

*'the difficulty' (the necessity)*

I think people being actively aware are jumping out of a propagandized state of social conventions. Writing could be an active state outside social convention.

—Leslie Scalapino in conversation with Sarah Rosenthal, *A Community Writing Itself: Conversations with Vanguard Writers of the Bay Area*

Leslie Scalapino's *that they were at the beach* — *aeolotropic series* (North Point Press, 1985) blew my mind in graduate school. I walked around in this poem for weeks—trying to sort out her syntax, her complex usage, her articulation of this life as I'd never seen it before. Years earlier at UC Santa Cruz, I had been a philosophy major and was used to thinkers making up their own terminology to explain the world (Heidegger's *Dasein*, Kant's *phenomena* and *noumena*, and Hegel's *Absolute...*), but in Scalapino's work, I was experiencing a poem that came at me from all directions in a woman's oddly private and self-determined language. I was confused and in awe.

Although I found the work incredibly difficult, the poem was vital to me as an emerging writer. The more I tried to "get" her writing, the more I felt it shift and was forced to move with it. My margin notes from that time are funny to read now. Next to the first section of *Buildings are at the far end* I put a star and an emphatic "yes!" By *I'd see her on the street and then at some point obviously be the one who's old, but with someone walking there. Cars driving in a setting that is near-by.* I wrote that Scalapino was like Trinh T. Minh-ha, writing next to a subject, not trying the crafty trick of capturing an event or perfect description. On some pages, I was clearly attempting to locate the speaker. I wrote, "check affiliation with action and simple sight." I wanted to comprehend the poem's different vectors, its own understanding/experience of the world. On the last page of the excerpt, I had two notes: "one in many" and simply, "birth & death."

Decades have passed since then, and I've read many books of Leslie's and worked closely with her on a few projects. I've grown to understand how she incorporates ideas of Buddhism and real concerns about awareness into her work. I've admired all that she

freely lets arise in a piece, simultaneously, discovering. As a poet interested in writing's ability to question and create perceptions and as a woman writer at odds with social conventions, I am grateful for the deep and completely idiosyncratic ways that Leslie's work approaches these challenges. In *Letters to Poets: Conversations in Poetics, Politics, and Community* (Saturnalia Books, 2008), she begins her correspondence with Judith Goldman by asking about 'the relation of writing to events' and warns against "doctrinal writing" and unexamined authority. In her final letter in the anthology, Leslie writes:

It seems that now 'the difficulty' (the necessity) of writing is both to be and to apprehend utter transformation of reality, by everyone at once, at every instant of the writing. If this can't be done the writing becomes a saying about something particular (some episode in history) that has already happened, has gone, and reality has altered in relation to it as well as in relation to all perspectives 'at once.'

I am inspired and moved by this passage. It's a tall order—"the difficulty." The idea/practice, as I understand it, is to make writing an active event, a happening, that engages the gap between the conceptual and the political-social. So that (the act of) writing changes the world. On one's own anarchic terms. Otherwise, we risk poetry merely painting pictures whether pretty or otherwise. I will miss her.

### **Lullaby**

I keep pretending Leslie Scalapino is still around  
that there will always be more of her  
to channel a fragment  
this world and events gyrating  
the way she changed my mind in grad school  
then there's tomorrow—taking care of  
a mouth held open with instruments  
numbered names on a sheet  
the awkwardness of everyone's life happening at once  
thought *I should have sent the note*  
thinking she might say  
*gratitude doesn't come too late*