

KAREN DI FRANCO

SPEAK-
ING
LINES:◊◊

KATHY
ACKER'S
MANTRAS

‘In this world of the continual repetition of a minimal number of elements, in this aural labyrinth, it is easy to lose one’s way. When all is repetition rather than the production of meaning, every path resembles every other path.’

(Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body)

For Kathy Acker, writing that statement in 1993, to attempt the process of speaking through a body in order to articulate an experience, was to repeat a series of gestures; to undo herself through the repetitious act of doing. By translating the antagonism attached to writing from a subject position into an exercise that questioned the sovereignty of language, Acker performed a literary calisthenics of unlearning — to be without a language, in order to begin speaking again.

With a body of work that reads as a genealogy of literary subversion, Acker’s work flowed from libidinal currents, as her habitation of multiple subjects would undo the linguistic corralling of traditional narrative associations. Situating the negation of structure as a strategy against the apparatus of capitalism was the position of many of the Language Poets Acker would associate with at the beginning of the 1970s, incorporating much of their teaching within her writing processes. In the serialised text *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* (1973), Acker would embody varied and diffuse characters within the novel through appropriation and aliasing, moving between plagiarism and the incorporation of her personal diary. The interlacing of these materials established the narrativization of the author as a subject collaged within each passage, framed within and without parenthesis.

The performative use of grammar and citation as modes of verbo-visual materiality within that novel extends an understanding of the processes Acker would incorporate in her early works, with text as a concrete formation, to be read and vocalised off the page as a materialisation of language. Other examples of Acker’s experimentation with a more formalised type of textual construction, are located in materials that sit outside of her published books. The first, made between 1971-72, are a series of four visual works

09 titled *Mantras* (1-4), housed in an unlined spiral-bound

Brown & Red Art sketchbook itself titled 'Concrete Poems (along w/ poems)¹'. The second is a typescript², relating to a Women's Ensemble³ meeting that took place on 26 September 1972. Both sets of materials were produced during a period of transitions between San Diego, where Acker would meet both Pauline Oliveros⁴ and David Antin⁵ and New York, where she had developed her first self-published work, *Politics*⁶.

As documents they elide formal interpretation as items that contribute to Acker's literary corpus, instead their ephemeral and hermetic constructs speak of a confluence of interests that would *become* located in Acker's writing. As exercises in voicing subjective reproduction, the notational formats Acker appropriated within these items emerge as an ambivalent context in which a theoretical mediation between fantasy and reality could be staged. The implication as

1 The notebook is gathered with another thirty-four produced in the period 1968-1974 at The Fales Library & Special Collections in New York, a distinctive and separate collection from Acker's papers that are held at Duke University Library, North Carolina.

2 Records of the Women's Ensemble are located in the Projects series of the Pauline Oliveros Papers, housed in the UC San Diego Library Special Collections & Archives. Several types of material are stored in this folder including session notes, diary entries, promotional material, photographs, reviews and related correspondence. (Box 12, folder 1, dated by the author).

3 A group of women composers and musicians led by Pauline Oliveros, who taught at San Diego in the Center for Music Experiment, the ensemble at this time included Zina Louie, Lin Barron, Lynn Lonidier, Patricia Strange, Bonnie Mara Barnett, Joan George, Pam Sawyer, Ellen Van Fleet.

a reader of this material now resides within our interpretation of the imagined community that Acker attempted to enter, and the linguistic symbols she would attach to herself.

Wikipedia: A mantra (Sanskrit: मन्त्र, translit. mantra, English pronunciation /mæntɹ, 'mɑ:n-, 'mʌn-/) is a sacred utterance, a numinous sound, a syllable, word or phonemes, or group of words in Sanskrit believed by practitioners to have psychological and spiritual powers. Mantra meditation helps to induce an altered state of consciousness. A mantra may or may not have a syntactic structure or literal meaning.

Each of the four works follow the same procedure applied by Acker: handwritten text in capital letters flows from the left hand top margin across to the right and then down the right-hand side, forcing the hand to reorient the page on

a horizontal axis, and on further to complete an 180 degree turn. The text continues across the bottom margin as a single line and up the left, bordering the page with one word repeated. This procedure continues in decreasing space until the page is filled. Using a formula of word selections, for example, “Midnight, Lesbian, Angelic, Holy,” and “Myself, Lesbian, Holy, Angelic,” the permutations are applied in a different coloured pen, with varying sequences. The book opens with a partially complete work — the only one to use the word “midnight” which is later switched by Acker for “Myself.” Two examples are attributed the title ‘*Mantra 1*’, the first, contains the words ‘Myself, Lesbian, Angelic, Holy’ which is then reversed for the second arrangement, and so on.

The materialisation of text in formation lends a transitive quality to the visual composition of the *Mantras*, which are transformed by the direction of the words — in one’s hands the notebook becomes a navigational device — to be reoriented through the process of reading and voicing the iterations. Concretising the activity of self-actualisation for the reader, the *Mantras* activate a type of corporeal poetics that *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* would continue through its use of narrative embodiments.

4 Pauline Oliveros (b. 1932), was an accordionist, composer and teacher, and an instrumental figure in the world of electronic music. Oliveros is the founder of The Deep Listening Institute, in 1991 she coined the term Deep Listening, its philosophy distinguishes the difference between the involuntary nature of hearing and the voluntary selective nature of listening.

5 Along with the writer Jackson MacLow and the conceptual artists, Dan Graham and Eleanor Antin, the legacies of David Antin’s work are frequently cited as an influence on the young writer.

6 Self published under the imprint Papyrus Press in 1972, and is an account from Acker’s diaries of New York in the early 1970s.

Together they push a destabilisation of subject through the operational use of repetition — as symbolic terms or as the language of the first-person present-tense phrases “I’m born,” “I become,” and “My name is.” The proprioceptive materiality of this body of language prevents it from being just typological. Text is evoked through its inscription to become form.

“*Language is alive in the land of childhood. Since language and the flesh are not separate here, language being real, every vowel has a colour... All my*

senses touch words. Words touch the senses. Language isn't only translation, for the word is blood." (In Memorium to Identity)

Blue ink is used for the first two words and black for the second, and again this sequence is repeated until the last line 'Holy' in blue is surrounded by 'Holy' in black. The second version follows the same word sequence but all the words are rendered in blue ink. On the facing page Acker accompanied the completed work with a single line of text, the word 'Myself' around the outer margin in red ink, the title is handwritten on the verso side. *Mantras 2-4* follow the same layout pattern of a single colour render, for the same word permutation, and *Mantra 4* also includes an accompanying text on the facing page.

As with the notebook's explicit utility for orientation, the spiral binding also acts as a margin for the correspondence of the text on the facing page, its occupation within the structure of the compositions anchors the material within the bookform. Acker's handwriting formally distances the works from traditional concrete poetry⁷, however, the precision lent by machine-made type is not absent from her composition,

7 Concrete Poetry has been described by Dick Higgins as 'not one style but a cluster of possibilities, all falling in the Intermedium between semantic poetry, calligraphic and typographic poetry, and sound poetry.'

8 Mary Ellen Solt (b.1920) was an American concrete poet, influenced by Ian Hamilton Finlay and the objectivist works of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky. She published an anthology, *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968) and a solo publication *Flowers in Concrete* (1966).

9 These works are reproduced in *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967), ed, Emmett Williams, New York: Something Else Press.(np).

as the incomplete versions describe, there is a labour indicative within each work's structure, where the language moves between words and motif, expression and representation. One might think of Mary Ellen Solt's mandala works⁸ that utilise a single word, repeated in circular formation to produce a mimetic theme, as the compositional strategy of the *Mantras* forces a kinetic shift, from a rectangle to a spiral, rotating upon a centralised axis. Solt's work, as with Jackson MacLow's handwritten *2nd Gatha* (1961), *4th Hare Krsna Gatha* and *7th Hare Krsna Gatha* (all 1967)⁹, are produced from typographical

arrangements that focused on a *reduced language* to produce meaning from the repetition of sounds; as silences, syllables and word groups. Just as repetition could be harnessed to reinforce meaning into matter, by extracting each sound the *Mantras* also present a *récit* of Acker's identity; a narrative *unworking* iterated as terminology, between breaths. From that indeterminate space on the page, produced by the gaps between words, absence emerges as erasure of denotative meaning, rendering language meaningless, and identity redundant.

Formulating the *phrase* into a single word iterated without end, places certain sonic implications upon the work, opening out the possibility of reading as the process of making, a production of the 'substance of speech'. Activated listening entwines the body as it attempts to cohere sound, into something intelligible.

The repetitious and rhythmic activity prescribed by the *Mantras*, involuntarily connects to the sound practice of *deep listening* – an intensive activity that for Pauline Oliveros, connected the spiritual and the political, understanding its sensual as well as sensitive affects as an embodied process. Devised as a series of exercises to be used with a group of people over a sustained period of time, the *Sonic Meditations* incorporated non-verbal activities such as 'telepathic visualisation', deep breathing exercises, and harmonics.

Acker's account of her contact with Oliveros and Women's Ensemble in 1972, situates itself as a form of documentary evidence of her connection to the group sessions, which emphasised non-verbal forms of communication. Instead, participants were encouraged to keep a written diary to record their thoughts afterwards, as Oliveros would observe, 'writing is verbal'. Her account, dated 27 September, is spread across six sheets of paper. Typewritten, its structure as a formal composition can be registered by the adoption of particular formats within the writing and its layout, with shifts that commence with a diarised account of her activity during the day:

"there is a nasal man droning on about modes. He suggests columns as the most efficient method for notating this part of the lecture. I drink hot coffee out of a milkshake Styro-foam cup"

PARTNERS WITH PAM
GIGGLING WITH LOVE

touching her all over. Relaxing her tight trumpet lips.
Getting her loose hanging her down.

When read through the composition, the disclosures absorb the tension within their formations, as teeth gritted or lips pursed to exclaim, the desire to vocalise pressed against the formulation of the non-verbal instruction of the sessions, with punctuation exchanged for energy redistributed within the group.

“Georgia saw me as a clown and I liked that because I love to get close enough to a body to make them laugh.”

Cutting between scenes, the ‘I’ of the narrative begins to collapse further as the external and internal voices assert themselves, pushing against the neutrality of the account. As a result, the distinctions between what might be an interchange between text and performance destabilises as the coherence of the group begins to dissolve:

“Wanting to cry because somehow I had ended up explaining and because Julie was offended by my verbal question. After silently working together, after liking three new strong women I wanted to talk with them. I wanted to know how they got there.”

Emerging from the account, Acker’s text-as-body, disjunctive and incompatible with the structure of the Ensemble sessions becomes inseparable from the page. By positioning the conditions of exchange as a point of tension, the text reconfigures the role of the body as structurally incoherent to the channels it is in the process of receiving. Disruption in this instance is a ‘continuous instability’, descriptive of the intention within the organisation of the text, as much as it signals the influence that *nonlanguage* forms would have within Acker’s writing. The reader’s complicity is evoked through the proximity of the gaps between texts as much as it is translated through description:

was so warmed by that reunion, that reunion overtook me
it over-whelmed me I was grabbed by it my attention was
pivoted to this re-meeting, the sense of where we are going
to go. We are going to go far. We are going to work quietly
hard. We are going to stretch quietly away together like
rubberbands.

WE WILL PLUCK OUR MAGIC TWANGERS

So.

I was very surprised to hear my voice, listing. I heard the
echo of this list and wondered what (first) had been the
trigger that started the recitation and (second) what automatic
pilot had been turned on.

Georgia saw me as a clown and I liked that because I love to
get close enough to a body to make them laugh.

Carol looked like Lyn Lonidier and I missed Chris. Julie
reacted to my aggressive voice and I was very hurt. I was
sitting there wanting to cry. Wanting to cry because somehow
I had ended up explaining myself with a list and because Julie
was offended by my verbal question. After silently working
together, after liking three new strong women I wanted to talk
with them. I wanted to know how they got there. I was so
curious about what their worldly costume was. (It is true that
usually I move too fast. I hurry things.)

“I knew the whole circle of us was very sensual in our touching; Pauline and I were very sensual. I felt her sensuality very deeply and was glad I could accept it.”

Yet acceptance and force power the proposition of desire and its affects through the control system of language. Acker’s use of repetition in the formations of the Mantras attempted to disrupt the invocation of meaning, just as her account of the meditations destabilises the readers understanding of the account. By scripting herself within the text Acker manipulates an embodiment of her plagiarised form, simultaneously experiencing and performing the activity as an encompassing act of piracy:

Pauline calls and I cry cry scream:
I am angry with you.

SHE DOES NOT GET EXCITED (which scares me)
SHE DOES NOT GET SWEATY.
SHE DOES NOT GET ANYTHING BUT MORE QUIET
and her voice seems flat and nasal.
I don’t have time she says.
You were hostile she says.
Are you serious she asks again.

I cannot understand how my joy could be
read as hostility.

I could not see how Pauline could get quieter as I got more hysterical.

Jeff Lohn and Pauline both tell me I am speaking lines.

In 1973 Acker would explain that the events in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* were derived from other sources, “my past, and my fantasies,” claiming both the archive and repertoire — texts and self — as source material. The schema presented within the novel claimed reading as a performative gesture, through the exchange of these

textual models as both ephemeral and fixed, yet in continuous oscillation. As these documents reveal, Acker would experiment with these modes prior to this time, blurring the conditions between object and performance, with materials that within their physical construct as text objects, simultaneously conceal and reveal Acker's attempts to disassemble her identity. The differentiation between the epistemology of the archive, through its location as repository and its function as repertoire, is positioned within the activation of each document. In Acker's hands the imaginative process of reading extends from immateriality into embodiment, text is materialised into the bodies of the reader, and at that moment it erases the temporal and conceptual authority of the context from which the archival object was located. Before *the Black Tarantula*, Acker would assume several characterisations, that resituated the meaning of her physical body into the text formations produced through her experiments, which incorporated speaking and listening. The fragmentation of this narrative persona, distributed among these separate archival documents, performs a temporal discontinuity with Acker-as-subject as an endlessly reproducible multiplicity.

Access to Kathy Acker's notebooks came through an AHRC International Student Placement Grant in 2017-18. Many thanks to Irene Revell, whose research on Pauline Oliveros unearthed the Acker typescript among the papers of the Women's Ensemble. Thanks are also extended to Irene and Louise Grey for sharing their knowledge on the Sonic Meditations and Deep Listening, The Special Collections at UC San Diego, Matias Viegner and the Estate of Kathy Acker.