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## Sounds Physical

CHARLES BERNSTEIN ON JACKSON MAC LOW (1922–2004)

Jackson Mac Low, who died on December 8, 2004, at the age of eighty-two, had two children. His son, Mordecai-Mark, is a computational astrophysicist working at the Museum of Natural History, and his daughter, Clarinda, is a dancer and choreographer who often performs in downtown Manhattan. The two paths his children have chosen exemplify Mac Low's own contribution to poetry: his profound understanding of the physics of language and his exuberant articulation of the sounds of words in unpredictable motion.

Mac Low is probably the most controversial of the many great poets of the legendary "New American Poetry" generation, those literary artists born in the '20s and weighted with names like Beat and Projective, New York School and San Francisco Renaissance. He has certainly been the hardest to assimilate into the predominantly humanist, self-expressive orientation of postwar poetry. Seen from the point of view of the visual and performing arts, Mac Low's work may appear less abrasive; and yet there is no visual or performing or conceptual artist whose word works approach the complexity, ingenuity, and density of Mac Low's, not even his many Fluxus associates, or his longtime comrade and instructor in the art of chance, John Cage. It is not that Mac Low's work is better than his contemporaries—he himself rejected such forms of evaluation—but his work's significance for the development of poetry and for our understanding of verbal language is without parallel.

Mac Low was a superb performer, combining a musician's ear for tempo and pitch with a preternatural precision in enunciating even the most far-flung vocabulary. The experience of those who have only read his work on the page pales in comparison with the pleasure of hearing him perform live or on recordings. Mac Low's texts were scores for performance—by the poet, but also for the reader. One of his works was staged, in fact, by Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theater, in 1962, while his signal work *The Pronouns: A Collection of Forty Dances for the Dancers* (1979) emerged from his engagement, in the '60s, with Simone Forti, Meredith Monk, Trisha Brown, and other dancers associated with the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. Mac Low's readings often involved the active participation of a small group from the audience, as for instance in the realization of "simultaneities," a work in which the text was read not in unison but through a practice of active listening. Throughout the past two decades, Mac Low often performed stunning duets with his wife and fellow artist, Anne Tardos, as well.

Over his long career, Mac Low wrote many types of poems. His first works, such as "HUNGER STRIKE whAt doeS lifemean," were composed when he was a teenager, in the late '30s. Although he went on to become one of the most prolific American poets of the twentieth century, much of his work still remains unpublished—a good deal of it remains untyped, even. Mac Low continued to create poetry, including sound and visual poems, and musical compositions right up until the time of his death, with many of his most powerful and original works—and the majority of his published output—written after 1980, including *From Pearl Harbor Day to FDR's Birthday* (1982), *Words and Ends from Ez* (1989), *Twenties: 100 Poems* (1991), *Pieces o' Six: Thirty-three Poems in Prose* (1992), and *42 Merzgedichte in Memoriam Kurt Schwitters* (1994). Much of Mac Low's most compelling writing from his later period echoes qualities of his aleatoric poems, while being freely composed. This is also true of the work of a number of the poets associated with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, many of whom, myself included, felt a close kinship with Mac Low and with whom, it could be said, he found one of his aesthetic homes as an elder and fellow traveler.

The multiplicity of Mac Low's forms and his rejection of any hierarchy among the forms of poetry—objective or subjective, expository or nonrepresentational, lyric or epic—as well as his refusal to identify poetic composition with a characteristic poet's "voice," are among the most radical aspects of his poetic practice. But Mac Low's radicalism went beyond his art. He was a lifelong anarchist and pacifist, engaged in decades of antiwar, civil rights, and



JACKSON MAC LOW IN NEW YORK, 2003.

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But despite the great variety of Mac Low's output and the significance of his political commitments, he is most frequently associated with a compositional practice he began in the '50s: the use of predetermined structures—procedures or algorithms—for generating poems. Texts produced by this method are featured in Mac Low's best-known early publication, the 1963 Fluxus collection, *An Anthology*, on which he worked with La Monte Young, as well as in his two groundbreaking collections written in 1960, *Stanzas for Iris Lezak* (1972) and *Asymmetries 1-260* (1980). In later years, Mac Low himself preferred to call such works "quasi-intentional," rejecting the designation "chance-generated."

If Mac Low realized an alternative to the personally expressive poem, it was not through a rejection of intentionality, but through a realization of the hyperspace of aesthetic motivation, which takes into account the social trajectory of a work and the aesthetic choices made, as well as specific content. His work reflects intention writ large, along with a ferocious commitment to precision and documentation. Intention in Mac Low is found not in any one poem or structure but rather in the interconnection among works—or perhaps, in the burning space between, as Edmond Jabés once put it. *Representative Works: 1938-1985* (1986) provides the only single-volume map, so far, of the exemplary pluriformity of his work.

As anyone who knew Mac Low or worked closely with him knew, he did not countenance accident or carelessness or typographic error, even in works whose word order was determined by a systematic process. His aim was to fully articulate the possibilities of form forging meaning. As such, the means he employed in creating his compositions were never offhand or mysterious.

Consider, for example, Mac Low's characteristically long, detailed, and sometimes exasperating introductions to his work—not only did they document the rules for text generation and the dates of composition, but they often stipulated exactly how the works were to be performed, down to the number of seconds to pause between phrases. Mac Low sought to achieve a total aesthetic control more often associated with contemporary composers of complex music than with poets. To this end, all of the identifiable material conditions involved in the fabrication of his work were acknowledged up front. For Mac Low, the motivation for a poem was not to convey a predetermined meaning or set of marked associations but rather to maximize semantic potential within the bounds of stipulated constraints. As a result, the difficulty of reading his work is of a different order than that associated with much modernist poetry. With Mac Low, it is never a question of deciphering, since there is nothing hidden, obscure, or purposefully ambiguous: To read him is not a matter of figuring out a puzzle or interpreting a dream, but of responding to the virtually unassimilated, the nearly unfamiliar, and the initially unrecognizable.

What could make a sharper political contrast than the one between the imaginary of a Mac Low composition and a reality in which so many of the rules that manipulate social meaning and choice are deliberately hidden. In contrast to core values manufactured by unstated or disguised objectives, Mac Low provides no effects but only principles. Our greatest poet of the manipulated poem is also the great poet of negative dialectics—of the total rejection of hidden manipulation in the pursuit of expressive engagement. As such, Mac Low's work embodies an ethics of sincerity and responsibility.

But of course, all the objectification in the world can never explain how the poems take flight or the resonance they shore against an ever-darkening night. It turns out that far from emptying the poem of emotion or interiority, Mac Low was a Zen Jewish alchemist—converting words into quarks and sparks.

Among Jackson's most beautiful works are his "Light Poems" (the first twenty-two of which were published by Black Sparrow Press in the volume *22 Light Poems*, in 1968). Although "32nd Light Poem" is an elegy for Paul Blackburn, it causes me to think of my companion, guide, and light in so many things seen and unseen, heard and misheard, hoped and lost:

Let me choose the kinds of light to light  
 the passing of my friend

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If there were a kind of black light  
 that suddenly ed reveal to us  
 each other's inwardness

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but to black light of absence  
 not ultraviolet light  
 revealing hidden colors

but revelatory light that is no light  
 the unending light of the realization  
 that no light will ever light your bodily presence again

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