

Jackson Mac Low
 "Lines–Letters–Words"

The Drawing Center
 20.1. – 19.3.2017

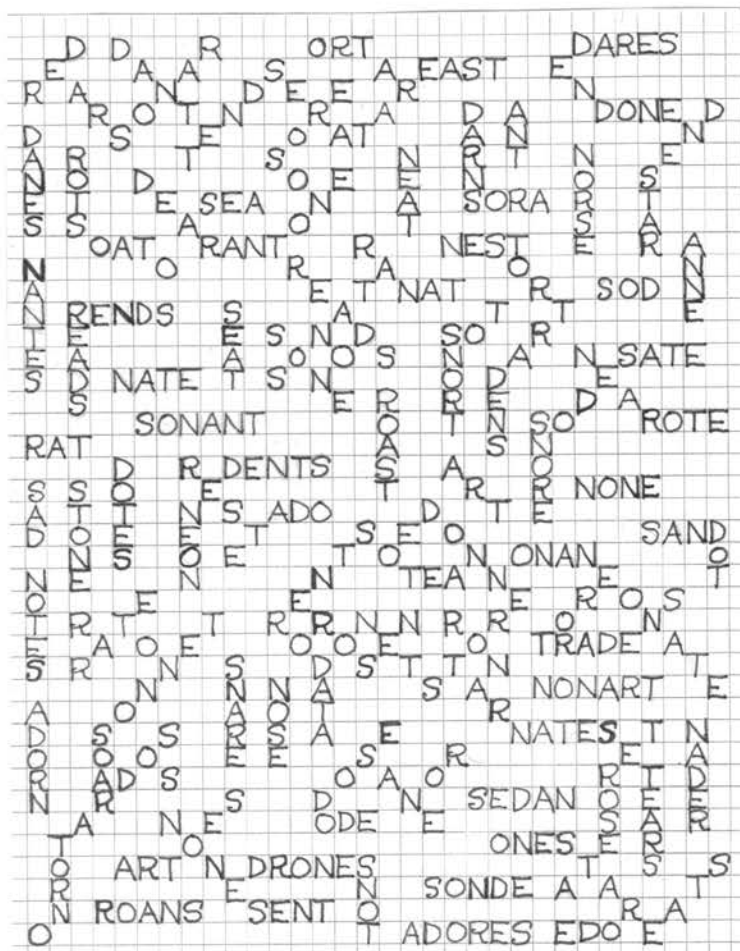
Hidden histories of poetry are threaded through the twentieth century. "Lines–Letters–Words", the first solo institutional exhibition of works on paper by Jackson Mac Low (1922–2004), engages with a history that hides in plain sight – visual poetry. It collects a modest yet confident cross-section of drawings produced by the multidisciplinary artist across a timespan of over sixty years. Many of them were rediscovered by his wife and frequent collaborator, the poet and performer Anne Tardos (to whom a number of the drawings are dedicated), after his death.

A formative member of Fluxus and a progenitor to New York's Language school, Mac Low was among the most inquisitive poet-artists of his generation, and developed a richly performance-based and intermedial body of work. In 1961, he produced his first series of "gathas" (*gatha* is Sanskrit for *verse* or *hymn*). In these, letters snake and deconstruct across the vertical and horizontal axes of a sheet of quadrille graph paper, proffering new verbal and visual configurations that on first glance could be mistaken for cross-words. From 1973, his gathas start incorporating the names of friends, family, and texts by other writers, transcribing his Buddhist philosophy into modern compositional techniques and social formations.

Most drawings in the exhibition functioned as open-ended performance scores, as Mac Low attempted to open a collaborative, decentered poetics that moved beyond the static ground of the page. *Tree* Movie* (1961/1971) provides the sole example of performance documentation in the exhibition. It builds on a script that instructs that a tree should be filmed with two cameras for an indeterminate time. Upon running out of film, one camera should be substituted by the other, while a note advises the reader that the word *tree* can be replaced by any other. The film, realized in 1971, is in dialogue with structural experiments of

the era, and through almost 200 minutes of focus on a single object and its signifier, provides a stark fulfillment of Mac Low's desire to democratise art through other media.

Poetry so often builds excess from absence. In *Skew Lines*, dating from the mid-70s, pen cartoons of ruler-drawn lines in different pastel colours, lengths and angles invite a form of interpretation that is at once strictly codified and playfully open. Like brambles of pre-linguistic signifiers, the exhibition's earliest works, untitled and contemporaneous to his time as a student of John Cage, reference Surrealist automatic expression within a pacifist-anarchist-Buddhist trajectory, giving insight to the historical and philosophical foundations of Mac Low's project. These are compellingly bookended by the artist's late drawings. Featuring a word that is repeatedly rendered in



A Vocabulary Gatha for Anne Tardos - May 1980 - © 1980 Jackson Mac Low

pencil until its own entanglements render it indistinct, and reminiscent of zany, calligraphic clouds, his *Vermont Drawings* (mid-1990s) are the only pieces that were not intended to be performed. Here the work locates a latent, lasting energy within visual poetry – with language so enmeshed with cultures of dominance and destruction, practices of unlearning must extend well beyond recognisable forms.

Harry Burke

Jackson Mac Low
 A Vocabulary Gatha for
 Anne Tardos, 1980
 Pen on graph paper
 28 x 22 cm