

*Cross/Scalapino Interview (Part 1)*  
*[revised 9 December 2009] from Aufgabe Magazine*

**Michael Cross:** Let's start with your first full-length trade edition, *Considering how exaggerated music is* (a book that collects many of the early chapbooks). You claim in *Autobiography* that "it was the first time (you were) writing."<sup>i</sup> In what ways is this writing different from other experiments you were involved in at the time, for instance, your chapbook *O and Other Poems*, and can you elaborate on your claim that this work is "a light extremity?"

**Leslie Scalapino:** I regarded myself as writing 'for the first time' with "hmmmm," because I had the sense of that work being unlike the other poets I'd read, of being my own; whereas *O and Other Poems* my very first poems, were similar, as I discovered while in the midst of writing them, to Frances Ponge, a discovery which cut short that writing and prevented me from beginning anything else for a year. The poems in *O* were as if doing the inside of objects, passionate elucidation of objects, somewhat similar to Ponge (at least that was my intention recognizing the similarity when I read him).

As for why I described "hmmmm" as a "light extremity": emerging from a violent conjunction of circumstances, I was in a state of shock and "hmmmm" arose from being in that state and waking up in that state. The subject matter of "hmmmm" was not the source, was after what I'm describing as a violent conjunction of circumstances, the sense of the individual's (my) private context and a violent outside, public context (in that case the Vietnam War) entering or being the same space. Perhaps the vernacular expression "blown away" is similar to "light extremity" and realistic conveying having lost or no longer having your self. Having been dismantled, no longer there, there's a sense of being curiously free, so even painful circumstances personal-social happening to or in front of oneself (not war) seem very funny. This is not unlike the theme of sensations of objects (as in *O and Other Poems*) but more wildly felt.

In regard to my sense of individual context and the outside in chaos converging on each other and being the same, I had perhaps five or so formative instances of such, which helped to form my writing. I recall a poet not too long ago at Georgetown University, in a question-answer session, remarking about some of my writing that it is "psychological," the word used disparagingly to mean that "psychological" is as such conventional which is limitation (of the human and of writing). Meaning, we have the same responses, these are closed? It's a view of my generation which I've heard expressed many times, probably enhancing intellect above examination of any "experience" (itself a word that has been excised from usage by those with this view). I'm not regarding "psychological" as conventional (as repetitive) and as such a limit (this view implies the human mind is separate from one's senses and body and that we cannot change and learn as direct action in event). In "hmmmm," I was trying to make seeing (and) being motion be one's total change as direct action, event.

**MC:** I'm interested in your use of the word "event" here, a concept which, thanks in part to philosophers such as Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben (after the work of

Heidegger), is very much in vogue in contemporary aesthetics at the moment. Your sense of coming into a voice seems very much related to an investigation of the “event of the poem” (as it relates to so many singular “events” in the world). Some characterize this event, wholly in relation to your work, as an investigation into the simultaneity or relationality of interiority and exteriority; however, as I read your writing, the “event” of the poem obliterates these binary distinctions as such. You often refer to the event of writing as a “horizon,” or as a “rim” of experience. In *New Time* you write,

the events: a rim collapsing (in one)—differing times on the same present—(and one’s)—no—bud—one fears that’s too fast

the two ‘two’ events are only ‘spring’—‘obstructions’—as one won’t be in (be) them at the present at the same time—being—no—bud”<sup>iii</sup>

And in *The Front Matter, Dead Souls*, you write, “I’m trying to get the real event. It’s a balance as to when the real event emerges.”<sup>iiii</sup> Can you respond to the distinction you see between events as such and the event of the poem as a kind of immanent “event horizon?” How does this distinction relate to your early experiments to find a voice?

**LS:** Reading your description of Badiou, Agamben, and Heidegger in relation to the concept of “event” I think all are very interesting and amidst these examples there is some resemblance to my sense (more investigations than theory) of “event.” For example, my sense of “event” in the passage you quote from *New Time* is similar *in a general way* to the description: “For Badiou, the subject’s militant fidelity to this event, that it took place, is the material trace of its occurrence. In this sense you could say that the poem is a material trace of a happening that has withdrawn.”<sup>iv</sup> My passage from *New Time* is also similar *as* (‘just as’—and ‘while’ or ‘because’) there is no producer—no (single) event—no cause and effect (though something’s happening—has happened). The site of occurrence can’t exist (as it’s interdependent with everything else). I’d read Nagarjuna but not Badiou; yet I was not so much influenced by Nagarjuna as enabled by him after the fact to try to explain or think through what I was encountering. The particular passage you quote:

the events: a rim collapsing (in one)—differing times on the same present—(and one’s)—no—bud—one fears that’s too fast

the two ‘two’ events are only ‘spring’—‘obstructions’—as one won’t be in (be) them at the present at the same time—being—no—bud”

This is a sense of space as time-event, the starting of an event (which has no time of starting as no time in the present) and the sense of the event *being* a present only by (imagining) a rim (a mental marking, as visual line of attention, which has no existence anywhere except the individual’s attention there). It’s like trying to keep time if one were in sensory deprivation in prison without outside reference—except the opposite, it’s the state of flooding of outside references which, as simultaneous, are not beginning, are not in ‘the middle’ and are not ending. Comparing mine to Badiou, I too am viewing an event

as “a material rupture in this situation that is unknowable, haphazard, and unpredictable”<sup>v</sup> (both the event and situation)—and I’m seeking giving up one’s own militant insistence on the event (any), militancy in which the event becomes a kind of lawlessness (its assertion obliterating other events and the event is causal where it is actually not-existing—such as spring. Not-existing in fall). Spring exists, held onto—viewed as single, also obscures, distorts as an event that’s posited, say as two occurrences of spring (obstructions) obscuring everything else, requiring (in one dropping the mode of orientation) that there *be* no events of any kind held?

I did not approach this occurrence or problem of writing as theory (such as reading Nagarjuna and applying it—or Heidegger, whom I have not read I confess). I was approaching conceiving “event” as I was encountering or undergoing it, like testing space and events in it with writing by (as) a spatial lineless (no line breaks except as paragraphs) mind syntax.

The use of the word “voice” or vocabulary “finding a voice” I think is inappropriate, in fact antithetical to my writing in the sense that I’m aware in any/all writing (of mine at least) of one’s fake or created constructions of voice, there in any case in anything, and the whole idea is to peel these away, exposing and using them—to use language to recognize in the writing and be actions. The poem is doing or is state of being in no single time no single event.

**MC:** How would you characterize the “event” of the *poem*, then? Are you saying that the poem is also interdependent with other occurrences—that writing as an activity in the world is no different than other activities, and, as such, cannot operate as a privileged mode of thinking? And if so, why write poetry *specifically*? In my understanding, your writing *deactivates* occurrence—it makes hierarchies of power, significance, and difference *inoperative*, and as such, works *next to* this interdependence as a mode of self-reflexivity (which, I suppose, privileges the writing by pushing it outside the act of leveling). In other words, does writing *level* occurrence in your practice by making all events interdependent (that is, does the thinking and writing actually *perform* this task?), or is the writing always already simply another occurrence in a web of happenings?—a record of simultaneity? *Or*, does the writing somehow transcend this leveling in the *act* of attention (imaging the rim), by reflecting on this “lawlessness” in real time, *next to it*? Is it that there’s no site of occurrence or that there is no *privileged* site of occurrence because *everything is always eventual in nature*, is always touching?

**LS:** You give a multitude of possibilities—I like all of them to be in operation at once. Even if they are conflicting they are questions in the mind and the response of the reader, not needing to cancel each other but jostling. However, I don’t understand the question: [my view apparently being] “that writing as an activity in the world is no different than other activities, and, as such, cannot operate as a privileged mode of thing? And if so, why write poetry *specifically*?” My answer: There’s occurrence that can only be as the poem, it’s a mental activity that’s a space and relation that doesn’t exist otherwise, in the world. It is not that poetry “is no different than other activities,” (though I may have said that, I meant:) it’s that it is *ALSO* activity—so, mind and action are not separate in the sense of mind being weak and ineffective in the face of ‘real’ action (the motions of history predominate and the individual mind is nothing, without power—minds are also

making those motions? those that ARE the history). Anyway, throughout my writing it's a problem I'm working on, I don't have an answer or fixed view: it's like I'm trying to find out, differently, in individual works.

As I get deeper into your series of questions, I realize there are other thoughts I don't quite understand: "does writing *level* occurrence in your practice by making all events interdependent (that is, does the thinking and writing actually *perform* this task), or is the writing always already simply another occurrence in a web of happenings—a record of simultaneity?" I don't think writing would be "leveling" occurrence by making (or enabling seeing) all events as interdependent. As such they are in a sense seen from a distance and also actively altering every second and every instance in that second. Events ARE interdependent (in fact, in reality) and seeing that (as if one reads the events in fact, directly—OR in writing as motions of syntax) does not lessen the vitality of each event or link—Writing CAN do that (that is, it can BE that interdependence). As such, writing interacts with phenomenal action in the formation of other actions (single individual's mental-phenomenal—and 'phenomenal-actions in the world').

**MC:** Can you address *your* experience as a reader of your poems? I imagine undergoing the time-event of the work as a reader must be radically different than as a writer; and yet, I experience a kind of *displacement* when reading your work, as if the text is emptied of authorship *by* or *because of* the reader's labor, which creates a kind of vertigo (at least for me) in which the time of reading and the time of writing become impossible to trace. In other words, do *you* experience similar "conflicting...questions in the mind" (as you have it) as a reader *and* writer, and how would you differentiate *the time of reading* from *the time of writing*?

**LS:** Can you say something more about "the time-event of the work as a reader must be radically different than as a writer"—? Do you mean that the event as reader reading is far from the real-time event (also—and the same as?—the time of writing)? Are you saying you can't understand it, can't get with it? My first reaction to your question was that I'm having the sense right now (in the work *Floats Horse-floats or Horse-flows* in fact) that I'd needed in the past to catch the motion that's event its transpiring as syntax shape (not representing the event but getting at something inner and outer as spatial occurrence sculptural kinetic that's an event itself, as the language—but also is an occurrence that's real-time for the reader unrelated to any real-time event of the past)—but now returning to some similar life events I'm needing to render my need or intention itself, the after-effect in time of being separated from one's own events...something like that. But I don't know if that bears on what you mean in your question.

**MC:** You respond pretty accurately to my question in reference to *Floats Horse-floats*. I certainly don't mean that one can't *get with* the text, but that one's experience of the poem as temporal (experiencing the event as it happens) must be much different for one living with it, struggling with it, day to day etc. My interest, I suppose, is in a number of different things (hence the confusion!): on the one hand, the kind of displacement that happens when a reader *re-enters* a time space the writer shaped (occupied), sort of twice removed, trying to *get in* the poem (so to speak) ((I wonder if I mean here that delay that

occurs when you tune your body to the measure of a difficult poem?)), but also that every reading is a new experience of the poem's temporality (is a new temporality) (so what makes the writer's experience in real-time different than the reader's experience after the poem is "finished"? Do you have to change gears as a reader, or do you feel that you're using a similar skill set to "stay with" the event). *Not* that the reader is entering the *writer's time*, but instead that the reader is tuning his/her own time to the writing's time (if that makes sense).

I'm interested in this given that reading your work is a kind of creative labor, a kind of *composition*, and I have a hunch that what makes the reader's experience of *composing with the poem* different than the writer's work of "living with the things as they exist" is how we experience the temporality of the poem...Rereading what you say here, I think it totally bares on what I'm asking...If it's not too complicated, you might think of an example such as *That they were at the beach* or *way*. How would you characterize the *labor* of writing either text, versus the labor of reading either, and how might you *occupy* or *accompany* the poem as both.

**LS:** The difference (and my intention as that) between *the time of reading* and *the time of writing* is actually a mode or process of probably all of my writing. You mention experiencing a "displacement...as if the text is emptied of authorship *by* or *because* of the reader's labor." Then also: "*Not* that the reader is entering the—writer's time—, but instead that the reader is tuning his/her own time to the writing's time." The reader tuning their own time to the writing's time is my intention; *either* recording *or* re-experiencing a particular event is *not* the point. That is, the writing (in *that they were at the beach—aeolotropic series* or *way*) is not narrative about events or making those events. Rather, I was 'finding' or 'hearing'—having a sense of—a gyration or whirr, reading as coming in the poem to a place where motion occurs (accumulation as reading) as if that is interior and/of life itself of any simple action as if chosen at random. Particular events were deemphasized ('omitted' as denuded) of their narrative or psychological import, which wasn't this occurrence (and would only conceal it). Thus I was always dismayed when people would break down segments into individual stories, that were merely segments of series or sequences; frequently this would be from an individual who either hadn't read my work, more than a page or two, or would not approach language as a sound scheme.

For example, *that they were at the beach—aeolotropic series* had one recurring sound scheme: a two-paragraph form, the two paragraphs commenting on each other (somehow this sound-shape arising in my mind and continuing until the poem was done) and to which all the 'real-time historical events memories arising as it happens and then proliferating associational' were *submitted*. That sound-shape emerging was regardless of the content of the events (content which had nothing to do with the content of my time of writing, my internal time, which happened, in the case of *that they at the beach*, to be a crisis of chaos outside seeming to cause chaos inside in my life *then*). I wrote in a note on that poem (published as "Note on My Writing") that I was punching a hole in (real-time) reality as punching out in space each event as it came up. Years later, Paul Hoover wrote in his intro to the selection of my work that's in his *The Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry*, not only that I do the same thing continually, having one idea, but that my work is psychological, apparently dispelling psychological personal events by repeating these punching them out. Punching out all events (using one's own events

because these are real-time, historical) was in order *not* to be within memory, to get to some present *only as text* that's as such spaceless (of real-time) but in space as 'sound scheme' of reading interior motion as if 'hearing' life-itself-text's-imitation-of-motions. My imposing the same sound on all becomes as if a neutral ground on which that interior sound occurrence (or occurrences) can be 'heard' but only outside of single episodes.

In *way*, it was completely different (I had to keep changing to come at it differently, unlike Hoover's view that my writing is one idea): each series has a different sound scheme as different conception where somewhere in each work one comes to (creates as reading) a place that's gyration (a hitting the fan that can be 'heard' maybe delicately, also emotional) is only the syntax, spaces of dashes, one word juxtaposed to space and to another word. Now and then the reader 'gets to' such a sound-motion—that's sense of life itself as motions the continuousness in the whole. In *way*, there's accumulated motions as if all over a conceptual space; particularly "The Floating Series" in the middle (of the long poem) makes points or blips that are all over a large spatial 'conceptual-outer-space' as if you were looking at this space. This will never be noticed if you're reading for content. I received a Before Columbus Foundation Award for *way*. I was honored to receive this. However, David Meltzer wrote an introduction to this poem for an anthology from Before Columbus, publishing "bum series" from *way*, interpreting the poem to mean I was a nervous woman afraid of being mugged and generally afraid of city conditions. I was actually shocked by this. In "bum series," there's a very delicate grinding 'motion' (just emptying spaces, by dashes, line breaks leaving single words by/beside themselves) making empty slots compared to freighters as one self also being dumb too. That delicate grinding motion of the bums already having died—yet that motion still there affecting the landscape—this was at the *beginning of the middle* of the long poem *way* opening a huge space utterly outside one and simultaneous *as the time of writing and the time of reading* ('later' is at once).

The prose work *Floats Horse-floats or Horse-flows*, because it's prose its scenes take a longer time than in a poem, passages in which one can dwell (have the sense of being in a particular episode or thought). The earlier poems, as I say, are composed of small motions. Yet even in this prose I had the sense in reading it of the text making at some point a wall, sense of everything hitting that flimsy wall-skin flowing from the back of the text and flowing from the front of the text to hit that wall that's like a plug (bursting, as change of seeing it while reading). Maybe (I hope) the reader gets the sense of that 'outside' motion as if life-itself not in single content (but is—in single episodes—when you notice it 'outside'). If this is there to the reader, it only occurs in this work by small discrete chapters that suggest continuousness, like segments of a crocodile's back, being read to overflow sense of the discrete unit.

Anyway, in the past I would be disturbed when other poets said about works like *that they were at the beach*, *way*, or *Crowd and not evening or light* (the three being very different in what and how they are doing something) that I was "just writing narrative"—disturbed because communing as interior core as life itself of random (as 'exterior') events (seen by putting motions together) apprehension *only possible as the text* isn't there unless one is in the text *as* (that is) the writing time altering the reading time.

After these works (still in the period of North Point publishing my books), *The Return of Painting*, *The Pearl*, and *Orion/A Trilogy* carried this attempt a little further. "Orion" was/is the reader seeming always being (to be) in a present line of the text yet

moving into future which is present then (triple—the past also) by in “Orion” a line both making up events (fictionalizing) at the same time as being the vehicle for evidently real (real-time) events until the fictional takes over and can be ‘seen’ ‘ahead.’ This process could only occur (be visible—as their own mind, as if reader sensing their mind doing this, seeing their mind in a sense) to the reader by their having first read the earlier sections of the text (starting with the section titled “The Return of Painting”). Otherwise the gesture that’s the text can’t be seen. The reader has to have the illusion of their being in my (someone else’s) past real-time as my writing-time for them to be in the later writing’s time (of their own future, in “Orion”).

I don’t know if these descriptions make sense. It’s very hard to describe this. Anyway, I’m saying simply that the dislocation as reader, of which you speak, is part of the writing.

**MC:** I wonder if you could further elaborate on what you’re calling the “gyration” or “whirr” of the work in relation to the volume that followed the North Point Press books, *Crowd and not evening or light* (1992). I’m interested to know how the “sound scheme” of the work changed after *way*, especially as *Crowd* is such a distinctly *visual* work. It is the first, to my mind, to incorporate your photography (a relationship you’ve continued to explore in such works as *The Tango*), though you showed an interest in visual collaboration as early as the Cloud Marauder edition of *Instead of an Animal* (1978), which features drawings by your sister, Diane Sophia. If the sound scheme of the work creates a spatial, sonic “accumulation” in which the reader confronts a stilled interior that is one’s mind “seeing” one’s mind, how do the visual elements of *Crowd and not evening or light* (both photography and handwritten text) contribute to or alter the “interior motion” of the reader’s experience? Can we think of these elements as contributing to the wall or film that registers the reader’s interior movement?

**LS:** Perhaps the best I can do to answer the question of the nature of the gyration is to quote from the talk that I gave at University of Chicago.<sup>vi</sup> In this talk I was giving ideas that were stages of my work, the essay is an answer to Lisa Samuels who wrote an essay that was to be the introduction to my poems in an Wesleyan anthology in which Lisa said my writing is autobiography, my recent poetry “indictments” of the world, “reporting,” and other completely inaccurate representations of my writing. First I said I would withdraw from the anthology after she said she wouldn’t change any of her comments ‘because then it wouldn’t be her idea.’ This essay might be of interest because it’s the best I’ve written so far to describe my writing:

Any way of making event’s occurrence a singular *subject* or an argument of discourse outside of its language as its action (discourse as looking at event by separating oneself from *being* it, not seeing such separation is creating itself by its process of perceiving), is *as writing* to reproduce customary mind-body split that is inherently hierarchy-authority, to place perception (that is, writing) back in same social autism unknown to one while (because) doing ‘being that autism.’ In creating and doing any (singular) discourse we’re unaware, accustomed. I’ve wanted to make myself aware, continually. Dismantling hierarchy-authority (that of the outside is thoroughly embedded *as one self*) can only occur by ‘authority’

(that's determining the writing, such as its mode, its constructing) *not* existing except as the unfolding that is in *that* writing itself—its specific occurring. That is, there can be no general dictum, as the poetry's purpose, except it is mystery of being as its language mind-shape sound....

'The mind is action'—the writing keeping up with it—tracking it, is not to say that that is always re-action; it's this instant, to be unpeeling the social construction of reality and of oneself. Tracking is the (one's, reader's) mind's gesture itself in any instant of attention. Attention is an action, whose content *is attention*—apprehension as motion. Sometimes a sense occurs of 'between' apprehension-space-motion that is one's/outside's 'being'?

...Borderlessness as if a line is infinite: As an imagined originary event, or as there being *no* originary (and originating) event also, one is—neither—being—space—nor—in it—at once, (what) is the 'outside'? (Actual) sky space horizon to land is (*not*) infinite line *either*—seen 'at present,' *is*. The 'outside' and the 'inside' 'seen' at once:

silver half freezing in day  
                    moon's elation  
of the outside rose, his seeing  
                    on both  
                    'sides'  
seeing someone else at all and the  
                    half freezing  
elation of the outside so that's even  
                    with one  
continually over and over  
one/person<sup>vii</sup>

The following passage that's in the essay "Poetics—for Lisa Samuels" is my attempt to answer your question about what I meant by a "gyration" I'd feel or have a sense of in a sequential poem (not in prose, it has to do with the sound-shape in a poem—that is, duration is necessary to it and line breaks shape-sound). Your asking me about this sense of "gyration" compelled me to try to describe it:

As dismantling hierarchy-authority (that of the outside thoroughly embedded *as one self*) there can be no general dictum, as the poetry's mode or purpose: except it is mystery of being as its language mind-shape sound, a configuration (gyration) which can be 'heard' (silently even) at points in a sequential poem. As recognition of when *way* was 'there' (completed), I had a sense of (or heard) a gyration somewhere in the sound as duration of the poem sequence. The measure of the poem, conceived as the rendition of motions of the outside-events (sound as say the poem's line breaks): This 'gyration' might be described as a gap, that is emptiness, where word/reality face or abut each other, a whirr between word-based and experience-based idea, as apprehension. This gyration in measure is shape emptiness of one's conceptualization (that is name/word and that is reality/named), the sense that neither is existent. That is, *both* (word/reality) are



being constructed (at once, by the reader). This experience is similar to Buddhist emptiness theory in regard to language apprehension (this unknown to me at the time of writing *way*).

I realized something about this sense of syntax/gyration (an abutment in syntax of contrasting senses as word, emptiness of reality, these facing each other) from reading right at the moment a book by Gen Lamrimpa called *Realizing Emptiness/Madhyamaka Insight Meditation*. I'll quote several passages. Obviously, I did not conceive in terms of this or such ideas at the time of writing *way*, for example; but I was doing some similar process:

The image of the Space Needle that appears to the conceptual mind is said to be the generic idea of the Space Needle, and we say that mind apprehends the Space Needle itself and not the generic idea of the tower. In short, the generic idea of the Space Needle *appears* to that conceptual mind, but it apprehends the Space Needle...Both types of ideas appear to us, the verbal idea and the generic idea...The wisdom that realizes personal identitylessness focuses upon the self, the "I," but it falsely apprehends it as truly existent. Thus, there are two types of mutually incompatible cognitions: first, grasping onto true existence of the self, and second, the realization of emptiness with regard to the self. Even though they focus on the same thing, their modes of apprehension are mutually incompatible...for sensory cognitions, such as auditory or visual cognition, whatever is apprehended by the cognition is the same as what appears to it.<sup>viii</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> Scalapino, *Zither & Autobiography*, 34.

<sup>ii</sup> Scalapino, *New Time*, 61.

<sup>iii</sup> Scalapino, *The Front Matter, Dead Souls*, 7.

<sup>iv</sup> Cross to Scalapino in correspondence.

<sup>v</sup> Cross to Scalapino in correspondence.

<sup>vi</sup> "Poetics—for Lisa Samuels"

<sup>vii</sup> Scalapino, *It's go in quiet/illuminated grass/land*, 1.

<sup>viii</sup> Gen Lamrimpa, *Realizing Emptiness/Madhyamaka Insight Meditation*, 32-33.