finding

to be an obstacle, you know, and therefore in need of a critique in the same way, I think, it works just the way you say in this question in the political realm. That it *does* exclude – it *requires* certain things to be excluded, or else just tagged on at the end as a little sop to, you know, “here’s a few things for young people today,” or “here’s a few things for those of us who are not willing to just think about Marianne Moore, or Robert Lowell, you know, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, whoever it might be. I remember how Craig Dworkin told me that, when he was teaching at Princeton, one of his proudest moments was to get certain things taken off the required reading list. Robert Frost —

**DB:** [laughs]

**BA:** That was the point, that you can’t just expect people to be interested in Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot and also to be excited about Clark Coolidge or someone like that. It requires a critique, in a certain sense, or, an unveiling of the hidden assumptions that went into those earlier works.

**DB:** Re-reading Benjamin’s “The Artist as Producer,” the other day, I was struck by the parallels between his explications of Tretiakov and Brecht as well as the notion of a “mediated solidarity” and *your* writing practice. I also found the following remark, which reminded me of how frequently I burst into a peculiar kind of laughter while reading your work: “We can remark in passing that there is no better starting point for thought than laughter. In particular, thought usually has a better chance when one is shaken by laughter than when one’s mind is shaken and upset. The only extravagance of the epic theatre is its amount of laughter.” Would you like to comment on the significance of humor for your writing as well as your performances?

**BA:** Sure. Let me first ask if you could say anything about this notion of “mediated solidarity” because that’s been ages since I’ve read this essay and I don’t remember what that means.

**DB:** Benjamin notes that solidarity with the proletariat, in terms of the bourgeois intellectual artist, or writer — who might well be sympathetic towards the proletariat and the idea of a socialist revolution — is still mostly lip service as long as he or she doesn’t come up with new forms of art, or new methodologies of writing that seem capable of enacting that solidarity, in a mediated way. That it might be more appropriate for them to get involved in political rallying than using traditional bourgeois cultural formats to express their solidarity with workers and

critique the bourgeoisie. That as bourgeois artists their solidarity can only ever be a mediated one, though very effective in just that sense, like in the work of Tretiakov and, of course, Brecht.

**BA:** This seems to echo the distinction between thematic and formal, right? Where the solidarity that might be expressed by, let's say, someone like myself — a middle-class person, college teacher, privilegedly white, privilegedly male, privilegedly heterosexual, you know — that I could, through the thematics of my work, gesture toward the ideas that were in solidarity with the working class, or with gays, or with women, or with people from other countries, or with people from other ethnic groups, etc. whereas a *mediated* solidarity, if that means coming up with a *method* that would resonate with the task that was in front of these oppressed groups, then, that's closer to my thinking about methodology as the emphasis. I suggested at one point, in an interview, that the “so-called Language Poets” might have been called the “Methodist poets” — which is not just an artifact of my early going to Sunday school in the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Cheverly, Maryland, which was then taken over by the Methodists, or the fact that my father was an experimental psychology professor and scientist whose field was methodology, so, method is something I'm interested in. And I think it is the thing that can activate and capacitate the reader, more than merely invoking certain themes which are already identificatory, in the sense that I mentioned earlier, of producing sameness. That kind of solidarity I don't think gets you very far.

Now, the other thing, about laughter ... here, I think, laughter and humor involved in the reading of the work is something that I probably didn't think very much about until I came to New York and started giving public readings. That was a huge influence ... caused a big change in my thinking about my writing, and it literally was when I started to go to readings that I started to notice what people laughed at, not just in my own work because I was part of a poetry community and we were all going to each other's readings, and, you know, you could literally tell what was going to get a rise out of the audience, what would be provocative, what would make them go “Ooh, what was that?!”, or, what would upset them or shock them or make them laugh, in particular. So I *did* start to think about that more intensively when I got away from silent readings, sitting at home — before I might have noticed that something was funny or not, but it wasn't quite as vivid, in my mind. Now, since then, one of my models lately for thinking about the effect of something like laughter would be thinking about the Sublime — once we reinterpret Kant's model.

DB: A materialist or social constructivist turn?

BA: Right, and there's actually a good book I'm just reading that lays this out, by a Dutchwoman, Kiene Wurch, a book called *Musically Sublime*<sup>10</sup>, and she questions the somewhat mechanical version of the response to the sublime in Kant, which takes on these two stages: one where you're confronted with something, you're confronted with a presentation which you can't get your hands around, in a sense, it's unrepresentable, it's too big to be grasped. But then there's a second stage where that gives you a hint of your actual capacity for dealing with that large scale size, or large scale forcefulness of some object in nature, or in an artwork.

So, when I've lately been thinking about the Sublime, that's the effect that I see happening in so-called Language Writing: where what's unrepresentable is the system of language, the systematic networked formation of language as a structure, and also as a process, and also as something that involves embodiment in texts and in readers or speakers or listeners. That if you produce completely drastic, radical texts that they will be able *at first* to shake people up, and unsettle them, or, in the extreme, blow their mind ... as in "how to operate with a blown mind" — and *then* that will somehow work not just to immobilize them, not just to stun them, or put them into some kind of unconscious swoon, but it will somehow empower them, it will enable them, it will capacitate them, it would give them the confidence that they can, in fact, *see* that this initially unsettling and strange phenomenon actually points to a complicated bigger landscape or network than they had originally noticed. That they then realize they have the ability to get some leverage on it, get some grasp of it, and that that will be, in Kant's term, *elevating*. That they will get this elevated, "enobling," or what I'm calling, *capacitating* and transformative ability.

This book on the musically sublime was questioning the mechanical quality of the stages and suggesting that somehow the unsettling quality *never* stops, that you're basically laminating those two things on top of one another, in the experience of these texts. And that is probably the closest to what's really going on — that you stay fluid, you stay shaken up, you know, it's like a martini, "shaken but not stirred": things are in motion, they never reach a fixed, overly confident conclusion. But they do start to get you past your current fixations, your current fetishisms, your current attachments, your current identifications. So, in this quote, very interesting quote, when he says "thought usually has a better chance when one is shaken by laughter ...", now, there I'm completely in agreement. So the "shaken by laughter" to me would be closer to this first stage where something is shaking you up. But then he says, "... than when one's mind is *shaken and*

*upset.*” I would almost flip it around — it’s your mind that’s being shaken and upset, and the laughter is the second stage, when you realize that you have some overview, you know, that actually you are not part of some kind of elite — like you get the joke and others don’t — but that you have *some* distance, you have some contextualizing capacity that you then become aware of.

And I think that’s what, you know, when I hear people laugh, let’s say, if I’m reading from something like *I Don’t Have Any Paper*, or more recent works, people laugh and it’s unsettling, but they’re laughing because the unsettling quality of it leads somewhere. It doesn’t just stop there but actually gives people the sense that “Oh, I can see that!” But it isn’t just the laughter *without* being unsettling. So laughter that comes without being unsettled to me is closer to identity politics, you know, that means you feel superior — “Oh, I can laugh at that. I’m not implicated in that, I’m keeping my distance, I’m adopting a protectionist stance, I’m gonna wall myself off” — which might actually have some relationship to Third World Marxism, and Leninist versions of opposing globalization, instead of being implicated by it. So, to me, it’s implicating them and *then* giving them some distance, instead of the distance coming without the implicatedness, which then to me is a little bit like arrogance. Your mind is not shaken up, you just laugh because you feel superior or you feel distanced and protectionist enough, like, “oh, this isn’t really about me, this is about those other people that I’m gonna laugh at.” So, no, I think there’s this back and forth, this, shall we say, dialectic that can go on where you are in front of some kind of drastic, radical, shake-up style, you know, mind-shaking text, and then the humor comes from the pleasure, the pleasure of actually ... you know, if you can enjoy something that’s unsettling it’s because you can enjoy being reconfigured, and reconfiguring yourself, and that’s the pleasure. Not just the sense of distance and superiority but the sense that you have a capacity of contextual interpreting and relocating, and reformatting that you were unaware of. And that’s the capacity that’s exhibited by the writing, so that you end up — and this is what people have always said about so-called Language Writing, where the reader’s and the writer’s positions are merged, or intertwined, or flip back and forth in some kind of oscillation, that that’s what’s going on — that the capacity that you achieve is the contextualizing capacity of the writing itself.

*New York City, September 27, 2010*



[brief note on the transcript: Dennis did the painstaking transcription of this interview; I massaged it a teeny bit, mostly deleting a few “you know”s and “so”s & adding a few commas & dashes to capture something of the rhythm, but keeping it as loose & informal as it was, rather than trying to jazz it up or make it more official or impressive. I’m happy to leave in the more relaxed instances of “gonna” & “wanna” & “gotta” along with my idiosyncratic valorizing of the ‘aerated’ em dashes (with a little space before & after). This was a lovely afternoon for me; many thanks to Dennis for all his enthusiasm during his month in the USA as a self-identified ‘fan boy’ — the breath of fresh air still reverberates! ~ B.A.]

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Andrews’s collaboration with choreographer and dancer Sally Silvers and their collective multimedia performance practice since the 1980s read Erica Kaufmann’s [10 Questions for Bruce Andrews and Sally Silvers](#) on [poetryproject.org](#).

<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to Andrews’s “Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis,” *Paradise & Method: Poetics & Praxis* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996), 49-71. The essay is also included in Charles Bernstein’s edition of *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy* (New York: Roof, 1990), 23-44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 50.

<sup>4</sup> The essay collection Andrews has used privately and in the classroom is *Brecht On Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Most recently in a [2010 interview with Dan Thomas-Glass](#), published in *The Argostist Online*.

<sup>6</sup> This is the concluding paragraph from Andrews’s “[Praxis: A Political Economy of Noise and Informalism](#),” published in Charles Bernstein’s collection of essays on sound in poetry, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 73-85.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. both Kaufman and Thomas-Glass.

<sup>8</sup> Sianne Ngai, “Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust,” *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, ed. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002), 161-190.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. esp. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2009), 36-46.

<sup>10</sup> Kiene B. Wurth, *Musically Sublime: Indeterminacy, Infinity, Irresolvability* (New York: Fordham UP, 2009).