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REVIEWS & PRESS

Charles Bernstein & David Antin. *A Conversation with David Antin*. Granary Books, 2001.

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Andrews, David. "Review of *A Conversation with David Antin*." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 22.3 (2002): 172.

An e-mail interview that outgrew its original forum (i.e., *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*), *A Conversation with David Antin* is an illuminating exploration of the aesthetic philosophy behind David Antin's "talk" poems. Prompted by his distinguished straight man, the poet and critic Charles Bernstein, Antin first limns his early life and poetry. Particularly interesting in this regard are the samples of Antin's early work solicited by Bernstein. Anyone familiar with Antin's seminal *Talking* (1972) will be impressed by how far this major poet has come—and how ordinary, albeit skillful, his work once was. Most crucially, Antin discusses the Wittgensteinian imperatives that led him away from even the most radical poetry of his day toward "a poetics of talking as a poetics of thinking." For Antin, poetry is a tool. The poet is a pragmatist who innovates not for commercial or avant-garde purposes but because he has "to get something done and there's no tool that will do the job." That said, perhaps the book's greatest delight is the way it immerses its reader in an erudite interplay that, as Antin notes, itself resembles a talk poem. Hence the dialogue is hardly Socratic; it never imparts the sense that either interlocutor is moving the other toward trap or truth. Indeed, much of the book consists of digressions from the main topic. The conversation is interlarded with family anecdotes, memories of the New York art world of the sixties and seventies, samples of Bernstein's poetry, theorization about classical music, dream narratives, etc. This digressive texture is reinforced by "Album Notes," a sequence of Antin-family photographs that follows the interview. I found this section, and Antin's captions, anticlimactic after the excitement of the conversation. Still, if this constitutes a defect, it is a minor one.

Bergvall, Caroline. "A Form of Address: Caroline Bergvall Reviews *A Conversation with David Antin*, by David Antin and Charles Bernstein." *Jacket Magazine* 22 (May 2003).

Bernstein says a lot for the kind of framing which David Antin has envisaged for his poetry for the last thirty years and for the kind of situation and activity he advocates for the regeneration

of poetic practice. Nothing, barring prior knowledge, would have me believe that this engineer-like, explorer-like, performer-like with-assistant performs being a poet very convincingly. If anything most of its visual signs links the portrait by association with shots taken in situ of site-artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson, Allan Kaprow. This visual resonance with artists whose work is noteworthy for their highly critical stance towards the arts establishment and the artistic product is noteworthy.

At entry, the poet's panoply emphasizes situation, physical stance, equipment, friendship, non-studio based self-representation. Rather than pens, tables, typewriters, windows, books, booze, solitude. Interestingly, the stance also bears a passing resemblance to the picture taken of Foucault, speaking into a megaphone (that favoured marker of the agitator's loud mouth), which graces the cover for his posthumously published series of lectures *Fearless Speech*. In which, and of interest to our purpose, Foucault discusses the correspondence between speaking and the implied identity of the speaker in Greek tragedy and in the evolving contexts of Greek democracy. The one who takes on the act of public speaking does so as an act of criticism (or more precisely, truth-telling), and does so through the right (and duty) conceded by citizenship or social status. This status entails that right.

The expectation between a speaker's social or professional position and their public activities does not today have a similar concordance, and one would furthermore be rather hard pressed to define the bounds of the agora in singular fashion. Yet one can find a remnant which largely holds sway in the performative value placed on identity. Its curse as much as its pronounced guarantee. To do what one is or be what one does. A cook cooks, etc. Or, more likely, this cook cooks. To be expected to do what one is supposed to be. The representation (or active not-representation) of the writer's body occupies such a performative location. The body as possessed by the knowledge of writing becomes a writer's body, part of the writing, a synecdochic body. Rimbaud's elbow, Virginia Woolf's eyelids, Benjamin's glasses, Albiach's recluse body. Enjoy this: "The body is thin, undersized almost, childish breasts still, red and pale-pink make-up. And the clothes, the clothes that might make people laugh, but don't. I can see it's all there. All there, but nothing yet done. I can see it in the eyes, all there already in the eyes. I want to write." (Marguerite Duras, on a photo of herself at fifteen).

In this context, the photographic inclination towards representing hilarity of a Schwitters or of a Cage (for instance) confirm grave taxonomic difficulties. It is similarly significant that Foucault the historian and Antin the poet are represented and represent themselves (as activist, as technical controller), and by extension what they do, in ways which not only extend but largely contravene the more scholarly or literary personae one still mostly and conventionally likes to reserve (and preserve) for these two cultural actants. Such stances challenge what a poet is and by implication what poetry might be. The foolhardy yet profound assumption is that both the identity and its activity are up for grabs. The poet is excised socially, largely marginalized culturally, writes in a closet and for a closet-readership. The exploratory character of experimental poetry has become unbearable (if inescapable) and the poet's revolutionary mantle untenable (and as it stands, unenviable). One way out is to open the door and look around. Many of the initial exchanges between Bernstein and Antin concern these

preoccupations and locate Antin's affiliations through these. His dissatisfaction with poetry is intimately interwoven with the many affirmations and tactical statements of the latter part of the twentieth century's experimental and modern arts. Time and time again their Conversation comes back to the question of form, as artistic construct and as social identification.

"Like my close friends, I was interested in the widest range of poetries in the broadest term of poetry" (48). Through the detail of friendships that cover much of the amazing hubbub of New York's performance and arts crowds from the 1960s onwards, Antin discusses the dilemmas which led him to move early on away from composing a written poetry, concerned with the stylistic obsessions inherent to writing poetry, a move from a poetry one can therefore also perform to occasion, after the fact, to one which finds its prime manifestation neither on the page nor in the act of reading or recitation, but in the act of talking. From then on, from 1971 and *Talking at Pomona* on, most of Antin's work rests on talking poetry out of the expert corners of textualist environments.

A poet should stand and poetry should talk. Or perhaps one could say, it is when poetry talks that the poet stands, in the doing of thinking, "thinking as act, as activity" (47). The talking of poetry becomes a process of thinking aloud which is an experiential and intensely social (and sociable) activity. It is once poetry stops writing and becomes less of an art-language, less of a salon (or specialist) -speak and more of a responsive language practice that the poet can use their role (and knowledge) to talk to (situations and people). For Antin, the moment of a talking (as informed yet informal public speaking), attuned to its context and its audience, both open and given over to the surprise of taking place, is the moment of the poem. Readiness is its leit-motiv and its demand. What one surrenders to.

"Readiness is all. If I make a slip of the tongue, I can't erase it, though I can correct it publicly if I catch it. But then the audience may not catch it either" (54). As such, Antin's "extended solos," as Bernstein puts it, are intimately linked to the aesthetics of attentiveness and improvisation, and to an extent chance, much at work in American arts of the late 20th century, which promotes an art in life, an art of detailed responsiveness and a valuing of the banal, the habitual, the background noise. Cage, MacLow, Higgins, 60s happenings are obviously discussed, some of the Surrealists' deambulations are mentioned, as is Stein's intense adherence to a vernacular which favours plain-speaking nowness. Antin's emphasis on non-rhapsodic vocalization and prosaic textualisation shows clear affinity with this line of American modernism. Wordsworth's well-known arguments for a poetry which speaks 'the language really spoken by men' is mentioned by Bernstein. Closer to Antin, I'm reminded of O'Hara's "Personism" manifesto for a poetry which uses the poem in a wish to establish direct address: "the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages."

It is clear from this that Antin's work has developed across, rather than against, forms of inscriptiveness ("presentational formats"), across oral and written forms of poetry. The way he distinguishes "oral" as procedures for remembering and "literal" (rather than literate, historically too narrow) for procedures of recording and spatializing, and his interest in their many subtle forms of coincidentally, shows a non-hierarchical approach to questions of orality

and literacy. At any rate, at a time when technological relays, presence by proxy, by broadcast recording and live editing add themselves to print as acceptable modes of inscription, and demand an increasingly complex awareness of networked space, of multi-dimensional time, of intimate crossings and co-extensiveness to figure out the daily handlings of our communication and knowledge environments, the question as to what is oral (as physical pronouncement, verbalized event, referential memorizations, temporal relayings) and what is written (as textual trace, spatial inscription, audio-visual archiving and editing of language events) is no longer clear-cut, if ever it was.

In this sense, one could say that the priority still given to "written" poetry, as in published and of a particular kind of literary import, is more a question of cultural value and of dictated identity than one of intrinsic formal efficacy. It makes sense to consider this traffic between 'oral' and 'literal' as sitting not so much within the historic concept of literature as within the larger frame of these emerging social illiteracies. They are transforming the stakes of what is written (textualised, recorded) in the written arts: what is it one inscribes and why and for whom. This is bound to continue to inform developments within the poetic, notably with regards to readerships and the relationship between physicality (haptic, embodied) and textuality, as currently partially indicated by digital and programmable poetics. Antin's talk-poetry and the context he outlines for it (through his work and throughout this Conversation), testifies to his investment in this kind of thinking, as do of course some of Bernstein's pieces and critical reflections (notably the editorial preface for his *Close Listening*, his notions of "immemorability" and of "anoriginality", his interest in social discourses for poetry, his radiowork). It is no real surprise then, that the Conversation of this book, far from being the transcription of a face-to-face, constitutes in fact the unedited result of a long email exchange, which took place over the course of four months on Antin's invitation. Email being often thought of as lodging squarely between informal address and the epistolary form, "I can reproduce speaking when I compose like this," its accepted displacement and doubleness harks straight back to the underlying concerns of this book. Doubling up to allow for a reflection on poetic histories and the social exchanges inscribed within them.

Of course, what is nonetheless absent/ed from this decision of using email is the face-to-face, what facing (as seeing and being seen) does to conversing, and by extension, to thinking-with. Ironically, this also reproduces the complicated premises of Antin's work. Most readers are familiar with his work not for having heard it/him, but primarily for having read the books of revisited talk-poems he's published. And the respiratory syntax he's developed for these highlights similarly poetry's endlessly compromised relation to its spoken or sounded spheres of activity. "I think I mostly tried to follow the pulse of the speaking, in whatever way I seemed to understand that. But I also seemed to react to the way this pulse could be most clearly represented on a page, which is a different thing than literal copying of the breaks of my voice" (63). Antin's approach to the speaking as pulse (and not as "breaks" of voice) emphasizes the writing process as one which dematerializes the speaking process and stylizes it. And indeed, at first glance, the visually unwavering regularity of the Antin phrasing is closer to a heart-beat or a bass-line than to the unevenness inherent to speaking (what of its silences, hesitations, stumblings, coughings, and surrounding events). Furthermore, he uses the recorded talks as an

opportunity to expand on each talk, rather than to "simply" copy them out. Here the writing follows and precedes a talking that it is both transcribing and creating.

It is difficult not to think of the way this process stretches back to Western literacy's (and Western poetry's) founding philosophical dilemma about writing, Plato writing down the Socratic dialogues as much to circulate the (assumed) spoken teachings as to take the opportunity to elaborate his complex shadowplay between the exteriority of writing and the interiority of speech, between the im/material durability of text and the im/material temporariness of speech that amazingly we're still grappling with. One can understand Plato's focus on this at a time when Greece was confirming its literateness yet still placing great value on the impact of its public rhetorics. What Antin wants with this, given the greatly expanded realm of literacies and re-locations sketched above, is perhaps more to do with setting up and grappling with the experience of situation and indeed, public situatedness than with disputing the legacies of a complex hierarchy.

Having found a way, through talking, to "give [him]self more room" (43), the pretext for Antin's poetic activity (what he talks about) seems to become that of investigating the shared setting of this public speaking, that of framing its utterance, and working out a template for composing in public through personal memory, thought-associations and concepts. An attempt perhaps also at identifying the purposes of this "common space" by "coming to a place with things on my mind" ("the river" 126). As he said in another early talk-poem:

the point of doing these pieces for me is that it gives me a chance by a kind of subtle but ordinary human concentration to get a sense of where you're coming from and how and to allow that sense to put some pressure on my own way of moving to bring me into somewhat closer range of you close enough to compare our ways of moving our sense with each other and in this situation i find a fundamental human act this negotiation in a common space ('tuning', 205).

Artists currently engaged in redefining artistic practice along the lines of direct address and personal interactions rather than sculptural, material (poetic) work, intrinsically see such negotiations at the root of artistic intervention. But many take it on for a different purpose: the aim of the talking is not in the talking, but mainly in the talking-back. They use the skills of art to facilitate or precipitate dialogue, exchange, that "interruptible discourse" which Antin muses over in one of his early pieces but does not himself provoke. I'm thinking particularly about the collaborative duo Things Not Worth Keeping (poet cris cheek and artist Kisten Lavers) with their Millennium Collection project, the verbal exchanges coordinated by Krzysztof Wodiczko on urban streets, Sophie Calle's Smile project in the phone booth of downtown New-York, work done by the British performance duo Lone Twin in a whole range of geographical and cultural settings, and a number of other projects where various models of social interaction are used, through verbal as well as technological and physical means, as the aim and end of the artistic proposition.

Antin's sense that "the serious discourses of our culture took place in texts" (62) (he means

published texts), belies that he remains still somewhat closer to projects in which verbal interaction between writer and audience (not passers-by) and the setting of the piece, are generative of a publishable text, rather than of a situation. A talk-poem becomes a poem because it falls within the cultural capital of poetry. Seen in light of Antin's insistence on the shared moment of the talk-poem, both this ultimate valuing of publishing and the monologic dimension of Antin's work can seem initially troubling, and indeed trouble much of this Conversation. Although there is an undeniable sense of seeking a "tuning" between speaker and listeners, the onus is clearly on a situation which prioritizes the making of a speaker for whom "my image of audience is that it's a kind of equivalent of me. Equal but different" (56).

As different as talking is to listening. A scriptive assumption is located in the physical presence. The audience is present in this attentiveness. There is silence, but there is also critical mass at the point of nerve, to stand in front of and talk (not in order to write, but in order to talk). When someone is there explicitly to listen. Bernstein: "it is crucial to note that your talk poems are not conversations, except in the sense of conversations with yourself" (57).

Is this a talking which is a talking to itself, or a talking which comes back to the speaker via the listener. A talking in which the listener is not only witness but also very directly provides a focus, a "tuning," a specific ear: who is listening. The kind of concentration Antin creates through the conflation device of the talk-poem and the contract established between audience and speaker enables him to engage in an activity which provides patterns of thinking, and perhaps behaving, through talking, through listening. "There is a sense in which I consider them as conversational, not in the literal dialogic sense of actual conversation, but in the kind of space within which conversation exists" (59). Is this a contract which relies on the non-participatory audience of the poetry-reading or the lecture's didactic silence or the story-teller's intimate yet authoritative platform, or any, or all of these? Is the "-poem" part of the "talk-" there to guarantee the audience's silence or to force up a sense that poetry can "talk?" The premise for each talk being an invitation, to be invited into, it stipulates an insistence on a social, rather than a poetic, starting-point. Even if the end-point is as much a poetic product as a process.

But is it? Perhaps something else is also at work here. Perhaps one can think of it as a conceptual form of story-telling. Or perhaps it is all coming back to teaching. In the pre-modern sense of poetry as providing learning, and reminding of learning, as much as in the postmodern sense of art as developing critical awareness and encouraging non-specialist involvement. The fact that Antin creates a talk-poetry which is argumentative and deliberative, and rests on thematics that broadly have to do with social and cultural placing, connects up with this. And shows the extent to which rhetorical and performative concerns are embedded in the way he has structured his work from a desire to widen poetry's sphere of resonance and influence. Anecdotes around family history, friendships, persons met, situations encountered, provide fodder for deliberations on ways of behaving, seamlessly become questions of definition between memory and memory loss, remembering and memorizing, temporality and temporariness, science and art, what is a cultural expert, what is knowledge, deliberations of personal, autobiographical and more philosophical nature weave themselves into the talking

work, make it up.

The teaching is in the conditions set for the composition-reception of work, and in the material handled and proposed. Perhaps also in the very fact of the facing, which rests on personal and personified availability (potential interruptability). Teaching in the sense of 'the care of the soul', by way of example, the cultural and intellectual integrity to let oneself be seen and tested by situations and others. And teaching in the sense that Cage means it when, as quoted by Retallack in that other inspiring conversational book, her *Musicage*, he conflates composition, teaching and conversation: "The role of the composer is other than it was. Teaching, too, is no longer transmission of a body of useful information, but's conversation, alone, together, whether in a place appointed or not in that place" (Preface, xiii).

This evolving correspondence between talking, teaching and performative identity in the creation of Antin's public (witnessed) composition process seems to me announced at entry by Bernstein when he addresses Antin as one of his two "favourite wandering poets." This carries all sorts of possible connotations and contradictory resonances: an allusion to the wandering teachings of the Sophists, their sense of citizenry, their enjoyment of language and of politics, their talking for cash and their knowledge of rhetorical strings for which they were both much admired and a source of suspicion, at the other extreme, the exilic figure of the Wandering Jew, that archetypal diasporic figure of European Romanticism and its anti-Semitism, which chillingly anticipates the twentieth century's waves of Jewish exodus to America, perhaps Antin's family's trajectory, perhaps Bernstein's, finally, it has an echo of the poetic and philosophic traditions of the poet-scholars, griots, thinkers, troubadours, early scientists, intermittently attached to benefactors,.... Talking provides knowledge on the move, memory on the go, attaching itself to specific listeners, specific topicalities, on invitation. Seeking through these situations to capture and create an understanding of the moment, of the space of address, of the audiences' concerns, combining autobiographical events and speculative thoughts as the standing-ground for the unpredictability of "thinking while talking."

The last section of the book seems curiously disconnected from the Conversation proper. Entitled "Album Notes" it is, as its title suggests, a series of approx. 20 personal snapshots with apposed commentary, all broadly organized according to a fairly straightforward, not to say unreconstructed sense of chronology. The section starts with a portrait of Antin as a four-year old, continues with family and performance shots and ends with a portrait of his three-year old grand-son. Where the question of the gender of talking (who talks or what talks) has not been discussed in the Conversation, nor have I seen much of it addressed in the books, it is interesting how the gendering of lineage does assert itself through the innocuous ordering of photographic documentation. Strangely enough, this autobiographic and historicizing narrative also gives the lie to the complex ways in which Antin verbally uses personal material as a premise for exposition rather than for assertion. Here he displays a very peculiar and even surprising sense of compliance and trust in the photographic that it is telling a my-story. The biographic image is full of all sorts of myths and for this reason, and at a glance, it is difficult to see what kind of identity performance Antin's photo-album means to play here. The visual artist Christian Boltanski's early work was based on playing out the truth-value of the photograph's

autobiographic fiction. Likewise, the poet Anne Tardos embeds the sociology of the family snap into her textual material to create visual and textual maskings.

Perhaps it works more like "the author's treat to himself" which Barthes uses to justify the photo-comments which open his *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes. Given more scope, many other interesting points could be made about this. On contemporary's writers' reluctant fascination yet frequently fascinated and uncritical engagement with their own genealogical photographic traces. On the necessarily very different value placed on the photographic document by performance artists (whose practice is based on inbuilt ephemerality and dispersed spectacularity) and by writers (whose material inscriptiveness defies temporal structures and physiology). One would find at work in that difference much that links back to Antin's concourse with both environments, much that confirm the depth of his ambivalent yet also productive work as a poet.

Notwithstanding the ironies of this section, tucked away as it is at the end of the book, the open and casually erudite nature of the rest of *A Conversation*, the way these two poets correspond and exchange ideas, the intimacies of a situation which nevertheless knows it is staging itself for other, future contexts, makes for an enlightening book. Not least because it provides the dialogic and respondent form not present in Antin's talks. In this is its deeper interest and excitement. In the "between," in the "with." The form itself, a stretch between two, provides a lead-in to the essential and to some extent unsolvable questions: through the particulars offered by the poets, what is the nature of poetic engagement, where can it be accounted for, what is the function of poetic exchange. And what this availability says about the writers' relation to various situations of exchange. Precisely because a conversation digs in and functions by way of responses and challenges rather than as address, because it is about revisiting knowledge and thought-processes in dialogue, it underpins the place social communication (email as one) occupies for poetic practice.

Certainly this also depends on the way the conversant view the act of conversing itself in relation to their own project. Deleuze, master of the monovocal collaborative text, famously transforms his interviews with Claire Parnet into meditations on the revolutionary potential of conversation (dialogues). Brathwaite incorporates both Nathaniel Mackey and audience questions into the much expanded and politicized visual feat of his *Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey*. Retallack leaves the tape on, registering the many micro-details of her years of recorded conversations with John Cage. Between Bernstein and Antin, the edges are maintained, the friendly reliefs accentuated by their long expository replies. In all of these, there is a particular kind of optimism and worldliness. There's a culturally generous penchant, an awareness of shared commitment and curiosity at the source of such shop-talks. In the informal and inquisitive drawing out of the exchange which carries with it the patient, surprising, act of turning towards, of speaking to someone and of realizing that one is (or not) speaking, listening: identified, witnessed, shared. Which is the art of knowing how to be more than one even as one chooses to call oneself a poet.

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College of Arts and Associate Writer at Cardiff University. Her critical work is chiefly concerned with bilingualism and cross-media forms of writing. Her books include *Eclat* (1996) and *GoanAtom, 1: Doll* (2001). *GoanAtom* is excerpted and also reviewed in *Jacket 12*. Other work has been featured in magazines and anthologies, both in the UK and North America. She has collaborated on a number of performances and installations, most recently at the South London Gallery, Sept. 2002. Some of her work is available on the web, notably at:

<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bergvall/>.

Judith Hoffberg, "Review of *A Conversation with David Antin* by David Antin and Charles Bernstein, with *Album Notes* by David Antin." *Umbrella Magazine* 25.1 (April 2002).

A Conversation with David Antin by David Antin and Charles Bernstein, with *Album Notes* by David Antin (New York, Granary Books, 2002) is a monument to catching David Antin talking about his life, rather than the events that create a "talking" and this is an important book to add to one's understanding of this poet, critic, performance artist and polymath. Now a Getty Scholar, Antin's poetry is spoken, transcribed and only then does it become a written poem. But conversations are rich, engrossing and full of ideas with Antin, and to pick Charles Bernstein to go at it with him was a perfect match. The book is a great read, whether you know the protagonists or not, and is a result of an e-mail conversation back and forth lasting up to four months, which created not an article, but a book of uncut dialogue. And it is a history of the last half of the 20th century not only through poetry, but through culture, the culture of New York, the culture of the West Coast, the culture of two intelligent writers/ readers/ consumers of culture who coalesce into conversing as an art form.

The second text, *Album Notes*, is a kind of scrapbook of photographs from Antin's life with extended annotations, verbal elaborations of the pictures, which together, add further dimension to the work of a writer and thinker which Jerry Rothenberg has termed "as important a poet as we've got in America." Antin may think he is out of synch with what is going on, but he is much more prescient than most cultured people I know, and he offers us so much in this wonderful book which should be a treat for all! Buy two and give one as a gift.