

*The
Allen Fisher
Companion*

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edited by

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& cris cheek

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INTRODUCTION

Allen Fisher is one of the most important figures to have emerged from the London innovative poetry scene of the 1960s and 1970s.¹ His sustained fifty-year project, across poetry, performance and painting, provides a model for practice as research. His talks, interviews and writings about his practice have been a significant resource for other practitioners.² His work as a publisher and his generous and informed encouragement of younger poets have also made him an exemplary figure.

Allen Fisher made his name in the 1970s, in the context of what Eric Mottram called ‘the British Poetry Revival’, as poet, performer and publisher.³ Mottram describes Fisher in the early ’70s as working in ‘two different poetic areas’ (41): first, as a member of the Fluxshoe group, with its focus on happenings and performance; secondly, as a page-based poet, developing a procedural and processual poetry out of the constructivist and open-field poetics of Ezra Pound and Charles Olson.⁴ Mottram cites

¹ For an account of this scene, see Robert Hampson and Ken Edwards, *Clasp: late modernist poetry in London in the 1970s* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2016).

² See, for example, Allen Fisher, *The Topological Shovel: Four Essays* (The Gig Editions, 1999), which includes his important essay ‘Necessary Business’. This is also included in a more recent collection (*Imperfect Fit: Aesthetic Function, Facture and Perception in Art and writing since 1950* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2016)). See also Andrew Duncan (ed.), *The Marvels of Lambeth: Interviews & Statements by Allen Fisher* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2013).

³ See Eric Mottram, ‘The British Poetry Revival, 1960-1975’ in Robert Hampson and Peter Barry (eds.), *New British poetries: The scope of the possible* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 15-50. This was the revised version of an essay originally published in 1974.

⁴ It would be more accurate to describe Fisher at this time as already working in many overlapping cultures in London, in the UK and internationally. Interestingly, Doug Lang’s novel, *Freaks* (London, New English Library, 1973), presents a version of him lightly disguised as Al Bass, ‘as serious and as sensitive a poet and man as you could wish to meet’ (56). He makes his first appearance at a book-launch in ‘Belfy Books’ in Soho, talking about ‘water-divining and old roads built along the paths of ancient underground rivers’ (57). Towards the end of the novel, he takes part in a reading with the protagonist, Calvin Longbow, at ‘The Poetry Institute’, where they are introduced by Will Dilling, ‘a robust big grey-bearded man full of energy, with a sonorous voice, an authoritative manner, and a vast and impressive output of concrete and sound poetry to his credit’ (115). Bass reads from his best-known poem, a long work called *Information Outlay*, ‘which moved through its own language variants like a computer with a sense of humour’ (116). He is last seen in conversation with two other poets, talking about ‘conceptual poetry. Mathematical forms, Procedure. All that stuff’ (117).

two early works: *Long Shout to Kernewek* (New London Pride, 1971), Fisher's first long poem, 'a collection of topological and topographical poems centred on Cornwall', and *Sicily* (Edible Press and Beau Geste, 1973), with its use of 'cut-ups, random and conceptual procedures' (41). However, Fisher's major work of the 70s was the ten-year project *Place*, which appeared in a wide range of small magazines and in successive volumes: *Place Book One* (London: Aloes, 1973), republished as *Place I-XXXVII* (Carrboro, NC: Truck Press, 1976); *Eros: Father: Pattern* (Secret Books, 1976); *Stane: Place Book III* (London: Aloes Books, 1977); *Becoming* (London: Aloes Books, 1978) and *Unpolished Mirrors* (London: Spanner, 1979). It was not published as a single volume until 2004, and this fragmented and complicated publishing history has probably meant that a work whose serial publication was excitedly awaited by its original readers has not had the sustained critical attention that it deserves, despite the work of critics such as Clive Bush, Peter Barry and Robert Sheppard.⁵

Fisher has been involved in writing and performance since 1962. His first publication was the elusive *Bavuska* (1969). He subsequently published *Thomas Net's Tree-Birst* (Edible Magazine Poisonous Edition, 1970), a subtractive or auto-destructive 'writing through' of the first book of the 1850 version of *The Prelude*, written between 1966 and 1970.⁶ Fisher excavates from Wordsworth's long poem his own meditation on birth, sex and death; the relation of 'brain and eye'; the poet's role among living and dead peers; illness and health; discontent and ecstasy; the absence of myth and the present particularities of the natural world. His next publication, *Before Ideas, Ideas* (Edible Magazine, 1971), consists of three lunar meditations, written in 1967, and 'Play of Diction', added in 1970. It shows again Fisher's concerns with place and space, with the body and its relations, and with sex and

⁵ The most extended critical engagement with *Place* is to be found in Clive Bush's *Out of Dissent: A study of five contemporary British Poets* (London: Talus Editions, 1997), 102-124. See also Peter Barry's engagement with *Place* in *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester University Press, 2000), 179-85. Robert Sheppard has written widely on Fisher's work: in *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and Its Discontents, 1950-2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), he writes on *Place* (60-64) and on creative linkage' in *Gravity as a consequence of shape* (195-203); in *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2011), he writes on technique and technology in *Place* and *Gravity* (31-54); and in *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), he focusses on *Proposals* (181-91).

⁶ Subsequent volumes were to include *Tree-Bend* from *Book Second* and *Tree-Bird* from *Book Third*, but these seem not have been completed.

with health. He also produced in the early seventies a series of collage pamphlets in collaboration with Dick Miller: *My Bijou*; *All Horses have Feathers*; and *Shitwell Bernardo*.⁷

Perhaps his most important publications of the 1970s, besides *Place*, were *Paxton's Beacon* (Todmorden: Arc, 1976); his collaboration with Pierre Joris, *Fire Work* (Hebden Bridge: Hatch Books, 1977); and *The Apocalyptic Sonnets* (Durham: Pig Press, 1978). *Paxton's Beacon* is extracted from a larger work, 'The Art of Flight', which Fisher describes in his Introduction as a 'formal treatise' on 'the usage in ideas and in language of the terms "light and dark"'. The title, 'The Art of Flight', alludes to 'The Art of Fugue', Bach's unfinished exploration of the possibilities of counterpoint. Fisher used Bach's Contrapunctus I and III as the basis for sections I and III of his own work, translating Bach's notes through his own system of verbal equivalents for these sections. Other sections are less strictly procedural and introduce the process of Fisher's own writing patterns. His attention to procedural and processual practices has obvious affinities with *Place*. The title, *Paxton's Beacon*, references Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, a cast-iron and plate-glass structure originally erected for the Great Exhibition of 1851, designed by a distinguished gardener and garden-designer, drawing on his interest in glass-houses and inspired by the water lilies at Chatsworth. In addition, as *Paxton's Beacon* registers, the Crystal Palace, after its move to Sydenham, was also the location for John Logie Baird's 1930s experiments in developing television. This constellation of natural and man-made structures, of technologies of light and glass, of patterns of sound and colour, provides the matrix for Fisher's procedural and processual project with its investigation of light through a characteristically wide range of informations – optics, photochemistry, visual arts, heliotropic plants, lighthouses among others.

The Apocalyptic Sonnets were similarly part of a larger project, *Faust Undamned*, and Faust and Marguerite, from Goethe's version of the legend, re-appear throughout the sequence. *The Apocalyptic Sonnets* are actually double sonnets, set out as seven quatrains with the final quatrain indented, like the final couplet in Shakespeare's sonnets. These final quatrains offer a recurring address to 'Technology', exploring good and bad understandings of technology – and the relationship between technology and art – which are recurring concerns throughout Fisher's work. The

⁷ *My Bijou* (London: I. B. Held Books, 1971); *All Horses Have Feathers* (London: I.B. Held Books, 1971); *Shitwell Bernardo* (London: I. B. Held Books, 1972).

sonnets follow Dürer's woodcut series 'The Apocalypse', with almost every sonnet referencing one of the prints and with each sonnet dedicated to a current cabinet minister. Although the titles of individual poems bring in references to a range of books, films and art-works, the sequence engages with embodiment in a recognisably contemporary London – a characteristically Reichian engagement with energy, eroticism, health, and violence within the 'tight social noose' of contemporary capital. As in Goethe's *Faust*, however, this is a story of redemption – of undammed energies – and, as Robert Sheppard puts it, the tenth sonnet ends with an 'unalienated interaction and interpenetration of place, body, and utterance'.⁸ The sonnets were accompanied by seven etchings by Robert Clark and were described as 'scores': in performance, Fisher engaged in an element of improvisation, extemporising from the text.

Fire Work bound together *Fire-place* by Allen Fisher and *Hearth Work* by Pierre Joris. Both works responded to a comment by Jonathan Williams on the presence of 'warming particles' in the word 'hearth': 'hear, heart, ear, earth, art'. This led directly to Joris's extended birthday meditation on fire and the multiple origins of civilisation. In Fisher's case, a section of *Place* addressed to Peter Maxwell Davies and the Fires of London music ensemble and engaged with Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad* took a 'second spread' from Williams's words. *Fire-place* figures fire as both creative and destructive: on the one hand, fire figures as inspiration and as Wilhelm Reich's orgasmic energy; on the other, fire appears (as in *The Dunciad*) as the pyre on which the dunces' books are sacrificed, but also as the source for the inherited fear traced through the Great Fire of London, building regulations, insurance companies, and the fire-bombing of cities in the Second World War.

In 1982, Fisher began his second large-scale project, *Gravity as a Consequence of Shape*, which was completed in August 2005. The first volume, *Gravity*, was published by Salt in 2004. The second volume, *Entanglement*, was published by *The Gig* in the same year. The final volume, *Leans*, had its first appearance, when extracts from it were published by Barque Press in 2006 as *Singularity Stereo*. *Leans* itself was published by Salt in 2007. As with *Place*, Fisher has published versions of *Gravity as a consequence of shape* during the period of the project in magazines and as pamphlets. These showings include: *Boogie Break* (Torque, 1984), *Brixton Fractals* (Aloes Books, 1985), *Buzzards & Bees* (Microbrigade, 1987), *Convalescence* (Wiwaxia, 1992), *Dispossession &*

⁸ Robert Sheppard, *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry*, 47.

Cure (Reality Street, 1994), *Civic Crime* (Sound & Language, 1994), *Breadboard* (Spanner, 1994), *Fizz* (Spanner, 1994), *Now's the time* (Form Book, 1995), *Pulling Up & Quasi Queen* (Spanner, 1996), *Fish Jet* (Torque Press, 1997), *Ring Shout* (Equipage, 2000), *Sojourns* (2000). The complete *Gravity as a consequence of shape* was published by Reality Street as a single volume in 2016.

The title of the overall project sets it firmly in the world of quantum physics – just as the title of the first section ‘Brixton Fractals’ gestures towards twentieth-century mathematics. However, the life and culture of Brixton are as important to ‘Brixton Fractals’ as the various kinds of theoretical reading that Fisher draws on. The poems register the built environment of walkways and balconies, local place names like Electric Avenue and ‘The Windmill’, and the fire-crews and helicopters of the Riots. In the same way, after Fisher’s move to Hereford in January 1989, the poetry is then informed by this new environment and turns to ecological concerns. The individual poems, at first glance, appear to be organised by an alphabetical sequence of jazz-dance titles running from ‘Banda’ to ‘Yanayallow’. However, this pattern is disrupted: at the start, ‘Banda’ and ‘Ballin’ the Jack’ are out of sequence, warning the reader against relying on such organising principles; and, at the end, Z is missing. The penultimate poem in *Leans* was ‘Zigzag’, but this was followed by ‘Mezz Merround’, a play on the name of the jazz-musician Mezz Mezzrow, a name with plenty of zzzs but none at the start. Neither of these appears in the Reality Street edition. Instead, in his Preface to this edition, Fisher points the reader to ‘ZIP’ as the ‘last poem in the sequence’, which is only available online as a sound performance.⁹ In fact, as Robert Sheppard notes, ‘Zigzag’, which looked like a conclusion in *Leans*, was actually written for an earlier project, *Ideas of the Culture Dreamed Of*, so that any sense of linear development was undermined.¹⁰ In the Reality Street edition, this effect is achieved by a literal endlessness as the reader is directed beyond the borders of the book. At the same time, ‘ZIP’ itself is a reworking of ‘African Boog’, taking us back to the start of the sequence. Significantly, both poems foreground a cyclist (the German mathematician David Hilbert) making a figure of eight – the mathematical symbol of eternity.¹¹

⁹ Fisher gives the following addresses: <http://utterpsalm.blogspot.co.uk>; <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Fisher.php>; and www.allenfisher.co.uk.

¹⁰ *When Bad Times*, 186.

¹¹ For Hilbert’s ‘mathematical bicycle rides’ around his two rose-beds, see Benjamin H.

As this suggests, mirroring is one of the devices to which Fisher has recourse in his practice. In an interview with Ken Edwards and Peter Barry (January 1976), Fisher talked about the mirror structure of *Place*: 'Book III is a partly distorted mirror of Book I, and Book II again acts as a mirror to the other two, and Book IV again is a mirror, so that Book V is a composite mirror if you like'.¹² In *Gravity*, for example, the final sequences mirror the opening sequences. I have mentioned how 'ZIP' reworks 'African Boog'; in addition, 'Wobble' mirrors 'Ballin' the Jack' and 'Winging Step' mirrors 'Banda'. In each case, the later poem revisits and reworks the material of the earlier poem in what Fisher terms 'reconfigured repetition'.¹³ Thus, the opening line of 'Banda' ('Took chances in London traffic') is referenced at the start of 'Winging Step' ('Initial engagement recorded risk in London commerce'), while 'Wobble' repeats the form of 'Ballin' the Jack' (four sections of thirty-two lines) with certain horizontal thematic correspondences – most evident, perhaps, in the lines, in each section, attentive to healthy eating. From a different perspective, that opening line of 'Banda' introduces the bicycle which re-appears as a motif through subsequent poems as part of another pattern of echoes and repetitions.

In addition, appropriately for fractals, this large-scale mirroring has its smaller scale equivalents. Thus, in 'Ballin' the Jack', the second section begins ('painted blue') with a variation of the final words of the first section ('painted green'), the 'flat' (apartment) in the third line from the end of the first section becomes the 'knees flat' for Tantric sex in the third line of the second section; the 'tropical independence of miasma frame' in the fourth line of the second section reworks the 'topological dependence of plasma membrane' in the fourth line from the end of the first section. As this suggests, the second section is an inverted (and distorted) image of the first section. Section three is an inverted (distorted) but only partial mirror of section two: the final line of section two ('a tiredness from exposure'), for example, becomes the opening line of the next section ('wired up from explosion'). Fisher then

Yandell, *The Honours Class: Hilbert's Problems and their Solvers* (New York, NY: CRC Press, 2001), 17.

¹² 'An Interview with Allen Fisher', *Alembic* 4 (Winter 1975 / 76), 49-57; reprinted as 'Interview for *Alembic*, January 1976' in *The Marvels of Lambeth*, 29-37.

¹³ 'Of Mutabilitie: Interview at Roehampton University' (February, 2005), reprinted in Andrew Duncan (ed.), *The Marvels of Lambeth* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2013) 104-27, 104.

reworks the latter half of section two for the first half of section three. Similarly, in section four, the first half of section three is inverted as the final half of section four, but with new concluding lines, which are themselves re-worked in later poems. Through these repetitions, Fisher encourages the reader to experience connections between different poems (and different sections of the same poem) as part of a larger project of transforming damage into creative activity.¹⁴

This device of mirroring through the transformation of individual lines recurs throughout *Gravity*. In 'Dispossession and Cure', for example, adjacent poems reveal similar sonic and or syntactic patterns. For example, 'Horse' begins 'For sometime the Architect was unprepared for understanding'. The resemblance to the opening line of the next poem, 'Hubble', ('Suddenly the sleeper listened intensely') is not striking. However, the next stanza of 'Horse' begins: 'Not rich enough to buy cheap things', and the second stanza of 'Hubble' begins 'No itch rough but stinging nettles'. Similarly, stanza three of 'Horse' begins 'Zoned into separate conditions' while the third stanza of 'Hubble' begins 'Cloned as desperate renditions'. At this point the reader recognises how 'Hubble' is reworking the previous poem. In his Introduction to *Entanglement*, Fisher observed that 'several methods have been used to guarantee overlap in spatio-temporal imperfect fits'.¹⁵ The ideas of 'overlap' and 'imperfect fit' are evidenced in the examples above. For Fisher, it is important that things should not be resolved in order to energise the reader: expectations should be challenged; structures subjected to change.¹⁶ (This stands in contrast to Fisher's own reading experience of the poetry of R.S. Thomas: 'the level of predictability goes up through the entire book to the point where you can't even read a poem, because you know exactly where it is going to go.')17 From the writer's perspective as well, as Fisher notes, 'the complex of the work is never fully realizable' and 'each new part to the work deconstructs and potentially damages what has been written' (61).¹⁸ Later in the Introduction to *Entanglement*, Fisher observes: 'Distribution

¹⁴ See 'Of Mutability', 104-13.

¹⁵ *Entanglement*, 9.

¹⁶ See 'Interview with Scott Thurston' (1999), reprinted in *The Marvels of Lambeth*, 63-76, 65.

¹⁷ 'In One Side and Out the Other: Lulham Interview 2', *The Marvels of Lambeth*, 165.

¹⁸ 'Interview with Adrian Clarke', *Angel Exhaust*, 1987, reprinted in *The Marvels of Lambeth*, 53-62, 61.

of entangled states between distant locations is essential for quantum communication over large distances'. What Fisher refers to here is the meaning of entanglement in quantum theory: namely, how quantum particles mirror each other's behaviour even when far apart. However, as he goes on to say, 'Owing to unavoidable decoherence, the quality of entangled states generally decreases exponentially with length'.¹⁹ Again, in quantum theory, decoherence refers to when one quantum of energy experiences interference from another. These ideas of entanglement and decoherence underwrite the patterns of distorted and partial mirroring, of damage and transformation, present in *Gravity*.

Fisher's work from an early stage, has consciously resisted totalization – whether through the complex cross-referencing of the poems in *Place* or through the singular mixes of material for particular readings – or through the complex mirrorings outlined above. Fisher has described 'self-interference' and 'transformation' as two key terms for the *Gravity* project, and added that 'ordering and disrupting would be a second set'.²⁰ The handling of the alphabetical ordering of *Gravity* signals Fisher's need to 'make and break sets', a habit which he derives from Blake's injunction to make your own system or be enslaved by another man's.²¹ Indeed, an important element in *Gravity* is Fisher's meditation on Blake's *Notebooks*, the radical South London poet, painter and publisher is an important precursor, and Blake's *Notebooks* are part of 'the schema' of the project.²² In addition, Fisher has also noted in interviews that the Fibonacci series was 'the directing principle of *Gravity*'.²³ He began with a diagram using the arithmetic of Fibonacci and the Golden Section, which he made into a cylinder – and then he bent the cylinder in order to inflict damage on these orders as the basis for a positive transformation.²⁴ In *Gravity*, appropriately, Newtonian order gives way to quantum mechanics, chaos theory, chance operations, and the acceptance of mistakes, and radical discontinuity is

¹⁹ *Entanglement*, 10.

²⁰ 'Interview with Adrian Clarke', 61.

²¹ Simon Collings, 'Necessary vulnerability: an interview with Allen Fisher', *Journal of Poetic Research* 07.

²² 'Interview with Scott Thurston', 69.

²³ 'The Curve of Increase or, On Growth and Form', in *The Marvels of Lambeth*, 93-103, 93.

²⁴ 'Of Mutabilitie', 106.

produced through entanglement (mirroring) and decoherence, the juxtaposition and overlapping of multiple discourses. This multiplicity of discourses, with their individual and competing truth claims, points to the impossibility of any single coherent narrative. This relates to Fisher's expressed need 'to develop a new set of conditions' for thinking and being.²⁵ And this, in turn, has political implications – not least, an opposition to 'totalitarian capitalism, which tends towards the extinction of life on earth'.²⁶

Since 2005, Fisher has continued to be productive – indeed prolific – as poet, painter, and performer. His major publications from this period are *Proposals* (2010), *Sputtor* (2014) and *loggerheads* (2018). *Proposals* dates from Fisher's move from Roehampton to Manchester Metropolitan University and begins from Fisher's new travel arrangements and working conditions. The volume consists of a series of 35 'Proposals'. Each 'Proposal' takes up a single opening and consists of four elements: a poem on the left-hand page (which might, in fact, be the 'Proposal', since it carries the title); two visual images side by side (which might represent the opening of a sketch-book – a smaller represented opening within the actual opening of the codex) on the facing page; and a short passage of prose underneath the visual images, which is situated as if it were a gloss on the images, but isn't. The OED defines the primary meaning of a 'proposal' as 'The action, or an act, of putting before the mind; setting forth, propounding, statement'. Each opening certainly places something before the reader, but what is placed before the reader is not a statement. Instead, *Proposals* foregrounds the discontinuity of the component parts: not only is there a non-coherence of poetic text, prose text and visual image, but the visual image is itself composed of two parts, whose relation to each other varies, and the prose text is sometimes a statement and, at other times, some form of collaged prose or series of discontinuous sentences. Furthermore, since many of the left-hand images involve fire and industrial processes, there is also the sense of a vertical (but incomplete) linkage through the successive pages of the book pulling against the horizontal display of the opening. In short, the volume foregrounds discontinuity in multiple ways. It repeatedly suggests relations and simultaneously disrupts expected connections.

²⁵ 'Necessary vulnerability'.

²⁶ 'Necessary vulnerability'.

Sputtor was created from Andrew Wilson's *Space Shuttle Story* (1986), which, in Amazon's words, 'traces the history of the Space Shuttle from the early days of rocketry to the destruction of the Challenger in January 1986'.²⁷ Fisher's title is derived from Wilson's in the manner of Tom Phillips's treatment of Mallock's title *A Human Document* to produce *A Humument*.²⁸ However, Fisher's treatment of his source text is quite different: rather than revealing another narrative within the source text through a process of redaction (as Fisher had done early on in *Thomas Net's Tree-Birst*), he rather overlays his original with other verbal and visual materials, including a sequence of his own poems. Fisher's neologism 'Sputtor', while suggesting *sputnik* (traveller), the Russian name for first man-made object to be placed into the earth's orbit, summons its homonym 'sputter'. The primary meaning of the noun 'sputter' is 'a state of bustling confusion or excitement'. In more general use, this is a verb meaning 'to spit out in small particles and with a characteristic explosive sound', which might have more obvious relevance to rocketry. However, 'sputter' is also associated with candles (or flames more generally) in the process of going out, thus anticipating the Challenger disaster. Although he uses little of Wilson's text, Fisher picks up on a contradiction inherent in Wilson's book: the celebration of the science that made space missions possible, a narrative of steady progress ('an outstanding series of successes'), and the conclusion of this narrative in failure with the destruction of the Challenger. Fisher accepts the format and pages of Wilson's book, but he interferes with and redirects the original text by pasting over other materials in a complex verbal and visual collage.

In an interview in *Sugarmule*, Fisher described the themes of the original text as the idea of 'getting off the planet'. *Space Shuttle Story* offers adulation of the space race which started with that surprise launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957 and was a component of the Cold War between Russia and 'the West'. Fisher's intervention uncovers alternative possibilities that emerge from the contradictions in the original narrative. Thus, an early intervention isolates a section of Wilson's text ('New products and services will emerge from spacetime that living on Earth will make less sense for human beings, than more') in a way that links the story of space travel to the current dream of the super-rich to escape

²⁷ *Sputtor* (London: Veer, 2014); Andrew Wilson, *Space Shuttle Story* (Random House, 1986).

²⁸ Tom Phillips, *A Humument* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980).

from Earth ('getting off the planet') once it is rendered no longer inhabitable through the processes from which they derive their wealth. Early references to 'tipping points' (16, 18) intimate the ecological disaster of the Anthropocene within which Fisher re-situates Wilson's celebration of space travel. David Miller observes, in an online review of *Sputtor*, that the book is positioned 'at the very end-point at which a plan for the resuscitation of human history will ever emerge'.²⁹ However, in introducing readings from the work, Fisher has been more pessimistic and has emphasised that the 'tipping point' for human survival on Earth has already passed.

Sputtor begins by turning Wilson's monologic Foreword into Fisher's own multi-voiced 'Forewords'. This initial opening juxtaposes two narratives: Mary Shelley's account of finding in the Sybil's cave the writings which she has turned into her dystopian novel, *The Last Man* (a title which has some resonance in Fisher's ecological context), and Wilson's account of 1986, which 'promised to be a bumper year of space achievements' (7). Wilson's boosterism is set against Sybelline prophecy and Shelley's vision of catastrophe. Two further fragments are set in dialogue with these narratives: an extract from *The Coming Insurrection* by The Invisible Committee (on mobility as uprootedness, isolation, exile) and an extract from an extended article on the British 'New Age' composer, Daphne Oram (about bringing diverse disciplines to bear upon wave phenomena).³⁰ With this reframing, Wilson's celebration of technological advancement has its relation to state power and 'the war machine' foregrounded, while Oram's commitment to multi-disciplinary research and improving 'the conditions of human life' provides one of the parameters for Fisher's own work. (A coloured version of the photograph of Oram in her studio, which had appeared in *The Wire*, appears, subjected to some damage, later in the volume.) Oram's connection to science-fiction through providing the music for *Dr Who* is perhaps also not irrelevant.

²⁹ See the series of perceptive blog essays by Korea-based David Miller that were put up between February and July 2015: <http://www.urbananxieties.org>.

³⁰ 'The Invisible Committee' was the nom de plume or nom de guerre of a group of post-Situationist French radicals. A translation of *The Coming Insurrection* was published by Semiotexte in 2007. 'The Woman from New Atlantis' was published in *The Wire* (August 2011), 29-35. Oddly enough, the extract Fisher cites also appears in a June 2016 blog, 'Sound Morphology', as part of a review of a piece by Bill Smith, 'ImmunoRadio Dramatique' for Orchestra, Voices, Archival Shortwave Radio Broadcasts, Resynthesis and Particle Pluriphony.

One of the concerns in *Sputtor* is with truth and truth-telling. In an interview with Andrew Duncan, Fisher described one of the issues with which he has been engaged for some time as: ‘what are our criteria for truth, for certainty, for lacks of truth, for lacks of certainty’.³¹ This follows on precisely from his engagement with numerous disciplines with their different truth-claims. In *Sputtor*, Fisher initially fixes on *parrhesia*. In classical rhetoric, this signified speaking candidly – or asking forgiveness for speaking candidly. Fisher’s *parrhesia*, however, is Foucault’s, where the *parrhesist* is someone who takes risks by speaking truth to power as part of non-violent political action.³² In *Sputtor*, Fisher’s engagement with (lacks of) truth and (lacks of) certainty focusses on an examination of his own method of juxtaposing texts and images through bringing in Walter Benjamin (whose *Arcades* project is the great precursor), Theodor Adorno’s critique of Benjamin’s ‘dialectical image’, and Fredric Jameson’s critique of the dialectic.

From the start of his career, Fisher has been very conscious of the performative aspects of poetry reading. His early career involved Fluxus-style performance pieces and one-man fugal pieces involving reel-to-reel tape-recorders in series.³³ As mentioned above, performances of *The Apocalyptic Sonnets* in the late seventies included improvisation on the printed text. These performances, rather than asserting the authority of the poet, exposed the vulnerability of the performer, using the possibility of failure to energise the performance.³⁴ Fisher’s early performance work was directly related to Fluxshoe. Fluxshoe was conceived around 1970 as a show that would travel around the UK.³⁵ It was conscious of such precursors as FLUXFESTS (Amsterdam and Copenhagen, 1963), FLUXCONCERTS (New York, 1964; London, 1968) and FESTA

³¹ ‘Of Mutabilitie’, 109.

³² Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Semiotexte, 2001), edited by Joseph Pearson. These six lectures were given in English in 1983.

³³ For more on Fisher as performer, see the chapter, ‘You Are Invited to Perform: Process, Mutation and Participation in Allen Fisher’s *Blood Brain Bone*’, in Juha Virtanen’s book, *Poetry and Performance During the British Poetry Revival 1960-1980: Event and Effect* (Palgrave, 2017).

³⁴ See Tony Lopez, *Meaning Performance: Essays on Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2006) for a discussion of similar engagements with anxiety through improvised performance in relation to work by David Antin and Steve Benson (73-81).

³⁵ See Kyosan Bajin, *Introduction to Fluxshoe* (Cullompton, Devon: Beau Geste Press, 1972), 3.

FLUXORUM (Düsseldorf, 1963; Berlin, 1970). It followed in the Fluxus tradition of games, instructions, riddles, and performances in galleries and public spaces.

One survival from this period is *Creek in the Ceiling Beam* (London: Aloes, 1973). The published text provides documentation of an investigation into a creak in the ceiling beam in Fisher's flat in Hayes Court in the summer of 1972. After a notation of occurrences and a graphing of occurrences to produce a procedure for selection of textual material, Fisher follows various lines of inquiry (including water-cisterns and plumbing, possible stress concentrations on welded joints, and the location of the flat both locally and in relation to the planets) to produce the contention that there is a connection between the creak in the ceiling beam and multiple factors including 'the migratory patterns of pigeons, their sex cycle' and 'the influence of geodetics on this pattern'. He also includes a list of lines of inquiry not pursued (including geological influences, temperature and humidity, electrical factors, the history of architecture). In addition, the book also includes material that demystifies its own method of production. The project thus includes the potentially endless inquiry into the complex of causes, a display of the procedures by which work is produced, and a display of the processes of inquiry and production.

Fisher has also been actively involved as a publisher – primarily through his *Edible Magazine*; as co-publisher of Aloes Books (with Jim Pennington and Dick Miller) and of New London Pride (with Elaine Fisher); and through *Spanner*, which has published what Fisher would term 'pertinent work' since 1974. *Edible Magazine* and Aloes Books provided outlets for Fisher's own early work. Two sections of *Place, Stane* (1977) and *Becoming* (1978), for example, were first published by Aloes. In an early interview, Fisher mentioned 'the need to carry the work process across into book production'.³⁶ This not only provided 'autonomy in production' (and the possibility of doing things with typefaces and colour that a commercial publisher wouldn't countenance), but also the opportunity to engage with 'the "communities" of artists similarly involved'. New London Pride published volumes of poetry by numerous poets including Clayton Eshleman, Bill Griffiths, Pierre Joris, Tony Lopez, Barry MacSweeney and Bill Sherman. Each issue of *Spanner* has been devoted to a single author or topic. In addi-

³⁶ Allen Fisher, quoted in G. Soar and R.J. Ellis, 'Little Magazines in the British Isles Today', *British Book News* (December, 1983), 728-33, 732.

tion to volumes of poetry by Eric Mottram, Ken Smith, Ralph Hawkins, John Welch, Ulli McCarthy, early issues included John Cage and Eric Mottram in conversation (1974), Clive Bush on Muriel Rukeyser, Mottram on Ginsberg (1978), 'Speech Poetry' (1980), Clive Meachen on Charles Olson (1983), and Fisher's own influential essay, 'Necessary Business' (1985), which has recently been republished in his collection of essays, *Imperfect Fit* (2016).³⁷

Other Spanner publications included *Fool's House* (1980), *January 1981: A Painting* and Fisher's own *Convergences* (1976), *Blood Bone Brain* and *Unpolished Mirrors*. In addition to publishing some of his own work, Fisher has also made available a wide range of English and North American experimental poetics, as well as various forms of critical engagement with these poetics. These latter remain an under-used resource for understanding one aspect of Anglo-American literary relations in the late twentieth-century. More importantly, they also evidence and underline the sustained attempt on Fisher's part to develop an aesthetics of innovative practice.

Fisher has also been active as a visual artist since the start of his career.³⁸ Subsequent to the visual collages produced in collaboration with Dick Miller in the early seventies, Fisher published three of his own 'visual presentations' through *Spanner*: 'Reich', 'Combs' and 'Kessingland Studies' (1978). The last of these consists of a series of 6 studies made at Kessingland Beach, near Lowestoft. Site-specificity has been (and remains) an important part of both his poetic and visual art practice.³⁹ Over the last thirty years, Fisher has had several individual shows including 'Dispossession & Cure' in the Old Mayor's Parlour, Hereford (1991); 'Tools & Traps or Damage', a retrospective exhibition at the Hereford Museum and Art Gallery (1994), and 'Engaged Embrace' in the Apple Store Gallery, Hereford (2013). His work has also been included in numerous group shows including 'Fluxbrittanica', Tate Gallery, London (1994); 'El Arte de Los Libros de Artística' at the Instituto de Artes Gráficas de Oaxaca (1998) and at the Biblioteca México,

³⁷ For a fuller account of *Spanner*, see Wolfgang Görtschacher, *Little Magazine Profiles: The Little Magazines in Great Britain, 1939-1993* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg Press, 1993), 32, 148-9, and 194.

³⁸ Fisher was appointed Professor of Poetry and Art at Roehampton University in 2001. He was subsequently Professor of Poetry and Art at Manchester Metropolitan University.

³⁹ His current project, 'Black Pond', is a site-specific visual art and poetic project.

Mexico City (1999); and the MIRIAD touring China Show in Beijing (May 2007), the Gallery of Chinese Profiles, Xiamen (October 2007) and the Art Museum, Guangzhou (November 2007). His work is held in private collections in the UK, USA and UAE and in various public collections including Hereford City Museum; King's Archive, University of London; the Tate Gallery, London; and the Living Museum Reykjavik, Iceland.

The essays in this collection cover the range of Fisher's career. Redell Olsen and cris cheek discuss Fisher's relations to Fluxus and the documentary. Will Rowe approaches *Place* in terms of the large-scale poem as a heuristic device, a 'practice of knowledge'. Pierre Joris addresses the important topic of health in Fisher's work. Will Montgomery considers Brixton as a 'sounded space' in the work of Allen Fisher and Linton Kwesi Johnson, while Steven Hitchins tackles one aspect of Fisher's significant engagement with science: fractals as a way of negotiating the discontinuity and noise of everyday life. Robert Shepard discusses *The Apocalyptic Sonnets* as the link between Fisher's two large-scale projects, *Place* and *Gravity as a consequence of shape*; Scott Thurston offers a close-reading of 'Mummer's Shout' (from *Gravity*) in terms of its compositional procedures; Clive Bush engages with 'Philly Dog' and the political limitations of Deleuze and Guattari; and Calum Hazell explores *Spun* in terms of collage, quotation and poetic knowledge. The volume closes with two collaborative pieces: an interview between Fisher, Paige Mitchell and Shamoon Zamir and a selection of documents relating to *PhillyTalks #19* with Karen Mac Cormack (17 October 2001).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ PhillyTalks#19 is available online at <http://writing.upenn.edu/pensound/x/Fisher.php>.