

EVENING WILL COME: A MONTHLY JOURNAL OF POETICS (ISSUE 23, NOVEMBER 2012)

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Notes on Poets Theater

1. Conceptualism: 2008

From “Reflections on the Incomplete Project of Poets Theater” in
The Grand Piano, San Francisco, 1975-1980, *Part 7*

An emphasis on process, on idea not as a theory to be proved, the interest in making mental processes an apparent feature of the work, the emphasis on the mentality of the viewer or audience, the challenge to audience/viewer conditioning—many of Sol Lewitt’s tenets of conceptualism influenced a next generation of visual artists and were reflected in poets’ performances as well.

However, and significantly, works with performative aspects complicate Lewitt’s description. Seldom could the realization of a performance be perfunctory relative to its planning. Here I use two examples, one by Robert Smithson and the other by a San Francisco art collective of the period, T.R. Uthco.

Smithson is one of the most influential visual artists on Language writing. His significance to poets’ performance involves his use of concept as an aspect of temporal processes. For instance, his earthworks intermingle concept, process, and performativity. They begin with a concept—such as pouring asphalt down a slope—that he then meticulously plans and executes. Because he is using volatile

materials that behave in unpredictable manners, process mingles with concept. There are also performative aspects of the work related to documentation and the presence of the artist as a visible participant in the execution of the work.

In Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), a dump truck released a load of asphalt to flow down an eroded hillside in an abandoned section of a gravel and dirt quarry in Rome. The black viscous material merged with the hillside, [becoming] a grand tribute to entropy. In this piece, one of several Smithson calls *Pours*, there exists a tension between the temporality involved in planning (of organizing the materials to make the pour) and the temporality of the "pour"—the execution of the event.

Something caustic or corrosive happens between the action performed, the asphalt gliding down the cliff, the film documentation of the event, and the experience of the viewer who, through the medium of the documentary, witnesses the event as "original and unique" even as it is a reproduction. These fabricated activities and imagined periods of time in which actual things occur reform, reanimate, and unsettle the work's meaning, even if its conceptual site is, in Nancy Holt's words, "entropy made visible." In Smithson's *Pours*, the processing of the "clock time" of the planning is placed in tension with a much eerier and more theatrical time. Meaning is suspended in a fantasy of geologic time destructively conjured by the displacements of original action through its mediated versions.

While pieces like Smithson's *Pours* provide a framework for thinking through questions of materiality and time within performance situations, the San Francisco artist collective T.R. Uthco shifts the "frame" of such interests from the geological site to social narrative. *The Eternal Frame* (1976), a reenactment of the assassination of John F. Kennedy that was realized on site in Dallas, offers a good example of postmodern story-telling that blurs the distinction between historical narrative, cultural construction, and a performance.

Lucy Lippard identifies conceptual art with a diminishment of the value of material. Materials become ephemeral mediums of ideas.¹ Yet the diminishment of the “value” of materials paradoxically initiates an awareness of materiality. In engaging with a conceptual work, one might have the experience of looking at a penciled grid on a piece of paper: in recognizing the slightness of the material, one begins the engagement with the concept. This paradox is played out in T.R. Uthoco’s *The Eternal Frame*. The staged event is only a “copy” of the event that occurred, but it enlists a wide consideration of both ideas and material that lead up to and constitute the “real event.” In performance, idea, material, and event do not have stable relationships one to another but are shown to be, in part, ideological categories. The performative in art erodes the boundary between idea and material.

In re-enacting the original Kennedy assassination, T. R. Uthco’s anti-illusionistic documentary imitation calls attention to televisual media’s arbitration of history and its substantive contribution to the real event, which includes its form and narrative meaning. It reveals the media as the source for the “eternal frame” of the assassination. The performed re-enactment of the assassination also calls attention to the materials of documentation, camera, film, angle, and point of view that convey the meaning of the tragedy to viewers. The actors appear in their costumes, they interview bystanders, the video camera is part of the scene, and the JFK performer unmask for the camera behind the scene. The national event that had been transformed into a tradition of mythic dimension becomes the subject of a collective critique.

Thus the “spoof,” in drawing attention to its material construction, also evokes the constructed features of the original event and, thereby, through inference, the mediation/mediatization of both events. What’s left out of the original version of the tragic event’s representations becomes a ghostly presence in the re-enactment. This would include the national agendas tied to Kennedy’s legacy such as The Bay

of Pigs invasion and the inherited Viet Nam War politics, both of which in being omitted from the eternal frame haunt it nonetheless in the figures of the young artists who have just recently lived through the Viet Nam epoch and are now purposelessly masking as Kennedy, Jackie O, and their entourage. Conceptualism's purposelessness becomes also an affect of social history.

Calling attention to materials as a means of pointing to what is left out of a given scenario is one of the key features of language centered writing of that period and one of the primary concerns of Poets Theater. I wanted to make this aspect of the writing central to performance. The performer would be conceived as an instrument of the writing; the writing performed would in a sense become a character, or occupy space in a sculptural or emphatic manner. The displacement of language away from the body of the performer and onto the total scene of performance is what would lead me later to identify performers as "performing objects," a term that conventionally is reserved for puppets and props. In this scenario, both language and the performer are featured as materials of the total performance event.

The discrepant temporalities produced in conceptually inflected performance, are similarly, even if not identically, featured in Poets Theater. The time in which events occur becomes, in part, a function of the language of text as it is made to appear as emphatic (as opposed to natural) gesture and object in any given performance.

In discrete, partial, and absurd ways, my play *Third Man*, which, on a double-bill with Eileen Corder's *Mr. Sister*, ushered in Poets Theater at Studio Eremos in 1980, enacts an encounter with the social conditions and politics of language of the post Viet Nam War period as these are interpenetrated by fantasy, literary idiom, references to popular culture, and intervention into gender ideology. As a text, *Third Man* is quite different from T.R. Uthco's Kennedy assassination re-enactment script, because it forgoes or undoes the large narratives presumed to be

held in common amongst citizens subject to national discourses. Something that distinguishes Poets Theater from performance art such as T.R. Uthoco's is its construction of an indeterminate world out of bits and pieces of language events that the performance itself and performers themselves have to interpret on its (their) own terms. Physical gesture in this context is also radically different from the detoured imitative representations of visually based performance artists because it appears from an unknown or unidentifiable source or situation. It may achieve a kind of virtual autonomy, in the manner of language-centered writing.

2. Restraint and Fractious Order: 2001

From "Rules and Restraints in Experimental Women's Writing" in
*We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing
and Performance Poetics*

The Recalcitrant Text

"Walking Backwards with the Maintains" was a site-specific "talk," which I "performed" in the San Francisco live-in loft of Bob Perelman and Francie Shaw in 1977. In the performance, I gave people domestic tasks to do while I read Clark Coolidge's long poem, *The Maintains*, walking backwards. No documentation of the performance remains, although I did videotape the piece for purposes of later discussion with my interdisciplinary art seminar run by movement artist Susanne Helmuth. At the time, the videotaping of the piece was a rather uncomfortable issue for me; I wasn't going to be able to convince many artists to go to a literary event, but I also knew that "the writers" were not going to respond very analytically to the art event. So I did the performance for writers and discussed it with artists. In addition, I felt ambivalent about the trend toward documenting every act of performance art: it went against the grain of my disruptive impulses. I was flirting with a kind of now-you-see-it-now-you-don't aesthetic. I also didn't like the use of the video camera to magnify the self-conscious position of the audience, since it would additionally exploit that position later as the

documentation became commodified artifact. This is why I destroyed the tape. It is also why, given that I did choose to use the video camera, I tried to make my use of it obvious. The video camera became an extension of my own tyrannical role in the performance as I commanded others to do my bidding and floated around reading “sacred” text in the wrong direction...

In the performance of “Walking Backwards,” I thought of myself as an androgynous figure. I was performing the relationship between abstract art and domesticity: enacting the abstract work (male power) conceptually (backwards) while the audience (subjugated and feminized) did my bidding/my chores. Some of the men later told me that they liked being told what to do and others wouldn’t talk to me. The performance, then, was a critique with a lot of twists: nothing was settled precisely in a familiar place. I was also satirizing the role of the author by enacting a tyrannical (unraveling, whimsical and arbitrary) authority over Coolidge’s text and the audience/performers at the same time. This was even to myself somewhat off-putting.

Yet, this performance would disappear, was even intended to disappear while Coolidge’s text remained. In the context of the performance, the text was recalcitrant. And even though I performed the text in the wrong way, choosing words in the wrong order, nothing actually changed the text. This concept of a recalcitrant text, within the situation of performance, has been the basis of much if not all of my writing for theater. The text for theater in my *oeuvre* is not meant as an unequivocal medium for performance. The text is meant to perform its own object status as linked to and separate from the live performance of its language...

Perhaps the recalcitrant text, or that of the text that is resistant to easily lending itself to a performed interpretation, restrains one from being able to know it in the way one would know a person. It cannot be transgressed, because the performers will go off and do something else, but, like the indestructible personae in a farce, its words will bounce back up and resume their unruly organization. This fractious

order, which is neither opaque nor narrative nor fully definable, resists restagings that bear a relationship to each other. It is highly unlikely that any director or group of collaborators would create even a similar play based on the same text in a restaging of the work. The textual language, because of its freedom from context, suggests to performers open interpretations and open orders, but one pretty much has to reinvent the performance from scratch for ever “new” occasion. Such performative writing practice encourages a certain energetic community-based interpretive activity, but it also resists continuity of interpretation: what the text reflects then is an assumed lack of continuity of stable meaning and an assumed loss of continuity within performance community. “There Is Nothing Better Than a Theory” speaks for itself, also in this regard:

Oh, theory

Yes

There is nothing better

Than a theory

But confess

What?

We will eat anything.

Anything?

The book

The idea

Or the product

I would prefer that the painting resemble something a little less

dry

This has nothing to do with technique

It is all in the sequence

The sequins?

Are on the table

They are not

Looking for a place to stay

3. Sentence Behavior: 2009

From Interview with Renee Gladman in *How2, Issue 3, Vol. 3*

www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/current/index

RG: The behavior of your sentences has always struck me as other-worldly, not the way one is trained to think or act in language. I use “behavior” instead of something like “quality” here because I’m trying to call attention to the animate nature of your work, the individual mind of one sentence making contact with the distinct minds of surrounding sentences. I read your paragraphs as spaces of many (sometimes overlapping) voices, impulses, and directions.

CH: I am literally interested in behavior—especially when categorical understanding of what behavior is or does is loosened so that one isn’t thinking about behavior in rigidly causal [rational thought, formal logic] or empirical [scientific, experimental] terms, but rather as something that is close to or seen in relationship to the edge or limit of what can be described or named. This something involves motion, relative degrees of closeness, intimacy, distance, physicalization, and abstraction: one can, a sentence can, behave abstractly...

...The physicality I am referring to needs breathing. The elbow can’t bend without it. But not all of the sentences of my own writing are known to have my breath. The breathing is circulating amongst imagined others, readers, an audience, and the dog was licking my elbows and somebody was laughing. So that happened, then it’s over...

...throw darts at a target. They fall off leaving a pattern on it. The analytic pointedness and/or energetic aggressivity that motivated what eventually

came about falls away and what's left is the pattern, which is more open to interpretation and analysis than is the subjective drive and the intermediary processes that initiated and produced the pattern. This type of displacement would represent one variety of sentence among many.

4. Improvisation: 2008

From *The Grand Piano: Part 6*

Steve Benson's work requires an audience let go of narrative expectations and go with the unanticipated thing or surprise. This kind of experience, of relinquishing a set of expectations in order to have a meaningful encounter with the work, is something I recall early readers of *Language* writing commenting upon frequently. Performance can feed back, animate, and demonstrate such experiences of reading, and in this sense I think this sort of work has served and continues to serve as an important mediating and critical tool both for audiences and for artists working in laboratory-like collaborations.

In the early 1980s, Steve and I would meet to do verbal improvisations while spontaneously and interactively moving around his bedroom/office in his shared Oakland live-work loft. Although Steve would often choose something for us to listen to—Berg's *Lulu* was a mainstay in our rehearsals for some time—the improvising we did was exceptionally free of constraint...I am sure this lack of constraint was more frightening to me than it was to Steve, who could throw his verbal energies into an undefined space and achieve utterly surprising results.

But I share with Steve an interest in another, less free form of improvisation, which in music is often referred to as structured improvisation—a formal strategy that lends itself to constructing connections between something that's already given and the play of the unknown. Structured improvisation frames the immediacy of decision-making within a limit such that both limit and spontaneity

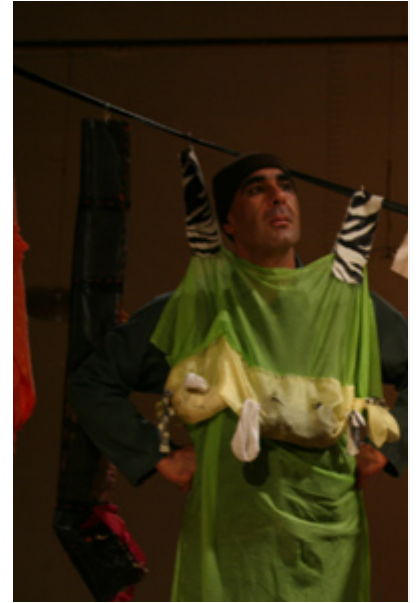
are made apparent in a third space. For me the written text has been a site of improvisation and has sometimes led to live improvisation, which uses the text as constraint and as a basis for developing structure.

5. Listening, Sampling, Site: 2002

From “Site Sampling in Performing Objects Stationed in the Sub World” in *Additional Apparitions*

“Performing Objects Station in the Sub World,” observes as language event the fluidity between public and psychological spaces as it also obscures normative delineations and familiar narratives about urban and suburban social spaces with non-narrative language games, lyrics, altered memories, and fantasy. The play deploys language that represents or suggests particular but not entirely classifiable relationships to social space: as mentioned above, it moves through sequence of contemplative interior psychic spaces and it also moves through aesthetic modalities—abstraction, expressionism, symbolism, and documentary—as it attempts to unsettle containing narratives about topics such as race and childhood that are often used to control and normalize human relations to social space. The language activity of the play as it bypasses, avoids, and exceeds containing social narratives, brings forth and constitutes the “Sub World...”

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Photographs by Donald Swearingen.

The performance of the play will be situated first in listening: otherwise we don't know where we are, or, we could be almost anywhere, except perhaps a forest. The performance of listening calls attention to language as the principal character of the play. In this sense the performing objects are conduits of language already shaped in other mouths(s). Language must also be thought to be the first site of the play, but its location is contextual. Context is constructed variously. In some situations the performing ensemble creates the context: it finds the orientations to the words, which suggest rather than supply reference for orientation. This is the case with the opening lines of the play.

Pull the tree up you've got

Sand

No shadow

Push the sea back

Sand

No shadow
Water in sky
No sand
I am reminded of this...
Not here
Architecture
Not here...

The phrases or lines of a poem in performance can be spoken in any order depending on the director's/ensemble's desired effects and individual performer's exploratory impulses. The first lines of "Performing Objects Station in the Sub World" emphasize elemental things: sand, water, sky, architecture, dream and the text's openness to disordered order. The poem remains fundamentally intact no matter what reordering, fragmentation, and overlays occur in the verbal performance of the work: this is partly due to the shift of registers in the writing but is also a phenomenon almost inherent to the performance of much poetry in my opinion. This sense that there is something that can not be entirely altered or destroyed is at the heart of the anarchy and freedoms the text invites its interpreters to explore and indulge...

Bricolage-like construction is emphasized over narrative coherence and character development: the construction is untidy. Things left on stage will contribute to the psychological thickness of the play, a thickness that elaborates through memory trace, departures and recurrences, forgotten and remembered props, and repetition of words or the recurrence of spacial relations on stage... The sub-genre variations that build the play, from lyric improvisation, to monologue, dialogue, masque, anti-masque, agit prop, and farce, lend emphasis to the work as *under construction*. An attention to different experiences of time—rationalized time, freely improvised time, conversational and gym work-out time, the affective time of loneliness, storytelling and card playing time, unruly time, musical time—also structure the play such that one might have various emotional and analytical

recognitions of time passing. The performing objects/dramatis personae then pass through different situations and time structures. As in life, they are affected by but not identical to the situations and temporal experiences they pass through or that pass through them; such experiences are not easily bounded by narrative time...

The shifts between narrative and non-narrative emphasize the fact of social space as essential to the language games of the play's drama. One could be watching an altogether different play performing the same words depending on where (locality and culture) one is and the circumstance of the performance. This does not mean that the thematic concerns of the play can entirely transmute, but that the play is an open form in the sense that "the power of authority gives way to the power of invention" insofar as the play is structured to require this to happen in any given version. This power of invention can facilitate the contact between selected interpretations on the part of the ensemble and the social circumstance of the production of the work.

6. Polyvocal and Bi-lingual: 2007

From an unpublished paper presented at ACLA in 2007

"...the idea of theater seems to sustain through the common experience of fracture the desire for an original unity."

— Herbert Blau, *The Audience*

Poetics Theater

As we know, an original unity may mean someone else's displacement. The desire for unity, the form it takes, may presuppose unequal power relations, a claim of the powerful over the less powerful, or it may threaten power by claims made on or for it. Unity can be mistaken for but is not the same thing as continuity. Unity is associated with a quality inherent to the work, while continuity engages social meaning and social exchange. Continuity of an art form may inspire or reinforce

the desire for unity. Any individual's desire for an "original" unity, primary though that sounds, may have everything to do with one's particular relationship to or position(s) within or politics relative to the "nation" or culture in which, or outside of which, one lives.

The polyvocal poets performance work concerns itself with constructs that one can identify from other forms of postmodern and feminist cultural discourses including that of relational positionality, which involves ideas of flow, syncretism, hybridity and non-unidirectional power relations as well as the familiar meeting place of the contact zone; but it is a different situation when we are not discussing a text that reflects these systems but rather a work that reflects, deploys, and invites activity that constructs a provisional and temporally ephemeral value in respect to such systems. The effects of the work can be noisy, excessively lively—a materializing of a "material" text that emphasizes language over narrative. If the poetry of Poets Theater is something akin to "a machine made of words" and the performers are decision makers, vocalizers, and "performing objects" then the work is activating relational positions rather than dramatizing them.

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Photographs courtesy of Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Ferndale, MI (2005).

In the performance of my work *Mirror Play*, the relational contact involves the performers' interactions among themselves in respect to a text that encourages animation rather than embodiment. The focusing on activity rather than on a pre-existing dramatic idea excludes the possibility that we are all hearing or listening to the same thing as demonstrated in this excerpt of a bilingual version of the text:

It's getting cold

Hast dud as gehoert?

It's getting cold

Nein, hoer mal, unter

They're not back yet
Hoer mal, hast du gehoert
I wonder where they get the fish
Du huerst nicht zu, hoer mal
What are you listening to? I wonder who prepares
Ich hoere etwas, das aus der Tiefe kommt
I wonder
Es kommt aus der Tiefe
Who prepares the fish? What is coming from below?
Kannst du es nicht hoeren?
I'm not listening.
Hoer mal.
We should have ordered something else.
Du hoerst es doch, oder.
Maybe it was a mistake to come here.

War

The politics of performance as an on-going practice encounters the contemporary moment of “world culture,” a culture in which “English” is often thought to be the *lingua franca*. It is, as any such language would be, an imposed language.

How then to weaken the “hardened social?” [Rodrigo Toscano] It is really the imposition of nation violence, rather than the English language, that *Mirror Play* engages initially as a text. *Mirror Play* is written in the context of the invasion of Iraq and the surrounding Middle Eastern crisis of violence encouraged and condoned by the United States policies and actions. This work speaks to questions of continuity and discontinuity within a global situation, imagining the site of the play as the environment for both continuity and discontinuity.

Its language points to language, abstracting or removing it from univocal representations of framed catastrophic events. Its method is often improvistory and musical. The text is musical not because there are tunes written for it but because the lower limit of speech is displaced onto the upper limit of (improvised) music in its composition.

Against the backdrop of power domination and world affairs, in *Mirror Play* “anybody” can enter or exit the one room that “everybody” in the world lives in or can live in. The polyvocality of the play is directly related to the “anybodies” who in the play’s imaginary occupy the room, and who are the individual performers of the work. It is a simple concept disrupted by certain spatial escape hatches. The play does not adhere to its spatial pretense consistently, as there is a tomb that, once discovered, can be exited underground. Through the exit one will find a passage way to Ga, which sometimes performers interpret as Gaza, but others, or an other might take “Ga” as a signifier of abject regression.

They say that you can breathe in it...

The tomb?

They say you can breathe in the tomb better...

Than in the house?

They say you can breathe in the tomb better now, that it’s been
raided.

Was it sealed?

It was on the news. That’s how I heard.

But did they know us? Was it sealed?

Three: Polyvocality

No ensemble would or could produce the same work the same way twice. And if there is visual art or music involved, that language becomes as significant as the text. This interpretive openness of the text has everything to do with the corrosive

edges and collective values that emphasize language as a shared and social medium.

Or in poet-playwright Rodrigo Toscano's words, these are the "intelligized & intelligizng *sieves* for the poetic text itself."

Words speak to at through and around the writer, the performer, and the audience. A line assigned a performer may be more or less reasoned or arbitrary. Out in public, on the job, in private or domestic space, on the streets, and in the fields "I" may be assigned a line as well, and the reasons for this assignation may be more or less reasoned or arbitrary. Sometimes I may refuse to speak the lines I am assigned. The resistance to speak under assignment might indicate the premise for a Poets Theater that in the words of Detroit poet and playwright Ron Allen, "attempts to walk the radical edge of theatricality in an assault on conditioned response and thinking in our culture." This is an example of Allen's assault:

hot tongue swallow the black cue/hot. a hung in cement bags of
punk/hot./sky of phallic eye in the message city./electric heat./a
hip hit hop trip of nostril-flared boogie./hot.truth pumping the
earth... god it's Friday./sellin' cool coiled taste, machine mine
fired war/hot./a rag dance./floor-show monkey...zoo of the
night./hot. [from Eye Mouth Graffiti page 29 ms.]

The negating or transforming of social interpolation that Allen's works "perform" issues a critique of language oppression while it performs an act of social liberation within the sphere of African American inhabited inner city. Any person or persons speaking these multi-voiced words would be called upon to select a way to say them. The performance then involves a shaping of decisive actions, especially in regards to the ways performers approach or commit themselves to words.

Bilingual

This ethics of decision-making in performance as engaged by poets' performative works raises interesting issues in respect to questions of works written in more than one language/and/or translated for performances. When the opportunity arose to work in countries where English was not the "local" language, I found myself resisting the idea that the writing would turn into a "German" or "French" version of an original. I found myself resisting the idea that performers were obliged to embrace an original in their own "secondary" language. Was it necessary that the audience hear or know all the words? An audience fluent in German and English would know all the words of the bilingual text, even if the performances' switching back and forth between languages and its simultaneously spoken segments would require individuals of the audience to choose how to hear the work. The experience of choosing what to hear may be thought to mimic what the performers do in improvising realizations/readings of *Mirror Play*.

As I was thinking about the audience I was also thinking about the performers, about the activity of listening that a polyvocal Poets Theater already emphasizes in optimal situations. If part of what one listens for is sound, difference, intonation as opposed to transparent meaning, identification, and sameness then the activity of listening rather than engaged with response and reaction to WHAT someone says is more about picking up on, going with, altering, adding to, amending, engaging, resignifying whatever sound, textures, meanings, resonances, nuances are conveyed at that instance.

In presenting *Mirror Play* in Germany and Austria, I wanted to create a social context between myself, other American performers, and German performers that reflected a polyvocal opposition to the Iraq War. What I most wanted to avoid in this situation was an author-centered work, all in German, where the performers presented the work in honorific reified translation context. The choral reading version, was scripted with minimal instructions to encourage a maximal condition

for improvisation, and for all of the performers to use and activate the text. As someone who speaks little German, I wanted to place myself in the situation of performing within a language environment of semi opacity, a circumstance which occurs on the most intimate and the most hyper-mediated and political levels of our society. While artistically I was interested in making a work “live” in a noisy way, I was socially or politically interested in the different comfortable, uncomfortable, freeing, and baffling experiences that are acknowledged by the bilingual work--experiences that in the context of U.S. superpower nationalism I think are best to be encountered than avoided.

7. **Retranslation and Re-performance: 2012**

from Program Notes on “Retranslation” and Performance of
“Occupying Theodore W. Adorno’s Music and New Music,”
DOCUMENTA 13 (2012)

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My textual score of “Music and New Music” significantly alters the form of Adorno’s original lecture, given by Adorno in 1959 in conjunction with the *Documenta 2* exhibition. The decision to use music as a voice in the performance concerns my wishes to literally bring music into the room, to create an historical dialogue initiated from our contemporary present, and to excite the space between

music and the natural speaking voice. The retranslation is structured to accommodate the conversation between music, the speaking voice, and the lecture as a poetic work written for structured improvisational performance.

Notes

- ¹ Lucy Lippard, “Escape Attempts,” in *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (1997), vii. “...the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or “dematerialized.”

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