

Anne Tardos, for Naropa Panel Discussion, 7 July 2008:

**Why I Have Been Avoiding Doing Collaborative Performances  
Recently, and How My Years of Experience Doing Them  
Has Informed My Current Work**

The short answer to the first part of the question is that it breaks my heart. Jackson Mac Low, with whom I collaborated for over two decades, died not long ago, and now to be emulating what we had done together seems troubling, if not absurd. I hope this will change some day.

What I'm interested in exploring is the ways in which the poly- and neolingual writing I've been doing, parallel to my collaborations with Jackson, have informed my current, noncollaborative and mostly unilingual writing, that occurs in my book, *I Am You*; and how working with improvisational performance has taught me to continue the trend, when working solo, of establishing guidelines and keeping to them, boundaries, within which I can play. And what is improvisation if not play?

In a collaborative, improvisational performance, you engage in a conversation, you respond to and bounce off of each other; while working solo, you bounce ideas, words, sounds, and other linguistic elements off of each other, using the same collaborative principles, in which you must rely on an unspoken understanding, on good intentions, consideration of the audience, the reader, and the self, the many selves, with whom we are working.

Maybe the question I'm asking is how is working alone different from collaborating? Is it different? How do you energize yourself when you're used to be energized by external forces, such as another person? Is collaboration

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a more positive, more uplifting form of art making? And if so, am I to regard myself as living in a commune with only me as the member?

In the early 1980s, when I began working with Jackson, my primary focus had been on the visual arts, on painting, sculpture, and video art, although writing, as an occupation, wasn't new to me because my father, Tibor Tardos, was a writer, a prolific novelist, known for his surrealism and political allegories.

And since I grew up in four languages, poly- and neolingual writing came to me naturally. French was my first language, then came Hungarian and then German. English is definitely my mother tongue, even though it's the fourth one I learned when I came to this country in the mid-1960s. When I was five, we left France for Hungary, where my father was from; and at 12, we moved to Austria, where my mother was from; at 21, I came to New York, where I am from.

Here is an example of my early polylingual writing from the mid 1980s, mixing the four languages I know, Engl. Fr. Ger. Hung., from my first published book from Tsunami Press, in 1992, *Cat Licked the Garlic*

Ami minden, quand un yes or no, je le said, viens am liebsten  
haette ich dich du susses, de ez nem baj, das weisst du me a  
favor, hogy innen se faire croire, tous less birds, als die Wälder  
langsam verschwinden. Minden verschwinden. Mind you step  
and woelf. Verschwinden de nem innen—je vois the void in front  
of mich—je sens, als ich érzem qu'on aille, aille de vágy a fejem,  
csak éppen (eben sagte ich wie die Wälder verschwinden). I can  
repeat it as a credo so it sinks into our cerveaux und wird  
embedded there, mint egy teória mathématique

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d'enchassement, die Verankerungstheorie in the Mathematik,  
hogy legalább...<sup>1</sup>

Later, in my book *Uxudo*, I began including neologisms, which to this day make their way into poems I write. The word "uxudo" itself was the result of a faulty or an imperfect handshake between my computer and my printer. It appeared on a page of gobbledygook. I tossed the page, but I kept the word. This is a unique case, since I usually generate my own neologisms, but found words are just as welcome.

Here is the title poem from *Uxudo*:

Lorraine hug-a-bee hiába  
Wanderwunderbare Ewigkeitstätigkeit  
Ráncostánc  
Objet sécurisé de griffonade  
Deadalus pagination rictus kiván

Ivan was terrible.  
Who am I really?  
Räuberträume follitude.

*Uxudo*.<sup>2</sup>

As I said, between 1970 and 1980, my focus was more on the visual arts, my film and video work, which I always regarded as poetry. After moving to poetry made of language, I often incorporated images into my texts, sometimes in order to create performance scores with them, and often using

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Tardos, *Cat Licked the Garlic*, Tsunami Editions, 1992 [unpaginated]

<sup>2</sup> Anne Tardos, *Uxudo*, Tuumba Press/O Books, 1999, p. 43

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video still frames, which were, now that I think about it, the forerunners of digital photography.

Combining visual imagery with my texts was a form of collaboration between two elements that are different enough to be potentially at odds with—or supportive of each other. Calibrating such elements as text and image, to work together, making words and phrases of different languages work together, can be considered a form of collaboration.

So, what is the difference between working alone and with someone else? My solo work today is most definitely influenced by everything that has preceded it, just as every moment of our lives adds to the next one—inevitably, so we will never know what would have happened had we not engaged in an activity, after we have done so? We are the result of our cumulative experiences which form us into something we peer out from, as it were, a form that we continually defend, as in the notion that being alive means defending a form.

In *I Am You*, I'm still preoccupied with combining images with text, but less so than before. When, in a recent interview, Susan Landers asked why I seem to be using fewer visual images in my recent works, I gave several reasons, one having to do with copyright issues for images found on the web, versus self-made images (I use both), and the other reason is that

[I]images are more powerful than words, more readily noticed, more quickly absorbed, and therefore the associated text, I always find, needs to be altered, defended, reinforced, or even done away with. In a sense, the illustration undermines the poem. It's a huge struggle to

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find a balance between the two, and maybe in *I Am You*, I became more interested in other aspects of the page.<sup>3</sup>

Returning to my polylingual compositions, I note that I started providing footnotes, in my book *Mayg-shem Fish*, giving occasional translations or transliterations, in an attempt to help the reader through more difficult passages. Later in *Uxudo*, I dedicated the entire left-hand page to notes, and the original poems appeared on the right-hand pages.

Later yet, in my book, *The Dik-dik's Solitude*, I began annotating poems that didn't need translations, they were all in English, yet I felt the desire to reflect on some of the brief phrases the poem's lines consisted of, as in the poem "Four Plus One K," which consists of a series of quatrains, followed by a single word beginning with the letter "k"

Female executive  
Long-faced Britannica  
Budgeting ecstasy  
Bungee mark water stain

Kerouac

And the annotation reads

When we purchased the online version of Britannica, we experienced a budgeting ecstasy.

A bungee is a long and strong rubberband capable of holding up a human being. A bungee mark water stain is the stain caused by the enormous splash resulting from the unplanned impact of the jumper.

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<sup>3</sup> "Anne Tardos's Elegant Software: A Conversation Between Anne Tardos and Susan Landers," in the The Poetry Project Newsletter, February/March 2008.

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The next stanza reads:

Trembling monogamy  
Money-back marmoset  
Mildewing gingerbread  
Standalone graffiti

Kiwi.

Which is annotated by:

Marmosets never keep any money you give them—they always return  
it.

Kiwis are great. The fruit, the bird, the people, the clean air, the blue  
skies, the benefit of the doubt.

Another from "Four Plus One K":

One person family  
Triggerfish mango  
Everyone different  
Humble existence

Keyboard.

Annotation:

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A triggerfish mango is simply a triggerfish's own, personal mango  
fruit.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Dik-dik's Solitude* I have several series of rhyming poems, quasi  
clerihews, entitled "Considerations." They are five-line stanzas, some of  
which are annotated, and others not. So here is the second stanza of  
"Considerations"

Ptarmigan psychology  
Organgutang theology  
Pre-biblical prairie dog  
Plutocratic pocket mouse  
Plunk-down mange pathology

Which is annotated by:

Religious orangutangs will never understand the psychology of  
ptarmigans, no matter how hard they try.

Pocket mice are called that because they like taking naps inside  
people's pockets.

The next stanza:

Petticoat pessimist  
Approbation optimist  
Neorican duck's feet  
Mud puppy muck sheet  
Monte Carlo copper sleet

Is annotated by

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Tardos, *The Dik-dik's Solitude: New and Selected Works*, Granary Books, 2003, p. 75

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The pessimism of a petticoat can become immeasurable sometimes.  
The muck sheet of a mud puppy is a slightly soiled list of things for the mud puppy to do.<sup>5</sup>

These annotations serve as a kind of talkback, a response to one's own work, through the use of such afterthoughts in the form of annotations.

In *I Am You*, I no longer annotate, as I no longer feel the need. The text is largely in plain English, and if a translation is needed, I incorporate it into the text itself, as in this section 13 of the 50-page poem "The Letter: A Bloodbath," written in the form of a dialogue:

How can there be truth in an ever changing universe?

*mitgefühl*

I beg your pardon?

I said *mitgefühl*, which is German for compassion.

And why bring up compassion when we are talking about truth in a changing universe? . . .<sup>6</sup>

And so on...

This kind of dialogue may be due to a desire to talk to someone, to discuss, to share. This kind of exchange within oneself *simulates* collaboration and allows various levels of the self to enter the artistic consciousness.

I'll close with a fairly untypical and uncharacteristic passage from *I Am You*, unusual in its generous use of neologisms, because, as I said, the lion's share of the book is in plain English, often using entire cliché phrases as linguistic and musical elements. Here is section 1 from "Letting Go"

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<sup>5</sup> — *The Dik-dik's Solitude*, Granary Books, 2003, p. 159

<sup>6</sup> — *I Am You*, Salt Publishing, 2008, p. 147

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It's the ego that lets go of the ego.  
A leftist is usually right.  
Everyone is really a very fine fellow.

I am an Acoustican.  
I come from the planet Acoustica  
Where we g'oham yeolnia ooh yeeanh  
Some varsity sensibingatee zenifer lida  
Shaka-ha-cha-ka!

Different papilla pamina different zugoria.

The standing the name the gesture  
The movement  
One cigale verisimilitude sentimentablement genial

Dissertation vegetation permission

A very fine fellow<sup>7</sup>

Which brings me back to Jackson, a very fine fellow, and his message to performers to listen and to relate. By that he meant to listen carefully to all sounds that occur—and I concur—whether they be one's own, the other performer's, a bird's, or a car horn's; and how you must take all these sounds into account before contributing something worthwhile to it all.

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Tardos: *I Am You*, Salt Publishing, 2008, p. 33

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This approach applies to any kind of art making, when you think about it, any medium, or any social situation, which is what Jackson was talking about. He spoke of a utopian society in which people would exercise courtesy, consideration, and tact. This was a sociopolitical approach to art making, and it worked beautifully. It was community-minded and allowed anyone, willing and able, to join him on this ride.

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