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REVIEWS & PRESS

Jackson Mac Low. *Doings: Assorted Performance Pieces 1955–2000*. Granary Books, 2005.

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Goldsmith, Kenneth. "The King of Boredom." *The Brooklyn Rail* 40.

A great big book of graphical scores, sound poems and experimental performative texts arrived in my mailbox recently. *Doings* by Jackson Mac Low (1922- 2004) is a massive—and massively important—tome for anyone interested in the history of 20th innovative poetry. Gorgeously printed with fold-out graphic scores and a CD of previously unavailable sound poems, this book is another essential piece in the large, rich puzzle that was the life of Mac Low.

Jackson Mac Low began writing experimental poems as early as 1938 but didn't publish until 1966 with a chapbook published by Dick Higgins' Something Else Press, *The Twin Plays* (available as a PDF on ubu.com). Over the years he was aligned at various times with The New York School of composers, John Cage, Fluxus, The Living Theatre, anti-war movements, Buddhism, Conceptual Art and the Text-Sound movement of the 1970s. But it wasn't until he was reclaimed by the Language Poets in the mid-70s that Mac Low found his true milieu in the fractured linguistic landscape and the leftist politics of those younger poets.

I didn't meet Jackson until the early 90's when I began working with vocalist Joan La Barbara. By that time, his legendary didacticism had mellowed and his glowing sense of humor rose to the front. We spent many Saturday afternoons at the Ear Inn poetry series gently teasing each other and laughing. His work, too, got funnier. Although my own work never went in aleatory directions, our practice shares one big attribute: boredom.

Jackson Mac Low was a writer who thrived on the notion of boredom as though the inexorable boredom is the very core of life. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. As a matter of fact, I've called myself the most boring writer that ever lived, but when I think about it, Jackson was boring in a completely different way than I am. He was boring in a way that I call boring boring; as opposed to the general tendency today toward the unboring boring. I've written elsewhere: "John Cage said, 'If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.'" He's right: there's

a certain kind of unborin boredom that's fascinating, engrossing, transcendent, and downright sexy. And then there's the other kind of boring: let's call it boring boring. Boring boring is a client meeting; boring boring is having to endure someone's self-indulgent poetry reading; boring boring is watching a toddler for an afternoon; boring boring is the seder at Aunt Fanny's. Boring boring is being somewhere we don't want to be; boring boring is doing something we don't want to do.' Jackson was the king of boring boring.

There were many stories about Jackson's famous ability to bore. My favorite one comes from a David Antin talk piece where he describes an anti-war poetry reading where Jackson went on and on, refusing to stop until the auditorium—was it the Fillmore East?—was emptied, taking the air out of that specific anti-war event.

Never mind. Jackson and his generation had a mandate to be boring. I recall attending a sound poetry festival in Miami Beach along with Jackson in the early 90's. We were all put up in a Deco hotel right on South Beach, which was just starting to take off around that time. I'll never forget the sight of Jackson decamped under an umbrella on the beach, his skin as white as the sand, his then-aged body slathered with Coppertone, watching intently as the parade of muscle-boys, hard-bodied gays and topless supermodels passed before him, our most important living innovative poet. As the sun started to sink and we walked back to the hotel, I tried to explain to him the allure of this scene: the wonderful, sexy clubs and the then-recent house music that was driving it; I tried to explain the history of disco, its democratic appeal across all classes, genders, races and sexual orientation; the allure of fashion and its liberating influence upon certain societal strictures. Jackson listened, then grimaced and spat, "Dance music is the music of the military. When everyone is forced to move in time together, it's absolute fascism." I tried to respond, but his mind was made up.

When I got back to the hotel room, I threw myself on the bed and began channel-surfing. Somewhere I stopped on a rebroadcast of a 1950s Lawrence Welk show. It was awful: stiff men with horn-rimmed glasses and greasy hair playing music that was really—even with Space Age Bachelor Pad revisionism—unsalvageable. Then in a flash, it all made sense. In Jackson's day, this was what passed for popular culture. It was unbearably stupid, wrapping its boredom in the guise of "entertainment" and suddenly it occurred to me that in his day, Jackson was right. A powerful way to combat such crap was to do the opposite of it, to be purposely boring. Today, of course, popular culture is infinitely more sophisticated and almost everyone creating ads has a degree in semiotics, but it's important to remember that pop wasn't always as fascinating and complex as it is today.

In a recent Q&A with students at University of Pennsylvania, Al Filreis was lauding the idea of Jackson Mac Low. It was shortly after he died and I was speaking on an impromptu panel with Jena Osman and we were asked to give our opinions about Jackson. Al claimed that his students were turned on by Jackson; the students all agreed. I asked what they listened to and Al named a lengthy sound poetry piece. I looked at Al and his students—them of the MTV short-attention span generation—and knew something wasn't making sense. I pressed on. "How long was the piece, Al?" "Oh, at least 45 minutes." "Really?" "Yep, it's a great thing." "How long did you listen

for, Al?" There was a pause as he scratched his beard. "Well, um, we listened to about a five-minute excerpt." "Ah ha! Of course it was great. It was great for five minutes, not forty-five!"

I tried my hardest over the years to bore Jackson and never succeeded. He was unborable. At a reading at The Drawing Center in New York City, Jackson was in the audience. I had my great shot and I took it, reading from my book *Day*, which is nothing more than an issue of *The New York Times* retyped from start to finish. After the performance I went up to Jackson, and in a teasing manner, poked him in the ribs and said, "So, Jackson, was that boring enough for you?" He said no, that it was not boring. I admitted defeat and jokingly told him to quit picking on me and to give it up to my brand of boredom. A few days later, I checked my email and found the following in my inbox:

Dear Kenny

If you really thought I was "picking on you" the other night, you were very much mistaken.

Your performances were brilliant. You are one of the best voco-verbal performers I know. You can perform any strings of words and make them interesting. If you really wanted to be boring, however, you didn't succeed. The very brilliance of your performances made this impossible. If you really want to be boring, you'd perform your pieces as John Ashbery used to perform his wonderful poems: in a low, expressionless monotone. He, fortunately, has stopped doing that. I don't think you'd be the least bit happy in doing that. You obviously get a great deal of pleasure out of performing your pieces.

I was really agreeing with you in saying that the pieces in themselves had—not really no meaning, but more accurately, no intended meaning outside themselves. That, I thought, was why you spoke so approvingly of boredom. What you did was certainly an example of what John meant when he said, "I have nothing to say, and I am saying it."

But I think you were both wrong. I have the conviction that anything a person says—any sound any sentient being produces—is willy-nilly meaningful. And when strings of words that are also intrinsically meaningful—even though not in themselves necessarily meaningful in the sense of 'significant' or the like to many people who hear them—are spoken both rapidly and with many nuances of tone, etc., they can't help being interesting—that is, "not boring."

I think the "content" of what you said was often not interesting to me (and I think you had no wish for it to be) but your ways of saying it were.

You may have (by your lights) nothing to say, but you sure say it grand.

best wishes,

Jackson

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McSweeney, Joyelle. "Review of *Doings: Assorted Performance Pieces, 1955- 2002.*" *The Constant Critic*.

Stephen Spender may have thought (and continually!) of those who were truly great but I think pretty frequently of those who get things going. Which brings us to Jackson Mac Low's posthumous verb of a collection, *Doings*. If you and your list-servmates can drum up fifty bucks, go in on a copy. Published in workbook format with an accompanying CD, *Doings* features fascinating, often hand-drawn rule—and chance-based texts for DIY improvised performances, extensive notes for performers, as well as sidebar commentary from Mac Low about the conception or imagined execution of each piece. The CD includes performances of texts from the book, most performed by Mac Low and collaborator Anne Tardos, as well as five additional mind-boggling numbers (I direct you in particular to "5th Bluebird Asymmetry"). But because the performances are guided improvisations, there are no canonical or correct ways to perform the texts; with one other partner you can speak, sing, rattle, chirp, dance, and attend these texts into new pieces of art. So for \$50 you get more than just 264 pages of theories, scores, maps, notes, drawings, and poems—you get a body of ideas and energies that will keep multiplying and changing as it comes into contact with new materials, i.e. your life, your voice, your body, your brain, and the sound and silence all around you.

Doings is arranged chronologically, tracking Mac Low's work from the mid-fifties, when, as a young man, he wrote verbal performance texts for John Cage's experimental composition workshops, until 2002 (Mac Low died in 2004 as *Doings* was in production; Steve Clay saw the book through). At this early stage, Mac Low identified with Taoism and with Cage's Zen-derived strategies for escaping intentionality in composition. As the introduction notes,

Among these methods were the use of chance operations and the composition of works "indeterminate as to performance." These methods were designed to allow fundamental elements, such as sounds, to "be themselves" unencumbered by "personal expression, drama, psychology, and the like." Out of this effort to redistribute agency from its traditional seat—the author—to the performers and even to sound itself, came "simultaneities," texts to be read simultaneously by a number of performers in which unison, contrast, euphony and dissonance arrange according to non-intentional and unpredictable systems. Sidebars inform us as to the particular rules by which each piece was written; the texts for 21.21.29, the 5th biblical poem (for 3 simultaneous voices) the 1st biblical play were written numerically according to throws of the dice which determined the number of events (words or pauses) in a given line. The

performers themselves decide on a tempo at which to perform their various texts—say, according to pulse beats—or they may choose indeterminacy. The resulting texts look like a puzzle that does not quite cohere. For example, for line 1, voice I reads:

/ / / / / one Lord children / / / / My the / /

while, simultaneously, voice II, line 1 reads:

/ / /side:/ / / the/ / /children/ / / / / My the/ / /.

The virgules mark off silence. At first glance, any given line of these erased-looking texts may resemble the pointedly airy work of a young post-avant, but the difference is that silence in Mac Low is not the frame for musings, or a glyph for the absence of God, or the white flag of the poet's profundity, or the mark of ineffability, or even just punctuation. Instead, it's a material in itself, part of the composition, a means of organization, measurable, a site for conscientious attention to the goings on around one.

The powerful properties of silence become apparent when one listens to a performance of Mac Low's pieces—silence is the exuberant über material, the one on which all else is written, which gathers and shapes the dissonance into short-lived, quickly mutating forms. In these pieces, silence is muscular, resourceful, active. It's no wonder that Mac Low is so careful to annotate his silence, both in the texts and in the notes to these performances. He cautions, in italics, "Silences must never be hurried." If, in another piece, two readers double up on a single part, then silence should separate their performances—"one reader doubling her initial silence." It is refreshing to see such a non-drippy, non-portentous approach to silence. It is, after all, just another building material for art, albeit an exceedingly durable and flexible one.

Works from the first two decades of Mac Low's career show great variety in visual realization. Scores for performance take the form of bird-like tracks which performers can "play" in any way they wish; random letters scrawled in various sizes on index cards which performers must find a way to pronounce, pausing for the amount of time signaled by a random integers also scrawled on the card; "gathas" or mantras arranged on quadrille paper, challenging the performer to get from phoneme to phoneme while progressing one square at a time; asymmetries, in which a performance must be determined from a painting of scrambled words and syllables; a fascinating play activity in which words and actions (actions such as "SEEMING TO COME BY WING" or "GIVING FALSELY") are listed on a card and dealt out to performers for the spontaneous composition of dozens of miniplays. Most striking visually in this period is the score for "Om in a Landscape," which appears as both a casual pencil doodle and an aerial map representing a huge field full of performers. The nebular, biological or topographical nature of this image is hypnotic, while the instructions for performance place a typical emphasis on kindness and comportment:

Om in a Landscape may be performed as they see fit by any number of people who have enough good will to listen intently to each other and to everything else they hear while they

perform it and to relate with what they hear by speaking or singing or both and observing plenty of silence from time to time. Please don't make your Oms too holy-holy.

The experience of reading such instructions and the accompanying scores is absorbing, even transporting; as one tilts and rotates the page to track the writing, one can feel time and sound bend in one's own head. After some strenuous imagining, one can play the CD for an example of what a performance of such a wild text might sound like. A trippy multiplicity leaps up.

By mid-career, Mac Low developed his "vocabularies," in which he took the letters of friends' names, painstakingly generated lists of anagrams, and arranged these words in elaborate free form or gridded systems which speakers, vocalists or instrumentalists could then encounter and perform. In some cases the composition was complicated by the addition of other vocab lists or rules based on randomly generated integers. Though this form occupied Mac Low, he continued to write gridded mantras or gathas as well. Through the seventies and eighties, Mac Low's instructions for performance grew more and more complex and detailed. For most texts collected here, he stipulated the possible conversion of words or phonemes into musical notes, discussed pitch sets, suggested a variety of amplitudes and attacks performers might choose from, proposed alternative approaches to tempo and time keeping, even suggested rehearsal strategies. It is to this proliferation of suggestions and alternatives that the term "guided improvisation" truly seems to apply; as Mac Low notes in the instructions to "A Vocabulary for Vera Regina Lachmann" (1974),

Having a repertoire of such procedures [i.e. those derived in rehearsal] available may often add more (in richness and multiplicity) than it detracts from spontaneity, especially since the use of those procedures is subject to in performance choices arising out of the immediate situation, including choices to modify some of the previously worked out procedures as the moment (and/or the performer's reaction to it) demands. The later decades of Mac Low's career were marked by the striking introduction of technology into his work. For "A Vocabulary for Annie Brigitte Gilles Tardos" (1980), the wordlist was prepared by a "computer printout of random groups of entries," and an elaborate complex of visual and performed realizations were imagined. A subset of the realizations were pasted on the windows at P.S. 1's Poetry Room, and later performances incorporated video, films, photos, photostats, drawings, and other media. As a sidebar notes, manifestations have "progressively proliferated." Surprisingly, the interest in computer-assisted art is accompanied in this book with a renewed interest in traditionally notated musical scores. The book concludes with a split movement towards computer-assisted vocabularies and gathas on the one hand and handpainted, gestural verbal scores, called "phenomicons," on the other. Mac Low, it seems, was diversifying up until to the very end of his mortal career.

Progressive proliferation is, finally, the most stirring aspect of *Doings*—the idea that, as the title suggests, these texts and Mac Low's art are not fixed in time but have, as a body, literally survived him. This body continues mutating, unfolding into new performances, inspiring new texts, moving outwards like a giant, unfixed, lopsided but maybe eventually symmetrical mandala. To think this way is to be touched by Mac Low's evident optimism. Since his metier

was performance, which is action, his poetics is ultimately an ethics, or a code of action. His notes and instructions constantly enjoin his performers to behave decently, forbid "ego-tripping," and declare, "Listen" and "Relate" are the most important "rules." In the 1968 instructions to "A Vocabulary for Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim," he insists:

All performers must be able and willing continually to listen with complete concentration and to modify their actions, sounds, and silences in accordance with the changes in the total aural situation as they perceive it. All should often listen silently and only add new sonic elements when they feel the latter may add positively to the aural plenum. Notions of what is "positive" will, of course, differ from individual to individual.

It is relieving to recall that if Mac Low anticipated or wished for good behavior from his fellow or future art travelers (and perhaps he could expect it among his friends and peers or the Cage set), he did not imagine perfect harmony. In fact his work mostly depends on the dissonance, flaws, departures and irregularities produced even by likeminded humans pursuing similar goals in an improvised context. This is where life is, and art itself. As instructions to the book's first text read, "in simultaneities, all must begin together. In all methods except 2a, they'll get apart soon enough."

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Luna, Christopher. "Review of *Doings*, Jackson Mac Low." *Rain Taxi*.

The death of Jackson Mac Low in 2004 marked the passing of one of our greatest experimental poets. Since the 1950s, Mac Low had established himself as one of the most inventive writers in American letters. Working with grids, dictionaries, and chance operations, he developed several poetic forms that can only be properly realized in performance. Now many of Mac Low's scores have been collected in *Doings: Assorted Performance Pieces 1955- 2002*, a lovingly assembled volume that deserves to be studied and treasured.

Early in his career, Mac Low was inspired by Buddhism and the work of composer John Cage. As Steve Clay explains in his introduction, this led to work such as *The Marrying Maiden*, a play "written in 1958-59 utilizing some chance operations of Mac Low's design employing both the *Ching*, or *Book of Changes* and the Rand Corporation's table *A Million Random Digits* and *100,000 Normal Deviates'* *Non-intentional methods of composition* allowed the artist to set aside his ego. A note adapted from a letter by Mac Low to Granary Books further explains, "These methods were designed to allow fundamental elements, such as sounds, to 'be themselves,' unencumbered by 'personal expression, drama, psychology, and the like.' "

Clay notes that Mac Low came to see that the poet is more involved in "chance operations" than the term implies:

Elements of the "Asymmetries" (as well as many other works written and composed from about 1960 to 1990), including words, punctuation, typography and spacing, were initially, in Mac Low's estimation, determined by chance operations. By 1990, however, Mac Low had come to speak of the methods used in writing these series as systematic and not involving chance operations despite the fact that he could not predict results.

Doings includes a generous sampling of the new forms Mac Low created: biblical poems, the structure of which was based on the toss of a die; gathas, Buddhist performance texts based on chance operations and inscribed on graph paper; asymmetries, "non-stanzaic" poems "with no regularly repeating" patterns, "of which the printed formats are notations for solo or group performance"; and vocabularies, poems based on a list of words derived from the letters in a person's name. Most of these poems are also exemplary pieces of striking visual art; for example, the vocabularies were notated by using several pens with different nibs, and the text may be rotated during a performance.

Each piece comes with detailed instructions for poets, vocalists, or in some cases, instrumentalists. Showboating is anathema. Each reader is implored to listen closely to her fellow readers and make decisions accordingly. Because many of the pieces can be performed by a cacophony of voices and instruments, silence is key. Many of the texts are very specific regarding pauses; in fact, performers are encouraged to "often fall silent and only listen." It is extremely important that the reader comprehend the meaning and the proper pronunciation of each word in a piece. Performers of "A Vocabulary for Annie Brigitte Gilles Tardos," for example, are charged with learning words such as "diester," "enolase," and "diableree." Virtuosity is acceptable but yelling is strongly discouraged, because "loudly spoken words need not and ought not seem to express violent feelings." Mac Low's general instructions, which vary little from poem to poem, are so brilliant that nearly any ensemble performer would benefit from adopting them. Ponder the following "General Considerations" from "A Vocabulary for Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim": "Since not only choices of words, syllables, and phonemes, and strings thereof, from the Vocabulary—and thus, too, for singers and instrumentalists, choices of tones and tone sequences—but also choices within all other parameters are made by the performers at their own discretion, they must each exercise great care, tact, courtesy, attention, and concentration to make every detail of their performances contribute (as far as they can ascertain from where they are) toward a global sound sequence and aural plenum (including ambient, audience, and outer-environmental sounds) each of them would choose to hear. "Ego-tripping" without regard to what else is happening is the worst of "wrong notes" in performing this piece. However, the exercise of virtuosity is strongly encouraged when it is done with as much consciousness as possible of its place in the total sound, especially its relation to the contributions of the other performers. In short, performers must be both inventive and sensitive to other persons and sounds at all times.

Many pieces written in the 1980s and '90s include a statement from Mac Low narrowing it down to two important rules: "Listen" and "Relate."

The book includes a CD featuring performances by Mac Low, his wife and collaborator Anne

Tardos, and others, the earliest of which was recorded in 1973. "1st Milarepa Gatha" is a transcendent interpretation that features masterful interplay between Mac Low and the trombonist Jim Staley. "A Vocabulary for Sharon Belle Martin" is a gorgeous, maddening layering of multiple voices and flute. There is ample evidence of how well Mac Low and Tardos worked together: in "Tara Gatha," for example, the pair's voices keen, purr, and exhale around one another in a mesmerizing and erotic sonic dance. At times their voices take on an unearthly quality; in other instances, they sound like religious fundamentalists speaking in tongues.

Doings is essential reading for anyone who believes in the importance of voice and sound to the poetic tradition. One can only hope that writers will approach it as a workbook upon which to base their own performances. But whether one takes on the daunting task of performing one of Mac Low's poems according to his instructions, or uses the book as the inspiration for their own experiments, *Doings* is a text which ought to be put into practice.

Silliman, Ron. *Silliman's Blog*. (Wednesday, November 2, 2005).

I once took a job with a weekly newspaper in San Francisco just to get my hands on their review copy of Jackson Mac Low's *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*. Jackson's first big book & the first great work of procedural poetry to be published in America, *Stanzas was/* is an epochal event. It wasn't the last work by Mac Low to have that impact. One can scroll through a Mac Low bibliography with one's mouth agape at all the major books that have had a huge impact on American (indeed, world) poetry & the performance arts, mouth agape also at just how very different each one is. There has never been an English language poet—not even Gertrude Stein, who comes closest—who ever had this many sides, nor did this many things so very well.

Now Granary Books has published *Doings*, offering us yet another major Jackson Mac Low. It is one of the most ephemeral, yet most important, of all his facets, that of performance artist. Arranged chronologically, from the 1955 "21.21.29., the 5th biblical poem (for 3 simultaneous voices) the first biblical play" to the 2002 "Gatha in C for Theresa Salomon," *Doings* chronicles the progress of Mac Low's work for live & recorded performance. At 266 7.5" by 10.5" pages, it's a production on the scale of a largish art book & the nature of many of these scores—there are five gate-fold pull-outs, for example—makes it every bit as complicated a project. In addition, there is a 60-minute CD (or CD/ MP3 is more like it) that offers recordings of 15 pieces, ranging from the vocal performances to Theresa Salomon's exquisite violin realization of that last project. If this publication has any limitation, it is only that the press run is just 1,000 copies. That has implications not only for the price—it's a \$50 paperback, though cheap for the value—but for the distribution also. A lot more than 1,000 readers are going to want this book—indeed, a lot more than 1,000 poets are going to need this book. Within six months, any poetry library that doesn't have this book can be dismissed as not serious.

One aspect I find fascinating, reading through—and like an art book, this isn't so much a volume one reads as it is one "reads in"—*Doings*, listening to the CD, is that performance represents the most joyous side of Mac Low's work—*Doings* is a bright, sunny, optimistic volume, not something one always gets in reading Mac Low's more text-centric works, which could brood

on the fate of the planet. It's as if the insertion of voice—or is it sound, as such?—causes the work itself to connect with what Yoda would call the life force implicit whenever air vibrates, on a string or in the hollows of a flute, or within the human throat.

Mac Low, of course, has his influences & they range from his classical music training as a boy in Chicago, the heritage of sound poetry itself from Hugo Ball & the Russian Futurists onward to different modes of Buddhist vocal practice & the old testament tradition of Judaism. Yet I don't think, if one were given these various legacies as a project & told "go make something out of all this & have it make sense," that anyone could have predicted just how Jackson Mac Low would have fit these things one into another. Today, having seen, read, or heard so many of these performances over the years, it seems so very obvious—but it's worth keeping in mind that it was Jackson that made it so. And that persistent thread that runs through it all, lively, all-questioning, brash & humble simultaneously, filled with humor & still utterly serious—read those instructions, there is not one instance of sloppiness or touchy-feely flab in them—that thread is the presence of Jackson Mac Low himself.

Mac Low worked on this project before he died, seeing & approving every step right through the final proofs. Like many others, I felt devastated when he passed on December 8 last year. This book is so completely like having him back in the room again that it's spooky. And that really is the magic of *Doings*.

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