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*Introduction:* As the 2010s progressed, Alice continued to write. In 2011, she published *Songs and Stories of the Ghouls* and was awarded the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize in 2015. The following interview – conducted my own professor, Dr. Nick Sturm, here at the Georgia Institute of Technology – was conducted in the late 2010s.

**Seeing the Future: A Conversation with Alice Notley**

Nick Sturm

Listening to recordings of poets reading is something I do every day. The recordings leave the voices in you, all their various textures in and next to this world, and then, hopefully, they crop up in dreams. It's such an intuitive way to study. Fonograf Editions, a vinyl record-only poetry press, has released recordings by Eileen Myles and Rae Armantrout, as well as Alice Notley's Live in Seattle. I spoke with Alice on the occasion of this new LP. Because she is an incredibly funny person, my only regret is that this transcript can't show the amount that we laughed during the conversation.

**NS:** In the recording of the reading in Seattle you talk about having to read *Certain Magical Acts* to make sure it's good because you hadn't given a full-length reading from it yet. I've heard you say things like that in the past. There's a reading at Buffalo in the late 1980s where you say, "I'm not very good at explanation, but I really like to read."
 **AN:** I said I'm not very good?

**NS:**You said you're not very good at explanation.

**AN:** Oh, no. I'm not.

**NS:**What happens when you perform your work in front of an audience? What's the necessity of reading in your voice in time?

**AN:** It's always been a large part, it's a large part of things, although I go long periods of time without reading because I live in Paris, so I don't get to read very much so I get very pent up actually with what I need to read and when I go to the United States and give a reading I kind of explode.

But the first time I gave a reading I noticed it was really important. I didn't have a lot of work. It was 1970, and Ted [Berrigan] put this reading on for me at Yale and I had all these pieces of paper with poems on them that were possibly not good and I rehearsed the reading for a long time, you know, for a couple of weeks before the reading. I gave the reading and I think I was doing something like an actress. For me it was like a dramatic presentation and that was the way I did it. Ted was totally blown away by the way I read and he always was after that. That was always the way I did it and I don't know why it happened that I was a person that would do it that way. But I was. And I am.

The vocal presentation is always in my head when I'm writing, a particular sense of space and presentation, process—whatever the current buzzwords are for that kind of thing—performance is what people say. It's all a performance. But these words are very inaccurate to what happens.

**NS:**There's a kind of movement in the space of the reading that's hard to describe.

**AN:** Every work has a shape. I work in a lot of different kinds of forms and a lot of the poems are long. I'm aware of using musical forms. I'm quite influenced by the symphonic form, for example, the sonata form. But I feel it's really necessary to make as much of the formal construction of it as I can obvious and at the same time there's an intimacy going on that has to do with the use of the human voice and the fact that one is talking to others and there's the possibility of having some sort of enormous performance thing happen, as if performing a play.

**NS:**It sometimes seems like people talk about readings as advertisements for their work or books. But your description resonates with an idea of what readings could be.

**AN:** It's like reading them is going on at the same as writing them. All of the existence of the poem is going on at the same time. You're writing it and you're reading it and other people are reading it and all of that is one thing. I was in an MFA program and then I was in New York with the New York School and they were kind of casual about reading. I was different from them about reading. I was different from all of them. I read differently from how Ted read, but Ted would set up poems because he didn't always have a lot of poems. I always have too many words. But he wouldn't have a lot of new poems so he would make a very long speech before he read the poem and you would be on edge as to whether or not he was going to read it. He would be totally entertaining you all the time and then suddenly he would read the poem and it was like "Here, here's my present." There was the poem, and it was different. Bob Creeley did a kind of similar thing where he would be talking and talking and talking then all of a sudden his voice would change and you would hear it become a poem. It was magical.

**NS:**That brings to mind this one reading at Naropa where Ted is looking for a poem he wants to read and he can't find it in his stack of papers. He stops narrating the little story he's telling and suddenly says, "Alice, where's that poem?" and you're in the background saying, "I don't know where it is!" It's so dynamic and textured. You're not just presenting these works on paper, you're making them into this whole environment with other people. You get that from the recording on the album.

**AN:** I actually had terrible allergies that day [in Seattle]. I'd had just a terrible allergy attack and I was totally congested. I remember thinking I was blowing various parts of various poems. But I had a really good time. It never seems to matter. You always seem to plow right through all that. But if you do it in a studio they make you repeat lines and words and sounds. They hear every time you go nasal or do a vowel or a diphthong wrong. Then you become so self-conscious that you can't read. I have done this. It made me completely crazy. This record is more like jazz where you just work with it. That's why the album is called *Live in Seattle*. It's like a jazz album.

**NS:**It makes me think about how poets would use vinyl recordings of poets reading in classrooms to teach. Ted would do this often.

**AN:** Yeah, those were LPs and also we played tapes. We had a lot of cassettes of poets reading things and he would play those. I had a collection of those for a long time and I used to use them for teaching. You get so much out of hearing the poet's voice. It's a whole new presentation of the poem, to the extent that I often wonder what I lack by not having heard Keats.

**NS:**Before *Certain Magical Acts* came out you sent me a note saying this is your most recent book but you didn't know if being recent matters anymore. I wonder what you think about the idea of recentness.

**AN:** At a certain point I realize what my next book needs to be. But I have a lot of manuscripts. *Certain Magical Acts* is odd because it wasn't written as a book. My last several books have been written as books, whereas *Certain Magical Acts* is composed of poems that are kind of in-between books. Then there's a long sequence in the middle, "Voices," which I thought was going to be book-length but part of it was in prose and I took out the prose and it suddenly wasn't book-length anymore. It took up the space in my life that writing a book-length poem takes. I wrote it in 2009 right after the election and there was this diary in it that was kept by a woman in some long ago past. It was this prose diary and somehow keeping the diary of this character enabled me to get from poem to poem. Then I realized the diary was of no interest and I pulled it all out. There's still a narrative structure behind it, kind of like muted notes.

**NS:**One of the things I'm noticing reading *Certain Magical Acts* is that everyone thinks that they understand what change is, but actually no one understands what change is. That seems to me to push through the whole book.
 **AN:** I hadn't thought it, I hadn't thought about it at all. But one is being change all the time, and one is the change. What you have to do is to keep up with what you're doing as a poet, you have to keep up with what you're thinking and doing and go to the exact—it's corny to say "moment"—the exact texture of things. I'm usually about ten years ahead of everybody else so if I'm publishing what I wrote ten years ago then I'm current.

**NS:**That's your one submission—like alright I'll take a ten-year break for everybody.

**AN:** I'm afraid if I took a break I wouldn't write anymore. I never stop writing and I now have been writing so much that I'm totally inundated. I can't keep track of it. But *Certain Magical Acts* was really interesting because I knew those works had to be published but I didn't know how to do it because I hadn't been making collections for a long time. Then I realized I had them all. There are two really important ones that I wrote all at once, I think in 2009 and 2010, "I Went Down There" and "Blinding the White Horse in Front of Me." I wrote "Blinding the White Horse in Front of Me" first then I wrote "I Went Down There." It was right after my mother broke her hip and I came back from Needles and I wrote them just kind of straight out as if they were dictated to me. Then I didn't read them for a few years. I didn't know what to do with them. I started reading half of "I Went Down There" in public and then I started reading a truncated version of "Blinding the White Horse in Front of Me." But it took me a long time to work up to reading them, to have the nerve to read them actually. It's odd to talk about but they were totally dictated to me. They were different from what I was writing but now everything seems to fit together.

**NS:**I'm curious about how your work as a whole is talked about. There's a way in which it's started to sound like *The Descent of Alette* is the beginning of your career…

**AN:** That's the MFA thing!

**NS:**…when there are more than 20 years of work before that.

**AN:** And a tremendous amount of work afterwards. But then there are always the books that are emphasized because you teach it, you know, and you teach it every year because you don't want to learn another one.

**NS:**That's about loyalty, right, about loyalty to certain narratives or about specialization. What do you think about the way your work gets talked about as if it's these two halves?

**AN:** It's not even that it's two halves. It's that nobody wants to take it all on. Everyone's really fucking lazy. They want me to be one thing. They want to pin down everybody and they want them to be one thing that they can call confessional or experimental or whatever. And I tried them all out because I just have to. And I'm not one thing. Hardly anyone does me justice therefore.

**NS:**Do you feel that moves your new work in different directions? We've talked before about the difficulty of having to remember and account for so much in a life, about how one person can only hold so much.

**AN:** I'm trying to hold it all. I have to hold it all because the point at which I arrived at writing as a woman, women had done small things. A lot of the work that the few women did was very good. But it was like each person did one thing. We didn't have the entire tradition behind us and I tried to put it all into me. I've just been kind of doing that. There was a point where I went to the epic because it was the earliest. It's held up as the great form and it's also the earliest form. I sort of tried to go through the entire history of poetry in myself, but not in order. That would be extremely boring. That would be like writing *Ulysses*. There also seemed to me to be so much to do. It still seems that way. I don't feel as if I'm doing it for people anymore. I feel as if I'm doing it out in the cosmos.

I think that most people think that they have to have a linear progression that makes sense and that they have to be loyal to some one thing or some one aesthetic. But my life hasn't made that possible for me. I've had to create what I've done out all of changes I've gone through and all of the different places I've lived, the different people I've lived with. I mean here I am sitting in Paris fifty years later and how did I get here? I don't know. But being here has required a lot of changes, too. But I think I still have the same voice as I did in the beginning.

**NS:**Something similar was said about Ashbery, I think, that there was this voice at the beginning and this voice at the end, and there was this kind of startling continuity, even if everything has changed.

**AN:** He was always the same! Always the same but each book was this surprise. It was so great to have these last books coming out. I looked forward with such pleasure to his books.

**NS:**What does it mean to be irreducible?

**AN:** Oh, well, everything is. That's the problem with the thing between a university and the people who are working in the field. The university's job is to be conservative, it's their job. They're supposed to say things and hold onto them and teach them and make sure that they're handed on from generation to generation.

The poet's job is this entirely other thing. It's to respond to what's going on right now at the same time as knowing everything already that the university is teaching. It's a very hard job and you don't get paid for it. I've only recently come to see that the world doesn't think very highly of me. I always thought that I would get a great deal of respect for being a poet but then the world really does only respect people whose work is monetary. It's sort of like being a trainspotter or something. I think that's how they think of you, that you're being a trainspotter. I've always thought that it was the greatest thing anyone could be and I thought that everybody must know that it was the greatest thing that anyone could be, that that was what I was trying to do. My parents were willing to go along with me because they were from an earlier generation and even though neither one of them went to college and my father didn't graduate from high school, they respected poetry and it had an aura.

**NS:**How do you feel about putting out a record that's a physical material thing instead of digital recordings floating around the internet, like on PennSound? You have to get the record and sit in one place with it. You can't be on your computer or have it on your phone and carry it around and listen to it on the train. You have to be in place with yourself or other people.

**AN:** I grew up with a turntable. It's the form that I'm most used to music in. For me that experience has totally disappeared. I don't listen to music anymore. But I have a lot in my head the way I have a lot of poetry in my head. I have it going on all the time.

When I was young and living in this town in the desert we had to entertain each other and it was amazing like when there was a phonograph or something, then there was a radio, and then when I was 10 we got TV. But TV was never as good as these other things were. People had to play their own music and people gave recitations and things like that. People sang. You weren't necessarily very good but this is the kind of thing you did because there wasn't anyone else to do it for you. My first memories are of people kind of doing it more for each other.

**NS:**I'm not sure if there are examples of you singing in poems, but I'm thinking of Ted's poem "Cranston Near the City Line" where he sings in the middle of it.

**AN:** He was a terrible singer!

**NS:**Yes! But it's so beautiful, only a few lines:

Alice and Nick sing:

"She told me that she loved me, but
      that was yesterday. She told me
that she loved me, & then
      she went away!"

**NS:**"I didn't know it must have been a sad song, for somebody!" he says next.

**AN:** Yes, I do this in many poems but you don't know where it is because you haven't heard me perform enough because I don't get to do it very much. But I have a lot of poems where there are songs. There are two songs at the end of *Alma, or The Dead Women* that I dreamed. I dreamed the words and music and then I put them into *Alma*. So when I read them I sing. I always remember the melody but I have no idea how I was able to dream a song and dream a melody and remember it because I've never composed anything. I don't know how to compose.

**NS:**It was just there for you.

**AN:** It was there. That's one of my most mystical experiences, that I dreamed songs. I dreamed three songs, actually. They were concentrated around the *Alma* experience. Two of them are in *Alma* and one of them is like an outtake.

**NS:** A B-side. There are all the places in *Certain Magical Acts* where a manuscript talks to you.

**AN:** Yes, there's a talking manuscript in "FOUND WORK (lost lace)." It's a manuscript that's been found that's talking to you except that there's no one alive to find it.

**NS:**Is that the future?

**AN:** That's the future. That's the future, babe.

**NS:**It's the point where, when you've made so many books, of course manuscripts are talking to you. I like that it's a manuscript and not a book. There's an unfinishedness.

**AN:** It's an artifact and it's kind of torn up, called "lost lace." It's supposed to look like it's torn. As usual I didn't realize what I was doing for a few pages then I had to keep with it. I wrote part of it in Needles and there are a couple of references in it that are somewhat hidden, like the Sno Cone Palace.

**NS:**What have you been dreaming about?

**AN:** I haven't been dreaming. I stopped dreaming. I seemed to have brought my entire subconscious up to the conscious level. There doesn't seem to be anything for me to work out in my dreams. But there's something going on. I am dreaming but I can't remember anything. I think I've got everything going on on one level now. It's a little frightening.

**NS:**The sense of being uncontainable.

**AN:** Well, there aren't any borders. What people have been doing for the last couple million years has been creating these mental compartments so they won't have dreams spilling over into regular life, that sort of thing. I have this experience where I dream at the same time that I'm awake. It's really irritating. Everyone always says it must be wonderful but it isn't, it's terrible. There's a whole part of civilization that's dedicated itself to walling off certain parts of the psyche. That's why we know nothing, we know nothing at all. All we know how to do is to make new machines. That is the death of us.

**NS:**I had a really strange dream once that I was explaining Ted's poems to Carson Daly.

**AN:** Who is that?

**NS:**He used to work for MTV. He did the show *Total Request Live*, you know the top ten music videos. That was my scholarship dream. Talking about Ted with an MTV personality.

I was re-reading "Voices" in *Certain Magical Acts* and looking back through your books from the 70s and 80s thinking about "Voices," which made something that's really clear become totally irreducible—that all of your work has been about voices. Poems like "September's Book" and all the poems that are the voices of the kids and you and Ted talking. It's always been voices, voices, voices.

**AN:** It is what I've always done. I started out as a fiction writer. I went to Iowa as a fiction writer and I read a lot of novels. I was always interested in the relation of conversation to movement and place and what conversation was, how different real conversation was from the way it was presented in books. I got really interested in presenting what was going on around me all the time in terms of voices. As I always say, I had to or else I wouldn't have been able to write down anything during the years when we lived on St. Marks Place.

I was getting so much at that point from novelists. I was still doing that. I was getting a lot from Kerouac. I was getting a lot from Henry Green, the novelist that John Ashbery did his Columbia thesis on. I was reading George V. Higgins, a crime novelist who presented in terms of people talking in Boston and making these little spellings for the ways people say things. They're completely filthy books! I remember reading all of Andy Warhol's *A* when it came out in 1969. I read the whole thing. It's just so wigged out! It was so great to read what they were saying and I could never understand them. I really liked opaque books of voices. I really liked all the John le Carré novels, the Smiley books. I couldn't understand anything that was going on in them and I would just kind of read them. It was this very pure reading experience! And then, theoretically, very important things were going on, including the fall of governments and things like that. But, you know, it was just these people talking in this strange spy language.

I've kept that sense of the mystery of communication with me throughout my oeuvre. But when I moved here I couldn't write down things people said anymore because I really didn't know the language. Now it kind of seeps in but I have to translate it into English and it sort of goes back and forth. It's weird to deal with it. After 25 years it's becoming a little more natural. I'm sure my brain has changed.

**NS:**I've been thinking of *Grave of Light: New and Selected Poems* as this evidence of your devotion to uncommon sources. They weren't uncommon to you, they were just what you were involved with, and they were always present. You never pushed them back for another concern or something literary.

**AN:** I always thought that my sources were obvious. I was sure they were obvious the way John Ashbery was always sure that whatever he was saying was obvious. I've always thought that at least everybody who I was dealing with who was a poet would know what they were, but actually that's not the case either. I was always sure that university people would know, but they never seem to know at all!

By the way, are you going to transcribe this interview yourself?

**NS:**Yes, I like getting into the process of transcribing.

**AN:** Oh, I did that, too. It was one of the influences on my using voices. I had a summer job doing transcriptions for Radio Free Europe when I was 20. I found myself transcribing various interviews with people over the years. I can't remember what they all were, but I did it for a summer job.

**NS:**Was that when you were in New York for college?
 **AN:** When I was in New York in college and I was just starting to write. I had written some stories and then I found myself transcribing for Radio Free Europe an interview with Frank Sinatra.

**NS:**No!

**AN:** Yes! They wanted records of their radio interviews that they were sort of flooding the communist world with trying to bring down communism. They were great interviews. Someone like Frank Sinatra was really bright and very articulate.

**NS:**The process is great because you pick up all of these different prosodies.

**AN:** Oh yeah, people talk so differently from each other.

**NS:**What have you been working on?

**AN:** I had the cancer experience and I started writing this set of poems. I was trying to figure out what I had been doing for the last 17 years life-wise because it didn't seem as if anything had happened to me except for a couple of serious illnesses. So I wrote these somewhat autobiographical poems for about six months. They're interesting because I discovered I couldn't write about the past 17 years without referring to the years before. I couldn't write about anything without stacking time up. Like experiences up on top of each other. It's sort of like redoing *Mysteries of Small Houses* from now [in Paris] but in this way where the poems are more casually formed. I don't know how to describe it.

When I was writing *Mysteries of Small Houses* I wasn't sure about the last part because I didn't really know how to write about having moved here and being in my life with Doug [Oliver]. I think there was something I was seeing in the future which is that he would die. But I didn't know how I knew that. I was sort of not letting myself know I knew that kind of thing.

I think people are always seeing the future.

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Alice Notley has published over forty books of poetry, including (most recently) *Benediction*, *Negativity's Kiss*, and *Certain Magical Acts*. She lives in Paris, France.

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