The Marvels of Lambeth

“He hunted out lost manuscripts of Bacon’s works. He encouraged Bacon’s eccentric disciple, Thomas Bushell, to realize ‘my lord Verulam’s New Atlantis’ in Lambeth Marsh.”
—Trevor-Roper, p.284
Publications by Allen Fisher include:

POETRY
Gravity
Entanglement
Stroll And Strut Step
Place
singularity stereo
Quietly Random
Confidence in Lack
Leans
Birds
Proposals, 1-35
A Portable Allen Fisher* (forthcoming)

Publications by Andrew Duncan include:

POETRY
Anxiety before Entering a Room. New and selected poems
Skeleton Looking at Chinese Pictures
The Imaginary in Geometry
Savage Survivals (amid modern suavity)*
Threads of Iron*
In Five Eyes*

CRITICISM
Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry
The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry
Origins of the Underground
The Council of Heresy*
The Long 1950s*

AS EDITOR
Don’t Stop Me Talking (with Tim Allen)

* indicates a Shearsman title
The Marvels of Lambeth

Interviews and statements by Allen Fisher, 1973-2005

edited by
Andrew Duncan

Interviewers
Eric Mottram, R.A.C. Kiss, Peter Barry, Ken Edwards,
Adrian Clarke, Scott Thurston, Victoria Sheppard, Andrew Duncan.

Shearsman Books
# Contents

*Prosyncel* preface 7  
Editor’s preface 9  

Fluxshoe interview with Eric Mottram at the ICA 1973 11  
Interview with Dr RAC Kiss, 1974 17  
Statements on early works from *Prosyncel* 20  
Interview with editors of *Alembic* 1976 29  
Talk for *Alembic* 1978 38  
Interview with Adrian Clarke 1986 53  
Interview with Scott Thurston 1999 63  
Interview with Victoria Sheppard 2003 77  
The Curve of Increase (lost interview), 2004 93  
Interview, ‘Of mutabilitie’, February 2005 104  
Interview, ‘In One Side and Out the Other’, on music, May 2005 128  
Interview on sources of *Stane*, May 2005 139  
Interview, ‘Mirrors for Waste Heat’, August 2005 167  
Statements on ‘Place’ 186  
Passages from *Long Shout to Kernewek*, 1965 192  

Synopsis 196  
Interviewers 198
Preface by Acoustic Dredger

These are all explanations, but they are not all the explanations.

Sound is voluble, volatile, evacuating. It just goes everywhere. It doesn’t always come back. My preoccupation during the series was with acoustics—some spaces either drain the sound away or overload the diaphragm with extraneous sound. I have hours of inaudible tapes and I know I don’t understand the laws of cognitive acoustics.

The series took place while a Companion to Allen Fisher was being prepared by other hands. This timing was not perfect, because if I’d had that book in my hands, I could have perhaps avoided overlaps, perhaps broached different subjects in interview. There is a bibliography on the Fisher website (www.allenfisher.org), which relieves me of the task of making one in duplicate.

The first interview dates from 1973. I took the decision to collect old interviews rather than make an all-new book. I am fascinated by the idea of a very long base line, records of one person’s views over 30 years, change as part of the object recorded. Drawing on the creative input of Eric Mottram, Adrian Clarke, and Victoria Sheppard (among others) made the book more robust and embracing. The trackless wastes of the Mottram tape archive made an especial call. Those interviews were so hard to find that I want to make them easy to find. Of course there may be interviews I’ve missed. I’ve also included some explanations from Prosyncel, which is now unavailable. You can still buy Ideas on the Culture Dreamed of, though. One of the tapes in Mottram’s archive is a 1978 talk at the Alembic workshop—not an interview, but a talk about the poetic process. I scarfed this up. Another approach to Fisher’s work would be to take about 100 of the resources in the Resources lists (in each of his books) and go away and read them. I can see that notes explaining who some of the people cited here (Robert Barry, Carolee Scheemann, and so on) are would be interesting. I just focussed on recovering the texts. Try the Internet. Ask around.

All those voices make a whole universe of discourse. 1973 seems like a vanished era, an unresurrectable city, not least because of the shared project of creation and discovery and new life, which most of the stakeholders pulled out of. The gap between the poetic projects which looked at the cosmos and wanted to compete with the great modernists, and poems which aim to fit into the gaps within the columns of prose magazines, cannot be bridged. The limits of attention are self-set. If you want to switch your brain off, the switch is just by your ear.
Large-scale republications of Fisher’s work took place during 2005. I have included a few pages from a 1965 work which is harder to obtain.

My thanks to all the people who made and published (in Alembic, Angel Exhaust, and Poetry Salzburg Review) the original interviews, and to the staff of the Eric Mottram Archive.
Snatches from Interview with Eric Mottram at the ICA, London, 1973

(The focus of the event was avant-garde magazines and self-publishing and the problems they encountered. Other people being interviewed were Doug Lang and Opal L. Nations.)

Fluxshoe

AF So far as I know, it started in New York in 1961. I think the name was first coined by George Maciunas. With George Brecht and various people in New York found that their work wasn’t presentable in galleries. Or at least that gallery owners were unwilling to accept their work. It wasn’t for sale. It was objects that were found, objects that weren’t objects, if you like, happenings, performances, things that weren’t for sale, and through some sympathy I think more than anything else, there wasn’t a manifesto, there isn’t a Fluxus manifesto, they came together, and they found an attic. Dick Higgins’ attic or someone’s. And they got together and did various performances together, various works together, and a publishing house came out of that, called Something Else press, which Dick Higgins ran.

EM When did you become aware of this?

AF Fluxus as a name? 1971.

EM Who invented the name Fluxshoe?

AF Fluxshoe is Ken Friedman. He is responsible for the West Coast of America’s Fluxus. At the moment, for instance, I think it gathers something like 2 or 300 artists who are using various forms of communication between each other. Mail. They’re mailing art to each other because the galleries aren’t interested. Television aren’t interested. You couldn’t say that Dick Higgins is a poet or he is an actor. Just the same, he might be acting or he might be reading poetry.

It’s very difficult to say more, because the main difficulty is that the artists are as artists separately, I mean apart from Fluxshoe. So for instance I can join in but still can do what I’m doing. And this is pretty well what happens, and has happened, and is happening. At the moment, in Oxford for instance, which is the fourth exhibition site at the moment, there are people coming to and fro with films, poems, and various performances, which haven’t been at the last three. Or might not have been at the last
three, and whose names might not even be in the catalogue.

**EM** Do you have a fixed time for this thing to start?

**AF** Once again that depends. If it’s George Brecht then it depends. There might not be. If it’s Dick Higgins quite often it’s laid down. The line is not to lay it down. It seems to be more on the mail side of things. That is to say, no dogma. You hardly even give instructions.

**AF** Well, performance creates its own improvisory… It might even be based on two lines. For instance, George Brecht will say, *You will pick up* and it will leave a blank, and it will say, *You will do… with that*. And so you’ve got to fill everything in.

**EM** Is there an invitation to non-Fluxshoe people, like non-artists to take part?

**AF** It’s more of an artist thing I would say. They vary. In Falmouth it was at the School of Art. In Exeter it was at a gallery, the Exe Gallery I think it’s called. In Croydon it was at the School of Art. In Oxford it’s the Museum of Art. But for me the actual context takes place in the post more than anything else. Then you’re getting into the other side of Fluxus, the people who are speaking of non-art, who are asking for non artists. People like Walter de Maria who is into meaninglessness work, and his idea is to produce a work of art that has no meaning whatsoever. Almost so that the artist himself is not involved in the work, which is almost impossible. But amazingly enough he’s pulled it off, quite frighteningly. If you actually read what he says and carry out what he suggests. And from that you can actually get, I think it’s more entertainment than art. It’s not art.

Well, I think it’s just come to a stage now where they realise that whatever happens the gallery will pick up on it, or the buyers will pick up on it. It’s anti-commercial insomuch as through the last I don’t know how many years, through the twentieth century I would say, they’ve found that people want a commodity to buy. Whatever it is, I mean Dada was turned in fact into a commodity in the finish. So it’s Neo-Dada if you like, it’s anti-commodity. The idea is, they don’t want to make it purchasable.

**EM** Where does the work of art emerge, in the kind of correspondence that goes on in the Fluxshoe group?

**AF** I think really as a series, as a progression, that is to say you would see a process. For me, that is it, that’s all I’d need, I wouldn’t hope for
any more than that. Out of most of the artists involved. You have to be careful, because there’s a lot of different attitudes involved.

EM If there’s one governing thing, is it not political?

AF Yeah, it’s a political attitude.

EM What is it, anarchist?

AF It’s almost not that now. But I’m not quite sure what it is if it isn’t. I’m not sure there’s a label for it yet. I don’t know if you’ve heard of Beau Geste Press, which is at the moment running down in Devon. They run on a completely community basis. Almost complete. They’re run by Felipe Ehrenberg, who is the person who pays the rent, if you like, and with him is his wife and David Mayor who’s the coordinator of Fluxshoe and various other people who are chopping and changing, and various visitors like myself. They produce schmuck magazine. Their concept there is of the craftsman, within a village if you like. Cooking a meal there is really exciting. Is it eatable? It’s incredible. Apart from printing, they have letter presses they have duplicators. His experimenting with duplicators I would say is really important. It’s the first extension I’ve seen since Bob, since Bob’s work in Writers Forum.

(describes action where someone paints a wall and allows themselves to stick to it as it dries)

EM What are you doing, Allen?

AF I’m bringing a sabre to cut him down.

EM Are you reading printed text? are you improvising poems at all?

AF More prose. I’m better at improvising prose than poetry, for some reason.

EM The artist’s body and voice is very much part of the action, isn’t it? It’s there, in the performance. When you read the poem on the page, you don’t have the presence of the body and voice in that sense. The difference between the two kinds of poetry, two kinds of action that Allen’s into, for example, and the one kind is very much to do with the fact that he’s very much concerned in one part of his life with theatre. Isn’t it?

AF Me. No. That may be what the body of it’s doing, that’s not what I’m doing.

EM Isn’t that performance thing a kind of theatre to you?
AF Alright. Loosely. I caught that. What I picked up immediately…

EM I don’t mean theatrical.

AF Lines for performance.

[…] The danger with performance is that it brings in the man who will govern the performance. Sell the performance for. And that’s what we’re against. It’s very dangerous to be against inasmuch as we don’t want to become an elite. It’s more dangerous to leave yourself open to that.

(Surely the material in Jimmy the Hoover and Place is very different.)

AF What I was going to say prior to that was, They’re not that far apart. I think you’ll find that Charles Olson was involved in dance. And that’s where projection came out of, as far as I’m concerned, it came out of the body. And that’s how I find the connection. At least that’s one way I find it. That was a bit abstract, but really that’s what we’re saying. Apart from that, I’m also talking about the conceptual artists or whatever you want to call them, that I enjoy, I take an interest in. Are interested in process, are interested in progressions. And that relates back to Place, as far as I’m concerned.

EM Do you think it’s important for the people from the non-creative area to know what those processes are?

AF I think it’s more important than is realised, in fact.

(about seeing the concept rather than just seeing a woman in a banana dress [referring back to an action Doug Lang had described involving Miss Anna Banana])

AF I was going to say the opposite, actually. I believe both. Yes and no. And in fact I can’t separate them. I’ve tried to and I can’t. I find when I take part in Concept Art, in Fluxshoe, which isn’t Concept Art, let’s face it, I try to separate that from what I’m doing with, say, Place, or with my main writing. And in fact they relate and I can’t stop them relating.

EM Am I right in saying it doesn’t need to be read aloud at all?

AF Well to me it does. If it doesn’t to you then it’s OK with me. But it’s not OK with me if I couldn’t read it. I read it aloud to myself. I can’t read it.

AF Suppose I’d arranged previously to arrange a group of words, and
arrive at a group of words, by a certain system. That system is outside me. That is to say, it could be using the *I Ching*, it could be a number of things. And then I arrived at these words. I couldn’t leave them like that. Because that doesn’t satisfy me enough if you like. I would arrange a rhythm into them. Now I don’t know how I do that, but I do. And until I do, it’s not a poem as far as I’m concerned. It’s something. We start, then, talking about graphics, and about whether what Dom Sylvester Houédard is doing is poetry, or whether it’s graphics, it’s just a…

You start getting into the field where the arrangement on the page is decorative, or pleasing to the eye, and also it enhances the poem, because it helps you read it in the rhythm intended.

It’s got beyond that now. It’s got to the stage where it’s no longer enough to take the top of your head off and put it on a page, in that sense. It’s got to the stage now where a certain amount of information has been said, and it’s now to do with how that information has been arrived at.

It doesn’t interest me *more*. I’m interested in Doug’s poetry, but he doesn’t often show me a process that he’s used to arrive at to get that. I would like to visualize a poet that can show me exactly how he’s got there. That’s why I was interested in James Koller.

(…) I think it’s one of the problems with the New York School in fact. That they’ve come out of John Ashbery rather than Charles Olson. And they’ve come to a dead end. And now they’re saying, they’re smacking into the dead end.

(*they discuss book, Fluxus and Happenings*)

(…) I should say, as far as Fluxshoe’s concerned, that isn’t what’s happening now, that’s what’s happened.

**EM** You mean the next stage is to re-introduce personality somehow? beyond this systems play?

**AF** No, I think it’s gone the other way in fact. Not as far as I’m concerned, but I would say that, now, you almost don’t know whether there is an artist involved. (…) It was good, I mean we had a good game of darts the other day. We had a good game of darts, and that was it. How it relates to the poetry I’m not quite sure. It’s not where I pick up from. (…) Well I am divided. I’m not disputing that. I would say, everyone is, but they might not know it. There is something out of his contradictions piece. Which says there’s got to be contradictions. If there isn’t, you’re telling yourself a lie.
**AF** Well I don’t know about Oxford, because that’s still going, but at the Exe gallery, in Exeter, the proprietor there said there were more going in there than there’s ever been, it was just amazing. The works aren’t for sale, of course.

**EM** How much was the University of Exeter involved in this, if at all?

**AF** They backed the letter that went to the various councils for the grants. That’s really what happened. The head of the American Arts centre there, that’s Mike Weaver, and David Mayor, co-ordinated it through Ken Friedman in California. That is to say, assembled all the American works there, and catalogued them and brought them over. Apart from that, David Mayor’s connected with the University of Exeter, or was, but that’s the connection. I don’t think it’s any more than that. Who goes in there?

**AF** What I’ve produced have been books, yeah, but the people I’ve been related with haven’t necessarily produced books. The last thing I saw at Fluxshoe was a plastic box, in fact, which contained a copy of George Brecht’s *Water Yam*, which had a heap of cards in it.
Extract from interview with Dr RAC Kiss, National Poetry Centre, 28.10.74

DK Are you able to define what we are about to participate in? (i.e. Blood Bone Brain) Is it conceptual art?

AF No

DK Then you find that conceptual is too often a loose and usually a misleading term?

AF Yes, I find I am more often outside its terms of reference.

DK So you agree with Joseph Kosuth who said “All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually”?

AF—Well—

DK But a critic to comment on the work must find a framework in which to place this type of work to give a structured criticism. Would you prefer the term Dick Higgins gave, ‘Intermedia’?

AF Yes.

DK Because it is dealing with several or more than one method of showing and with methodologies not necessarily in the same stage of development.

AF Well—

DK What about aesthetics, and the philosophy of beauty?

AF No, but—

DK You mean it is outside of your approach and process in art? That it only appears in terms of presentation which is again outside of what you would accept as a term for art?

AF Yes.

DK But you wouldn’t refute that you are concerned with intuition and presumably sensibility?

AF No, but I would add responsibility with an emphasis on senses and responses.

DK Doesn’t style quality and permanence support the notion that age is
a basic consideration for the value of the art object?

**AF** Yes.

**DK** And Daniel Buren’s “beware!” What d’you think of that?

**AF** Well—

**DK** —that the means becomes the end through the use of the word *concept*.

**AF** The better term would be process or project. But the process isn’t the art itself and does not allow it the title conceptual. Documentation as Object or No-object and so on.

**DK** Well, what about the manner or way of approach being the art? doesn’t that allow the title conceptual in some cases?

**AF** No, no.

**DK** Would a better term be *abstract*—as in reduction/selection? Something precisely describing the approach. In these terms you could not call Jackson MacLow’s work conceptual just because the methodology precedes and directs the content. In fact becomes part of the content—at times all too seldom—

**AF** A better term would be systems. The work of Clark Coolidge and more to the point, Dan Graham’s *The Conceptual Cloud*.

**DK** The term conceptual has been used for work that doesn’t show itself, but merely verbalises itself, say by a process-showing, that is to say by verbal rather than pictorial illusion. Can you accept that?

**AF** No.

**DK** But that is beginning to indicate what you’re getting at? Perhaps it might be easier if you cited works you felt could be related to the category you hint at. That is a sense that a true conceptual poem is one that does not in fact show itself and yet exists. That is not to say merely by showing a way in which it will go when written, but a way it *actually is*.

**AF** In particular I would cite Tom Raworth’s ‘Stag Skull Mounted’. Now parts of that have the feel of it. But I’ll cite further. On the one hand Raworth, as I said, and Richard Miller’s recent New York work. We have Robert Barry’s ‘Imperceptible Gas’, Terry Atkinson’s use of physics. On the other hand—what on the surface might appear to be unrelated works but which in fact relate on the level we first spoke of. That the work which
is not yet a work or a poem but which by being presented as such indicates
the poem that cannot be there. Lee Harwood’s *Captain Harwood’s Log of
Stern Statements and Stout Sayings*; his ‘Boston’ pieces. Roger Cutforth’s
‘The Empire State Building’, Lawrence Werner’s statements recording
a number of his words evoking a picture of the fact referred to and
without metaphor. In addition there has been Jonathan Williams’ *Loco
Logo-Daedalist In Situ*, Tom A Clark’s *Fresh water Journal*, Mel Bochner’s
measurements and Berner Vent’s *Lectures*. Take this statement from Ed
Ruscha: “I don’t have any message about subject matter at all. They
are just natural facts, that’s all they are.” I would add that he has made
a selection of these facts which is where the problem comes in. How
selected and so on. But some of these are not necessarily poetry or art.

**DK** But that gets us nowhere.

**AF** Exactly.

**DK** But elsewhere—you have said “Idea art is not necessarily Conceptual.”
The suggestion becomes obvious when we are observing a method of
replacement—what is not expressible in visual/verbal—censorial terms
—becomes idea art.

**AF** That isn’t Conceptual and that isn’t art! Take Carolee Scheemann’s film
event ‘Tracking’. The films depict her cat; the trains near her house; her
life with the cat and the house; nothing more. They are family, homely
movies. But during their showing she hangs from a rope meditating and
tracing, that is tracking, on the walls and floor around her with a crayon
or chalk the energies she wishes to convey. That is—that the Act of the
Tracking is the art—not whatever she may be making. Buren speaks of
art as the Rupture. Not Rupture with art but with Life. Ian Tibbet’s ‘The
feeling’.

**DK** So you accept Douglas Huebler’s “To bring inter-relationships
beyond direct perceptual experience”? 

**AF** Yes. I find that sharp.

**DK** But this depends on documentation after the event.

**AF** The meaning of my art is the use it may have. Cage’s sense of utility.
A way of helping out, as well as the fact that all art, every act in life is a
political act.

**DK** But that’s not conceptual.

**AF** I didn’t say it was.
Work descriptions from Prosyncel and elsewhere

Prosyncel
The work, described as a ‘blueprint for a retrospective catalogue’ is a collage of texts and pictures in the manner of the times, and contains descriptions of numerous projects past or continuing in 1975. (The ‘retro’ part-word is misleading.) It is also described as ‘a sketch-map of heat’, punning on ‘work’ in the sense that mechanics uses the word in, and in the sense of ‘artistic work’.

The title is explained as PROcess SYNthesis, PROjects SYNopsis. ‘The catalogue becomes, therefore, an artifact limited by itself and capable of its own increase as a SYNthetic Cell. In addition to this it becomes a putting of each part for sale and as a synecdochic sell (self) becomes a fiction.’…

Docking
: A set of poems worked out of ‘dream sentences’ in a processual and etymological manner.

The title brings in a weed with large leaves and a long root, summary of a larger writing, a place of arrival and departure, a way of cutting short, the French for bundle, a way of joining together in space, the enclosure in court for the accused, the words doctor, doctrine, documentation, dokesis, dokimasy, &c. An example has been given towards the end of prosyncel.

Hooks : place 32 taken out of place
Hooks uses material made ready for the work ‘place 32’. This work, then, taken ‘out of place’, as the first chapter in the work Convergences /in place /of the play, where the method of composition in that work continues the work-method of Hooks.

Convergences describes Hooks as a ‘preface’ to Convergences.

Convergences, in place, of the play
During the progress of research for the work ‘place forty’ I accumulated data in a “Cuttings Book” which I rewrote to my own emphasis in using the limiting procedure of given word orders. This gave me 24 columns of information making syntactic sense and covered a field of as many subjects. A system was then made to juxtapose the columns so that they could read both vertically and horizontally across columns. This long
painstaking task is still incomplete and yet to be shaded by ‘place forty-two’. Refer also notes on Jackson MacLow.

poetry, a priority: being notes on my relationship with the work of Jackson MacLow
The idea of an a priori meaning may be found in the older mathematics. Jung cites the mathematician Jacobi’s paraphrase of Schiller’s poem ‘Archimedes and his Pupil’.

He praises the calculation of the orbit of Uranus and closes with the lines:

“What you behold in the cosmos is only light of God’s glory;
In the Olympian host Number eternally reigns.”(1)

My concern here then with synchronicity and MacLow’s Asymmetry. I would like to give an indication of why I feel MacLow’s work is symmetrical conceptually and why, if I am to innovate out of it, it becomes necessary to point out the misgivings I have with his lack of PROCESS-SHOWING, and the dangers of systematic selection.

But first to continue with Jung’s valuable treatise on the subject of synchronicity:

“However incomprehensible it may appear, we are finally compelled to assume that there is in the unconscious something like an a priori knowledge or immediate presence of events which lacks any causal basis. At any rate our conception of causality is incapable of explaining the facts.” (ibid. 1)

In 1966 I started work based entirely on and limited to the letter and word order in Wordsworth’s The Prelude. As far as I recall them, the influences I knew of, that led to the completion of the first section (Tree-Birst 1970), was not MacLow but Coleridge in his Biographia Literaria and William Burroughs in his procedure-notes and work that first appeared in Jeff Nuttall’s My Own Mag and ‘Art & Literature’ published in Lausanne. In fact, the habit of crossing out letters from text books started (as some of MacLow’s work did) at school, out of boredom. It remains true, however, that Jackson MacLow’s work influences the procedure in my work whether I knew it at the time or not, in the same way that Tom Phillips was working, unknown to me, on his own A Humument, at the same time. (See Colin Synes’ review in Earthship No.7.)
By 1970 I had already come up against problems that working with systems or strict procedures brings about. It is one thing to explain your procedures after composing, as MacLow does to the major works I have here, *22 Light poems* and *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*. It is quite another when you wish to incorporate those procedures in the work. This was made clearer to me in 1971 when I started work, still in progress, on the third section of *ABCD (Sicily)* which gave me the problem direct. I incorporated the system into the work so that without the system-showing the work would become a mere skeleton of its whole. At the same time I had commenced a different work (under the working title of *place*) which did not use these procedural techniques but what I would loosely call ‘field and processual procedures’ that up until that time I felt I could operate independently of my ‘systems’ work.

By 1973 I knew that I needed to find a method of writing processually that could incorporate process-SHOWING procedures and systems where it wished to and yet still allow me to go, to be on-going, rather than the “closed field” that systems alone inevitably would lead me into. I came at that time to two works. The first started using a methodology that I think I gathered from John Ashbery, and the second involved the extension I felt I could make out of Jackson MacLow’s procedures. I completed the first (*Listen*) in 1973. It involved a series of words making sentences where the collective of the sentences only made sense as a concept. The process was to underline words in an already printed pile of articles, collecting them together in the order in which they appeared and making sentences out of them as I proceeded so that the sense of each became my imposition rather than the system’s and that collectively the sentence made their syntaxis. So the overall syntax was casual and, I feel, synchronic. My point here with relation to MacLow’s work is that in many cases this is exactly where his *Asymmetry* becomes symmetry—in its conceptualisation and in that sense where “as a whole” the work makes sense, even if it does not internally. The second work, still in progress, (*Convergences in place of the play*) brings in the extensions I have been speaking of. I have taken vertical columns of phrases and sentences made by syntactical method (my own syntax as opposed to that already present) and have then made a new syntactical arrangement horizontally by spacing out the vertical-columnned word-groups and placing them side by side—that is “dove-tailing” the word groups. I have reached the stage of being able to read a piece syntactically across ten columns of different informations and of course separately down them. The system is inherent in the poem so that
the poem is process-showing and procedure-showing. It is both a process poem and a poem incorporating strict procedures.

It is noticed that my concern for synchronicity persists and as I have said I believe it does too in MacLow’s work. Perhaps then this might be the point at which I should mention his often deliberate (or more often the system’s) paratactic language. Such excellence of parataxis I have only elsewhere seen in the work of Paul Goodman, Clark Coolidge and many of those who contributed to Acconci’s 0-9. The use it has I believe to be twofold.

In the first place a citation from Paul Goodman:
“Deliberate literature, oral or written, is not spontaneous speech, but it has compensating advantages in providing examples for exploring language.” (2)

So in the first place, my take is that much of MacLow’s work provides us with just that, providing examples for exploring language, and thus, consciousness.

My second sense might be more difficult to give you. I have said that I find MacLow’s work often “internally” unsynchronic, yet capable of making overall sense. The paradox will be helped if I recall, first Chomsky’s generative grammar and take that with me when considering the use of the I Ching (which incidentally MacLow uses in much of Stanzas for Iris Lezak). What the I Ching does is to make the associations we are unable to VISUALISE. The second sense of symmetry or syntax I get then is just that. His ability to present what cannot be visualised and make, help make the associations towards it. I hasten to add that I do not suggest that his work includes religious pretension. It is, however, one of a poet’s uses, if he is to give us any “wholeness”, to give us an insight we might not otherwise gather. The exactness of his vision here of course becomes a matter outside of my wish to include here.

It brings me on to a danger I have sensed in my own work and thus see in MacLow’s. By using systematic selection he is losing some (I don’t think all) of his own invitation or imposition. Anyone concerned with politics must find this disturbing. It is easy to think that by making the initial choice of material the poet is leading the subject matter of his course. When he imposes a determinate system of selection (which he often does, e.g. Random Number Tables) where the system takes over
the selection, then, because the generative is taken out of the word order, the new order might say what the poet /composer does not wish. Now it could be said that MacLow uses a rigorous selection of material to use and publish after the composing and thus rejects those works which come out as “noise”—that is as unacceptable statement. (It might well be the reason for MacLow’s abandonment of his ‘9th Light Poem for the Algerians—27 March 1968: Their Light Poem is Their Revolution’.) If this is the case, the poet is limited to using procedure and not using process. Because, if he used process within the procedure he could allow the final rejection/ acceptance at the composition’s completion to be shown and would not then be fully “process-showing”. Now that might be a mere quibble, but when it really comes to it, if for instance I am saying I must incorporate both axes in the composing, both process and process-showing and systematic technique in a work I am involved in writing, then I must have enough control to make my own impositions or invitations. If we cannot use poetry to give the insights and relationships we shouldn’t use it. My reasons for pursuing this, as I mentioned earlier, are that if “systematic poetry making” is continued in the present manner it needs to incorporate the processual but in so doing it needs to be aware of the aforementioned.

It is not enough to use poetry as a medium for music, for aesthetic demonstration, or as an objet d’art. I sense a danger in work, that because of its aesthetically pleasing procedures and/or materials, is acceptable as what we look for in poetry —especially when what it might also be is an imposition or invitation from—not from the poet, which it should be, but the system-determinations. Fortunately, Mac Low’s art is such that this danger appears to be minimal, perhaps for reasons I have mentioned. But I must look to further innovation and that is where the real danger lies.

I look for the day when a poetry will rhyme with Stockhausen’s intuitive aus den sieben tagen and I believe that work when it comes will be out of the work laid before us by Jackson Mac Low and some of those akin to his work.