

Written for “The Work of Leslie Scalapino” @ The Poetry Project
Saturday November 11, 2006

Simultaneous Multi-Local Mass-Body Rhythm in Leslie Scalapino’s *Way*.

Rodrigo Toscano

I didn’t think it would be so initially challenging to start to write something on Leslie Scalapino’s work, let alone to gloss lightly (but intently) on her book, *Way*, given that book’s clear-and-present impact on my own development as a writer, given my genuine fondness for the book. To wit, no sooner than I’ve started than has *it*—this challenge—by way of *Way*, made its way onto the stage. The very gears of the quandary that compel me—are already in motion. The very when-ness of this cultural-historical act is unmooring itself from the time of its inception. There’s a tension in my body as I write this, a tension, in relation to other’s bodies (I speculate now, as for later) “present”. I seek an evaluative (and ultimately transformative) resonance between several presences...a way alongside...*Way*.

History doesn’t happen to animals, its effects might, but History doesn’t happen to animals. History happens to humans; humans as aliens-in-the-making, make History; humans as near aliens, about to become human, are *needy* animals indeed. Unwittingly, and often excruciatingly, apes / martians / we, *bodily-emotionally* sense (but without making *sense of*)—the motion of our social interrelatedness. Instead we default into *pre-judicial* “views” of what’s “going on” around us, “views” that are more discursive pre-packagings—distributions of pre-packagings that ease us through so much small talk. Active investigations into the view-making processes that quantitatively amass over time, rarely come into *view*. Evaluations of the bodily-intellectual tipping-points that qualitatively motivate historical content—are too often bypassed in favor of rhetoricity.

In our epoch, the advent of the technology that is writing, is rarely *sensed* outright. A collective memory of the priestly origins of writing (Sumer, Chang dynasty, Palenque, runic script) or trade-based origins of writing (Phoenician, Roman, Arabic) is hazy at best. Without fear of priest-craft (priests abounding!) or basic apprehension of the political-economic necessity of text generation, many a contemporary ape-martian bloke /

bird is bonded into a trust that's called Democracy. Print culture (both cyber n' pulp), being constituted *by* and constitutive *of* that Democracy, moves bestride the wider effects of that Democracy. The D-Word, we speak of, here and now, who's external face is the All-Volunteer All-Disposable Imperialist Midnight Raiders, who's internal, ever-snarkier tittering face is Domestic Circus Tent Containment Foppery, provides us with (whether we like it or not) an intellectual "climate" to work with, or through, or around.

In writing on Picasso and Anarchism, Leslie Scalapino quotes Proudhon "Society divides itself from Art; it puts it outside of real life; it makes of it a means of pleasure and amusement, a pastime, but one which means nothing; it is a superfluidity, a luxury, a vanity, a debauchery, an illusion; it is anything you like; it is no longer a faculty or function, a form of life, an integral part, and constituent of existence" This provisional association with Proudhon's unvarnished thoughts on Art and Culture in the Capitalist Era belies some of Scalapino's ethical-political attitudes toward writing. Though quite knowledgeable and dedicated to avant garde literary movements of the twentieth century (with decades of teaching it on both coasts), the aesthetic prompts of "make it new", "make it strange" "make it alien", "make it not" "fuck things up", have (in my opinion) only a limited hold on much of Scalapino's poetic investigations.

What many readers return to, and are challenged by, is Scalapino's continual re-evaluation of her poetic investigations (staging + results) of the material-psychic interrelations that make up the dual (and transfigurative) phenomenon we—rather reductively, call *reality* (that is to say, *reality* as the bodily-sensed, and subsequent intellectual re-sensing *movement* from *appearance* to *occurrence*). In mid-early works like *Way* and *Not Evening and or Light*, the *appearance* of things in the world—through Scalapino's sensing body, initializes a rigorous identification and parsing of multiple locations on a global social grid. Plot points / poetic elements along that tensioned grid (organic and non-organic, people, their products, the untrammelled natural world, etc) are staged in a such a *way* as to approximate each respective element's alienated but still connected (causal) relations. This approximal-literary grid changes shape (the poem changes shape) insofar as the elements become aware (or don't) of the other elements, though Scalapino never pretends to inhabit another's consciousness. Instead, by laying as

bare as possible her own view-making processes as nodes along the gridwork, the *reach* towards reality becomes a calibration of the sensing of mass-body rhythm as it reaches *her* / as then to the reader. This in contradistinction to a metaphysical desire (religionist, nation-state auto-referential) to “aid” reality in reaching its “destiny”.

Contemporary experimental dance has done much with the exploration of the tensioned reach between sensing bodies and the transformative moment of touch, or occurrence, and subsequent jettisoning of that occurrence into further motion. But in Scalapino’s work, what would be the stage, the dancers, and choreography are all made of the same material, language. Therefore the presentation is not one that is primarily demonstrative (see what you can see) but must be rendered temporally (know what you can know as saying). The critical re-scaling of the movements of the social as *making seem to occur* in the reader’s consciousness *through* writing is reminiscent of Gertrude Stein’s way of writing (her grand mirth, one could even say), though for Scalapino, *literary* occurrence remains a potentially transformative field of human *historic* possibility.

The particular sequence of writing from *Way* that I want to be able to better bodily-intellectually sense (along with the help, intelligence, and social relational-tension of people here today) is called “Bum Series”. *Way*, subtitled “a poem”(published in 1988) is a book nominally divided into two major sections, *Later Floating Series* and *Way*. The two sections are themselves divided into several sequences. *Bum series* is actually the shortest of six sequences, ten pages of rather sparse text .

Way’s poetic sensibility as a whole, and *Bums Series* in particular, has much in common with the tradition of *No* drama. In *Noh*, the elements (which can either be people or non-people, entities) often appear without an immediate space-&-time bound context, as if coming from nowhere in particular, on their way to nowhere in particular. But it is these two “nowheres”, unbucklings of linear time, that are most luminously present, though not spoken of as such. In *Bums Series* what we have is a new kind of minimalist poetic theater, one dedicated to a maximalist (omni-chrono directional) study of social causality. The spare staging of geo-political strings marionetting the still-stiff stuff of the system (us) suggests to the reader that the very next move into History is likely to be the most the

unrecognizable one. Perhaps it is this pride-effacing recognition of the necessary misrecognitions that one has to endure in the pursuit of knowledge about one's place in time that makes *Bums Series* the diametric opposite of Clintonian Poetics, "I feel your pain". For, *Bums Series* is not a commemoration of an event (however tragic and outrageous the death two men left to die in the cold might be) but rather, it is a *re-tensioning of the present social by way of stilling social frames of the past as present futural motion*.

The series is composed of ten basic elements. I'm going to list the ten, followed by my brief notes on each one, not as a definitive interpretation of each one, but more as a speculation on what the multiplicity of roles that each element is able to play.

"The men" as about-aboutness, changeable

"The weather" as fixed-fact, changeable

"Cranes" as movers of freight, distribution of public

"Oil Rigs" as singular (serene) dependent entities, productive and waiting

"Man with the new wave died blonde hair" as vain impermanence, everyday coding of consumer culture (unavoidable?) comic fixture, mystery, what we are

"Hair Salon" as Hair Salon

"Our present president" as conscious plain speaking, mute buffoon (of then, and now)

"Man working in the garage" as permanence of labor, joyous or grinding

"Inverse" as the slackening or tightening tensioning reigns of power

"Dumb" as *warp* in the social grid, a special region where social nullity (non-awareness) serves to highlight activity (awareness). The narrator and audience giving over to Dumb (its intelligence) being comically-painfully plotted out as a simultaneous

occurrence (politically caused death) allowing the full scenario of “The Bums” to more fully *appear*—as mass body movement / rhythm

Leslie Scalapino reading “Bum Series”

http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Scalapino/12-13-86/Scalapino-Leslie_01_Bum-Series_Segue-Series_Ear-Inn_12-13-86.mp3

Recorded in 1986 at the Ear Inn, in New York City, and compiled into an audio CD anthology, titled *Live At the Ear Inn* (published in 1988)...here is Leslie Scalapino reading from her book, *Way...*

Rodrigo Toscano and Leslie Scalapino

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/29111057@N00/302427072/>

Rodrigo Toscano's CPT performances are indexed at
http://poeticstheater.typepad.com/photos/rt_pics/