7. Jackson Mac Low: *Three Social Projects* (1963)

John Hicks

At around 2:30 in the afternoon on Monday, 29 April 1963, the poet and performer Jackson Mac Low mailed four postcards to the double bassist and composer Benjamin Patterson. That evening, he sent two more—one postmarked 6:00 p.m. and the sixth and final postmarked 7:30. Earlier that day, Mac Low had sent copies of three of the six postcards by airmail to an address in Paris shared by the Romanian-born Swiss artist and writer Daniel Spoerri, the American concrete poet Emmett Williams, and the French artist and poet Robert Filliou (fig. 7.1).

Each postcard was a plain, unlined index card, on the back of which were typed, in all caps, titles and texts of short compositions that are difficult to categorize. The works bear a resemblance to a number of different genres, from mail art to lyric poetry, music, and drama, with each category offering a different context in which the works might be interpreted or realized in performance. Mac Low was best known as a poet, and the ragged right-hand margin of the typewritten texts do have the recognizable shape of thin-column free verse. (For comparison, A. R. Ammons's *Tape for the Turn of the Year* [1965], composed on adding-machine tape, was begun later in 1963.)[1] But the simple diction, syntax, and crudely direct instructional phrasing make it quite difficult to identify Mac Low's pieces as short lyric poems. Indeed, the language of the postcards does not resemble that of Mac Low's explicitly poetic texts—which since the mid-1950s had been composed using elaborate, chance-based procedures—or that of any other avant-garde poets of his generation. Instead, Patterson and the other

Fig. 7.1 Map showing locations relevant to the creation and distribution of Jackson Mac Low's postcard scores, spring 1963.

getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/404/

recipients probably would have recognized the format of the postcards as belonging to what is now known as the event score. These short instructional texts had been circulating among artists associated with the Neo-Dadaist group that had in 1961 been given the name Fluxus by the group's instigator, the Lithuanian-born American artist George Maciunas.[2] Mac Low himself later recalled that the Fluxus event scores had two main models:

> La Monte [Young]'s *Compositions 1960*: musical and performance works whose scores . . . were short descriptive paragraphs (eventually published in *An Anthology*) and George Brecht's card pieces, composed from 1959 to '62 and—beginning sometime in '61—mailed to friends [later collected in the *Water Yam* box]. . . . Brecht's most characteristic card pieces are extremely laconic and "demonstrative" rather than descriptive.[3]

Although Mac Low and Patterson had gotten to know each other following Patterson's return to New York from Germany, Mac Low had never met the Paris-based artists to whom he also mailed the postcards. Spoerri, Williams, and Filliou most likely knew of Mac Low through the selection of his works included in *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (1962–63) (fig. 7.2); or by his reputation as one of the composers featured in the famous Chambers Street concert series organized by La Monte Young in 1961 (fig. 7.3).

As the program for the concert at 112 Chambers Street suggests, in describing his art as consisting of "poetry, music, and theatre works," Mac Low was a legitimate polymath: in addition to being a poet, Mac Low had been writing music since childhood, going through a twelve-tone phase and then eventually experimenting with Cagean chance operations, both in music and in textual works.[4] He had been hired as a composer by director Judith Malina to write the musical accompaniment for the Living

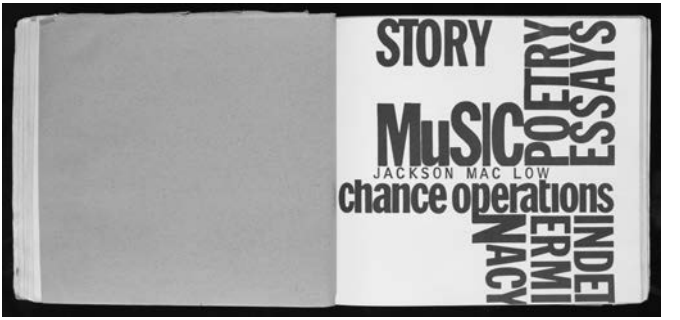
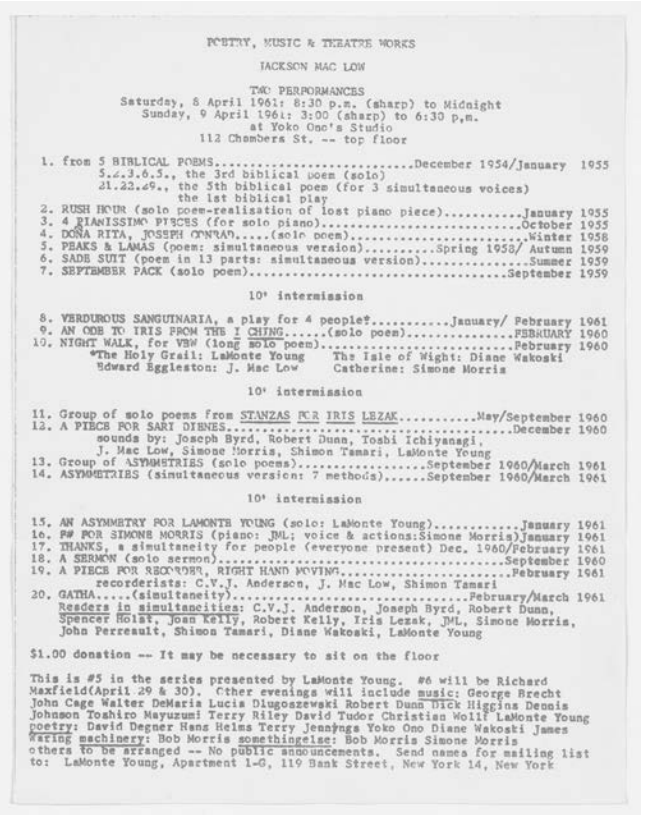


Fig. 7.2 Jackson Mac Low (American, 1922–2004; George Maciunas (Lithuanian American, 1931–78); La Monte Young (American, b. 1935). Pages from Mac Low's contribution to a unique copy of *AN ANTHOLOGY of chance operations, concept art anti-art indeterminacy improvisation meaningless work natural disasters plans of action stories diagrams music poetry essays dance constructions mathematics compositions*, 1962, offset printed. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Collection, item 94-B19099. Courtesy of the Estate of Jackson Mac Low.

getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/238/#fig-238-an



POETRY, MUSIC & THEATRE WORKS

JACKSON MAC LOW

TWO PERFORMANCES
Saturday, 8 April 1961: 8:30 p.m. (sharp) to Midnight
Sunday, 9 April 1961: 3:00 (sharp) to 6:30 p.m.
at Yoko Ono's Studio
112 Chambers St. -- top floor

1. from 5 BIBLICAL POEMS.....December 1954/January 1955
   5.2.3.6.5., the 3rd biblical poem (solo)
   21.22.29., the 5th biblical poem (for 3 simultaneous voices)
   the 1st biblical play
2. RUSH HOUR (solo poem-realisation of lost piano piece).....January 1955
3. 4 PIANISSIMO PIECES (for solo piano).....October 1955
4. DOÑA RITA, JOSEPH CONTAO.....(solo poem).....Winter 1958
5. PEAKS & LAWAS (poem: simultaneous version).....Spring 1958/ Autumn 1959
6. SADE SUIT (poem in 13 parts: simultaneous version).....Summer 1959
7. SEPTEMBER PACK (solo poem).....September 1959

10' intermission

8. VERDUROUS SANGUINARIA, a play for 4 people.....January/ February 1961
9. AN ODE TO IRIS FROM THE I CHING.....(solo poem).....FEBRUARY 1960
10. NIGHT WALK, for VBW (long solo poem).....February 1960
    *The Holy Grail: LaMonte Young The Isle of Wight: Diane Wakoski
    Edward Eggleston: J. Mac Low Catherine: Simone Morris

10' intermission

11. Group of solo poems from STANZAS FOR IRIS LEZAK.....May/September 1960
12. A PIECE FOR SARI DIENES.....December 1960
    sounds by: Joseph Byrd, Robert Dunn, Toshi Ichiyanagi,
    J. Mac Low, Simone Morris, Shimon Tamari, LaMonte Young
13. Group of ASYMMETRIES (solo poems).....September 1960/March 1961
14. ASYMMETRIES (simultaneous version: 7 methods).....September 1960/March 1961

10' intermission

15. AN ASYMMETRY FOR LAMONTE YOUNG (solo: LaMonte Young).....January 1961
16. F# FOR SIMONE MORRIS (piano: JML; voice & actions:Simone Morris)January 1961
17. THANKS, a simultaneity for people (everyone present) Dec. 1960/February 1961
18. A SERMON (solo sermon).....September 1960
19. A PIECE FOR RECORDER, RIGHT HAND MOVING.....February 1961
    recorderists: C.V.J. Anderson, J. Mac Low, Shimon Tamari
20. GATHA.....(simultaneity).....February/March 1961
    Readers in simultaneities: C.V.J. Anderson, Joseph Byrd, Robert Dunn,
    Spencer Holst, Joan Kelly, Robert Kelly, Iris Lezak, JML, Simone Morris,
    John Perreault, Shimon Tamari, Diane Wakoski, LaMonte Young

$1.00 donation -- It may be necessary to sit on the floor

This is #5 in the series presented by LaMonte Young. #6 will be Richard Maxfield(April 29 & 30). Other evenings will include music: George Brecht John Cage Walter DeMaria Lucia Dlugoszewski Robert Dunn Dick Higgins Dennis Johnson Toshiro Mayuzumi Terry Riley David Tudor Christian Wolff LaMonte Young poetry: David Degner Hans Helms Terry Jennings Yoko Ono Diane Wakoski James Waring machinery: Bob Morris somethingelse: Bob Morris Simone Morris others to be arranged -- No public announcements. Send names for mailing list to: LaMonte Young, Apartment 1-G, 119 Bank Street, New York 14, New York

Fig. 7.3 Program for *Poetry, Music, and Theatre Works: Jackson Mac Low*, the fifth concert in the series organized by La Monte Young at Yoko Ono's studio, 112 Chambers Street, New York, NY, 8–9 April 1961. Getty Research Institute, Jean Brown Papers, 890164, box 32, folder 6. getty.edu/publications/scores/object-index/275/

Theatre's 1954 staging of W. H. Auden's poem *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), and the Living Theatre also staged Mac Low's own work *The Marrying Maiden: A Play of Changes* (1960), with a musical setting by John Cage, which ran for forty-seven performances during 1960 and 1961.[5]

By the time he made and sent the April 1963 postcards, Mac Low's works had been produced as plays in theaters, as music in concert venues, as poetry readings, and as published texts. In published form, Mac Low's texts included explanations of the procedures used to produce them and/or performance instructions (which themselves frequently involved chance operations, performer choice, or both). The postcard scores, however, were not accompanied by any procedural notes, nor did they announce themselves as belonging to any one specific performance context. As a result of this ambiguity, how we understand the concept of the score can produce profound impacts on how we understand what Mac Low may have envisioned his colleagues, and future performers, might do with these works.

The postcard Mac Low mailed to Patterson at 7:30 p.m. on 29 April, his final installment for the day, presents an instance of the event score as a private, contemplative exercise or an inward task of concentration and discipline, with little if any room left for spectatorship other than a thinking reader: *Light Rhythms for Henry Flynt* (29 February 1963) contains a series of instructions for what presumably must be an individual performer, to be realized in the rear car of a subway train. It gives the reader-performer the difficult task of concentrating on the rhythmic appearance of the tunnel lights being passed by the moving train rather than the loud, percussive sounds and the felt rhythms (bumping and swaying) produced by the train's movement along the tracks.

In the first postcard sent to Patterson, Mac Low attempts to combine the hallmarks of both the models cited above—Brecht's abstract, conceptual titles, and Young's

interest in either droning or repetitive structures that continue for long periods of time. The score for *Architecture (for GB)*—the GB being Brecht's initials—which is dated 28 April 1963, the day before it was mailed to Patterson, contains the following instructions:

> Look at a wall
> Memorize it
> Go away and wait a week
> Build a wall just like it
> Go away and wait a week
> Tear the new wall down
> Go away and wait a week

The instructional text then loops through this sequence three more times (to the bottom of the card), followed by "&c," so that, in theory, the sequence should be repeated ad infinitum, or at least a large number of times. For a sense of the scale of repetition that these artists were interested in, one might look to Young's *X for Henry Flynt* (April 1960), a.k.a. *Arabic Numeral (Any Integer) to H. F.*, which calls for a single chord to be sounded at regular intervals for a number of times to be decided prior to each performance (see chapter 5). Young's score for this work, which he sent to the pianist David Tudor in hopes of having him perform it, provides 1,688 and 2,219 as examples of integers that might be selected.[6] Or, one might look to the epic eighteen-hour-and-forty-minute performance of 840 consecutive renditions of Erik Satie's *Vexations* (ca. 1893–94) organized by John Cage and presented on 9–10 September 1963 at the Pocket Theatre in New York.

In this frame of reference, and in light of Patterson's own compositions utilizing everyday materials, such as *Paper Piece* (1960; see chapter 4), Patterson might have viewed Mac Low's *Architecture* as a *musical* composition—the sounds resulting from the acts of looking at, memorizing, building, and tearing down a wall, with specified intervals or rests between each "movement." Note, however, that even

just the rest intervals that are to be performed during the four rounds of instructions that appear before the "&c." would require a minimum of twelve *weeks* to perform. A larger number of repetitions could easily require years or even decades to be performed, perhaps even exceeding the life expectancy of any one individual.

Most readers, myself included, will likely engage with the work more figuratively—as a prompt for some kind of meditation or reflection—rather than attempt a performance of it. If we read "Architecture" as a poetic or literary work, for instance, we may see in it an allusion to the story of Bodhidharma, the monk who is said to have brought Chan Buddhism to China in the fifth or sixth century CE after a ten-year-long meditation in front of a wall. The thin, ragged column of text has the look of a poem, after all, and the repetition might even be seen as a playful reintroduction of rhyme in a free-verse context.

But whereas a postcard containing the typewritten text of "Architecture" the poem could be considered a finished piece on its own, the same postcard containing Mac Low's *Architecture* the musical work has the intermediate status of a score. The work itself is only realized in a given performance. Likewise, *Architecture* might be considered a dramatic composition for the theater: the script for a play containing no dialogue, only mise-en-scène and stage directions. The script may be printed out, but the work itself must be realized in a performance. This dramatic/theatrical work, too, would have a powerfully resonant context within the midcentury avant-garde and within Mac Low's specific artistic network: Antonin Artaud's proposals for the "Theater of Cruelty" genre in his collection of essays *Le Théâter et son double* (1938) were an important influence on Mac Low's collaborators Judith Malina and Julian Beck of the Living Theatre. Artaud's ideas would come to wider renown through M. C. Richards's English translation, published in 1958.[7] Arguing that the mere performance of dialogue is not sufficient to distinguish theatrical works from

novels or other printed works that can be read aloud, Artaud called for spectacles that would "put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text" and instead foreground "all the means of expression utilizable on the stage, such as music, dance, plastic arts, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, intonation, architecture, lighting, and scenery."[8]

Another postcard score, *Schedule (for George Brecht)* (1963), has a repetitive structure that mirrors that of *Architecture* but creates challenges for the performer from an entirely different angle. In two narrow columns, the text of the score repeats sixteen iterations of the following instructions: "Sleep awhile / Wake up / Do something," followed by an ellipsis. If *Architecture* appears to require the concentration of a Buddhist saint, *Schedule* seems designed to expose the polar opposite of virtuosic difficulty, namely that of extreme ease of realization. Rather than presenting difficulties that are nearly impossible to overcome, the score of *Schedule* is ineluctable: it is so effortless to realize that it is, in effect, impossible *not* to perform the work short of falling into a coma or dying. Under normal living conditions, an ideal performance is virtually effortless, whether one intends one's daily activities to be part of the work or not. Indeed, it may not even be possible to *intentionally* begin a performance of this work, given that the instructions start with the largely involuntary act of sleeping.[9]

In composing texts that explore these extreme poles of performability—from impossible difficulty to inescapable ease—Mac Low seems to be intentionally provoking his colleagues to confront whether the practical concerns of real-world performances should or should not be considered as an essential component of the still-emerging genre of the event score. In short, does it matter whether a score can be performed in the real world, or are Fluxus event scores, at the end of the day, little more than playful thought experiments? These questions and distinctions become

most pressing, however, in Mac Low's three *Social Project* scores:

> *Social Project 1:* Find a way to end unemployment / or / find a way for people to live without employment / make whichever one you find work
> *Social Project 2:* Find a way to end war / make it work
> *Social Project 3:* Find a way to produce everything everybody needs and to get it to them / make it work

Are these pieces not, in effect, impossible to perform, or are they possible only to attempt? Much like the other postcards, the *Social Projects* seem designed to dramatically expose the outer edges of our conception of performance. But even supposing that one of the *Social Project* scores were to be successfully performed, further problems remain for conceiving of them as performance works. The piece could never be performed again because the preexisting state of affairs (war, hunger, need) would have been eradicated and would no longer be available as materials/media with which the artists could perform the work (similar to any work that requires the complete exhaustion of some limited resource). However far-fetched an initial realization might be for one of these works, the impossibility of a second performance seems to run counter to one of the most minimal criteria for the definition of a "score": namely, that the score be capable of generating multiple performances, allowing for divergent interpretations to emerge over time and extend the possibilities of the work with each new performance or realization.

This collision of practical and conceptual concerns regarding the nature of the performance score would likely have been extremely relevant to Mac Low's artistic colleagues, who were busy preparing inventive new performances of Fluxus event scores for the festivals that were planned for the summer of 1963 in the United States and Europe. As a historical matter, though, there was an

even more immediate point of reference for Patterson and the other recipients of Mac Low's postcards: the two-page, single-spaced, all-caps response that Mac Low had mailed just four days earlier, on 25 April 1963, to all of the Fluxus "members" who had received Maciunas's *Fluxus News—Policy Letter, no. 6* (dated 6 April 1963), which contained proposals for "Fluxus Propaganda" activities that Maciunas had drafted with Henry Flynt. Flynt's and Maciunas's proposed protest actions were explicitly Marxist-Leninist, and in some cases they were violent expressions of anti-art agitprop (for example, calling in bomb threats to cultural institutions in order to divert audiences to Fluxus events) that were incompatible with Mac Low's long-held pacifist and anarchist beliefs.[10] The proposed actions also clashed with Mac Low's sense of individualism, which led him to resist being named as a member of any particular political group, even those with which he largely agreed.[11]

In his 25 April letter, Mac Low writes:

> I INSIST THAT ALL CULTURAL ACTIVITIES BE TRULY BENEVOLENT & POSITIVE & DONE IN A SPIRIT OF LOVE RATHER THAN ONE OF SCORNFUL CONTEMPT OR HATRED OR POLEMIC. I WD NOT, EXCEPT IN CERTAIN EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES, BOTHER TO ATTACK &/OR DEFILE WRONG TYPES OF CULTURAL ACTIVITY. I WD RATHER CARRY ON THE RIGHT KINDS OF CULTURAL ACTIVITY (OR ANY OTHER ACTIVITY, FOR THAT MATTER) & BY DOGGED PERSEVERANCE DO ALL I CAN TO REPLACE THE NEGATIVE BY THE POSITIVE, TRUSTING THAT ANY STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION IS A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION & THAT BY ENOUGH SUCH STEPS WE WILL BE ABLE TO SUPERSEDE AN UNDESIRABLE SITUATION BY A DESIRABLE ONE. WE WON'T BE ABLE TO DO THIS BY MAKING IT HARDER FOR THE ORDINARY WORKER TO MAKE

HIS LIVING OR TO GET ABOUT THE CITY OR TO COMMUNICATE.

Those who received his letter of protest to *Policy Letter, no. 6* likely would have seen his *Social Project* postcard texts in light of this dispute—perhaps even as a restatement of his arguments in a format uniquely tailored to the Fluxus members he hoped to persuade. That is, instead of a two-page, all-caps rant, which Maciunas would refer to as one of the "hysterical outbursts . . . from people who failed to read the attached sheet [to *Policy Letter, no. 6*],"[12] Mac Low presents his objections in the form of a Fluxus event score. In doing so, he calls on his interlocutors to articulate more clearly the ethical stances and theories of social change that were being implicitly invoked in this newly expanded model of artistic performance.

Viewed as a group, the six postcards Mac Low mailed to Patterson in April 1963 explore several axes along which the idea of the score was expanding: as public or collective performance, private reflection, political action, an art form of the everyday, an orientation towards process, and a tool for artistic collaboration. At the same time, these scores maintain their connection to existing genres and performance contexts such as mail art, protest art, poetry, music, and theater. Nonetheless, their richness derives less from the pure potentiality of all these possible modes than from the need to make and commit to choices among them along the way to a realization: to find a way and make it work.

Notes

The author wishes to thank to Benjamin Bishop, Alexis Briley, Aaron Hodges, and Sarah Senk for their feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

1. For an image of Ammons's manuscript for this work, see Archie Ammons Papers, #14-12-2665, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections,

Cornell University Library, https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:23093081.

2. Patterson's own self-published *Methods and Processes* (Paris, 1962) was an important early collection of such scores, along with George Brecht's *Water Yam* (1963) and Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* (1964).
3. Nicholas Zurbrugg, "Jackson Mac Low Interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg" (16 January 1991), *Crayon* 1 (1997): 277–78. Mac Low notes that "all of Young's 1960 compositions and Brecht's card pieces were written long before Fluxus was 'founded' by Maciunas," 288.
4. Zurbrugg, "Jackson Mac Low Interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg," 264–65.
5. Mac Low's script consists of an "action pack" of approximately fourteen hundred playing cards containing single-line instructions for the play's nine performers. Cards are distributed to the actors by a silent "dice player" who also manipulates the playback of Cage's tape-loop score. See Jackson Mac Low, *Representative Works: 1938–1985* (New York: Roof, 1986), 44–51. For Cage's tape-loop score and a nine-minute recording, see John Cage, *Music for "The Marrying Maiden"* (New York: Henmar Press, 1960), Edition Peters nos. 6737 (score) and 6737a (tape).
6. For the version of *X for Henry Flynt* that Young sent to Tudor, see David Tudor Papers, 980039, box 14, folder 9, and the recording in box 34A, item R325, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
7. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1958). For further discussion in this volume of Artaud and of Richards's translation of *The Theater and Its Double*, see the "Music, Scores, and Indeterminacy" and "Scoring Intermedia" sections of the introduction, and the commentaries by Michael Gallope and Nancy Perloff in chapter 2 and Gallope in chapter 3.
8. Artaud, *Theater and Its Double*, 89, 40.
9. The notion of an involuntary or unintended presentation of a performance score will be taken up again in chapter 9 on Alison Knowles's *Identical Lunch*.
10. Mac Low's commitment to pacifist anarchism dates back at least to the early 1940s, when he published a series of interviews with conscientious objectors who were imprisoned for refusing to serve in the U.S. armed forces during World War II. For Mac Low's anarchist writings and political activism, see Louis Cabri, "'Rebus Effort Remove Government': Jackson Mac Low, *Why? / Resistance*, Anarcho-pacifism," *Crayon* 1 (1997): 45–68; Andrew Cornell, *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the 20th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 163, 183–87; and Al Filreis, "Adjustment and Its Discontents: Aleatory Art vs. Cold War Deradicalization," in *1960: When Art and Literature Confronted the Memory of World War II and Remade the Modern* (New York: Columbia

University Press, 2021), 131–63. For more on the dispute between Mac Low and Maciunas regarding art/anti-art/art engagé, see Cuauhtémoc Medina, "The 'Kulturbolschewiken' I: Fluxus, the Abolition of Art, the Soviet Union, and 'Pure Amusement,'" *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 48 (2005): 179–92; and Cuauhtémoc Medina, "The 'Kulturbolschewiken' II: Fluxus, Khrushchev, and the 'Concretist Society,'" *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 49–50 (2006): 231–43. See also Dick Higgins, *Intermedia*, *Fluxus*, *and the Something Else Press*, ed. Steve Clay and Ken Friedman (Catskill, NY: Siglio, 2018).

11. Jackson Mac Low's papers at the University of California at San Diego contain a collage of newspaper clippings about a protest action that Mac Low participated in on 15 June 1955, which vividly illustrates his sense of political individualism. The state of New York had ordered a mandatory air-raid drill in which the public was instructed to practice what to do in the event of a hypothetical five-megaton hydrogen bomb attack. Mac Low was among a group of pacifist protesters who gathered outside in a Manhattan park near New York City Hall, arguing that such preparatory drills only served the purpose of normalizing and accepting as inevitable the idea of thermonuclear conflict. They further argued that the drill coerced the public into acting as though a conflict involving such destructive weapons would be survivable and called for an end to nuclear weapons testing and other activities intended to prepare for, rather than prevent, war.

    Approximately thirty protesters were arrested for refusing to take shelter during the exercise, including the well-known activists Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, and Bayard Rustin. Mac Low's individualist anarchist politics are evident in the article by Malcolm Logan for the *New York World-Telegram and Sun*: "The demonstrators were members of The Catholic Workers, the War Resisters League, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, plus one man, Jackson MacLow, 32, who said he was not a member of any of these groups." See the collage of newspaper clippings documenting Jackson Mac Low's arrest—along with Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker, Bayard Rustin of the War Resisters League, and others—for refusing to participate in a nationwide mandatory air-raid drill, ca. June 1955, UC San Diego Special Collections and Archives, Jackson Mac Low Papers, MSS 180, box 32, folder 4.

12. George Maciunas, addendum to *Fluxus News—Policy Letter*, *no. 6* (1963), reprinted in *FLUXUS etc. Addenda I*, ed. Jon Hendricks (New York: Ink &, 1983), 159.