



LESLIE SCALAPINO  
W/MICHAEL CROSS  
LAST INTERVIEW  
& "POETICS"

**MC:** I wonder if you could further elaborate on what you're calling the "gyration" or "whirr" of the work in relation to *Crowd and not evening or light*. I'm interested to know how the "sound scheme" of the work changed after *way*, especially since *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*<sup>15</sup>), though you showed an interest in visual collaboration as early as the Cloud Marauder edition of *Instead of an Animal*, which features drawings by Diane Sophia.<sup>16</sup> 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? [27 april 2008]

**LS:** Perhaps the best I can do to answer the question of nature of the gyration (about which I was speaking) is to quote from the talk that I gave (called "Poetics") at University of Chicago. In this talk I was giving ideas that were stages of my work, the essay is an answer to Lisa Samuels who has written an essay that's to be the introduction to my poems in a 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.<sup>17</sup> Anyway, given our

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<sup>14</sup> *The Return of Painting, The Pearl, and Orion: A Trilogy* (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> *The Tango* (New York: Granary Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Diane Sophia is Leslie Scalapino's sister. She provided drawings for the chapbook editions of *Instead of an Animal* and *This eating and walking at the same time is associated all right*, a number of Scalapino's early broadsides, and the sixth issue of Richard Duerden's magazine *Foot*, guest edited by Scalapino.

<sup>17</sup> Samuels' essay was subsequently pulled from the anthology. My own essay "Leslie Scalapino's Anarchic Moment" will accompany Scalapino's essay "Poetics" when the anthology appears later this year. The final version of "Poetics" is included here on page 39.

interview, this essay might be of interest to you because it's the best I've written so far to describe my writing: I quote several relevant passages as answer to your question. But there are pages in the essay, talking about *way*, that also bear on the sense of gyration as apprehension and 'being.'

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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...<sup>18</sup>

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'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'?<sup>19</sup>

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...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:

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<sup>18</sup> This passage is from Scalapino's essay "Poetics," written in response to Lisa Samuels. Here she quotes directly from pages 3-4 of a manuscript copy she sent me on 29 April 2008. She subsequently sent four more revisions of the essay over the next two months, drastically altering the context around these quotes as a direct result of our conversation about the "whirr" or "gyration."

<sup>19</sup> This is from page 4 of the first draft of the manuscript copy of "Poetics."

silver half freezing in day  
elation the  
outside  
of the outside sky walking  
rose

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>20</sup>

[29 april 2008]

**LS:** The following passage (revised again!) that's in the essay "Poetics" 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): Tis '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

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<sup>20</sup> Scalapino is quoting from pages 23-24 of the first manuscript copy of "Poetics." The poem quoted at the end is from *It's go in quiet/illuminated grass/land* (Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 2001).

way).<sup>21</sup>

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>22</sup> [15 May 2008]

**MC:** I'm curious to have you address the role of the image in your work. In much of your poetry, and across the board in your fiction, image plays a crucial role in fixing the reader's attention while simultaneously disrupting the rational hold of "objective reportage," or of "objective point of view" for that matter. I think immediately of the images in *The Front Matter, Dead Souls*, a book written as "a serial novel for publication in the newspaper."<sup>23</sup> Opening the book at random I find "Hyenas trotting on the blackened ground in oil drag a woman crumpled in black robes,"<sup>24</sup> and "The sumo wrestler's eyes are tiny fish lost in the mass that's floating head on it."<sup>25</sup> Can you address the "texture" of these images in terms of the unfolding line as "mind action"? I imagine them "amplified," like an Imagist thrust into, say, the vibrant color and character of 21st-century Japanese youth culture. They certainly work as tracking points for the reader's attention, but I also see them functioning as what you're calling "whirrs" or "gaps" "that (are) emptiness, where word/reality face or about each other." Put differently, how do these extremely sharp images participate in "discourse as looking at event by separating oneself from *being* it"? I don't read them as surreal, as I'm sure many readers do, but as *percussive*, almost as sound shapes. [26 August 2008]

**LS:** First, yes I was influenced by looking at contemporary and also 19th-century Japanese sculpture, painting, and graphic art — and certainly by watching sumo wrestling matches (on TV

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<sup>21</sup> This paragraph was added to the third draft of "Poetics" in response to our interview. Scalapino sent me this draft on 12 May 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Gen Lamrimpa, *How to Realize Emptiness* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2010), 32-33.

<sup>23</sup> *The Front Matter, Dead Souls* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



and live in Japan). From TV I took stills of videos of matches (for use in a play, *Goya's L.A.*<sup>26</sup>). In *The Front Matter, Dead Souls* (a serial novel for the newspaper, though never accepted for publication in that format), I'm 'taking' images from public life and in a sense blowing-up the images/enhancing them, but not by enlarging: by qualitatively revealing their imagined (thus past mindoperation of the author) past-future connections — so none are single entities (though we, the viewers, see each as such and focus on these one at a time), they're causally connected as stream of actions. So, each image is empty (as single entity — exposing that it is *not* being that) and, as you suggest, they are sound, in the sense of a rhythm of presentation (in/as their stream of actions). This rhythm of presentation, I hoped, would be sensed (heard) also in *The Front Matter, Dead Souls*. The idea of such rhythm in a play, the material of *Dead Souls* simultaneously spilling over into the play and some passages repeated, was influenced by Kevin Killian's plays, those that seemingly have a transparently simple, multiple quality of starting new tracks of conversation and movement opening new directions, these 'new starts' being created apparently by the performers (really, by the playwright, Killian—with a collaborator if there is one). However, *Goya's L.A.* may not work in that way (I don't know), a free sense which could also be emphasized by a director. It's the sense (and this is the conception of *The Front Matter*) that one image is producing one other or more than one other image, then each of these producing others as if single spontaneous outbursts; these magnified, by being extreme in substance, burst as if the faculty of optical sight is merged with its substance or content. Because one's sight (of an object) merges with/is the object, one is both separate from/ seeing it, and is the same as the object (one's optical seeing is oneself). It's like watching a screen or playing a video game. The sense that the reader is creating it by reading/seeing the text is linked to this process of apparently influencing the single images, setting of a stream as if some in it (or all, but some more or less) altering the direction. It's part of my interest in *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold*,<sup>27</sup> related to our connection to outside, world events. Regarding the sentence, "Hyenas trotting on the blackened ground in oil drag a woman in black robes": the blackened ground refers to oil-soaked Kuwait, its oil fields bombed (that were supposed to be saved by "smart bombs"); hyenas are the carrion-eaters such as President Bush and his government, profiting; women in black robes being dragged refers to Muslim women in Iraq and Kuwait, whom George Bush and Barbara Bush (who said women shouldn't work, without considering their need — both using the idea of liberating women in conservative societies), their 28 circumstance worsened by war. Many of the sentences in *The Front Matter, Dead Souls* were similar ways of short-circuiting complex terrain, thereby an action, rendered by a series of visual images linked (creating future images and their linkages). An aspect of action is that, even if or when the events referenced are obscured by being the past they are still particular combinations of actions. [4 September 2008]

**MC:** You mention that these images "short-circuit complex terrain," as if they enter into the grammar of the poem in order to deactivate and reconfigure the text from within. How do you

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<sup>26</sup> *Goya's L.A.* (Elmwood, CT: Potes and Poets Press, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> A second, expanded edition of *How Phenomena Appear to Unfold* was published shortly after Scalapino's death in 2011, published by Litmus Press. Leslie and I worked to collect and scan essays for this edition in the final months of her life.

land on specific images when writing? Further, we find these recurring visual characters (sumo wrestlers, hyenas, black irises, etc.) across the body of your work, entering into different relationships within an individual text and then recurring in later works. Do any of these images take pride of place depending on the genre you are investigating (or put differently, does genre dictate the images you use)? And finally, you mention that some of these images have symbolic meaning (such as the hyena relating to George Bush, Sr.); however, I certainly don't see them as symbolic in the conventional sense. I often read them as rhythmic variables that attain meaning given the context of the line in which we find them—that is, rather than the images in some way acting as the source of meaning in a line, I find that the line imbues the empty form of the image with meaning. Can we read them in this manner? [1 December 2008]

**LS:** Simply, I'm drawn to certain figures or images and may repeat them because I'm attracted to them (like the sumo, hyenas, black irises). Ten, because they are repeated they begin to make a genre (as a supposed serial novel for the newspaper, modeled after Dickens), the same information or parts of it being repeated in each or anyway many sections (passages) to orient the reader (as occurs in serial works). The favored images just begin to accumulate and that makes open-ended stories between them or anyway interaction that isn't completed. I didn't regard any of these, even the hyena in relation to George Bush, as symbolic or "symbols." I think I mentioned that that particular work (*The Front Matter, Dead Souls*) began from a source: I saw a show at Columbia University of political cartoons that had been printed over the years in *The Nation*. Some of the images were so clear and striking, they were accurate; they were violent, gross, but perfect as such because they had a beneficial purpose. Kissinger fucking the world was one: he was huge and bestial, lying on the globe of earth that had a small woman's head. It was truly shocking. Tis one work of mine (*The Front Matter, Dead Souls*) used this idea — that is, it is unlike my other work; the images are intended to be visual extremes (as if sight, rather than moral meaning even) that causes 'them' to alter sight (as if the action is coming from the image outside animated — but this factor or phenomenon also goes along with your observation or idea "that the line imbues the empty form of the image with meaning." The line (which is the present time of wherever one is in the text) keeps introducing the images (new ones or repetitions) as a kind of rhythm of presentation that has (or the intention is that it will have) energy of movement, kinetic, the quick and the dead. In a sense it by-passes the individual who is seeing (an example of short-circuiting). [11 December 2008]

**MC:** Has your treatment of image — or how you use the recurrence of image formally — changed since you began experimenting with fiction? You mention in your most recent essay "Poetics" that you "had no interest in fiction until beginning to watch (in *The Return of Painting, The Pearl, and Orion*, 1991) my mind making things up alongside imitating motions of the real-time events—seeing these as they separate alongside each other altering each other."<sup>28</sup> While fiction certainly affords the opportunity to establish (and dismantle) generic formal constraints (regarding narrative, character, plot, etc.), perhaps more apropos of your recent practice, the prose line seems to present a significant durational difference. You mention at

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<sup>28</sup> Page 17 of the fifth draft of "Poetics." Sent to me on 17 June 2008.

various junctures that writing prose lines is experimenting with a different kind of motion, whether it be treating the “paragraph” or prose block as a single “poetic” line, or thinking about the “frame” (as it applies to the comic book), or practicing a kind of “writing in motion” (as opposed to “travel writing”) in *R-hu*.<sup>29</sup> Would you say that your interest in the prose line is based primarily on experiments with duration, and if so, how has this changed your formal use of serial images? [4 February 2009]

**LS:** There are a number of parts of your question. Yes, my use of recurrence of image has changed formally by my experimenting with fiction: as you point out it’s a question of differences that relate to duration; incorporating more elements to increase the connections. Durational mode is the need to see how seemingly unrelated motions/events of people’s behavior and actions configure in — and how these are — time-space (in reality, and in writing); this configuring causes the sentence to have to incorporate more. Simultaneity requires breaking down barriers of syntax, whose conventional form is to maintain these barriers. Thus a number of meanings can occur at once in a sentence, rather than specifying. This at any rate is my current practice, experimenting in a work titled *Floats Horse-floats or Horse-flows*. I thought I’d finished it; then discovered I had to add a section: I couldn’t get to the point of utter simultaneity, really impossible in any language because it occupies one space-time at a time. I was trying to push the language to be malleable, in this work using words chosen (by my being attracted to them reading the dictionary) ones I haven’t tended to use and by this somewhat procedural practice allowing a future to take place outside of my control as plot (defined as known before being written). In *Floats Horse-floats or Horse-flows*, characters would suddenly create themselves: such as introducing the word “dag,” which my dictionary defined as “an unusual person”; the dag becoming a ‘character’ doing motions, actions, eventually dying (unknown as to how). In this work I was getting away from using serial images by allowing the words to form new images, though a plot did emerge (which is good, in the sense of allowing one to get at one’s preoccupations—one of mine in this work being people dying or almost dying at the time of writing); the plot could open by a sense of a space occurring that is new to me. As you’re suggesting a prose line can incorporate, add on, space-time in a sense of duration. A line of poetry, on the other hand, by its condensation can suggest simultaneity in space-time and give the sense of freeing one from that particular (or any?) space-time. In the recent work I was trying to have both of those possibilities; perhaps the freeing that’s possible in poetry may occur now and then in this recent work? If so, that in itself (sense of quintessences and freeing only now and then occurring as the space itself) imitates daily life. [27 April 2009]

**MC:** Before we discuss your newer work in depth, I wonder if we could address what you say here about plot in terms of your “detective” novels, especially in relation to one of my favorites of your fiction projects, *Orchid Jetsam*.<sup>30</sup> I haven’t heard much critical discussion around this work, which seems to me a huge misstep (though I wonder how much of this is due to your writing

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<sup>29</sup> *R-hu* (Berkeley, CA: Atelos, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> *Orchid Jetsam* (Berkeley, CA: Tuumba, 2001).