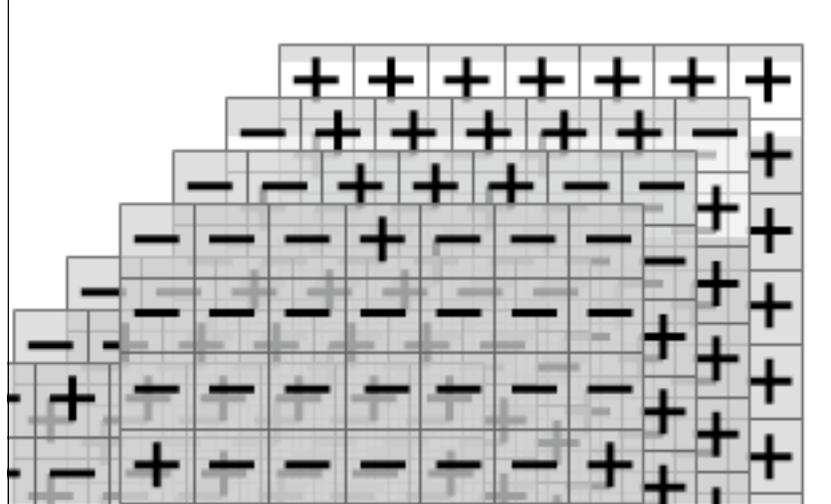


THE CHINESE NOTEBOOK

RON SILLIMAN



The Chinese Notebook
Ron Silliman

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Originally published in the book *The Age of Huts*
Roof Books (0-937804-22-3)

Cover image: from “Seven Translucent Tiers”, a grid study in three dimensions by
Mel Blocher. The interactive version of this artwork can be viewed in issue 5-6 of
UbuWeb’s Aspen magazine section, ubu.com/aspen

/ubu editions

www.ubu.com

/ubu editions series editor: Brian Kim Stefans

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/ubu editions
2004

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1. Wayward, we weigh words. Nouns reward objects for meaning. The chair in the air is covered with hair. No part is in touch with the planet.
2. Each time I pass the garage of a certain yellow house, I am greeted with barking. The first time this occurred, an instinctive fear seemed to run through me. I have never been attacked. Yet I firmly believe that if I opened the door to the garage I should confront a dog.
3. Chesterfield, sofa, divan, couch—might these items refer to the same object? If so, are they separate conditions of a single word?
4. My mother as a child would call a potholder a “boppo,” the term becoming appropriated by the whole family, handed down now by my cousins to their own children. Is it a word? If it extends, eventually, into general usage, at what moment will it become one?
5. Language is, first of all, a political question.
6. I wrote this sentence with a ballpoint pen. If I had used another would it have been a different sentence?
7. This is not philosophy, it’s poetry. And if I say so, then it becomes painting, music or sculpture, judged as such. If there are variables to consider, they are at least partly economic—the question of distribution, etc. Also differing critical traditions. Could this be good Poetry, yet bad music? But yet I do not believe I would, except in jest, posit this as dance or urban planning.
8. This is not speech. I wrote it.

9. Another story, similar to 2: until well into my twenties the smell of cigars repelled me. The strong scent inevitably brought to mind the image of warm, wet shit. That is not, in retrospect, an association I can rationally explain. Then I worked as a legislative advocate in the state capitol and was around cigar smoke constantly. Eventually the odor seemed to dissolve. I no longer noticed it. Then I began to notice it again, only now it was an odor I associated with suede or leather. This was how I came to smoke cigars.

10. What of a poetry that lacks surprise? That lacks form, theme, development? Whose language rejects interest? That examines itself without curiosity? Will it survive?

11. Rose and maroon we might call red.

12. Legalistic definitions. For example, in some jurisdictions a conviction is not present, in spite of a finding of guilt, without imposition of sentence. A suspension of sentence, with probation, would not therefore be a conviction. This has substantial impact on teachers' credentials, or the right to practice medicine or law.

13. That this form has a tradition other than the one I propose, Wittgenstein, etc., I choose not to dispute. But what is its impact on the tradition proposed?

14. Is Wittgenstein's contribution strictly formal?

15. Possibility of a poetry analogous to the paintings of Rosenquist—specific representational detail combined in non-objective, formalist systems.

16. If this were theory, not practice, would I know it?

17. Everything here tends away from an aesthetic decision, which, in itself, is one.

18. I chose a Chinese notebook, its thin pages not to be cut, its six red-line columns which I turned 90[degrees], the way they are closed by curves at both top and bottom, to see how it would alter the writing. Is it flatter, more airy? The words, as I write them, are larger, cover more surface on this two-dimensional picture plane. Shall I, therefore, tend toward shorter terms—impact of page on vocabulary?

19. Because I print this, I go slower. Imagine layers of air over the planet. One closer to the center of gravity moves faster, while the one above it tends to drag. The lower one is thought, the planet itself the object of the thought. But from space what is seen is what filters through the slower outer air of representation.

20. Perhaps poetry is an activity and not a form at all. Would this definition satisfy Duncan?

21. Poem in a notebook, manuscript, magazine, book, reprinted in an anthology. Scripts and contexts differ. How could it be the same poem?

22. The page intended to score speech. What an elaborate fiction that seems!

23. As a boy, riding with my grandparents about Oakland or in the country, I would recite such signs as we passed, directions, names of towns or diners, billboards. This seems to me now a basic form of verbal activity.

24. If the pen won't work, the words won't form. The meanings are not manifested.

25. How can I show that the intentions of this work and poetry are identical?

26. Anacoluthia, parataxis—there is no grammar or logic by which the room in which I sit can be precisely recreated in words. If, in fact, I were to try to convey it to a stranger, I'd be inclined to show photos and draw a floor map.

27. Your existence is not a condition of this work. Yet, let me, for a moment, posit it. As you read, other things occur to you. You hear the drip of a faucet, or there's music on, or your companion gives a sigh that represents a poor night's sleep. As you read, old conversations reel slowly through your mind, you sense your buttocks and spine in contact with the chair. All of these certainly must be a part of the meaning of this work.

28. As students, boys and girls the age of ten, we would write stories and essays, reading them to the class if the teacher saw fit. The empty space of blank paper seemed to propose infinite dimensions. When the first term was fixed, the whole form readily appeared. It seemed more a question of finding the writing than of creating it. One day a student—his name was Jon Arnold—read an essay in which he described our responses to hearing him read it. It was then I knew what writing meant.

29. Mallard, drake—if the words change, does the bird remain?

30. How is it possible that I imagine I can put that chair into language? There it sits, mute. It knows nothing of syntax. How can I put it into something it doesn't inherently possess?

31. "Terminate with extreme prejudice." That meant kill. Or "we had to destroy the village in order to save it." Special conditions create special languages. If we remain at a distance, their irrationality seems apparent, but, if we came closer, would it?

32. The Manson family, the SLA. What if a group began to define the perceived world according to a complex, internally consistent, and precise (tho inaccurate) language? Might not the syntax itself propel their reality to such a point that to our own they could not return? Isn't that what happened to Hitler?

33. A friend records what she hears, such as a lunatic awaiting his food stamps, speaking to those who also wait in line, that "whether or not you're good people,

that's what I can't tell." As if such acts of speech were clues to the truth of speech itself.

34. They are confused, those who would appropriate Dylan or Wittgenstein—were there ever two more similar men?—, passing them off as poets?

35. What now? What new? All these words turning in on themselves like the concentric layers of an onion.

36. What does it mean: "saw fit"?

37. Poetry is a specific form of behavior.

38. But test it against other forms. Is it more like a drunkenness than filling out an absentee ballot? Is there any value in knowing the answer to this question?

39. Winter wakens thought, much as summer prods recollection. Ought poetry to be a condition of the seasons?

40. What any of us eventually tries—to arrive at some form of "bad" writing (e.g. 31–34?) that would be one form of "good" poetry. Only when you achieve this will you be able to define what it is.

41. Speech only tells you the speaker.

42. Analogies between poetry and painting end up equating page and canvas. Is there any use in such fiction?

43. Or take the so-called normal tongue and shift each term in a subtle way. Is this speech made new or mere decoration?

44. Poets of the syntagmeme, poets of the paradigm.

45. The word in the world.
46. Formal perception: that this section, because of the brevity of the foregoing two, should be extensive, commenting, probing, making not aphorisms but fine distinctions, one sentence perhaps of a modular design, verbs in many clauses like small houses sketched into the mountainsides of a grand Chinese landscape, noting to the mind as it passes the gears and hinges of the design, how from the paradigm “large, huge, vast, great, grand,” the term was chosen, by rhyme, anticipate “landscape,” time itself signaled by the repetition.
47. Have we come so very far since Sterne or Pope?
48. Language as a medium attracts me because I equate it with that element of consciousness which I take to be intrinsically human. Painting or music, say, might also directly involve the senses, but by ordering external situations to provoke specific (or general) responses. Do I fictionalize the page as form not to consider it as simply another manifestation of such “objective” fact? I have known writers who thought they could make the page disappear.
49. Everything you hear in your head, heart, whole body, when you read this, is what this is.
50. Ugliness v. banality. Both, finally, are attractive.
51. Time is one axis. Often I want to draw it out, to make it felt, a thing so slow that slight alterations (long v. short syllables, etc., clusters of alliteration . . .) magnify, not line (or breath) but pulse, the blood in the muscle.
52. Entymology in poetry—to what extent is it hidden (i.e., present and felt, but not consciously perceived) and to what extent lost (i.e., not perceived or felt, or, if so, only consciously)? The Joycean tradition here is based on an analytic assumption which is not true.

53. Is the possibility of publishing this work automatically a part of the writing? Does it alter decisions in the work? Could I have written that if it did not?
54. Increasingly I find object art has nothing new to teach me. This is also the case for certain kinds of poetry. My interest in the theory of the line has its limits.
55. The presumption is: I can write like this and “get away with it.”
56. As economic conditions worsen, printing becomes prohibitive. Writers posit less emphasis on the page or book.
57. “He’s content just to have other writers think of him as a poet.” What does this mean?
58. What if there were no other writers? What would I write like?
59. Imagine meaning rounded, never specific.
60. Is it language that creates categories? As if each apple were a proposed definition of a certain term.
61. Poetry, a state of emotion or intellect. Who would believe that? What would prompt them to do so? Also, what would prompt them to abandon this point of view?
62. The very idea of margins. A convention useful to fix forms, perhaps the first visual element of ordering, preceding even the standardization of spelling. What purpose does it have now, beyond the convenience of printers? Margins do not seem inherent in speech, but possibly that is not the case.
63. Why is the concept of a right-hand margin so weak in the poetry of western civilization?

64. Suppose I was trying to explain a theory of the margin to a speaker of Mandarin or Shasta—how would I justify it? Would I compare it to rhyme as a sort of decision? Would I mention the possibility of capitalizing the letters along the margin? If I wanted, could I work “backwards” here, showing how one could posit nonspoken acrostics vertically at the margin and justify its existence from that? What if the person to whom I was explaining this had no alphabet, no writing, in his native tongue?

65. Saroyan and, more completely, Grenier have demonstrated that there is no useful distinction between language and poetry.

66. Under certain conditions any language event can be poetry. The question thus becomes one of what are these conditions.

67. By the very act of naming —The Chinese Notebook—one enters into a process as into a contract. Yet each section, such as this, needs to be invented, does not automatically follow from specific prior statements. However, that too could be the case.

68. I have never seen a theory of poetry that adequately included a sub-theory of choice.

69. There is also the question of work rhythms and habits. When I was a boy, after each dinner I would place the family typewriter—it was ancient and heavy—atop the kitchen table, typing or writing furiously— it was almost automatic writing—until it was time to go to bed. Later, married, I still wrote in the evening, as though unable to begin until each day’s information reached a certain threshold which I could gauge by fatigue. All throughout these years, I could not work on a given piece beyond one sitting—a condition I attributed to my attention span—, although on occasion “one sitting” could extend to 48 hours. Since then there has been a shift. I have lately been writing in notebooks, over extended periods (in one instance, five months), and in the morning, often before breakfast and at times before dawn. Rather than the fatigue of digested sense data, the state of mind I

work in is the empty-headed clarity which follows sleep.

70. This work lacks cunning.

71. An offshoot of projectivist theory was the idea that the form of the poem might be equivalent to the poet's physical self. A thin man to use short lines and a huge man to write at length. Kelly, etc.

72. Antin's theory is that in the recent history of progressive forms (himself, Schwerner, Rothenberg, MacLow, Higgins, the Something Else writers et al), it has become clear that only certain domains yield "successful" work. But he has not indicated what these domains are, nor sufficiently defined success.

73. A social definition of a successful poet might be anyone who has a substantial proportion of his or her work generally available, so that an interested reader can, without knowing the writer, grasp, in broad terms at least, the scope of the whole.

74. If this bores you, leave.

75. What happened to fiction was a shift in public sensibility. The general reader no longer is apt to identify with a character in a story, but with its author. Thus the true narrative element is the development of the form. The true drama of, say, Mailer's *Armies of the Night*, is the question: will this book work? In film, an even more naturally narrative medium than prose, this condition is readily apparent.

76. If I am correct that this is poetry, where is its family resemblance to, say, *The Prelude*? Crossing the Alps.

77. The poem as code or fad. One you must "break," while the other requires the decision of whether or not to follow.

78. Is not-writing (and here I don't mean discarding or revising) also part of

the process?

79. I am continually amazed at how many writers are writing the poems they believe the person they wish they were would have written.

80. What if writing was meant to represent all possibilities of thought, yet one could or would write only in certain conditions, states of mind?

81. I have seen poems thought or felt to be dense, difficult to get through, respaced on the page, two dimensional picture plane, made airy, “light.” How is content altered by this operation?

82. Certain forms of “bad” poetry are of interest because inept writing blocks referentiality, turning words and phrases in on themselves, an autonomy of language which characterizes the “best” writing. Some forms of sloppy surrealism or pseudo-beat automatic writing are particularly given to this.

83. Designated art sentence.

84. One can use the inherent referentiality of sentences very much as certain “pop” artists used images (I’m thinking of Rauschenberg, Johns, Rosenquist, etc.) to use as elements for so-called abstract composition.

85. Abstract v. concrete, a misleading vocabulary. If I read a sentence (story, poem, whatever unit) of a fight, say, and identify with any spectator or combatant, I am having a vicarious experience. But if I experience, most pronouncedly, this language as event, I am experiencing that fact directly.

86. Impossible to posit the cat’s expectations in words. Or Q’s example—the mouse’s fear of the cat is counted as his believing true a certain English sentence. If we are to speak of things, we are proscribed, limited to the external, or else create laughable and fantastic fictions.

87. Story of a chimpanzee taught that certain geometrical signs stood for

words, triangle for bird, circle for water, etc., when presented with a new object, a duck, immediately made up the term “water bird.”

88. That writing was “speech” “scored.” A generation caught in such mixed metaphor (denying the metaphor) as that. That elaboration of technical components of the poem carried the force of prophecy.

89. Is any term now greater than a place-holder? Any arrangement of weighted squares, if ordered by some shared theory of color, could be language.

90. What do nouns reveal? Conceal?

91. The idea of the importance of the role of the thumb in human evolution. Would I still be able to use it if I did not have a word for it? Thought it simply a finger? What evidence do I have that my right and left thumbs are at least roughly symmetrical equivalents? After all I don’t really use my hands interchangeably, do I? I couldn’t write this with my left hand, or if I did learn to do so, it would be a specific skill and would be perceived as that.

92. Perhaps as a means of containing meaning outside of the gallery system, the visual arts have entered into a period where the art itself exists in a dialectic, in the exchange between worker, critic and worker. Writing stands in a different historical context. Fiction exists in relation to a publishing system, poetry to an academic one.

93. At Berkeley, when I was a student, graduate students in the English Department liked to think of themselves as “specialized readers.”

94. What makes me think that form exists?

95. One possibility is my ability to “duplicate” or represent it. As a child, I could fill in a drawing as tho it and color existed.

96. I want these words to fill the spaces poems leave.

97. The assumption is, language is equal if not to human perception per se, then to what is human about perception.
98. Good v. bad poetry. The distinction is not useful. The whole idea assumes a shared set of articulatable values by which to make such a judgment. It assumes, if not the perfect poem, at least the theory of limits, the most perfect poem. How would you proceed to make such a distinction?
99. Those who would excerpt or edit miss the point.
100. “When I look at a blank page it’s never blank!” Prove or disprove this statement.
101. Before you can accept the idea of fiction, you have to admit everything else.
102. “The only thing language can change is language.” Ah, but to the extent that we act on our thoughts, we act on their syntax.
103. The order of this room is subject-verb-predicate.
104. Put all of this another way: can I use language to change myself?
105. Once I wrote some stories for an elementary school text. I was given a list of words from which to work, several hundred terms proposed to me as the information range of any eight year old. This included no verbs of change.
106. “Time is the common enemy.”
107. Concepts of past and future precede an ability to conceive of the sentence.
108. Subjects hypnotized to forget the past and future wrote words at random intervals about the page.

109. So-called non-referential language when structured non-syntactically tends to disrupt time perception. Once recognized, one can begin to structure the disruption. Coolidge, for example, in *The Maintains*, uses line, stanza and repetition. Ashbery's *Three Poems*, not referential but syntactical, does not alter time.

110. The flaw of non-referentiality is that words are derived. They do not exist prior to their causes. Even when the origins are not obvious or are forgotten. The root, for example, of *denigrate* is *Negro*. Words only become non-referential through specific context. A condition as special (i.e., not universal or "ordinary") as the poem perceived as speech scored for the page.

111. When I was younger, the argument was whether, when you stripped the poem of all inessentials, you were left finally with a voice or with an image. Now it seems clear that the answer is neither. A poem, like any language, is a vocabulary and a set of rules by which it is processed.

112. But if the poem/language equation is what we have been seeking, other questions nevertheless arise. For example, are two poems by one poet two languages or, as Zukofsky argues, only one? But take specifics—*Catullus*, *Mantis*, *Bottom*, "A"-12—are these not four vocabularies with four sets of rules?

113. Compare sections 26 and 103.

114. If four poets took a specific text from which to derive the terms of a poem, what I call a "vocab," and by prior agreement each wrote a sestina, that would still be four languages and not one, right?

115. A hill with two peaks, or two hills. If I grant that the language alters one's perception, and if it follows naturally that, depending on which perception one "chooses," one acts differently, becomes used to different paths, thinks of certain people as neighbors and others not, and that such acts collectively will alter the hill (e.g., one peak becomes middle-class, residential, while the other slips into ghettohood later to be cleared off for further "development" which might include lev-

eling the top of the peak to make it useable industrial space)—if I grant the possibility of this chain, is not the landscape itself a consequence of language? And isn't this essentially the history of the planet? Can one, in the context of such a chain, speak of what we know of as the planet as existing prior to language?

116. This jumps around. It does not have an "argument."

117. Paris is in France. Also, Paris has five letters. So does France. But so do Ghana, China, Spain. How should I answer "Why is Paris Paris?"

118. The question within the question. To which does the question mark refer? If one question mark is lost, where does its meaning go? How is it possible for punctuation to have multiple or non-specific references?

119. In what way is this like prose? In what way is this unlike it?

120. Only esthetic consistency constitutes content (Yates' proposition regarding music). Applied to writing one arrives at the possibility of a "meaningful" poetry as the sum of "meaningless" poems.

121. But consistency demands a perception of time. Thus, if we accept the proposition, we tacitly approve some definition of poetry as a specific time construct.

122. There is no direction. There is only distance.

123. What is the creative role of confusion in any work?

124. At times, my own name is simply a gathering of letters. Very distant.

125. Words relate to the referred world much the way each point in a line can be said to describe a curve.

126. The sun variously rises each morning. We, variously, attempt to relate that. No single way is exact, yet everyone knows what we mean.

127. The words are not “out there.”

128. By the time you admit the presence of verbs, you have already conceded all of the assumptions.

129. The historical attraction of the arts to madness is a question of what happens if you redefine the language.

130. Content is only an excuse, something to permit the writing to occur, to trigger it. Would a historian looking for information about Massachusetts fishing colonies have much use for *Maximus*? To say yes is to concede that in order to like, say, Pound, you’d have to agree with him, no?

131. *Sad is faction*. That sounds alone are not precise meaning (in the referential sense) means that before the listener can recognize content he/she must first have the perception of the presence of words.

132. But if one denies the possibility of referentiality, how does *sad is faction* differ from *satisfaction*? How do we know this?

133. “Post-syntactical” implies that syntax was a historical period of language, not a condition inherent in it. Rather than seeing language as a universe whose total set cannot be dealt with until all its conditions are brought into play, this designation opts for an easy and incorrect solution. Occasionally, it has been used in such a fashion as to assert some sort of competition with “syntactical” writing, with the supposedly-obvious presumption that, being later in language’s various conditions, it is more advanced. Such a view distorts the intentions and functions of abandoning syntactical and even paratactical modes.

134. Terms, out of context, inevitably expand and develop enlarged inner con-

ditions, the large field of the miniaturists.

135. Eigner's work, for example. The early writings resemble a late Williams/early Olson mode, discursive syntax, which becomes in later works increasingly a cryptic notation until now often words in a work will float in an intuitive vocabulary—space, their inner complexities expanded so that words are used like the formal elements in abstract art.

136. To move away from the individualist stance in writing I first began to choose vocabularies for poems from language sources that were not my own, science texts, etc. Then I began to develop forms which opt away from the melodic dominant line of the past several decades, using formal analogies taken from certain Balinese and African percussive and ensemble musics, as well as that of Steve Reich.

137. The concept that the poem “expresses” the poet, vocally or otherwise, is at one with the whole body of thought identified as Capitalist Imperialism.

138. If poetry is to be perfect, it cannot be all-knowing. If it is to be all-knowing, it cannot be perfect.

139. I began writing seriously a decade ago and was slow to learn. For years I was awkward, sloppy, given to overstatement, the sentimental image, the theatrical resolution. Yet, subtracting these, I am amazed at the elements, all formal and/or conceptual, which have remained constants. It is those who tell me who I am.

140. The presumption of the logical positivists that “the relation between language and philosophy is closer than, as well as essentially different from, that between language and any other discipline,” would upset most poets. Three answers seem possible: (1) the logical positivists are wrong, (2) poetry and philosophy are quite similar and perhaps ought to be considered different branches of a larger category, (3) poetry is not a discipline, at least in the sense of the special definition of the logical positivists. I reject the third alternative as not being true for

any except those poets whose work lacks all sense of definition. This leaves me with two possible conclusions.

141. Why is this work a poem?

142. One answer: because certain information is suppressed due to what its position in the sequence would be.

143. But is it simply a question of leaving out?

144. It is our interpretation of signs, not their presence (which, after all, could be any series of random marks on the page, sounds in the air), that makes them referential.

145. There are writers who would never question the assumptions of non-objective artists (Terry Fox, say, or even Stella or the late Smithson) who cannot deal with writing in the same fashion. Whenever they see certain marks on the page, they always presume that something *besides* those marks is also present.

146. On page 282 of *Imaginations*, Williams writes “This is the alphabet,” presents the typewriter keyboard, except that where the *s* should be there appears a second *e*. Whether this was “in error” or not, it tells us everything about the perception of language.

147. The failure of Williams to go beyond his work of *Spring and All* and the *Great American Novel* seems to verify Bergmann’s assertion that nominalism inevitably tends toward (deteriorates into?) representationalism.

148. Konkretism was a very narrow base on which to build a literature. Futurism of the Russian school, especially the *zaum* works of the Group 41 [degrees], is the true existing body of experimental literature with which contemporary writers have to work.

149. What is it that allows me to identify this as a poem, Wittgenstein to identify his work as technical philosophy, Brockman's *Afterwords* to be seen as Esalen-oriented metaphysics, and Kenner's piece on Zukofsky literary criticism?

150. But is it a distortion of poetry to speak of it like this? How might I define poetry so as to be able to identify such distortions?

151. Can one even say, as have Wellek and Warren, that literature (not even here to be so specific as to identify the poem to the exclusion of other modes) is first of all words in a sequence? One can point to the concretist tradition as a partial refutation, or one can point to the great works of Grenier, *A Day at the Beach* and *Sentences*, where literature occurs within individual words.

152. Possibly, if one approached it cautiously, one could hope to make notations, provisional definitions of poetry. For example, one might begin by stating that it is any language act—not necessarily a sequence of terms—which makes no other formal assertion other than it is poetry. This would permit the exclusion of Kosuth and Wittgenstein, but the inclusion of this.

152. But how, if it does not state it, does a work make a formal assertion? Certain structural characteristics such as line, stanza, etc. are not always present. Here is where one gets into Davenport's position regarding Ronald Johnson, to say that one is a poet who has written no poems, per se.

154. Performance as a form is only that. As always, the intention of the creator defines the state in which the work is most wholly itself, so that it is possible that a talking piece, say, could be said to be a poem. But formally its ties are closer to other arts than to the tradition of poetry. I have, in the last year, heard talking pieces that were proposed as poetry, as music and as sculpture. Each, in all major respects, resembled the late period of Lenny Bruce or perhaps Dick Cavett. The form of the talking piece, its tradition, was always stronger than the asserted definition. Nor is the talking piece the only nontraditional (if, in fact, it is that at all) mode to run into this problem. Some of the visualists, e.g., Kostelanetz, have uti-

lized film for their poems, but the poem is readily lost in this transfer. What one experiences in its presence is the fact of film.

155. Why did I write “As always, the intention of the creator defines the state in which the work is most wholly itself”? Because it is here and here only where one can “fix” a work into a given state (idea, projective process, text, affective process, impression), an act which is required, absolutely, before one can place the work in relation to others, only after which can one make judgments.

156. What if I told you I did not really believe this to be a poem? What if I told you I did?

157. Periodically one hears that definitions are unimportant, or, and this implicitly is more damning, “not interesting.” I reject this, taking all language events to be definitions or, if you will, propositions.

158. I find myself not only in the position of arguing that all language acts are definitions and that they nonetheless are not essentially referential, but also that this is not a case specifically limited to an “ideal” or “special” language (such as one might argue poetry to be), but is general, applicable to all.

159. If, at this point, I was to insert 120 rhymed couplets, would it cause definitions to change?

160. Lippard (*Changing*, p. 206) argues against a need for a “humanistic” visual arts, but makes an exception for literature, which “as a verbal medium, demands a verbal response.” One wonders what, precisely, is meant by that? Is it simply a question of referentiality posed in vague terms? Or does it mean, as I suspect she intended it to, that language, like photography, is an ultimately captive medium? If so, is the assertion correct? It is not.

161. It becomes increasingly clear that the referential origin of language and its syntactical (or linguistic, or relational) meaning is the contradiction (if it is one)

that is to be understood if we are to accept a poetics of autonomous language.

162. If I could make an irrefutable argument that non-referential language does exist (besides, that is, those special categories, such as prepositions or determiners), would I include this in it? Of course I would.

163. What you read is what you read.

164. Make a note in some other place, then transfer it here. Is it the same note?

165. I want form to be perceivable but not consequent to referred meaning. Rather, it should serve to move that element to the fore- or backbrain at will.

166. Form that is an extension of referred meaning stresses that meaning's relation to the individual, voice or image as extension of self, emphasizes one's separateness from others. What I want, instead, is recognition of our connectedness.

167. A writing which is all work, technical procedure, say a poem derived from a specific formula, is of interest for this fact alone.

168. Words in a text like states on a map: meaning is commerce.

169. One type of criticism would simply describe the formal features of any given work, demonstrate its orderliness with the implicit purpose of, from this, deducing the work's intention. A comparison, then, of the intention to the work (and, secondarily, to other works of identical or similar intention), would provide grounds for a judgment.

170. Is it possible for a work to conceal its intention?

171. But if the intention is always to be arrived at deductively, will not the work always be equal to it? Would we be able to recognize a work which had not met the writer's original intention?

172. Perhaps this poem could be said to be an example of the condition described in 171.

173. Is it possible for intentions to be judged, good or malevolent, right or otherwise? This brings us into the realm of political and ethical distinctions?

174. In recent years, criticism has played a dynamic role in the evolution of the visual arts, but not in writing. Theory, much of it unsound, even mystical, on the part of writers, has had more impact. A possible explanation: criticism is applied theory, useful only if it is rigorous in its application, which has been impossible given the loose and vague standards characteristic of so much recent writing, while theory can be used suggestively, which it has been regardless of the mystifications present.

175. A poem written in pen could never have been written in pencil.

176. When I was younger, I was so habituated to the typewriter as a tool and to the typewritten page as a space, that, even when I worked from notebooks, the poems transposed back into a typewritten text tended to perfectly fill the page.

177. Deliberately determining the way one writes, determines much of what will be written.

178. If I were to publish only parts of this, sections, it would alter the total proposition.

179. How far will anything extend? Hire dancers dressed as security personnel to walk about an otherwise empty museum, then admit the public. Could this be poetry if I have proposed it as such? If so, what elements could be altered or removed to make it not poetry? E.g., hire not dancers but ordinary security personnel. But if the answer is “no,” if any extension, thing, event, would be poetry if proposed as such, *what* would poetry, the term, mean?

180. Possibly poetry is a condition applicable to any state of affairs. What would constitute such a condition? Would it be the same or similar in all instances? Could it be identified, broken down? Does it have anything to do with the adjectival form “poetic”?

181. If one could propose worrying as one form of poetry, what in the worrying would be the poem?

182. Or could one have poetry without the poem? Is it possible that these two states do not depend on the presence (relational as it is) of each other? Give examples.

183. Why is it language characterizes the man?

184. Or I meant, possibly, why is it that language characterizes man?

185. Is it language?

186. Context—against the text. Literally a circumstance where meaning is not obvious simply by the presence of terms in a specific sequence. Remove 185 from this text: “it” in 185 then means either “this writing” or some “other” event. But in the notebook as it is, the sentence must mean “Is it language that characterizes (the) man?” Is the same sentence in two contexts one or two sentences? If it is one, how can we assign it differing meanings? If it is two, there could never literally be repetition.

187. Alimentary, my dear Watson.

188. But if poetry were a ‘system’—not necessarily a single system, but if for any individual it was—then one could simply plug in the raw data and out would flow ‘poetry,’ not necessarily poems.

189. Is this not what Robert Kelly does?

190. It was Ed van Aelstyn who, in his linguistics course, planted the idea (1968) that the definition of a language was also a definition of any poem: a vocabulary plus a set of rules through which to process it. What did I think poetry was before that?

191. But does the vocabulary include words which do not end up in the finished text? If so, how would we know which words they are?

192. A friend, a member of the Old Left, challenges my aesthetic. How, he asks, can one write so as not to “communicate”? I, in turn, challenge his definitions. It is a more crucial lesson, I argue, to learn how to experience language directly, to tune one’s senses to it, than to use it as a mere means to an end. Such use, I point out, is, in bourgeois life, common to all things, even the way we “use” our friends. Some artists (Brecht is the obvious example) try to focus such “use” to point up all the alienation, to present a bourgeois discourse “hollowed out.” But language, so that it is experienced directly, moves beyond any such exercise in despair, an unalienated language. He wants an example. I give him Grenier’s

thumpa
thumpa
thumpa
thump

pointing out how it uses so many physical elements of speech, how it is a speech that only borders on language, how it illumines that space. He says, “I don’t understand.”

193. Determiners, their meaning.

194. Each sentence is new born.

195. Traditionally, poetry has been restrictive, has had no room for the appositive.

196. I imagine at times this to be discourse. Sometimes it is one voice, sometimes many.

197. Language on walls. Graffiti, “fuk speling,” etc. As a boy I rode with my Grandparents about town, learning to read by reading all the signs aloud. I am still apt to do this.
198. This sentence is that one.
199. “This in which,” i.e., the world in its relations. What is of interest is not the objectification, but relativity: Einstein’s “What time does the station get to the train?”
200. Imagine the man who liked de Kooning out of a fondness for women.
201. There is no way in language to describe the experience of knowing my hand.
202. I was chased, running through a forest. Because I knew the names of the plants I could run faster.
203. The formal considerations of indeterminacy are too few for interest to extend very far, even when posed in other terms—“organic” etc. But organic form is strict, say, 1:1:2:3:5:8:13:21. . . . What is the justification for strict form (Xenakis’ music, for example) which cannot be perceived? Is there an aesthetic defense for the hidden?
204. Presence and absence. This axis is form’s major dimension.
205. Are 23 and 197 the same or different?
206. A paper which did not absorb fluids well, a pencil that was blunt or wrote only faintly. These would determine the form of the work. Now, when I set out on a piece, choice of instrument and recorder (notebook, typing paper, etc.) are major concerns. I am apt to buy specific pens for specific pieces.
207. Words to locate specific instance—personalism, localism. Quality of a jour-

nal to what this or that one does. "Another hard day of gossip."

208. Any writer carries in his or her head a set, what 'the scene' is, its issues, etc. So often little or no overlap at all, but how it defines what anyone does!

209. The day is wrappt in its definitions, this room is.

210. Whether one sees language as learned or inherent determines, in part, what one does with it. The 'organic' sentence (truncated, say, by breath, or thought's diversions) versus the sentence as an infinitely plastic (I don't mean this in the pejorative sense) one, folding, unfolding, extending without limit. Dahlberg or Faulkner.

211. Absolutely normal people. Would their writing be any different?

212. Information leaks through these words. Each time I use them new things appear.

213. Values are vowels.

214. A language of one consonant, one vowel, various as any.

215. Like eyesight, our minds organizing what we 'see' before we even see it. As tho I did not know about oranges, tho I had eaten them all my life. Each time I ate one I would not know what taste to expect.

216. I do not read to 'read of the world,' but for the pleasure in the act of reading.

217. The ocean's edge is a mantra. Strollers, bathers, dogs, gulls. Its great sound. The smell of salt. Sun's sheen on water. But there is no way to repeat this in language. Anything we say, descriptively, is partial. At best one constructs an aes-

thetic of implication. One can, however, make of the language itself a mantra. But this is not the ocean.

218. Buildup, resolution. What have these to do with the writing?

219. Just as doubt presumes a concept of certainty, non-referentiality presumes knowledge of the referential. Is this a proof?

220. When I return here to ideas previously stated, that's rhyme.

221. Any piece I write precludes the writing of some other piece. As this work is the necessary consequence of previous writings, called poems, so it will also create necessities, ordering what follows. I take this as absolute verification of its poemhood.

222. Language hums in the head, secretes words.

223. This is it.

