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David Antin: listening and listing¹

Hélène Aji

or maybe i should go in with a video camera instead of a view
camera and ask these people if they want to tell me what they
think its like their life and i shoot it and show it to them so
they can give me their second thoughts about it because maybe
they think their first thoughts werent right it seems to me
most people would want to take a crack at that making their
own self-portrait especially if they arent worried about their
lack of readiness or competence and have a chance for second thoughts
except perhaps in that part of the art world where no one has
second thoughts about his life because you cant have second
thoughts where there are no first ones
(Antin “remembering recording representing” in Dawsey 190)

¹ The final version of this article owes a lot to the editing suggestions made by three students in my poetry seminar at the University of Texas at Austin (Fall 2017): Hailey Kriska, John Calvin Pierce, and Emma Whitworth were supportive and constructive as I struggled with the distressing fact of writing about David’s work without David.

In “remembering recording representing,” David Antin imagines a project to collect autobiographies that would kindly allow the autobiographers to have “second thoughts,” and amend their first accounts. As an ironical afterthought, he adds a slightly cryptic twist: how can one have second thoughts “where there are no first ones”? This is much further reaching than at first sight, as with much of David Antin’s work: in the context of the present article it translates into an invitation to reconsider the work, what has been said about it, and what may have remained largely unsaid because unthought in the first place. The striking form of the talk-poem and massive corpus that falls into this category could be seen as “second thought”: the original actualization of a more overall procedural strategy that presides over Antin’s poetic production from the beginning.

In his introduction to the *Selected Talk Poems of David Antin*, Stephen Fredman calls forth the key concepts that preside over any assessment of the work, and, with mentions of Marcel Duchamp, Allan Kaprow and Andy Warhol, outlines less of a lineage than a possible community of intention able to transfer the poet outside “the limits of poetry” into the domain of the visual arts, and of performance:

Like the conceptual pioneers who eschewed technique but redefined the medium and contexts for visual art, such as Duchamp, Kaprow, and Warhol, Antin is an adventurous explorer assessing the limits of poetry. Giving up the attractive coloration of meter, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and stanza form, his talk poems offer instead brilliant bursts of intellectual light provoked by radical demythologizing, linguistic playfulness, conceptual enigmas, new theoretical discoveries, and uncanny collisions among a company of memorable characters. (Fredman “Introduction” in Antin *Selected* xxiii)

The poetic medium is questioned, as its conventional defining traits are discarded, though one may find in Antin’s texts alternative reinvestments of these traits, informing and structuring an only apparently continuous flow of discourse: meter is deprived of its fixity but still present on the page as spacing alludes to the persistence of feet; the unjustified margins make up lines that resist the temptation of prose; sounds and words return in rhythmic patterns; or the twists and turns of digression as demonstration form proto-stanzaic movements that lead from irruption to interruption, from the onset of

the talk to its provisional closure. Myth, language, conceptualization, the exploratory qualities of speech, the challenges of contingency and contiguity are indeed the so-to-speak nuclear cores of Antin's work, radiating from all of his texts, from the early experiments of the *november exercises* to the more widely disseminated talk-poems.

As in the liminary quote from Antin, the preoccupations focus on some key issues: accounting for the reality of experience; evidencing the processes of memory and witnessing; adapting accounts to present situations; assessing the conditions for the production of this discourse about experience through iterated performance. Like the people in the fictitious video project of "remembering recording representing," the poet needs to overcome or at least control his doubts about the relevance of his "self-portrait," and his "worries" about being not "ready" or "competent" enough. The challenge rests in addressing Antin's work as a whole, beyond talking back to the talk-poem: we need to "take a crack at that" now, to borrow Antin's own colloquial expression. The variety of his procedural experimentation overflows the specificity of the talk-poem, and works up to it as a series of attempts, that have a cumulative effect in their iterations and variations. The talk-poem, in its written transcribed version from the recording of a performance, is "second thoughts". In the quotation above, lineation plays on the phrase, separating "second" from "thought" in the third instance of the terms: it is elusive "thought," postponed to the next line as it is postponed from experience.

Thinking as a provisional process is what the talk-poem evidences. The streamlined conditions of the poem's production show the heterogeneity of Antin's art rather than what is often described as a homogeneous idiosyncratic poetic form. The talk-poem implies a procedural process involving multimedia creation: live performance; audio recording; transcription into a single continuous text; inclusion into the "radical coherency" of a volume; integration into the massive diversity of an archive. It articulates what is at stake not only with his poetry but with poetry at large in a world that is "post" (postwar, post-Holocaust, postmodern...), and which this paper will try to address: the relation to reality or Antin as "debunker of the real"; the choice of audio and text over video as testing the delusion of presence in performance; the production of minor narratives as method to undermine the dictatorship of master

narratives; the choice of procedural modes of composition to define the boundaries of the author's authority.

With "whos listening out there," Antin does not just raise the question of the work's reception (who these people in the audience are, what their expectations are, and how the mechanisms of "hearing" what they are listening to are activated, in their openness and limitations.) The anecdote told by Marjorie Perloff collapses the 1979 talk-poem with an event she had organized when Antin's practice collided with the expectations of a "listener":

Here an anecdote may be apposite. In 1980 or so, I invited David to give a poetry reading—that is, a talk—at USC. The auditorium was reassuringly full. But about ten minutes into the piece—I think it was 'Who's Listening out There?'—David was interrupted by a woman's voice from the audience. 'When,' she asked impatiently, 'does the poetry reading begin?' Everyone laughed. 'You're not going to hear anything you're not hearing now,' David responded calmly, 'so feel free to leave. There is nothing else coming.' She stayed. (Perloff 179)

It is this article's contention that the succession of Antin's experiments with the poem as concept (the idea of composition), process (the modes of composition) and product (the resulting textual objects) generate a list of instances of listening to one man listening to the poem of contingency. Each of these instances stand as so many hopeful incitations to oneself and others towards a non-prescriptive, non-normative listening to the world.

"Debunker of the 'real'"

On second thoughts, then, if one returns to the "discrete series" of Antin's poems now housed in the Getty archive,² including all his texts published and unpublished, official in books or ensconced in the secrecy of notebooks, one might want also to reconsider Lita Hornick's 1979 chapbook, *David Antin Debunker of the "Real."* Although relatively thin, it is most certainly the first (and as yet only) book to be entirely devoted to his work: it is committed to the work and its evolutions in open admiration of Antin's audacity. A downside of this is that it remains consistently descriptive whereas it could have interrogated its own categories: both the "debunking" and the "real." Antin's demystifying and de-mythologizing processes do

² On this, see Perloff 178.

not so much cancel myth as they propose alternative constructions of myth and collective expression through the de-realization and conceptualization of personal reality. A recurrent dynamic of the talk-poem is thus to take over the material of individual experience and construct its convergence through contiguity with other seemingly disconnected events: a kind of common denominator emerges allowing the provisional formulation of an idea and thus bringing the poem to a close. This is the conclusion Stephen Fredman draws from Antin's poetic practice in his notes for the 1975 issue of *Vort* dedicated to both David Antin and Jerome Rothenberg:

His method is what Lévi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind*) calls *bricolage*--a man pulls used elements out of his sack and throws them together so they make a structure that fits the present need. Lévi-Strauss sees this as homologous to myth-making. A scientist differs in that he invents new materials. An artist is between the two. Antin leans more toward pure *bricolage* in his Talkings. He tries to argue ideas with other poets & push them into his way of thinking--but that misses the point: it's not his way of thinking but his way structuring that is unique. (Fredman "Notes on Antin" *Vort* 66-67)

The extent to which Antin's talk-poems enforce structure (through Lévi-Straussian *bricolage* and structuralism) rather than de-center it and deconstruct it (as with Jacques Derrida's initial take on the epistemological limitations of any systematizing normative process³) can be discussed. David Antin himself carries out this discussion when he describes the awakening from the "dream" of Claude Lévi-Strauss to the transformation of the domain of hard science into an art domain.⁴ The detour of myth and art leads to a redefinition of the "real" as other than reality. This "real" is what discourse deals with, since reality is nowhere to be found as soon as mediation occurs. This "real" emerges as an abstraction characterized by its relativity, and provisionality. So, what Hornick's book does in a ground-breaking albeit unassuming manner is to outline and problematize the transition between the procedural

³ See "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1970) in *Of Grammatology*.

⁴ "It may be that Lévi-Strauss was suffering from modernist delusion when he imagined that anthropology would lie down among the social sciences to rise among the natural sciences. It may, after a troubled sleep, like linguistics, like sociology, like history, like psychology, or even mathematics, profitably wake up to find itself among the arts." (Antin "Postmodernism?" 134-135)

and ironic work of the beginnings (the *november exercises*, the *london march*, *novel poem* notably that are based on systematic appropriation and recontextualization of found text) and the stabilized idiosyncratic form of the “talk-poem,” as first evidenced in “talking at pomona” (1972). The transition may seem to yield a new poetic genre, but it also represents one possibility to draw the formal consequences from a dynamic reflection on the “real,” this experience of reality in the present and its interpretation in language.

In this perspective, Hornick indicates directions for further inquiry into Antin’s poetics: the diverse forms of the poem, culminating with the talk-poem, emerge from an ongoing attention paid to the real as experienced reality. The malleability of the textual medium allied to the devising of specific modes of composition thus generates changeable formations and “configurations” (Hornick 7). She indeed spells out major lines of questioning that inform David Antin’s work: about occasion and the occasional poem; about readiness, preparation, and the accomplishment of one’s project; about dislocation in composition when one ceases to conform with the convention of “sitting at a typewriter and addressing a hypothetical audience” (16-17). Although she primarily seems to be limiting herself to an introduction to David Antin, a relatively young and lesser known poet at the time, she in fact brings to the fore the ontological issues that are consistently addressed by the poet. The evolving tactics of the poem try to circumscribe these questions, at the same time as they evidence their pervasive and irredeemably “enigmatic” qualities (Fredman “Introduction” in Antin *Selected* xxiii).

His major theme is the ambiguity of truth in all human learning and all mental configurations. Related to this are the themes of the ambiguity of the self and the unreliability of memory.
(Hornick 7)

Test of presence

“Ambiguity,” and “unreliability,” these are not so much “themes” of the poems as what the poems come to embody: they enact the instability of knowledge and understanding at every level. They engulf in a common condition of mutability the producer of the text, the processes of its production, a product that is objectified in multiple media, and a whole gamut of potential receivers. The audiences of the poems range from the witnesses

of the performance to the hypothetical readers of a book, through the frustrated listeners of a tape who, like Barry Alpert in 1975, wish they could see the source of the voice and who wonder about Antin's refusal of video:

The ontology of Antin's improvised oral poetry is unusual, to say the least. A talk first exists as it is being articulated live by David Antin. The original aural experience can be simulated by listening to a tape-recording of the talk proper. Since one can listen to any part or the whole talk any number of times, the audiotape is not merely a canned substitute for the original experience. It has an unfixed temporal existence of its own. Antin hasn't yet arranged, as far as I know, to have one of his improvised performances videotaped. Since he's worked with videotape before, I'm not clear about his reasons. The videotape would share certain possibilities inherent in the audiotape and at the same time compensate more adequately for the absence of Antin's human presence in the poem. (Alpert "Post-Modern Oral Poetry" 680)

Alpert's suggestion of video as "compensating" for Antin's absence "more adequately" than audio expresses a deeply-ingrained desire for and fantasy of an actual presence of the poet and the poem. In better-known terms, this reader aspires to what William Carlos Williams would qualify as an idolizing relationship both to the poet and to his text: yet if we want "to cease to be idolators," says Williams, we must stop confusing reality and its "signs" (*The Embodiment of Knowledge* 182).

This is why the audiotape is paradoxically successful thanks to its very shortcomings: as can be experienced by listening to the recordings from the Getty digital collections, audio subtracts the body, foregrounds the absence of the poet, and intensifies the efforts of attention to the text. In print, the poem is further disembodied, but encounters a new materiality. The formatting intervenes at that point to extend the reader's estrangement from the poet as person through the deliberately bizarre and disorienting typesetting of unjustified margins, lack of punctuation, phonological word spacing and spelling. Consistently Antin's works signal how his texts deal in the "signs" for experience rather than in the actual experience. Formal exploration, in Alpert's evaluation, is directed at an idealized total conservation of the "original aural experience," which he assumes would be better approximated with the use of video than with audiotapes. But if one considers Antin's commitment

to oral poetry and, to some extent, to ethnopoetics from the 1960s onward and mainly through his awareness of his friend Jerome Rothenberg's work, this conservation may not be the objective of Antin's experiments with the form of the poem: rather it is what is lost in representations of the lived moment that is exhibited, both in the staging of memory in all the talk-poems and through the lacunae in the conservation process.

The dubious case for audio over video may be meaningful in the way absence is foregrounded by the explicit choice of partial traces against a medium that could provide the delusion of integral persistence of the original experience over time. Key to Antin's devices, radical ephemerality and incompleteness, loss of aura, of intensity and of information are built into the structure in ways that are not to be "compensated." As Alpert underlines, and Jill Dawsey reminds us, David Antin promoted video as a major art medium as early as 1971, but chooses not to use it himself. He "took a group of graduate students with him to learn video production in the only place on campus where that was possible: in the basement of the medical school, where autopsies were videotaped for teaching purposes" though (Dawsey "Introduction" 18). What was to be learnt about video production from the videotaping of autopsies at the medical school? Were those morbid occasions the only ones available for Antin's teaching of video to his visual arts students, or did the fact of these videos' objects (dead bodies to be dissected) provide an embedded reflexive comment on some lethal effect of video on its objects despite the assumption of a total, "live" recording?

Antin's take on video is that it might work only if used as a recording device that can be corrected (Antin "remembering recording representing" *in* Dawsey 190), and not as the answer to the wild fantasy of seizing the present and recovering life through aesthetic and poetic devices. Sherman Paul's appraisal of the task of the talk-poem, its objectives and achievements thus echoes Barry Alpert's wish for video:

The talk poems restore the primacy of speech and demonstrate some of the things that enable us to live in a human universe. As the title of some of them tell us, there is the need to be (in the) present, in the here/now of one's occasion; to live one's life now and not, as Thoreau would say, postpone it. We are always in

the right place; it is always the right time. And we can have our lives by contacting them, by talking about them. (Paul 42)

The poem as direct response to existential imperatives is not a notion foreign to Antin's own practice of composition, as he redefines the status of the poetic text by turning it, apparently at least, into the raw transcription of a language event. This emerges as an alternative take on earlier or contemporary destabilizations of the text which, according to Antin himself, have stemmed from the vogue of poetry readings. The poem as "score" (as in Jackson Mac Low) or as "notation" (as in Charles Olson) "occupies a middle ground between an idea of oral poem and an idea of literature" (Antin "Modernism" 132). Yet, the poem as "in the present" or literature as "of the present," which video might seem to support, are but decoys. The "primacy of speech" claimed by Paul (42) cannot be sustained; Antin's work stages the unavoidable "secondariness" of all discourse. Video tries to obliterate the fact that life is lost in mediatization. It fails in doing so, but does occasionally support delusions of presence and immediacy. Significantly, the same tension between success and failure informs Antin's discussion of modernism in *Occident* as early as 1974, and feeds into the general debate over genre and medium. "Art's claim to truth" (Antin "Some Questions" 37) persists and motivates the redefinition of genre and medium as notions in flux, rather than as fixed *loci* for the production of art:

The point is that modernism to play itself out had to step away from the Romantic domain of definition in order to determine to what degree the application of the fundamental axiom for defining the medium was necessary and sufficient in itself. This resulted in a new version of the fundamental axiom: *it is necessary to define the medium of action, the elements that are acted upon and the operations that are performed upon them to make a work or a body of works*. The defining act had become a mechanism for generating work or, to use the somewhat more appropriate computer terminology, a program. Clearly this version of the axiom does not require distinctive uniqueness for the medium because the medium is not permanent. It is not "the medium" of art or of an art, it is "a medium"—that is a temporary arena, which may be used several times or once and be abandoned without regrets. (Antin "Some Questions" 37)

As a medium implying production and post-production, video cannot be an arena of choice over audio, for instance, since the

stakes are in not in finding a single medium of choice but in using several choices of labile media. Rather than being exclusive of one another, these media remain in constant interaction. By editing and erasing the markers of discourse through montage, video suppresses heterogeneity and the signs of hybridization, doing to reality something akin to what, in Antin's words, "story" does to "narrative": video produces "corpses" that retain the appearance of life in the same way as stories piece together types of information to produce a homogeneous and continuous whole. Story homogenizes sources to the extent of canceling their tense inadequacies and of preventing the processes of their hybridization.⁵ In the videos of autopsies of UCSD medical school, the interest lies not just in the technology but in the implications of this technology made explicit by their incidental objects: the fantasy of life conservation through the moving image is simultaneously staged and undermined, recorded and remembered against odds as one witnesses the *mise en abîme* of clinical dismemberment. The "fraud" is in the pseudonarrative or fiction of direct witnessing and presence which it enforces, in ways similar to what Antin calls the political "pseudonarratives" of history: processes that generates fake agents and fake facts which dogmatic discourses and ideologies instrumentalize to limit the range of individual or collective self-awareness.

I think you have a narrative corpse or, to put it another way, you can have a fraudulently invented narrative, a pseudonarrative, as in political narratives. Historical narrative is often of this order. For example, master narratives of a nation's history are generally pseudonarratives undertaken for particular subject enjoyment, and they've tended to engender a justifiable distrust for narrative history among historical scholars. They become pseudonarratives when they begin to generate pseudosubjects like "the people," "the working class," "the revolutionary spirit,"

⁵ Significantly Antin returns to the issue in many of his essays, and some of the talk-poems, attempting to address the persistence of these categories that prevent at the same time as they provoke experimentation and the rise of artistic avant-garde. See for instance his 1989 essay "The Stranger at the Door": "As many, and perhaps even more, of my contemporaries would be dissatisfied with it, apparently definition is no more useful for the notion of a genre than it is for the notion of a family. Seen from this view point the viability of a genre like the viability of a family is based on survival, and the indispensable property of a surviving family is a continuing ability to take in new members who bring fresh genetic material into the old reservoir. So the viability of a genre may depend fairly heavily on an avant-garde activity that has often been seen as threatening its very existence, but is more accurately seen as opening its present to its past and to its future." (Antin "Stranger" 245)

“the citizen,” “France,” “the Free World,” which are usually endowed with fictive feelings that suggest fantasy subjectivities. (Antin *in* McHale 98)

“Minor” narrative?

Antin’s narrative would then be “minor” in the sense given to the term by Gilles Deleuze in his comments on Franz Kafka’s use of the German language in writing his fiction: the language is made strange to itself through the more or less perceptible thwarting of conventions. This strangeness questions narrative conventions and their coercive implications.⁶ Similarly, when Antin mentions “master narratives,” he refers to the danger of master narratives pointed out in Jean-François Lyotard’s comments on the postmodern condition, an essay first published in French in 1979, and pervasively commented upon by scholars at the same time as the most intense phase of talk-poem production. Antin turns to the talk-poem not to tell stories, but to practice stories until they are demystified. Narrative “explains nothing,” contrary to the explicitness and cohesiveness of “story.” Rather narrative highlights “the struggle of the subject to maintain his existence,” and “is the shamanistic transmission of the confrontation” (Antin *in* McHale 101). The dynamics at work in the anecdote about buying socks for his mother at Sears is in this respect emblematic: the poet departs from the anecdote to reassess the coherencies (and incoherencies) at work in the world that surrounds us. He also suggests possibilities to subvert them:

and now whats beginning to interest me is that once
there was a kind of coherency a fully articulated
system of hosiery that included waist height stockings
and knee stockings and calf stockings and ankle
stockings and maybe also toe stockings
but whatever the system contained at this
particular moment all that is left of the system
is whats on the shelves and such logical
structure as we can infer from whats left and whats
left turns out to be calf height and my mother is
once again getting depressed so i grab three pairs
of calf height stockings and assure her that she can
cut them down to anklets when she gets them home

(Antin “radical coherency” 186-187)

⁶ On this see Deleuze on Kafka notably, in a text published in 1975.

The anecdotal story, because it is steeped in the personal, stops short of “master” status; the succession of such stories triggers a conceptual distance that allows narrative to show its stakes. Thus as contrasted with story, which structures, organizes, and imparts teleology, narrative refrains from the “defective” “logical structuring” Antin finds in Brechtian “alienation or estrangement technique” (Antin in McHale 107). The aporia resides in the necessity both of story and of narrative; the difficulty lies in the distinction between these intertwined notions: “you need the story to grasp the logical course of the change. But without the narrative you wouldn’t have the sense of what was at stake” (Antin *in* McHale 101).

In the 2004 interview with Brian McHale, that targets poetic activity as “narrative” Antin gives the example of newspaper stories, and the way they “piece the story together” “into a more or less logical structure” (Antin *in* McHale 97). The example is a reponse to Kenneth Goldsmith’s work, which David Antin knew very well. The newspaper takes front stage indeed in Goldsmith’s 2003 publication of *Day*, the literal transcription of the September 1, 2001 issue of the *New York Times* from front to last pages: through different modes or methods, both Antin and Goldsmith aim at “inferring several possible subjectivities and several possible but unrepresented narratives” (Antin *in* McHale 97). Both Antin and Goldsmith play on the side effects of the expository modes of text. Through literal transcription of every line of the paper from beginning to end in strict succession, Goldsmith returns the different stories to the chaotic state of partial pieces of discourse to be patched together. Unredacted again, the stories cannot recover the integrity of the journalist’s discourse since the reader cannot circulate within the issue to follow the story any longer. Dismantled once through the issue’s composition, then a second time through transcription, the stories become reminders of their own instability and tenuous relationship to a truth of fact. In *Day*, no story will remain unread if one does read the book, but none will acquire the polished closure of what Antin calls “pseudonarrative”; similarly the successive stories in the talk-poem signal their temporary relevance and interchangeability.

With the talk-poem, the main mode which develops is based on successive reminders of “the transactions we undertake with one another,” of our “effort to create a continuum which makes self possible” and how this process is “always conditioned by the nature

of the person to whom you are relating” (Hornick 7). The encounter evidences less the “dialogical” dimension of the talk-poems evoked by Paul,⁷ than the structural significance of “contiguity” mentioned by Hugh Kenner in his brief *Vort* piece:

Contiguity is the oldest of encoding devices. Utterances emitted serially, utterances recorded in adjacent spaces, affirm some perception of connectedness. (Kenner “Antin, Cats, &c.” *Vort* 85)

Kenner’s comment bears essentially on the linguistic process at work within the talk-poem, through the succession of utterances that connect because they unfold in succession. This remark however goes beyond the observation of a language phenomenon. If the stories produce meaning through the very fact of their “contiguity,” it is in this contiguity that intention is located, overcoming and perhaps belying their declared randomness (many Antin stories are incidents or accidents), or the suspicious serendipity of their relevance to the question at hand in the talk. In “The Price,” for instance, the discrepancy between the successive stories helps emphasize the underlying questions raised by the poet about heroism.

because every functionary knows the story of nathan hale
and has an idea of what it might be like to look disdainfully
over the redcoat bayonets and say “I only regret that i have
only one life to give for my country” even though they
may despise both hale and his country and say to themselves i
am not only not nathan hale but ive never wanted to be nathan
hale and i dont admire nathan hale what i want is a quiet
life in the country or a condominium with a swimming pool and
a jacuzzi and anyone who wants anything else is stupid or
a troublemaker

but the knowledge that thats what you want and how
much you want it and are willing to pay for it is also an
organization of a subjectivity around the fault line of some
potential narrative crisis that might dry up your jacuzzi

(Antin *Selected Talk Poems* 352)

Such contiguity within the poem allows for the emergence of a whole range of meanings, at times contradictory: where Antin seems

⁷ On this see Paul 21, and in particular: “The talk poems are also dialogical because, in Buber’s sense, he meets us. Reality—perhaps the poems represent this reality too—reality, real living is meeting. The poems are relational events (Buber’s phrase). As Dick Higgins, who was there, says of exemplative art, ‘the action is always between’.”

to attack heroism as self-sacrifice, he simultaneously shows the construction of subjectivity and its survival as conditioned by such heroic projections of the self. It is the thematic version of a contiguity that connects the successive versions of the work, and assert its transient nature.

The diverse incarnations of the work, in performance, on tape, in transcription, in reader reception, indeed underline the provisional dimension of art in Antin's practice, as well as they enforce a technical consistency, turning each so-called improvisation into a crafted piece. Through their plural contiguities, the talk-poems materialize the impossibility of integral conservation, the serial affirmation of ephemerality, and the poet's realization of any work's circumscribed relevance (to the occasion, to the circumstances of time and space, to the constitution of temporary and unstable communities). This circumscribed relevance is not a fault in the work but rather the very condition for its relevance.

Furthermore this relevance is not solely circumstantial in what Barrett Watten may call a "presentist" commitment (Watten 137ff): it is scripted, and encrypted into the overall production of the poem through a diversity of procedures. One of these procedures presides over the production of the talk-poem The talk-poem is not just what we find in, for instance, Antin's New Directions series of books: it is a total, intermedial and transitory object made of preparation in notation and score, participative production and reception in performance, transcription, edition, publication, reception in print. And still this enumeration might be lacking since the poetic aim to precipitate a crisis of art media is reactivated with each of the poet's interventions.

"underlying procedure" (Antin in Conversation 46)

In this respect, David Antin's take on the "happening" acquires new resonance. In his description of Allan Kaprow's happenings, Antin focuses on the anticipation of the event in "script," and the constraint of "precise instructions" that may generate a "chaotic appearance," but remain orchestrated and organized:

I didn't see happenings as chaotic. Almost every happening I saw or took part in was carefully scripted. There is certainly in the '60s work a kind of baroque painterly quality to surfaces. But Robert Whitman's work, Ken Dewey's, Allan Kaprow's work

in particular, were tightly scripted. Allan's performers usually received very precise instructions and had specific jobs to carry out. The chaotic appearance resulted from the collision of many precise tasks. (Antin *Conversation* 46)

The underlying comment may be self-reflexive and providing tools to understand his own practice of improvisation in the talk-poem. In "Some Questions about Modernism," Antin mentions John Cage, and Jackson Mac Low who carry out similar experiments in procedural participative production (37); in his introduction to the volume dedicated to Allan Kaprow's work, Antin reminisces about joint events in which he and Mac Low took part⁸; well before that, he had paid close attention to Jackson Mac Low's *The Pronouns* when interviewed by Barry Alpert for the *Vort* issue of 1975:

'The Pronouns' was a kind of flickering machine that kept moving around and around building provisional intelligent meanings that would rapidly crumble and that Jackson would construct and reconstruct out of this rubble of obligatory words he could modify only by changing their grammatical relations--turning a verb to a noun or a noun to an adjective and inserting the pronoun in the place he happened to feel like--as the receiver of action or the dealer, so to speak. (*Vort* 15)

Similarly to the remarks on Kaprow, the comment on Mac Low and the "intelligence" of decomposing/recomposing constructions is not solely an approach to the disconcerting methods of Mac Low's works: it indirectly provides more clues to understand Antin's own practice, at a turning point marked by the advent of the talk-poem as an increasingly scripted procedure.

David Huntsperger has thus pointed out the political and cultural implications of proceduralism in the earlier poetry of Antin, notably in his close reading of "Novel Poem," a text composed through the systematic reading-through of pulp fiction or "trashy novels" (Antin's words) and appropriation of citations. The process

⁸ "The first time I saw Allan in action was at a performance of Karlheinz Stockhausen's opera *Originale* in Carnegie Recital Hall, for which Karlheinz had persuaded Allan to play and act as the director. I don't know what the German version is like, but in the American version that Allan seems to have put together himself with a little help from Charlotte Moorman, it was a carnivalesque affair with lots of things going on at the same time, lots of props--ladders and scaffoldings, a trapeze hanging from the ceiling and lots of colorful people--the "originals" of the title--wandering in and out. There was a kind of audience, mostly on the stage at the end of the hall, while the action was on the floor. Jackson Mac Low and I, who were recruited to simply read poetry no matter what happened, were seated at the edge of the stage." (Antin *in* Kelley xii)

follows previous attempts, in *the november exercises* with snippets from the news, or in part III of the “Black Plague” which Antin describes as “an arrangement of words taken from a translation of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*” (Antin *definitions* 38). Huntsperger focuses on the way procedures of poetic composition thematize and critique “the larger conditions of production within an era of American hegemony,” making “intellectual labor—either implicitly or explicitly—the primary concern of the literary work” (Huntsperger 3): this leads him to read Antin’s intention as underscoring “the creativity required by the act of reading itself, which is always both an act of consumption and production of meaning” (Huntsperger 83).

Following up on what Huntsperger sees as Antin “further expanding the possibilities of proceduralism itself” in the openly procedural experiments of the 1960s and early 1970s (76), one can see that the talk-poem prolongs and seals this commitment to proceduralism. It does this in a paradoxical way, since the work primarily seems to fall into the category of live performance and improvisation. Yet from having helped David organize several of his talks I know that there were fixed conditions to be fulfilled for the performance to take place: the unscripted part was carefully framed by an addition of factors (the definition of place and occasion well ahead of the event; an evaluation of the expected audience; room organization and the visible presence of the recorder; no chair...). Through the production of this type of constraints, Antin’s work evolves in a manner akin to the procedural inventiveness of Jackson Mac Low, Allan Kaprow, or Jerome Rothenberg, all of them friends and collaborators.

This is also what might account for the closeness between Antin and French Oulipo poet Jacques Roubaud, which Marjorie Perloff underlines in her text “In Memoriam: David Antin (1932-2016),” calling them “kindred spirit[s]” (179). Roubaud finds interest in Antin’s talk-poem because it is procedural. This proceduralism does not contradict the idea of Antin as “an American pragmatist” (Perloff 179) as it helps in fact define this pragmatism. Antin brings about a fundamental recognition of the empirical nature of poetic form. The claim had been made before the talk-poem for flexible poetic forms as a pragmatic response to changeable conditions, and Antin’s talk-poem responds to that claim while countering the criticism against

“free” form: flexibility does not imply to renounce form altogether. The talk-poems are simultaneously unique in their form and iterative in their successive instances because they are the results of a single procedure that is in part scripted and in part conditioned by exterior factors: they emerge as the form of flexible form.

The device of the talk-poem aims at accounting for the irreducible contingency of existence and of creation: it hinges on a procedure whereby the conditions of composition have been identified and assessed. Some of these conditions have been procedurally determined and scripted: an anticipated time and location, the recorder, the presence of an audience, the process of transcription, and formatting in print. Meanwhile, other variables are ostensibly put into play: the inscription of the moment in individual and collective history, the specificity of a place, the interaction with the audience, the demands of expository coherence in writing, the unspecified yet enforced constraint of about an hour’s performing/reading time for each talk-poem.

As one can infer from these enumerations that make up the main characteristics of the talk-poem, the overarching main rule or constraint, to take up Oulipian terminology, the common denominator to all the items in the series is time. This is the intuition of Jennifer Scappettone in the conclusion to her comparison between Antin and Rothenberg. She maps out the convergence and divergence of two works with apparently very different options:

The poetic act emerges as a pulse of potentially infinite rapprochement and estrangement— until time, for the moment, runs out. (Scappettone 785)

The metaphor of “a pulse” used by Scappettone is significant, as it crystallizes the iterative dimension of the compositional modes, their regularity, their implied perceptiveness to the context as well as their essential vital urgency.

the ethics of conceptualism

Recent assessments of the work have thus shown the convergence between Antin’s work and the work of younger artists. This is the case with some photographers and videasts from the 2016 exhibition at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. The catalogue to the exhibition features Antin’s 1976 “remembering recording representing,” from which I quoted initially. This talk is a

landmark in Antin's work, as it thematizes the parallel workings of memory and of the talk-poem. In the 2016 San Diego exhibition, Antin is included among artists "diverse in their approaches, [that] shared an orientation toward conceptualism and a desire to challenge modern orthodoxies" (Dawsey "Introduction" 18). This "conceptualism" dating back to the 1970s takes us up to the present, and present instances of "conceptual writing." The definition may shift as the term moves into the foreseeable future of poetic work, but it may also offer tools for a rephrasing of poetic practices in less negative (non-modern) or relative (post-modern), thus more proactive/productive terms.

As William Spurlock had already noticed in his introductory notes to the 1979 Santa Barbara Museum of Art exhibit entitled *Dialogue/Discourse/Research*, a key issue in Antin's processes is the achievement of a specific state of "readiness." Readiness implies much more anticipation and intentionality than the fantasies of spontaneous explosions of fascinating intelligence and wit may allow for.

Antin's process is to prepare himself with knowledge about his subject by spending several days "on location," researching and dialoguing with it as a resource for his performance. When he enters the gallery for the *Dialogue*, his artistic process is complete to the point of formalization. His resources include what he has learned from the location and the linguistic concerns at the base of all his work. With all in readiness, the dialogue is structured and the experience manifested at the moment of presentation. In this sense, the *Dialogue* is in the recent tradition of site-specific art. His work is conditioned by the circumstances of his immediate environment. (Spurlock in *Dialogue* 4)

Thus, a twofold dialectics is at work in the production of the talk-poem, that rests on this achievement of "readiness." It involves preparation and scripting well beyond the mere awareness of a day and place for a planned event in the calendar: the "site-specificity" of Spurlock's comment implies a siting of the poem in an intellectual and mental place, that may be as systematic, and much less random than expected. This mental and intellectual siting of the poem impacts the text as strongly and significantly as the practical and material conditions of its production, and is part of the procedure.

A way to this mental space is through David Antin's notebooks: they abound in exploratory lists that move from

conventional phrases to uncanny expressions (figure 1), that create connections between words through substitution and permutation (figure 2, but also a feature of figure 1), that keep testing linguistic organizations and foreground potential connections that will generate “infinite” possibilities “until time [...] runs out” (Scappettone 785). When the notations span three pages and two different notebooks (figures 3 and 4), they encourage the reader to deconstruct the boundaries of single volumes.

After having destabilized the line, the stanza, and the page through the form of the talk-poem, Antin performs this paring-down to the “radical coherency” of poetic work as he intends it: in a poetics of relation and sociability (“friend”), through repetition (“accumulate”), attention (“recognize”), conservation (“save”), maybe some form of salvation (“save”), to ensure transmission for an elusive distant voice (“telephone”). Indeed, the process of defamiliarization that distances us from linguistic configurations pervades all levels of the work from the “atomic” level of letrist games (figure 2) to the “cosmic” level of the book as “gravitational center”:

So I seem to remember writing the name of each of my pieces on a small slip of paper and putting them in a pile from which I extracted one at a time and considered it for inclusion or exclusion. Once I had my eight inclusions I had to figure out the placement, which was easy for the first one and the last two in the book. The first serves as an imaginary origin piece and the last two gave my image of a “personal” piece. Then there was “the sociology of art” [...] And so it went with this notion of the book as a kind of solar system with a gravitational center and a set of planetary talks orbiting around it. (Antin *Selected* 379)

The lists for a contents table in figure 5 illustrate this method of composition as it affects the composition of the book, inclusions and exclusions, and the attention paid to the re-contextualization of the poem in the “site-specific” conditions of a printed volume.

It also incites us to look back at the organizations of Antin’s poetics as deliberately transitional, calculated yet changeable formations. The texts conceptualize this condition of contingency, provisionality and contiguity; art’s configurations are alternative linguistic systems that “take a crack at” organization (Antin “remembering recording representing” in Dawsey 190). Disconcertingly however, they constantly threaten to return to the random units and sequences of “pieces on [a] small slip[s] of

paper [...] in a pile” (Antin *Selected* 379). But listings such as those exhibited in the archive but also in a wide number of published poems show us the poet listening to the “real,” along with us, rather than voicing it for us to listen and hear.

“whos list(en)ing out there”

So as we expand the “domain” (Antin “Some Questions” 37) of the work, to include all of the texts beyond the apparent heterogeneity of the media they use (from tape to printed volume), we might not “hear anything [we]’re not hearing now,” to recall Marjorie Perloff’s anecdote (Perloff 179): yet Antin’s apparently dismissive statement to the impatient listener is programmatic in its assertion of charted yet non-prescriptive poetic modes of production/reception. If all forego limiting expectations in favor of preparation and readiness, there may be hope for a more adequate response to David Antin’s poetic and ethical commitment, a generalization of his own example-based definition of “the basic form of irony”: “a kind of destabilization” that “doesn’t stop you but [it] destabilizes meaning.” (Antin *in* McHale 111). Antin’s language games and art engage in destabilizing modes of listing and listening. The open-ended cumulative processes of composition, the refusal to commit to the singularity of a medium, or the unicity of a one-sided truth participate in a process of desacralization of artistic media, and of experimentation in a poetics of conversation and communication:

For example, we are making use of computer software to converse in a manner that I somewhat described as a combination of the eighteenth century and the twentieth. You propose that its possibilities seem very different from the face-to-face communication of the oral tradition. And you’re right. But so is snail mail, and the notebook in which we compose our own thoughts, and the tiny audiotape recorder and even smaller digital recorders that have replaced them. The visual effect of true face-to-face communication is I think less important than the belief that someone out there is really listening. (Antin *Selected* 381).

This implies to conceive of the talk-poem as a combined process of composition whereby the “someone out there [is] really listening” is not just a passive member of the audience. That “someone” is a dynamic agent that subsumes all these instances that we categorize rashly from poets, to readers, or even critics,

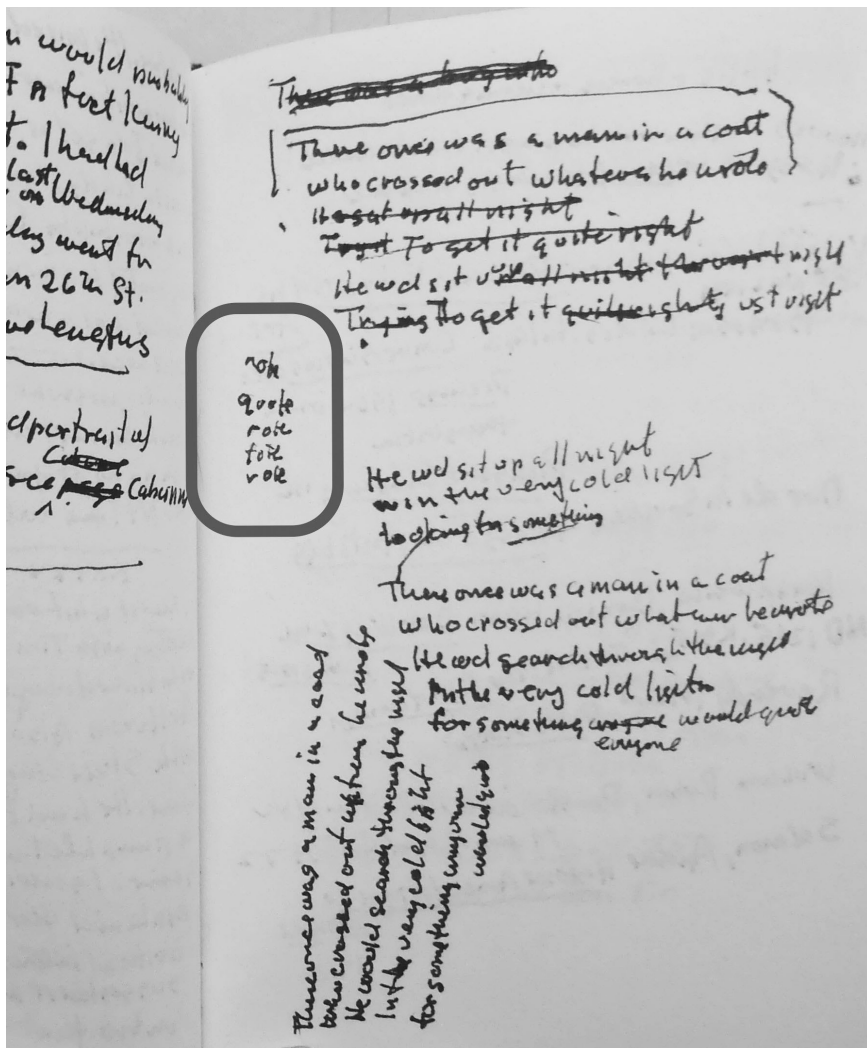
and constitutes them into non-dogmatic, provisional yet effective communication-based communities. Under these conditions, then, and as we reconsider David Antin's multiple list(en)ings, we can recognize the painful irony of his statement that there is "nothing else coming" (Antin evoked by Perloff 179). Often letting people know that they can leave, and stop listening, David Antin conversely voices hope that the listening will persist as we list our "second thoughts" (Antin "remembering recording representing" in Dawsey 190).

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Figure 2 (Antin Papers Series 1 Box 9 Folder 4):



Figures 3, 4 (Antin Papers Series 1 Box 11 Folder 4):

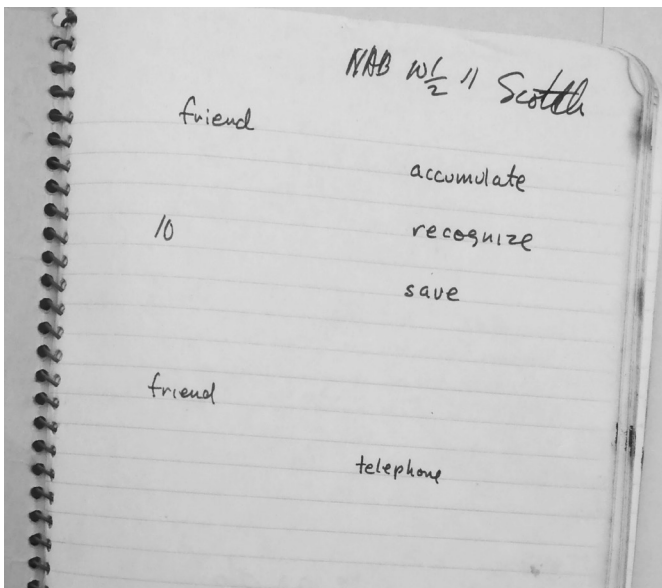
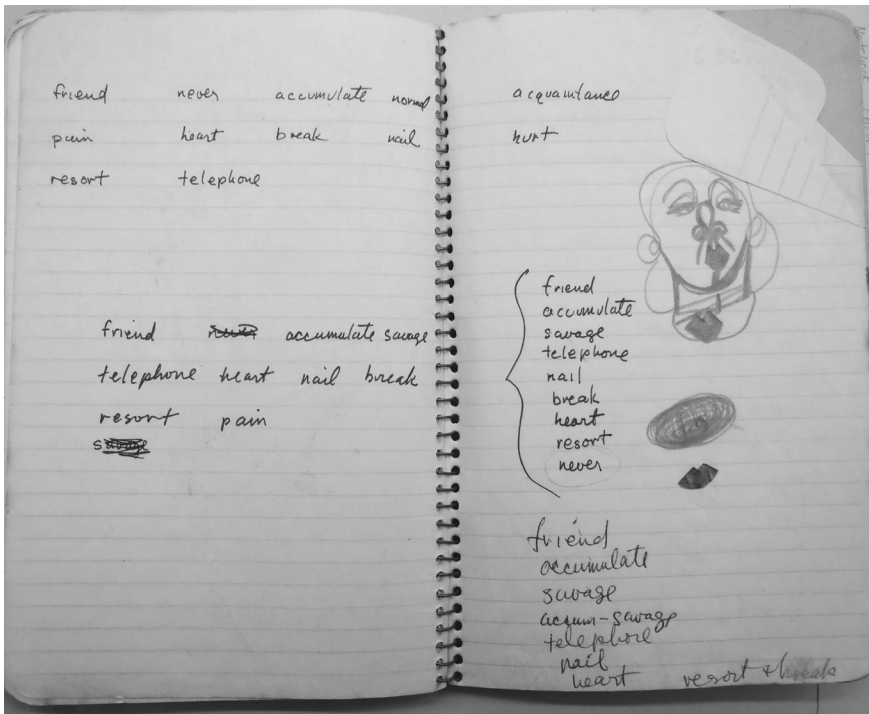


Figure 5 (Antin Papers Series 1 Box 11 Folder 9)

