

Andrew Duncan, extract from *Nothing is being suppressed*
‘Notions on Allen Fisher’¹

Andrew Duncan’s new book (*Nothing is being suppressed – British Poetry of the 1970s*) includes attention to Allen Fisher’s *Long Shout to Kernewek, Sicily* and *The Art of Flight*. Andrew later provides a chapter in the book titled ‘Notions on Allen Fisher’. A lightly annotated copy of this chapter, with Andrew’s permission, follows below.

1. Because literature is pushed ever more either into the area of saying ‘this is my personality. you like me and I like me’ or into the area of gardening and cookery, there is a need for a work which takes the opposite pole of endeavour and stands up for that. Craving drew the outline of a book which re-imagines society and in which all our thoughts about a different society are released from control and lived out on the broadest possible canvas. It would enact a heroic view of art which takes on all the political radicalism of the era of 1968, and which dissolves the downward weight of history by recounting the past and removing the illusion of inevitability from its open processes. For my generation this function was fulfilled by the work of Allen Fisher.

2. The artistic impact of 'Place' isn't the force of one theme or another but the stripiness, the alternation and recurrence, in the course of a page or a book, of many themes. So it's ABCD A1 B1 C1 E D1 A2 F B3 C3 and so on.

3. There was a conceptual art movement called *Fluxus* in the Sixties; Fisher was involved directly with its European wing, *Fluxshoe*, in the Seventies. By reconstruction, his main interest in the 1960s was in this conceptual art. This came before the start of the poetic project *Place*.² He was more experienced in performance and visual art than in verbal art, and created verbal art, subsequently, using the practices developed for visual and performance art.

What was conceptual art? I don’t really want to define it. A definition is beside the central point of a bolt of energy and of a social atmosphere – a number of people intensely involved with art working and whose capacity for violent enthusiasm or boredom was formative for other people caught up in that atmosphere. Defining just what made them bored or enthusiastic is a forlorn hope – they weren’t that simple and the art works they were reacting to or in weren’t simple either.

Generically, Allen is a conceptual artist and if, in going to exhibitions of conceptual art or reading books about it, you reach a state of understanding its motives and hearing its message, then you are just one step away from being a Fisher expert. Of course, the idea of conceptual art involves building a new concept and set of procedures for each new work.

The process of moving through radically unfamiliar art is a preparation or analogy for moving through a radically unfamiliar life.

In the USA, the conceptual art project began really as a reaction to Cold War propaganda, as an attempt to walk out of the conditioning apparatus and find empty ground. In Britain, conceptual art consisted of disengaging the rules of the middle class project and was linked to acquiring middle class values. Understanding capitalism at the level of firms, families, and individuals was the superordinate goal of an intellectual project. It was linked to a burst of class mobility, an exceptional phase, as it seems. Today this project may be over.

¹ Andrew Duncan. ‘Notions on Allen Fisher’ from, Andrew Duncan. *Nothing is being suppressed – British Poetry of the 1970s* (Swindon: Shearsman Books, 2022), pp. 297-306.

² A collation of the books from the *Place* project into one volume was published in Hastings by Reality Street Editions in 2005 (a second edition appeared in 2016).

There is that strange dream in a Martin Thom poem about simultaneously being the chess player and being the piece on the board. The universities have that strange dual project of teaching students how to criticise society and teaching them how to become middle class adults.

4. We can imagine Fisher as beginning with the idea that William Blake was a great writer and cultural leader, and imagining what a writer in around 1970 who was like Blake would do. This included looking for an alternative physics.

The transition from hippie physics to experimentally based physics is one of the major processes causing Fisher's work to change, over decades. The word hippie is important. The notions of a transformation of everyday life and of radical opposition to values implicit in Western capitalism are basic to Allen's work. If you don't grasp that the whole project loses its meaning. His work takes place completely in a countercultural framework and is a form of living differently as part of a shared intent of changing the way we all live.

5. We can see all this question asking as being like the Parsifal legend. Someone comes out of the forest where they have lived all their life, having been kept away from society in order to protect them.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a branch of sociology called ethnomethodology tried to uncover the rules governing the generation of behaviour (the methodology) of ordinary people in their own view (this was the 'ethnic' bit) by asking the question 'why are you doing that' endlessly. The classic reply was 'you know I have to do that'. But you don't. There is a reason and you can unbury that reason and utter it. Subjects found this process very stressful.

Poets don't like this process. The answer comes to be, interminably, repeatedly, 'because it makes me sound more attractive'. 'I write poems showing myself taking moral decisions because it makes me sound attractive'. The need to bury the basic decisions is all-powerful. It is hard to switch it off even for five minutes. Fisher wrote poems in which explicit processes replace value-judgements. While doing this he opened the question of why society behaves in the way it does.

The conceptual art movement did succeed in explaining why society runs the way it does. But the results got buried.

6. One of the two lead sources underlying *Place* is Charles Olson's *Special Theory of History*.³ The process we see in the text is Fisher developing away from this stage.

This can be seen as a tracking of the main line of poetic modernism: Olson was visibly a disciple of Pound and was trying to develop on from him, Pound was visibly connected to Paris in 1914 and the fabled era of modernism. We can set *Gravity*⁴ and *Place* in a series of large-scale modernist works in which the *Cantos*, *Paterson*, and the *Maximus* poems⁵ are also episodes. Fisher writes about Lambeth in reaction to poems about Paterson, New Jersey, and Gloucester, Massachusetts.

³ Charles Olson. *The Special Theory of History* (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970).

⁴ Allen Fisher. *Gravity as a consequence of shape* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2016).

⁵ Ezra Pound. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1970); William Carlos Williams. *Patterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963); Charles Olson. *The Maximus Poems* (New York: Jargon/Corinth Books, London: Cape Golliard Press, 1960) and Olson. *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (London: Cape Golliard Press, 1968). [University of California published a complete edition of *The Maximus Poems* in 1985.]

7. The other main initial source of 'Place' was Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution in Daily Life*.⁶ Instantly, we get the feeling that Olson had written a history of a community and by extension of the whole of the West but had left out class conflict and the political process in general. The Situationist Vaneigem moves the aim of art resolutely back towards the transformation of everyday life. Everything in 'Place' starts with an individual who has a revolutionary attitude: this is the point of departure for the knowledge process.

Place reclaims the main line of revolutionary form from the figures who had compromised variously because of affluence, egoism, or even a belief in esoteric science, and combined again with revolutionary politics.

Working out the overlaps or non-overlaps between hippies, counter-culture, Situationism, and New Left is probably key to grasping the state of mind of involved people in say 1968-73, including writers, and including Allen Fisher. We will point to this area without entering it. Surely bringing up facts like Ted Heath winning the 1970 general election does not amount to a refutation of revolutionary theses – as opposed to a setback or detour.

8. Conceptual artists published or made available documentation of the idea behind the works – the concept, in fact. The ‘schema’ of *Gravity* is in *Ideas of the Culture Dreamed of*.⁷ The concept of *Place* is at least partly in *Prosuncel* and various notes in the original publications (now reprinted in *Marvels of Lambeth*).⁸

9. The original cover for *Stane*⁹ shows a map of part of London with an inset of a diagram which we find out is a drawing from a photograph of ‘the micro-structure of material about to break’. Inside, an account of rick burning by dispossessed day labourers in a rural economy gripped by a crisis in about 1820. All of these images related to damaged fabric. The text also describes the poet’s migraine, congestion of blood as a consequence of stress – a function perhaps of social damage in the map of London. Sometimes Fisher likes to line similar things up. Accumulating analogies is one rule for generating the text.

10. One principle (in the poems of ‘Shorting Out’)¹⁰) is based on the vitrines made popular by Francis Picabia in the years after the First World War, cases where objects are made into a mysterious new whole by being placed together. Collecting objects by analogy is complemented by a step of grouping objects which are dissimilar and unrelated: disengaging the power of association and freeing it from tradition. Associating is one of the fundamental acts of the mind. Fisher is starting here from objects, as one of the significant components of visual art, and their function as bearers of memory. Arranged in set groups, they instruct us to experience certain memories. But by creating new groupings one can return to the moment when coding is set up and so to a primal freedom.

This departs from the original rule of conceptual art, that is to create visual art which left no objects behind as commodities.

⁶ Raoul Vaneigem. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Practical Paradise Publications, 1972).

⁷ Allen Fisher. *Ideas of the Culture Dreamed of* (London: Spanner, 1983; republished by Pontypridd: The Literary Pocket Book, 2016).

⁸ Allen Fisher. *Prosuncel, blueprint* (Notting Hill, London, Canada and New York, 1975); Andrew Duncan (ed.). Allen Fisher. *The Marvels of Lambeth. Interviews & Statements* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2013).

⁹ Allen Fisher. *Stane. Place Book Three* (London: Aloes Books, London, 1977).

¹⁰ Allen Fisher. ‘Shorting Out’ in *Poetry for Schools* (London: Aloes Books, 1980, issued 1982; reprinted in Allen Fisher, Bill Griffiths and Brian Catling. *Future Exiles* (London: Paladin, 1992).

11. There are ‘rules’ for constructing a volume of verse. Fisher’s ideas involve a shape of the imaginary surface on which the poem is written and a variety of transforms, bending, reconnection, distortion, etc. applied to the surface and so to the poem. The tomb of Bishop Elphinstone in Aberdeen has a poem on it written in Classical Gaelic (although composed in the early 20th C) which begins and ends with the same word (*lige*), an old practice known as *dunadh* or ‘closing’. (A better translation might be *joining* – so castle is *dun* because the walls run right round and join.) Fisher sees the poem as a physical shape on an imaginary object.

If you look at the development of writing, at the spirals, ribbons, etc. on which very early inscriptions run, it emerges that a set-up in which the containing space is a rectangle, lines are all straight, all letters are the same size and colour, the page has straight sides and is always the same size, is the most monotonous and schematic of all possible patterns. The variation of form became sharply reduced in the Iron Age – from roughly 300 BCE. Writing became bound to an imaginary grid, homogeneous and universal. The realm of scrawl and spiral survived in the service of magic.

Spanner is a theoretical magazine which has always explored the suppressed variants at every level of the production of sound and written sound. Allen is the editor. *Spanner* represents the core of theoretical activity in an English poetry scene where most poets refuse theory. Related to this is the sound work *Art of Flight* (there is a tape version of this) which starts out, obviously, from the idea that reproducing a single voice with fidelity to its accidentally present sound characteristics is not compulsory.¹¹ *The Art of Flight* disassembles the idea of attention by positing the idea of a space in which meaning is three-dimensional and distributed universally. Consciousness shows up as a line in a world made of volumes. Momentary flooding gives us the idea of a border which seals consciousness off from unconsciousness – where clarity and suppression are inextricably related. The idea of erasing that line invokes subversion, infinity, transcendence.

12. ‘Gravity’ has a title which starts out with an invisible truth: a body which has its centre of gravity at the centre of an imaginary sphere has ‘down’ and gravity, whereas a body of the same mass arranged in a different way would not have a centre of attraction at its centre. The earth really is a near-sphere – but *n* variant arrangements of mass can be imagined and modelled. The title detours a familiar sentence, that the shape of an organism is the consequence of gravity. This is an example of detouring as an aesthetic gesture: the loss of an owned concept as the moment of liberation – the step into an unknown territory.

Society has a certain shape because we imagine what we are familiar with. Someone could write a long poem whose theme was to re-imagine the social process.

Fisher was impressed, early on, by research disengaging numerical patterns as part of the rules by which *The Faerie Queene* was written. Such patterns recur throughout his work – though not based on the movement of constellations and seasons, as in Spenser.

13. The process preceding the written text of Fisher’s work is one of conceptual interrogation. The text describes the answers and so points back to the questions – which were the structural principle of the work, we can say. It would be pointless to look at this interrogation without emphasizing the process hidden within it, of moving from ‘why is it like this’ to ‘whose interests does this arrangement serve’ and ‘how can we arrange it to better serve the interests of every other living

¹¹ Allen Fisher. *The Art of Flight* in *Paxton’s Beacon* (Todmorden, Lancs.: Arc Publications, 1976; Allen Fisher. *The Art of Flight* and *Blood Bone Brain*, extracts from performances and studio recordings, Typical Characteristics cassette, 1982). An excerpt from *The Art of Flight*, recorded by Chris Carter at the COUM/THROBBING GRISTLE STUDIOS in 1976, and originally issued on cassette by Balsam Flex, on the British Library site. <https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2015/04/probably-not-on-spotify-balsam-flex-cassettes.html> (This is section eight, titled: ‘End of middle and last section of THE ART OF FLIGHT VI, three into four voices, phase shifted’.)

human being'. The initial challenge to arranging a text in regular characters in regular lines on an exactly quadrilateral page is part of a project for overthrowing the ruling class. The ruling class relies on acquired attitudes and it is the people who shed those acquired attitudes who will change society. The point of codifying processes in conceptual art was also and from the very start an attempt to expose and make conscious patterns sunk into the unconscious of society and economy. Recovering how we acquired the rules of capitalist society demonstrates how we could acquire the rules of a completely different society.

14. The exceptional feature of Fisher's work is after all the scale of the structures. The initial questions displace or suppress an area of acquired knowledge, creating a gap. The course of the work is to fill this gap by answering the questions. This involves a movement in depth which makes the domestic lyric poem seem quite trivial. The small-scale structure of the poetry has to be light enough so that when huge quantities of it are built into an architectonic structure it does not put unbearable stresses on the individual parts. To put this another way: the exercise of those stresses has pressed the local design into the pattern, rigorous and buoyant, which it actually possesses.

A Fisher reader has to anthologise the large-scale structures – the ones which represent themselves at actual size.

15. A good deal of Fisher's work involves evaluating objects. His approach is more like art history than literary criticism. The piece in *Unpolished Mirrors* ('Morale Confusion')¹² on a decorated ceiling is a good example of this: "Spurt of Juno's milk into night sky/ silver coins/ Milky Way in idealised universe//visible equinoctial colure/ celestial north south connected/ uninterrupted broad Watling Street/ intersecting eclipses' field/ equatorial crossroads/ axes uniting galactic avenues/ centring noble embraces". He lacks the background of classroom literary criticism in which most English poets developed their idea of the poem and what its limits are. Gazing at the means of traditional poetry so intently made it impossible for people to see that poetry could have quite other ends.

I think we have to say that a great deal of poetry written in England in the late 20th C is very similar. Also that, after the first 15,000 pages or so of this English standard, the effects are convergent, converging specifically on losing any effect at all.

Language is built on norms. A phoneme is a statistical norm, and pronouncing the sound short a in an eccentric way hinders understanding. Words have conventional sound shapes and conventional values. But we can doubt that this normality was equally good when it was applied to the construction of poems and the presentation of the self speaking them. Talking in a certain way signalled, rather accurately, that the speaker was educated and belonged to a certain social spectrum. At maximum the operation of literature was to signal the presence of someone bearing certain forms of prestige – a photograph of someone recognisable. People were led to discount the value of this proposed good by the observation that it went along with apathy and unwillingness to carry out more energetic operations such as dealing with the *unknown*. The more the writer and engaged readers desired the educated or insider role, the less interest they had in anything else. The present of the text was squeezed out by the past of acquired and licensed knowledge. The self was reduced to the boundaries of a social role. We can see this question of convergence as a mathematical problem – in which the information value of new texts slowly sinks to zero and is replaced by recognition and recurrence.

At some boundary in artistic space there is a shift whereby predictability ceases to be a source of clarity and starts to be a source of dullness and dankness. The exact location of this boundary is of great interest.

¹² Allen Fisher. *Unpolished Mirrors* (London: Spanner, serial format 1979-80, collated edition 1981; republished in *PLACE*, 2005), pp. 352-353.

16. In part 4 of *Place* we hear an 18th century story set in a wood in Lambeth (Norwood) where a man, Samuel Matthews, eccentric and possibly with learning difficulties of some kind, lives alone in a hut in the wood and makes a living by gardening. Matthews has cognitive difficulties; the story is told in his language, incomplete but expressive, retained as an act of respect to him. It tells that the owners of the wood had an argument with him about the right to firewood: ‘And College Warden come/ ask how I dare to sell wood/ I don’ know it is your wood’. (That is, Dulwich College.) A few years later, in 1802, he was murdered, possibly by people who thought he had money. This is a point where Fisher overlaps with a wider area of English writing, because we can imagine quite a few writers telling this story. It is there because it is part of the history of Lambeth, which is the overarching subject of *Place*, but it is also thematic because it is a degree zero: it shows how someone can live as a drop-out, in a hut of furze and branches, and almost outside the exchange system. It is a fable about how space becomes property: the wanderer has no notion that the land on which he lives also belongs to someone. The whole history of appropriation is profoundly unequal and is threadbare in its claim to be consensual. It is fundamental to the recorded and hoarded knowledge of society, and the project of acquiring great knowledge is threatened by the possibility of excessively internalising, in doing so, the ascriptions of property and the rights of the powerful. The theme of *Place* is also how artificial divisions of time bind people into acquired patterns of anxiety, energy, and exhaustion; and how artificial divisions of space bind people into rigid patterns of movement. Through all the detail we glimpse a pristine and blank field underlying everything, something infinitely permissive, boundless, undamaged. Another story in *Place* is that of Roger Pike (parts 42 and 44), confined in a home as a child perhaps around 1820:

Roger Pike ‘housed’ in Elder Road
for breaking church music
misspelling ‘guard’

‘Clean up the centre...
‘Sugar dust the page ...
‘Move out the feeble...

Herbert Spencer, Malthus, Cyril Burt
Rockefeller debudding minor blooms in the rosary¹³

– seen as a victim of classification – humans bound into rigid patterns as objects of knowledge just as property titles bind the originally blank land into plots. Roger was placed in the House of Industry for the Infant Poor in Elder Road. The thinkers named were fans of eugenics, the restriction of births, the hereditary nature of intelligence.

17. Mainstream poetry has been reformed. The old middle class has become less fanatical about the boundaries of its territory. Yet a work like *Gravity* is as divergent from the literary norms of 2012 as it was when being designed around 1981. It gives us a vision of what poetry is by denying the rules, which are exposed as we remember, in this wholly new, wholly designed, linguistic space, what they were. Through *ostranenie* (making strange) we detect the rules of literary endeavour – as a preliminary to uncovering the rules by which society is composed. In this outside, we see the negative outline of the mainstream; the edge of what always presents itself as inevitable.

18. An alternative to lyric, the biography of sentiments, is constructivism. In this, rather than reproducing situations from ordinary experience, the artist creates situations from constructed rules and then reacts to the unexpected circumstances brought about by the hidden possibilities of those rules. Fisher’s theme might be said to be the power of rules to generate the unforeseen, and the

¹³ Allen Fisher. *Place* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2005), p. 243.

animating force of his work is the moment when a new and strange pattern becomes visible as the dice come to a halt. Part of the definition of a game is that it can be run multiple times and that it can be reset to the starting point, unaltered, after being played. But games are just a subset of rule-driven behaviour, for example language can also be defined as the repeated application of a finite set of rules.

This is distinct from the notion of authenticity whereby the poem reproduces the poet's personality, the documentary view. It seems to have more potential. Many people don't have very interesting personalities. Things that actually happen might reveal principles or they might make them invisible because they are so familiar. If you look at a large amount of contemporary poetry based on 'domestic anecdote' principles you may well conclude that they are ineffective and worn out. Whereas using preset rules immediately makes social rules visible by breaking them. Why should something be significant just because you walked into it? or how is it that so many thousands of poets lead such boring lives? why make a record of this?

Place describes the old roads leading through Lambeth (mainly). This is a melody on reiteration – the road was not originally different from the rest of the land surface, but was worn into a road by being walked on many times by travellers. Tiny initial differences become the features dividing the world into substances, over millions of iterations. The journey reinforces the route.

19. As a critic, I know of poets who can be described economically because they have a small set of procedures and recycle them multiple times. If you describe the procedures you get to a vast number of poems in a brief prose statement. This only works for poets who are obstinate about their procedures. Someone like Fisher has made the rules as flexible as the instances. He does not want to depress the procedures to the unconscious level, where they are reliable and just keep cycling.

20. I was searching for analogies to Allen Fisher. J.H. Prynne & Iain Sinclair spring to mind. This just foregrounds the problem of analogy – and so of literary terminology, which presupposes valid analogies supporting its units of meaning and distinction. A comparison with visual artists of the same generation might be more productive.

I have a copy of *intermediate spirit receiver*, an A4 stapled object on yellow paper, published by Zonne Heft (undated, but 1980). It is credited to Ulli McCarthy but is actually Allen writing in Ulli's style, a sort of tribute. This is just an example of how prolific Allen was and of how natural his writing was. There is a specific aura, affecting my whole state of being, about A4 photocopied work of the 1970s. They sum up what I miss. The problems with distributing such products – bookshops never displayed them, they really just sold on stalls I think – give an outline justification for reprinting the work in more robust form. Also – the sheer fluency of Fisher's output, a productivity rooted in 'flow', in a whole state of mind. Piling up many of these works suggests an excuse for not being complete – we can afford to leave stuff out. One thing about *Spirit Receiver* is that it lets the social language around Allen break in for a while – suggesting, for me anyway, that the whole of these projects is a social thing, that their energy is that of a conversation and that it is what everyone was thinking (and not just Allen). It works as a history of ideas – flows in a shared intellectual life. This is more accurate than a description as 'autobiographical'. Fisher essentially does not believe that intelligence is also property. Did I say everyone – no, just the people who found their way to certain rooms and read those stapled photocopied books.