Talking Criticism with David Antin, or Criticism at the Boundaries

Alex Kitnick

> What have we been doing? What are we addressing ourselves to, in what way, who do we hope to *talk* to, and in view of what urgencies?
>
> —David Antin, letter to Leo Steinberg regarding "The Goals of Criticism"

In the 1960s, David Antin's work moved along two parallel tracks. Deeply involved with the New American Poetry, he wrote poems "with prefabricated and readymade materials, recycling texts and fragments of texts, enclosing valuable and used up talk and thought and feeling, hoping to save what was worth saving, liberate it and throw the rest away."[1] Between 1965 and 1968, he also edited, alongside poet and translator Jerome Rothenberg, four issues of the poetry journal *some/thing*, which featured work by writers such as Jackson Mac Low and Margaret Randall, its covers graced with work by artists Amy Mendelson, Robert Morris, Andy Warhol, and George Maciunas. These covers point to Antin's other activity at the time—the writing of art criticism. Antin was one of the first critics to seriously consider Morris and Warhol, and he wrote about other important contemporary artists, including Alex Katz and Jean Tinguely, for publications such as *Art News* and *Art and Literature*. In the November 1966 issue of *Artforum* he reviewed the exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction*, organized by Lucy Lippard. On occasion he authored wide-ranging essays on other topics, for example, the influence of corporate money on contemporary art. An early biographical sketch describes his activities this way: "Poet, linguist, critic David Antin is an enthusiastic spectator of new painting and sculpture which he relates to modern ideas in science, philosophy and literature."[2]

In summer 1965, Antin wrote the column Art Chronicle in *Kulchur* magazine, reviewing the critical reception of Marcel Duchamp; in the winter issue of 1965–66 he examined recent art criticism by Thomas Hess, Max Kozloff, Harold Rosenberg, and Irving Sandler, chiding them for what he considered their noxious mix of humanism and sentimentalism. "I began by attacking the bases of art criticism for *Kulchur* magazine," Antin put it in a capsule biography of 1970, "then wrote several art articles

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to show it should/could be done in a reasonably intelligent manner."[3] The criticism Antin went on to write was extremely good—more than "reasonably intelligent," and certainly much more philosophical than what was typically found in art magazines. While it was not of a radically different character than other criticism written at the time, Antin's work did break with certain conventions.[4] There was a tradition of New York poets writing criticism about New York artists—John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler are the three best-known examples—but Antin's texts, lengthy and arch in tone, are far less belletristic than those of his predecessors.[5] And yet Antin's move was still to come. In the early 1970s his work underwent a fundamental shift, changing the way he made both his poetry and his criticism. The boundary between the two began to blur; Antin called this new form *talking*.

Dispensing with desk and typewriter, Antin's talking took shape live, without anything written down. Presenting at art schools, museums, and poetry projects, Antin would arrive with some ideas in his head, possibly even with some notes in his hand, and he usually had a title to serve as a guidepost. He delivered his work extemporaneously; it was not read or delivered but thought and improvised. Often the performances would go on for an hour, sometimes longer. The talking was recorded and subsequently transcribed and edited. The result was not quite poetry or criticism—or, as literary scholar Sherman Paul put it, "The talk poems become his art and his criticism."[6] Over the years, Antin published four books of work made according to this method—beginning with *Talking* in 1972—which all consider the differences between listening and reading, and writing and speaking, and in which Antin imagines different scales of community. The list of subjects Antin discusses in these high-wire acts includes personal relationships, gossip, real estate, architecture, philosophy, and photography, but he ruminates again and again on art and criticism. As publisher Lita Hornick imparts, these "works are always classified as poetry, because the Library of Congress has no classification for talking."[7] That said, many poets didn't consider Antin's work poetry. It is a truly free verse: There is no meter or rhyme, and its improvisatory nature chafes against tradition. Antin's project purposefully poses a problem of categorization and genre, but here I want to think about what it might mean to consider Antin's talking as a lost episode in the history of criticism. Call it talking criticism, improvisational criticism, wandering criticism, or criticism at the boundaries.

orality / audience / community

> Radio and gramophone and tape recorder gave us back the poet's voice as an important dimension of the poetic experience. . . . But TV, with its deep-participation mode, caused young poets suddenly to present their poems in cafés, in public parks, anywhere. After TV, they suddenly felt the need for personal contact with their public.
>
> —Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*

I would like to begin with two questions: Why did Antin's work take the form of talking in the early 1970s? And how did his talking alter the conventions of criticism regarding position and voice? Certainly, Antin belonged to a larger groundswell in poetic thinking. "For poets of the 1950s and 1960s, a new oral impulse served as a corrective to the rhetorically controlled, print-based poetry of high modernism," scholar Michael Davidson writes.[8] Influences outside poetics exerted their energies too. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan claimed that a new orality was taking shape in culture at large. If Gutenberg's press, invented in the fifteenth century, had pushed Western culture into a linear, literate, and visual order, McLuhan believed that new technologies were launching it into acoustic space: "In the electronic age which succeeds the typographic and mechanical era of the past five hundred years, we encounter new shapes and structures of human interdependence and of expression which are 'oral' in form even when the components of the situation may be nonverbal," McLuhan notes in his 1962 treatise *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*.[9] McLuhan's ideas animated Antin's circle, with some members dedicating themselves to a field they called *ethnopoetics*, connecting prehistorical, archaic, and "primitive" oral traditions with the newest iterations of poetry. "The rediscovery of formulaic oral traditions by Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and Eric Havelock," Davidson writes, "provided a link between avant-garde literary practices and earlier tribal cultures."[10] The new work looked backward and forward at the same time. The publication in 1968 of Rothenberg's anthology *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia and Oceania*, edited with Antin's help, describes a "'post-literate' situation, in McLuhan's good phrase, or where-we-are-today."[11]

If Antin's talking exists in a constellation with spoken poetry, stand-up comedy, and avant-garde performance, it intersects with tendencies in criticism too. Although a number of contemporary critics adopted a talky, vernacular style in their writing—consider Jill Johnston's coverage of 1960s dance-happenings in the *Village Voice*, defined by antic first-person narration—Antin made talkiness literal.[12] He made his criticism live and in person; he delivered it without a net, bringing it face to face with a social world that provided criticism with its very conditions of possibility. Antin's move toward talking speaks to a changing conception of the audience at this moment, with criticism being the form of writing most closely associated with the public sphere. By the mid-1960s, the public sphere was in crisis: individuals were overwhelmed by new technologies that threatened to turn the public into a mass and by an increasing pluralism of concerns, particularly the equality demanded by the civil rights and women's movements, which made it clear that the public's coherence had been made possible only by many exclusions.[13] Performing live was one way to guarantee an audience for criticism, making it palpable and concrete while at the same time diminishing its universalizing pretensions. The public, in other words, was no longer an abstract entity, nor was the critic. Antin stood there as himself.[14] The audio recordings of his talks, though rarely distributed, contain crucial information in this regard.[15] We hear Antin's voice, avuncular and laced with a singsongy New York accent as well as

laughter. "There is a good deal of borscht-belt humor in Antin's work," Davidson writes. "He relies extensively on timing—the incremental building of a metaphor, the deferral of the punch line—and combines it with the subtle creation of himself as a schlemiel in the world of slick impresarios."[16] Antin did this in part by opening up criticism to intimacy and renouncing critical distance. Conventionally, critics are supposed to stand outside and peer in, but Antin generated his work within crowds. "All I needed to know was who I was going to be talking to," Antin told editor Barry Alpert in 1973. "Because, for my purposes, what I wanted in talking was this sense of address."[17]

transcription

The fact that Antin transcribed, edited, and published his talking suggests that he didn't see live performance as the end point of his work. While the live audience served as an engine, Antin's talking found another meaning when it was codified and typeset, and entered into a separate context.[18] It was almost as if he were trying to extend the intimacy of the oral community into the matrix of print. (Had he published his work as recordings, as opposed to texts, he might have made some kind of claim to authenticity.) The site of publication mattered, too, especially in the case of Antin's first talk piece, "talking at pomona," which, staged at Pomona College, near Los Angeles, "in early 1971—around April, I think," was not published in a poetry journal or little magazine—though this would be the most common home for his work—but in *Artforum*, the art world's magazine of record and a proper space of criticism.[19]

The story is that after delivering his talk to art students at the small liberal arts college, Antin and his wife, the artist Eleanor Antin, drove back to their house in Solana Beach near San Diego and listened to the recording on the way. They put it on the car stereo—it begins, "testing testing testing testing"—and Eleanor said, "that's a poem."[20] She recognized the recording not as a talk delivered by a critic and curator but as a form of poetry, and Antin, a poet who was always making "an effort to get away from the sealed-in package that poetry is often treated as," decided to use this understanding as a way to expand poetry beyond its established conventions.[21]

Eleanor's insight, of course, didn't come out of the blue. A table had already been set in which such an idea could surface. Ethnopoetics privileged oral traditions, and certain strands of contemporary art turned toward voice too. In 1964, Morris lip-synched a lecture by art historian Erwin Panofsky in his performance *21.3*; later, in 1968, Warhol published *a: a novel*, cobbled together from twenty-four hours of methamphetamine-addled discussions that actor and Warhol-studio regular Ondine [Robert Olivo] recorded at Warhol's Factory with a motley crew of interlocutors.[22] Talking was also gathering around the borders of the work of art. The artist talk and artist interview assumed a new relevance at this moment, with the conceptual-art tabloid *Avalanche*, published between 1970 and 1976, featuring an artist-cum-celebrity on each of its covers and a long interview inside.[23] It is clear that Antin saw himself as part of this tendency, and it is significant that, despite Eleanor classifying his talk as poetry and Antin

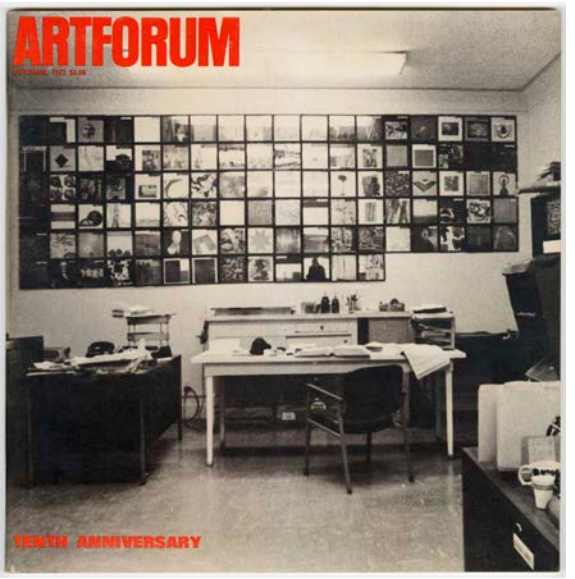
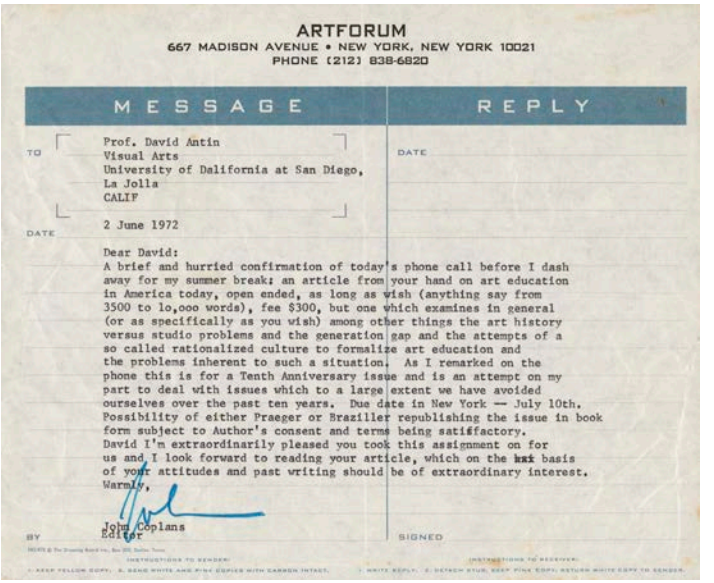


FIG. 1. — Cover of *Artforum* 11, no. 1 (September 1972).

designating his work as "talk poems," "talking at pomona" first appeared in *Artforum*'s tenth anniversary issue in 1972 alongside essays by curator Lawrence Alloway ("Network: The Art World Described as a System"), critic Kozloff ("The Trouble with Art-as-Idea"), and scholar Rosalind Krauss ("A View of Modernism"), all of which offer "a synoptic overview of the art ambiance during the past decade."[24] Antin was expanding the parameters of not only poetry but also criticism (fig. 1).

Significantly Antin's title doesn't mention what he was talking about—there is a trace of John Cage's "Lecture on Nothing" from 1959 in the refusal to establish a topic. That Antin was talking—and where—were the important elements. Within the art world, Pomona College was known at the time for its commitment to advanced conceptual practices.[25] According to a telegram dated 2 June 1972, Antin, who at the time was a professor of visual arts at the University of California, San Diego, had been commissioned by *Artforum* editor John Coplans to write an article "on art education in America today, open ended, as long as [you] wish (anything say from 3500 to 10,000 words), fee $300, but one which examines in general (or as specifically as you wish) among other things the art history versus studio problems and the generation gap and the attempts of a so called rationalized culture to formalize art education and the problems inherent to such a situation"[26] (fig. 2). Coplans invited a more or less traditional essay about art education and its role in a changing society. While Antin's contribution must have surprised Coplans—not only in that it took art education as its context rather than subject but also in its unusual form and singular voice—the work was not merely iconoclastic.[27] Antin's piece may have differed in substantive ways from those of his colleagues in terms of tone and style, but it shared a preoccupation with questions of voice and critical distance. All of these figures belonged to a larger tendency



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MESSAGE | REPLY

TO
Prof. David Antin
Visual Arts
University of California at San Diego,
La Jolla
CALIF

DATE
2 June 1972

DATE

Dear David:
A brief and hurried confirmation of today's phone call before I dash away for my summer break: an article from your hand on art education in America today, open ended, as long as wish (anything say from 3500 to 10,000 words), fee $300, but one which examines in general (or as specifically as you wish) among other things the art history versus studio problems and the generation gap and the attempts of a so called rationalized culture to formalize art education and the problems inherent to such a situation. As I remarked on the phone this is for a Tenth Anniversary issue and is an attempt on my part to deal with issues which to a large extent we have avoided ourselves over the past ten years. Due date in New York — July 10th. Possibility of either Praeger or Braziller republishing the issue in book form subject to Author's consent and terms being satisfactory.
David I'm extraordinarily pleased you took this assignment on for us and I look forward to reading your article, which on the basis of your attitudes and past writing should be of extraordinary interest.
Warmly,

John Coplans
Editor

BY

DATE

SIGNED

FIG. 2. — Telegram sent by John Coplans to David Antin, 2 June 1972. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2008.M.56. © The John Coplans Trust.

in criticism that challenged the autonomy of art by privileging sociological terms. The emergence of a unique voice, in distinction to the opticality of the eye and its claims to objective truth, spoke to the break with modernism then under way in art and criticism. Indeed, this was the crux of Krauss's argument in "A View of Modernism," which ends with the lines: "It matters who one sounds like when what one is writing about is art. One's own perspective, like one's own age, is the only orientation one will ever have."[28] Foregrounding voice opened up the possibility of contingency, if not relativism, in criticism. While his talking was ultimately monologic in form, Antin did broach the possibility of interruption, dialogue, and conversation.[29] He also nodded at openness by occasionally getting things wrong. At the end of the text "talking at pomona" in *Artforum,* Antin provides footnotes (he calls them *afterthoughts*) in order to correct the slips he made in the live talk, but he refused to intervene in the body of the text, insisting on the primacy of live thought.

Antin's talking changed "the appearance of the Gutenberg printed page."[30] His text has no punctuation marks or "traffic signals."[31] In order to reestablish criticism's connection to voice, Antin had to delete the graphemes of typical written language. That is to say, he bucked five hundred years of printed history and parted ways with both standard poetry and prose. "If written language is singled out as the culprit, what will be sought is not so much the reduction as the metamorphosis of language into something looser, more intuitive, less organized and inflected, nonlinear (in McLuhan's terminology) and—noticeably—more verbose," Susan Sontag wrote around this time.[32] So instead of sentences and paragraphs, clusters of words slide across the page, breaking in accordance with Antin's breath. Margins are unjustified, an innovation allowed in part by the move from cold-type methods of printing toward electric

typewriters.[33] All the text is lowercase, Cagean and antihierarchical, and this lowering is very much to the point: Antin's work maps out a nonstandard, horizontal space, and he claims that it is there—in the scrum of sociability—that art's meaning gets made.[34]

The artworks reproduced in the *Artforum* article are mentioned only in passing. Antin didn't incorporate pictures in other talk pieces, and I would assume they appeared in the article at the editor's behest. The new art was built on elaborate conceptual structures rather than visual appearances, so it was better to describe them, to talk them out; pictures would not necessarily divulge their meanings. The import of artist Douglas Huebler's *Duration Piece #15* (1969), for example, which Antin lauds because it "operates a system" in "real space,"[35] rested on an elaborate pricing structure based on the capture of a wanted criminal; the artwork's collector would pay the captor's reward. One best grasps the stakes of Huebler's project through mapping out its components rather than viewing the piecemeal documents that constitute its nominal form (fig. 3; see the image in the online edition). Huebler is the hero of Antin's text, not least due to the way questions of capture—and morality—operate in his work. (What Antin calls the "violence" of Huebler's work is what distinguishes Huebler from the other conceptual artists Antin discusses, such as Dennis Oppenheim, who harvested and sold wheat.) Five years earlier, Warhol had painted a mural for the New York World's Fair of 1964 depicting mug shots of thirteen most-wanted men, and while the murals offered Huebler a precedent, Huebler's work is distinct in the way that it engages a social system as not simply a picture or representation but a demand made on the world. The result, Antin claims, doesn't simply modify art history but "raises the question about the meaning of art."[36] The artwork, no longer self-contained and autonomous but despotic and diffuse, required a new type of similarly open-ended criticism. Antin understood that art's shift toward information altered established roles and ways of working, and his work responded by reconsidering criticism's form. As the artwork moved into real space, it ensnared the critic. The two entered a new kind of relationship, and a novel mode of engagement took shape.

painting relators

One of the key terms that Antin coins in "talking at pomona" is *painting relators*. These are the folks who lend painting meaning:

> there are a set of people who are painting relators
>
> and these painting relators relate your painting to
>
> other paintings which is how you know these
>
> are paintings now in order to make a painting
>
> of the sort that is related to other paintings
>
> by painting relators you have to find painting

relators thats very important painting relators

are essential to artists sometimes these

painting relators are other artists and sometimes

theyre people who do nothing else but

relate paintings they have sometimes been

thought of as critics sometimes theyre hustlers

called dealers and sometimes theyre people

who are just sort of wandering around

with nothing else to do but relate paintings[37]

Different kinds of people fit under the mantle "painting relators." Artists, critics, and gallerists all relate paintings; they all work toward a similar end (relating paintings), and thus have a similar effect (the relation of paintings). Antin does not mention curators, who were perhaps only beginning to accrue the clout and profile they now enjoy. Antin, of course, is a painting relator as well.[38] By coining the term, Antin gathered species under a genus and located a lingua franca that they all share: talking. And it is the talking—this relationality, sociability, network vernacular, or "live discourse"—that, however conditional it may be, gives art its meaning.[39] But to make art truly meaningful, Antin contends, one must not simply link painting to painting but open art up to life, which is what Huebler sought to accomplish in his work. Such a claim offered a direct challenge to Clement Greenberg's modernist doxa, which prized medium specificity and opticality above all else. Art's meaning, for Antin, was made less of materials than it was the surrounding social world.[40]

A photograph from 1973 by Fred Lonidier offers an example of Antin's relating in action (fig. 4). Outfitted in a black turtleneck and sports coat, Antin stands talking on the phone in his office in front of Roy Lichtenstein's screenprint *Sweet Dreams, Baby!* from 1966. The male comic-book character's head collapses in the work's bottom right-hand corner while a clenched fist swings upward toward the top. Meanwhile, Antin's left arm, outstretched, gives the impression that the print is in motion while the tail of the speech balloon containing the titular caption is pointed at Antin's mouth, hinging together representation and the real. Antin is not only connected to the print but extends it, wiring and relating it to the world through the technology of the phone.

Antin's relating also took more immediate forms. A photograph from Antin's talk "Figures of Thought or Figures of Thinking" at San Francisco's 80 Langton Street in 1978 conveys the intimacy of Antin's talking, as he stands close to his audience, a term whose etymology, with its roots in auditory processes, seems particularly important here (figs. 5a, 5b). Much in the manner of the happenings of the 1960s, the hard line between

FIG. 4. — Fred Lonidier (American, b. 1942). Photograph of David Antin, 1973. Courtesy the artist.

FIGS. 5A, 5B. — Postcard, front and back, of David Antin delivering the talk "Figures of Thought or Figures of Thinking," 80 Langton Street, San Francisco, California, 13 May 1978.

spectators and performer breaks down, with the two sides of the equation joining together in a group. People sit on the floor and smoke amid scattered beer cans; posters and fliers are pinned to the wall. One might say the audience is on view, or that Antin, who is seen from behind in the photograph, belongs to the audience, and the bodies around him catalyze his performance. Here is a private-public sphere—what used to be called an alternative space—and everything and everyone in attendance helps give it shape.[41] It is interesting to compare the emphasis on liveness with the stillness of the cover of the tenth anniversary issue of *Artforum*, which features a photograph of the magazine's barren office, chairs empty and desks piled with books and phones (see fig. 1). Each image offers its own model of textual production, and while both are technologized—tape recording is crucial to Antin's work—the latter lacks the embodiment of Antin's pedagogical performances. Critic Lytle Shaw has used the term *narrowcast* (as opposed to *broadcast*) to describe a tendency in New American Poetry that emphasized "intimate, corporeal space," or "microspace," so as to position itself against the universalizing "anywhere" tendencies of mainstream media.[42] Antin may have created a kind of narrowcast criticism.

critic

Others were arriving at similar conclusions about the possibilities for criticism during this time. In 1966, artist Les Levine made a video called *Critic*, which recorded thirteen members of New York's critical establishment speaking about their work for two minutes apiece (fig. 6). "My point was that criticism and art are different things," Levine said in an interview. "Reading criticism is a completely different experience from dealing with art."[43] One can, however, also draw the opposite conclusion from Levine's work: by making the talking of critics the content of his art, Levine suggested that art comprises language. The critics share a range of ideas in the video, but Kozloff makes a particularly important point about what one might call, after Rosenberg, the de-definition of roles in the art world, which also speaks to Antin's notion of painting relators. "I'm very much impressed by a curious situation that one sees more and more in the art world these days, the art world in New York," Kozloff says.

> You might summarize it by saying that it's a shifting of roles in which traditional categories of activity or professional behavior of people whose identity seemed secure enough in the past no longer really obtains. . . . In a sense I suppose this does belong to what's coming to be called the McLuhan age, in which the fantastic media mix of what were previously separate arts goes on at an ever-increasing and uncanny rate of speed, an acceleration puzzling to view.[44]

Impressed is a funny word for Kozloff to use, for he seems concerned by the so-called McLuhan age, which is characterized by not only a return to acoustics and orality but also a post-medium situation that parallels the breakdown of strictly defined roles. Needless to say, this new art-world formation challenged the possibility of critical distance, and Antin consciously acknowledged this by working within the maelstrom. In a vignette included in his second book, *talking at the boundaries* (fig. 7), Antin tells a story about a conversation he had with Kozloff and the fact that Kozloff saw Antin's position as part of the problem:

> on my way down madison avenue i ran into max
>
> kozloff who i hadn't seen for over a year and since it was
>
> about one oclock we went into one of those steak-n-brew
>
> places to sit and talk over lunch max who is one
>
> of the most serious art critics i know was concerned
>
> about the way my new work was going he was afraid
>
> that by putting my critical concerns in an art context and
>
> "becoming an artist" i was going to lose any chance i had

FIG. 6. — Les Levine (Irish, b. 1935). Photographs shot from the video version of *Critic*, 1966. Courtesy the artist.

to have a serious effect on peoples minds he was

more familiar with my art critical writing than with my poetry

and hed recently published one of the talk-pieces in *art*

forum so he may have had a better chance to collect feed-

back but what bothered him most was that the usual

effect of estheticizing a discourse was to neutralize it

and i agreed that this was a danger[45]

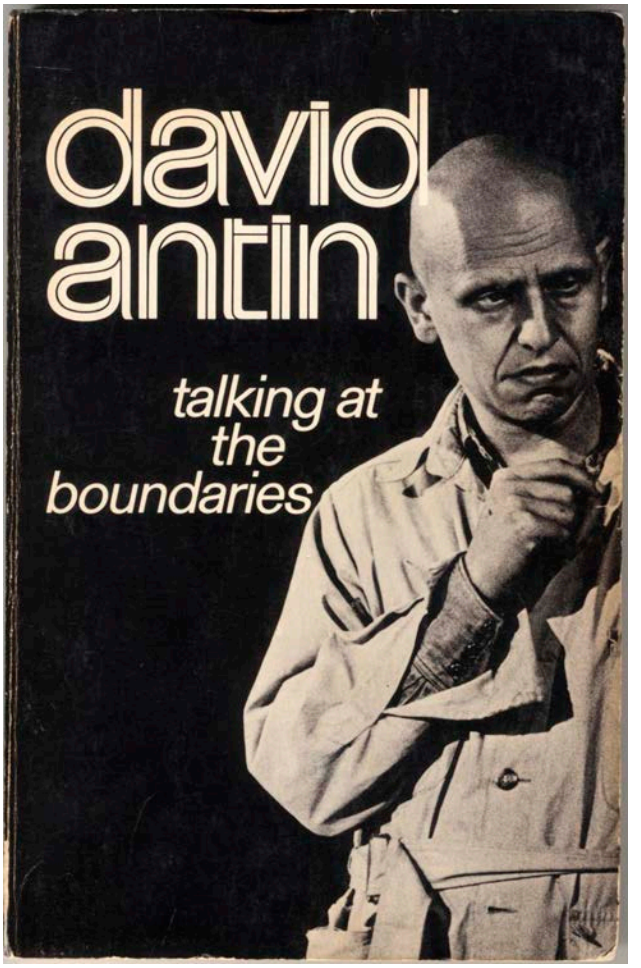

FIG. 7. — Cover of David Antin, *talking at the boundaries* (New York: New Directions, 1976).

Antin is a real-life example of shifting roles in the art world, and by "becoming an artist," Antin—for Kozloff at least—necessarily forfeited critical distance.[46] For Kozloff, when critics stepped outside their roles, or blurred them, criticism lost its bite. Critical points, made in the wrong way, risked losing "serious effect."

Despite his differences with Kozloff, Antin found common cause with other critics. In fact, Antin's text "talking at pomona" shares much with Alloway's essay in the anniversary issue of *Artforum*. In "Network: The Art World Described as a System," Alloway makes claims virtually identical to what Kozloff described some six years before about the shifting of roles and what Antin chronicles about painting relators, but Alloway values them differently:

> Art historians prepare catalogues raisonnés of living artists, so that organization of data is more or less level with their occurrence. Critics serve as guest curators and curators write art criticism. The retrospectives of de Kooning and Newman at the Museum of Modern Art were both arranged by the editor of *Art News*, Thomas

B. Hess. (A crossover in the opposite direction was made by John Coplans, former curator of Pasadena Art Museum and now editor of the magazine.) William Rubin, a curator at the same museum wrote a monograph on Frank Stella; he is also a collector and lent a Newman to the retrospective. In ten years I have been a curator, a teacher and an art critic, usually two at a time. The roles within the system, therefore, do not restrict mobility; the participants can move functionally within a cooperative system. Collectors back galleries and influence museums by acting as trustees or by making donations; or a collector may act as a shop window for a gallery by accepting a package collection from one dealer or one adviser. All of us are looped together in a new and unsettling connectivity.[47]

In other words, everyone is now a painting relator, and while Alloway finds this unsettling, true to his pop art roots, he believes that one must work within the situation, which he rather generously describes as a "cooperative system." Although Alloway and Antin agree on this point—Antin also sees the art world as a network, though he favored terms such as *arena, art world,* and *live discourse*—the difference between their views is important, and it falls largely along formal lines. To put it bluntly, Antin invents a critical form, talking, which both delineates and extends the shape of the art world, whereas Alloway leaves historical models of criticism in place. Talking, for Antin, is the default medium of art's network. Chatting, dealing, gossiping, and rumoring are some the most common ways of disseminating information, and, given the fact that information was now art's primary material, talking had a new claim on criticism too.

talking place

The thing about talking is that it can happen anywhere; it only requires one or more individuals to do it. On the one hand, talking's mobility and openness enable discourses to expand beyond institutional structures; on the other, the mercurial nature of talking can lead disciplines to lose their shape (which is Kozloff's fear). Either way, Antin realized that as the audience for criticism changed from the public to something like community, criticism had to change in step with it. As his anecdote on painting relators suggests, critics, artists, and hustlers/dealers not only get closer in this new formation but also become more alike. The epigraph in *Talking* captures a real curiosity about what might come next: "If someone came up started talking / a poem at you how would you know it / was a poem?"[48] This is a genuine question—how and when does something become legible to a discipline? Talking out of bounds might lead to a loss of recognition, and yet, language binds people and fields together. Language ties art to a world, Antin implies—and this was a particularly significant claim to make at a moment when art's visual coherency was giving way to a pluralism of media, styles, and ideas. Talking would be the new glue holding the field of art together, not only because it opened up the possibility of dialogue and conversation but because it privileged presence over the page.[49] While Antin extended the avant-garde project of tying art ever more closely to life—"it is possible to construct make our art out of something more meaningful than

the arbitrary rules of knot making out of the character of human experience in our world," he says at the end of "talking at pomona"—he spoke and published in almost exclusively institutional spaces, while adamantly addressing his work to colleagues and friends. For Antin, the institution was intimate. "Nobody knows who the public is or what it wants or needs. Or whether it should be considered singular or plural," Antin notes in a late essay.[50] When Antin attended to the institutional identities of the contexts in which he worked, he carved out a kind of embodied space that refused both the inward turn of privacy and the abstraction of the public. If Antin worked at the boundaries of art, he delimited them at the same time, and it is significant that almost all his talks resulted from invitations.[51] He rarely talked on his own accord. In Antin's vision, art, artist, and institution are inextricable from one another, bound together by language.

While talking offered a fitting form for criticism as the art world took on a new shape in the 1970s, as interdisciplinarity swelled, medium specificity fell away, and art lost its relation to the public, one cannot help but note that few followed Antin's example. For all the claims I have made for his horizontality—the way that his talking both comes from the self and centers a social world, and shows the self to be social in turn—and for all the claims I have made for what must be called Antin's postmodernism—the way that his criticism is both sited and site-specific—there is something deeply modernist about his endeavor.[52] For, ultimately, what else did he do but make criticism new? And as is the case with all modernist newness, Antin got there by tapping into something ancient and outside. Antin revealed a possibility for criticism by rescaling it, living it, and thinking it out loud, but he also made it impossible for others to use his invention as a model. Talking belongs to Antin, and others who follow his lead would only be derivative. And so, while Antin's talking glimmered with possibility, while it shook free all the ossifications that had barnacled themselves on criticism, it throws back the question of what criticism might look like today. To say that others didn't follow in his footsteps is not to lament the fact but simply to wonder how else one might make criticism anew. "Fools lament the decay of criticism," Walter Benjamin wrote in his meditation "One-Way Street," and Antin was no fool—there's no wistfulness in his project, only a genuine desire to find a form that fit his moment.[53] Antin wanted to do something consequential; he was not averse to judgment. "In mathematics it is well known that anybody can devise and prove a proposition, but the problem is to devise propositions that have profound consequences that reverberate throughout the entire system," Antin wrote in his second installment for *Kulchur*'s Art Chronicle, which pointed out the foibles of contemporary critics, and in a way this foretold his entire critical project: to propose a new model for a new system.[54]

postscript?

I hope I've made it clear that I'm not advocating for a return to talking some fifty years later. Antin's criticism grew out of a recognition of the structural conditions

of his moment: Criticism's audience was changing; it demanded something different, and Antin's intervention, however short-lived, provided a generative response to this moment of crisis and transition. By the late 1980s, Antin had become somewhat bitter—he refused to publish in the big art magazines so as not to pad artist CVs—but in the early 1970s, his talking had fulfilled some need, and it made certain behaviors, structures, and tendencies transparent, thus lending criticism, for a brief moment, some newfound relevance.[55] But, of course, not all forms are relevant for all times. We may look back at the intimacy and community of Antin's moment with some nostalgia, aware that that such qualities are no longer available in our ever more global, digitalized world, and demand some other form or language to bind our networks together.

Artist and writer Gregg Bordowitz has studied Antin closely, and his series of lecture-performances *Testing Some Beliefs*, staged in 2011 and 2012, apply something of Antin's method to new ends (fig. 8).[56] Where Antin is often virtuosic—he always lands the plane, so to speak—Bordowitz toys with the possibility of the crash. Indeed, in the worst know-it-all moments of Antin's performances, he veers into the domineering territory of patronizing his audience, whereas Bordowitz gets overheated and forgets things. In the *Testing* performances, Bordowitz offers impromptu monologues about various beliefs that he holds, and the audience is key to his testing of ideas. In spaces filled with friends and colleagues, Bordowitz bounces his beliefs off those in front of him, exposing them to skepticism and doubt. The act furnishes the value of the live audience: talking in public is different from writing in private. *Testing* is immediate, visceral, personal, and sensible. Facial expressions and nods from members of the audience might encourage the speaker to proceed or else to pursue different lines of thought. Testing is also a type of criticism, or at least it suggests something about the critical impulse. The work of criticism is not simply to judge artworks but also to use artworks to test one's own suppositions, values, and beliefs.

The relevance of Antin's work today might have something to do with its relationship to testing. So much contemporary criticism, even mundane, transpires outside traditional domains such as the journal and the newspaper, surfacing instead as critical energies applied to personal blogs, Substack content, social media, and even Yelp reviews. Posted and reposted conversations slink around and occasionally gel, or gather and lose steam—but it is often every critic for themself, and the reader's task is to follow the scent. In a sense, there has never been so much criticism, and yet one might also say that there is hardly any criticism at all, with very little audience today, in terms of a stable, coherent entity, and perhaps even less of a sense of address. That said, criticism is found in unlikely places. Tagging might be our talking. Hashtags scatter code words for searchers. The asperand is all. The historian in me accepts this while my inner, old-fashioned critic, tied to midcentury mores, bridles. Antin's lesson, I think, is not purely to find a form appropriate to one's moment—although that is key—but also to see that criticism can't go it alone; it can't happen just anywhere. Criticism needs structures to sustain it. It needs places and worlds, whether that be the museum, the poetry project, the magazine, or the conference. Put differently, it matters both where

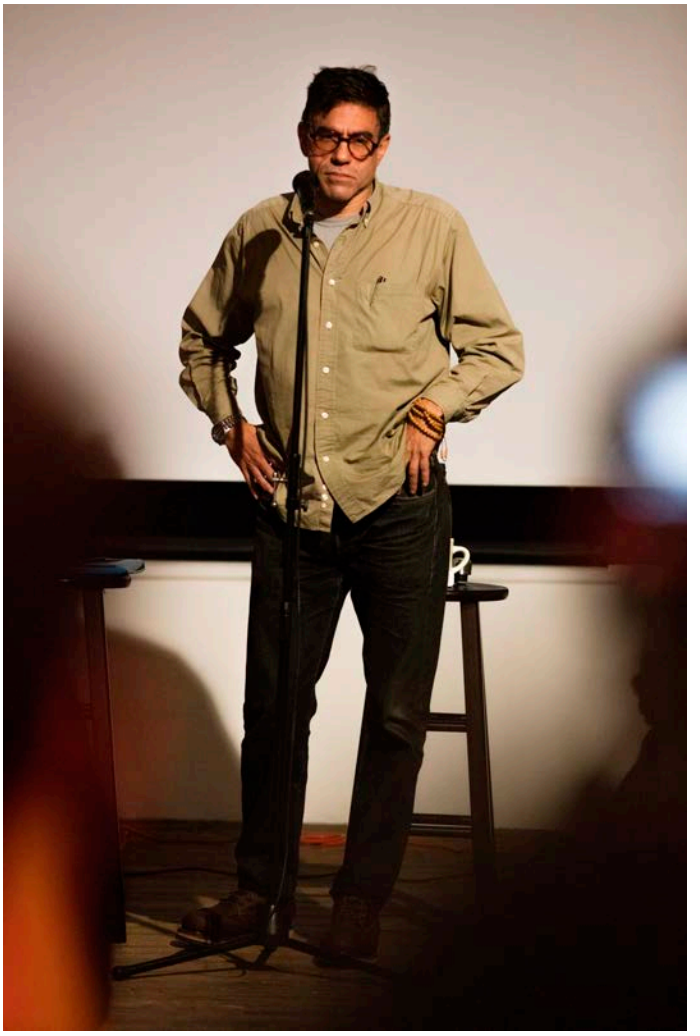

FIG. 8. — Gregg Bordowitz delivering improvised talk piece at Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York, 2019. Photo by Oto Gillen. Courtesy the artist.

and to whom one is talking. Many understand this: a tagline for Documenta 15 in 2022 was "hanging out, telling stories," an Antinian turn of phrase to be sure. Of course, this presents a conundrum for a digital world, but the attempts to organize and situate ourselves in relation to it, and to braid together the digital and the physical spheres, must be part of any critical project today. The MFA program, the masthead, and the museum—with all the problems of gatekeeping they might possess—should play an active part in sustaining critical dialogue.

The public might have had its day—born in coffeehouses and riddled with exclusions, it was always a fiction. It's hard for me to say this, because its broad sweep and dream of coherence still has a powerful appeal. The clique, coterie, and community, with their varying degrees of boundedness, have their problems. There's the cohort, but that sounds too statistical. I'm not sure how I feel about the mass or swarm—too

irrational, electric. I am trying to find another word that might break and rearrange the ranks of identity and class, a word or phrase that might help construct an audience. I keep drifting toward *interested parties*. It has a glimmer of festivity and a touch of political organization. Perhaps it is a way of building up to something like a public, little by little, rather than taking its existence for granted as something already there and in place.

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Notes

I talked to many wonderful people while working on this essay, including Charles Bernstein, Ann Lauterbach, and Robert Slifkin.

Epigraph: letter dated 27 May 1976, sent from David Antin to Leo Steinberg for a panel held on "The Goals of Criticism" at the College Art Association annual conference in Los Angeles in February 1977. David Antin papers, 1956–2006, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (GRI), 2008.M.56, box 27, folder 10. Emphasis mine.

1. David Antin, "A Few Words," *Selected Poems: 1963–1973* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1991), 13–14. Antin's early books include *Definitions* ([New York]: Caterpillar, 1967); *Code of Flag Behavior* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1968); and *Meditations* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1971).

2. David Antin, "Grey Paint: Robert Morris," *Art News*, April 1966, 22.

3. *New American Poetry Circuit* (San Francisco: New American Poetry Circuit, 1970), n.p. Antin described his entrance into art criticism on a few occasions. Another time he wrote, "[Nicolas Calas] suggested I do a piece of criticism in which I criticize the critics. And I did. Two of them for *Kulchur*, the magazine edited by Lita Hornick. And Lita said go out and do it, so I simply examined the assumptions of a number of well known critics from a more or less logical or commonsense point of view and watched them crumble. Later I went on to try to propose a 'sensible' or 'straightforward' way of talking about art in a couple of articles for *Art News*, which I merely offered as examples. That was the beginning." Barry Alpert, "David Antin—An Interview," *VORT* 3, no. 1 (1975): 25. Note that Antin refers to his work in these early articles as talking.

4. For a full tally of Antin's art criticism, see Stephen Cope, "A David Antin Checklist," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 182–85.

5. Antin took over *Kulchur*'s column Art Chronicle from poet Frank O'Hara shortly before O'Hara's death in July 1966.

6. Sherman Paul, ed., *In Search of the Primitive: Rereading David Antin, Jerome Rothenberg and Gary Snyder* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 4.

7. Lita Hornick, *David Antin / Debunker of the "Real"* (New York: Swollen Magpie, 1979), 14. Hornick is paraphrasing Antin in David Antin, "what am i doing here?," in *talking at the boundaries* (New York: New Directions, 1976), 4.

8. Michael Davidson, "Technologies of Presence: Orality and the Tapevoice of Contemporary Poetics," chap. 7 in *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 196.

9. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 3. The epigraph to this section is from Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 53.

10. Davidson, "Technologies of Presence," 199. In a letter dated 25 September 1973 to *boundary 2* editor Robert Kroetsch, fellow editor William Spanos makes a similar point. Antin's work, he writes, "*reverberates* with echoes of the past (the oral poetry of Homer, Plato's *Dialogues*, and the peripatetic poet-philosophers, the whole Parry and Lord *Singer of Tales* context) and is at the same time utterly *situated* in the present: McLuhan, the French *parole* vs. *ecriture* debate, Heideggerian phenomenology, and, of course, the whole thrust of American poetry towards oral 'composition.'" David Antin, William V. Spanos,

and Robert Kroetsch, "A Correspondence with the Editors," *boundary 2: a journal of postmodern literature* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1975): 602. Emphases in original.

11. Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), xxiii. Rothenberg notes that "the present collection grew directly out of a pair of 1964 readings of 'primitive and archaic poetry' at The Poet's Hardware Theater & The Café Metro in New York. Working with me on those were the poets David Antin, Jackson Mac Low, & Rochelle Owens." Rothenberg, preface to *Technicians of the Sacred*, xxv.

12. See Jill Johnston, *Marmalade Me* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), which collects much of the work Johnston published in the *Village Voice*. One might also consider the talking-head criticism John Berger offered in his BBC broadcast *Ways of Seeing* in 1972.

13. See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text,* nos. 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

14. Describing Antin's talk piece "talking at pomona" in his essay of 1974, artist Allan Kaprow notes, "David Antin was asked to give a lecture on art. He talked impromptu and recorded what he said on tape. The tape was transcribed, and all breath stops and phrases were indicated by spaces left in the lines of print. The transcript was published first as an article in an art magazine and subsequently as a poem in a book of his recent works. But when read silently or aloud, it was just like David Antin was speaking normally." Allan Kaprow, "Education of the Un-Artist, Part III," in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 146–47. Antin and Kaprow were colleagues for many years at the University of California at San Diego.

15. There are a couple of early examples of Antin's work appearing on vinyl, such as his reading of "The Black Plague" on the anthology *Poems for Peace*. David Antin, "From 'The Black Plague,'" track A6 on *Poems for Peace: A Benefit Reading for the New York Workshop in Nonviolence at St. Mark's Church in the Bouwerie,* LP, 1967, Broadside Records BR465. He also released two cassettes in his career: *The Principle of Fit* (1980) and *the archaeology of home* (1987).

16. Davidson, "Technologies of Presence," 208. Antin himself notes, "im an old new Yorker as youll probably recognize from my accent." Antin, "is this the right place?," *talking at the boundaries*, 27.

17. Alpert, "David Antin—An Interview," 27. Antin continues, "And usually these 'talks' were addressed—not only *to* people, but also *toward*—a domain. That people called art." Alpert, 28. Emphases in original.

18. Antin's printed talks, Davidson notes, are "in no sense a replica of the talk itself. Antin freely edits and modifies the talk so that it becomes a representation, not a mimesis, of speech." Davidson, "Technologies of Presence," 208.

19. Antin, letter to Sherman Paul, 14 October 1981, quoted in Paul, *In Search of the Primitive,* 69. Antin notes that "the first really clear talk poem came in late 1970, when I was invited by Dore Ashton to be part of a series of speculative lectures to be given at Cooper Union," though, for a variety of reasons, Antin's piece was never published. An excerpt of "talking at pomona" appeared in *Alcheringa: A Journal of Ethnopoetics,* no. 4 (Autumn 1972): 42–44, and it was included as the final piece in Antin's book *Talking*, published by Hornick's Kulchur Foundation in 1972.

20. This story appears in a number of places, including Marjorie Perloff's introduction to the new edition of Antin's *Talking* (Dallas: Dalkey Archive, 2001). See also Antin quoted in Paul, *In Search of the Primitive,* 69. Eleanor Antin was working on her photoconceptual work *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* at the time, which was also engaged with gerunds and process. The original audio of Antin's talk at Pomona, a little over an hour long, is available online: GRI, Selected audio and video recordings from the David Antin papers, C6, http://hdl.handle.net/10020/2008m56av.

21. Antin, Spanos, and Kroetsch, "Correspondence with the Editors," 620.

22. See Andy Warhol, *a: a novel* (New York: Grove, 1968). Antin mentions Warhol's "taped novel" in his 1966 article on the artist, although *a* wouldn't be released until two years later. David Antin, "Warhol: The Silver Tenement," in *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature, 1966 to 2005*, by David Antin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 21.

23. See Peggy Gale, ed., *Artists Talk, 1969–1977* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2004).

24. Dedication in *Artforum* 11, no. 1 (September 1972).

25. See Rebecca McGrew and Glenn Phillips with Marie Shurkus, eds., *It Happened at Pomona: Art at the Edge of Los Angeles, 1969–1973*, exh. cat.

(Claremont, CA: Pomona College Museum of Art, 2011).

26. John Coplans to David Antin, 2 June 1972, David Antin papers, GRI, 2008.M.56, box 15, folder 34.

27. "I really didn't know what it was those students needed to hear," Antin later said. "So I decided I wouldn't prepare anything to talk about before I got there. I was scheduled to meet some of the students and look at their work." Alpert, "David Antin—An Interview," 27.

28. Rosalind Krauss, "A View of Modernism," *Artforum* 11, no. 1 (September 1972): 51. Reprinted in Rosalind Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 115–28.

29. See David Antin, "what am i doing here?," in *talking at the boundaries*, 23–24.

30. Antin, Spanos, and Kroetsch, "Correspondence with the Editors," 616.

31. Theodor W. Adorno, "Punctuation Marks," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 91.

32. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence,"in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 28.

33. Ideally, this was the case—and "talking at pomona" appears this way in Antin's book *Talking* (New York: Kulchur Foundation, 1972). In *Artforum,* the text conforms to the periodical's columnar structure and is justified on the left.

34. Cage's work was important for Antin, especially his "Lecture on Nothing." For Antin on Cage, see Antin, "john cage uncaged is still cagey," [1989–2005] in Antin, *Radical Coherency*, 331–43. See also Marjorie Perloff, "'No More Margins': John Cage, David Antin, and the Poetry of Performance," in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 288–339.

35. Antin, "talking at pomona," in *Talking,* 174, 175.

36. Antin, "talking at pomona," in *Talking,* 177.

37. Antin, "talking at pomona," in *Talking*, 147.

38. Antin was one of six critics asked by dealer and curator Seth Siegelaub to select six artists for a conceptual exhibition organized by Siegelaub within the pages of *Studio International* in 1970 (vol. 180, no. 924). Antin chose Dan Graham, Harold Cohen, John Baldessari, Richard Serra, Eleanor Antin, Fred Lonidier, George Nicolaidis, and Keith Sonnier.

39. Antin, "talking at pomona," in *Talking*, 171.

40. A line from Johnston comes to mind: "I like to think of the critic as a corporate sensibility," she writes. "Ideally the critic would be a transparent medium giving off vapors of ideas and opinions constantly passing through the body from street to concert to cocktail party." Jill Johnston, "To Whom It May Concern," in *Marmalade Me*, 154.

41. Antin titled a later book of talk poems *Tuning*, a term that speaks to the situational tactics he used to make his work—the process of syncing his voice, body, and thoughts to a given space and audience. This is not to say that Antin's work created peaceful unions or that he preached to the choir—it can be surprising to hear the damning things he has to say about close acquaintances and colleagues—or even that he was trying to garner shared understanding, but rather that he intervened in particular situations.

42. Lytle Shaw, *Narrowcast: Poetry and Audio Research* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 3.

43. Les Levine, quoted in Elayne Varian, "Schemata 7," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 369.

44. For Kozloff's words, see the transcription of Levine's video, *Les Levine: Critic, 1966* (New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 2020), n.p.

45. Antin, *talking at the boundaries* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 51.

46. Antin was included as an artist in *Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art*, an exhibition curated by Jack Burnham in 1970 at the Jewish Museum in New York. Antin also appeared in the tenth issue of *Art-Rite* (Fall 1975) on performance. See also David Antin et al., *Dialogue-Discourse-Research*, exh. cat. (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1979); and Annina Nosei Weber, ed., *Discussion* (New York: Out of London, 1980).

47. Lawrence Alloway, "Network: The Art World Described as a System," *Artforum* 11, no. 1 (September 1972): 29. Reprinted in Lawrence Alloway, *Network: Art and the Complex Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984), 3–15.

48. Antin, epigraph in *Talking*.

49. See Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Scribner, 1975) for one example of the new prominence of talk at this moment, and perhaps as a counterpoint to other forms of discourse. Significantly, Eleanor Antin is one of the artists interviewed in Nemser's book.

50. David Antin, "Fine Furs," in Antin, *Radical Coherency*, 302.

51. "since these works could not have been realized without the kind invitations of many people at many institutions this book is dedicated to them." Antin, dedication in *talking at the boundaries*, n.p.

52. Antin's name appears in a section titled "Post Modernism as Participatory Environment" in Maurice R. Stein and Larry Miller, *Blueprint for Counter Education* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), n.p.

53. Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in *Reflections,* ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 85.

54. David Antin, "Arabian Chess," Art Chronicle, *Kulchur* 20 (Winter 1965–66): 80. Antin ends this text—as he would later do in "talking at pomona"—with reflections on chess-like games.

55. For Antin's withdrawal from publishing criticism, see his unpublished talk "Criticism as Madness or Liberation from Madness," 1987, GRI, Selected audio and video recordings from the David Antin papers, C176, http://hdl.handle.net/10020/2008m56av.

56. See Gregg Bordowitz, "Testing Some Beliefs," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, MOCAtv, 21 December 2012, YouTube video, 12:44, https://youtu.be/RrlxtFuVWEs?si=FaHYGRMJyq731YP2.