

## MAMMALS AND MACHINES: MICHAEL MCCLURE'S EMBODYING POETICS\*

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Michael McClure was only twenty-three when he read his poetry at The Six Gallery in San Francisco and, along with Allen Ginsberg and others, helped initiate the San Francisco Beat movement. Since that time he has authored over forty volumes of poetry, fiction, essays and plays, and continues to experiment with the performance of poetry, most recently in his collaborative work with keyboardist Ray Manzarek (previously of the rock band The Doors). McClure's poetry has been consistently experimental, with an aim towards communicating thought and emotion in as visceral and physical a manner as language will allow. Born on the twentieth of October, 1932—"the same day as Rimbaud" (McClure, *Ghost Tantras* 109)—in Marysville, Kansas, McClure grew up in Seattle, where he developed an interest in wildlife and the environment. As a child he dreamed of becoming a naturalist. He moved to San Francisco in 1954, enrolled in Robert Duncan's poetry workshop at San Francisco State College, and published his first book of poems, *Passage*, in 1956. Like the poetry of Gary Snyder, McClure's poetry manifests a deep concern with nature, but McClure's main interests lie less in a descriptive poetry of natural scenery than in developing ways to awaken the mammalian consciousness he believes is dormant in all human beings.

A primary and oft-stated motive of McClure's art is the discovery and communication of the materiality of consciousness. Given the different media McClure employs in pursuit of this goal, I feel it is worth asking whether or not the way this motive manifests itself in McClure's poetry is dependent upon the specific medium in which his poetry appears. At times, McClure seems to level the distinction between the poem on the page and its oral delivery. For instance,

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according to his “Author’s Note” to *Rebel Lions* (1991), McClure’s impulse to center his poems “allowed the poems to have a body language on the page, and with the voice when they are spoken aloud” (McClure, *Huge Dreams* 168). In this note he attributes to the centering technique an analogous effect in both print and oral performance. Elsewhere, however, he posits a poetics that is aware of the alternate means by which a poem is projected into the world in relation to a theory of expression that hopes to convey the materiality of thought and emotion by replicating the sensory field of our bodies in other (unfleshly, but still material) media. This concern for materialization in McClure’s poetics makes his work especially interesting for a critical exploration of the means by which the mammalian body (McClure’s term for the initial material form of our senses) comes to be replaced by alternate machines and technologies during the process of creative expression. My main effort in this essay will be to flesh out McClure’s own critical conception of an embodying poetics, and to consider some of the formal, expressive tactics in print and oral performance he has used in his attempt to accomplish such embodiment. I find it interesting that McClure’s articulated poetics is one that attempts to transcend the boundaries between print and oral performance by exploiting the material attributes of each mode of communication, and by rendering each medium its own adequate case for what he would call “mammalian pleasure.” Writing of the performed word, Charles Bernstein has argued that “[i]n sounding language we ground ourselves as sentient, material beings, obtruding into the world with the same obdurate thingness as rocks or soil or flesh” (Bernstein 21). It is precisely this motive to ground language and consciousness in the affective, gestural and performative body (whether the body of text, or of “flesh”) that characterizes McClure’s videos of his live performances (most recently with former Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek), his poetry books and his sound recordings.<sup>1</sup> McClure proceeds with a faith in his ability to achieve the materialized word that Bernstein identifies with oral performance in all of these media.

Running with the poetic license provided by Olson’s re-conception of the poetic line in terms of breath, McClure develops an approach to poetic production that conceives of the poetic media (written text, recitation) as an enactment of the poet’s own physical

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<sup>1</sup> Among the more widely available videos of McClure’s readings are *Love Lion* (1991) and *The Third Mind* (1997).

presence.<sup>2</sup> To recall a moment from Olson's essay, "PROJECTIVE VERSE" that would have had particular resonance for McClure:

[B]reath [says Olson] is man's special qualification as animal. 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, but the life in him, for all that) then he, if he chooses to speak from these roots, works in that area where nature has given him size, projective size. (Olson 25)

Projection might be another term used to describe McClure's embodying motives, the goal being to *project* the self ("his physiology," "the life in him") in poetic productions that ultimately function as a surrogate body for that of the poet who produced them. McClure exploits the specific attributes of different media of poetic expression (print, oral performance) in order to fulfill his vision of a poetics that is not so much based upon literary tradition (what Wordsworth, in the 1802 "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, called "a family language which writers in meter seem to lay claim to by prescription" [251 n36] as upon a material enactment of a mammalian tradition of thoughts, feelings and desires emanating from the body (there is no direct Wordsworthian equivalent for this, but we can refer to Wordsworth's stated desire that by his poems, he might keep his reader "in the company of flesh and blood" [250]). If this rather unlikely pair, Olson and Wordsworth, provided McClure with a vocabulary by which to formulate ideas about the possibility of an immediate even unmediated expression of the physical self in language (what I am calling his "embodying poetics"), the work of William Blake—one of the most significant sources of McClure's poetics—helped McClure take into account the specificity of the various media through which the poet's body might be extended.

### **Mammalian Philosophy/Blakean Aesthetics**

Blake's early poetic and graphic productions, and especially the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789/1794) and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1792), were important models for McClure, representing an artist's attempt to capture the oral and environmental aspects of poetic expression (whether they were songs, conversa-

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<sup>2</sup> McClure describes the importance of Olson for his own conception of poetry in this way: "Olson's recognition that the mind is a construct of the heart, of the nervous system, and his interest in the energy charge that we derive from the subject, whether in mind or in the world, was a help. Also his recognition that the syllable is a unit of measurement rather than the foot or the word." ("Writing the Body" 15)

tions, or orally transmitted Proverbs) in a textual and graphic medium. In these early works of Blake one finds a repeated concern with what it means to collect songs and lore from an oral tradition and transform them into print. Arguably, Blake's own use of words that signify differently in oral and print manifestations (through the double meanings they possess when spoken), and the dialectic he develops between images and the message of the words that appear in their midst were, for McClure, significant models of presenting body across different media of expression.

In describing the success of Blake's own creative strategies as regards the communication of his mammalian presence, McClure is unequivocal in his praise of Blake, his description of the effect of Blake's work suggesting a strangely literal understanding of the idea of an artist's expressive corpus. As McClure puts it:

Blake is as present today as if he were biologically alive. His works are extensions of himself [...] Blake's works, like the artifacts of all high artists, are his body. Gestures come so directly from his physical being that their presence is real and physical. (McClure, "Wolf Net," 325)

Elsewhere, McClure explains that the value of this function of the literary work as an extension of the poet's self lies, first, in the broadening of the poet's own sensorium and, second, in the broadening of "the sensoriums of other individuals who read it." "In other words," McClure explains in a rather Blakean manner, "the function of poetry, as I see it, is to create a myriad mindedness" (McClure, "Writing One's Body", 6). While he is speaking of the text versions of his poems here, he speaks elsewhere of the oral performance of poetry as having an analogous transforming effect, describing the oral performance of poetry as "a man standing up repeating for an audience the organic extensions of himself, which have subtle and beautiful interplays within themselves" (McClure, "The Beat Journey," 138). What McClure has in mind when he speaks of broadening the "sensorium" can best be explained in terms of what he calls "the biological self" or "our mammalian nature", an idea that he was developing in the years just preceding his composition of *The Ghost Tantras*.

As Rod Phillips has explained, McClure's *Meat Science Essays* of 1963—published just a year before *The Ghost Tantras*—mark a turning point in McClure's environmental politics, and ultimately in his materialist poetics. This collection of critical essays ranges in content from a manifesto aimed at freeing "the word FUCK from its chains and strictures" (McClure, *Meat*, 7) and an essay on "Revolt" with analogies to worms, to a critical attempt to re-embodiment Artaud's

voice,<sup>3</sup> and a series of “Drug Notes” that chronicle the transformational properties of Mushrooms, Peyote, Cocaine, etc., with the ultimate aim of “revolt against habitual ways of feeling and action” for the sake of “more direct gestures” (43). *Meat Science Essays* also marks a shift away from McClure’s initial vision of man’s universal interconnectedness with the natural world and “kinship with all creatures,” to a more narrow conception of his role as “mammal”, entailing a greater acknowledgment of the difficulties in bridging the differences between humans and non-mammalian creatures.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps most significantly, these essays spell out a political and aesthetic distinction between the cultural and the biological self which goes a long way to explain precisely how poetry, for McClure, can be understood as an alternative manifestation of the poet’s material body. In an interview from the 1980s, looking back on these terms for the self, McClure explains the social and political significance of his conception of artistic creation. He says:

[T]he more you discover your biological self, the more value you can be to yourself, and the more value you can be to those around you. People fear such acts because they believe that their biological self is a monster. That is certainly not the case. I mean, we’re social primates, and we have distinct social patterns. The more we find those deeper patterns and the less we are robotized by the cultural patterns, the better we’ll be (McClure, “Writing One’s Body”, 11). This idea that through a heightened awareness of the body an individual may extend him or herself into affects and experiences that one’s cultural, robotized self inhibits us from knowing, is exemplified by the compositional strategies that McClure has employed in his writing and performance of poetry.

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<sup>3</sup> The essay, “Artaud: Peace Chief” from *Meat Science Essays*, and the context in which Artaud’s “anti-body” poetics was (paradoxically) been embraced by “body” poets such as Burroughs and McClure, has been discussed recently by Douglas Kahn (322-358).

<sup>4</sup> As Phillips puts it: “*The Meat Science Essays* mark for McClure a turning point, as he begins to move from the vision of universal interconnectedness (i.e. the ‘uncarved block’ of Tao) first posited in the St. Geryon poems, to a refined and somewhat more narrow view of his role as ‘mammal.’ While he in no way abandons his earlier monistic view of nature (and would, in fact, occasionally return to it throughout his career), as McClure notes in his essay ‘Reflections After a Poem,’ the complex differences between humans and creatures vastly different from ourselves prevent humans from fully knowing or understanding them. After first pointing out ‘our kinship with all creatures,’ he reserves his true feelings of empathy for species more closely related to humans.” (109-110).

## Textual and Oral Strategies of Extension

The most obvious formal characteristic that belies his desire to convey body in text is McClure's ubiquitous tendency to center his poems, to alternate line-length, and to apply shifts from capitalization to small case lettering for effect. McClure repeatedly explains this visual presentation of his poetry as a means of giving "body language to the poem itself" (18). He describes his discovery of his mode of lineation, and especially of the centering effect as an intuitive response against the "justified"—one might say robotized or mechanized—and in McClure's words inherently "uncreaturely" format for most poetry books whose "rigid endless right at left margins [...] fill up pages mercilessly" ("The Beat Journey" 134). His manner of centering poems, on the contrary, allows the poem to resemble a biological organism. And often his account of this tactic makes claims that go beyond mere resemblance:

A poem can be an overall organism, the direct extension of our biological selves in the sense that Jackson Pollack or Franz Kline imagined Abstract expressionism to be [...] an extension of the arm's energy leaving a trail of paint. I picture poems being the same kind of extension. ("The Beat Journey" 132)

Of course, the problem with this last analogy is that a painting (as opposed to a mechanical print of the painting) is more literally an imprint of the artist's body than a poem that has been typeset and printed (no matter how the words have been arranged on the page). A handwritten poem may be truer to the idea of the analogy, but McClure is actually suggesting tactics of extending body into the world without a need for imprinted artifacts, but rather by literary modes that convey the body despite reproduction, and even across very different materials of expression.

McClure's description of his tactics of oral performance are equally literal in their conception of the materializing potential of language. While he has never experimented in an extended manner with oral composition (by speaking into a tape recorder), at the core of his development of his poetic "beast language" (most extensively performed in the *Ghost Tantras*) is a conception of language as a medium of gestural sound, as much as a medium of semantic communication. In a very practical sense, oral performance is understood by McClure to be useful for maintaining the ambiguities of meaning, and ultimately for transforming language into physical sound in ways that are sometimes not possible with printed text (McClure, "The Beat Journey", 131). The repetition of words breaks down one kind of meaning into another that is of a more purely

affective or physical kind. If you repeat the same word again and again, McClure says, “the meaning does crumble. As a matter of fact, the meaning disappears. Then the meaning becomes ritual... Then the meaning becomes a metric. Then the meaning becomes a sound pattern; it no longer has justifiable significance. Then it returns to significance” (“Writing One’s Body” 19). McClure has described this effect both in terms of his practice of recording the sounds of actual animals (most notoriously, at the San Francisco Zoo), and in terms of the development of a listening practice that focuses on the sound as opposed to the meaning of quotidian human speech.

Regarding the former, the zoo recordings, McClure again describes the sounds of the animals in terms of physical gestures, (“I am surrounded by the physicality of [the leopardess’s] speech. It is a real thing in the air [...] Her face and features disappear and become one entity with her speech” [“Wolf Net” 336]), and, interestingly, in terms of the space that vocal sound can occupy. Speech here functions as a physical means of establishing spatial territory that includes, not only the sounds of animals, but the sounds of the city, of the general environment. McClure identifies “location” as a kind of auditory version of perspective, one that gives sound a physical dimension. Sounds come to have a spatial and reciprocal life of their own, animate objects and inanimate ones all negotiating their positions in relation to each other. Listening back to a recording he had made at the San Francisco Zoo, McClure describes the spatiality that informs and defines what he hears: “Three-quarters of the way into the tape is the clear piercing crow of a bantam rooster making his reply to the *wise-en-scene* about him—to the calls of the ladies, to the sparrows, to the sounds of traffic, to the growling leopardess, to the morning sun, to the needs of his own being to vocally establish his territory” (McClure, “Wolf Net”, 337). Similarly, a striking aspect of the *Ghost Tantra* recordings is that we can actually hear the physical environment in which the poems are performed and recorded, the environment of a San Francisco apartment, with traffic sounds entering the room from the window in the spaces between McClure’s beast recitations. Heard in the context of McClure’s critical statements about recording and oral performance, these environmental sounds highlight the sense of a voice in a locale, and provide his sounded words, grrrs and growls with an aspect of physical extension. We hear a voice speaking, a body emitting sounds, but never in a vacuum.

The idea that sound conveys (perhaps even represents) exten-

sion into space and a particularity of locale can probably be applied to all literary sound-recordings insofar as the voice of the recitation is enveloped by a particular acoustic environment that is audible to the careful listener. This is arguably so even with certain experimental recordings delivered from rather abstract, technologically fabricated locales such as Allen Ginsberg's recording of "A Mad Gleam" (which sounds as though it is spoken from a poorly received radio signal) and especially certain recorded monologues of William Burroughs like "Last Words of Hassan-I-Sabbah" (which, acoustically, suggests speech from inside some sinister machine, which may be the now robotized version of Hassan's previous self). A sense of space and locale are certainly conveyed in many documentary Beat recordings, that of Jack Kerouac performing his "American Haikus" in New York (1958) or, most obviously, the recording of Ginsberg reading "America" at Town Hall Theatre in Berkeley in 1956, where the voice is heard to speak from an historically identifiable space or scene. In this last recording, Ginsberg is more than occasionally on the verge of slurred laughter in response to his own words, and there are chortles and guffaws throughout in response to the many funny lines, and especially those which defy standard American values through their stated identification with Marxism, or advocacy of mind altering substances. This vocal repartee suggests a concern for spatial territory as the poet and his audience negotiate the relative positions that they may occupy in this particular literary scene.

No moment of this recording of the Ginsberg reading is more substantial in this regard, and none of the responses to Ginsberg's poem more raucous, than when he delivers the lines: "It occurs to me that / am America! I am talking to myself again." The tone of self-satisfaction (even self-involvement) and amusement that infuses Ginsberg's delivery of this line, followed by an intense wave of laughter and applause from the audience that drowns out Ginsberg's voice for fifteen seconds before he can deliver the next line of the poem enacts a *mélée* of vocal subjectivities, an absorption of the individual poet by the space that surrounds him at the instant he seems to be identifying himself as his own sole interlocutor. This moment is especially poignant for its inversion of the regular motives associated with the trope of apostrophe. Here the object of address that serves as the apostrophic refrain of the poem—"America"—is no longer the resurrection of something or someone absent, but a playful recognition of the malleability of all poetic objects of apostrophe, forwarding the credible idea that our constructed presences and interlocutors are always, in fact, merely aspects of ourselves.



The trope of apostrophe as it is heard in sound recordings, as opposed to read on the page, is particularly interesting in relation to McClure's focus on the materializing potential of language across media, again because of the implicit sense of locale that seems to accompany vocalization. Charles Bernstein has identified location to be the auditory version of visual perspective, and argues that this sense of location is "a constitutive element of the medium of the poetry reading" (Bernstein 11). It is as though the trope of apostrophe is automatically literalized, and the object of address materialized in a sound-recording of a performance, and especially of a recording made before an audience.<sup>5</sup> The recordings (and printed versions) of David Antin's talk poems exemplify this point, for in these poems, when he is addressing someone, he is quite literally addressing someone present in the hall with him. For example the opening lines of his transcribed talk poem, "a private occasion in a public place":

i consider myself a poet but im not reading poetry as you see  
 i bring no books with me though ive written books i  
 have a funny relationship to the idea of reading if you cant hear  
 i would appreciate it if youd come closer because this is not a  
 situation where i intend to amplify (231)

The talk poems of Antin are all situations of verbal interaction, and perhaps most explicitly so in their audio format, when one can hear the feedback of the microphone, the coughs and snuffles from the audience, the physical situation from which he is talking. When the talk is transcribed and put in its new context on the page, the public situation in which it was uttered is no longer there in such a literal sense, but the idea of the audience, and the gestures of address are still present, and so Antin's poems (if we allow the generic identification for his genre-blurring mode) remains deeply dialogical, and relatively concrete in their sense of locale and direction. Like McClure, Antin employs certain techniques of typography in his transcriptions (for example, he avoids traditional punctuation and left justified margins) in order to imitate the immediacy of the original, improvised performance (see Perelman 203). Subsequently, even in a written transcript of one of Antin's talks, when Antin employs the second person one has the sense that he is quite literally addressing someone at the moment of utterance, speaking to his audience, as in the

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<sup>5</sup> For an extended discussion of the trope of apostrophe in relation to Antin's poetry, please see my essay: "'The Talk' as Genre: David Antin, Apostrophe and the Institution of Poetry." *Recherches Semiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* 22 (1-2) (December 2002).

quote above, where he directs them to change their physical positions so that he can be better heard. As Marjorie Perloff has noted, it is mainly when the idea of audience is lost that abstraction in discourse ensues. Commenting upon “the level of abstraction to which the dream of a common language descends” in the age of media (again, with reference to Wordsworth’s “Preface”), she accurately states that “poets are precisely those who, faced with the abstraction and emptying out of [...] media speak [...],” strive to reaffirm the primacy of feeling in language. (Perloff 40-41). The persistent presence of the performative situation in Antin’s written texts is one tactic that tends to keep his work from gravitating toward this kind of abstraction.

The printed versions of McClure’s *Tantras*, on the other hand, are not as easily grounded in a specific locale of discursive performance and exchange. The material grounding of this work is not so obviously a dialogical one, but seems to emerge from different sources, shifting between a kind of neutral objectification (that is, thingification) of language (but not an abstraction in the sense that Perloff uses the term) and a loading of language with interactive, gestural significance. In his essay, “The Problem of Speech Genres”, Mikhail Bakhtin suggests a formula for the changing aspects of words that might be useful to recall at this point. Here Bakhtin argues that words exist for in different aspects, depending upon their relative location or status between speaker and listener:

[A]ny word exists for a speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an *other’s* word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other’s utterance; and, finally, as *my* word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression. (Bakhtin 88)

McClure is suggesting that seemingly neutral sets of words (neutral because on their surface they are non-semantic, they are nobody’s words) are in fact loaded with the gestural information of the body, imbued with mammalian expression. In his instructions for how to read the *Ghost Tantras*, McClure is not prescriptive, but rather he presents his poems as a template into which the reader may pour his own accent and affect: “Pronounce sounds as they are spelled and don’t worry about details—let individual pronunciations and vibrations occur and don’t look for secret meanings. Read them aloud and there will be more pleasure” (McClure, *Ghost*, inside back cover). The poems function, in this regard, as a mode of praxis, like yoga, or scream therapy, with the purpose of turning words that seem either *neutral* (for their meaninglessness) or *other* (for their strangeness)

into an individual's encounter with his mammalian core. In the *Ghost Tantras* McClure is attempting to write a poetry that oscillates between a psychological meaning that we identify with listening and a physiological meaning that might be identified with hearing. In the shifts that occur between a recognizable English and a more purely sonorous beast language, we come to hear meaningful words for their sound, and we attempt to listen to beast for significant meaning.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to serving as a mode of expressive performance, McClure has described "beast language" as an auditory approach to human interaction, as a mode of listening which may provide a cue for how to tap into the meaning of his poems as they are conveyed in his recordings. McClure presents an example of this mode of "beast hearing" in the following description of a couple having an argument:

An invisible watcher is in a room with a man and a woman who are arguing ... If the invisible observer closes his ears to the *meanings* of the words and listens only to the vocalization as *sounds*, a thought occurs to him:

He is listening to two mammals. It might be two snow leopards, two bison, two wolves. It is a *mammal* conversation. The man and woman are growling, hissing, whimpering, cooing, pleading, cajoling, and threatening. The specific rite and bio-melodic pattering of meat conversation rises and falls in volume [...] The game that the man and woman are enacting, and the ritual, is as old as their plasm. ("Wolf Net" 333-334)

At the heart of this method of listening is something analogous to Bernstein's proposal that we approach the oral performance of poetry "as its own medium" (Bernstein 17). If we do so, Bernstein suggests, then we become aware of the "iconicity" of language, that is, "the ability of language to *present*; rather than represent, its meaning" (17). Keeping this term in mind, then, we can think of McClure's motive toward the animalization of language in relation to Bernstein's conception of a new aural prosody, a mode of "close listening" that actually entails the negation of listening in a psychological and semantic sense, and replaces it with a material, affective (in McClure's language, mammalian) mode of hearing. That is, a mode of encountering a language for its isochrony (its "unwritten tempo whose beat

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<sup>6</sup> This shift between modes of hearing and listening are identified by Bernstein with the poetry reading, and what he calls "the poetic mode of listening." As he puts it: "In the poetic mode of listening, there is an oscillation (or temporal overlap) between the materially present sound (hearing: the non-speech mode) and the absent meaning (listening: the speech mode): this is a satisfaction of all reading aloud, as when we read stories to children" (Bernstein 18).

is audible in the performance as distinct from the text” [14]), its iconicity, its ani-melody, for the “matter of language” which McClure would go on to say, is an embodiment of our inherent mammalian knowledge, a rendering of that being in a new, material form.

### Ghost Tantra #51

On the back cover of the first edition of *Ghost Tantras*, McClure asks the reader to look at Tantra 51 as an example of how to read the poems in his book:

Look at stanza 51. It begins in English and turns into beast language —star becomes stahr. Body becomes boody. Nose becomes noze. Everybody knows how to pronounce NOH or VOOR-NAH or GAHR00000 ME. (*back and inside back cover*)

The turning of English words into beast words, described as a kind of organic development (or a celebrated regression), gets to the root of McClure’s desire to transcend a mimetic poetry for a primal, mammalian one, for “a poetry of pure beauty and energy that does not mimic but joins and exhorts reality” (*Ghost, back cover*). The gleeful confidence with which he states that “everybody knows” how to pronounce his beast words belies a faith both in his mammalian philosophy, and in what Bernstein would call a poetics of presentation as opposed to representation. Tantra #51 is particularly characteristic, not only of McClure’s attempt to implement (typographically) some of the poetic ideas I have just sketched out, but also of his thematization of the issue of trans-substantiation and extension across media by tactics of synaesthesia. This poem was first published in 1964, and then recorded by Michael Kohler on August 30th, 1978, at McClure’s home in San Francisco. The Cassette Recordings of this performance were released by S-Press, in 1979. I cite the poem in its entirety as it appeared in the first edition of *Ghost Tantras*:

51

I LOVE TO THINK OF THE RED PURPLE ROSE  
IN THE DARKNESS COOLED BY THE NIGHT.

We are served by machines making satins  
of sounds.

Each blot of sound is a bud or a stahr.

Body eats bouquets of the ear’s vista.

Gahhhrrr boody eers noze eyes deem though.

NOH. NAH-OHH.

hrooor. VOOR-NAH! GAHR00000 ME.

Nah drooooooh seerch. NAH THEE!

The machines are too dull when we  
are lion-poems that move & breathe.  
WHAN WE GROOOOOOOOOOOOOOR  
harm dree mykethoth sharooo sreee thah noh deeeeeemed ez.  
Whan eeethoooze hrohh.

In the opening line of this poem we move from “thinking” of the rose, to visualizing it, the “red-purple” giving it a kind of visual shading or depth, which is further deepened as the enjambment here brings us into locale, and temperature, creating a three-dimensional environment, enwrapping the image, giving it a sense of touch, a sense of the cold. The enjambment separating the next two lines (lines three and four) has an equally concretizing effect, as the “machines” (tape machines feeding tape/textiles of sound?) which are simply “making satins” up until the enjambment, are suddenly “making satins/into sounds”, turning something material into something auditory and perhaps giving us (the readers of the poem) a sense of how sounds can carry a material, satiny residue. The next line (line five) marks the moment at which the imagery of materialization, which is functioning on the level of metaphor up to this point, is enacted by the language of the poem itself, as it shifts from English into (a still semantically comprehensible) beast language: “Each blot of sound” (a phrase that suggests sound as individual ink blots, and perhaps even utterances of voice as equivalent to the prints of our fingers) “is a bud” (something about to open out, to have extension) “or a stahr”. This last word, “stahr,” appears as if the potential extension suggested by the image of the bud has now been realized on the page. The metaphor of the bud becomes the manifestation of aural extension in the form of an sonorously expanded, yet still semantically recognizable English word (although the spell-checkers on our computers will not allow it). Further, as McClure notes in his suggestions for how to read these poems, the appearance of “stahr” represents a *becoming*. A word we are more familiar with is becoming something else, something beastly, that the reader should come to recognize as a meaningful, non-mimetic, expressive sound.

The line that follows this first intrusion of sound into sense—(“Body eats bouquets of the ear’s vista.”)—seems to comment upon what is happening in the poem, and to the reader as he becomes immersed in a process of materialization enacted by the words he reads. This line suggests an association of the physicality of eating with the act of hearing, the diamond shape of the bouquet of flowers penetrating the body through the ear (which is doubling as a mouth, according to the sense of the line) stems-first, and at the same time, serving as an icon of the vista, the actual spatial territory of the ear’s

sensory field. From here we move again from a metaphor depicting the physical presence of sound to the beast growls that enact what the metaphor describes, the beast language materializing language until we reach lines eleven and twelve:

The machines are too dull when we  
are lion-poems that move & breathe.

Before the poem reverts again to being creaturely, with movement and breath in its final lines, the couplet cited above seem to suggest a distinction between the mechanical media of sound reproduction, and the mammalian extension of material experience across (or even, without) media. The flat tapes that are themselves material embodiments of sound (audio tape has its own extension, its own materiality) are inferior to the aesthetic embodiment that occurs when we tap into our bio-selves, when the poems themselves (whether in written or oral form) become creatures with movement and breath.

It is in this way that McClure employs (and even thematizes in his poetry) the media available to him to convey a poetics that ultimately hopes to transcend these duller machines for an expression of the mammalian body itself. McClure's is a poetics that purports to move beyond material vehicles, and (thinking back to his description of Blake) beyond time itself, by accessing the primal, gestural significance of language. Emerging out of a scene that defined itself in performance—the Six Gallery reading, where Ginsberg first read “Howl”, and where McClure read as well—his poetry on the page is written with a motive to convey physical presence and the accentual and affective sounds inherent in the spoken word. What is ultimately absent in his poetics is a sociological awareness of the particularities of reception, an acknowledgement that one person's mammalian plasm (so to speak) may not be the same as another's due to cultural or even personal circumstances. McClure would ultimately deny such a possibility of difference.

This absence is probably most evident in the maleness of the sexuality expressed in his poems, such as his poem commemorating Marilyn Monroe's passing (Ghost Tantra #39) which, although well-wishing (“Farewell perfect mammal./ Fare thee well from thy silken couch. ...” [*Ghost*, 46]), works itself into an ecstasy of *ahhs* and *ohs* that (especially in the recorded version) may seem indecorous given that the effusion of the poem is delivered upon a woman's dead body. While one need not read the effusive beast sections of the poem in this way—they may be heard as a voicing of Monroe's own sensuality, still alive despite her factual death—the legitimate possibility of the less generous reading suggests that as McClure

moves to surpass the various media of communication he employs, he is also disregarding certain problems of cultural and social mediation. While no one (myself included) wants to be thought of as prudish, questions of social decorum often provide some of the most interesting avenues of inquiry when it comes to accounting for the sounds of vocalization. Thus, in McClure's embodying poetics, and to a large extent in Bernstein's conception of "close listening" and of the poetry reading as a unique medium, the motive to highlight the "matter of language" may sometimes come at the expense of what matters most in language, that is, the social nuances that are conveyed in language at a distinct moment. This said, there is much to learn from a poet who has worked so persistently with an ear to the heart that the sounds of the body in language seem to resound in him (and from him) as a second nature.

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