

KAREN MAC CORMACK

Karen Mac Cormack's work is an open challenge to the *habitual* in reading. She risks the unfamiliar by resorting to the minimum of linguistic devices (there are, for instance, no similes and few metaphors in her work). As a whole her writing represents a courageous exploration of the possibilities opened up to poetry when we jettison the traditional expectancy that a poem's semantic fabric be integrative and regulated grammatically. Her texts flatly repudiate consumption, demanding to be encountered as networks of material resistance and indeterminate reader opportunities. In her poetry (and this is its singular brilliance as well as its sociological importance) the element of meaning *is not assumed but earned* in readerly struggles across stretches of deliberate cognitive dissonance. The temporal encounter with meaning is restricted to extremely *local* levels, where language unfolds *as itself* in striking adjacencies and where words call interrogative attention to themselves as sensuous, cognitive events. Mac Cormack additionally employs an extensive range of vocabularies to powerful effect. She applies the profound understanding that words are neither a-historical nor instrumentally innocent but rather enter usage via prior social codings (patriarchal, subaltern, medical, colonial, domestic, to mention but a few). As a consequence her poems never read as if they were issuing from a unitary subject or "voice," but from an overdetermined social space, in fragments that carry the traces of previous usage and desires. It is this, more than anything, that renders her poems unparaphraseable. Although she never theorizes her writing, Mac Cormack's preferences are obvious: opacity rather than transparency; the material resistance of words over their use as syntactic units of transit; the value of semantic labour over the easy consumption of a meaning and linguistic force above form.

— Steve McCaffery

