

Discursive Events in the Electronic Archive of Postmodern and Contemporary Poetry

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THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT IS NOT KRAPP SPEAKING, from Samuel Beckett's 1958 one-act play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, which features one actor and "a tape-recorder with microphone and a number of cardboard boxes containing reels of recorded tapes" (10). The following is David Antin writing, in a 1984 book of, as he calls them, talk poems. This excerpt is from the introduction to the published rendition of Antin's talk-poem entitled "whos listening out there." Italicizing introductory materials is a publishing convention of drama that the Beckett play and the Antin talk-poem both follow.

*... it was my habit to record my talks
to find out what id said (tuning 268)*

Antin is from the generation whose work would be anthologized as the New American poetry, but he went his own way, inventing an improvised talk genre beginning in the late 1960s that requires performance and inscription, audience and tape recorder and typewriter.¹

¹ Antin reflects in 2001 on his relationship to the 1960 Donald Allen anthology *The New American Poetry*, "a poetry," Antin declares, "I wasn't very close to": "I

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I want to begin to address the event in relation to poetry by considering Antin's evocative phrase, "to find out what id said." There is, as Derrida might say, a double discovery to be made here. In Antin's statement, the first discovery occurs by means of tape-recorder, and refers to what is said, and, one can add, to how it is said. By introducing variables of interpretation (context, tone, etc.), the question of *how* what is said is said, already hints at the doubling.

To arrive at the second discovery contained in the phrase "to find out what id said," imagine yourself Antin about to give a live talk before an audience. That is, shift your temporal sense from past-tense *after* to present-conditional *before* and present-conditional *as* the talking and tape-recording happens. The second discovery occurs by means of audience presence, and mostly refers to what *might* be said. The present-conditional of this discovery does not leave a magnetic trace on the tape, is speculative. Derrida argues that in its Latin derivation, *to invent* is to find out what is already there waiting to be discovered, and also to found a speculation ("Psyche"). The double sense of invention applies in Antin's case. By listening to the talk-poem recording, Antin discovers what he's already said. In order to transcribe the talk-poem for publication, he must also speculate once again on the present-conditional moments of what he might say and how he might say it. That is, writing intervenes in the double discovery. Speculation on what he might have said is not an idle afterthought listening to the tape, but implicates editing the transcription and results in his distinctive representation of speech in the presentation of the talk-poems for publication (spacing between phrasal units, almost no punctuation, and no capitalized letters).

Antin's professed commitment to what he calls "dialogue" in his talks—in which no dialogue, as that word is generally understood, occurs (I will further detail this below)—is also speculative yet integral to invention in the above sense. It is the *staging* of talking *as an event* that invents the talking. In order to conceive of what *might* be said, one must already have staged a place or scene for talking, a pragmatics that enables certain possibilities of speech so that a speaking may be enacted in the first place. Talk as a genre points speaking and writing towards a "staging of coappear-

was already working in ways that had very little to do with them.... [A]mong my immediate predecessors the two poets who had the most effect on my work were Jackson Mac Low and John Cage, and neither one was in the Allen anthology" (*Conversation* 96). Antin was not anthologized, either.

ance,” in Jean-Luc Nancy’s phrase (71), a “staging” (*praxis scénographique*) of being-together and its invention.²

The general question I am starting from is the following: How does one construct an event of poetry? To conceive of the event in relation to poetry requires staging. It also requires recording, whether by remembering, writing, and/or tape-recording (and/or some other technologically iterative means). One might think that the question I start from is different from this one: How does one construct an event in the poem? I shall argue that these questions are integrally related to each other exactly because the poem is always staged by, and as, some event. One can therefore combine these two questions into one: How does poetry construct an event? Foucault remarks in the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that at the very heart of the classical understanding of the event lies the series (e.g., “A follows B”). Historian, critic, or philosopher is minimally tasked with “defining the position of each element in relation to the other elements in the series” (7), traditionally by means of narrative and dating techniques. Foucault’s “discursive event” still prioritizes the series, but as a methodological construction, which allows for greater contingencies than does causal historiography and philosophy. At this structuralist point in his trajectory (the book was published in French in 1969), it is fair to say that Foucault archaeologizes the event from the vantage of the first discovery-mode described above as “to find out what is said” (here I have slightly rephrased Antin’s words, partly in order to anticipate Herodotus’s definition of history that I discuss below). By contrast, for Nancy in 1996, the event must be understood as overturning the series by staging wonder and surprise; it cannot confirm and conform to any series or process or cause in advance of that which happens. According to Nancy, it is Hegel who first opened modernity to thinking the event in this way, “where the opening of modernity is nothing other than the opening of thinking to the event as such” (162), to the event as wonder and surprise, not as causal link within a linear narrative. In this modern sense of “event,” Nancy asks: “How is one to stay in the event? How is one to hold onto it (if that is even an appropriate expression) without turning it into an ‘element’ or a ‘moment’ [of a causal series]? Under what conditions can one keep thinking within the surprise, which is its task to think?” (166). The event is not the preparatory staging itself, but rather the surprise and wonder of speech and action that specific staging conditions unpredictably generate. It is this

2 In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy begins to turn Heidegger inside-out by rethinking Dasein as a “social being-plural.”

unpredictable, but not unthinkable, aspect of the event that enacts both the first and second discovery-modes of invention, and bears on the next issue I shall also introduce by way of Antin's italicized, written phrase, "*to find out what id said.*"

For Antin, poetry constructs an event by staging, by surprise, and finally, by enacting the real. To some ears, "enacting the real" might sound from over a cultural horizon long-since considered to have been supplanted, and this is indubitably an effect, as much as fate, of theoretical nodes over time. Antin's phrase echoes—providing, in the poet's talk, context for—Charles Olson's "special view"³ that history means not exclusively to find out the truth of what happened, but, as importantly, to find out for oneself what is said (i.e., about what happened). The distinction here between two levels of event, truth and story (truth, and truth or rightness in its telling), is crucial to Olson's New American projectivist poetics. In his lecture-notes for a "New Sciences of Man" Institute at Black Mountain College in 1953, Olson cites J.A.K. Thomson's *The Art of the Logos* (1935) about history as Herodotus understood it, which "appears to mean 'finding out for oneself', instead of depending on hearsay" (Thomson 237). Mythology becomes increasingly present in Olson's writings,⁴ and these notes confirm that he viewed it as one of the great sciences of "man" on par with recent archaeological and anthropological findings.

U.S. poets associated with the New American poetry were much interested in how archaic dimensions of speech (disclosed primarily via anthropologies of oral cultures, for example Malinowski's, cited below) alter preconceptions concerning what poetry might be.⁵ Mythical dimensions of speech structure language, argues Ernst Cassirer, whose *Language and Myth* Susanne Langer translated in 1946.⁶ Reappraising poetic language from the vantage of speech meant reappraising, for Olson in particular, the relationship the idea of truth had established, since Plato,

3 I am referring to the title of Olson's 1956 lecture-notes, *The Special View of History*: "a course of study which proceeds on the level of history ... with the dynamic first proposed in *Projective Verse*."

4 In *The Maximus Poems*, for instance, Olson's father and mother at the beginning of Volume III come to stand for heaven and earth at the end.

5 Jerome Rothenberg's several anthologies are exemplary in this regard, especially *Technicians of the Sacred*.

6 Following the Platonic Western tradition, Cassirer emphasizes how writing ("discursive thought") and speech ("mythic thought") oppose each other. For Olson as poet, however, the opposition lies between two modes of writing, discursive and literary (or, poetic). The poetic mode enacts what it says; the discursive mode explains what it says.

to *mythos* and *logos*. Following Thomson, Olson notes how “mythology” is made out of these two ancient Greek words, which Olson combines into an English translation as the phrase: “TO SPEAK [legein] of WHAT IS SAID [mythos]” (“The Chiasma” 62). *Mythos* and *logos* are “two names for the same thing,” *muthologos*, namely story, Thomson explains (Thomson 19). Until, in one of his odes, Pindar criticizes Homer for telling constative falsities, talking was considered to be neither true nor false, but “right”—as in, getting what is said right when telling the story. Intriguing Olson here is that, conceived of as what Antin will call “mything” (presumably to rhyme with riffing), speech does away with the Western-inherited distinction—made in order to uphold verifiable truth—between the event and its reports, the event and its reporting. In a language borrowed from the structural anthropology of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, talking as mything constitutes the humanly real: “it rests itself on a content which can be said to be the inextricable human content: *that what is is, in the final analysis, what is said*” (“The Chiasma” 65). Reporting becomes event; the event becomes its reporting; speech becomes the event of the real; truth is as one finds it in the telling. Myth is, for Trobriand Islanders, according to Bronislaw Malinowski, “not the nature of an invention such as we read in our novels today, but living reality ... which provides men on the one hand with motives for ritual and moral acts, on the other with directions for their performance” (Olson “The Chiasma” 112). In citing this passage, Olson insists that such mythic reality “is as much our own as theirs” (67). Olson’s contemporary, Robert Duncan, agrees. When the all-importance of myth is grasped, “All the events, things and beings of our life move then with the intent of a story revealing itself,” he writes early in *The Truth & Life of Myth: An Essay in Essential Autobiography* (7). Little wonder Olson inaugurates the term “post-modern” in English, given this rethinking of truth in relation to *muthologos*.

The mythological dimensions of the speech act achieve, for Olson, first, a conflation of times present and past (the past becomes useful for the present—one’s own present) and, second, an identity of language with the real, or at least of speech with the symbolic, as Lacan was himself speaking about it in his seminars of the 1950s. Antin achieves similar effects to Olson, but without recourse to the mythological. Antin discovers a conflation of time in the moment of speaking and language as constituting reality in the event of his talks, which he describes in terms of a “dialogue” that the event itself releases for both him and his audience:

Mythos and
logos are “two
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namely story.

[...] *i see myself involved*
in a discourse with some kind of material and with a
particular audience that I don't know till I get there
and with which I hope to enter into a dialogue that i
also conduct with my material and myself so what
im involved in is some kind of discourse which
always when its real discourse is some kind
of dialogue (tuning 218)

As I have mentioned, and as critics have observed,⁷ there is no dialogue with the audience in any literal sense, neither in the live event nor in the written version of the talk. At best, there is the rare audience-member interruption—for example, in order to find a seat—that would have remained unknown had not Antin remarked on it in the course of his talking.⁸ Social psychologist Erving Goffman would say that Antin preserves conventions of the lecture which prevent a literal dialogue from ever occurring. Following Goffman in *Forms of Talk*, one might argue that an assumption about “dialogue” in general is that something is communicated back and forth, whereas what frequently happens at a live lecture (or talk) is that everything but what is verbally communicated as information is noticed by a listener. The event’s wonder and surprise gets in the way, in a sense. How to understand “dialogue” in Antin’s talks, then? The dialogue occurs between Antin and the event of the event itself—its staging, its unpredictability (for himself, in terms of what he might say), its being-plural (audience) quality of enacting the real.

To summarize so far: The unpredictable event of poetry stages speech as the real. One might well expect, next, the supplement. Not that the supplement—writing—is in some way hidden in Olson’s work. After all, Olson’s projective-verse prose and poetry stage the unpredictable event of speech *in* writing. For both Antin and Olson, the event of poetry unpredictably stages speech *and* writing. Derrida has thoroughly questioned the mutual exclusion Plato claims holds between *mythos* and *logos*, that the dialogue the *Phaedrus* identifies with writing and speech respectively. The Platonic distance between writing and speech is foreshortened today, more than ever before, due to technology. In a review of Charles Bernstein’s

7 See Bob Perelman’s essay, “Speech Effects,” and Marjorie Perloff’s “Introduction” to the re-issue of Antin’s *Talking*.

8 Antin is clear about the uselessness of a literal dialogue between the invited speaker who has prepared for speaking and the audience who improvises a response on the occasion. See the opening of his talk, “dialogue” (*tuning* 219).

four-month email exchange with Antin, published as *A Conversation with David Antin* (2001), poet Caroline Bergvall succinctly identifies how Antin's merit lies in "[t]he way he distinguishes 'oral' as procedures for remembering and 'literal' (rather than literate, historically too narrow) for procedures of recording and spatializing" (n.p.). Bergvall goes on to argue that opposing orality to the literal (opposing speech to writing), let alone distinguishing one from the other (distinguishing *logos* from *mythos*), seems increasingly impossible to assert, let alone ascertain:

[A]t 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, verbalised event, referential memorisations, 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.

With respect to admitting the supplement, it is not enough to merely supplement the summary above, as: The unpredictable event of poetry stages speech as the real, *in writing*. Bergvall signals to a panoply, a virtual panopticon perhaps, of recording technologies—not only writing, photocopying, desktop publishing, website, but telephone, email, laptop with ethernet connection, videocam. As I shall show momentarily, all can be applied in a poetry event, just as, with very different effects and purposes, recording technologies are already applied in contemporary everyday life in the USA, Canada, and parts of Europe. Once long-standing opposed values holding speech and writing apart seem now to have exhausted themselves, technologies of reproduction become so seamlessly complex that the terms appear inadequate to the task of delineating a cyborgian textual real. And yet, with dialectical finesse, as the oppositional relation itself (between speech and writing) empties of usefulness, the significance of speech and of writing is not only retained, but transformed, particularly the event staged through speech, which achieves a new, mediated fullness and singularity. Poet and critic Michael Davidson predicts that "the use of audio materials in studying the avant garde will produce new critical methods and attitudes useful for studying the broadest context of literature" (119). Thus too, Bernstein, following notably Jerome McGann's mate-

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rial-text scholarship and theory of radically questioning the original—that authoritative, primary version of a poetic text—goes so far as to suggest that the recorded speech-event of a written poem is “anoriginal,” which is to say the equal of any other, including authorized print, version.⁹

Since the 1960s, the tape recorder, specifically, seems to have served three purposes: documentation, composition, event-staging. Documentation: The tape recorder provides the opportunity to preserve a seeming ephemeral embodiment of poetry, the poetry reading (for example, Fred Wah’s recordings of the Vancouver 1963 poetry conference, available online,¹⁰ or Paul Blackburn’s tapes, available at the SUNY-Buffalo archive). Composition: By the mid 1960s, Allen Ginsberg, for example, began using a tape recorder as he travelled the U.S. alone in a car, in order to compose poems subsequently published in *The Fall of America*. Event-staging: Antin carries into print form the event of talking before an audience, by transcribing from a tape recorder.

An assumption one might be tempted to make about recording a poetry event (whether for documentation, composition, or even event-staging purposes) is that the recording occurs at a second remove from the event. In other words, one might assume that recording operates much like Newtonian space-time and does not affect the quality of the events and their performances, only the quality of the recordings themselves. In this view, the time of the recording of the event is a different (objective, neutral) and all-encompassing time from the (subjective, relative, finite) time of the performances. The time of the recording bears only a technical relation to the time of the event performances and to one’s own time of understanding the performances. Recording and event (which includes performance and audience) operate independently of each other except in the obvious, technical sense of their simultaneous occurrence.

There are, however, instances of unease concerning recording, which hint that recording interlinks, in complicating ways, not only with audience, but with event-structure. The Newtonian paradigm of recording can so easily be envisaged as surveillance. Christian Parenti’s sober, readable account in *The Soft Cage: Surveillance in America from Slavery to the War on Terror* evokes the *locus classicus* of free-speech address, the *polis* (of great significance to Olson himself), opposing its long Western history (as public space, including town square, commons, street) to the encroach-

9 See Bernstein’s introduction to *Close Listening*, an excellent volume that attests to recent critical interest in the poetry reading and the voiced poem.

10 The main page of the Slought Foundation website features Wah’s recordings, <<http://slought.org>>.

ments of surveillance technologies into the very interior-walls of the *polis*. “Like commercial life, which is now thoroughly tagged, metred, and recorded, so too are the politics of access, mobility, and public space being radically restructured by the new surveillance. The clearest example of this is the proliferation of closed-circuit television,” Parenti writes (110). Today’s smart-card, -label, -badge, or -key (where “smart” refers to the ability of the microchip tool to gather and send information) already anticipates the full extent to which everyday life may be one day encoded via recording technologies—as in the following scenario: “information on people and objects in time and space can be constantly updated and recorded passively and automatically in real time to create a ubiquitous self-generating infrastructure of the dossier” (123). In 1959, Allen Ginsberg decried mass-media technologies themselves as “a vast conspiracy to impose one level of mechanical consciousness on mankind” (3). Timothy Yu remarks on this statement—from Ginsberg’s “Independence Day Manifesto”—that “Such arguments were hardly new even at the time, echoing the views of many cultural critics throughout the 1950s” (1). In a metanarrative of U.S. cultural history, one might go as far back as Emerson’s opposition of societal conformism to self-reliance.

For an instance of unease about recording, consider the following introductory remarks Olson made in his Goddard College talk and reading of 1962. Olson begins with what may seem to be a prevarication, either between reading his own work and “talking about poetry” by someone else, or between talking about poetry and talking about himself. Then someone asks Olson whether he would mind if his reading/talk were recorded. Olson’s answer raises a number of issues pertaining to the question of recording/being recorded: he criticizes a trend that envisages poetry readings as performances/concerts; he considers how in this visit to Goddard, recording/being recorded establishes temporal precedence (in this case, Robert Creeley’s Goddard reading from the previous year) and thus implicitly a context and even lineage for his own work; he reflects on audience expectations as a negative, contrasted with the idea of a poet who is “free” to read whatever, regardless of others’ interests. From the transcript¹¹:

CHARLES OLSON Well I’m very glad that I’m going to be here for a few days. Because I’d really rather talk about poetry or

11 The full recording and a transcript by Kyle Schlesinger are available online at the Slough Foundation, <<http://slought.org>>. This specific audioclip is also available online (see works cited for address).

read somebody else's than myself. Being at some stage of existence which makes that sensible.

UNKNOWN VOICE You don't mind using a tape recorder do you?

CHARLES OLSON Huh?

UNKNOWN VOICE You don't mind using a tape recorder do you?

CHARLES OLSON No. As a matter of fact I'm going to just watch it, [Laughter from audience] like a fire, let's sit here and watch that tape. [Laughter from Olson] What happens if it just goes on and I don't say anything? Just that problem of being, it gets to be kind of a bore, because it—it's become a performing art, you feel as though you have an audience, and as if you're supposed to do a concert or something, and uh, I don't think I believe in verse in this respect at all. As a matter of fact, I know I don't. [A long pause, followed by the shuffling of papers]

Miss Glaser asked me to introduce myself, which is nuttier than a fruitcake. I suppose I'm here, because my co-agitator Mr. Creeley was here a year ago, and in fact I feel very much at home, because that previous tape, as far as I know was of a reading was—unless you've had someone in between—is Mr. Creeley's tape which ran from this room, was it? Into our kitchen in Gloucester, *directly* almost. I think it was in a matter of hours—it was like hotcakes. Have you had a poet read since?

UNKNOWN VOICE Not since then, no.

CHARLES OLSON Then I see it's a trap. If I don't read you'll all be disappointed, and if I do read I'll have to be very careful because it'll have to be the poems that interest me, and I'm not so sure, in recent experience, that they're the poems which interest anyone else.

UNKNOWN VOICE You can do whatever you want. [Laughter from audience]

CHARLES OLSON I don't feel unfree. But then I, like—it's not a captive audience, it's more a captive poet I think. [Laughter from all]

Listeners to/readers of this text might differentiate between three kinds of speaking here: speaking as in a poetry reading *performance* in front of an audience whose acknowledged presence predetermines, Olson claims,

what (and how) to read; speaking as in *talking* about someone else's work (to which I will return again, shortly); and of course a third kind, unstated in this excerpt, for which Olson is most famous—speaking as in a *poetics* of the breath-line. In all three kinds of speaking, recording/being recorded and the event itself structurally interlink and are not independent space-time processes.

The dynamic of how recording structures/influences event, and vice-versa, raises the question of speaking, of talking, as performance. In *Talk Talk: The Cultural Life of Everyday Conversation*, S.I. Salamnesky rightly wonders whether “awareness of talk’s mechanical inscription may remove it from the everyday to other forms of performance” (25). Olson’s Goddard comments reflect a wariness about speech and poem becoming performance. For Peggy Phelan, performance, even when an artform, is “in a strict ontological sense” “nonreproductive”; thus, to “attempt to write about the undocumentable event of performance is to invoke the rules of the written document and thereby alter the event itself” (148). One could substitute for “writing,” in Phelan’s assertion, any other reproductive technology (e.g., tape recording). By contrast, Antin’s poem-talks artfully embrace performance—to such an extent that Bob Perelman, in an essay that includes an examination of Antin’s work, approaches the talk-performance as an identifiable genre.

Literal dialogue in the talk genre appears in the Language poets’ series that Perelman organized from the late 1970s through the early 1980s in Berkeley. Perelman transcribed and published portions of the audience exchange after each talk as part of the published record of the talk itself. Because some audience members are poets who might equally have been giving the talk (some of whom did, elsewhere in the series), the effect is to dialogize poetics itself, to render it as a contested discursive space (a space primarily of investigation than of loggerheaded assertions). Perelman characterizes the role of proper names in the poets’ talk as an aspect of the genre’s “novelistic” tendency, thus as an instance of how recording alters speech. He contrasts his own series with Antin’s carefully-scripted, seeming-improvised verbal art performances, and with Jack Kerouac’s use of conversational transcription in *Visions of Cody*. With one notable exception, the Language poets’ published versions of their talks do not attempt to stylistically mimic spoken language. The notable exception is Steve Benson’s talk, “Views of Communist China,” which faithfully notates the meandering speech of what appears to be, to begin with, a

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semi-improvised performance (improvisation would be the exception, too, in the Language poets' talks series).¹²

Another example of the talk genre in contemporary poetry is *PhillyTalks*, which ran from 1997 to 2001.¹³ This poetry series is archived by the Slought Foundation, a non-profit artists' space based in Philadelphia. Housed online at its website are twenty newsletters and seventeen sound and/or video recordings from *PhillyTalks*. As the portmanteau title's second word evidently implies, talk, specifically poets' talk, structures the event. *PhillyTalks* utilizes a broad range of recording technologies which force a reassessment of oral versus literate, speech versus writing oppositions mentioned by Caroline Bergvall (57). In fact, *PhillyTalks* is structured on at least five modes of discourse: talk (as in Olson's talk at Goddard College, and Antin's talk-poems, but also Perelman's poets' talks series), letter (epistolary address), lecture, manifesto, and poetry reading. *PhillyTalks* is not singular in use of these modes so much as in their simultaneous use.¹⁴

What is *PhillyTalks*? The *PhillyTalks* event would begin with a written exchange between two selected poets. As the *PhillyTalks* curator, I would publish these letters in newsletter form, and distribute it in advance of the "live" component via subscription (and free online download with the help of Aaron Levy, Slought Director¹⁵). The live component of the event consisted of a reading by each poet followed by informal discussion extending from their newsletter, including audience participation, particularly by those who came to the event wanting to talk, having read the newsletter.

12 To my knowledge, there is only one Benson talk that is available both as a recording and as a transcript. This is Benson's 1979 talk, "Careers in the Arts," which was recently made available in Slought Foundation's "Linear A" series online, <<http://slought.org>>. Included as well, thanks to Benson, is a transcript, and related documents pertaining to a survey that he undertook as part of his research for the talk.

13 All but one *PhillyTalks* event took place at the Kelly Writers House, University of Pennsylvania. The exception is *PhillyTalks* 18, which took place at the University of Calgary. *PhillyTalks* was initiated and curated by myself; Aaron Levy came to co-produce it with a web component. Each event could not have been produced without the financial assistance and the many volunteers of the Kelly Writers House.

14 For a recent variant on the *PhillyTalks* modes, see the Buffalo-focussed series curated by Kristen Gallagher and Tim Shaner, *Rust Talks* (Gallagher). For an example of how a range of poets treat the subject of dialogue, see the special dialogue issue of *Chain* magazine (Osman).

15 Levy has been instrumental in producing *PhillyTalks* as a technologically mediated event, and in thinking about the consequences of such mediation given the dialogic nature of the event (see his open letter on *PhillyTalks* online).

The *PhillyTalks* format was recast numerous times. The advance newsletter eventually included respondents selected to write on the poets' exchange. Some newsletters in the series featured discussion transcripts. By the end of the series, I started to publish a newsletter supplement, in order to invite post-event respondents. The materials that the post-event respondents had available to them included the advance newsletter with the poets' written exchange, a live event recording (sometimes audiovisual) including emails and telephone calls by virtual participants during the live portion of the event, as well as, on occasion, an edited transcript of the informal post-live event discussion. On average, then, the duration of a *PhillyTalks* event was, for audience members, three weeks or more (and for the two principal poets involved, one or two months, or more), only a part of it was "live" (1½ to 2 hours), and each event was initiated and concluded by written documents. The first *PhillyTalks* newsletter totaled about six pages, followed the review rather than the letter mode, and involved two poets; the nineteenth and last, over fifty pages of single-spaced materials and over six poets (not including audience participants).

In *PhillyTalks*, recording and event-performance become structurally linked in at least two ways—from the truth of how this particular event (and series) unfolded, and, as some poets in the series claim (and as I have been claiming here), from the truth of poetry as an event. Two conditions had to be met, then exceeded: the presence of readers and writers together, and, interlinked with this first condition, a second, the staged yet unpredictable event of poetry.

One significant difference from Antin's talks, even from Perelman's series, is that the dialogic nature of oral and written exchange is fully manifest in the *PhillyTalks* event. The minimal unit is two, not one. One effect is to alter the concept/category of reader. Ron Silliman recently asserts: "In poetry, *the self is a relation* [in other words, a social relation] between writer and reader that is triggered by what Jakobson called contact, the power of presence. There is no subject that is not, strictly speaking, intersubjective" (Silliman 373, italics added) The subject is a collaboratively constituted event. Silliman adds: "No event invokes the power of presence like a reading" (373). I would like to dwell for a moment on what Silliman means by "reading." He reveals an ambiguity in the word. "Reading" can refer to a critical interpretation; hence, if we were to follow Silliman's statement, the "power of presence" referred to must be the critic's. "Reading" can also refer to a literary event (poetry reading or talk); so too then the "power of presence" established via contact must refer to the poet's, or interchangeably, poem's, or interchangeably yet again (but in the broadest

Criticism as
event is criticism
that transforms.

terms that embrace the subject-positions of both critic and poet), event's. Thus *PhillyTalks* is a format designed to engender poetry as event, which means engendering criticism as part of the event as well—that ventriloquizing (as Silliman calls it) interpretive apparatus usually regulated by the educational institution and its disciplines and rules. Criticism as event is criticism that transforms the professionalizing and institutional—but importantly, not historical—moorings in the subject-position (professional critic) and the object (poem). Silliman argues that the question of who speaks in the poem continues to be a major theoretical concern for poet and critic, whose formal and interpretive decisions respectively are affected by how each comes to answer this highly problematicizing question. Silliman's own answer is that the so-called self in the poem “has very little to do with whether the text is autobiographical, adopts a persona, is dictated by Martians (as Jack Spicer suggested), or utilizes the language of ghosts or lions except insofar as whatever stance it takes proposes a relation between the poet, a real person with history, biography, psychology, and the reader, no less real encumbered by all this baggage” (372–3). Thus self and subject of poem are a set of social relations between writers and readers. In these terms (which have a legacy through V.N. Voloshinov's social-accent theory of language-use, back to the sixth of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* where the concept of “social relation” is for the first time severed from the idea of a transhistorical essence of human nature¹⁶), a *PhillyTalks* enacts the collective self and subject of the poem. In “The Subject of *PhillyTalks*,” Matt Hart considers the event's plural subject-status as a principal feature of the series, concluding:

PhillyTalks doesn't imply any particular model of subjectivity. As long as we view subjectivity as a psycho-social phenomenon cut through by identities of race or gender or sexuality [or class, etc.], the series will be constituted by the collision, or collaboration, between the different speaking subjects that fill its physical, virtual and textual halls. Not “presence” but “presences,” not subjectivity but intersubjectivity, and not a discrete and harmonious addition of newsletter upon reading

16 The publication record of these texts describes a highly foreshortened diachronic trajectory: Voloshinov and Marx become virtual contemporaries. While Marx wrote his eleven theses on Ludwig Feuerbach in 1845, they were only published in Russian (and in German) in 1924. Voloshinov published his social-accent theory of language-use in 1929. For the historical importance of Marx's sixth Feuerbach thesis on the concept of the social relation, I am indebted to the emphasis that Étienne Balibar places on it in *The Philosophy of Marx*.

upon talk, but a demanding not-quite-synthesis of writings, genres and performances. (n.p.)

There is a striking resonance between the notion of event that a *PhillyTalks* enacts and Alain Badiou's philosophy of the event. For Badiou, too, the subject is created by the event. "Thus conceived," Badiou writes, the subject

does not overlap with the psychological subject, nor even with the reflexive subject (in Descartes's sense) or the transcendental subject (in Kant's sense). For example, the subject induced by fidelity to an amorous encounter, the subject of love, is *not* the "loving" subjects described by the classical moralists.... [W]hat I am talking about has no natural pre-existence. The lovers as such enter into the composition of *one* loving subject, who exceeds them both. (43)

While *PhillyTalks*' event-status might suggest Pound's and Gaudier-Brzeska's "vortex," Benjamin Lee Whorf's Hopi-derived verb, "eventing," Foucault's call "to restore to discourse its character as an event" (Foucault 229), Nancy's "social being-plural" without origin, it is Badiou's event philosophy that seems to offer the most fully developed theory of the event as, specifically, a future-oriented, plural occasion.¹⁷

Here is an example from a *PhillyTalks* newsletter of how its event-status as a form of talking/recording implicitly alters the constitution of the categories of criticism/poetry and writer/reader. At the risk of the series coming across as monologic, I wish to continue with the example of u.s. poet Ron Silliman, whom I had invited in 1998 to engage in dialogue with a poet from a younger generation and a different country, Canadian Jeff Derksen. Silliman's first pre-event letter to Derksen begins:

Thinking perhaps too literally about your interest in contradiction, the following revision of Bob Grenier's 1971 declaration popped into my mind:

I hate speech but like talks

How does this contradiction—liking talks, hating speech—work itself out? "Speech" here is code for the Olsonian breath-line as much as for a naive conception of free verse (the "McPoem of the Writing Workshops," below). "Talks" by contrast evokes the necessary role of criticality, com-

17 I consider some of these other interpretations of the event in dialogues with Aaron Levy: "On *PhillyTalks* Online" and "On the Event, the Real-Time Image, the Archive, and Other *PhillyTalks* Matters."

mentary, etc., in poetry, regardless of poetics partisanship. Here is mostly the rest of Silliman's first letter, locating poetry in the world, from the initial premise that talking about poetry is necessary to grounding poetry in the present:

Poetry, like so many cultural phenomena, proceeds by apparent opposition. I say "apparent" because it always seems to be possible to step back from the immediate context only to discover that the seeming difference is instead just the next step in a larger logic that proves all encompassing. Langpo opposes the speech-based poetics of New American poetry, yet is on another level just the next generation of a tradition that goes back through Creeley, Olson, Eigner, the Beats and the New York School, through the Objectivists and high modernists all the way to Whitman, Blake, Dickinson, and even, if you look at the work of Charles Bernstein and Bob Perelman, Alexander Pope. Langpo's evil twin, the so-called New Formalism, opposes all variations of modernism, yet it and Langpo have remarkably similar things to say about the McPoem of the Writing Workshops. Step back further still and all three tendencies are making a parallel argument about the value of something called poetry in an increasingly post-literate world....

So my question is this: is there a deeper relation between contradiction and opposition, or is it merely (only) the entropic one of scale? What about other "apparent" oppositions—for example, between prose and verse? Or between national traditions, the whole spectrum of identarian differentiation? (*PhillyTalks* 3)

Silliman strives for an objective view of the contemporary poetic field, a sociological perspective that is able to acknowledge the formal and historical specificities of various poetic strategies and tendencies.

I offer one further excerpt from another newsletter in order to demonstrate that there is no consensus on how to historically read the social forces articulating the contemporary poetic field. This is from a transcript of the post-reading discussion from *PhillyTalks* 14 (1999), featuring Dan Farrell and Peter Inman:

INMAN One difference I would locate in the way we work is, basically, that my whole strategy (if I can dignify it with that term) is to isolate a space, to isolate the language—it would sort of be the opposite of interaction with ideological terms.

It would almost be set up like an anti-contamination chamber. I saw that as a difference. There are a lot of similarities I think in our interests in terms of the historical nature of language and in terms of trying to go against the ideological pre-usage of terms. But I did see that as a difference.

FARRELL I think I would say that that's not what we're doing. That kind of isolation or creating that space—I don't think that is actually the way I would read that work or the way I would look at or listen to that work. It's more like you're creating a depth to what you're dealing with rather than an empty space.

INMAN Right. I guess the difference would be, for me—it's really a case of starting from square zero and building up from at least a symbolic nothing. Now I think all of us are aware that that's not possible and that there's a strong gestural element and utopic element to that kind of project. But I still think at this point in time, and probably at other points in time, it really is necessary to get away from the continual stream of information and non-speak that we're being baraged with and sort of try to say, well, there can be a space within an administered whole, to use an Adornian term, to look at the possibility of finding something that could actually create space within that. The model would sort of be instead of a world that's chunked full of atoms and magma, you've got a Nerf ball where there are pores. There is activity that can occur there.

FARRELL It's a different way of describing it, I think. I see that whole Nerf ball as being not so total. These pores are actually where language fails and where you can then create a space where you're actually using that language again...
(*PhillyTalks* 14)

On inspection of Inman's and Farrell's poetry (which for lack of space, I cannot present here) it could be argued that, were one to follow Silliman's schema (in his letter, above), both poets work within a poetics tendency that "opposes" speech-based poetics. But this is not the end of it. Reading and/or listening to them talk about their poetry, one realizes, if one did not before, that each poet holds to a completely different set of assumptions about how poetry integrates and does not integrate into the world, into the social. Inman assumes that a poet can set up an "anti-contamination chamber" of words against capitalist relations constituting the social world, which is reminiscent of Adorno's approach to the modernist lyric.

Silliman strives for an objective view of the contemporary poetic field, a sociological perspective that is able to acknowledge the formal and historical specificities of various poetic strategies and tendencies.

On the contrary, Farrell assumes, in the post-Marxian discourse-theory mode of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, that the social totality (“that whole Nerf ball”) does not exist as such, allowing for the re-use of what Inman conceives to be “contaminated” language. For Farrell, the capitalist “contamination” of language is not total, but incomplete, partial, in flux even.

PhillyTalks not only alters the concepts/categories of criticism/poetry and writer/reader, but also poem. The object of reified attentions, the identity of the poem, shifts, from being found in book or anthology, circulating within an economy of book production and reception, to poem as an event, staged within, interrupting, slowing down circulation and communication within the paradox of a *produced reception*.

The event is thus primary to the *PhillyTalks*. Enacting a tension between performance and recording is a motive force of the *PhillyTalks* event. As an organizer, I want to ask: How might talking be reflexively defamiliarized from conversation, within the present moment, so that conversation’s default setting—some version of Richard Rorty’s liberal pragmatism, or of Jürgen Habermas’s “communicative rationality,” perhaps—shifts ever so slightly? Clay Shirky recently made an interesting assertion at the 2003 O’Reilly Emerging Technologies conference that has circulated among poetry bloggers: “Prior to the Internet, the last technology that had any real effect on the way people sat down and talked together was the table.” Shirky coins a phrase, “social software,” defining it, in plain terms, as software that “supports group interaction.”

One example of a social software platform that supports group interaction is the poetry listserv, and more recently, poetry blogs such as Brian Kim Stefans’s *Free Space Comix*. I like this analogy to the table for the allusion it contains to a long-standing literary genre, table-talk, but realize at the same time that there have been plenty of other technologies for “social software” (software in the metaphorical sense) since, for example, Boswell and Johnson. The *PhillyTalks* format suggests, finally, a “live proceduralism,” a phrase which I borrow from Jackson Mac Low describing his determined chance-generated texts requiring group performance. It is as an enacted proceduralism that recording and performance become reflexively and structurally interrelated, and that the archive of the *PhillyTalks* event becomes the event of the archive. This idea of *supporting* group interaction reflexively links to *shaping* group interaction and both have been central to poetry—from the idea of the modernist aesthetic manifesto to poets’ talk.

Acknowledgements

A shorter version of this paper was delivered as an oral presentation for “The Event of the Archive” panel organized for the Archiving Modernism conference (University of Alberta, Edmonton, July 22–26, 2003) and posted online at Slought Foundation <<http://slought.org>>. I am grateful to Michael O’Driscoll for having invited me, as a board member of Slought, together with Aaron Levy, its director, to present on Slought and poetry, recording and the online archive. Thanks to Kyle Schlesinger for bringing to my attention the essay by Michael Davidson listed in the works cited, Michael Basinski for help in securing me a copy of it, Timothy Yu for sharing his conference paper with me and for providing me with the example of Allen Ginsberg, and Aaron Vidaver for a transcript of the *Philly Talks* 14 discussion.

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