

Jackson Mac Low:
Expectations Gatha,
1978, marker on
notecard, 6½ by 4
inches.

All images this
article Anne
Tardos Collection.
Courtesy the
Drawing Center,
New York.

THE MUSIC OF CHANCE

Jackson Mac Low's drawings feature the same mix of abstract procedures and spry lyricism as his poetry and the many other creative forms he employed in his diverse career.

by Brandon Brown

JACKSON MAC LOW (1922–2004) was—at least—a poet, composer, visual artist, playwright, filmmaker, essayist, curator, teacher, performance artist, and choreographer. These were not vocations he dabbled in; he fully inhabited them all. He did not subordinate different forms of expression to a primary role; he pursued each on its own terms. His poems, if unconventional and far ahead of their time, are usually written in rhythmic lines. His drawings are made with ink or crayon on paper. His dances—sequences of spontaneous movements prompted by words and statements—are meant to be performed by trained dancers.

Mac Low started writing poems as a preteen in Chicago. He began drawing in earnest in 1941, at nineteen. Mac Low was associated briefly with the nascent Fluxus movement in the early 1960s, and for that short time was a central and influential figure on the scene, partaking in performances with Yoko Ono, George Maciunas, and La Monte Young. He was later involved in other art and poetry communities as well. He lectured and taught at New York University, the University of California, San Diego, Naropa University, and Bard College, among other institutions. He lived most of his life in New York, where he frequently collaborated with his wife, Anne Tardos.

This month, an exhibition of Mac Low's drawings opens at the Drawing Center in Manhattan. Curated by Brett Littman, who studied with Mac Low in San Diego in the 1990s, "Lines–Letters–Words" assembles works dating from the 1940s to the early part of this century. The Drawing Center is also screening Mac Low's *Tree* Movie* (1961).

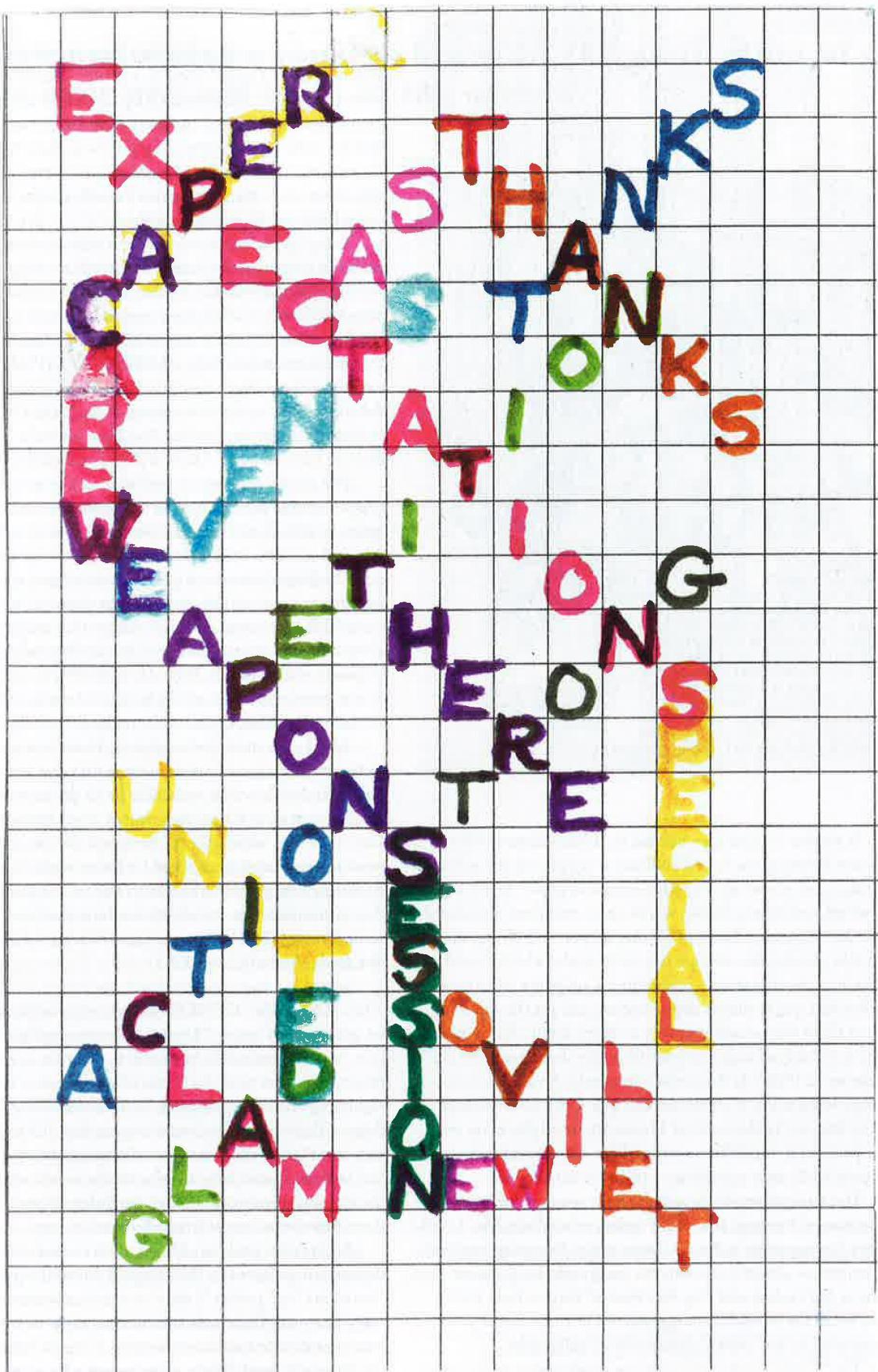
Billing the show in his curatorial statement as the first solo museum exhibition of visual works by Mac Low, Littman seeks to establish that drawing was a fundamental part of Mac Low's work across genres. Positioning Mac Low's drawing practice as his initial field of experimentation with the chance procedures and formal openness that distinguish his poems, performances, and other works, Littman offers a revised narrative for Mac Low's work.

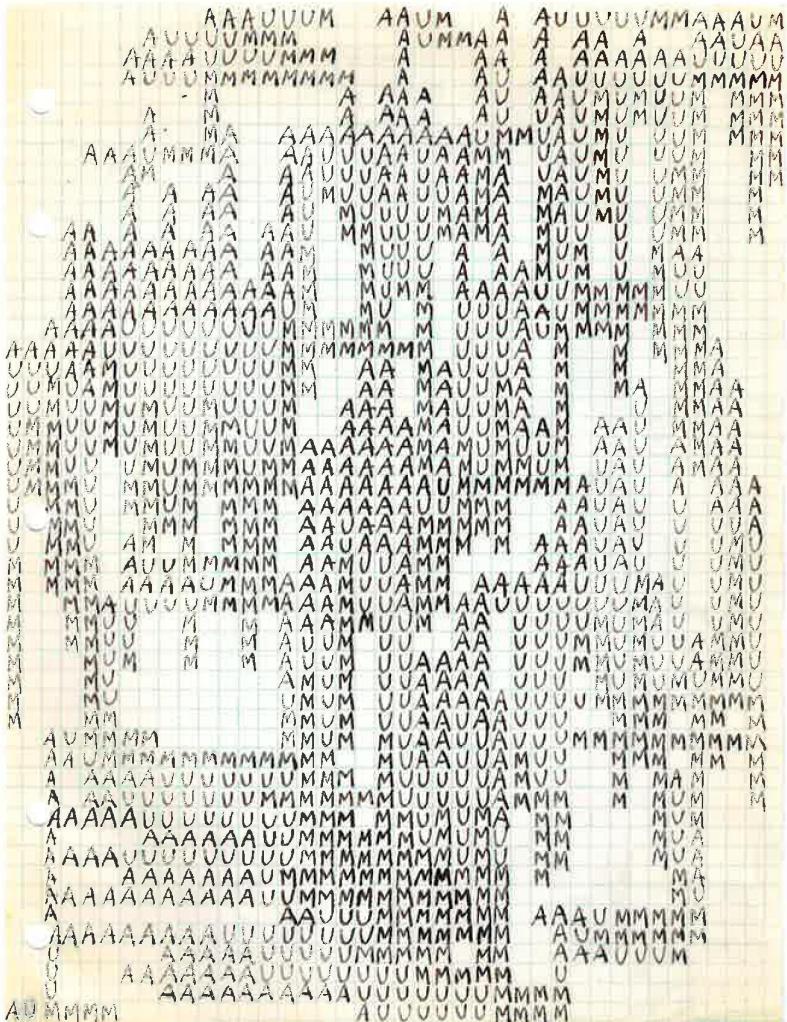
Mac Low is better known as a poet than as a visual artist, though his texts stretch the conventional definition of a poem by centering on non-semantic aspects of language and deprivileging the poet's ego and voice. His techniques include aleatoric operations and the appropriation of found language, but his works are also deeply lyrical, playful, and at times unabashedly pretty. (I've been to more than one wedding where one of his "Light Poems" was included in the vows.)

The particular genius of Mac Low lies in his ability to preserve a personal, emotional quality in poetic texts committed to the systematic dislocation of the lyric speaking voice. The "Light Poems," for instance, are based on a formalized conceptual apparatus, written as collections of sentences chosen at random from a chart made by Mac Low of descriptions of different kinds of light. The final poems, however, are not so rigid. The maker is in them—a human being expressing longing, regret, sadness, delight. "32nd Light Poem: *In Memoriam* Paul Blackburn 9–10 October 1971," for instance, uses a schematic compositional process while hearkening to the conventions of elegy: "Let me choose the kinds of light / to light the passing of my friend."

OPENING SOON
"Jackson Mac Low:
Lines–Letters–
Words," at the
Drawing Center,
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AUMMM Gatha,
1961, pen on graph
paper, 11 by 8½
inches.

A similar tension is embedded in “Lines–Letters–Words,” a contrast between the formal abdication of ego and the ever-present hand of the artist and his marks on paper. Mac Low’s drawings sometimes contain words, their meanings juxtaposed with the qualities of line and volume proper to drawing. *Pie* and *Ape* (dates unknown) are two early works which consist entirely of the title word scrawled in ink on paper. Mac Low’s strokes feel quick, almost improvisatory, and yet the minimalism of these works calls attention to every detail of his script. Is there anything we ought to infer from the slantwise direction of the word “PiE”? Is it supposed to mimic the angular lines of a slice? Why is the “i” in minuscule? Is it a playful expression of the famous “egolessness” of Fluxus art, deemphasizing the first person pronoun? These pieces defer answers, adumbrating allegory while slyly appearing to be just what they are.

The minimalism of *Pie* and *Ape* does not characterize the collection of drawings as a whole: rather, throughout Mac Low’s career, heterogeneity is the consistent mode. Sweeping handwritten sentences almost form narrative paragraphs in *This is not going to fool anybody* and *Very Few Football Players* (both 1965). They recall the repetitive strangeness of Gertrude Stein’s prose, augmented by the “drawn” dimensions of calligraphy.

The “Gatha” drawings in pen on graph paper, with letters

Opposite top, *This is not going to fool anybody*, 1965, india ink on paper, 8½ by 11 inches.

Opposite bottom, *Skew Lines*, 1979, pen on paper, 11 by 14 inches.

distributed across the page’s cells, raise questions of surface and structure. “Gatha” refers to a poetic form in ancient Indo-Aryan languages like Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Pali. Indo-Aryan poetics involve some of the most complex prosody known, and the difficulty of composing poetry in their highly wrought formal structures is echoed by Mac Low’s struggle to fit individual letters in the graph paper’s small squares while writing omnidirectionally across each sheet.

Using “gatha” in the titles of these works also suggests spiritual praxis. In contemporary Buddhism, a *gatha* is a verse recited in rhythm with the breath, an accompaniment to mindful meditation. Mac Low’s “Gatha” pieces express in mute two-dimensional drawing what is normally done with breath (in meditation) and the voice box (in chanting). *AUMMM Gatha* (1961) is made up entirely of those three sacred letters (A, U, M) rooting the body to the cosmos. The spiritual dimension of the “Gatha” series is given further nuance by the fact that Mac Low used rule-based procedures to mine language for the works from Buddhist scriptures.

Not all the drawings in the Drawing Center exhibition depend on this juxtaposition of the illustrative and the denotative. In each drawing of the “Skew Lines” series (1979), a minimal sequence of lines stretches across the horizon of the page. In three-dimensional geometry, skew lines are ones that do not intersect and are not parallel. These drawings eschew verbal material for the serene music of pure math. Later works in the show, dating from the late ’80s to the late ’90s, contain hardly any linguistic material at all. *Trope Market* (1989) is a dense abstraction in crayon on paper, a bulging mass of marks. A hint of letters lies below the mess, buried under multiple layers of wax.

Mac Low’s strategies in drawing, from chance operations to the intentional eradication of the artist’s ego to the spiritual dimension of his works, are similar to his poetic techniques. They are also present in the development of *Tree*Movie*, wherein Mac Low gives instructions for the film, both describing his own work and prescribing a method for future works by other artists. Essentially, the project is to select a tree (the asterisk indicates that instead of a tree, it could be anything else) and film it for several hours. *Tree*Movie* anticipates the epic banality of films like Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* (1963).

THE ANCIENT GREEKS had a term, *mousike*, from which we get the term “music.” Despite the etymological connection, however, *mousike* did not refer to what we now think of as music, but rather to all the forms of art that were “of the muses,” including lyric and epic poetry, instrumental music, dance, and theater. This is not, of course, to suggest that all Greek artists were nimble and adept interdisciplinary practitioners—they had separate muses, after all—but that a commonly understood divinity was distributed through the different mediums, binding them together as one polymorphous technology.

Generally speaking, Fluxus artists recognized that the demarcations between the forms of cultural expression (e.g., “visual art” vs. “poetry”) were conventional at best and arbitrary at worst. These artists looked to early twentieth-century avant-garde texts, such as the 1914 Futurist Manifesto, which proclaimed: “there is no reason why every activity

Mac Low maintains a tension between the abdication of ego and the ever-present hand of the artist.

must of necessity be confined to one or another of those ridiculous limitations that we call music, literature, painting, etc. EVERY ARTIST WILL BE ABLE TO INVENT A NEW FORM OF ART.¹

The strategies and ideas that emerged during Mac Low's brief association with Fluxus influenced the direction of his later career. His association of poetic form and spiritual praxis in the "Gatha" series distinctly recalls John Cage, one of the key artists for the Fluxus set, who characterized the "egolessness" of the maker in Buddhist terms. Cage's sense of how chance and accident determine the shape of a musical work or piece of writing through obfuscation of the individual creator was inherently spiritual.

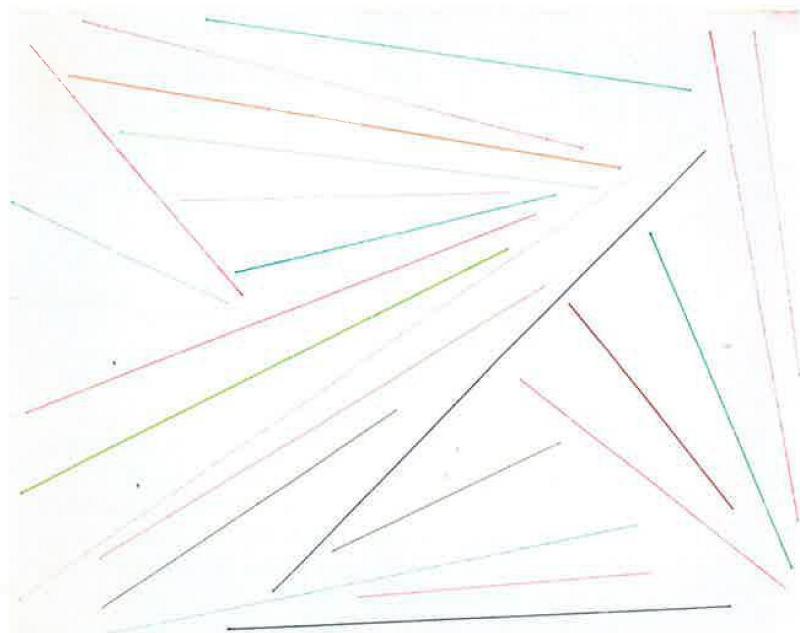
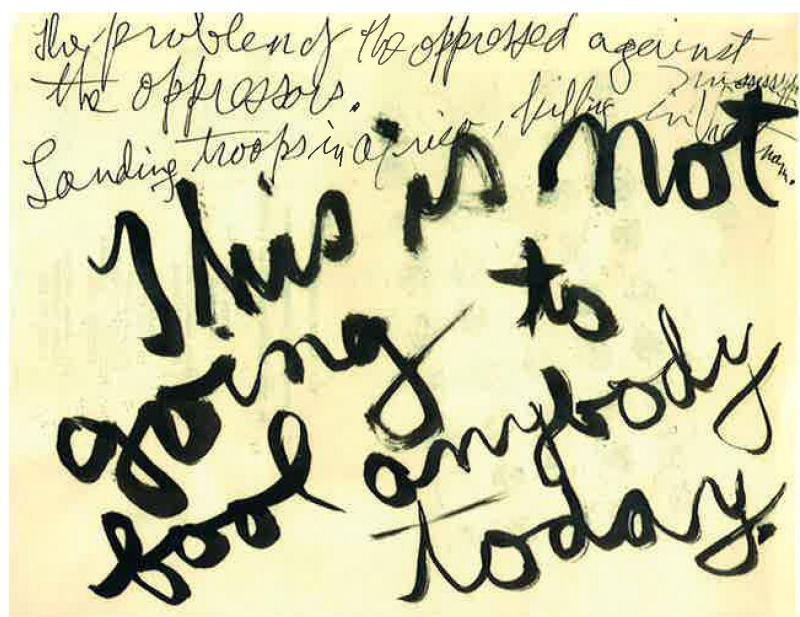
Today, the distinction between poetry and art seems to be compulsively reiterated through a limited number of tropes. "Art," whether it refers to huge abstract paintings, limited-edition video made for gallery and museum contexts, or performances that can't be properly bought or sold, tends to be subsumed under the rubric of a monetary economy, turning sublime works of human feeling into a regular commodity, like monohydrated corn.

"Poetry," on the other hand, is touched by the angel of poverty. Free from the onerous demands of buyers and sellers that inflect all aspects of the visual art world, poetry is considered the domain of permissive speech and thought unstained by the bloody vicissitudes of the marketplace. In this scheme, any kind of poetry is "pure," whether we are referring to an anecdotal lyric poem about identity, the body, or family, one made entirely of material appropriated from the internet, radical leftist analyses in verse, or words spoken in videos and performance pieces.

There is of course no doubt that this dichotomy is so prevalent because it partakes of something like the truth. But for Mac Low and artists who follow in his tradition, these distinctions are trivial. Drawn for no check, written for no explicit ideology, work like his is rare in today's art and poetry milieus. Whether or not you buy Littman's thesis that Mac Low's drawings are especially important as harbingers of the artist's future techniques in other disciplines, the works included in the exhibition are a strong testament to Mac Low's spirit of seriousness and play.

One reality that must be faced is that Mac Low pursued this intense interdisciplinary work at a time when cheap rents and easy living for little work were in their most fabled period. Perhaps the idea that such reductive dichotomies between disciplines are wholly based on economics is compelling because of increasing scarcity of time and pressure of debt. If we had all the time in the world, perhaps we would all be choreographing ballets, writing poems, and making museum-quality memes at once.

Littman said in a phone interview that Mac Low was "basically an anarchist." There's a glimpse of practical disobedience in Mac Low's drawings, in the radical terrain his work traversed:



the relation of language and meaning, self-expression and self-negation, chance and intention. These works aspire to the state of music—in the sense of *mousike*—and this aspiration is itself a kind of refusal to obey. ○

1. Bruno Corradini and Emilio Settimelli, "Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius—Futurist Manifesto 1914," trans. J. C. Higgin, in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio, New York, Viking Press, 1973, p. 146.