

AN ACT OF GNOISIS:

PAINTER JESS
AND POET ROBERT
DUNCAN

Graça Capinha
Universidade de Coimbra

Living with Jess's work for more than twenty years — it was 1950 when we first met, and we have lived together since the beginning of 1951 — my own work and thought has grown intimately with his, and, just as writing here is his work I find myself coming into realizations of elements of my own poetics that have been born in contemplations of paintings and paste-ups, so passages come to mind, as here, from my work, that seem to speak for his intent.

Robert Duncan (1971: xiii)

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In 1966, speaking about his holistic poetics in an essay titled "Towards an Open Universe", Duncan claimed that the imagination of cosmos was as immediate to him as the imagination of his household or his self. "For I have taken my being in what I know of the sun and of the magnitude of the cosmos, as I have taken my being in what I know of domestic things", said the poet (Duncan, 1985: 76).

One could say this was not new in American poetry. This Romantic organic and democratic vision of the world and of the self, the importance of the inseparability of the part and the whole, the microcosmic as an emblem of the macrocosmic could already be found both in Whitman and in Dickinson. However, in the case of Duncan, this vision included a vision of his household as a world of Love — and Love, for him, was *Logos*. A self-proclaimed heir to William Blake's agonistic view of Creation (the opposites' struggle) and deeply immersed in the study of religions (namely Buddhism, but also Sufism), this meant that his household — a household shared with the American painter Jess (Collins) since 1951 — was a world where the generative force of the body in the practice of love was one and the same with the generative force of the body of language in the practice of art. Boehme said: "all is together an eternal *Magia*, and dwells with the center of the heart in itself, and by the spirit goes forth from the center out of itself, and manifests itself in

the eye of virgin wisdom endlessly" (*apud* Palmer, 1993: 99). This sacred and/or magical practice — of establishing relation (the basis of all magical practice) — led to "lines of communication in a continent of unknown outcomes" (Duncan, 1972: xii). It is this idea of "unknown outcomes" that I will here try to relate to the idea of the "open universe" that both artists shared in a poetics that was based in experimentalism and that became known as "open field poetics".

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Duncan's interest in the visual arts and in the importance of the question of process and the time/space unit in language, as well as on the Steinian experiments with textures and/or plasticity of sound, had been part of his poetic concerns for a long time. In the fall of 1938 (he was then 19 years old) he had left Berkeley for the East, and he lived in New York City until he returned to California in 1945. During the war years, he was associated with the literary circle of Anais Nin (including André Breton, Roberto Matta, and Henry Miller). He and the young painter Virginia Admiral typed manuscripts for Nin and Miller, and although they were not part of the inner circle of the European Surrealists then living in New York, they fully understood the importance of Surrealism as a changing aesthetics and vision. Duncan says about those years in New York:

The early forties (...) were formative years of a new American painting which in its first phase — the abstract expressionism or action painting of Hofmann, Pollock, Motherwell, Kline, De Kooning — was to establish New York as the world center of painting, which again now in the definition of "Pop Art" and minimal art it remains. (...) We went ceaselessly to galleries, as only in New York one can, following not only the new painting that was beginning to emerge, and speculating upon what the changing aesthetics and vision implied, but searching out too the variety of works of art which New York Museums provide. (*apud* Bertholf, 1993: 69-70)

He was being taught, he said, "in the world of forms" (*apud* Bertholf, 1993: 70).

Jess had been a nuclear-chemist, and he abandoned this profession to become a student of art at the California School of Fine Arts (which became the San Francisco Art Institute) where he studied with Elmer Bishoff, Hassel Smith and Clyfford Still. He started as an abstract expressionist, then moving to a more "realistic" form that could help him, as Michael Palmer points out, "locate and recognize, and then paint minute details" (Palmer, 1993: 94). This led him to a greater inclusiveness and complexity, and to understand the process of painting as a process of learning within the "metamorphic fluidity of the signifying process" (Palmer, 1993: 93). The importance of minute details as forms of energy that create clusters of meaning led him to the great collages of his latest work.

In 1951, Duncan and Jess began their grand collaboration of art and life. With painter Jacobus, they opened and operated the King Ubu Gallery, in San Francisco, from 1952 to 1953. Their house then became the location where all kinds of different experimental San Francisco artists and poets could meet and create. Duncan was reading gnostic and hermetic texts and it was to these that both Duncan and Jess were drawn for further elaboration of forms and/or myths in the actual process of image appropriation. Both artists, poet and painter, began to establish "a diachronic landscape, or ground, of the work as one where multiple times intersect and are *collaged* together, just as diverse styles of representation are juxtaposed and symbols from diverse cultures are placed side by side." (*Idem*: 100). The meaning of such radical juxtapositions, Michael Palmer notes when writing of Jess's *Narkissos*, means "the subversive defiance of art historical *doxa*, and [a] tacit suggestion of a counter-narrative, one which defies the accepted logic of aesthetic categories" (*Idem*: 103). And I would add "the accepted logic" on the whole, since what I find most interesting in the work of both artists is precisely the way in which they are dealing with the many hierarchies of power in discourse in our world and in the worlds before us. Original language is no

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longer possible — a recognition that all poets have experienced, especially from Romanticism onwards and mainly with Modernism (some of them more painfully than others). Thus, Duncan claims, we are all derivative.

Using what Claude Lévi-Strauss would call, when speaking of myths, a *bricolage* process (Lévi-Strauss, 1962), we take what “feels in key” (what we take as useful and productive), and abandon old forms that are no longer suitable to us. Like others before us, we are both subjects and objects in the process of construction of the real — and what we call “the real” is a *social construction of the real* — in language. It is this artificial/non-natural/social — and poetical (*poiein* as “to make”) — nature of the real that the hegemonic powers in discourse erase. However — even if unseen, even if unspoken — that nature is in the open field of every page or canvas. It is an objective construction, even if a fanthom: a “fanthom objectivity”, as anthropologist Michael Taussig calls it. A part of language and/or of the world that feels like an amputated limb, Taussig claims (Taussig, 1980). Even if it is not there now, we are able to feel it: its pain is very objective. All of us have experienced it when struggling to invent a territory in language that may better approach to what we would like our place and our self to be. That is how we build and/or how we write our worlds and our selves — both as subjects and as objects of “the real” — in an agonistic process in language. The struggle to change the dominant forms in language that shape the social construction of the real is objective and it implies a process of deterritorialization that, being poetic, is also epistemological and epistemic. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, when dealing with the immigrant jew Franz Kafka, a line of escape is needed to avoid the language of the masters (even, and especially, when one is using it) and this leads to the nomadic and rizomatic experience of language and of self: in search of unknown territories — a search that will always have to deal with the lack of a center, with the lack of a map, and with incompleteness. A search that will unavoidably

lead to a non-Sense, a sense-that-is-not, in a creative process that is simultaneously poetical, social (both individual and collective) and political. We are dealing with counter-hegemonic forms of resistance to the accepted hegemonic social construction of the real — in language and through language (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986). Both Duncan and Jess were fully aware of this in their religious, sexual, and political aesthetics.

Influenced by this poetics, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet and theorist Charles Bernstein says:

Don't get me wrong: I know it's almost a joke to speak of poetry and national affairs. (...). Yet, in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau writes that since our conventions are provisional, the public may choose to reconvene in order to withdraw authority from those conventions that no longer serve our purposes. Poetry [art, in general, I would say] is one of the few areas where this right of reconvening is exercised (...). The political power of poetry [art] is not measured in numbers; it instructs us to count differently. (Bernstein, 1992: 225 e 226)

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Poetry is, thus, aversion to conformity, claims Bernstein. Therefore, the need for malformation in language, the need to abandon the mapped territories of language and of the self, the need to abandon the worlds written in our world. Trying to escape the language of the masters, both Duncan and Jess erred nomadically in the open and unmapped territories of language and painting — out of order, out of sense, non-sensically — in search of other possible senses to re-write/to represent the world. French theorist Jean-Jacques Lecercle develops a philosophy of nonsense that takes something that I find very close to this space as the field of linguistic excess. He argues that when abandoning the world of order in language, we do not find a lack of language; on the contrary, we face the excess of chaos and infinite multiplicity, the field of infinite possibility for other forms and models of representation yet to emerge (Lecercle, 1990). This is the resistance field of the un-approved, as well as of the un-proved or yet-to-be proven.

These artists' main poetic concern is then the question of form. They aim at what Marjorie Perloff calls, when speaking of our age of media, a radical anti-formalist formalism (Perloff, 1991). New contents cannot fit in the forms we already know, and *vice-versa*. Post-colonial studies could be given as another example here. Actually, this was the question raised by Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock, in the 60s, when speaking, for instance, of Native American languages and the need for what they called an Ethnopoetics that would have to accept the untranslatability of those other worlds into our linguistic model of representation of the world (Rothenberg, 1993). This is an epistemological question prior to anything else, and it is a question of politics of representation. Modernist poets were already dealing with it more than a century ago and both Duncan and Jess were self-proclaimed heirs of Modernism.

As Pablo Picasso said, speaking about the invention of *collage*:

(...) different textures can enter into a composition to become the reality in the painting that competes with the reality in nature. We tried to get rid of "trompe d'oeil" to find a "trompe d'esprit". (...) [The] displaced object has entered a universe for which it was not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness. And this strangeness was what we wanted to make people think about because we were quite aware that our world was becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring. (Gilot & Lake, 1964: 70)

Nowadays, as in those days, displacement and strangeness in the forms of representation are demanded almost as a strategy of survival at a time when new geographies are being created by technological and scientific developments and, especially, by globalization. The real is changing at a pace so different from the conceptual and linguistic categories, that tensions emerge in the dominant model of representation asking for a new universe of discourse. The categories of time and space, as well as their relation, became one of the main con-

cerns of artists and poets, dealing with the coming-into-being of things. The normal sequentiality and causality in the order of language was challenged, and most of the times completely abandoned, exploring a spatial logic that, by liberating words freely on the page, would allow for meanings to emerge from contingency. Different forms with different meanings, thus constructing different objects and different subjects, exploring the open field of language, the field of excess of sound and of all the possible orders of sound/meaning — that are usually, *normally and/or normatively*, silenced. These artists struggle, as Duncan put it, against form to liberate form. >>

Trying to recuperate their original and, for many centuries, lost, social function, these artists want poetic language and the many identities of the “I” in their works not in terms of abstraction, but in physical terms — as substance and body interfering in the physical world, not only to reflect but, mainly, to *affect* “the real”. They want the language of art to have a social function — like the language of science had/has: different, but equally capable of a “knowledge” that could change the order of the world, that could participate in the social construction of “the real”.

Both Duncan and Jess were interested in the new developments of science, and used in their works scientific terms as well as structures that were trying to imitate new physical structures recently discovered by science (especially Physics). In the first decade of the 20th. century, fighting the artificiality of convention and looking for an organic poetry, Ezra Pound said the line should not obey the metronome, but instead the rhythm of the sentence. In the 30s, William Carlos Williams, approaching biology, created what he called “a variable foot” which depended on the breath of writing and reading the poem: on the actual inspiration (no metaphysics included) and expiration of the body. Approaching physics, Williams was also the first to speak of the poem as a field of action. And, already in the 50s, Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, deriving both from

Pound and Williams, created what they called "projective or open verse".

For us, scholars dealing with questions of language — dealing with the many epistemological and political questions in the social construction, in language, of what we call "the real" (and identities are a part of this social construction) — for us, perhaps more than for any other kind of scholar, the question, I believe, remains, priorily, a methodological question. The awareness of chaos and contingency, of fragmentation and decentering, of incompleteness, of indeterminacy and relativity in the world — and in our selves — is not new. But how can we, literary scholars, deal with all these and still be able to provide meaning and knowledge? We still have to "make" a language that, as Charles Olson was asking for verse in 1950, "if it is to go ahead (...) now", it must "be of *essential* use" (Olson, 1966: 15). So, I take this non-collaborative model of language against a collaborative, communicational model that insists on recognisable images of the world in poetry and/or in art — because I agree with Picasso that "we are all quite aware that our world is becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring". I take this agonistic model of language (a model shared both by Duncan and Jess), and I use Olson and Duncan's theory of open field poetics as a methodological tool, an experimental tool, to deal with a language out of territory, a language of the deterritorialization of a totalized world and of a totalized self that is the language of our present day.

In "open field poetics", the representation of space and time remains the crucial problem. The concern with the representation of the coming-into-being of things is immediately present at the beginning of Olson's foundational essay of 1950, titled "Projective Verse" (*Idem*). This essay, making what seems to be an aleatory use of the space of the page, begins with these words: "(projectile", "(percussive", "(prospective" (each opening — but not closing, brackets). After a critique of the "Egotistical Sublime" and/or "the private-soul-at-any-public-

wall” of the conventional “I”, and of his/her authority in the poem, Olson asks for an exploration of the possibilities of breath “to bring the stance toward reality”. He asks for a language of “drama” in contemporary poetry (as movement, change, tension and confrontation) to lead “to new poetics and to new concepts” (*Idem*: 15). Using the words of Physics, he then speaks of the “kinetics of the thing”, the energy transferred from the thing to the poem, seeing the poem as an energy-construct, an energy-discharge. In the open field of the page, through the projection of the body of the poet — which is breath, with the “acquisitions of the ear” —the particles of sound, the smallest of which is the syllable, charged with energy, attract and repel. Lines and images result from the formation of these clusters within the field of composition (how interesting this must have sound to an artist like Jess, formerly a nuclear-chemist!).

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The work of art becomes an act, a process — and not a product — a flux, a metamorphic fluidity of a signifying process, as Palmer would put it (Palmer, 1993: 93). “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION”, Olson wrote (*Idem*:17).

In this poetics of energies, the work of art, this act, will always remain incomplete, unfinished, because every reading will re-enact the process of energies in a body that, like any other body, will never repeat itself in space and time. We always in-breathe anew. “Which brings us up, immediately”, Olson claims, “bang, against tenses, in fact against syntax, in fact against grammar, that is, as we have inherited it” (*Idem*: 21). To a certain extent, echoing 17th century John Milton, in his disobedience as the first obedience to the law of creation, Olson argues that “the LAW OF THE LINE which projective verse creates, must be (...) obeyed, and [...] the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open” (*Idem*: 21). Olson, like many social scientists nowadays (namely the Portuguese Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 1995), is

thus pleading for a new common sense, clearly within an agnostic model of language.

He goes on to say that "breath is man's special qualification as animal", and "Sound is a dimension he has extended. Language is one of his proudest acts. And when a poet rests in these as they are in himself (in his physiology, if you like, [...]) then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size" (*Idem*: 25) for "the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than man" (*Idem*: 25) — this was also the epistemological challenge, as well as the political challenge that Olson was offering in his poetics. "Keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen" (*Idem*: 17), he demanded.

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In the same vein, Robert Duncan addresses space/silence in the open field of the page, in "Some Notes on Notation", the short introduction to his book *Ground Work. Before the War*:

In the ground work there is a continuing beat that my body disposition finds and my moving hand directs I follow in reading. Its impulses are not schematic but rise, changing tempo as the body-dance changes. The caesura space becomes not just an articulation of phrasings but a phrase itself of silence. Space between stanzas becomes a stanza-verse of silence: in which the beat continues. (Duncan, 1984)

This ground seems not to be visible — and yet the poet shows it is there, and renders it visible: "indicated by spaces of 1:2:3; which may be rendered 2:4:6: 9" — the duration becoming flexible "in each reading". Between the words there is, the poet says, "sounded-silence" — not an emptiness, but substance. In "A Song from the Structures of Rime Ringing as the poet Paul Celan Sings", this substance is oxymoronically described as:

(...)

the possibility of no thing so
being there.

It is totally untranslatable.

Something is there that is it. Must
be nothing ultimately no
thing. In the formula derived
as I go
the something is Nothing I know
obscured in the proposition of No-thingness.
(...)
(Duncan, 1984: 8)

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From this *seemingly* unseen and unheard substance, the whole poem, i.e., the whole movement of the dance (heart and of the body included) depends. It is so real, so physically and materially felt, that, according to the poet, "the hands (...) know more than the (...) brain" (*Idem*). This is the field, the *ground*, that we find in the whole of Robert Duncan's poetry, the foundational excess of sound in all language — eternally uncaptured and unbound by words (a monstrosity, Jacques Derrida called it), "a primary trouble", said Duncan. This restoring music "larger than mankind" appears, according to the poet, as "a deeper rhythm, the coming and going of a life/death tide back of the heart of the breath", a "rhythm whose patterns are set but whose tempos go back to the body they come from" (*Idem*). This *ground* is, he claims, "Poetry before Language": the universal and immanent Energy which is "What Is". Duncan names it "What Is". "What Is" is the Law we must obey and, in its all-including Wholeness, it must also include error and sin. And:

the Language of What Is and I
are one.
(Duncan, 1984: 74-5)

This ground, this Law, is our Nature, and yet, as Heraklitus argued, it is that which is most unfamiliar to us. It is therefore a ground at the margins of our already discovered and acknowledged continents. And margins signify, Duncan claims. Paradoxically, it is a ground that remains forever ungrounded — that is, untotalized and untotalizable: a ground in the making, in process. Robert Duncan's *Ground Work* is the poet's participation in the process, the poet's participation in this making — which includes the making of his self: nomadically, rhizomatically, uncentered and permanently deterritorialized, in expansion. The exact same characteristics that we find in Jess's collages.

Duncan's *Ground Work* books are the books where Osiris becomes the central figure. Not so much the feminine principle of Creation, Isis, the Great Goddess, the Queen Under the Hill; but the son and lover, who must die to allow for the rebirth of the body, for the rebirth of the Ground. This poetry constitutes a rite of passage between an old world and a new one, the bricolage process of transforming old myths into new myths, thus arousing new modes of perception and recreating the world anew. At the time of the Vietnam War, this ground work responded to the need for a radical revision of concepts such as centre and territory, such as self and language, such as citizen and city — a radical revision of what America meant. This was certainly the radical revision and its political implications that led Duncan to renounce the United States, refusing to publish and be part of the American literary scene for a period of 15 years.

As with William Carlos Williams, in Duncan as well as in Jess, groundlessness didn't mean an absence of substance, didn't mean an absence of the body of the literal earth. On the contrary, it meant the all-to-immediate presence of the land, the all-to-immediate presence of what America literally was; groundlessness meant the all-to-immediate presence of the war (in Vietnam; and in Iraq nowadays?) — in which the absence

of a mediating language resulted. Jess and Robert Duncan's ground work was the struggle to conquer this language, a struggle that had to accept error as part of a ground that has neither a beginning nor an end: since we are in history, we are in the act. Language is excess, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle would say. The excess that Robert Duncan finds at the margins of words, in the "sounded-silence" and the "deeper rhythms" back of the beat of the heart and the breath: all the possibilities of sound and articulation: "There is a field of random energies from which we come, or in such myriad disorganization "field"/ rises as a dream,/ the real. This projection of many dreamers" (*Idem*: 144).

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In "Notes on Poetics Regarding Olson's *Maximus*" and going back to Pound and Joyce but also to Dewey and to Emerson, Duncan describes this aesthetics based on energies in process:

Metrics, as it coheres, is actual – the sense of language in terms of weights and durations (by which we cohere in moving). This is a dance in whose measured steps time emerges from the dance of the body. The ear is intimate to muscular equilibrium (...). But, if the muscular realization of language is the latest mode of poetry, the beginning point was muscular too, localized in the discharge of energy expressed in the gaining, first, breath, and then, tongue. The gift of spirit and of tongues." (*Idem*: 70, 72)

This muscular equilibrium at the root of all movement (of creative movement) – the movement of breath and of language – leads necessarily to experimentalism. Experimentalism then becoming an organic need: the need to exercise that muscular energy which is "the gift of spirit and of tongues" (and the biblical echoes are obvious).

In this aesthetics based on energies, the closed causal and sequential syntactical orders are not dominating but they will not be excluded either. In 1971, Duncan argued: "I'm not

going to take the closed form versus the open form because I want both, and I'll make open forms that have closed forms in them and closed forms that are open (...) we work to contain our feeling in our extending our feeling into time and space".

In Jess and Duncan's project for a *grand collage*, a *collage* that would include all the discourses/images of all the different knowledges — without hierarchies — causality and sequentiality are articulated with proliferation and contingency so as to allow for a form open to free association — always depending on the energies that are available at a given moment. To contain in the body of the poem is then, simultaneously, to extend into time and space. Jess would describe it like this:

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The artist, after Dante's poetics, works with all parts of the poem as polysemous, taking each thing of the composition as generative of meaning, a response to and a contribution to the building of form. The old doctrine of correspondences is enlarged and furthers in a new process of responses, parts belonging to the architecture not only by the fittings — the concords and contrasts in chronological sequence, as in a jigsaw puzzle — by what comes one after another as we read, but by the resonances in the time of the whole in the reader's mind, each part as it is conceived as a member of every other part, having, as in a mobile, an interchange of roles, by the creation of forms within forms as we remember... So, the artist of abundancies delites in puns, interlocking and separating figures, plays of things missing or things appearing "out of order" that reminds us that all orders have their justification in an order only our faith as we work addresses. (Collins, 1980: 13)

"An Art of Wondering", Duncan called it in the essay opening the publication of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts catalogue of *Translations Salvages Paste-Ups by Jess*.

In collaborations such as the serial work of Jess's *Translations* or some sections of Duncan's serial poem *Passages* (both started in 1959, as a learning process), we can see how both artists share this aesthetics of complexity made both of reflected

and of broken rays/myths/words, deviating and proliferous, whose beginnings and ends cannot be knowable. Ultimately, in the borderland which is the realm of the work of art, in the borderland which is the realm of the self and of the artist, extension in detail ceases to be knowable. Duncan once said: "I enter the poems as I entered my own life, moving between an initiation and a terminus I cannot name" (Duncan, 1968: v).

This is *The Ground*, the decentered, rhizomatic territory (or should I say, unterritorializable territory) of the "sounded-silence" whose presence Robert Duncan tried to notate in his poetry. Silence as substance. Silence as the infinite possibility and excess of sound in poems that become "a theatre, a drama of Truth" (Duncan: 1985: 4). In *The New American Poetry*, Robert Duncan argued:

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There is a wholeness of what we are that we will never know; we are always, as the line or the phrase or the word is, *the moment* of that wholeness — an event; but it, the wholeness of what we are, goes back to an obscurity and extends to and into an obscurity. The obscurity is part of the work of the form, if it be whole. (Allen, 1960: 436)

Thus, art becomes an act of gnosis.

In open field poetics what is at stake with the question of representation and with its possibility for the renewal of the world is not a question of essences, but of responsibility. A responsibility demanded by a paradigmatic transition that Modernism and all the fields of knowledge inaugurated at the beginning of the 20th. century. We must be — as the last poem of Duncan's *Ground Work. Before the War* reminds us:

sent out from what we were to another place
now in the constant exchange

renderd true

(Duncan, 1984: 175) <<

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