

Donato Mancini interviews Andrew Klobucar in 2006

DM: How do you understand the KSW's place in Canadian artist-run culture?

AK: I had a talk about that with Margaret Christakos, and I think she made a good point. She said it's important to see it within a larger context of the artist-run network, and the whole dissolution of AMPAC, which was the artist-run governing agency. Before PAARC there was a national network based in Toronto and it produced a magazine called Parallelogram (I used to work on it, in Toronto, on Bathurst). The organisation it was a pretty small outfit but it was both the managing and funding agency that allowed the national grants to be distributed, and disseminated to the different artist-run centres. But it didn't survive the 80s, and the funding became so dry on one level that it lost its capacity to do much for the centres other than put out this magazine, which was still kind of good. It had articles and featured the shows all the way from Victoria to NASCAD. So the different curators would send in their announcements, for a subscription you could keep track of what was happening across the country. It came out quarterly. When that dissolved, that had a lot to do with the different centres not wanting to be part of a larger national network but to develop a more regional identity. Often that created a lot of the ethnography that was happening and created the identity politics. Just about the same time that Monica Gagnon changed her name to Kin Gagnon – and AMPAC really didn't move quickly enough to adapt to that shift in sensibility and the shift in politics. And a lot of it was coming out of the Westcoast, particularly Vancouver, and Alberta strangely enough, where they saw AMPAC and parallelogram as just another national voice for what should be smaller regional issues. And I guess they made the same argument about how Toronto was getting more coverage than the regional centres. The AGM was supposed to be held at different cities across the country but it seemed more difficult so the AGMs held in Toronto outnumbered the regional ones. But I think if you don't have the money to really maintain it obviously these regional issues begins to eat at the structure itself. So this is 1990-91. Right about the same time that KSW is going through its first kind of shift. And I think Jeff also saw that losing AMPAC and losing its connection to Toronto was a weaker move that would fall into regionalism, because there wasn't anything outside of regionalism and identity politics to maintain issues, so issues like class and globalism didn't seem to be on the agenda.

DM: Identity politics entered and influenced the KSW?

AK: Well Lisa had more of an issue with gender politics. Politically she was more critical of Language writing and its supposed male stance. She didn't like the writing of Bruce Andrews, she didn't like the writing of Ron Silliman, you know. It seemed necessary to her to open it up. So if you talk to Lisa she would obviously say it was time to inject a little variety; her identity politics were really quite strong. If you look back on it now, look back at the city, you can see it was really starting to change, population-wise.

It's funny, because just within the last 10 years you can see that kind of shift. So I think if AMPAC had been better funded it probably would have been better able to accommodate these other issues, but it wasn't so it started to fall apart and then it was aggressively taken-down. A lot of people saw it as an attempt to seize power. The argument that came about not too surprisingly was that this kind of shift into identity politics was actually conservative, based upon therapeutic approaches or victim-politics. And that's very different than what Jeff was interested in. It's seen as more of an aestheticisation – it's a shift from continental thinking into more post-colonial theory, and it was affecting who was getting what grants when. Lisa's a very strong-willed writer. She had a lot of very interesting intellectual projects. She was able to work well, at least for a while, with Strang and Shaw. The good part of that is that the programming was really strong. She had a lot of time and a lot of capacity to dedicate herself specifically to that. She really took that on – I mean she opened Proprioception books, I think in 89-90. It was in-existence when I got here around 1991-2. I think it was on Richard's.

DM: Colin mentioned a town-hall style meeting at Artspeak. Did you go to that meeting? Is that where your involvement began?

AK: Yes, I did, that's exactly it. I started coming around a little before that, cos Lisa was running some very interesting workshops. So she was getting a lot of support from the writing community, and she also got a lot of support from the Erin O'Brien who had just broken up with Jeff Derksen – they'd been together for a long time, and so there was that element too, cos Erin and Lisa became really good friends. He was also in Calgary by that time, so it was difficult for him to maintain that kind of grip, so maybe there was an opportunity; there certainly was a gap, in a sense. I saw that there were a lot of people coming to the readings and there was a lot of interest and I think Lisa just seized upon the opportunity to see if she could bring in more people who wanted to do volunteer work rather than just be an audience member. And everyone seized upon that. The town-hall meeting was pretty interesting. There were like 30 people that came, mostly writers. Colin, Dan Farrell – and I think this was the first time he was taking a more active interest in the KSW, he was working as a cook – Dorothy – and that's when Victor Coleman came – Tom Snyder, Neil [] Snyder had his own program; he wanted to do a small press, which I thought was not a bad idea. Susan Clark was there (with Raddle Moon), Susan Buffam, Dave Ayre, Mike Barnholden. It seemed like this was a new beginning.

DM: That's how Colin Smith seemed to understand it; a bunch of people who had been core members had left and so it came to not necessarily a point of crisis but certainly a point of significant change.

AK: O yes, that town hall meeting was really interesting, it was the first time I'd seen anything like it. It reminded me of AMPAC and Parallelogram. What I liked about it was that nobody spoke of about a specific vision of KSW, except Victor Coleman. He used the word "moribund", he said the KSW had become "moribund". I remember that word. It made Lisa very upset. It seemed completely out of whack with the sense of the meeting. As far as I know the workshops were working, and the programming was really good. The first reading I saw there was Charles Bernstein, when he was visiting artist in residence. Abigail Child came in 1991 – she'd just gone off with Kevin Davies – That was really exciting I'd never seen any of her work before she'd been working with the New Narrative people.

DM: Still reads as a shift in the focus to me – doesn't seem as overtly political.

I think she's more interested in a writing that's celebrating a kind of de Sade politics, a poetics of excess. New York must have been an exciting place in the 1980s, it was just bringing itself back up, having been close to going bankrupt. She was an interesting stylist, like Bernstein mainly a stylist.

DM: Was Robertson directing the programming at the time?

AK: It seemed to me from my perspective that there was nobody else. The strongest continuity was coming from Catriona and Lisa and Nancy, but then Nancy left too. Colin was a constant figure, a capital office manager, but as far as the content went he didn't do much. and I know what Jeff is saying but from my perspective, as someone who's just moved there and wants to see the old KSW, I was a little bit surprised, cos I expected to meet Kevin Davies, I expected to meet Jeff, I expected to meet Nancy Shaw but they were gone. I was also interested in Tsunami, but Larry Timewell was gone too. He was in Japan. Barnholden and Ferguson were running it at the time, and Ferguson never wanted anything to do with the KSW. So I think if Lisa didn't do it, if Lisa hadn't picked it up, nobody would have to a point, cos you had people like myself, and Colin and Susan Buffam; we certainly didn't know enough as far as grant writing and running something like that went. We didn't have the experience.

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In the following year, 1993, I wanted to bring Bob Perelman, with whom I associated the aesthetics of the KSW, and I brought him and I thought I was bringing back an old favourite, but it wasn't that way at all. They were really kind of shocked, that he'd come back. And I had had to get Koerner funding, cos he said he wouldn't read for anything less than two grand. And I think Lisa really liked Bob Perelman's writing, and so did I, so that's probably where we all worked well aesthetically together, cos Jeff also liked his writing, and he had published quite a bit of it. But it was funny, I think he had misunderstood what the KSW was. I think he thought it was getting just tons of funding and that it would be able to find two grand easily. And he gets here and it's just not that, it's people on welfare. It was a really interesting mixture. You

had Susan Clark who wouldn't walk on the floor unless it had been cleaned; there were a lot of class issues there too. In the 90s Susan would get angry if you didn't open the wine properly – she could be kind of difficult to work with. Dorothy was also difficult to work with, because she was difficult to manage. I loved her work, I was so shocked when I met her, cos she just seemed to be such a different person from the work I'd read. I mean I gave her my phone number and she'd be calling constantly. She was just so gossipy, so it was kind of a strange experience of the KSW, between this very well-functioning organisation and the personalities involved. Lisa had the bookstore, and that was really important, and there was a press associated with it, Tsunami, so people who were writing or working in it could work on it and hope to get a Tsunami chapbook, and that was really important. What a great way to actually get a book out there, and then you're eligible for a Canada Council grant. It had a bookstore associated with it, Proprioception, a really good poetics and theory bookstore, and it had two journals, *Raddle Moon* and *Writing*. And so you've got a great reading space, a books store a press, and two journals: there was no other institute in Canada that could do that. And you've got an art gallery, Artspeak, still closely associated. It's amazing, really. "Moribund" wasn't the right word; it was completely off. I was shocked.

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So Perelman comes for three days and he gets there and someone instantly offers him a joint right and he smokes and he's looking at it in a really, really awkward way and he's just like jeez you guys still do this, huh. You know, and then for drinks we take him over to the Pig and Whistle and we're all sick the next day – the beer was so bad. You know I left a couple of my sneakers there because I couldn't actually walk out in the same way, and that was like 2 beers, I had no idea what was wrong. It was so bad like basically toxic, you know. And you're there with someone who's just come from Pennsylvania trying to show him a good time – and he's looking at us saying you know I can't believe you guys you are the weirdest collective I've ever seen. And it really shocked him, but he was just about to publish *The Trouble with Genius*, his Ph.D. thesis, and so he gave a couple of talks from that book. I mean it was a really great intellectual space. And look at what you had. So when Victor Coleman says, you know it's time to shove off this moribund institute and rebuild it, I looked around and thought did I miss something? I thought maybe he was just...

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Here's the best way to interpret it – AMPAC dissolved so people like Victor Coleman, people who had basically depended upon the ARCs in Toronto in the era of a vibrant, nationally-supported artist run culture, became extremely greedy about their jobs, and their positions because there was no place for them to go. So not only were they becoming conservative, but they realised that the CC had changed and they had to come up with very, very specific – and this is what disgusted Jeff – very specific mandates, whereas before it had just been a lot easier. That's what the CC was looking for. They were opening it up, they wanted to see gallery owners make positive steps towards private sponsorship. It's almost like what they're

doing with healthcare; they wanted a cultural network of production. And that politicised everybody. On the other hand you had people like Coleman who thought, well I have to seize this opportunity or what am I going to do? Am I going to live off my royalties or the odd classroom chat? You know, as a: here's a blast from the past, we've got Victor Coleman a poet from 1972 here under the category "Where are they now?"

So I think that's really what motivated his move out here. He was with Alice Burdick at that time, who couldn't have been more than 25, and that whole thing just disgusted people like Lisa. You know he represented a totally different avant garde. You know the problem with the TISH poetics here; for people like Lisa he was anathema to anything she thought of as progressive and ultimately good. He probably misunderstood how well-organised people actually were here. If he'd been a little smarter he could have moved in quite easily, he could have found a place for himself here, because there were a lot of people at that meeting and we all knew Victor from his work and his writing. When we had the 70th birthday for Robin Blaser and they had the readings at Granville Island he wasn't on the program, and a couple of people stood up, American poets, some older poets from the Berkeley period stood up and said We've got Vic d'Or here in the audience, I can't believe we haven't asked him to read, I'm going to give up my place and let him read. That's how much support he had. He did have a really strong reputation. There was nothing to stop him. If he had just been a little more social and less creepy as far as his relationships and his politics and his mouth he would have done fine here. Everybody had respect for him; a mixed respect, but we couldn't write him off completely.

DM: But it seems to me that there must have been some kind of vulnerability in the KSW for Victor to even have attempted what he attempted.

AK: I think that's really the way to see it. It was foolish of him to do that

DM: What about the details? So he was coming to meetings, he was interacting; what was he actually saying and doing? What was he actually attempting to do?

AK: One of the first things he did after that town hall meeting – we had several other meetings – he decided to organise the KSW into more of hierarchical structure, with an actual director. At that meeting he said he would like to nominate himself as director of the Kootenay School of Writing – that's literally what he said – and he had a couple of other subdivisions underneath it. As far as credentials went I remember him talking about how he had formed A-Space, and how it was *the* exemplary artist run centre in Toronto, the one that had the largest reputation and he was gonna bring that professionalism and experience and turn it into an organisation that even without AMPAC would acquire even more national grants. He really wanted to raise the identity of the institution as a whole, make it more international.

DM: It's not insane. It still seems a little strange to me that the KSW has so deliberately avoided that kind of professionalisation. I mean an artist-run centre is an institution of a kind, but it's not like a university or something – but it's avoided becoming even as institutional as a normal ARC, like the Helen Pitt. It seems strange to me cos the funding is almost at the same level, wouldn't have to be much more, and it would actually make the organisation run that much better, and it wouldn't necessarily hurt the organisation, except maybe in terms of its ideological self-image or something.

AK: Yeah, and I think this is where the politics of Victor step in, cos I think in a lot of ways people recognised that as a good idea. You had people like Tom Snyder, and you had people like Susan Buffam listening to that and thinking that's a great idea. First of all they're not in an academic program, they're coming out of creative writing programs but where does that really lead you? This was a good opportunity to establish a good professional foothold outside the academy, and if the grants were available and the funding was available you'd be able to build some very, very impressive international programming. I think he saw it more along the lines of the CAG – there was really a huge opportunity to build a much more dynamic market-friendly place.

DM: That's the other issue I'm hearing here. He was still an innovative poet, but it doesn't seem like he would have had the political passions that a lot of people coming out of the KSW have.

AK: No, I think his politics came from that other era. Just being part of the avant garde was enough. Suffice to say he believed his leadership would be a gift to the institution, so why they didn't embrace him coming in. I mean he had everybody, people a whole generation younger, and the people who went along with his plan earned some administrative positions. He said we're going to get rid of Tsunami, cos it doesn't seem to be working anymore – Timewell had given it to Barnholden and Ferguson – and but it wasn't working at the level that Coleman wanted. He saw Tom Snyder as somebody who wanted to produce a lot of books, a much larger variety of books, but make it into a real functioning press, maybe more like New Star – or more productive even, more like a kind of Coach House west coast. And not everybody was completely against this because a lot of what he said seemed like a good idea. I mean, why not become a more visible, a larger organisation with a more institutional structure? But the politics he has and his own personality got in the way; you just didn't trust him. And in that I think he was kind of foolish. The KSW wasn't 'ripe for a takeover', but it was a good moment, when a lot of people could have brought a wider variety of different projects. Lisa had in fact invited Victor.

DM: How long was he around?

AK: He was there for about a year. There were moments where it really looked like he was succeeding, getting enough support. It was just a matter of who showed up at the time, right. And he made it

his essential project in Vancouver, so he was there everyday – organising the files, reorganising everything, basically making it his office. Tom Snyder was there everyday. So when the meetings happened they were controlling it more and more and it made people really, really uncomfortable. Because it seemed really quickly that if you had an idea you had to filter it through these personalities, and if they didn't like it...quickly Lisa saw it as a huge mistake, and this was really her baby too because she invited him, and it was her bookstore that wasn't doing so well, *Writing* had disappeared – that was Jeff's magazine, and he was not going to let Lisa edit it as far as I understood. So we had a meeting where I remember *Raddle Moon* was christened the de facto KSW organ. I remember feeling a little bit weird about that, cos I really liked *Writing* and I felt a little different about *Raddle Moon*, partly because it took her so long to get an issue out. Jeff was a little upset, 'cos he'd put so much work into it – and he still wanted to be on the editorial board, I know that. To find that as soon as you leave it sort of dissipates, in favour of Susan Clark's magazine, it was a bit of a hard blow.

DM: There must have been some class tensions there, especially with Jeff's punk-intellectual attitude.

AK: O yeah, I remember one of the first things he told me was that her name was completely false, that she was Susan Yarrow, that she was connected with the Yarrow family shipping lines. That she just changed it because she didn't want people to know that in fact she comes from a lot of wealth, one of the wealthiest families in the west. It's not her fault she was born to a rich family, but it's quite easy for someone to look at it and see that there's a line between you and me that's never going to be crossed no matter what you do. And the problem is that that's part of the poetics. There's just no way that Susan could be writing the way that *Writing* had been done, and I think he saw that her convictions were closer in line with the work that Lisa was doing. It probably did seem to be a bit of a coup, but I really think you can't expect Lisa to run with the program.

DM: Well, I'm sure that Jeff has a capacity to be autocratic as well. I mean he's a very kind person, tho very outspoken. I could see him being quite aggressive in pushing his agenda, although I'm not going to assume that he was. Part of his pain is probably that he really wanted the KSW to be a certain thing, with good reasons; he thought it through quite thoroughly. And then to have it just turn into an artist-run centre with "program-a-rama", as Roger Farr says, must've been quite difficult.

AK: Quite a different thing. That's exactly it. I mean he was happy that there were representatives, I think he was happy that I joined and that Dan Farrell was there.

DM: Are you from that kind of a background? You came here to study with Quartermain, right, and he doesn't necessarily seem to be of that cut.

AK: Well he comes from a working-class background in North England, and there's a strong politics there. He's always been very suspicious of all institutional politics, and I think he's always felt a very similar sense of a class-based approach. Hence, his interest in WCWilliams maybe. He was originally doing Hawthorne and when *Spring and All* was re-released in 1963 – cos you couldn't get it, I mean this is something that came out in 1923. Nobody talked about Williams then. In the 60s there were only 2 critical books on him, and nobody knew who he was. And two things that happened the Carlos Williams book came out, and Basil Bunting published *Brigflatts*. That brought back a whole lost interest in American experimental writing, revisionary writing I guess you could call it – breaking with tradition. *Brigflatts* came in and made people more interested again in what had happened in the 30s, and so people like Jeff working through some of the language poets there was an obvious class politics to it, especially in the early Zukovsky, and then George Oppen, and Carl Lucosi. And that became ver significant for Peter. So when the KSW could bring poets who were reading, who were looking at Bunting and Zukovsky, like Perelman, who was doing piano work on Zukovsky's stuff, Quartermain was very very interested in that writing. He brought me to the Bernstein reading, well he told me about it. I'd already heard about it, but he was the only one from UBC who came out, and I was a bit surprised because my understanding of it came from Edinburgh, where I was doing my masters. I was working with the poet Drew Milne who was doing parataxis. Now he's at Cambridge, but before, he had studied with Eagleton and he was my Masters advisor. And he was the one who told me about it, he said if you're going back to Canada I would choose Vancouver. And he named Lisa Robertson, Jeff Derksen, Proprioception Books... In Britain the Prynne group saw Silliman's San Francisco from 1970 onwards, and Vancouver from about 1983 onwards as a really exciting poetics, more exciting than New York. So he was the one who said take a look at Bob Perelman, and I'd never read anything like it. it was amazing. It was primary and I thought it was fantastic. And it just so happened that I was also reading Frederic Jameson who in his book on the postmodern cites Perelman as an example of a very interesting radical aesthetic that could be addressed in terms of postmodern theory. Even though he was wrong, I think, in his interpretation, it still really seemed like something was happening in the 80s, there was a shift in poetics and theory that was producing some very interesting critical and poetic work. With Bernstein and with Fred Wah, and Jeff Derksen too you had a very interesting awareness and understanding of the means of production that was then shifting into electronics. And that's a very weird moment when that happens, cos suddenly everything is reinterpreted to a point, and I remember we talked about that a lot at KSW. KSW got an Apple Classic, and this was a very significant thing for KSW cos suddenly it could put out its own little flyers and for a while we had a really interesting experiment with those flyers, there were tons of them, very interesting. I don't know what happened to the original Apple.

DM: Is that the computer Tom Snyder gummed up with his magazine? Colin said that everyone blamed the problems the computer was having on Snyder.

AK: Yeah, he and Victor were there the most, and Colin was there maybe the second most, so I think Colin had a better understanding of what was going on. Every time we shut it up it seemed they'd basically taken the office over. That's an interesting component, cos I think it gave maybe not Coleman so much, but I would say it influenced him. Snyder was interested in starting up a press and it became quite necessary at this point to learn digital layout. This is exactly the same time that Catherine Leigh and so and so started DNA press it was looking more at the electronic aspects of production. And Lisa came to Dave who was already getting into computers at that point, and myself, who wanted to look at technology and writing in a more critical way, I mean there was something there, right? We just didn't know what it was, but we knew immediately that it was going to change everything.

Bernstein started the EPC and the Poetics list in '95, *Swiftcurrent* started in the 1980s. Wah was way ahead. Bernstein always realised that the means of production were incredibly important as far as the poetics itself, but Fred Wah even more so than the others. He always had been looking not just the product but the means of distribution, and that was very critical. The others were interested also, but quickly electronic networks became commercialised, much more quickly than we thought. I mean we knew it would happen, but that's when you look at '95 and you think that's as significant as the moon landing, when Netscape came out and the whole dot com thing began. Dave and I had many talks in '94-95 just to explain what the web was, cos at that time it wasn't just the web, you had to understand what the internet was as well, so the web was the visual component, there was archive, there was ftp, there was a usenet group – all different internetworks, and the web was just a little component of that. And gradually it was defined by Mosaic. And now there is no distinction between those things, between the web and the net, but then there was a very strong distinction. When you logged on you made a decision what you were going to do.

In '92 I was the first arts student who asked for an email address at UBC, and I still didn't really know what it was. It was amazing. I think I only remember essentially because they didn't want to give me one, and they were going to charge me for it and then they didn't know how to charge me cos there was nothing in the internal system that allowed external accounts to be charged. So they said well we guess we'll give you one and they gave me one on one of the unix servers – they had a number of unix servers, 9 or 10, and said we'll put you on unix G. And I still remember she asked me What are you going to use it for? And I said well for email, and they said Do you know anybody on email. And I said well not yet but I might. And she said if you're not going to use it I don't see why I should give it to you and I said There will be people on it and we're going to need it in the arts and for my own thesis. And she looked at me like I was asking for wings, and said ok whatever, and it just seemed to be cheaper for her to get me out of the office. And it

was like 50 kilobytes I think. And she was right I had no one to write to but in the usenet group you could get Ezra Pound's Cantos, somebody had already put all of the Cantos up online and you could download lots of poetry. It was really interesting and I remember watching that come across my screen and going well this is amazing and then there was a really interesting tool that had come out, it's still here, the Hypertext when the web came into being it was literally using hypertext for its screen text and I remember thinking I'm going to be able to create a bunch of interlinked narratives, and this will be great for study, cos I could do say annotations of Steve McCaffery's poetry and then if I came across *Four Horsemen* I would link that to another page on the four horsemen. I mean it made perfect sense to me right away.

DM: Well it does make sense, cos it can be understood as just a really dynamic extension of footnotes.

AK: But it was really surprising cos nobody was really thinking about it in those terms, it was still a bit of an oddity to think of its usefulness. So the software came out, Storyspace, that allowed you to do that to hyperlink and I used that for all my comprehensive exams, for all my studying. I just wrote the notes and linked them. I could call them up on screen and I could see all the paths, you know if I wanted to follow modernism from 1920 to 1926 you know there was a little box that said "Russian Formalism" and I clicked on it and got a whole other network. It was astounding. So I was so excited, and Dave was the only one who shared my excitement cos he was into computer programming, and we kept bringing it up. And Lisa was really interested too, and I said we could do a hypertext version of *Riddle Moon* – and we were all instantly talking about it. In the end the software Storyspace didn't work cos it couldn't handle all the text. I literally went past its limits as software within 4 or 5 months of text, and when I clicked on hypertext to find another page it would take 5 minutes to find it and download it. It was no longer useful. It didn't have the RAM. What did we have for RAM? 4 megs, 6 megs? – it couldn't do more than 3 or 4 documents at a time without getting completely overloaded.

DM: Did you actually do anything with poetry directly?

AK: Yeah, we had workshops and we wrote electronic poetry. Applet poetry.

DM: Meaning what?

AK: Algorhythmic poetry – using algorithms to manipulate the text, not to generate it. And also lots of cut and paste. It seemed like the only way to go.

DM: How do you think electronic media have affected poetry?

AK: I think it's affected a lot, actually. In some ways I think it destroyed Language poetry. Look at Ron Silliman's *Tjanting*, for example. He had to work that all out on paper, and in his head. And a computer

does it just as quickly, so it kind of upped it. To get a really radical poem using electronic media right now you have to actually look at how language is generated on the phonetic and the syllabic levels rather than the words the semantics.

DM: Do you think that has something to do with the re-emergence of concrete poetry?

AK: Yeah, but which is really silly in way because you know concrete on screen is a totally different than what they were doing. But I think the parallel has not yet been properly distinguished. So on the one hand it makes it easier to understand a process driven aesthetic such as you might find in concrete poetry, so you can read concrete poetry more easily. And in that case it loses its radicality because the visual and the collage nature of it becomes an aesthetic rather than a process. And once it becomes an aesthetic rather than a process, becomes a style, it comes to constitute an entirely different project. I mean flash poems I find really boring for the most part, they're really just dull visual typography. So the typography moves, so what? In some ways it also makes the concrete poem actually quite linear and quite literal. I think there's a tension between the promise of movement and the inability of movement on the page, and that tension can produce a really interesting effect.

DM: It's a kind of alphabetical animism.

AK: That's right. I mean if Picasso made movies it wouldn't really be that interesting. Flash hasn't really advanced the process of concrete beyond Sesame Street, where you walk and talk to the letter G, and you understand the letter G as a living thing.

Looking at code and its relation to language I think constitutes a really interesting avenue to explore because you're looking at language as specific transferred directive. And that tension's always been in poetry but we've always seen it more or less as a prose content, a prosaic content. And now in computer languages you have actual languages that work behind the scenes, generating behaviour's and actions, telling the poem how to behave. Rather than look at the visual aspect of it, the product, I think it would be interesting to shift more towards the behaviour, the actual coding that drives the behaviour.

DM: So rather than be, say a flash cartoon of letters, the poem is constantly regenerating itself, it would never necessarily become important as an document, as an artifact.

AK: Which you've actually produced. I mean the use value of the poem is not in the effect – that becomes complete exchange value, whereas in concrete poetry part of the use value of the poem was actually putting the piece together. And so the use value shifts towards the actual language generating the images and the product itself. There's lots of potential there.

The internet now is going to emerge now as a network, as a giant supercomputer – it itself is going to be the supercomputer. Your consciousness when you're working on your computer at home has to be shifted from the computer as a super typewriter to the computer as a node on a much larger machine, and your poetics must take into account how you're interacting with this much larger machine. And there's so many ways to take that into consideration. One, you don't see the machine, so that's gotta be dealt with both aesthetically and politically, and you don't know how big it is, and you don't know who's out there or what's happening. All those are really interesting qualities that have to be brought into the poem.

DM: You kill one part of it and the whole thing doesn't die out.

AK: Which is very interesting.

I know the object, the finished poem-artifact, is going to be less important and more radical – it's one thing to not produce an object, because the process still doesn't have much of an exchange value, and it's maintained that way through open source code and maintaining a very very open access to information the web, which is still one of its great aspects, its great qualities.

DM: And this to you is Language poetry's death, in a way.

AK: Yeah because a lot of the considerations it made as far as the behaviour of language writing a particular social context, which is still its primary directive as a poetics within a particular social context. The question is How is language used? And looking at a definition more from a practical perspective, you're defining something in terms of how it's going to be used rather than from a formal perspective. So in the most interesting Language poetry its obscurity comes from the fact that it does not reveal the way the language is being used, and that's so much of how the most interesting effects of Language poetry were developed. When you hide how the language is being used it suddenly opens up the sentence, the new sentence, as I understand Silliman's theory of it, into a whole set of different directions, not just a transparent message being communicated, or conveyed. The objective becomes completely different.

The frustration with it moves from that point. If you look at the use of puns for example or even in Silliman's pieces or Bruce Andrews and Terry Mullen, she uses examples of parataxis, misspellings, puns. All of those are reactions to ways language is conventionally used, and the radicality comes from that attack on the use-value of language. As a result you pay attention to the component of use-value in Language, and I guess you could draw politics from that, because I guess we don't really consider the use of language in a concrete manner.

So I think that's what's quite enabling about their work. That's why I think Jameson is wrong when he talked about Perelman's "China" in his book on the postmodern. He compares it to the schizophrenic. "We live on the third world number 3 ... The people who taught us to count / were being very kind." and on

and on and on with these disjunctive sentences. The sentences make sense to a certain point but the relationship to the title “China”, the relationship to themselves as far as a narrative goes becomes completely baffled, and Jameson says this could be the way a schizophrenic sees the world where the signifiers and signifieds are permanently detached, so objects no longer convey their semantic meaning. Words no longer necessarily point at objects. He said if you want to understand the postmodern mindset maybe you should look at this poetry which seems to reflect an ongoing semantic disorientation.

DM: O my god, look at that guy with all those buttons he’s written slogans and phrases on these wood discs with a woodburner he’s covered in them.

AK: Oh? But anyways I think I would argue that that politics and that interpretation of the book depends upon the codex form, a poetry book, and it has to be considered within that context. It has to be talked about in the context of Vietnam, but also the context of the means of production. When you produce something like that on the screen there’s a different consciousness that immediately begins to observe the poem as opposed to the consciousness that actually picks it up in a book form. When you look at it on the screen what might originally be discontinuous actually shows up quite continuous – there’s a strong continuity because the screen itself the very nature of the screen as being millions of pixels its very nature is disjunctive. Whereas the book is very different.

DM: No matter what a book tends to make the poem linear.

AK: But I think you can’t do that on the screen, which presents a whole new opportunity, a whole new relation to language itself because even the very idea of a letter on the screen is very interesting because it’s really just a bunch of lights performing a letter and that has to change the way you understand the work itself. And I’ve seen this in class, too. I can show a class work by Lawrence Wiener, for example, on screen and they love it. If I were to show it on paper they would find it disorienting and a little bit disturbing.

DM: Part of what you’re saying is that electronic media will make Language poetry more legible. And that destroys it by making it no longer a radical project, is that what you’re saying?

AK: Yeah. I mean the project has to change. The project was based in a particular means of production and it has to take into consideration the shifts in means of production. In a simple way it’s very easy to write that kind of poetry on the screen. I mean when the first translators came out, BabelFish for example, suddenly everybody was writing Language poetry quite easily because it was producing the same kinds of readerly effects as a Lyn Hejinian piece, without all the pains, without all the work. And there’s a moment where everyone’s quite excited, cos it can save time, and you can publish 4 or 5 books of poetry rather than just one, and I know people who thought like that. Because I remember at a certain point these

poets were considered quite radical and you thought How can I write like this? and the computer presents a means with which it's quite easy to write like that. So it becomes another issue, now what do you do? Now you've gotta actually become even more disjunctive, you've actually gotta work on the level of the pixel. Olson said you have to work on the syllable – we've gotta go even deeper than that. That's why I kind of like your work, I mean take specific pixels out of an actual letter and that's your poem. And its saying really the same kind or a much more radical statement and that's all you really need to say: why are these pixels in this letter missing? And that should be enough.

DM: Do you think that one of the KSW's key contributions to the project was a better understanding of the means of production?

AK: O yeah, absolutely. I really think that was really significant, what's fascinating is that you literally had nobody in academic programs, and the Language poets were in academic programs. And only now have KSW writers started to enter the academy, they stayed out of it as long as possible. I think that's really interesting.

DM: If it had been more possible to get respectable work as an intellectual outside of the academy even those who did go that way might not have.

AK: I think that's true, absolutely. Same with Lisa, who never did become an academic, and I think that's pretty amazing, for what she was able to do. Dan Farrell too. He was better read than most of the people in my graduate seminar. Way better read. His bookshelves were astoundingly sophisticated in terms of his knowledge of poetics and theory. And I'd bring some of this up in the classes and no one had ever heard of this stuff, and not just the poetry but the philosophy behind it too. I was so amazed. We had so few people at UBC – a very weak philosophy department except for Lorraine Weir, and she felt herself to be oppressed there from day one. And the KSW was a bit of a threat. There were signs all over the English department saying These people are selling degrees, these are not actual degrees. We were told as graduate students *not* to support the Kootenay School of Writing because it looked like they were trying to attain some kind of private degree-granting status. I mean they completely missed the boat. They never bothered coming to any of the readings, and never really understood what was going on. And that was a huge wake up call, cos I expected something completely different. To be honest I actually thought the KSW was somehow connected to UBC. I first looked for KSW writers in my department. I mean I went around literally asking Which one of you is involved in the Kootenay School of Writing? None had heard of it, or wouldn't bother. Only Peter Quartermain.

DM: The KSW to me also doesn't have that sense of cultural heroism that the Language poets and scene still have to some degree.

AK: Well there's a longer history of American radical poetry they had to deal with. I mean when the Language school came out in the 70s they often termed it the third objectivist movement. The first being Pound, the second being the Objectivists (including Zukovsky). It was a way of kind of understanding – it makes sense. And you still see an institution like Orno; they'll go with specific decades, and the way they actually talk about it is: you have the 30s, which is Poundian, then you get the 50s, which is New American Poets, and then you get the 70s, which is the Language poets, and they just go back and forth. It's like the Olympics. But they're a university and of course they have to do that, they have to maintain some kind of continuity. It's the national poetics conference, basically paid for by Stephen King, and that's how you can situate yourself as a poet, you've got a stronger history that helps you academicise yourself. The KSW would have had more success in the States, because there's that genealogy that's fully documented decade by decade. But I don't think Canada has that. I don't think we really have a literary culture in a lot of ways when you compare it to the US or Britain. For example there if you align yourself and your poetics with someone like [Prinhth] right away there's a whole genealogy of alignment that follows you. And you can do that in the US too. If you ally yourself with Carlos Williams then there's a discourse you can situate the poetry in, so it gives people a kind of instruction booklet on how to read you. The conferences work and the presses work according to that as well.

DM: All the KSW might appear to have in a Canadian context is TISH.

AK: And what kind of lineage is that, really. It's a pretty small west coast movement that lasted between 63-69 maybe, not long at all. And there really aren't the academic jobs here as well. I mean look at you've got quite a few strong universities in Southwestern Ontario that can support radical theory, like Wilfred Laurier, where Wershler-Henry is, or Guelph, Brock, UofT, and Concordia and McGill, but that's it. You've got two arts colleges, NASCAD and ECIAD, on either side of the country, and that's really it. I don't know, it might change but compared to the different opportunities in the States it's a totally different breeding-ground for poetics and discourses. I mean there isn't a university in Canada that would actually allow somebody to start an electronic poetry centre, as Bernstein did, it wouldn't happen. And in 1992! He was able to go to Buffalo and say this is what I want to do. Even McCaffery couldn't get work until the last few years. He was at York as a sessional, he certainly wasn't assured of tenure.

DM: And this brings it back specifically to a question of means of production again.

AK: Yeah, absolutely. That's what I found interesting when McCaffery was here and talked about Bernstein doing 24 Ph.D. theses at a time. Speaking of proseletizing, here it's: ok you've got to generate

academic poets as quickly as possible, get em out there, spread the word. That's where I think the artist-run centres in Canada had an advantage. It wasn't just an alternative institution to the university – we *owned* it.