

“The Time to Play among the Borders of the Possible is a Gift:” An Interview with cris cheek

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cris cheek is a documentary performance writer, sound composer, and photographer. They worked alongside Bob Cobbing and Bill Griffiths with the Consortium of London Presses in the mid 1970's to run a thriving open access print shop for *little press* poets. In 1981 they co-founded a collective movement-based performance resource in the east end of London at Chisenhale Dance Space, working in collaboration with choreographers, musicians, and performance artists to make interdisciplinary events. cris taught Performance Writing at Dartington College of Arts (1995-2002), played music with Sianed Jones and Philip Jeck as *Slant*, collaborated on works about value and recycling with Kristen Lavers in *Things Not Worth Keeping* and has been a professor at Miami University in Ohio since 2005. cris lives in Cincinnati. Most recent publications are *the church and the school, the beer* (Critical Documents, 2007), *part:short life housing* (The Gig, 2009), *pickles & jams* (BlazeVOX Books, 2017), and *fukc all the king's men: the tower and a few beasts living in its rubble* (Xerolage, 2019). They podcast with Mark Hagood as Phantom Power: sounds about sound.

It would be, in every sense, a fool's errand to try and pin down what particularly interested me so thoroughly in cris cheek's work that I was compelled to reach out to them for an interview; not because it couldn't be done, but because any attempt to delineate singular points of interest would inevitably only serve to push away others just as present as I read their work. To say, for example, that I was drawn immediately to the way in cheek's *pickles & jams* that words, lines, even stanzas dance staggeringly across the page, often floating towards and juking away from stability, while certainly true, would ignore how equally pulled I felt toward the way cheek's refusal of alphabetic context in *fukc all the king's men: the tower and a few beasts living in its rubble* simultaneously implodes reading-as-such and constructs images so literal they refuse to not be read. Perhaps the most sensible argument I can make for the following interview is that cheek's work is, at every point, a performance; therefore, like all great performances, cheek's work inspired in me the festering curiosity that ignites every behind-the-scenes documentary. I needed to know the distance between the artist in the wings and art unfolding on stage. More importantly, I needed to know how, and by what crafty devices, the distance might be crossed so fluidly, so fully, and with such clarity of motion that I found myself unsure the distance actually existed.

(Where possible, I have provided endnotes with links to available versions of referenced works.)

Trevor Root: I'm curious about the expectations you set for both *pickles & jams* and *fukc all the king's men: the tower and a few beasts living in its rubble*. In the acknowledgements for each you lay out a terminology for the poems: "occasional poems" for *p&j* and "speculative poems" for *fatkm*. In doing so, you seem to both lay out and unsettle an authoritative process for reading ("there is a way to read these poems, but it's a process of reading tied to and only present in the poems themselves"). To what extent are you interested in using your work to challenge the understanding of reading (and perhaps understanding itself) as a universal process, and what affordances do you think such a challenge generates and works with?

cris cheek: I am also curious about both *occasional* and *speculative* when brought into whispering distances with the capacious discipline of poetry. The poet as intimate and intricate responder

to *occasion* is one useful way to get under the skin of the performances of the institution of poetry and the performances of a poet in what can be written among substantively differing cultural, topographical, lexical contexts. Sometimes a poet simply needs to stay attentive while they get down in the mud.

I worry immediately that i am conflating occasion and context, but i hope not. I tend to orbit terms, phrases and sequences that have trouble with boundary, that worry and fret too much so that at times they cannot sleep to become sore from discomfort. AN occasion might be an invitation to respond to a themed issue of an online and or in print zine, or an event to celebrate and or honor the memory of and or to marry or wave goodbye to, or the bringing of an attention to xy and or c , performing a measure of love and or a recognition of friendship and or a response to and or debt owed to conversations that gave rise to an act of language (some might use a word such as inspired). AN occasion might be more *public* and more *private*, more and or less although when less bye-bye intention more, dang to all these cloisters, gateways and scare marks. Although the time to play among the borders of the possible is a gift.

I talk sometimes about the performances of poetry as an institution at a presidential inauguration or some kind of entertainment for the broad court, for example. I think about all of the various forms of village, city, state, local – trans-local functions, including arguments against such ‘posts.’ AN occasion might be an attempt to make it rain, as in Johanne Haaber Ihle’s all too brief and giving no time to be anything less than excellent documentary focusing on aspects of poetic performance and the culture of circulating song-poetry on tape cassette in the Yemen, ‘Men of Words’ whose gendered title makes me giggle.^[i] But,



AN occasion might be to the inscription for a temporary monument, to adorn a park bench, a sign for impromptu protest, a t-shirt, a street poster, a greeting card. A poem might be an occasion to pay attention to mental health, personal and community maintenance, psychic well-being and all of the above. Given that a certain kind of helping the self helps everybody else to a certain extent. A context frames an occasion. These senses of occasion bring poetry a measure of function. Often not to do with conventional monetary systems (whether statist or local currency), although the accumulation and redistribution of something operating on the social body in the forms of cultural capital cannot be

ruled out. I don't know why i am so desperate or playfully curious about wanting to bring understanding of utility as well as necessary inutility of poetry back into conversations but i am.

I see and hear the influences of poetry in all our speech and script, everywhere. Poetry and rhetoric, the fanciful or satirical or hazing pun, the borderlands among poems and songs, the pacing of political speech. An occasional poem and an occasional poet then. If i trot back that has often been the case. A walk. A drift through a district. A performance of some kind. A piece of music – i was writing poems listening to music that challenged the limitations of alphabetic language in early books. A memorial to the passing by of a friend. Poems occasioned by conversations with place in attentively practiced spheres of flora and fauna. Poems born out of listening to rhythms and cadences among the curses of the vernacular. Pluri-vocal and plurilingual.

I might say there are as many ways to read the poems as readers, in the sense of their interpretative embodiment. Is that too extreme, if i bring place and time into play? If i tackle those two terms you mention then Trevor, the *occasional* and the *speculative*, in terms of unsettling the process for reading, the first suggests that each text object has a context that gave rise to it alongside its new sequential companionships and kinships, while the second involves speculation on everybody's part.

Making what i have come to call *speculative poems* began as a way of referring to sign-making / trace—and-even-trance-mapping that is not necessarily alphabetic on my part, but that i intuited and recognized in myself of necessity to get perspective on the typographic alphabetical i occupy and am occupied by in turn so much of the time. I mostly filtered, partly erased, applied trace effects, magnified, cropped, reworked, inked in what seemed to me an indicated shape for a possible poem or ghost of a poem lost. Something i have doing for decades and shared via social media but rarely published in print. A rarity due to having internalized my own letter of expected rejection, because the publication was not able to handle the images for one reason and another. Whatever it is that holds me back, as much as whatever it is that holds me back from sharing the work i make in sound.

I find i return to that relation to a speculative language object with great regularity and had begun to think of them as being *projective* and or *speculative*. The trendiness of that *s* word being vivid for me, having had numerous conversations about speculative fictions. It might seem opportune but it struck me that i could be usefully playful by making a link to conversations i saw occurring among proposals about poetry, and shape (shape including both sound and image both contained and projected by a text object) going on in the work in and around *pickles & jams* and by many other poets i love to read. I stuck a few pieces up on social media with that *Speculative Poem* tag and people had a very positive response. I did several dozen in a kind of amused frenzy and then stood back to catch my breath. You ask about affordances and both terms offer playful and generative openings, as i hope i've shown.

I find and hope to show generative spaces and places between myself and the contextual environment of the work. I am concerned about environment and how writing can be and often is a literal as well as figurative pollution. My fascination is in ink that does not behave according to bureaucratic orders. These poems have brought a fresher skin on making those kinds of shall i dare to say readerly/writerly shapes, rendered my interest keener. So that aspect of what i do have an energetic lease on life.

TR: One element of both works which seemed to particularly stand out was the role of movement, both within and eventually away from set forms. I'm thinking, for example, of the piece "meal-mouth manifesto" from *p&j* where the poem seems to hint at, but ultimately resist, being centered on the page through lines that stray just slightly to one side or the other.^[ii] Given your focus on performance

and visual work as well, to what extent do you consider and deploy the poem as a kinetic (or perhaps, more accurately, anti-static) space?

cc: A simple way to respond to your perception about movements informing both those books would be to point to my fairly lengthy engagements with movement-based performance arts, dance, and live art, weird processions, rituals. I'm partial to those kinds formal and informal intersections.

That meal-mouth is clearly missing a *y*, so that the 'mealy-mouthed,' as being afraid to speak in a straight-forward manner becomes an *ars poetica*. The *meal-mouth* already sets a lot of serious play into motion. Is it a mouth eating itself, for example? Just fun musing. I take pleasure in acts of language that seek to decenter our attentions to literal and figurative affect. The figure of the poem on the page remains of great interest to me. The placement of the text object within that paginated frame, and how its placement can both play into and play away from conventions about notational order.

I do want all manners of resistance and rebellion to play its active part. Yet i worry about the extent to which my ongoing experiences of sound composition and the text object as a prompt for embodied performance might hinder some readers of poetic texts from engaging with my writing. That by insisting on a dynamic between the stability and the instability of any given text anxiety gets in the way. Where and why and how a text begins, how one page faces onto and is in conversation with another, much along the lines of a folding diptych, one frame and its figure closing onto another when a book lies flat. I want to share a sense of both risk and play with readers both within and outside contemporary poetic discourse boundaries.

I might be characterized as wanting to have my cake and eat it, by design. Of overthinking everything and bringing that sense of reading the devil in the details too alive so that its anti-authoritarian drives become overwhelming. That an invocation of the kinetic, even if it is brought and bought at the expense of controlling a reader's interest is harassment right now. As i write this i find myself circling a question that has intrigued me for almost 40 years. Can the movements and agencies afforded by a poem moving immersed in and among what Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write of in trying to define affect as 'the world's obstinacies and rhythms' be instruments of perceptual change?^[iii] Can poetry set its readers free, even for a microsecond, within its giving frame?

TR: To focus for a moment on *p&j*, I'm interested in how you use the interjection of computer graphics and images to disrupt or perhaps disorder the poem. Pieces like "Liberty Plaza is no nearer," "the people's microphone," and "if anything should happen to you" seem to use the infiltration of graphics to decenter the formal authority of the 'poem' so to speak.^[iv] In your writing, how do you conceive of the relationship, or perhaps tension, between linguistic and graphic expression? In the same sense, what about a poem seems to necessitate, or perhaps just appeal to, the intervention of graphic or visual elements?

cc: The design of our hardware and software platforms for writing are *relatively* recent aren't they. They carry the history of other computational reading and writing frames for sure, well-known examples such as Denise Schmandt Besserat's theory of the origins of writing as tokens for inventory purposes,^[v] Ada Lovelace's contribution to bringing text and textile back together,^[vi] William Carlos Williams' description of a poem as 'a small (or large) machine made out of words,' Bob Brown's *The Readies*,^[vii] Vannevar Bush's post WW2 *memex*,^[viii] Mina Loy's *Alphabet* brilliantly rendered in recombinating 3-D by Margaret Konkol,^[ix] and the work of Doug Engelbart's team resulting in '*the mother of all demos*' showing the potential of the computer mouse interface &c.^[x] The key aspect for me in that text-image material can be moved about.

When i began to write all of the many many short poems from which the subset in *pickles & jams* are edited i had one big baggy folder called *Liberty Plaza is no nearer . consolation*, a folder in reference to the *occupy* movement. Nicole Starosielski and i were Altman Fellows for the Humanities Center at Miami in 2011-12, choosing as our theme ‘Networks and Environments.’ It was a turbulent year, as i mentioned in my brief introduction to the book. We were talking with a group of scholars from differing disciplines about networks and power, then network archaeology, about the ‘Arab Spring’ and ‘Occupy’ as events were unfolding. A very exciting and challenging series of conversations for me and extremely messy, especially as i was quite out of depth on the subject and needed to learn how to swim in an ungainly fashion pretty quickly. Tough to get a distance on. There were a couple of machinic intrusions into my attempts to *save* poems into folders and i was thereby encouraged to pay particular attention to them and incorporate them, partly in the spirit of acknowledging *process*, a trait i carry from way back, and partly because they offered meta-commentary about the influence of tools and machines – to borrow a phrase from an early and continuing auteur in my thinking about poetry and limit cases Bob Cobbing. I celebrate and seek to amplify tensions among forms of linguistic and graphic expression to the extent that the linguistic can be understood as graphic and vice versa and find company among work by many contemporary poets i admire

TR: In reading *fatkm*, one technique which seemed to ground the experience was the use of a sort of imagistic parallelism, in which pages that face each other mimic, if not the shapes present in each other, at least the rough textures, shadings, and curvatures of the other. This seems to break down in two places: the separation of the first and last tower image, and the seemingly photo-negative images split on each side of pages 11 and 12.^[xi] As you generated *fatkm*, how did you conceive of the role connection and disruption would play in grounding or perhaps unsettling the experience of reading?

cc: That moment of breakdown in the mid-point of the book was an intriguing pill to swallow Trevor. I’m glad that you felt it so keenly too. It was necessitated by mIEKEL AND’s publishing format. No more than 24 pages he told me. I had generated about 650 variations. I had to pick a place for that to occur. Whilst the beginning and end of a loop through which time has passed and things have changed was easier to think through – I wanted that tower to be falling down, like London bridge in the nursery rhyme – choosing another spot presented me with many other pages that i lament having left out of this iteration of the sequence. Suggesting other possible versions of this series and yes there could at some point be another publisher to be keen on these, even though there are many other speculative poems i am working on. SO i chose it to be a place where rupture occurs across the double page spread. The book works at facing page by facing page rhymes mostly, and i chose the rupture to occur midway through the sequence with a facing double page, whereas the start and end of the whole loop begins on a recto and end with a verso.

TR: In *fatkm*, I was particularly struck by the seemingly unrestricted, but at the same time guided, possibility of the work to point towards various allusions without necessitating any hegemonic readings or definitions. For example, in my reading, the sense that the work ends in the corrupted reconstruction of where it began (the tower reestablished, almost puzzled back together through the fragments generated by its collapse) as well as the mention in your acknowledgements of the “humpty dumpty figure” on page 2 seemed to gesture towards but not necessarily require a comparison with the fragmentary recurrence and nursery rhyme play of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*. Thinking back to your claim that *fatkm* is a work of “speculative poetry,” I’m interested to hear how you conceptualize and work with the ability of “speculative poems” to suggest, or perhaps dance around, images, objects, and allusions while resisting the binding effects of clarity and singular readings or, to borrow a line from “meal-mouth manifesto,” to “promote[s] englishes, not English.”

cc: I'll happily accept the structure of rhymes built for learning a language Trevor, as part of and party to this speculative play. Nonsense is not an absence of sense, nor the opposite of 'sense' i'll warrant. That straight modeling buys into a destructive binary about languages, that one ought to say what one means and mean what one says. Which strikes me as giving up way too much power to those who police the goalposts in a game of two halves comprising *transparency* and *opacity*. I'll take Duke Ellington's *Transblucency*, which i first heard on a recording issued by RCA in the UK under the title *At His Very Best*, following *Creole Love Call*, on that side of the pressing after the *Black, Brown and Suite*, an album that made a profound impact on me on its release in 1972, not least for the debt i owed as a clarinet player at that time to the playing of Jimmy Hamilton and the sublime tone of Johnny Hodges in that band. [xii]



But i digress of course. That sense of *fatkm. ttaafbwliir* as an exploded bracket between initial proposition and corrupted fall or collapse as you also quite rightly put it. That, in the colonial imposition and its mutations and morphologies of capital English, with its received pronunciation, riven against as well as by class snobbery and the monstrous mouth of empire replete with stiff upper lip – o, the moustaches, and subject of writing for capitalism by exhibiting servitude to the master rules in the master's game played in the master's house maintained by the subjects of labor precarity – due recognition be glittered on torquing that language to speak subversive truths to power by fracking its authority. That kind of exploded moment, as if one could walk among the shadows around Cornelia

Parker's installation of her exploded garden shed *Cold Dark Matter*, which i was lucky enough to do for its first iteration at Chisenhale Studios in London's East End.^[xiii] The scale and microscopic duration as a loop that is *Finnegan's Wake* as you bring it. Thanks for making that link.

That engagement with reading.



[i] <https://vimeo.com/7183783>

[ii]

mealy-mouth manifesto . he is not gone ("i live again")

i am glad if

a heart and mind blood and guts poetry
promotes englishes, not English.

I abjure authority and recognize the paradox
of speaking out against its taint and tincture

from the stage i seek
a blood and guts poetry
that questions and resists and undermines authority.

I include authority proposed by or radically emanating from itself

i seek

autonomous poetry not reliant
on nor promoting exclusionary access
through forms and formulations
of authority as erudition

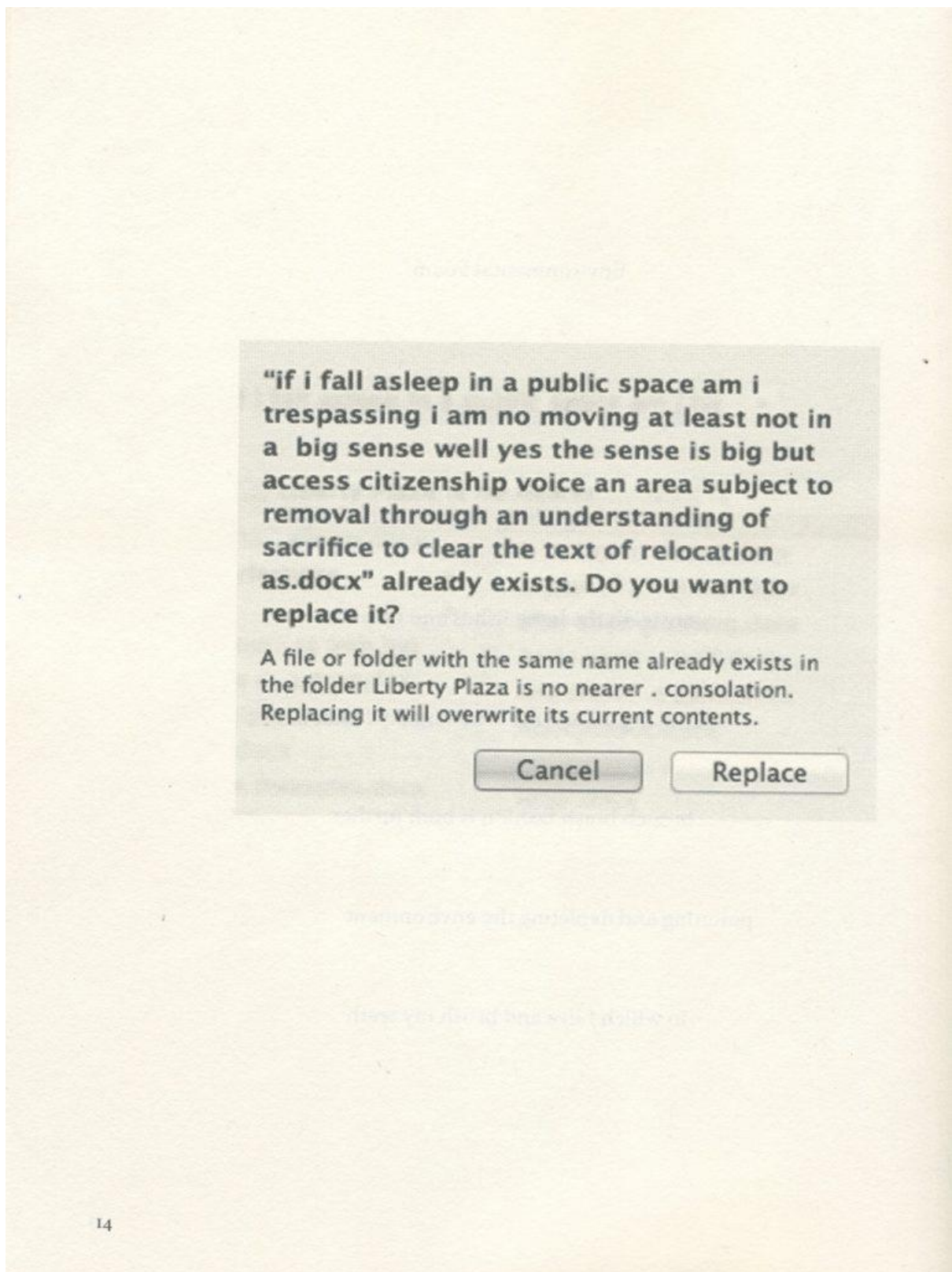
i seek not a plain language but

a poetry advocating on behalf of resistance to external authority
at every twist and turn resting
honky moving the goalposts of authority by obscuring its codes
for personal accumulation of cultural capital

i am glad if

there is still a folk politesse
which makes me a very parodic english
kin still under the idiotic burden of a crown
that uses government to form exclusive association

i so imply action



[v] <https://sites.utexas.edu/dsb/tokens/the-evolution-of-writing/>

[vi] <https://massivesci.com/articles/ada-lovelace-first-programmer-science-heroes/>

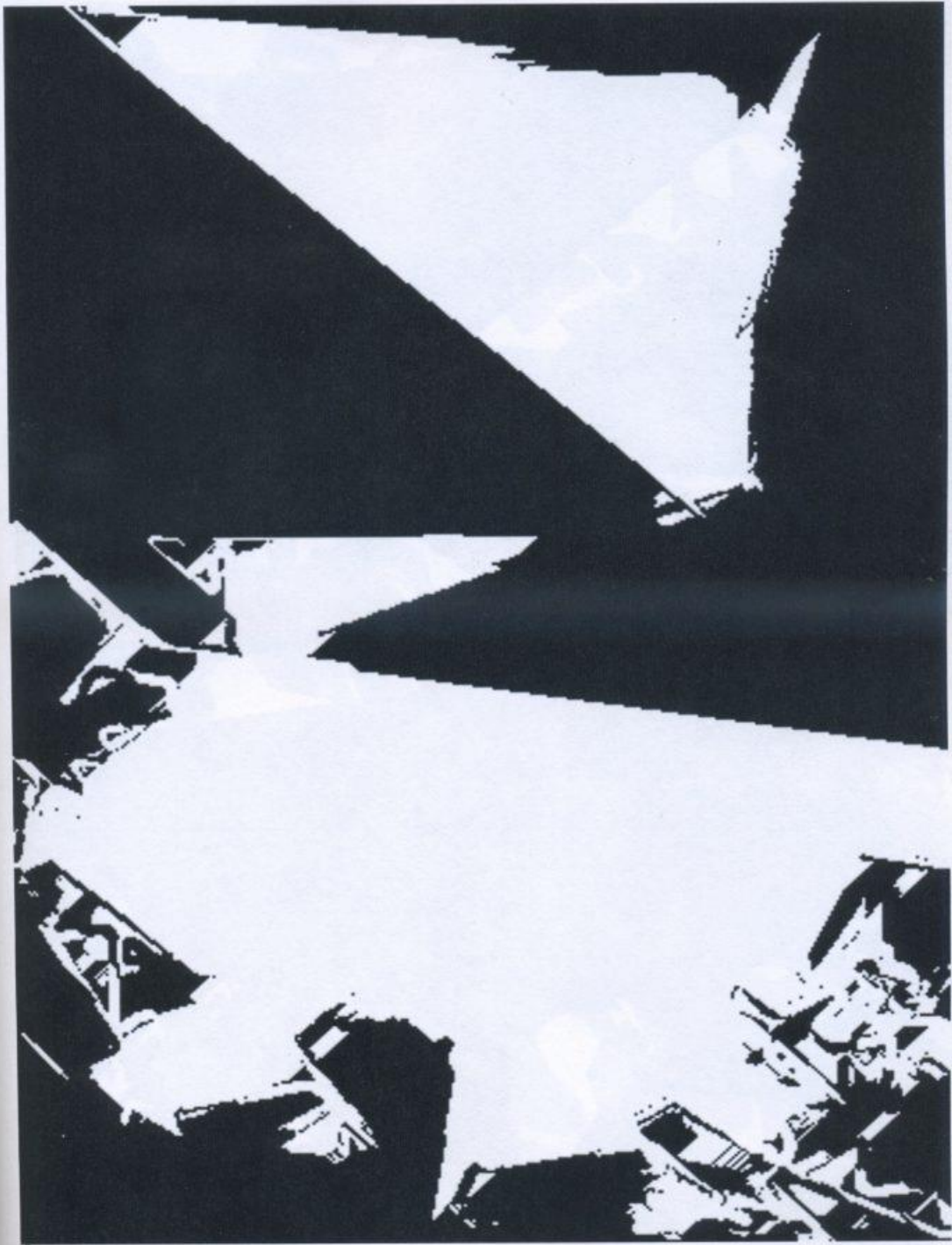
[vii] <http://rovingeyepress.com/readies>

[viii] <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/>

[ix] https://www.academia.edu/37365955/Prototyping_Mina_Loys_alphabet

[x] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJDv-zdhzMY>

[xi]



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11



12

XEROLAGE 70

[xii] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4QjoyBb5Sw>

[xiii] <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/parker-cold-dark-matter-an-exploded-view-t06949/story-cold-dark-matter>

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