

9 A CONVERSATION WITH LIZ KOTZ

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This interview took place via email September through October, 2008.

Octopus: What I find compelling in your scholarship, from a visual studies perspective, is that you examine Conceptual art, Happenings, and Fluxus precisely because they are “object-less,” or “events” where “nothing (or is it everything?) happens.” Could you begin by discussing what drew you to this particular aspect of art or theory?

Kotz: Well in many ways I suppose this was a project that I backed into. I had been working on uses of language in 1960s art because it was a topic that confused and fascinated me, and also, for more practical reasons, as it allowed me to pull together work I was doing in both art history and comparative literature. It was clear to me that this broader tendency of work with language was something that art critics and art historians hadn’t looked at in any deep way—and of course, coming from literary studies, these types of materials—say, event scores, or the work of someone like Lawrence Weiner—remained almost entirely illegible, if not irrelevant to most literary scholarship.

The supposed “objectlessness” of these projects wasn’t such an issue for me—though certainly part of what appeals to me in these works is the ways they act inseparably within language, within a visual field, and temporally, within something that one can understand as performance. Part of what I wanted to do was to look at these materials in some specificity, which meant holding at bay certain critical models—about textuality as a suspension of visibility, for instance, or as a turn away from objecthood. But the tendency of performance studies, say, to focus on the ephemeral or the performative and not look closely at the textual and material elements, also seemed insufficient.

As I worked with materials by George Brecht, La Monte Young, et al., it became apparent to me that music, especially the trajectories in 1950s experimental movement represented by John Cage, David Tudor, et al., was essential to understanding 1960s art practice. So I ended up pursuing that to a great extent, which greatly transformed my own thinking.

Octopus: This question as to where art “takes place” is clearly evident in Cage, Brecht, Weiner, Kosuth, etc., and strikes me as one of the impetuses for the emergence of Visual Studies as a discipline. Are there particular challenges in researching or discussing text- or event-based works—as opposed to a more “traditional” art historical focus on the object? You note that Kosuth stresses that “only the idea was art,”¹ and Maciunas calls Brecht’s work “readymade actions.”

¹ Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 191. See also Joseph Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy,” in *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966–1990*, ed. Gabriele Guercio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 31.

Kotz: Yes, there are many challenges, but that’s also what makes it such a provocative topic. I have a somewhat odd training, as I did graduate work in film studies, and then did my PhD at Columbia in Comparative Literature, with Benjamin Buchloh as my advisor. So it always seemed normal to me to work in an interdisciplinary way, and necessary to do so since so much of the most interesting art or aesthetic production of the 20th century occurs in this kind of relatively cross-disciplinary or anti-disciplinary space, where poetry, art, music, film, etc., bump up against one another in different ways. So in my critical writing and scholarship I’ve seen one of my responsibilities being to develop the skills and flexibility to follow these trajectories, whether that means learning about 1950 musical notation or 1970s video processing.

Although I’m very intrigued by visual studies as a model—and



always considered, say, different models of critical theory and of film and media theory to be among the key elements of our field, I think a lot is lost when “art history” and “visual studies” are posed in a certain kind of opposition or exclusion—after all, I consider the historical dimensions that art history as a discipline contributes, as well as its attention to reading images and objects and materials closely and carefully, to be essential. And of course, I have a real commitment to aesthetic practices, however problematic that may at times be. However strangely, art history has given me a place to do the work I do, whereas in media studies or literary studies...I doubt these materials would seem important. But of course I believe in a version of art history that strives to fully integrate and respond to the upheavals of global modernity, which means to me, among other things, addressing the integral role of technology.

Maybe I’m lucky that I came to art history late, after having done a bunch of other things. I began to study art history from being involved with art and artists in my own present, from worlds that were very nonmainstream, including different kinds of activist and more or less underground things. When I became involved with art in the 1980s, I wasn’t involved with the art world, but with programming Latin American and Central American media and different kinds of artists’ video and film. It was a whole San Francisco nonprofit world—of Cine Acción, Artists Television Access, the San Francisco Cinematheque—that couldn’t have been further from any kind of “art market.” I remember when I moved to New York in 1991 and a pretty well-known feminist art critic, someone who considers herself very Marxist, explained to me “Liz, if it was any good, it would be in a gallery,” or something like that. I found that attitude incomprehensible, and I still do. Of course here in the US museums and other institutions are terribly dependent on collectors and private support—and that has more of an effect on art history than we’d like to admit.

When it comes to critical theory, the comparative literature approach to these materials still seems more rigorous and deeper than what we are usually able to do within art history or visual studies. When I studied Freud and psychoanalysis with Gayatri Spivak, we got that training that, if you’re going to work with Freud you should, well, maybe not have read the entire corpus, because that is exceedingly vast, but at least all the majors works including some of the key texts not published in his lifetime, and then, of course, if you’re going to quote any-



thing, you should at least look at it in the original German. That kind of conceptual rigor, and close attention to language, still seems essential to me.

In my own work, I don't think I've gone anywhere near far enough in bringing some of the tools of Literary Study to these materials. Partly it has been a real challenge to generate appropriate critical models for some of this work, like Cage's scores of the 1950s or, say, Young's *Compositions* of 1960–1961. I certainly take seriously Maciunas's description of Brecht's pieces as "Readymade actions," but...I also want to take them seriously as texts and as perceptual events and performances and as visual materials, so I am hesitant about too quickly inscribing them under the banner of Duchamp and all that might entail. That is clearly one important side of them, but so is this curious relation to musical notation and, very importantly to me, Cage's decision, at some point in the late 1950s, to transcribe his 1952 composition "4'33" into textual notation—that continues to be a very important moment to me, as I genuinely believe that many of the impulses of what become conceptual art crystallize in that moment—whether subsequent practitioners were aware of this or not. To me, Huebler and Weiner's works of the later 1960s are closely related to the use of text in different types of musical and performances scores—though with Kosuth, I'd have a harder time making that argument. I continue to be fascinated by Kosuth's work partly because it vexes me so.

In terms of challenges to doing this work—I want to note that when I started on this project, around 1994, Benjamin Buchloh was always hugely supportive of it, and pushed me toward materials like *An Anthology* and Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer's *0 to 9* that I barely knew when I started. The fact that he had such a strong involvement in modernist poetry and authors like Gertrude Stein and Stéphane Mallarmé always helped open that horizon. And of course it has been exciting to see these materials, which seemed so marginal at that time, be pulled back into circulation by all kinds of younger and not so young writers and artists and composers.

Of course, for someone committed to a kind of conceptual tradition in artmaking, living in LA continues to be somewhat perplexing, mostly in a good way, as I still am far from clear what the actual reception or legacy of Conceptual art is here. The current MoCA show, on "California Conceptualism,"



offers certain perspectives, but entirely misses others, such as the close ties to music. I know a number of young composers here who are deeply involved not just in Cage's work or Morton Feldman's but with Alison Knowles and George Brecht—and helping perform these works, in a musical context, has given me a new perspective on them. And of course, because the MoCA show is a permanent collection show, it is dependent on what MoCA has collected, so there are all sorts of relatively minor young artists, and nothing by someone as major as Lutz Bacher.

Octopus: What is your role as performer in these works, and your background in music praxis? I imagine you were no stranger to artmaking when you began writing about these things. Could you discuss how this experience has changed your perspective?

Kotz: Well, although I made different kinds of art when I was younger, I have little musical training, so it's been more about learning to perform a disciplined action with a kind of focus and intensity, to bring a seriousness or structure to what could otherwise seem like very slight actions, like rubbing two rocks together. At a concert in LA, I was with some friends in the audience who were performing Alison Knowles's *Nivea Cream Piece* and I had no idea, not just of the smell of the Nivea, but the fact that...it's a completely strange, completely unnatural substance, so it doesn't absorb into your skin at all, it just sits there and feels greasy and kind of tacky. There's this tactile dimension that is very strong, and even repellent. And because the piece was done in a kind of guerilla fashion, during a concert performance of Cage's *4'33"*, there was a sustained and quite contentious discussion afterward (via email) among some of the people involved, about whether this was or wasn't a disruption or mocking of the Cage composition. So it made all these questions about the openness of a work to ambient sounds and conditions very alive.

In terms of how it might affect my critical work, I've gained a greater sense of the incredible importance of performance practice, of the kinds of shared language and discipline and understanding that a group of people who perform works develop among themselves, and how crucial a part of the performed work that becomes. When I have the time, I try to go to rehearsals, because I learn so much more about how music is put together. These are probably really obvious things to anyone with that background, but it's been fascinating to me.



² Kotz, *Words*, 193–94; Kotz, “Language Between Performance and Photography,” *October* 111 (Winter 2005): 12.

³ Kotz, *Words*, 87.

Octopus: You note that, as Rosalind Krauss has argued, “the breakdown of medium-based practices provides one model of an historical shift from ‘specific’ to ‘general’ forms of art, another logic is at play right along side it, in which a ‘general’ template or notational system—be it musical scores, fabrication instructions, architectural diagrams, or schematic representations—generates ‘specific’ realizations in different contexts,”² and stress that the simplest structure, i.e. “Exit,” produces the greatest variety.³ Could you elaborate on this, from the perspective of a scholar who then contends with interdisciplinary issues, departmentally and in publishing?

Kotz: Well, from the strictly biographical point of view, it has been a bit complicated, and I’ve bounced around a bit—I used to teach in a Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies department at Minnesota, and now I’m happily based in an Art History department at Riverside. I’ve been fortunate to have a fair amount of support—a Getty, a Warhol, other grants—most of which has come from the worlds of art and art history. I’m also fortunate to do work that addresses audiences that aren’t only academic audiences. I did a book party this fall at Machine Project in LA, that included musician friends realizing scores and pieces by Brecht and Weiner and my friend Eileen Myles reading. For all their differences, there’s a good bit of continuity between *Words to Be Looked At* and the book I co-edited with Eileen in 1994, *The New Fuck You*—they’re both about responding to various anti-institutional and counter-cultural artistic practices. And of course if you are focusing on all this work that is relatively anti-canonical and anti-institutional, you can’t then expect that it will be embraced by certain kinds of institutions. If anything, the investment that major institutions like the Getty have made in Fluxus can be deeply confusing—I mean, I’m grateful that they preserve those materials and make them available, yet at the same time...it brings out the precious, fussy-side of Fluxus work.

Ironically, it was my long-term work on women artists that largely got me into what became *Words*—artists like Simone Forti, Alison Knowles, Yoko Ono, Yvonne Rainer—even if they became quite sidelined from the book that resulted. That, and my love of Bruce Nauman’s work—even though I’m not sure his name even appears in the book.

Octopus: Why do you say “ironically”?



Kotz: “Ironically” because *Words* is like the book about men, where female artists who are very important to me, like Rainer and Knowles and Forti, sort of peek in from the sidelines. The book opens with Cage and closes with Warhol, but mostly it’s the parade of straight white guys. But I felt I needed to lay claim to certain traditions, and certain more or less originary figures. I mean, I’m glad that there is so much more scholarly and critical interest now in artists like Adrian Piper and Lee Lozano and Eleanor Antin, but...if you’re going to understand conceptual art, you do need to deal with Kosuth too.

Octopus: In your *October* essay, “Language Between Performance and Photography,” you state: “Unlike in photography, with its logic of original and copy, the relationship between a notational system and a realization is not one of representation or reproduction but of specification: the template, schema or score is usually not constricted in the locus of the ‘work,’ but merely a tool to reproduce it; and while the ‘work’ must conform to certain specifications or configurations, its production necessarily differs in each realization.”⁴ This sense of the notational system clarifies for me this connection between text- and event-based art, and of course then raises so many questions of language, of indeterminacy and context, “template” and “realization.” It seems to me that while objects of representation or reproduction always contend with issues of context and “meaning” or “intention,” these works/events are both more “general” and “specific” than object-based art. I’d also like to discuss these notions of the “linguistic dimensions” of minimal sculpture, and the iterative structure of the event.

⁴ Kotz, “Language,” 13.

Kotz: Yes, I think there is clearly a relation here—after all, so many minimal sculptures are built on an iterative model, a relation between a plan and a realization, even as they so frequently repress this. The Panza papers at the Getty—his correspondence with artists like Flavin, Judd, Morris, et al.—are so illuminating in this respect—it’s really tragic.

Octopus: How so?

Kotz: Because even while many sculptors wanted to retain control over the fabrication of their work, a certain logic of replication, of delegated fabrication, is also built into the work. In most critical accounts of the controversy over Panza fabricating artists’ works, and of course in the famous protests by Judd and Flavin, Panza comes out looking like the bad guy.



But...when you read the letters, it's so much more nuanced, ambiguous. And then there are artists like Nauman for whom, with the corridor pieces, there aren't really originals, just various exhibition copies made according to plans that are actually pretty schematic. Of course I continue to feel that Weiner, with his notion that the work may be fabricated, that it need not be built—he really gets to the core of this problem, and builds his project around it.

Octopus: Could you elaborate on your notion of a “Post-Cagean” aesthetics? I find it curious that you should use the term “aesthetics” here at all, as these events and notation systems seem to be operating on an “anti- or non-aesthetic” level. And perhaps, to historicize this, you could explain why/how you locate this aesthetic shift at this specific juncture, and not, say in Berlin, circa 1918.

Kotz: Let's see. The notion of “aesthetics” is slippery—to me, it's not confined to, say, traditional models of beauty, but entails any highly developed set of sensual, affective, perceptual systems—after all, practitioners of things like noise music have nuanced aesthetic criteria and values, even if those may not seem “aesthetic” or pleasurable to everyone. I don't know if the notion of the “anti-aesthetic” is all that useful now, since it seems to imply the existence of a pre-existing or dominant aesthetic system, or aligns the aesthetic with the conservative, conventional or dominant. Cage's *4'33*” can be a profound aesthetic experience, one that is moving, sensual and perceptual—it is not simply an idea, or some sort of ethical construct. I certainly don't think that a notion of the aesthetic requires a universalized model of subjectivity or a disengagement from the social sphere. Defamiliarization, distanciation, and disruption are all potentially powerful perceptual, sensory, and aesthetic strategies.

More specifically, my claim for a “post-Cagean aesthetics” requires some definition of a “Cagean” aesthetics, and that is necessarily provisional, as Cage's work—which ranges from the 1930s to the 1992—was quite wide-reaching and far from consistent. Among the things that are essential about his work of the 1950s was the emphasis on the perceiving subject—the way that a work like *4'33*”, though structured, throws so much of the experience back onto the perceptual capacities of the



listener. Also crucial is his deliberate delinking of any sort of hierarchical or communicative model between score, performance and listening—any notion that X leads to Y leads to Z. Instead, in works like *Fontana Mix* (1958) the notation is like a tool kit that provides materials from which to generate the parameters for performance—but it doesn't determine these parameters in any conventional sense—this potentially yielding realizations as unexpected as Max Neuhaus's landmark work of electroacoustic music, *Fontana Mix - Feed* (1965), performed with feedback.

For the purpose of my discussion of the event scores, which emerge in the period 1958-1961, part of what interests me is the compression and simplicity of the scores. Pushing against Cage's work of the time, which was often characterized by a diffusion and superimposition of elements, artists like Brecht and Young pushed toward a focus on concentration that one can certainly read as minimal, or proto-minimal, as well as toward a use of minimal incidence and serial repetition over an extended duration, a strategy that will become a hallmark of 1960s practice—though Cage too plays a crucial role in this strategy—even if it wasn't until 1963 that he was finally able to mount a performance of Satie's *Vexations*, which was performed by teams of pianists over 18-19 hours—but he was actively working to get it performed since at least the early 1950s.

As to your question about 1918: While this late 1950s juncture is in some ways clearly linked to the experiments the 1910s, these practices also have a specificity to them: as Cage proposed in 1961, "Dada nowadays has a space, an emptiness, in it that it formerly lacked."⁵ I still think that's a pretty profound diagnosis—though how to really read that, historically or art historical, how to theorize that, is far from clear to me.

Octopus: This volume of *Octopus* deals with the topic of "surface," which, as we had previously discussed, is not readily apparent/relevant to your work. Alongside this, the journal continues to highlight UC art and theory. As someone who moved from San Francisco to New York, and now to Riverside, do you have any final insights on the UC academic and artistic environment? You mentioned how you've been given a place for your work in art history; I'm wondering if this is also due to a degree of institutional or cultural flexibility,

⁵ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), xi.



perhaps unique to the West Coast.

Kotz: I just came back from a panel at the Guggenheim with Coco Fusco, Jennifer González, and Simon Leung, talking about aftermaths of art and identity in the 1980s, and of course three out of four of us teach at UC schools. When you look at the programs in Visual Art and in Art History/Visual Studies, especially for a public university system, there is just nothing to compare with the UCs. There is such a wealth of talent. But the UC system has been under tremendous financial pressure for a long time. The cost of a college education now is vastly more expensive than when I was an undergraduate, and when I look at my students at UC—where undergrads, on average, work 18–20 hours a week—I wonder how the heck they do it. And these financial pressures are going to get a lot worse. So this is very worrisome, but it only makes me more committed to the idea that these are essential projects for public education, for the wider culture, and that making art and the study of art and culture are not simply going to become the privileged preserves of a handful of very well-funded private schools.

There is a lot of flexibility here and of course there are all these cross-campus initiatives and projects, though frankly right now I never have time to do anything like that. But I can hang out with close friends who teach at UCI, UCSD, and UCLA, who all live within 10 minutes of me, and we can all be part of this strange, very disjointed artworld that exists in Los Angeles. Thinking that through in relation to art history is actually a lot harder. I did my graduate study in New York and, like most people, learned a very New York-based canon of post-1945 art, and then wrote a book that is very avowedly set in New York City. So it represents a real challenge to develop a set of critical tools, historical tools, for what is being made here now, on the West Coast—not that that exists in any kind of isolation, but there are different tendencies, different trajectories.