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FIA BACKSTRÖM + CORRINE FITZPATRICK + LISA ROBERTSON =

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The Maritime Hotel, New York City

FIA: As you know from the invitation I sent out to you, since your reading, Lisa, at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in November 2013 of your new book-length poem, "Cinema of the Present," I have been thinking about the two lines that I believe came together, on speculative rhyme and transforming rhythm. That set me off thinking about language and the social and political effects of rhyming and rhythm. I thought this conversation could be a wonderful way to open up a deeper probe into those questions.

I'm not sure where to start, but I know, Lisa, that you've been thinking about this at length. I saw in *Nilling*, your 2012 collection of essays, that the whole last section has a big part on rhythm and draws from Émile Benveniste and Henri Meschonnic. Would you like to start by talking about those two lines in the poem?

LISA: Well, the adjacency of lines in the poem is arbitrary because there's an alphabetization procedure. So it wasn't my specific choice to put the lines together, and that's one of the things I like about the way I composed it, that things like that happen.

FIA: I'm not quoting you, but one of the lines read something about rhythm being transformative?

LISA: I've been reading for five, six years now Benveniste's essay on the concept of rhythm. In this essay he critiques the standard or accepted traditional etymology of rhythm, that you would still find in an etymological dictionary. It is connected to the Indo-European root *rhein*, which means "to flow." So it's believed that the Greek term *rhuthmos* was morphologically connected to an idea of movement by "flowing." Through this connection there's a story of the history of the meaning of that word, an idea that the concept of rhythm relates to nature, the movement of water, and the regularity of waves. That's the standard assumption about the etymology of the word "rhythm." Benveniste completely tears this apart in a couple of paragraphs by saying a) waves don't flow, so b) *rhuthmos* can't connote regular, alternating movement. He critiques this etymology by showing how the

word *rhuthmos* was actually used in archaic Greek. He turns to different kinds of discourse—philosophical, lyric, dramatic. He starts with the philosophical. He talks about the atomist philosophers Leucippus and Democritus and looks at the way they used the word *rhuthmos* in their texts. The word did not have to do with temporal regularity or return or beat or alteration of beat. It had to do with form—human and cultural and historical: the forms that bodies create socially when they're in movement. So one example would be the folds of cloth on a garment as it is being worn, or the strokes of the written alphabetic characters as they are being written, or the features of the human face as it is in expressive movement. There's a sense that *rhuthmos* meant formal expression, the particularity of formal expression as it is changing in time. In other words it had nothing to do with regularity. It maybe had something to do a little bit with character.

FIA: So it is completely different from how I came to think about rhythm in poetry in relation to meter. Meschonnic writes that rhythm widely exceeded meter.

LISA: Meschonnic's critique of rhythm is based in Benveniste's essay. Then he takes it outward from there to develop a geopolitical critique of rhythm in which he's talking about cultural specificity, problems in translation. He talks about the translation of the Hebrew books of the Old Testament into European languages. So through the problem of rhythm in translation and the problem of rhythm in Jewish cultural forms in relationship to European culture he is opening up rhythm as a cultural dynamic.

FIA: Traditionally rhythm connotes the meter as a tool in classic education and it also has militaristic associations, but for Benveniste he traces it to a meaning that is free of the regulatory sense.

LISA: Yes, Benveniste identifies Plato as being the person who normalized the regulatory concept of rhythm. And in Plato's usage he was talking about dance, the alteration of steps. But prior to that usage meter or regularity was not its

meaning. Although *rhuthmos* could be metrical it most likely wouldn't be. The two don't necessarily have any relation.

FIA: So it's rather about form as it develops in time.

LISA: Yes, form as mobility.

FIA: Then it is rather about morphological change or mutation rather than this segmentation or fragmentation.

LISA: Yes, morphological change as an expressive mode, too, which is partially what gives it its social meaning. What we express toward another or how our expression is received. That's what brings form into visibility or to reception.

FIA: When you write, what is your relationship to rhythm and meter?

LISA: I was going to say I'm disinterested in meter, but actually that is not true. I've spent a fair amount of time learning about the translation history of classical texts and a million years ago when I was writing my second book, *Debbie: An Epic*, I was studying the translation of Virgil's epic *The Aeneid* into English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There was a metrical problem that began in translation. The problem with rhythm and meter often comes up in translation, because you know it's a quality that can't be reduplicated, that has a specificity to one language. So how do you carry that specificity into another language? The problems that the early translators of *The Aeneid* had was that Virgil was writing in hexameter and hexameter doesn't work in English. It's really clunky, it's just aesthetically bad. So early translators started devising the ten-syllable line, the early ten-syllable pentameter line as a way of making an English heroic meter. It's an English epic meter that was different from the hexameter but had a parallel cultural meaning. I got really fascinated by that. I was writing an epic so I decided that I would count ten-syllable lines. I was writing a lot of prose really, and I was breaking down prose by doing this. By counting I experienced meter as a system of constraint and I saw what you could learn and perceive through that tight frame. So I have worked with meter as a counting system that served as a compositional motive.

FIA: But seeing meter versus rhythm, rhythm is something different than counting syllables.

LISA: Yes absolutely, and people with a musical background already know this. People with functioning musical vocabularies know what a lot of us poets seem to have forgotten, that rhythm and meter are separate things.

FIA: In music the metronome ticks with regularity, then rhythm can travel anywhere on top of that. In Henri Lefebvre's text *Rhythmanalysis* he pathologizes arrhythmia in a moralizing way. In opposition to that I connected it to dub music and one of the stories of how it came about, through poor radio transmissions. Because of a lack in

technology, beats were dropped and from this translation from one place to another came dub and reggae rhythm, the syncopated rhythm. This is hearsay, but it's a nice way to think about arrhythmia and what pathologizing it means to cultural transmission. Syncopation is powerful in that something is dropped, there is a gap that you have to fill in in some way.

CORRINE: Can I just ask you about rhythm in your writing, Lisa? I am thinking about *The Men* and *R's Boat* and here, in *Cinema of the Present*, where you are splicing together these voices formally by italicizing them. It's not metric, but it's clear that there's a rhythm to the thoughts that are coming out. How would you talk about that as your mode?

LISA: I think about the form that I'm using in this book more in terms of rhyme. Because what happens, if you want to call them voices—which you don't have to—is that the italic voice is a double of the Roman voice, but it's alphabetized. So it started out as an exact double but in a different sequence. What that means is that everything has an echo, but the temporality of that echo is arbitrary rather than regular, because you don't know when it's going to happen. Sometimes the echoed lines are right up beside each other. As I was writing it I didn't know that that would be the case, so that's part of the fun of the form. But I like the idea of this deferred sense of rhyme and also an irregular sense of rhyme. Although I haven't yet been able to read it carefully, a book that I've begun to read several times is Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*.

FIA: I am part of a group called Group Guattari, and we are working with some people who were part of his intellectual community. One of them is Anne Querrien. She is a political organizer, a feminist, a writer, and philosopher and is an editor of the magazine *Chimères*. As she came out of 1968 as a political organizer and feminist, many of her friends who were disillusioned turned to violence. She claims that *Difference and Repetition* saved her life and gave her a new understanding of possibilities of how to work.

LISA: Rhyme is an expression of difference, actually; of a particular difference rather than an iteration of the same.

CORRINE: This morning I was rereading "The Rhythm Party Manifesto" by Meschonnic. Here's something he says: "Because the poem is the moment of listening. And the sign merely brings us to see..." And further along in that passage, "Only the poem can put into voice, make us move from voice to voice, make of us a listening. Give us all of language as listening... the ethics in action that is this listening, whence the politics of the poem..." The politics of thinking, the politics of thought; I mean, it's not quite arbitrary, the rhymes you are making.

LISA: Well, a student the other day pointed out to me that though we could say that alphabetization is arbitrary, the alphabet is a historical document, too.

FIA: It is a construct, a collective agreement or a social contract. I'm interested in this notion of rhythm as a form that develops over time. It somehow comes closer to how I have understood rhyming. That one word can fold, change, and metamorph into another word.

LISA: That's exactly how Meschonnic talks about it. He often spells it "rime." I think in medieval poetry that rhythm and rhyme were quite overlapping.

CORRINE: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

FIA: So rhyme can speak about difference, but also create connection and overlapping between words.

CORRINE: Fia, you had said in your initial email that you wanted to think about the ethics of idiorrhymia. Are you thinking of the ethical dimension of rhythm and how it relates to the body and to language?

FIA: Yes, I saw that I had written that. I can't recall. You just referred to Meschonnic and listening as an ethical act. In relation to some art contexts, which seem to be these places where one does not need to be concerned with ethics, somehow, for fear of being moralizing.

CORRINE: That drives me crazy.

LISA: That's one of the things that Barthes draws out with his term idiorrhymy in *How to Live Together*. That's why I love this text so much.

FIA: It was interesting how Barthes brought up scale, ranging from society-at-large to the hermit, with idiorrhymia occurring in between somewhere. That is not in organized social form, but where form is to come.

CORRINE: That society-at-large depends on these organizing rhythms of time: the calendar, the workday, and as you scale down to smaller utopias, for instance a group of monks or a hermit, you can "escape" from that rhythm and those regulatory principles. What I took away was that part of a retreat from society is also a retreat from rhythm being organized.

FIA: Or from prescribed rhythm. But a hermit can lead a very regulated life in terms of asceticism. Idiorrhymia seems to be the loose liminality between the extreme cases, where other forms of organization can happen. There is a utopic dimension to it. We are talking about rhythm in relation to social and cultural significations, but there is also the relation to the body, where there are many different rhythms: the rhythm of brain waves, heart rhythms, the pulsation of the blood, breathing.

CORRINE: Hormone rhythms.

FIA: I guess all women are aware of these rhythms. We think about the heartbeat as something that's very regular, but in

fact it fluctuates in more or less all of us. In fact, in contemporary dance music, a slight arrhythmia is added to avoid a ghostly corporeal feeling of the perfect beat that the digital drum machines produce.

LISA: I've thought about it in terms of hormonal rhythms. Because it seems to me that with the medicalization of female corporeality, part of what's happened is the desire to control hormonal cycles. Typically doctors like to get girls on the pill as young as possible so that they have a twenty-eight day cycle. It's all tidy and contained. It's like the pill is being used as a metrical device.

CORRINE: I was put on it at fifteen, four or five years before I even needed it for sexual purposes. And it fucked me up. It has very significant emotional repercussions I think, especially on a young mind.

FIA: It's heavy medication. When you are together with a group of women over a period of time—this in relation to idiorrhymia—periods start to synchronize across bodies. It starts to move around and other kinds of rhythms occur.

LISA: Well, being post-menopausal I am very interested in these questions from the point of view of an older woman's body because I no longer have menstrual cycles. You spend so much of your life counting out that cycle, being aware of where you are in it or where you might be in it, trying to control it, trying to guess when it's gonna come for a million reasons. You know so you have the equipment around that you need or whatever. You might think you're pregnant, or want to be pregnant or not want to be pregnant. So you are always counting this rhythm. Then it's gone. I think there's a huge social, cultural, and political fear of an old woman. Obviously we're outside of reproductive possibility, or I guess we have a changed relationship to reproductive possibility, but when our bodily processes can't be counted out, what does that mean? They want to put us on estrogen to keep it going for as long as possible, so that this metrical recurrence of female hormones keeps circulating in the same way. I don't have answers for all this stuff, but it's something I am really interested in. This projection of a certain bodily relationship to time, how it's controlled through one's life as a potentially fertile woman from puberty to menopause and then how it's controlled or represented after menopause. What that means about social perceptions about the aging woman's body, about one's own perceptions of one's own and other women's bodies. I don't have any answers. But if you're thinking about Beatriz Preciado and her book *Testo Junkie*... I think it's really interesting work and I've turned a lot of young female students to it because you can see it empowering young women. But it's not dealing with the long duration of the body. That hasn't been part of her experience yet. Every one of us is going to undergo an enormous hormonal transformation that's going to change everything. It's going to change your sensations, your sexual expression, it's going to change your emotional temporality, not to speak of aesthetics and so on. It's really interesting, but of course it's pathologized. ▶

CORRINE: What about women's bodies isn't?

FIA: It's interesting that you bring out scale here. These things are regulated in terms of the medical industry and regulatory citizen practices but also as individualized experiences in one's own body. But how does it come together on the scale of the social, how do we come together in relation to these rhythms or non-rhythms, or refusal of certain rhythms, and the incorporation of other rhythms?

CORRINE: This might be a stretch, but I do think that society as a whole is slowly cracking open to allow for more notions of all of the above, of what constitutes these categories such as female or male, the timing, and structures. I'm thinking now of this article I read recently about female runners who have a high natural testosterone count being prohibited from racing in the Olympics and world championships. It's creating this huge ethical and also biological dilemma for the Olympic committees about what constitutes female. Is it genitalia, is it testosterone count, is it estrogen count? So the women who are refusing to have either estrogen therapy or in some cases genital surgery to become "more female" are not allowed to run, and of course they are not allowed to run with the men, so there ends up being this third gender in mainstream society. It's one of the first times in mainstream society that these questions are really being hammered out. It's just one example of these binaries being contended with, and people don't know how to handle it. A little word of optimism for these things.

LISA: I think that menopause potentially can be mobilized as a discourse against the binary, because we're outside of femininity as a measured manifestation of the norm. If being a woman means having an estrogen count in some regular way, then you know we're not women. That's really interesting.

CORRINE: I was just proofreading my friend's book on nineteenth-century American utopias (*Paradise Now*, by Chris Jennings) and he has a chapter on the Perfectionists. They believed in heterosexual complex marriages. Everyone within this quite large utopic community really could sleep with almost whomever else (there were a few restrictions). There was no primary coupling, though. The men did not orgasm, they had a technique. So to teach the younger teenage men how to do this, they would pair them with post-menopausal women to avoid pregnancies, and because of this society also became eugenic as far as who could become pregnant. But it created this other category of post-menopausal women who were the teachers of sexuality, and they would be with teenage boys.

LISA: They're teaching masculine sexuality.

CORRINE: Yes, and they're safe because they're not going to be impregnated by boys who can't control themselves yet. But it was this wild example of a society controlling sexuality. I had never heard of that. Just to throw that into the ring of a binary being skewed.

FIA: It also relates to idiorrhythmy in the Barthesian way of smaller utopic communities. But rhythm and rhyming are also mnemonic devices. Especially in oral cultures who don't have the written word, they use it to record history and all of culture. Rhyming is something that is very physical as it goes through the mouth. It feeds the words. There is a lot of pleasure in rhyming, in the articulation of the words that are similar, yet express a difference.

CORRINE: Yes, it's like the oldest trope in the book in poetry to use the refrain, to repeat, to drive a point home or to maintain the attention of the reader or the listener.

LISA: One thing that it makes me consider is that when we think of rhyme in this traditional or oral-culture literary context, the mnemonic usefulness of the rhyme comes through its short duration. But I think it could be interesting to open up duration. I guess that takes it to a more psychoanalytic turn. What if the A-B, what if the rhyme, the cycle of reiteration is not regular? What does that do? And second of all, what if there is a separation of years before the rhyme is made. We don't really know how rhyme functioned in pre-written culture. A lot of what we think is primitivist projection. I think the question of duration in rhyme could be problematized in a way that opens up a different kind of thinking on temporality and the body and memory.

CORRINE: It's almost Cageian. I mean isn't it "As Slow As Possible," where the notes occur years apart? How many years is that? The one in Germany, with a note every decade or so. But this notion of a temporal construct being expanded and distilled over time. It is more about the anticipation of it, the memory of it than the actual note.

LISA: It intensifies it.

CORRINE: Yes, it creates an event around it.

LISA: Yes, so that the rhymes can be deferred again.

CORRINE: It also makes me think about fashion when you mention a rhyme that took years to come back. Suddenly now in 2014, the nineties are back, you know. It's like this twenty-year scale where things start repeating: aesthetics, fabrics, and cuts.

FIA: It is a function of how nostalgia operates.

CORRINE: And also there are only so many ways to cut a dress under the sun. Those sort of rhythms I also think about.

FIA: We can also think about it in relation to other contemporary memory devices such as hard drives and Google and how our own memory starts to operate in relation. My own memory is somehow downloaded into Google, or uploaded, rather. So one can wonder what other functions rhyme can have beyond being a memory device. It is interesting psychoanalytically, as you say. I don't know how to articulate

the difference between a human brain and a computer, but the human seems to involve organic growth, which returns through reiteration, association, and life experience in relation to deferred rhyme. There is something inherently human about this way of rhyming.

CORRINE: I wish I understood more about how those algorithms work and how rhyme or at least recurrence plays into that. You think about how they cull your emails for advertising by just noticing which words you use a lot. That's repetition, that's not a rhyme, per se. That's a refrain, that's a recurrence that gets fed into a logos that spits it out as a capitalist action.

LISA: So our own unconscious rhyme is commodified. It transforms us into a market.

FIA: Rhyming is also close to nonsense depending on the words you couple up with each other or even invent.

CORRINE: Like nursery rhymes, nonsense. That's a whole other can of worms. I feel that a lot of my writing, at least ten years ago, tended to nonsense and poetry. In retrospect I think that I was trying to find my own musicality with it. When I took the pressure off the words as signifiers or used them to signify a sound, that is as a tool rather than as a vessel, it freed me up to play around and to understand what I could do with the ground of the poem, the current of the poem, the rhythm if you will. For me this is about a Barthesian thing as well. I don't remember in which book it is off the top of my head, but he says that poetics is as much about the effect as the referents.

LISA: The referent. You mean in *How to Live Together*, living at the level of the signifier? Like staying in the signifier rather than moving to signifieds?

CORRINE: Is that possible, though?

LISA: I think that that's partially what nonsense is.

CORRINE: But then we have such an overdeveloped capacity or will as a people to make meaning, to cull meaning. And in artistic, literary circles I feel like there's the potential to broaden it to anything and that's where I worry that the *avant-garde*, or the experimental poets of right now, will start to just slam up against the wall of their own tropes. My thought is going in several different directions now; I'm not sure what I want to say, but trying to use only the signifier instead of the signified, I just don't know if that is possible.

LISA: Well, here's an example of how I would understand that. I live in France, so a big part of my life is undertaken in the French language and I am an imperfect reader and speaker of French. Sometimes in my social participation in situations at the post office or at a dinner party or whatever, I don't entirely know what's happening. I am hearing language. I have a sense of its general movement and situation but I actually

don't know what's going on. It's not functioning at the level of the referent. It's not functioning at the level of the signifier. So the relationship to French has drifted in and out and I've been there for long enough that luckily it has improved, but that still happens. There is always going to be a new accent or a new vocabulary or new kinds of social contexts. I am just not always fluent in terms of vocabulary or syntax. So I am often living at the level of the signifier. At first it was much more—it was exhausting and frustrating. It was upsetting. You sort of feel outside of what's happening. So I am really happy to be past that stage, but I've come to realize that there is this pleasure in it, too. Especially for me in reading, because I don't feel, when I'm reading something in French, my mechanisms for judging. When I read something in English, we are all so trained to read at the level of the signified, what the discourse is. We have a social sense of meaning of the discourse, we have a sense of hierarchies, we are constantly judging.

CORRINE: Even at the level of the grammar, the punctuation.

LISA: So that level of the signified is inserted at a really early stage in a reading experience, as an institutional frame. We learn how we are supposed to read. You can hardly prevent judgment as you get older and more sophisticated, in terms of what you've been exposed to institutionally, culturally, and so forth. But for me one of the great pleasures of French is that I can't judge. I am just reading something. I actually don't know if it's good. I don't know what its links are, I can't read the subtext in every case. I don't recognize the embedded citations. So for me I've learned to experience that as a real pleasure, that I have this kind of freedom.

CORRINE + FIA: I love that. I love that. Yeah, that makes perfect sense.

FIA: In French I never understand idioms. I read everything very literally. Even though I have spoken and read English over so many years actively, it still has this quality. It's a little bit like an out-of-body experience, because my early emotional self is formed in Swedish, so English is another layer in my development. I had experiences of being psychotic in my twenties, which felt as if language was outside of me or separated from the self. Being in a foreign language is not that dissimilar. I am speaking in this body now, but speaking English is also like being a little bit from elsewhere, because there is translation going on and ...

LISA: Or you're going along perfectly, more or less seamlessly and suddenly there's a precipice that *ohh* ...

FIA: Yes, and there's tonality that I am not attuned with and can't hear, like you say you come to this place and all of a sudden realize that you're not in tune. I agree it gives a lot of freedom and also irresponsibility to be in another language.

CORRINE: I like that, the irresponsibility of it. So this completely makes sense, what both of you are saying to me as a lived experience, but then transposing that idea onto art ▶

or form in a literary sense, I don't know if it can quite bridge the personal experience of moving through the world as a semiotic being and its application to poetics or to some sort of conceptual art modality.

LISA: Just personally speaking, I have been trained into this critique of the semiotic through my readings of Benveniste and Meschonnic. They're looking at an earlier Saussure, not a structuralist Saussure. They're looking at the movement of meaning in language more in terms of metaphor, history, and not in the binary terms of signifier/signified, which is one way that language works. But it's only one way it works.

CORRINE: I forget that actually.

LISA: It's the easiest way, it's the most quantifiable way and so it's the way political and economic infrastructures would prefer to keep language working, at that level. What if you moved through language and culture and art not semiotically but metaphorically? I know the term metaphor has been—

CORRINE: That's laden with a lot.

LISA: Laden with a lot, but how else do you describe this sense where meaning is fluctuating between two or more terms and is not fully situated in a sign, but has to do with the difference between signs?

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FIA: In Jakobson's text *Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbance*, he brings in metonymy alongside metaphor. Metonymy includes a scale difference and meaning operates from a smaller scale to a larger scale. It has similar movements of displacing meaning like a metaphor but in relation to scale. So maybe it's not only metaphorically but also maybe metonymically or even other tropes that also do this movement of meaning.

LISA: This is the kind of thing I always have to look up, over and over and over; not to put you on the spot, but what's metonymy again?

CORRINE: When the example is also a part of and can describe the whole.

FIA: The excerpt of part stands in for the whole, so in a sense, like how we earlier spoke about the period, as standing in for all these kinds of regulatory societal regimes of women's bodies—that could be a metonym.

LISA: Oh, I see.

CORRINE: Or if you say the White House, that also means the entire U.S. political system. You're referring to one specific to describe the whole. My mind is reaching to wrap around this suggestion to think outside of signified and signifier and I like it a lot. And I think I already do think that way without maybe having articulated it, but then, within the context of being writers or being artists, I wonder how

to signal that shift to the reader or to the viewer or to the people this work is eventually going to be for. Do you even need to worry about things like that: how things that you write are read? Maybe I can just make this a more specific direct question to you, Lisa. When you're in the pleasure of writing do you think about how the work will be framed within the polemics of contemporary poetry?

LISA: No. I try to defer that kind of thinking for as long as possible because it's just really not a pleasure. And that's not to be—it's not that I want to claim some sort of individualist or some sort of asocial position at all. But I think that people already read at all kinds of levels. I know for sure that people read at all kinds of levels and that within our various institutional discourses it's become the fashion to privilege certain kinds of reading or certain vocabularies around reception. And I feel that some of those institutional agreements or vocabularies can serve to limit the other kinds of movements of meaning that are already happening anyways. So that people are not necessarily attending to certain ways ... certain experiences they're having as readers and thinkers and makers because our institutional formations have valued some ways of thinking and speaking at the expense of others. The structuralist semiotic vocabulary has become the *dominant* interpretive screen for social and cultural interpretation and analysis. But it doesn't have to be. It's not to say that we should throw it out because it's really useful, but we can put it along side other ones.

FIA: I think of Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev who wrote in the forties, fifties, and sixties about the sign function of solidarity and who claims that you cannot extrapolate the signifier from the signified or, rather, expression from content, which is slightly different but related.

LISA: But even Saussure recognizes that. So much of structuralism is sort of an oversimplified reduction of Saussurian discourse. His example of the signifier-signified was a piece of paper. Do you look at the material support or do you look at the text on the surface? Each requires the other. And so it's a question of point of view. But there are going to be more than two points of view, you know. So in a sense, you can take the Saussurian discovery of the point of view as creating the object and even diversify it so it goes beyond the binary.

FIA: It makes me think of Karen Barad's work with quantum physics. She brings up the indeterminacy principle that says that if you isolate the location of a particle, then movement and everything else gets excluded. I guess it's the same thing with this piece of paper; if you look at the text, the support and everything else recedes, so depending on the perspective or measuring device you will get specific kinds of information, reading or form, so yeah, why not many.

LISA: Yeah, to just sort of circle back—Corrine, you asked me what I think about as I'm writing and I said that I tried to defer my imagination of an institutional framing of my work for as long as possible. Because I feel that it limits

the—it *severely* restricts your limits, of what can potentially be made. I'm positive that one cannot put oneself *outside* of discourse per se, and I'm not saying that that's desirable but, you know, discourses are so rich, historically, and it seems that in *avant-garde* poetry communities, we're putting ourselves—we're putting our reading skills in an *extremely limited* vocabulary set that is often very ahistorical or historically tightly circumscribed.

CORRINE: And acultural.

LISA: And acultural, yeah.

CORRINE: You have to read Jennifer Scappettone's essay in *Boston Review*, it's really—

LISA: I did, yeah. Well, I really liked her talking about vernaculars and it's something that I've thought about, too, going back to Dante's essay on the vernacular. Jennifer's talking about a layering or a multiplicity of vernaculars in the plural to evade a sense of purity of origin or true vernacular, and I think that's totally valuable. And I think that definitely happens—various poets, all of us probably, are using this at the level of lexicon and idiom within our composing practices, our writing practices. But I think that sense of multiplicity of vernaculars can be thought of in terms of the institutional reception as well. That we just don't have one set of readers or one kind of reader bringing a certain interpretive apparatus to a reading of a text, but any particular reader or any spectrum of readers are bringing ... you know, there are vernaculars of interpretation as well.

CORRINE: I like that, vernaculars of interpretation—we need to write that one down.

LISA: They're always multiple. And we're foreclosing that in ourselves by limiting our imagination of reception.

CORRINE: I've been sort of retreating from poetry in the sense of the poetry machine of New York or of English-speaking experimental poetry because of this, because after so many years of working behind the scenes it had just ...

LISA: It's closed.

CORRINE: This limited apparatus was completely claustrophobic. I felt like I couldn't write anymore.

FIA: But I think now, as a somewhat outsider of poetry, in the sense that I haven't participated identifying as a poet, it feels like poetry has become more open; it seems less closed.

LISA: You mean like people in the art world are now finding poetry as this freedom song?

FIA: Yeah, I guess, as a song of freedom, which is non-commodifiable.

LISA: That's what they believe.

CORRINE: They're romanticizing it.

LISA: In terms of its commodification.

CORRINE: There may not be a lot of monetary value to it, but ...

FIA: Exactly, it's harder to understand how else value is created if you operate within a gallery context.

CORRINE: Well, part of the irony is that, in New York City at least, a lot of the commodification of poetic value is in its reception by the art world, being able to slide on over there is as worthy as selling your painting for \$300,000. When I think about this back and forth between contemporary poetry and the contemporary art world, I often think that it's like having two cups of water and pouring a little here and a little there and a little of it gets sloshed out and spilled every way, and you end up with two empty cups. I think a lot can be fed into these two worlds, but I think that there's an awful lot of just skimming off the surface of things. Not to be a total cynic, I think that it's good that there's crossover, and poetry shouldn't be isolated, but I'm wary of the trend of poetry in the art world and I'm wary of the clamoring for the attention of the art world from a certain milieu of poets.

LISA: I agree with that and at the same time I'm sort of—I want to stay open to it and, in some ways, not. I actually just wrote an essay this summer about a Swedish sculptor and poet Karl Larsson. He's a great example—he is a poet, and he is an artist, but his poetry's being situated in the art world. What I spent the summer reading about was basically his relationship to literature and to Broodthaers and Mallarmé and Flaubert. It's become a cliché in thinking about Broodthaers, to over-interpret his decision to leave poetry behind. He shrouded his last poetry books in plaster and then moved them into the gallery so he could make money. But in fact, he didn't leave any of the techniques of poetry behind, he simply changed the space of the presentation of poetry. He took it out of the book and put it into the gallery space. But all the modes of thinking and making meaning remain the modes of thinking and making meaning in poetry. Broodthaers works with literary figures—metaphor, allegory ...

FIA: I guess in my case it's the opposite movement, like when you, Corrine, invited me to the Poetry Project I brought performance and photography, even though I didn't use any images. The work could start to exist in this space rather than in the gallery, but the techniques of bodily presence and visuality remain. I wanted to say something more about the importance of poetry because over the last ten years, I don't know if there has ever been a point in human history where writing has been such a huge part of our lives. We write unprecedented quantities texting, emailing, and everything else. I don't know any other moment in history where writing or text has had this prominent of a position. ▶

CORRINE: There's an analogy there, of course, with photography and the visual, the saturation of the visual sphere. The hysteria that comes up for poets and for photographers is that suddenly everyone else has access to the materials. On the one hand, this can create a sort of essentializing of the role of the poet or the role of the photographer. On the other hand it can also be—debasement is much too strong of a word—it can be devaluing. I'm searching for the right word, but the idea, sort of what you'll see in conceptual poetry, is now that we're just in this soup of so much language we need not create anymore, we need not write a lyric or be cultivating or crafting a certain voice, that that's actually very elitist, and instead we should be using—to quote Jennifer Scappettone again—the detritus, the language detritus of society rather than creating more detritus. (And, of course, Jen is for the creation of more detritus.)

FIA: Which is similar to photographic rhetoric as in: Why take another picture when every photograph already has been taken?

CORRINE: Exactly. And I don't think either pole is right or wrong, but I think that those polemics are boring at this point within poetry and within visual art and that there needs to be a shift in focus and attention toward actual work instead of having this histrionic argument about the need for new language or the glut of language.

48 FIA: Meschonnic writes about the formation of the subject in relationship

LISA: Yeah, he talks about subjectivity. That's what I was thinking of, and that's why I do think that the discourse around conceptual poetics and its insistence on seeing subjectivity as being a kind of guilty, asocial, sort of—I don't even really want to get into it, but there's a kind of shorthand around what the role of subjectivity might be.

FIA: A simplification, it's an extreme simplification.

LISA: I think that position is actually profoundly apolitical. Because, first of all, it's ignoring the fact that subjectivity is not some sort of encapsulated state—subjectivity and the individual are not the same thing. Subjectivity circulates and it's transformational. We are changed by our interactions with other subjects and speakers as they're happening. And we're changed by our interactions with institutions as they're happening. And subjectivity does not have a particular good or bad value in that sense, but is historical agency.

FIA: And it does exist. To pretend that it's not a form, a part of cultural production or social/technological interactions is apolitical.

LISA: It's the basic mode of politics. There's no politics without subjectivity.

FIA: Exactly! This way of only turning poetry or photography into simply modes of dealing with the detritus of received language and different computational logics is a sort of disavowal of that responsibility or of the politics of what subjectivity is and can be and how it is formed and functions.

LISA: Yeah, you could look at it in terms of Althusserian interpellation—we're called into social meaning by others, always. I'm not against the modes of composition that conceptual poets use, and in fact I think it's impossible to write without using those. But I'm against the binary structure of judgment that's set up in order to defend these methods, which are in fact the methods that have been going on forever anyways.

FIA: Yes, it's not about the binary, we have to recognize that both of these modes exist and that you can't exclude questions on the authenticity of the subject nor questions of individuation or how subjects are formed for the preference of language; it's not that simple!

LISA: In Meschonnic's discourse subjectivity is part of a kind of stream of ways of thinking about sociality and language. Subjectivity is related to historicity, is related to politics, is related to rhythm. So he almost sets up conceptual continuums, where he's clustering concepts and they're all contributing to one another's ongoing transformation. But yeah, for Meschonnic, subjectivity and historicity are completely inextricable.

FIA: In your book, *Nilling*, you write about rhythm and prosody in relationship to Meschonnic. What is prosody? I don't actually know.

LISA: Prosody is the way that we talk about meter and rhythm in literary language. So prosody has become a real kind of formal procedure, a way of counting stress in different poetry forms. It's been pinned to defined, formal protocols and procedures. And so, Meschonnic takes this word *prosody*, and he wants to bring all of this renewed thinking that we've just been talking about in relationship to rhythm and rhyme and talking about rhythm and rhyme as historical movement, as movement of subjectivity, prosody as all of these things. So he wants to open the term of prosody beyond any tightly defined technique of counting of stress, and open the term to a historical understanding of the movement of meaning in language and in subjectivity.

CORRINE: I always think of prosody as akin to the way that someone walks. Like when I think of Lisa's prosody I can't separate it, because I know Lisa very well, from the way she wears her scarf around her shoulders, it's like the way that language moves. It's the gestural aspects of language, the breath in the language. I unabashedly romanticize the individual author and subjectivity—it's what someone brings to it, it's the pinnacle of their own experience, the place and the time in which they're writing, the subject that they may be writing about, it's just the

way. And it's hard to articulate necessarily, but you know it when you see it. To me, the writers I'm most interested in, who I come back to again and again, have a very characteristic prosody. It's like their style.

FIA: But it's something that is bigger than style?

CORRINE: Talk about metonymy, so yes, style is within prosody in my understanding of it, in my usage of the word.

FIA: And also rhythm?

CORRINE: Definitely. I had written down this morning, when I was reading Meschonnic, that "rhythm is the language-organization of the continuum of which we are made," which I loved. Rhythm is the way of parsing out, which I think situates language and literature and cultural production and all of it into a polis. I love what you just said, Lisa, that subjectivity is circular and it kind of alights upon certain works of art or certain artists or writers, but it's something that—

LISA: I like that you just used the word *polis*. Talk about the prosody of the polis, nice.

CORRINE: The question of voice comes into prosody for me too, or not the question of, but the—and I may not be correct in thinking of prosody this way, like in a definitive sense—but all of these sort of intangible things that one might attribute to certain writers or a certain artist, like the taste, the texture, the color, so to speak, of someone's work. I think all of that is contained within the prosody.

FIA: I think here, already, we're out of signifier and signified.

CORRINE: Very much so, yeah.

LISA: That's exactly what I was thinking, yeah.

FIA: More of a multidimensionality. I'm coming back to rhyming again, as a nonessentializing technique, because the meaning of the words glide from one word to another, instead of being essentially located at this one word, again morphing through different words, and a connection happens. I was also thinking about rhyming in relationship to how to encounter the other.

CORRINE: What do you mean, of encountering the other?

FIA: Encountering, it's a nonbinary technique if you will, not a "me" and "we" versus "they" logic. So rather than an either-or situation, rhyme could reach, it could start in one way and morph from one word to eventually become something completely different.

CORRINE: Do you think that necessitates rhyme?

FIA: It doesn't necessitate it, but I think it's one of the things that rhymes can do.

CORRINE: That's nice. There're also such subtle units of rhyme beyond a literal "this word rhymes with that," just thinking syntactically about internal rhyme, things that my ear is very tuned to when I'm writing or when I'm reading, the way something sounds and the assonance or consonance, that's a unit of rhyme that I think is probably *hugely* important and hugely significant in the transmission of meaning or the transmission of intent that maybe not everyone who's texting and emailing all day will think about, but I certainly, for one, think it's more than a thought; it's like a muscle that I use.

LISA: We echo others and we echo ourselves, so there's always this slight sonic mimesis going on and probably even especially when we're not recognizing it.

CORRINE: Yes. I think it's a way to connect, too.

FIA: Yes, exactly. Emphatic functioning, in a sense.

LISA: It's part of what Saussure was on to when he was doing this work on the hypograms in Latin poetry. He had this theory of poetry composition, of ancient poetry composition, that poems were structured around the phonemes of sacred names. So the name Aphrodite, for example, can be broken down into these sounds, Aph. I'm not going to go through it—that a poem could celebrate and bring the presence of Aphrodite into the world by forming itself around the repeated units of the sounds in a name.

CORRINE: It's like a devotional act. I *love* that.

LISA: Yes. He was working on this actually in the same years that he was giving the courses that became *Course in General Linguistics*, then he abandoned his work on it—although it was like the core of what he was doing for several years—because he wasn't able to find agreement in the linguistics community and he began to fear that he was projecting this into the poetry, and in fact nobody knows whether or not it's true, but—

CORRINE: It's a vernacular of interpretation.

LISA: A Swiss critic, Jean Starobinski, wrote about it in the sixties and it really influenced Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Desire in Language*, all her notions of revolution and desire and stuff. The essay that Starobinski wrote about Saussure's hypograms was circulating in the *Tel Quel* scene and then came out as a book a little later in the sixties. And so there's this whole other kind of underground terrain of Saussure, where he's looking at naming differently and he's looking at composition devotionally. But in terms of our conversation, I think it's really interesting because it is about rhyme. And it was you talking about assonance and consonance and dissonance that made me think of it, so this is assonance and consonance, it's this iteration of a phoneme and how we build meaning through this iteration of a phoneme. What does it do?

CORRINE: It's so wild.

LISA: In Saussure's theory of the hypogram, rhyme, in this sense, was *profoundly* installed at a devotional level within the history of poetry composition.

CORRINE: I mean, it's almost like an incantation.

LISA: Yeah.

FIA: But it also comes down again to rhythm. As we have noted they are not separate because of this way of separating or fragmenting the words into these smaller units that creates new form.

LISA: The whole duration thing, yeah. And the sequence might even be scrambled. But it's all in your mind, anyways.

FIA: But it also makes me think about devotional in terms of ecstatic or trance practices, like Hindu mantra meditation, or other instances of language breaking down into shorter units. Hypograms are the apocrypha of post-structuralism. We never get to hear about the spiritual or devotional part of Saussure in post-structural critiques. Just as with Benjamin and the aura, for historical reasons it has been turned into an either/or rather than a more nuanced reasoning on how aura would operate. But devotional practices are social practices and all social practices have political grounding because you make decisions on organization.

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LISA: Well, right, and also one of the critiques of these sort of discursive strains is the claim of it perhaps being apolitical. But why should the political be only ever rational? Why should the political function only on a binary model, or an enclosure of meaning? Why shouldn't the political be wild? ==

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