

PhillyTalks 19

ALLEN FISHER / KAREN MAC CORMACK

pre-event respondents: Matt Hart, Marjorie Welish

post-event respondents (for *PT 19* Supplement): Rob Holloway & others

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 17 (2001)

Reading: 6 p.m. E.S.T.

Discussion: 7 p.m. E.S.T.

WEBCAST LIVE from the Kelly Writers House, 3805 Locust Walk, Philadelphia. Participate by emailing a response or question during (or before) the event, or telephone (at caller's expense). Further info, Aaron Levy: adlevy@dept.english.upenn.edu.

Marjorie Welish

Deleting "For Them This Brochure is Unnecessary"

1.

Sequences implicate sets corresponding. Contemporary societies...
we at once began; the future will likely consum-
tion of a representation. Anyone else, anyone else's litter
making literal his "tion" of a representation to impregnate
blue and green matches (after hav- —after that date, never—
ing its tides). From the left, a predicate out of breath
delays category, and sometimes not.

Histories of the subjugated read otherwise
than do those of the victorious.

And rising is 1913, almost always
being coextensive with 1690, the 9th century pending and within sight of
an inch of water in a basin. Minutes in a neolithic settlement.

2.

We at once began corresponding; the future will likely strip-search, will likely anthol-
tion of a representation. Anyone else, anyone else's litter, the book's first half
making literal his "tion" of sonorous velocities permeated and said,
unfailingly blue from green, origin of (after hav- —after that date, never—
ing its tides). From the left, a predicate short of breath, the hand lifted
"skeptical" and "agora" together, and sometimes not.

Histories of the subjugated read other's dicta
than do those of the victorious.

Your uppermost story is 1913
much of the time eclipsed in 1690, the 9th century pending...and felt it
writing in a basin. Minutes adapted to a neolithic settlement.

3.

tion of a representation. Anyone else, anyone else's litter
making literal his lay launderette for "tion" of "imitation" to impregnate
ultramarine and/ or cobalt (after hav- —after that date, never—
ing its tides). "Prefabricated wiring with insulation and terminals" left a predicate breathless,
territory together with category transposed sometimes, as
histories of the subjugated read edgewise and are dusty, other
than those of the victorious.

Pre-event respondents

Uppermost is 1913, immense, simultaneously being read with 1690; the 9th century took place within sight of an inch of anathema. Minutes passed a neolithic settlement.

4.

making literal his “tion” of “imitation” to impregnate two blues: scarcely red, in being green (after hav- –after that date, never– ing its tides). From stage left and clockwise, what is said of a fan ventilating category, quantity and number, and sometimes histories of the subjugated reverse. Speak through it, thickening. If you... than do those of the victorious.

Theory of 1913 is as a fresh start, and uppermost is your being multi-linear. In 1690, the 9th century took place and caused/ was caused by an inch of anathema, the basin as such, a split-second neolithic settlement.

5.

blue and green aspects (after hav- –after that date, never– ing its tides). From the left wing, a predicate retaliated and walked out, territory rewritten in category, and sometimes histories of the subjugated read as vernacular underestimated, its entablature reserved to describe a serious scatter of tubing above a disposition.

Particles of 1913,

teenth century being read with 1690; the 9th century will burst an inch of a thing done. Day passed a neolithic settlement.

Pre-event response to PT 19: Fisher / Mac Cormack

Throughout their intoxicated conversation, Karen Mac Cormack and Allen Fisher delight in a superfluity of telegraphic messages that refer to texts, texts concerning form and the representations of mentality which such form indicates. In other words, their shared excitement is not in referring to people, places and things in the intellectual's equivalent of a Grand Tour of cultural concepts, but in finding points of contact through rapid mention via non-proscriptive means. Of the messages sent and received concerning their poetics, Mac Cormack is especially interested in setting forth certain concepts regarding alternative or neglected visual and verbal schema for representing architectural space in historical time and what may be salvaged in understanding these interpretive schemes; for his part, Fisher is interested in setting out the possibilities of cognitive poetics through what the sciences reveal about organizing an entire gradient of phenomenal interactions, especially those that save complexity. In more general terms, what interests Mac Cormack is textual representation of spatiality and temporality and what interests Fisher is the structural basis of systems construed in functionally exhaustive array – this in order to be as intelligently discriminating and conceptually ramified as physical and ecological systems themselves require. For that the logic of ideology will not do.

It is possible to say that an encyclopedia of the subjective domain informs Karen Mac Cormack's “Implexures,” and that representations of this ordering of space and time in past rhetoric and literature help make “Implexures” specific as it now stands. What rhetoric reveals about mentality or mind-set is a condition Mac Cormack transfers from her reading to her writing. World views may be charted as essentially literary. An architecture for medieval thinking, as Mary Carruthers renders it, may be accessed through the rhetoric that would make of the house, as well as of the cathedral, a repository for concrete things that are to be remembered collectively. On the cusp of modernity, meanwhile, sits Robert Musil, endowed with an excess of microscopic knowledge and a macroscopic comprehension of ignorance. The epochal disintegration of self-justifying empire which in Musil's work plays out in excruciatingly intelligent hyper-consciousness is a perfect citation for this project of Mac Cormack's.

Pre-event respondents

May I offer this? Pierre Boulez, a systemic thinker of discontinuity if there ever was one, has volunteered that *The Man Without Qualities* was an early favorite book.

My question for Mac Cormack would be how the laws of association informing the subjective domain of events and their surrounds necessitate invoking the particular mapping configuration of a Deleuzian sort.

A possible answer may be advanced. Some passages in “Implexures” display a topic through an aggregated vocabulary of causes displaced onto effects, or episodes discrepant in scale. Death of a household pet in time present reconfigures itself a few sentences later as extinction, as such, which then modulates toward being the implied retrieval of subject through palaeontology. Topics are then not vehicles of subject matter but markers of historical coordinates expressed through the individuation of sentences. Meanwhile, the detained vocabularies offer specific events rather than evidence valorized through overcoding in reference to a system, adhering to the order of a heap. Aspects of her topic throw connectedness into relief in ways remote from coherence.

Similarly, for Allen Fisher: to what do we owe decoherence that is not already a familiar representation of simultaneous superposition?

Possible answers are these: the superposition of incommensurate objects interacting with their environments is now to be acknowledged as having infiltrated the quantum minutiae of our worlds, in effect. Yet on a macroscopic scale as well decoherence applies, such that there exist tenuous reciprocating influences between objects or systems and their environments.

So in this way chaotic poetic objects may be seen to be self-monitoring situations. This would seem especially true of Fisher’s insistence that poetic equivalents of reciprocating influence be hard-wired in time-space objects.

Thinking of this, it is tempting to hypothesize that Fisher sustains a poetics in which a lexical farrago allows forsensitized science and brute social science. I wonder whether I believe this. I wonder whether I believe this now that I have reread *Sojourns*.¹

“The Crowd,”² however, does represent Allen Fisher’s own sensitized cognition articulating the taxonomy of facture in Cy Twombly’s painting through the instrumentality of science.

Written a few years ago, his piece does not take cognizance of my own articles. (In a gloss that decorum requires be more properly delivered after – not before – Fisher appears here, I shall say that of my writings on Twombly, the earliest came about on the occasion of “Fifty Days at Iliam,” 1978, on its debut at the Dia Foundation in New York to coincide with the Twombly retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1979, for which Roland Barthes had written the catalogue; the most recent, “Narrating the Hand,” considers work by him and by Mary Kelly in a comparative study of writing as a developmental set of motor and cognitive skills assumed by both him and Kelly to be the basis of language acquisition.)

And what Fisher and I independently realize is that the deliberative semantics informing Twombly’s mark is posited on something other than optical twittering and, rather, “is factured exactly,” to quote him on this.

Even so, cognitive science is an instrumentality too restrictive for Allen Fisher’s poetics, which refers to and samples thematic predictive functions from ecology to quantum mechanics, and derives much of its poetic matter from these realities as a language of thought. Or rather, as languages of thought, which, superposed, animate each other in the process, or as he says, “Collage can be defined as more than one plane of reality presented in one plane of reality, a kind of cubist enterprise...a range of realities that overlap, sometimes blur into each other, sometimes erase one over the other, sometimes crowd-out the previous instant...” Admirable is his incessant investigation of blur, erasure, crowd-out and other unkempt structures not found in handbooks devoted to literary form.

Admirable in both Allen Fisher and Karen Mac Cormack’s writings is that there is not the manifestation of discourse for its own ironic sake.

Marjorie Welsh

¹ *Sojourns*, by Allen Fisher, fully online at: <http://www.wildhoneypress.com> – ed.

² “The Crowd,” part 3 of Fisher’s essay “Decoherence & crowd-out”; available at <http://www.poetics.yorku.ca>. – ed.

Matt Hart

the dangers of synthetic vernaculars

youse cd stahht sumwere 'n
looze breaff sso t' polise wd
uv panoply, slag. redundancy
of feedback won't play out.

Pre-event respondents

"O, come on, you know that one"

split. rapture is pencil lead fractured, unhappy.
an american finds voice distracted, unhappy.
an english is faced by words, systems with no
precedent but random matter, arbitrary
matter & never a purely anglo matter.
what? elsewhere, in the same reader,
it's the only card worth carrying.

...

the barometer drops northumbrian
after 1945 english poetry seemed to go on
some inherent horizon

idiom, form simply never happened
never technique english as ever
only technique gives us access

...

the barometer drops northumbrian,
notes some inherent horizon; idiom,
that constant poetry since briggflatts,
democratic, some of it: loyalty and incest.

...

split. rapture is pencil lead fractured, unhappy.
the american finds voice distracted, unhappy.
the english is faced by words, systems
with no precedent but random matter.
how do you get to be northern, unhappy?

poetry, that sell out, elsewhere.
it's the only card worth carrying.

Pre-event respondents

major breakthrough at easter

critic:
christ is crisis
etymology 'f
the handes i
hv no scriptyr.
am awl lone
herero ideolecht
me be celtic
licht lick licht
like like licked
light

pretend pentecost

licht:
all flaming
head hand's
story answer
t' glangwuage
'f air miles
lift lift lift
lift lift lift
sky sky sky
sky sky sky
light

after erik returns from calvary, progress

all:
white wicht blight
west philadelphia
orange hill
is unstill
anamnesia do
this in anamne
sia of me
my me me
me me all
wight

Pre-event respondents

Wrong'un: A Pre-event Response to PhillyTalks 19

1. A problem.

Consciously, in a rush of reference and aspiration, Karen Mac Cormack and Allen Fisher's exchange raises one of those hardy perennials of aesthetic debate. It's a problem so persistent that we can easily lose touch with its many names. Call it, using Mallarmé's title, the "demon of analogy." Or resort to a more conventional rhyme and talk about the "problem of homology." Phrase it as a question, then rephrase through specific example: At what point does the relationship between two putatively separate fields of knowledge escape metaphor? When is such a relationship not reductive? Consider what weight to put on the words "as if" in the following phrases from Karen Mac Cormack:

To write a work structured not as an architectural blueprint but as if exploring an architectural surround (known or unknown?) length of a line or sentence concurrent with number of steps toward a wall, punctuation as door or window perhaps . . . to write as one would explore a city, so a map would produce numerous routes of numerous lines of a poem (from Implexures, quoted in PT19, p. 2).

Here's that question again, described by Fisher as a problem of disciplinarity that, in his terms, defines the horizon of aesthetics itself:

One of the understandings from what we've been exchanging is that specialist practice is secondary to aesthetic necessity, and that any specialist practice needs interaction, however framed or broken, with another practice and more. Of course, once we grab aesthetics as a requirement, but not a precedent nor a simple outcome for active consciousness, the momenergy, subsequent on the impertinent, imperfect fit, becomes the wonderful ... (Fisher, PT19, p. 18)

The implication here is that "specialist practice" not only "needs interaction . . . with another practice and more" but that such interactions define "aesthetic necessity." Mac Cormack, whose interest in the poetics of architecture shapes much of the poets' exchange, stresses that it is not only interaction that needs emphasis, but the irreducible multiplicity of the "singular": "[T]he more I consider these issues the more I think in terms of the plural. 'Architecture' is no more an homogenous given than 'language' is, yet both are too often taken for granted in the discussions to which they are central" (PT19, p. 19) No danger of that in this discussion. Here, architecture, physics and cartography are all potential forms for poetry. More than that, to the extent that poetry is a performance in the multiple dialects of multiple systems and structures, architecture, physics and cartography are potential forms of poetry.

2. Parallel lines; or, How did we get here, so fast?

Deformation occurs when parallel lines in a body remain parallel, but are relatively displaced in a direction parallel to themselves. Contact usually includes a tendency to slide over each other (Fisher, from Sojourns, quoted in PT19, p. 6).

Could parallel lines, here, stand for disciplinary "fields"—those fantastically discrete areas of enquiry, all going in the universal direction of truth, but never or rarely touching? Reading these poets, we learn quickly to avoid the fictions of parallelism, learn to see and examine the deformation of the singular. This involves, yes, a certain attitude to language: "'Meaning' and the weather both change. Why an insistence on the static as a given, in what is anything but a stable environment?"³ Here's the opening to the third stanza of Fisher's "Winging Step," published in the April 2000 issue of Jacket magazine:

Tendency to perceive connected regions
uniform image properties
different from the neutron trap

³ Karen Mac Cormack, Interview with Stephen Cain, Queen Street Quarterly, Vol. 3, No. 4, Winter 2000. 53-61. Quoted from the online text of this interview at <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/maccormack/interview.html>.

Pre-event respondents

luminance, colour, texture,
motion and disparity
stops responses
adapts, but retinal blood not
perceived sees what she expects
experience on the basis of edge information
lost focus, reception dependence
shape largely invariant over similarity transformations
underlie internal representation
conscious perception of texture segregation
requires attention
suggests expectation
as an important component of inattention's blindness.⁴

We can read these lines as medical description and diagnosis. There might be a patient here ("but retinal blood not / perceived sees what she expects"), deep in the language that signals a future without "edge information," "texture segregations"—a future newly dependent on "internal representation." Or blindness might be metaphor, not referent. Fisher writes, after all, of "inattention's blindness." Blindness, then, is a property of "inattention" and "expectation." The patient, losing her sight, has a "tendency to perceive connected regions," to join the dots and fill-in those spaces where sensory expectation is thwarted by sensory degradation. But the patient is not a person, or not singularly so. She is rather a mobile epistemological barometer: a weather-vane for a way of seeing the world, not seeing the world. The pathology of blindness is, here, a complex metaphor for our tendency to pursue connections under the aegis of expectation. This is millennial avant-garde poetics: "interaction" is an engine of newness, not comfort; difference, not identity.

This practice has its problems, not least of them the seeming necessity of polymathia—which looms as large in this exchange as it does, for instance, in the bibliophilia of a modernist like Hugh MacDiarmid. The poets' exchange suggests that "interaction" entails the deformation of mastery, rather than the mastery of multiple forms.⁵ And yet their sheer range of reference and quotation raises, for this reader at least, the question of complexity as a problem in literary history. What price another drop-quotation? "We may need to pull out some texts already written, to help new readers to this get some it [sic]" (Fisher, PT19, p. 3). Unanswered questions and malformed connections are inevitable:

Just as there is no universality of language there's no 'universality' of architecture, i.e. 'architecture' should not be construed as a blanket term anymore than 'poetry' is some singular, neutral 'form' . . . how this does or doesn't work re: quantum mechanics I don't know-thoughts on this? (Mac Cormack, PT19, p. 24)

I'm also full of questions. Indeed, quantum mechanics seems most relevant to this argument precisely because it admits the necessity of uncertainty. Biology, memory and pattern are other poetic analogues, and not for some synaesthetic "correspondence"—as Baudelaire has it in his famous poem of that name—but because (as we learn in Fisher's second letter) they lead us to appreciate the necessity of error: "pattern is an overlay on disparate elements / how many // desperation's continual distribution of complexities / singular and present" (Mac Cormack, from Straw Cupid, quoted in PT19, p.6).

3. Just be wrong.

I want to end by emphasizing error. I began with the many ways of talking about a problem of metaphor or homology: When one writes a poem that employs the language of chaotic physics (e.g., Fisher's Brixton Fractals), how does one avoid identifying poetry with physics, telling us little about either? It seems we must go in the direction of wrongness, a *via mismatchia*, as in this comment from Fisher: "This sounds eclectic, but that's simply

⁴ Allen Fisher, "Winging Step," in Jacket 11, April 2000. Available online at <http://www.jacket.zip.com.au/jacket11/fisher-allen.html>

⁵ Apologies to Houston Baker, who invented this language, in a very different context, in his book Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: a vernacular theory (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1984).

Pre-event respondents

an illusion. The architecture of the micro-cellular spacetime, the impossibility of personal, human perception of part of the activity and the reliance therefore on prediction, expectation, confidence and the reliance, always unnamed and hardly ever signalled, of mistake" (PT19, p. 3). As I understand it, "mistake," is central to the vision of poetry outlined in this exchange: the brilliant but erroneous analogies through which one makes a path in the intellectual forest (a stanza is not a room, after all). The grand mistake is the monomania of "crowd-out"—of hacking-away, not hacking-through, those nuggets of difference and confusion that define aesthetic objects.⁶ The theoretical road for this sort of journey might be found, these poets argue, in analyses like Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between a "map" and a "tracing": "The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged 'competence'" (Deleuze and Guattari, quoted by Fisher, PT19, p. 20).

But there's one more mistake at issue. And Mac Cormack's poetry describes it quite brilliantly. Here's the opening to "At Issue III," a poem you can find in full via the Electronic Poetry Center:

Putting shape into getting without perfect in a culture that doesn't think, pumps up, the two traits go at the face of rate themselves, cropped by impasse, express your monochromatics from within, discover it blushes, reduce the signs to surface, sharing space in a new high-tech fabric, the pale face extra - prevent every day year after year, retreat returns by filling out advance notice, since seeing is oxygen more supple, sways, just take graceful, tilt feature-controls are big, stable rattles accept different speeds sing, sprawl-moguls seized a story, raking in celebrity, heat-activated genre, hands full turned, loops removable gusseted, postpone television, revelations, introspection, an assemblage not incidentally imposed, crossover success, so many boxes yet smashes toward toward[. . .]

Here's a poem that takes on the central problematic of what Fisher calls "a syntactic or paratactic continuity that provides a ground for demonstration of sudden change" (PT19, p. 12). Despite the absence of periods, the poem's clauses are paratactic. Though "putting shape" and "pumps up" are both redolent of the gym, any hypotactic relation soon wanes. (It's possible that "tilt feature-controls are big, stable rattles accept different speeds sing" still plays on the image and argot work-out machines, but I won't bet on it.) The poem therefore works, as in the familiar definition of New Sentence writing, by exploiting a disrupted relationship between figural and syntactic continuity. The poetic unit here, sure, is the phrase, not the sentence; but we're all familiar with such play and take great pleasure in the poem's trumping of its own tropes: "express your monochromatics from within, discover it blushes . . . the pale face extra." But the poem is wiser than this description allows. Here's real concern with the homology between its back-and-forth parataxis and the media-space it critiques and reconstructs: "postpone television, revelations, introspection, an assemblage, not incidentally imposed, crossover success. . ." Could Implexures, or WADDLE, be a "crossover success," their endless will-to-interact end up mimicking the noisesome eclecticism of the "sprawl-mogul"? The answer suggested by PhillyTalks 19 is a cautious "no," so long as we keep our eye on error. So long as we write from the house of mistake.

Matt Hart

⁶ "Singularity in the sense proposed here involves an over centralised view of artistic production. This over-centralised view, derived from the crowd-out of semiotic analysis, can only provide an incomplete analysis of material production. To provide a fuller analysis of practice it is necessary to include pragmatic description with semiotic analysis." Allen Fisher, "The Crowd," (a paper that "proposes to bring comprehension of momentum and energy into understanding through a discussion of the graphic work of Cy Twombly") at <http://www.poetics.yorku.ca/>.