

On Clarinda Mac Low's 40 Dancers do 40 Dances for the Dancers by Scott Thurston

In "40 Dancers do 40 Dances for the Dancers," at Danspace Project in St. Mark's Church on September 13–15, performance and installation artist and co-director of Culture Push Clarinda Mac Low assembled nearly 40 performers over the course of three nights to execute all 40 of her artist, composer and performance artist father Jackson Mac Low's performance-instruction poems from his 1964 collection, The Pronouns: A Collection of 40 Dances for the Dancers. The event was a tribute in the form of a "child's-eye view" of the 1970s avant-garde; an homage both to the Judson era and to Mac Low, who would have been 90 that month. Scott Thurston is currently researching the relationship between innovative poetry and experimental dance practices. As part of this work he traveled to New York City in September to see 40 Dancers, to interview Sally Silvers and Bruce Andrews, and to take a workshop with Simone Forti.

2ND DANCE—SEEING LINES—6 February 1964

She seems to come by wing,
& keeping present being in front,
she reasons regularly.

Then—making her stomach let itself down
& giving a bit or doing something elastic
& making herself comfortable—
she lets complex impulses make something.

She disgusts everyone.

Later she fingers a door
& wheels awhile
while either transporting a star or letting go of a street.

—JACKSON MAC LOW

From *The Pronouns: A Collection of Forty Dances for the Dancers* (New York: Station Hill, 1979) pg 14. Reproduced with the kind permission of Anne Tardos.

Stepping into the space of St Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery for the first time on Thursday September 13th 2012 for the first of three nights of performance, I realized that I had completely misconceived the production of this piece in my mind's eye. The usual boundaries between audience and performers were not be drawn as tightly, nor the progression of linear time to be adhered to as stringently as I had expected. When I entered, the performance had already started, with dancers dispersed, improvising, along the risers around the perimeter of the room and moving among the audience. It was intriguing to watch people's reactions to this—ranging from delighted participation to outright denial—and to sense how this intervention formed part of the meaning of the whole.

This unsettling of habitual boundaries had actually begun for me even before arriving in New York. Clarinda Mac Low—the show's director—had offered an “Audience with the Audience” prior to the opening in the form of one-to-one meetings in person or via Skype. *40 Dancers* is a staging of the extraordinary book of forty dance-instruction poems entitled *The Pronouns: A Collection of Forty Dancers for the Dancers* that her father, the late Jackson Mac Low (1922-2004) wrote in 1964. During our conversation Mac Low unfolded her intentions for the piece to explore how her lifelong participation in dance had made her aware of how art creates “little societies.” In returning to dance after ten years of making performance art^[1] she was treating her approach to her father's work as part of a larger research project on the anthropology of the dance world. Directing *40 Dancers* was intended to honor her father but also to produce an auto-/biography of the dance world that made her, reflecting on twenty-five years of experience in art's making of forms, community and family. The piece was to be an experiment in the actions and networks of art—its own affect and bonds—and how it produces a different kind of intimacy beyond the standard connections, a result of what Mac Low calls a “being-with.”

A glance at the program told me not to expect an orderly sequential unfolding of the forty poems of *The Pronouns*. In fact there were fifty-nine dances in all—distributed more or less evenly over the three nights—with multiple versions of eleven of the poems. The total number of dancers actually turned out to be thirty-eight, although Mac Low told me that this figure had fluctuated a lot in the run-up to the opening. The programming itself had been given over to a chance-driven algorithm not unlike the one used in the composition of the original book. Mac Low and the staff of the space took pains to let the audience know that they should be prepared to move around in order to properly see all parts of the performance —advice which not everyone chose to heed as the event unfolded. I realized quickly that I would not be able to sustain note-taking in this space and would need to entrust my body with storing my impressions. This turned out to be an apt decision for a work so concerned with the body's intimate relationship with language.

The first dance, *Making Things New*, began with only the announcement of a spotlight towards the entrance of the main space, where David Thomson and George Emilio Sanchez faced each other, with Thomson sitting on a chair. The duet unfolded as a kind of facing-off between the performers in which turns were taken to be an audience for

each other via the chair position. One of the most memorable images of this exchange was Thomson's lewd snake-hips, parodied by Sanchez's deliberately gauche reply, which drew laughter from the audience. In this way, both performers developed a kind of intimacy with each other and with Mac Low's dance-poem, but without, at this point, any articulation of the actual language of the poem.

Knowing the text of *The Pronouns* was both an advantage and a disadvantage over the three nights. Given that the poems were composed algorithmically using a constrained body of material (fifty-six index cards on which were written one to five actions—amounting to 173 different actions), certain actions recur over and over again, modulated according to a different pronoun for each of the forty poems. Thus the ability to recall even a small number of these actions gave access to a large number of different realizations. Reflecting on the first dance and comparing my memory of it to the poem, I interpret Thomson's hip-swagger as a possible response to the phrase "having waves," but I may be incorrect. Sanchez's reply might also have been a version of "pointing to a fact that seems to be an error," but I am unsure. One choice available to me as an audience member at the time would have been to follow each performance with my copy of the text and put myself in a position to analyze each performer's interpretation. I certainly wondered how audience members who did not know the text at all were responding to the performances, including those in which the poems were verbalized. The printed program included the texts of five of the dances which were performed more than once, but this may not have been obvious. As it was, I felt that attempting to read along with the performers would be a sure-fire way of not only missing a lot of the detail of their work, but also of getting very confused along the way. I felt fortunate to have read *The Pronouns* previously. I had also gotten to know one dance-poem very well by writing about it, and, as the piece developed over the three nights, more and more of the text's language appeared to remind me further of the other poems.

In his accompanying notes to *The Pronouns*, Jackson Mac Low's instructions to would-be performers are surprisingly simple and straightforward, especially when compared to the performance instructions for some of his poems, which can run to several hundred words. Mac Low simply asks that performances of the work should clearly convey "the *integrity* of each dance—its having a definite beginning, middle, & end." He requires dancers to "find *some definite interpretation of the meaning of every line*" and to "carefully work out the time-relations between the various actions." Although Mac Low insists that "no line or series of lines may be left uninterpreted & unrealized simply because it seems too complicated or obscure to realize as movement (&/or sound or speech)," he certainly does not specify how these interpretations should be undertaken, thus giving considerable freedom to the performer. The consequence of this approach—and Clarinda Mac Low's decision to ask forty individual dancers to participate—was a huge range of interpretative styles, some of which came across to me as lucid expositions of the poems, while others seemed more elusive. Importantly, this did not give me a sense that some realizations could be considered "better" than others because of how clearly they interpreted each text, as they all obeyed Jackson Mac Low's wish to convey the integrity of each dance-poem.

Back to Thursday night. As if to dramatize this range of interpretation, the next three solos constituted three different versions of the second dance *Seeing Lines* (see above), which turned out to be the most interpreted single dance-poem of the entire show, being danced no fewer than seven times by different performers over the course of the three nights. Carolyn Hall began by taking the phrase “she seems to come by wing” as a hilarious chicken-walk along the risers on which some audience members were still seated. After doing some remarkably precise hip rolls on her back (a possible version of “making her stomach let itself down”), she picked up her foot and licked the sole of it to enact “She disgusts everyone”! Paz Tanjuaquio joined Hall briefly before allowing her own solo to develop on the risers by throwing a barrage of angular shapes as her response to “wing” and offering the first verbal gesture of the evening in the single, clearly-enunciated word “Then,” which appears in the text. Next was Abigail Levine, now in a corner of the space where she held one of the balcony-supports while looking up towards the ceiling before moving backwards in a circle towards the audience. Repeating this route several times, on each circuit she offered the development of a kind of skewed argument about facial hair and wiffle balls—demonstrating the phrase “reasons regularly” —while her response to “She disgusts everyone” was to lick the floor at her feet: like Hall’s, a powerfully shocking gesture.

This quick sequence of successive interpretations of the same piece was instructive in showing both commonalities and divergences in the performers’ devising strategies. While one could perceive a strong link between Hall and Levine’s use of their tongue to convey disgust, I don’t recall a clear interpretation of this line by Tanjuaquio. Conversely, there was a clearer relationship between Hall’s and Tanjuaquio’s responses to “wing,” than to Levine’s version. The decision to factor in multiple versions, and indeed to stage them successively and in a subtly overlapping manner, revealed a confidence in the underlying poetics of the work. It demonstrated a trust that the text would deliver variety—though repetition reigned throughout—and showed a willingness to expose the artifice of the work by comparing different approaches. In conversation after the performance, Mac Low described her approach as “structured improvisation” and “loose choreography”—giving a sense of a production which also questioned the troubled boundary between choreography and improvisation.

The contribution to *40 Dancers* of the renowned dancer/choreographer, artist and writer Simone Forti also could be said to dramatize the tension between planned and chance action. Rather than performing texts from *The Pronouns*—the 1979 edition of which makes her a dedicatee^[2]—Forti performed using *Nuclei for Simone Forti*, a pack of 108 cards with words and actions on them that Jackson Mac Low wrote for her in 1961. As Mac Low explained in an interview filmed at his apartment in 1981,^[3] he developed the cards for Forti to use after seeing her Dance Constructions at Yoko Ono’s loft. Mac Low describes how Forti did three or four “wonderful” performances of the *Nuclei* at George Mancunias’ gallery, including interpreting the word “angry” and the action “giving the neck a knifing or coming to give a parallel meal, beautiful and shocking” by shoving a very large conference table at the audience which she then chomped the edge of while

shouting “hungry, angry.” Mac Low claims that Forti had been working with autistic and schizophrenic children at the time and was using some actions based on them.

In her improvisations Forti worked with words and phrases as much as movement. Each morning she wrote a text in response to the *Nuclei* in order to generate material for the evening’s performance. In the first night’s piece she asked, pausing to give each word its full weight: “What’s the point of all this art?” As the piece developed, Forti’s line of thought/movement included notions of delicacy: “something as delicate as a piece of bread you hold in your hand, you could squish it”—deftly miming the action. At one point she declared dramatically, “That’s the point! Give me some!” Forti resolved the piece by opening her black hardcover notebook which had lain all the while within the performance space and reading her precursor text in which some of the themes and phrases from the improvisation could be heard—a generous and process-showing gesture. Because there are some actions which appear in both the *Nuclei* material that Forti was using and the fifty-six card deck which Mac Low used to write *The Pronouns*, it is tempting to interpret some images in this scene as a possible response to “going about and coming across art” and “delicate things.”

On the second night Forti—who worked in the same circular spot each night, slightly further than halfway up the left-hand side of the body of the church—unfolded an improvisation that seemed more explicitly autobiographical in its images, which were presented as if they were recollections. These included a description of a photograph of a woman with her mouth held open like “a wedge of watermelon,” and also the image of garter snakes in the grass which “you could tame, they’d become your pet.” Forti enacted the movement of the snakes in a very subtle and effective manner—reminding me of the line “handing or seeming to hand snakes to people” in *The Pronouns*. On the third night, her performance recalled a story about the famous zoologist Konrad Lorenz introducing a dog-fish into a tank of “lazy fish” in order to stimulate them to more normal levels of active behavior—at one point she suggested the darting moves of the fish with beautifully precise hand gestures. Again, each night Forti resolved the piece by returning to her notebook and reading the seed text which had formed the basis of the improvisation. In some ways this gesture felt almost too revealing—like exposing the secret of a conjuring trick—but at the same time it allowed a powerful understanding to settle on one’s experience of the performance.

In his afterword to *The Pronouns*, Mac Low explains at length the complex process of devising the *Nuclei*, based on the same fifty-six cards that he eventually used to write *The Pronouns*, but also drawing on a further 1200 cards on which imperative sentences were written which he had composed for his play *The Marrying Maiden, a play of changes* in 1960. Forti describes her own practice of using language and movement, which she calls “Logomotion,” as an “improvisational dance narrative form in which movement and language spontaneously weave together to explore thoughts and feelings about the world.”^[4] The work of another distinguished participant in *40 Dancers*—Sally Silvers—also explores the edge between movement and language in her collaborations with the poet Bruce Andrews. Like Forti, Silvers reprised earlier work with Mac Low in

recreating a version of the sixteenth dance *Being Red Enough* which she had performed as part of a celebration of Mac Low's sixtieth birthday in 1982.^[5]

In her performance for *40 Dancers* on Thursday night, Silvers appeared on the altar with two pink balloons (the "delicate things" of the poem), one strapped around her waist and the other free but held under her left arm. Slotting herself into the central space at the very back of the church, she created a stunning arabesque that was highly evocative of the phrase "being in flight." Next followed a series of movements to the left and right of the altar space—a kind of testing of the boundaries—in which Silvers stopped short of the wall, raised herself on her toes, put her arms out straight and allowed herself to fall forward so that her hands met the wall and stayed taut, while she remained on tip-toe—each time conducted with a look of comic anxiety towards the audience, which the balloons also contributed to! These actions felt that they also might illustrate "going about & coming across art"—as if the anxiety was about confronting a painting or even the very boundaries of the proscenium arch itself and wanting to touch it, though forbidden to do so. The actions might also have been a response to "doing something under the conditions of competition" as they seemed to pit the body of the dancer against the space in which she found herself. Silvers then hunched down to the right of the altar and rapidly unfolded a sequence of actions using the balloons, including "making a structure with a roof or under a roof" by holding the balloons above her head. Finally she stood up, turned to her right—parallel to the altar—and let herself fall forward onto one of the balloons, bursting it instantly with a noise like a rifle shot which echoed through the space. This extraordinary gesture was a brilliant response to the phrase "finally damaging something foolish" but perhaps also enacted some aspect of "shocks somebody," because of its surprising volume!

In an interview I conducted with Silvers and Andrews the next day at Silvers' apartment in the East Village, she spoke about returning to her performance notes for her 1982 performance as part of her preparation for *40 Dancers*. In the earlier version she had used two large industrial spools instead of balloons. Silvers explained her approach to Mac Low's text as finding the main verb in each line of the dance-poem and developing her movement sequence from there—trying to give a suggestion of the verb's context, but mainly focusing on the action. Silver's use of the pink balloons typified Mac Low and the other performers' playful approach in *40 Dancers*. While we were constantly reminded not to take anything too seriously, the humor of the piece had the powerful effect of making it feel less separate from other areas of experience.

Immediately after Silvers' performance, the sixteenth dance *Being Red Enough* received a second treatment in the form of a duet by Levi Gonzalez and David Thomson. The visual drama that they presented with Thomson's lean figure dressed in simple black and white elegance contrasting with Gonzalez's sturdy frame bedecked with colorful casuals, belied an underlying chemistry between them that made their duet utterly compelling. Gonzalez began what was effectively a solo on the floor which got more and more intense and involved as he got to his feet—swinging and arresting his momentum in powerfully interrupted arcs. Thomson—whose movement remained fairly neutral—

simultaneously performed a narration about a child asking how people landed on the moon. As this developed, Gonzalez began to introduce objects into the space. Bringing in a flask, Thomson quipped “it was bigger than that!” and kept up his gently chiding comments as Gonzalez wrapped the flask in a plastic cushion cover and then laid out a long line of toilet paper on the other side of the space. Thomson’s discourse then diverted itself onto the subject of molecules. He touched the exposed skin of a nearby member of the audience with his finger and announced: “When I touch you, I’m taking something of you with me, and leaving something behind. Are you concerned about that? And what I’m going to do with those molecules?” to hilarious effect. At this point the performers switched roles and Thomson went into a silent solo on the floor, making intense sensuous eye contact with members of the audience—myself included! Meanwhile, Gonzalez began his own narration on the development of the fetus in the womb, including a fascinating piece of information about how developing cells differentiate themselves from one another, so that cells destined to become heart cells separate from cells destined to become part of the brain.

To the casual observer it would have been very hard to spot any common thread between these two versions of the same dance poem—a testimony both to the inventiveness of the performers and the suggestiveness of Mac Low’s uncanny writing which seems both concrete and abstract at the same time. The permissive looseness of the interpretive relationship certainly worked at eroding the edges between performance and everyday life, providing the occasion for all sorts of diverse actions and behavior—literally from the sublime to the ridiculous—the dance-poems functioning like a kind of strange attractor, drawing the full gamut of human expression into its midst.

In many ways family and kinship also function like a net, gathering disparate souls into relation, and this notion was given material form by the elegant “Kinship network sculpture” made by Peter Stankiewicz—a kind of giant cat’s cradle of interlinked string and wiffle balls hung across the space between the balconies and becoming part of the work’s set design. Mac Low’s tribute to her father also involved her brother Mordecai-Mark and niece Susan Mac Low (Mordecai-Mark can be seen in Peter Moore’s photographs of a 1965 production of *The Pronouns*) alongside mother and son duos Anna Azrieli with Ezra Holzman and Leyna Papach with Masumi Kouakou. On Thursday night, a tender and playful duet between a mother and child developed for the twenty-ninth dance *Having an Instrument*, portrayed by Luciana Achugar and three and half year-old Ignacio Achugar-Granoff, and another family performance of the thirty-eighth dance *Keeping Sheep or Seeing an Offer* came via Skype from Melbourne with Kim Sargent-Wishart and Llewelyn, Jarrah and Rico Wishart. For this last, the image was projected onto the altar space of the church while the children in the cast interacted with it, appearing to grasp dangling fragments of cut-up gummy worms being offered to the audience by the Melbourne family!

The seventh dance, *Being Earth*, was also performed by a family team of poet E.J. McAdams and his daughters, five-year-old Jane and eleven-year-old Lyla. In this version, E.J. read the complete text of the piece while Jane and Lyla danced. Jane, wearing a

beautiful wide-skirted crimson dress, bounced on a miniature trampoline—representing the earth—while Lyla ran around her sister. There were some touching, funny interactions between the two, especially around the line “doing something under the conditions of competition” in which they squared up to each other with relish, and the phrase “it hammers” which brought forth apt and gleeful actions. Jane brought the piece to a conclusion by sitting on the edge of the trampoline and reaching out toward her feet with the full length of her arms—evoking the last word of the text—“mouthing.”

There were many other memorable images and moments throughout this piece, not least my own opportunity to participate alongside other audience members in reading out part of the fourteenth dance *Doing Something Under the Conditions of Competition*. (I then worried about my performance!) The overriding impression of the whole was of a kind of liberating anarchy held within the firm but gentle arms of community. Indeed, it was this kind of contradictory tension that animated the piece—its dissolving of the boundaries between audience and performer, body and language, linear time and cyclical time, planned and spontaneous action, performance and everyday life. For Mac Low, the work was an “esthetic by-product of a social situation, where the provisional community formed by a shared project is as important as the performance itself.” In accordance with this view, Mac Low startled me by suggesting that the other work I had been doing on my visit to New York—interviewing Silvers and her collaborator, the poet Bruce Andrews and taking a workshop with Forti—was also a part of the larger overall piece conceived of in this way.

The real pleasure for me of *40 Dancers* lay in its capacity to explore relationships of power in a playful yet penetrating manner. Its humor lay in transgressive releases of tension, but this was far from simple catharsis. Instead the piece involved one in a deep engagement with one’s social intelligence: activating an ethics of attention. I often felt as if I was witnessing, and participating in, a ritual from another world—one uncannily similar to our own, but with its social rules radically altered. If this suggests a utopian aspect to the piece, it was tempered by a much more pragmatic approach to politics, grounded in a sense of the deep potential held in the everyday as we move about our lives, tending to our art, work, families and community. If the community that Mac Low and her dancers convened was only a provisional one, it has created effects which will endure for a long time to come.

[Scott Thurston](#) is a poet and mover based in the North West of England where he runs a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Salford and practices Five Rhythms and Contact Improvisation. His books include: *Reverses Heart’s Reassembly* (Veer Books, 2011), *Of Being Circular* (The Knives Forks and Spoons Press, 2010), *Internal Rhyme* (Shearsman, 2010), *Momentum* (Shearsman, 2008), and *Hold* (Shearsman, 2006). He writes critically on contemporary poetry, co-edits the [Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry](#) and co-organizes [The Other Room](#) poetry reading series.

[1] See Mac Low's 2012 – "My Year in Dance or: A Farewell/Comeback Tour" in *Movement Research: Critical Correspondence*, viewable at: <http://www.movementresearch.org/criticalcorrespondence/blog/?p=5040>.

[2] Alongside Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk, Kenneth King, Lanny Harrison and Fred Herko.

[3] *The Judson Project: Jackson Mac Low* (48 minutes, b/w, 1983). Videotape project produced by Bennington College, 1983. Interview by Michael Rowe, taped at Jackson Mac Low's loft, New York City in 1981.

[4] See interview with Simone Forti in *Contact Quarterly*, Vol. 37, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2012).

[5] The day before *40 Dancers* opened—12 September 2012—would have been the poet's ninetieth birthday.