

# The Continuous Present: A Note About David Antin's *Selected Essays*



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maybe that's the problem with the notion of the avant-garde that it turns itself from a discourse into a tradition whose members worry about its decline in a threatening future—and maybe that's why I'm such a poor avant-gardist because I'm mainly concerned with the present (“what it means to be avant-garde” *what it means to be avant-garde* 53)

This concern with the present seems to contradict the very action of anthologizing a selection of essays about art and literature, focused on avant-garde works and spanning four decades—unless the present which David Antin is grappling with is not the flitting interstitial moment between a receding past for which we are inexorably nostalgic, and a looming future filled with uncertainties and hopes that can be as daunting as threats. Could it be the continuous present in which Gertrude Stein claims to be writing? A continuous present which is staged and enacted by the text itself, in the ways it keeps track of the difficulties of its composition, and makes us experience the difficulties of reading. In the ways also the text absorbs all the variety of life itself, and transfigures the autobiographical into “everybody’s autobiography.”

On the front cover of *radical coherency, selected essays on art and literature 1966 to 2005* (University of Chicago, 2011, Fig. 1), whose title is derived from a talk poem included in the collection, two recognizable figures face each other: standing where we stand as readers and looking back, David Antin watches himself climbing up a path in the brush of a California canyon. The montage seems at first fairly innocuous, expressive of the movement of the book: a look back at the path taken to reach the present of retrospection, and a look forward to what the future may hold, something which neither Antin nor we can clearly envision. This photograph, however, is also a statement on method, an image inscribing David Antin's constant preoccupation with the relationship between the agent of creation and the spectator: the addressees are part of the picture in the strong sense of the phrase, and as participating in the poet's project to articulate an exchange based on cohabiting with the reader. In the on-going project of the talk poem, now a very long-term *action poétique* dating back to the early 1970s, David Antin proposes an organization and a rationalization of the communication between poet and reader: the talk poem emerges from a live performance to be edited taking into account, among other criteria, the reactions of the public. Thus it is interesting to closely compare the recording of "talking at blérancourt," published on a CD along with the proceedings of Jacques Darras's 1999 conference on fifty years of American poetry, and the poem "talking at blérancourt," published in 2005 in *i never knew what time it was*:

someone asked me once    a simple question    an  
absurdly simple question    and i gave an absurdly simple  
answer    whats an artist he asked and i said somebody  
who does the best he can    by now ive said this so  
many times ive begun to believe it    because when you  
think about it there are very few people in this world  
that do the best they can

you know    if general motors makes a lemon  
of a car its your problem    but if an artist makes a lousy art  
work its his problem or her problem    so it turns out that  
artists are the last people in this world who have to do the best  
they can    because their life is at stake    you say you  
know a plumber who does the best he can    i say he's an

*artist you know lots of artists who dont do the best they  
 can? its very simple theyre not artists anyhow  
 thats how i answer the question because up to now  
 thats the best i can do for an answer now as a poet  
 thats the term i get stuck with*<sup>1</sup>

(Antin *i never knew what time it was* 49)

Listening to the recording, and reading along in the book, one soon comes to notice that alterations do not appear at random, that they are not developments that the poet added *ad libitum*, but that they occur quasi systematically at moments when the unfolding performance elicited reactions from the audience (especially laughter—but don't we know that laughter is not just a symptom of amusement, but can just as well express some degree of unease, a difficulty to understand, an agreement or a disagreement with that which one is witnessing). In the beginning of the talk, the added sentences bear on the stakes of art making: a recurring issue in David Antin's work, and one which the *Selected Essays* address in a very useful and pointed manner. The talk-poem, like the essays in Antin's collection, raises the issue of reception, and its complex relationship with an author's intention. One could argue that the belatedness in the publication of these essays stems, at least in part, from the implications of collecting as a new arrangement, a performance in itself and a meaningful gesture of composition. With the talk-poem and its sometimes uncomfortable, and always problematic position as oral and written text(s), David Antin is continuously questioning the very chronology of composition, and asserting over and over the contingency of the work of art as final object. The results of the poet's work can take a variety of forms: they can remain recordings as in *The Principle of Fit 2*; they can be lost but for a series of photographs taken during the performance without text, date or location (Fig. 2 from *Conversation* 115); they can become the objects of dream and imagination as the "sky poems" evoked in "Fine Furs":

My image of those beautiful white letters, formed so elegantly  
 by the plane and over such along time, that I had to wait to  
 find out what the words were, and had to remember them  
 as they began to disappear—by the time it said FURS, FOX

<sup>1</sup> My italics to signal the text added in the 2005 written version.

had begun to blur and the “I” had begun to vanish—my sense of sitting on the beach, in the bright light of a clear blue sky, and the new pleasure of reading, gave me such a physical experience of the act of reading that I thought it would be nice to do a poem that way, a skypoem.

(“Fine Furs” *Selected Essays* 292–293)

What remains of the poem is the telling, a photograph that ironically does not reveal the text of the poems (Fig. 2 from *Conversation* 120); what remains is what Antin evokes as “a simple memory” (“Fine Furs” *Selected Essays* 292) in the opening of the essay. Of course, “Fine Furs” is included in the selected essays, concurring to the demonstration that there is no such thing as “a simple memory,” in the same way as there is no simple composition nor simple reception. The expansion of the field of action of the poem is, according to Antin in his comments about Allan Kaprow’s practice and legacy, the correlative of the painters and sculptors’ “enrichment and expansion of their field of action from the virtual space of the gallery wall and off the base of traditional Modernist sculpture out onto the floor and into the environment” (“Allan at Work” *Selected Essays* 146). In this expanded field of action, the “boundaries” between the arts, tested and questioned in Antin’s “talking at the boundaries,” are porous, and poetry as the “language art” acquires the omnipresence of the disseminated.

To be “postmodern” in David Antin’s book is then indeed to accept the “very enlarged repertory of possibilities” (“Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in Modern American Poetry” *Selected Essays* 185) which the Modernists have bequeathed us, so that the matter, the form, the context of poetry hold infinite variations, in a very Cagian manner. Once de-sacralized, by such as Kaprow and his notion of “un-art” (“Allan at Work” *Selected Essays* 158) as well as by such as Ezra Pound or Robert Duncan in their search for alternative theories (“Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in Modern American Poetry” *Selected Essays* 188), the work exists less in its palpable, reified or commodified results, than in its telling. To this extent, the difficult and complex enterprise of the *Selected Poems* does not just provide us with a history of what the stakes of art and literary criticism were over more than forty years of continuous aesthetic revolutions (although it does provide this,

and as such is a valuable document): it is a narrative, a remembering in the strongest sense of the term, in which the scattered members of a thinking are gathered to take a new life and talk to us in the continuous present.

The *Selected Essays* can as a consequence be read as an avatar of the archive, with the Benjaminian dynamics of a talking archive, resonating with the work of a poet, one among the many *media* in which David Antin's message conveys itself. Or they can be seen as one of the modes in which an extremely consequent poetics expresses itself, as it both promotes and enacts the freedom and constraints of a committed, democratic, non-dogmatic practice. Far from being spontaneous and easy, the practice is carefully mapped, planned and calculated, as the different objects it leaves to us combine to form a modelization of poetic action today. In the same way as an exploration of David Antin's archive at the Getty Research Institute yields notebooks and drawings to establish the continuousness of his work over the years and in many places (Fig. 4 from Antin's Getty Archive Box 11 Folder 2), the essays provide a spectrum of the many wavelengths in which his work radiates. At the risk of mixing metaphors, a layered, multi-faceted, polymorphous... poem.

As a poetical gesture, indeed, the *Selected Poems* encourage the reader to see the poet's condition as one of on-going struggle for polyvalence, for a poem that is action in time (against loss), and in space (against emptiness), in flux in the Bergsonian sense of the term, as we begin to perceive our relation to time and place in terms of duration. The essays are thus also testimonies to an open injunction, expressed in the persistence of diverse actions in diverse contexts, and integrating the basic tenets of David Antin's poetics:

- tuning: an attention to the world and the plurality of its manifestations.
- talking: an attachment to communication, and the idea that the individual never exists but in verbal relation to the other, to the "stranger at the door."
- thinking: as what makes us human, it unfolds in speech, so that the trajectory of the texts, be they presented as essays or as poems, instances the "dance of the intellect" that William Carlos Williams invented, and transcribed in his own distinctive manner.
- meaning: always difficult to determine, a shifting horizon, but

also one that cannot be ignored, an unavoidable aspiration and thus an ethical commitment. And, in the words of David Antin, in the talk-poem derived from a performance at the Musée des Beaux Arts in Paris, an interrogation as to the sustainability of all discourses:

can i bring my thinking close enough to my wanting to  
 know what i mean if not how can i tell whether  
 or not i or you or all of us know whether or not we can  
 mean what we say

(“can we mean what we say” 19)

In conversation with Charles Bernstein, to whom the *Selected Essays* are dedicated, David Antin looks back on the coherence of the chaotic, in the happening of the ‘60s, indirectly commenting on the diversity of his own work:

I didn’t see happenings as chaotic. Almost every happening I saw or took part in was carefully scripted. There is certainly in the ‘60s work a kind of baroque painterly quality to surfaces. But Robert Whitman’s work, Ken Dewey’s, Allan Kaprow’s work in particular, were tightly scripted. Allan’s performers usually received very precise instructions and had specific jobs to carry out. The chaotic appearance resulted from the collision of many precise tasks.

(Antin *Conversation* 46)

“The collision of many precise tasks” is what David Antin’s essays testify to: a “radical coherency,” emerging from the delusive chaos of forty years’ work, and written in the continuous present—a narrative of life and art eminently thought-provoking, and most continuous with our present.

## Works Cited

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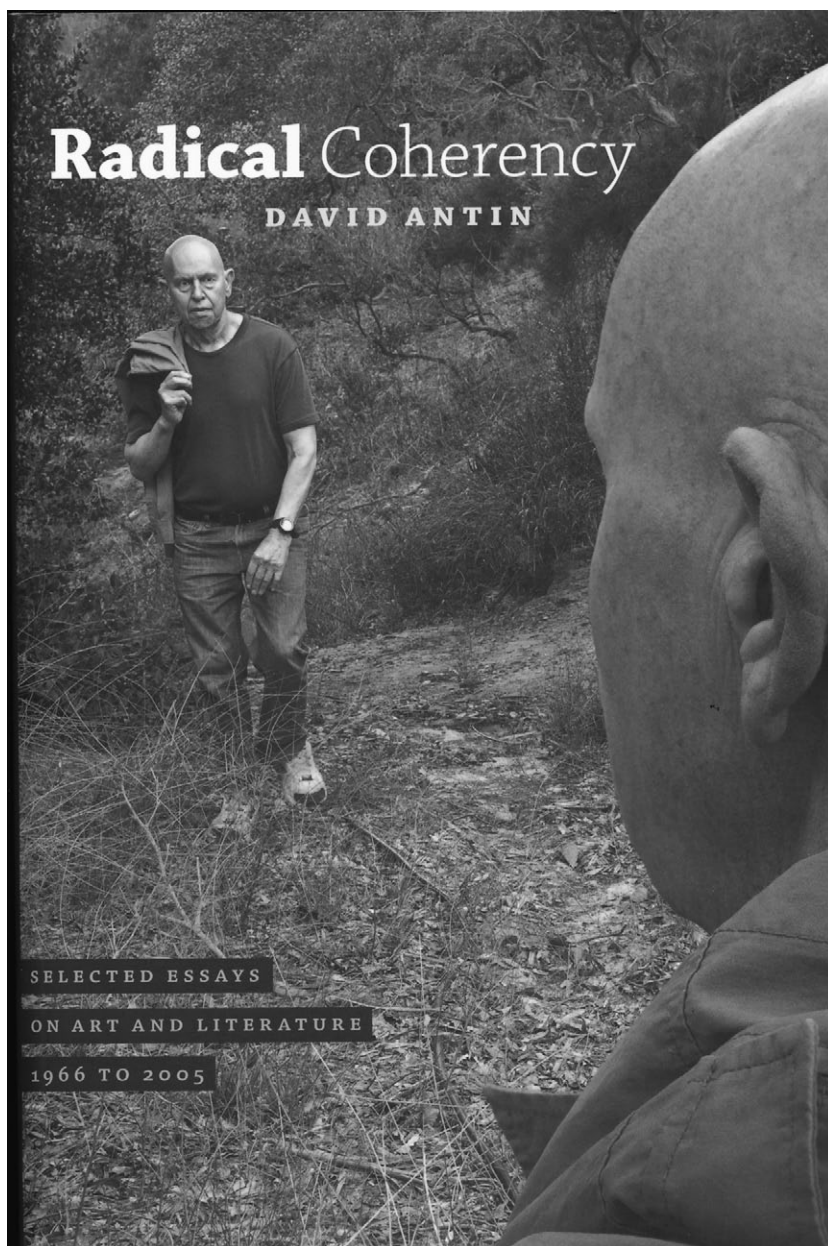


Figure 1



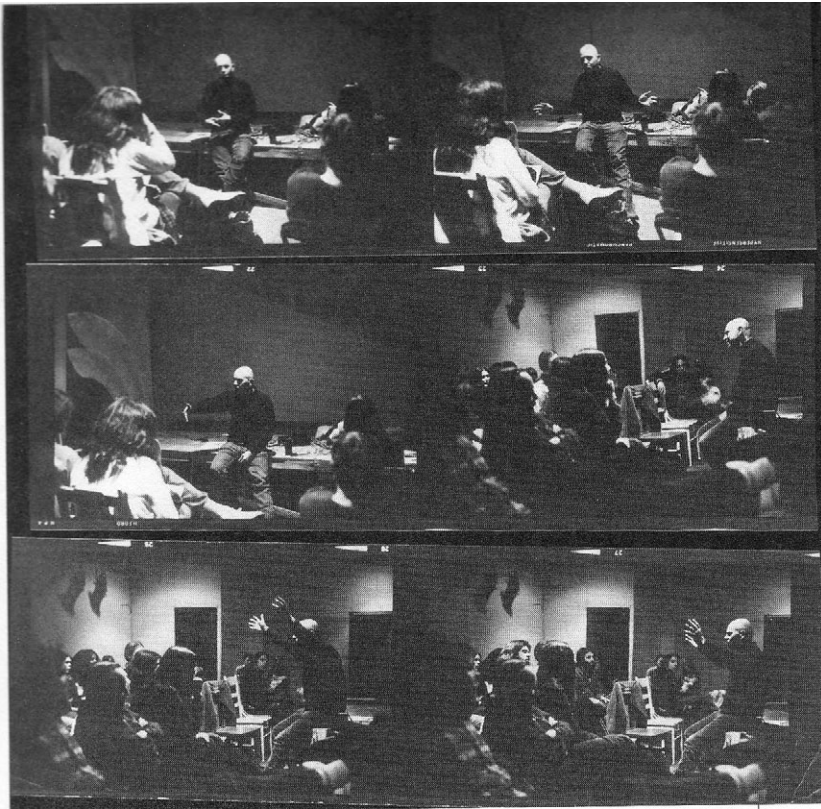


Figure 2



Figure 3

The idea of a genre as a "possible language" is it possible to construct an interactive situation for to arrive at discourse —

the ~~concept~~  
 the availability of a "language" means that a set of ~~conventions~~ ~~of habits~~  
 a set of aptitudes, habits, a set of possibilities for interaction between at least two people. By interaction

⇒ language  
 the idea of a language  
 is the idea of a system of conventions governing discourse among the speakers of a language

a system governing the choice of sounds and their ordering to form signalling units utterances or sentences. These utterances are analytically or subdivisible into smaller elements words, morphemes,

subsystems | tense aspect | Verbal System  
 Distributional Categories

Figure 4