



**VISIBLE LANGUAGE 35.1**

A special issue

# voicimage

VISIBLE LANGUAGE 35.1

GUEST EDITOR Enzo Minarelli

A special issue

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**004 Preface**

**005 Foreword**

Enzo Minarelli

**006 The Word of Poetry, Sounds of the Voice and Technology**

Mario Costa, Italy

**012 True Heritage: The Sound Image in Experimental Poetry**

Harry Polkinhorn, United States

**020 Technology, Polypoetry and the Aura of Poly-performance**

Nicholas Zurbrugg, United Kingdom

**036 Visible Language, Audible Language, Inarticulable Language and the "Supplementary Signifier"**

Nicholas Zurbrugg, United Kingdom

**048 A Soundscape of Contemporary Hungarian Poetry**

Endre Szkárosi, Hungary

**064 Experimental Poetics Based on Sound Poetry Today**

Philadelpho Menezes, Brazil

**076 Experimental Poetry in Barcelona during the 1990s**

Lis Costá, Spain

**092 Relations Between Sound Poetry and Visual Poetry:  
The path from the optophonetic poem to multimedia text**

Christian Scholz, Germany

**104 The Singing Blackbird: voices images, technology in polypoetry**

Enzo Minarelli

**116 The Manifesto of Polypoetry**

Enzo Minarelli

## PREFACE

**This special issue of *Visible Language*** may appear to be a departure from the journal's stated mission of examining "visible" language. As mentioned previously (*Visible Language* 34.2, 198-219), I believe we are in a period of re-examination of acoustic and visible language presentation as mediated by the technological possibilities of using simultaneously visual and acoustic channels. This issue presents an exploratory sample of sound poets or polypoets along with their critics and theorizers; it should be examined *in contrast* to visible language.

Because this is an interdisciplinary journal that bridges science and art, technology which is both the practical outcome of science and an instrument for art production required scrutiny from both perspectives. Here the interests of art in new technology are examined. Separated from everyday interests, art is free to openly explore the range of expressive action that other disciplines may find restricted. *Visible Language* is interested in these open explorations for the insights they can produce.

So in this issue the reader will find an unusual topic, sound, coupled with live performance, as mediated by technical manipulation and even technical amplification of the human body at its most corporeal moments. The reader/viewer is encouraged to consider the solitude of the silent reader, the generation of mental image, the problem of translation from one medium to another, the print, screen and live performance, the challenges of time and space in communication generation and storage for on demand use.

**Sharon Poggenpohl**  
January 2001

## FOREWORD

# VOICIMAGE

an international collection of essays about sound and image in contemporary poetical experimentalism

**Voicimage** is an apt neologism in the field of poetic experimentalism for the new century.

Voicimage is a symbiotic union of two parts (voice and image) that have suffered from great attraction, as well as from great rejection. The ideas and typical practices of the historical avant-gardes (futurism, dada, surrealism) necessarily attempted a reconciliation, which has never been completely fulfilled due more to a technological gap than for lack of creative will. Today, as we seem capable of almost any achievement, we can reach for aesthetic utopias, since we have technology for all purposes.

However, perhaps it is unwise to overly praise such a found paradise of electro-technical delights. Technology is undoubtedly important, but the concrete use of these new technical means to attach novelty to the poetic work is simply inadequate. Between the end of the past century and the beginning of this one, there has been a sudden jump forward with regard to the progress of technology, but one cannot say the same about the ability of written poetic projects, or about the patience needed for inventing fascinating new procedures in sound-poetry performance.

Traveling throughout the world, as performers or sound-poetry experts, it appears that an excess or lack of technology ruins the original idea of the poem. In other words, it is easy to recognize old patterns belonging to lettrism, or *poesia visiva*, or the futurists' *parolibere* works, re-employed inside an extremely sophisticated frame, or worse, re-used like a modern

epigone. This collection of essays draws attention to the operative nucleus of the act of poetry. Technology is at the service of what once was called aesthetics, not vice versa. It is important to establish the right order of poetic praxis, using the right instrument once one has got a clear structure for the poem itself: first, what one wants to say; second, how one wants to say it.

That's why I have chosen the binomial *voicimage*, the key elements of a dialogue where what is universally considered the antidote to all the artistic contamination, that is, *fusion*, in fact does not happen. Such a declaration, the mainstay on which all theory called "polypoetry" is based, holds that the voice must retain its own supremacy, its unchallenged role of protagonist, opening itself to a dialogue with images and the languages of other media, without losing its first denotatum.

The voice is connected to the body, to the living presence of the poet. The image is the visual consequence of the technology employed in the act of poetry. They are surely the two main components through which future experimental poetry will develop.

Once the printed page has forever been left behind, a special kind of poetry will abandon the static aspect of writing and the printed image in order to be performed live in front of an audience. We advocate poetry not done for consumption in private, from book to reader or from screen to receiver, but a poetry that is within an involving, exciting, ultimately free and spectacular process.

Enzo Minarelli  
April 8, 2000.

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The **Word Sounds**  
of **Poetry,** of the **Voice**  
and **Technology**

**In his aesthetics lessons** held between 1817 and 1829, Hegel sought to differentiate “poetry” and “music,” which were both related to the arts of “sound.” Hegel says: “The sound, the extreme, exterior material of poetry is no more the feeling which resounds (as happens with music), but a sign without a meaning,”<sup>1</sup> that’s, “sound as a simple sign useful for intuitions and interior representations”<sup>2</sup> in poetry, “the sound becomes word as a phoneme in itself, whose function lies in giving sense to representations and thoughts.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1923 Victor Sklovskij wrote: “One cannot say that each literary work has got contents, as everybody knows that the real origins of poetry are marked by absence of contents. The songs of the indios [indians], say, in the British Guiana, are only based on ‘heja, heja.’” Also meaningless are the songs of Patagonians and Papuasians, some North American tribes. Form preceeded content. The singer didn’t want to communicate a specific idea by means of words, but aimed to build a series of sounds and among them found a perfectly justified link, called form,<sup>4</sup> and earlier, in 1916, in a very important, essay, Sklovskij had written: “men need words apart from their being meaningful . . . [maybe] in the special dance of the parts of the tongue, there is all the pleasure provoked by poetry.”<sup>5</sup>

**What happened? Which events caused such a sudden, total change? Why are the borders between “poetry” and “music” so shortened? Why has the pregnancy of the word left the area of signified for that of signifier?**

The desire to include poetry within music was evident: in a famous letter, dated July 2, 1844, Edgar Allen Poe wrote: “I’m really sensitive to music, ... Music is the perfection of soul and the essence of poetry. The undetermined impression generated by music ... ought to be the purpose of the whole poetry.”<sup>6</sup> Verlaine, in *Art poetique*, 1882, suggested: “First of all, music, ... music, again and again, once more music.” And Mallarmé, in 1895, concluded: “we are looking for ... a kind of art which is able to bring into Poetry the symphony ... let’s forget the old-fashioned distinction between Music and Poetry ... I run the risk of such a statement: that Music and Poetry are the opposite sides of the same phenomenon.”<sup>7</sup> Hopkins, the greatest victorian poet, because of the high level of his experimentalism considered a father of modern poetry, wrote all his poems under an overwhelming amount of musical research. In one of these, Spelt from Sybil’s leaves,<sup>8</sup> he said: “About this sonnet, but that is true for all my poetry, please, remember that it has been written ... just to be said, said means not to read it with the help of the eye, but to read it aloud, slowly, poetically ... with long pauses, stopping along the rhymes and also into the stressed syllables, so on. This sonnet should be sung: this rhythm carefully analyzed, should be the stolen one.”<sup>9</sup>

Many critics and aesthetic scholars are writing a real “musical review of literature,” whereas others try to argue about what was supposed to have been Nietzsche’s point of view.<sup>10</sup> The German philosopher may have shared the idea that poetry was born

through a certain, interior, musical feeling, which searches for its own words (sonority) and its own images (thoughts/meanings):<sup>11</sup> it seems that such a view was also supported by the abbot Henri Bremond in *La poésie pure*, 1925, issued with other critical essays in 1926,<sup>12</sup> and above all, a short but very important essay written by Jan Mukarovsky in *The motor process in poetry*, which appeared in the period between 1926 and 1929,<sup>13</sup> which identifies the “motor process” or (interior rhythm) as any kind of poetic creation starting with a “sound current.” He says: **“the phonetical aspect acts not only in parallel with other parts of the text, but it operates towards them as a direct influence.”**<sup>14</sup>

But, let’s pay attention. “Musicalization” and “sonorization” are well separated concepts: speaking of “musicality in the line,” one means that the relationship between signified and signifier is so closed that the meaning is expected to be suggested also by the sounds of the words; the “sonorization” breaks, on the contrary, any links between signified and signifier, and it employs only “the sound signifier” as a self-meaningful material.

The passage from “musicalization” to “sonorization,” despite any declared intention of mysticism or pseudo-scientism, lies with the idea of “verbal structure” developed by Renè Ghil in *Traité du verbe* in 1886, and about which Mallarmè wrote, in *Avant-dire*: **“something else ... something musical rises,” bringing to an end “the isolation of the word.”**<sup>15</sup> Ghil introduces in poetical composition (apart from the prejudice of the synaesthesia — the correspondence between sounds and colors) words taken from any kind of dictionary and meaningless neologisms to open the way to the future, abstract declamation and consequently mark the beginning of the long history of “sound poetry.”

## **And then, the question from the beginning, is still relevant: what has happened? Why is the pregnancy of the word so totally changed from signified to signifier?**

An answer could be the following: Herbart’s aesthetics, unlike Hegel’s, were based on “meaning” and “symbol,” art as a pure chain of forms. All that was due also to the influence of a professor, first at Prague University, then in Wien, Robert Zimmermann, who followed Herbart’s theories.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a group of thinkers, more or less influenced by Herbart and Zimmermann, ignoring the more general philosophical view still alive in their research, re-plan the role of arts under a formalist perspective. The start was given by *The musical beauty*, an extraordinary work done by Eduard Hanslick, issued in 1854, in which the old-fashioned belief of music as expression of feelings was banned. The absolute independence of the music values was promoted and it stated that **“musical beauty lies only in the sounds and in their artistical connections.”**<sup>16</sup>



Some decades later, the visual arts are analyzed through the same formalist perspective, according to what is called the theory of the “pure visibility.” Such a theory was the result of conversations about art held between the painter Hans von Marées, by the art investigator Konrad Fiedler and by the sculptor Adolf Hildebrand. Fiedler wrote some essays, the most important of which, *The origin of artistic activity*, was published in 1887,<sup>47</sup> while Marées left no writings and Hildebrand only applied to sculpture the theories of the “pure visibility,” in a work whose title was *The problem of the form in visual art*, in 1893. The whole theory, a real earthquake from an Hegelian point of view could be easily summed by Riegl, Zimmermann’s student in Vienna, who thought himself a formalist and who writes about the “contents” of the work of art: **“these thoughts disturb the observer ... from the real, true, artistic datum in the work of art, that is, from the phenomenon of the object as form and colour in the plane and in the space.”**<sup>48</sup>

In poetry, the autonomy of the word related to the meaning, though its inclusion into music, was not initially due, as we have seen, to the theorists, but the poets themselves. First of all, Mallarmè who was able to express it in the most conscious, definite way.<sup>49</sup> The change, even in poetry, from signified to signifier, the new approach to the aesthetic subject, has to be considered as a consequence of that “formalist” contest which, coming from philosophy and aesthetics, involved a great part of art life at the end of the nineteenth century. But such an answer is only partially satisfactory.

As argued elsewhere,<sup>50</sup> the building up of the form is due in all the arts to technological events which upset them and re-establish them. Returning to the development of poetry, which is the main focus already somewhat sketched out, we find inputs — the suggestions given by technological actions — whose value has not yet been given the consideration it deserves. Therefore, let’s start again from the beginning.

In 1876, the first telephone installed by Alexander Graham Bell at the Philadelphia Jubilee Exposition, provoked a huge impression throughout the world. In 1877, Thomas Alva Edison patented the phonograph. The telephone and the phonograph set the word into a new situation. In the living dialogue of the speakers, the instrument of the word is lived as a very normal, obvious act. The aim is directly to the meaning; now the technological word did not allow a similar casualness: first of all, it drew attention to itself, it made itself understood from the point of view of the sounding body and its technological being; it cut its primordial ties with its previous form of existence and status quo; it was no longer an immediate function of the body, nor was it connected to an essential unity of space and time; it could still be kept and recovered apart from any process of writing, it didn’t need any support different from its origin and it could be recalled as an authentic word from a voice.

All that made the word appear as a pure sound epiphany, it got rid of the subject and its meanings and it presented it as portrayed in itself, as an autonomous, self-sufficient existence. On one side we have to consider the experiments of poetic avant-gardes, first “musical,” then “sound” from Verlaine and Mallarmè to Ghil, from the abstract

declamation of the futurists and the dadaists to the “transmental” language, to the “zaum” of the Russian cubo-futurists. Also the experience of musicians like Leos Janàček who since 1894, under the influence of Zimmermann’s formalism, started to study the value of rhythm and melody in the word, creating “a theory of the melody in the language” according to which, “all the mysteries of the melody and of the rhythm in the music find a solution in the melody and the rhythm of the music at the level of the spoken language.”<sup>21</sup> All that can’t be understood without considering the new presence of the technological word, the introduction of an existent, absolutely new, status.

But the technological aspect was not only worth being considered as a starting point for any form of “sound poetry,” it determined its secret purpose, its arrival: abolishing meaning from poetry, but did not want to introduce a mystic “poetry of the silence,” as Brèmond suggested. Its unconscious purpose was the destruction of “written poetry on the paper” and its change into a sonority typical of the magnetophone.

It is not true that the sound poets (as they love to say) have exploited the magnetophone to develop their poetic-sound research. It is true, on the contrary, that the magnetophone has exploited them to develop itself and their research. Since the very beginning, sound poetry was due to a technological development whose unconscious work, first aimed at the magnetophone, then at the electronic synthesis of word and sound.

I have demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>23</sup> the whole history of the poetic avant-garde is a sequence of periods, pushed forward by an interior logical necessity aiming at the transformation of “poetry” from the “page” to the technological instruments of sound: from the “musical” poetics (Verlaine, Mallarmè ...) to the abstract performance of historical avant-gardes, which still had writing as a point of reference, to the “new letters” (noises of the body) introduced by lettrism (Isou, Pomerand, Lemaître ...) which was already difficult to catalog, to the extreme results of ultra-lettrism (Wolman, Dufrene) which can’t be defined, but can be included in the area of “poetry” directly done thanks to magnetophone (Chopin, Heidsieck, Gysin, Nannucci ...) till all the possibilities available after the electronic approach of the voice (Radovanovic, Rothenberg, Amirkhanian, Minarelli ...).

**The musicalization of poetry, then “sound poetry,” since the advent of the performing voice up to its electronical amplification, are the consequence of technologic actions and transform poetry according to its techno-methods and its techno-needs. From this point of view, “sound poetry” represents together with the “aesthetics of the communication” one of the most interesting aspects of that change in the aesthetic object that I call the technological sublime.<sup>25</sup>**

## ENDNOTES

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- 6 Caba, Jacques. 1961. *E.A. Poe*. Milan: Mondadori, 138.  
See also, Ostrom, John Ward, editor. 1955. *Epistolario di Edgar Allan Poe*. Milan: Longanesi, 220.
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- 8 See Hopkins, Gerard Manley. 1952. *Poesie*. Parma: Guanda, 94-97.
- 9 See McLuhan, Marshall. 1976. *La galassia Gutenberg*. Rome: Armando, 123.
- 10 See della Volpe, Galvano. 1972. *Critica del gusto*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 95-100.
- 11 See Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1977. *La nascita della tragedia*. Milan: Adelphi, 40-42.
- 12 Brèmond, Henri. 1926. "La poésie pure" (1925). In *Prière et poésie*. Paris: Grasset.
- 13 Mukarovsky, Jan. 1987. *Il processo motorio in poesia (1926-29)*. Palermo: Aesthetica.
- 14 Mukarovsky, Il processo motorio, 62.
- 15 Mallarmè, *La Musique et les Lettres*, 252
- 16 Hanslick, Eduard. 1978. *Il bello musicale (1854)*. Firenze: Giunti-Martello, 48.
- 17 See Fiedler, Konrad. 1994. *Aforismi sull'arte (1914)*. Milan: TEA Arte.
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- 20 See Costa, Mario. 1999. *L'estetica dei media. Avanguardia e tecnologia (1990)*. Rome: Castelvechchi, 43-46.
- 21 See Abbiati, Franco. 1968. *Storia della musica*, Vol.IV. Milan: Garzanti, 720.
- 22 See Langer, Susanne K. 1965. *Sentimento e forma (1953)*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 272-274.
- 23 Costa, Mario. 1982. Poesia sonora e tecnologia elettrica. In *Misure Critiche*, XII, n.44-45, July-December, 171-174.
- 24 The "manifesto" of the aesthetics of the communication (Costa-Forest) has been written the 29th of October 1983; the history of this group is now in Costa, Mario. 1999. *L'estetica della comunicazione. Come il medium ha polverizzato il messaggio. Sull'uso estetico della simultaneità a distanza*. Rome: Castelvechchi.
- 25 See Costa, Mario. 1999. *Il sublime tecnologico*. Salerno: Edisud. Now in *Il sublime tecnologico. Piccolo trattato di estetica della tecnologia*. Rome: Castelvechchi, 1998.

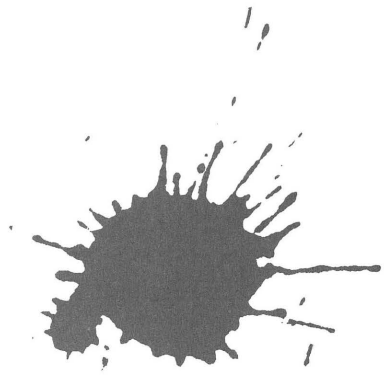
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TRUE HERITAGE:

# The Sound Image in Experimental Poetry

**The role of the image in experimental poetry is examined through an exploration of poetic reference to human sensory experience. From this vantage point, “True Heritage” differentiates sound images from visual images in poetry.**

**THE TWENTIETH CENTURY** witnessed a renaissance in the exploration of sound in poetry in Europe and North America. There were several aspects to this renaissance, from its early canonical manifestations in Italian futurism, dadaism, and the other historical avant-gardes through the audio-tape phase of the 1940s and 1950s (*poesie concrète*), on into the digital age. The return of performance in both large and small settings also occurred. At the same time, one should not fail to recognize the extra-canonical manifestations — popular musical forms, advertising, street rap, skat and the like — a rich brew drawn upon freely by poets. In a sense, the resurgence of interest in sound in poetry constitutes a kind of reaction to the rigidity of printed language and the institutional ossifications it mediates. That is, inherent in these cultural forms lies a politics, always, usually well concealed whether or not foregrounded in terms of content. When I speak of “sound” in poetry, I am aware of the distinction between the human voice/body as real-time originator of the art, on the one hand, and technological extensions or substitutions of the voice, on the other hand. In what follows, I present



a meditation on the image seen as imbued with power; hence the need for a politically sensitive understanding of what might seem somewhat removed from matters of power. However, in my approach to the subject I want to make sure to include a broader spectrum of perspectives so as to enliven debates about the role of the image in experimental poetry.

They used to call the sound image the music of language. Dante says: “A canzone is a composition of words set to music.” (Pound, 31) Pound also says, “If a nation’s literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays.” (32) Another way of putting this is that when there is no common idiom or medium, there is no real nation as such, and this state of affairs will be reflected in literature. Pound again: “. . . you still charge words with meaning mainly in three ways, called phanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia. You use a word to throw a visual image on to the reader’s imagination, or you charge it by sound, or you used groups of words to do this.” (37) He goes on to develop his notion of melopoeia, relevant to our discussion, as follows: “There are three kinds of melopoeia, that is, verse made to sing; to chant or intone; and to speak.” (61) What I take all this to mean is that poetry in its fullness as a living art comes to us embedded in structured sound. Only this way can the imagination be fully engaged. Therefore, printed poetry becomes a kind of performance score for the specific embodiment of these potential meanings during a particular realization of them, highlighting in another way what Blake calls the “minute particulars.” (Of course, there remains the question of the received conventions of structured sound – call it music, oralized poetry – and how they themselves have undergone radical transformations throughout the twentieth century, but to explore this would lead us off in another direction.) Yet none of this attempts to say just what the sound image is. What about the visual image?

It’s clear that the link between the domains of sound and sight (vision) lies in the overlapping of the bridge term “image” (same morphological construct participating in two different discourses), which leads to confusion. Among the fruitful discussions of these matters are those of Ong, Zumthor and Mitchell. For example, in discussing the historical change-over from an aurally-based to a visually-based aesthetic, Ong says: *The sensorial organization specific to any given time and culture may bring us to overspecialize in certain features of actuality and to neglect others. Each organization of the sensorium will likewise predispose us for errors typical of such an organization: verbomotor man can overlay the personal as visualist man can underplay it.* (175)




I find this kind of statement has a moderating influence, although frequently Ong argues for the superiority of sound over sight in questionable metaphysical terms. In each case, the core question is the following: what is an image? Even to pose the question immediately involves us in the oldest of philosophical debates in the Western world. However, not to pose the question begs it. In order to further the matter, then, what I would like to add to the dialogue is another sense of image than is common in the literature on the subject.

To the degree that poetry is an art of sound, and from the viewpoint of the listener, the poetic image may tap into more than one dimension of the sensorium: 1) as sound and 2) through verbal reference to the visual, tactile and so on. Insofar as poetry is an art of sight (so-called silent reading), the poetic image takes vision as its primary sensory medium but may make verbal reference, at least implicitly but more often explicitly, to sound, touch and so on.

These kinds of observations, however, do little to expand our appreciation of poetry. To this end, I feel that not nearly enough emphasis has been placed on the verbal/non-verbal complex, especially in a context of the distinctions commonly drawn between inner and outer dimensions of perceived reality. That is, a phenomenology of the image based in a splitting of consciousness can open up new ground for a deeper understanding of how experimental poetry functions.

Part of the confusion stems from the fact that the grounds for examination of poetry remain pre-eminently verbal (printed), not graphic-visual or aural. Printed language is naively and uncritically taken as a direct reflection of a prior, fuller language condition, whether or not oralized in the speech act. What's excluded here are the suprasegmental phonemic level (juncture, stress, rhythm, pitch and pause) of oralized language, on the



one hand, and the visual-graphic dimension of printed language, on the other. This narrowing of signification throws excessive emphasis on syntax (word order in English), disadvantaging the metaphorical, symbolic, allusive, imagistic, musical qualities of language, in other words, those qualities conventionally held to be the specifically poetic. According to Olson, we can thank the ancient Greeks for setting up this dilemma. He says:

*... the Greeks went on to declare all speculation as enclosed in the "UNIVERSE of discourse". . . We stay unaware how two means of discourse the Greeks appear to have invented [ . . . logos as generalizations; the particulars of a single person's speech . . . ] hugely intermit our participation in our experience, and so prevent discovery.<sup>(54)</sup>*

Olson of course favors the particular: "If there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action."<sup>(55)</sup> That is, without taking into consideration the socio-historical contexts in which various registers of language are created and disseminated, and the material-power values that accrue thereby, we are hampered in our ability to offer more than a formalistic analysis, which would simply repeat what has already been accomplished by a number of others.

How, then, can we use printed language to expand our understanding of those aspects of language (the poetic image) that exist by virtue of their ability to contradict, undermine, transcend or drive energy deep into the structures of conventional critical discourse? First, we can acknowledge the tenuous nature of such statements. Second (and on the basis of what was just mentioned), we can use language to gesture towards the non-verbal image, acknowledging its autonomous existence. Thus, I want to draw an explicit distinction between the phrase "mental image" and that to which it refers, for the purpose of validating that to which the phrase refers rather than of subsuming it once again under the rule of words.

This first division opens a space for pre-verbal or non-verbal images, which, with Achterberg, we can loosely define as "the thought process that invokes and uses the senses. . . . the communication mechanism between perception, emotion and bodily change."<sup>(6)</sup> In this connection, then, the image, like the senses, is a kind of bridge between the inner and outer dimensions of human experience. It is that bridge

constructed by the senses to mediate between the Cartesian divide of body and mind. If we can accept some such formulation, then it is not necessary to give a more specific definition of “sound image” or “visual image” in poetry; anyway, different people would undoubtedly come up with somewhat different ways of circumscribing these uses of the terms. Instead, we are proposing a dynamic or functional approach – not what the image is but what the image does.

The mechanism referred to can be called a symbol. Whatever the name, some images carry an emotional charge that compels attention, whereas others are relatively neutral. That is, incorporating Achterberg’s formulation, we can say that some images communicate more fully than others. Among the various language forms invented by people, poetry is the specific home of images. Furthermore, experimental poetry (that kind always in search of different forms), or at least some kinds of it, tends to rely heavily on symbolic images, especially the most fully charged kinds it can muster. I want to put forth a very generous sense of the symbol here, one in line with Sandner’s: “A symbol is any thing which may function as the vehicle for a conception. . . . a word, a mathematical notation, an act, a gesture, a ritual, a dream, a work of art . . .”(12)

Symbols convert energy. In Navaho healing ceremonies, “It is as if two compartments in the psyche are forcefully brought together: there occurs a release of energy and a feeling of relief.”(15) In order for such symbols to function, all parties to their deployment must share cultural beliefs in their nature and efficacy. The same holds for poetic symbolic imagery, itself a direct descendant of these more integrated symbol systems. Perhaps this is why discussions of the metaphysics of aurality often touch on the whole area loosely and inadequately referred to as “the sacred” (either nostalgically or scornfully) (cf. Ong, Menezes).

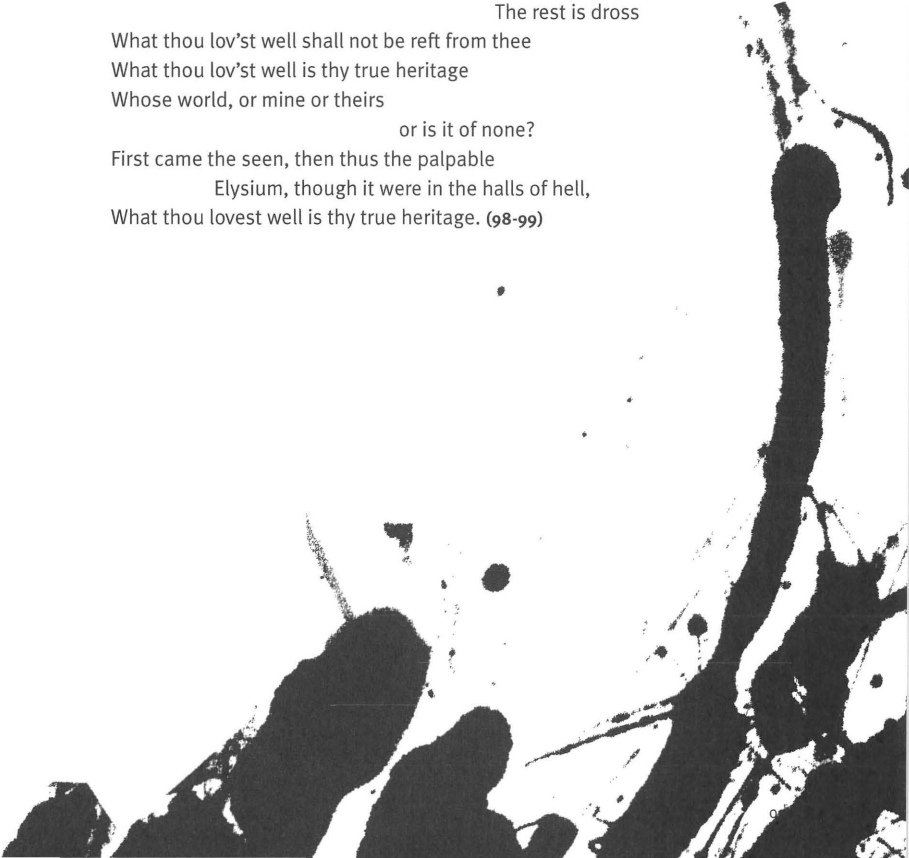
Jung’s theory of the archetypes of the collective unconscious provides an alternative way to understand the emotional dimension of symbolic images. First, it is important to understand that Jung took great pains to differentiate his psychology from religion, especially after the publication of *Answer to Job* (1952), which brought down on him the wrath of some theologians, who claimed he was being sacrilegious, and at the same time the self-righteous fury of others, who asserted he was out to found a new religion. However, Jung was not out to found another religion (prophets, revealed truth, priesthood to interpret it, sacraments and the like). Rather, his intent was to address the inner experience of individuals who had lost their faith, just as he himself had. As he says in “Psychology and Religion” (1937), “To gain an understanding of religious matters, probably all that is left us today is the psychological approach. That is why I take these thought-forms that have become historically fixed, try to melt them down again and pour them into moulds of immediate experience.” (*Collected Works*, 11, 89) Late in his life Jung returns to the subject, again trying to make clear that for him what matters is the psyche, one’s inner life. He says, “I do not imagine that in my reflections on the meaning of man and his myth I have uttered a final truth, but I think that this is what can be said at the end of our aeon of the Fishes, and perhaps must be said in view of the coming aeon of Aquarius . . . .” (MDR, 339)



Powerful emotional reactions to sound-poetry performances always go well beyond the level of immediate physiological response, thereby requiring a theory of how the symbolic image functions as a mediator between inner and outer dimensions of experience. Because we live in a culture that still uses this distinction (between the inner and the outer), image theory makes possible a flexible and effective way to understand the dynamic tensions between these registers of our experience. As Jung says, "The symbolic process is an experience in images and of images" (IX, 1, 38), which arise through a mixing of sense data and psychic predisposition. "The fantasy-images outweigh the influence of sensory stimuli and mould them into conformity with a pre-existing psychic image."<sup>(66)</sup> Sound poetry taps into the deeper layers of the psyche, oftentimes sacrificing reliance upon verbal syntax, maximizing use of para-verbal elements of language, and, in the digital domain, working purely with pre-verbal sound structures.

Rather than understanding this condition as "the new" or "the different," my proposition is that the most exciting and profound developments in experimental sound poetry are symbolically mediated through and through. A theory of the image allows us to retain a link with what is most valuable in the ever-changing past. As Pound in his most strictly measured musical style says in Canto LXXXI:


What thou lov'st well remains,  
The rest is dross  
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee  
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage  
Whose world, or mine or theirs  
or is it of none?  
First came the seen, then thus the palpable  
Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell,  
What thou lovest well is thy true heritage. (98-99)





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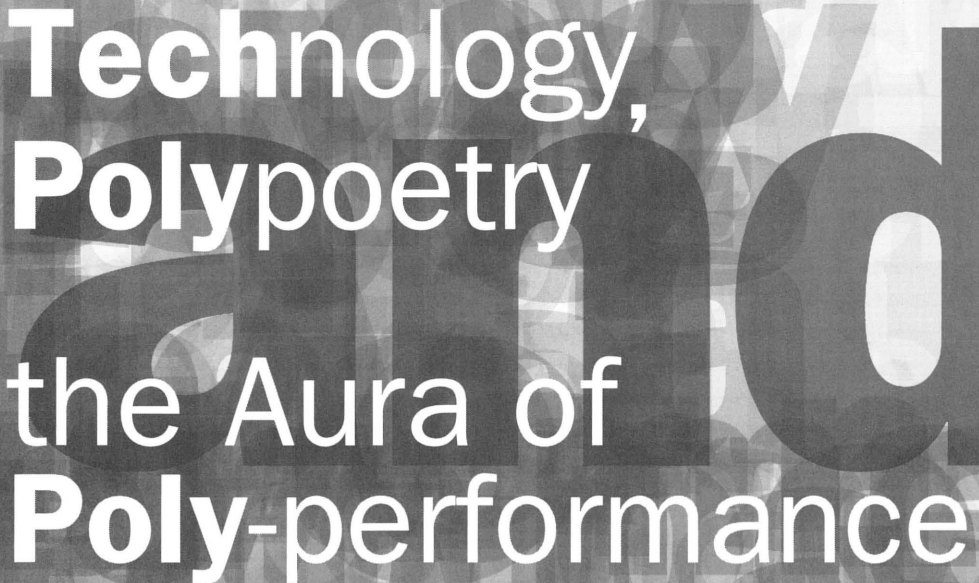
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N I C H O L A S   Z U R B R U G G

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*Visible Language*, 35.1  
Nicholas Zurbrugg, 20-35  
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Using extracts from poets and critics alike, the author lets  
demonstrating the pros and cons of aurality in poetic  
poetry and performance? A secondary question concerns  
investigation. Diverse international artists are presented  
critical writings of Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard and



# Technology, Polypoetry and the Aura of Poly-performance

them speak directly, through quotation and poetic offering, performance. The central question is: How does technology influence the locus of creativity — is it in the poem itself or the technological? Henri Chopin, Stelarc, Robert Wilson, Orlan and others, while the Paul Virilio provide a counterpoint.

**MY CENTRAL ARGUMENT IS** that comparative analysis of the almost century-long traditions of media theory and media practice reveals how — across the decades — over-general cultural theory consistently neglects the auratic intensity of new kinds of technological poly-performance.

The following extracts are from the writings and interviews of theorists: the German modernist cultural theorist, Walter Benjamin; the French postmodern theorists, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio; the writings and interviews of poly-artists, such as the Italian futurist Marinetti, the American fluxus artist Dick Higgins; the French and Italian sound poets, Henri Chopin and Enzo Minarelli; and the Australian body artist, Stelarc. They suggest how the modern and postmodern avant-gardes have successively identified what Marinetti calls new dimensions of “tactile sense” and what Stelarc defends as new strategies for perpetuating “life in general, and intelligence in particular.”

Finally, I suggest that increasing hybrid performance artists, such as the American performance artist and director Robert Wilson, the New York “Transgressive” film-maker Nick Zedd, and the French body-artist Orlan, have combined many of the strategies of the historical avant-garde, and of subsequent postmodern “poly” avant-gardes, in predominantly commercial forms of “Techno-Poly-Pop” performance, offering provocative syntheses of experimental and mass-market, popular and “porn-modern” multimedia cultures.

**Central Question:**

How does technology influence poetry and performance?

**Possible Answers:**

- a) Technology multiplies poetic and performative “aura.”
- b) Technology destroys poetic and performative “aura.”
- c) Technology trivializes and commercializes performative “aura.”

**1. Negative and Positive Theoretical Concepts:**

- 1a Walter Benjamin (1936): Technology causes the “loss of aura.”
- 1b Walter Benjamin (1936) Techno-experiments reveal art’s “richest energies.”
- 1c Jean Baudrillard (1987): Technology reduces “metamorphoses” to “metastasis.”
- 1d Jean Baudrillard (1998) Photography rediscovers “aura.”
- 1e Paul Virilio (1995) Technology reduces “animal” bodies to “terminal” bodies.
- 1f Paul Virilio (1996 & 1998) Art reveals ways to “fight” technology.

**2. Positive Artistic Concepts**

- 2a F. T. Marinetti (1924) New Technologies and “radiophonic sensations.”
- 2b Dick Higgins (1992) New Technologies and the “Spirit” of Chopin’s work.
- 2c Henri Chopin (1967) New Technologies and “audio-poésie.”
- 2d Enzo Minarelli (1987) New Technologies create new “Polypoetry.”
- 2e Stelarc (1994) New Technologies and “cyber-aesthetics.”

**3. Techno-hybrids: Techno-Poly-Pop Performance**

- 3a Robert Wilson (1980s) “Theatre of Images.”
- 3b Nick Zedd (1980s) “Transgressive Cinema.”
- 3c Orlan (1990s): “Carnal Art.”

**1. NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE THEORETICAL CONCEPTS**

The writings of Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio all typify the way in which cultural theory repeatedly associates new technologies with the loss of various kinds of creative authenticity. Benjamin, for example, associates mechanical reproduction — and cinematic acting in particular — with the loss of performative “aura.”

In much the same way, Baudrillard argues that technology reduces the dynamic energy that he associates with “the body of metamorphoses” to the more symbolic, monodimensional register of “the body of metaphor” and to the still more negative register of “the body of metastasis.” At his most pessimistic, Baudrillard argues that we are all destined to become “metastatic,” and that we must now learn from those whose handicapped bodies already respond to corporeal decline.

In turn, Paul Virilio argues that the increasingly static working conditions of those using computers transforms the “animal body” into the “terminal body,” eliminating distinctions between the technologically healthy body and the technologically “spastic” body.

At the same time, Benjamin also defends the avant-garde's technological aspirations (such as the Berlin dadaist Raoul Hausmann's call for new kinds of technologically modified sound poetry).

Baudrillard's recent writings still more affirmatively argue that photography can rediscover dimensions of "aura." Virilio's recent interviews similarly insist that he too defends technological performance, so long as art "fights" technology and avoids becoming dominated by superficial techno-culture.

Briefly, Benjamin, Baudrillard and Virilio typify the hesitant ambiguity with which academic research approaches the more confident ambiguities of early-, middle- and late-twentieth century techno-creativity.

### 1a Walter Benjamin: Negative Arguments

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936)

"The film actor... feels...exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. He feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice... The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera."

"Aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it."

"The aura which, on stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays."

### 1b Walter Benjamin: Positive Arguments

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936)

"One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later."

"The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form."

"The extravagances and crudities of art which thus appear, particularly in the so-called decadent epochs, actually arise from the nucleus of its richest energies."

"In recent years, such barbarisms were abundant in dadaism. It is only now that its impulse becomes discernible: dadaism attempted to create by pictorial — and literary — means the effects which the public today seeks in the film." (*figure 1*)

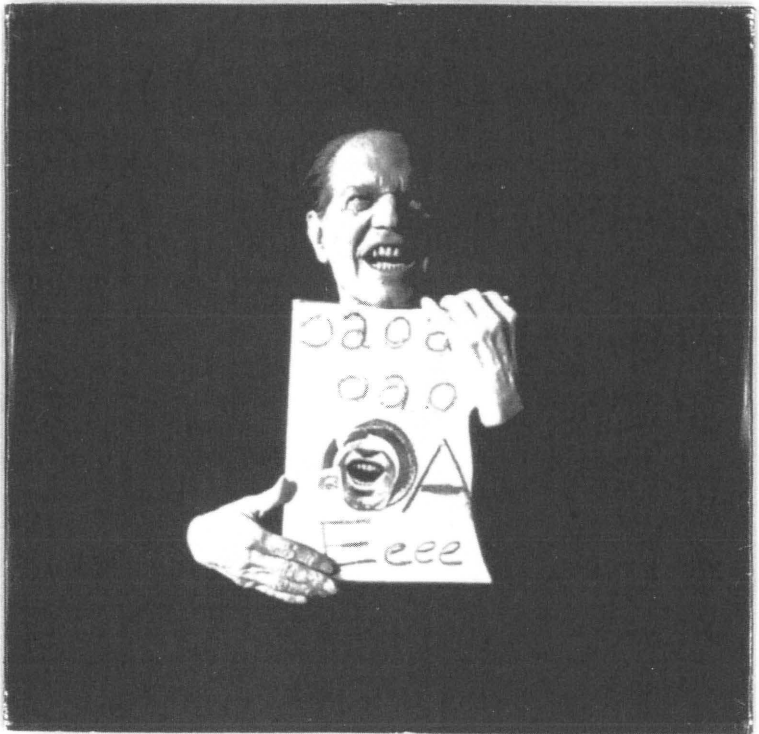


FIGURE 1 Raoul Hausmann Reading Phonetic Poem

### 1c Jean Baudrillard: Negative Arguments

“Metamorphoses, Metaphors, Metastasis” (1987)

“Mechanical machines ... were still machines with alterity, an other, whereas ... at this point one wonders where the real world is.”

“This kind of artificial world ... completely automatized” brings about “an exclusion of man, of the real world, of all referentiality.”

The “body of metamorphosis” is “a non-individual body without desire, yet capable of all metamorphoses — a body freed from the mirror of itself, yet given over to all seduction.”

The body of metamorphosis “knows neither metaphor nor the operation of meaning” and resists “symbolic order.”

The body of “metamorphosis” deteriorates into the body of “metaphor” whenever “a symbolic order appears” and it becomes “a metaphoric scene of sexual reality.”

The “body of metaphor” no longer offers the poly-valent impact of “a theatre of multiple



initiatory forms,” but only presents “the scene of a single scenario ... the stage of phantasies and the metaphor of the subject.”

“After the bodies of metamorphosis and metaphor follows the body of metastasis.”

The “body of metastasis” brings about a “deprivation of meaning and territory,” where there is “no more soul, no more metaphor of the body.”

In these circumstances our best strategy is to observe and imitate the survival strategies of “the handicapped,” who seem to “precede us on the path towards mutation and dehumanization.”

#### **1d Jean Baudrillard: Positive Arguments**

*Car l'illusion ne s'oppose pas à la réalité* (1998)

“Photography has rediscovered the aura that it lost with cinema.”

Photography generates a “magic and dangerous reality,” according to “a principle of condensation diametrically opposed to the principle of dilution and dispersion characterizing all our images today.”

Photography identifies: “The immobility of an instant in time behind which one always detects a sense of movement, but only a sense of it.”

“This is the kind of immobility that things dream about, this is the kind of immobility that we dream about.”

#### **1e Paul Virilio: Negative Arguments**

*Open Sky* (1995)

“Radiotechnologies ... will shortly turn on their heads not only ... our *territorial body*, but most importantly, the nature of the individual and their *animal body*.”

“The super-equipped able-bodied person” becomes “almost the exact equivalent of the motorized and wired disabled person.”

“Doomed to inertia, the interactive being transfers his natural capacities for movement and displacement to probes and scanners ... to the detriment of his own faculties of apprehension of the real, after the example of the para- or quadriplegic who can guide by remote control — teleguide — his environment, his abode.”

“Having been first *mobile*, then *motorized*, man will become *motile*, deliberately limiting his body's areas of influence to a few gestures.”

“The urbanization of the body of the city dweller” introduces the “catastrophic figure” of the “*citizen-terminal* ... based on the model of the ‘spastic’ wired to control his/her domestic environment without having physically to stir.”

## 1f Paul Virilio: Positive Arguments

### Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1996)

"My research is not at all opposed to technology or technological performance ... Many people claim that I am apocalyptic, negative, pessimistic. But all of that is out of date — it doesn't rise to the heights of the situation!"

### Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1998)

"Jacob met his God in the person of an angel and he wrestled with this angel for a whole night and at the end of the night he said to the angel, 'Bless me, because I have fought all night.' What does this symbolize? It means that Jacob did not want to sleep before God. ... He wanted to remain a man before God ... he fought rather than just sleeping as though he was before an idol. Technology places us in the same situation. We have to fight against it rather than sleeping before it."

## 2. POSITIVE ARTISTIC CONCEPTS

Unlike the writings of cultural theorists such as Benjamin, Baudrillard and Virilio, avant-garde artists such as Marinetti, Chopin, Minarelli and Stelarc enthusiastically defend new kinds of technologically modified creativity. Marinetti's modernist manifestoes, for example, envision new mechanical "fusions" of different media, and explore new poly-possibilities such as Marinetti's experiments with "tactile art" (such as his "tactile table," *Sudan-Paris*) and with new kinds of "radiophonic" creativity. Significantly, whereas Baudrillard and Virilio argue that the healthy body is becoming increasingly indistinguishable from that of the handicapped and the spastic, Marinetti argues that new art forms can "educate the handicapped" and in general increase the artist's "tactile senses."

In turn, postmodern poets such as Chopin and Minarelli discuss the various "new values" and "sonorities" made possible by recording technologies and Australian cybernetic performance artist Stelarc discusses the ways in which new technologies generate still more complex "operational possibilities" provoking "new desires" and "new ways of interfacing with the world." While Marinetti explores the tactile dimensions of the body's surfaces, Chopin and Stelarc discuss their "probing" of the internal body, by swallowing microphones and cameras.

As Higgins observes, the most successful forms of technological performance reveal forceful manifestations of auratic authorial "spirit," and are always more than simply "sonic" performances. Nevertheless, certain general distinctions can be made between different kinds of technological poly-performance. Chopin's work seems above all a mixture of poetic and musical sound, accompanied by physical gesture. Minarelli's work seems to combine musical and theatrical energies, at times integrating a mass cultural rock n'roll sensibility.

Investigating still more open-ended forms of mechanically intensified body art and performance art, integrating sound, movement, dance and robotic technologies, without necessarily prioritizing any "one particular area," Stelarc is one of late twentieth century culture's most fascinating "poly"-artists.

## 2a Fillipo Tommaso Marinetti

“Destruction of Syntax-Imagination without Strings-Words-in-Freedom Manifesto” (1913)  
“Man multiplied by the machine” and “New mechanical sense, a fusion of instinct with the efficiency of motors and conquered forces.”

“Futurist Synthetic Theatre” (1915)

“Electromagnetical inventions ... permit us to realize our most free conceptions on the stage.”

Tactilism Manifesto (1924)

To “educate my tactile sense” and to discover “new ways to educate the handicapped.”

“To wear gloves for several days, during which time the brain will force the condensation into your hands of a desire for different tactile sensations.”

*Sudan-Paris*: “abstract suggestive tactile table” — the first “tactile art.”

“In its Sudan part this table has spongy material, sandpaper, wool, pig’s bristle and wire bristle. (*Crude, greasy, rough, sharp, burning tactile values, that evoke African visions in the mind of the toucher.*) ... In the Paris part, the table has silk, watered silk, velvet and large and small feather. (*Soft, very delicate, warm and cool at once, artificial, civilized.*)”

“*La Radia Manifesto*” (1933)

“A pure organism of radio sensations.”

“The amplification and transfiguration” of “the vibrations emitted by living beings” and “the vibrations emitted by matter.”

## 2b Dick Higgins (on Henri Chopin)

“The Golem in the Text” (1992)

“The poet uses complex vocal and non-figurative sounds, edited at several levels — electronically manipulating and broadcasting them at top volume — and adding to them in live performance with voice and microphone.”

“Despite his diminutive height, Henri Chopin radiates such an intensity that he seems to grow to a gigantic scale, the gravity of his expression suggesting some kind of vampire or evil spirit. The process by which this spirit emerges on stage can be really terrifying... Because the real process of the work is non-mimetic, deriving from what the artist — in this case Chopin — is actually doing. In other words, the emergence of this spirit is inherent in the live performance of the work.” (*figure 2*)

## 2c Henri Chopin

Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1998)

“With the Christian tradition the body was absolutely nothing, but for me the body is of primary importance. Between 1948 and 1949 I studied theology in a seminary, and was furious when people said, “Only, Christ, Christ.” For me it was absolutely impossible, because the human body is very important. Without the body it is impossible to produce the spirit.”



**FIGURE 2** Henri Chopin, Pompidou Centre (1980) Photograph: Françoise Janicot.

**Interview with Lawrence Kucharz, Larry Wendt and Ellen Zweig (1978)**

“I started in '55 with sound ... the diction with my voice was very bad ... but I listened to my voice on a tape recorder ... and my voice is very good ... the timbre is very good too ... so I put my finger between the head and the tape on the tape recorder ... and ... the sound was different! Distortion! After that I changed with my finger the speed of the tape on a very simple tape recorder and again the speed was different.”

**Interview with ABC TV (Australian Broadcasting Company) (1992)**

“When I put the microphone into the mouth I have simultaneously five sounds: the air and the liquid in the mouth, the respiration in the nose, the air between each tooth and the respiration in the lungs.”

“In 1974 I put into my stomach a very small microphone and it was a discovery — the body is always like a factory! It never stops — there's no silence!”

**“Open Letter to Aphonic Musicians” (1967)**

“Sound poetry, made for and by the tape-recorder” composed of “vocal micro-particles rather than the Word as we know it,” is “more easily codified by machines and electricity ... than by any means proper to writing.”

**Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1992)**

“We already have a geometric, computerizable language. But what we still haven't discovered are the ways in which this language will evolve. This is firstly because technology is evolving so rapidly, and secondly, because whereas computers only have forty or so phonemes, we know that we possess thousands of sonic values. We know that the ear not only receives sounds, but also gives out sounds.”

“All these discoveries were completely unknown when I began working with sound poetry — I was starting from very basic literary ideas. It’s thanks to the new technologies that I’ve discovered all these new values.”

“In the same way, future technologies will reveal the multiplicity of our auditory and visual cells — the eye, the ear and all our other senses. So while we cannot predict the future, it’s certain that new departures have already been made and that we cannot live without them.” (figure 3)

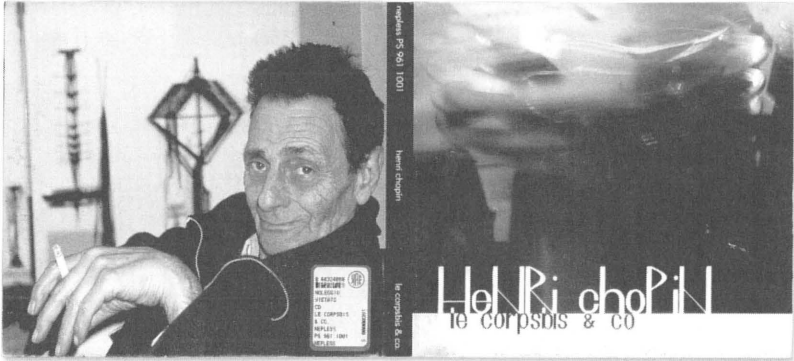


FIGURE 3 Henri Chopin: *Le Corbis & Co*, CD Cover. Nepless Records PS 961 1001, Nepless, Casella Postale 1597, 20123 Milano Corduiso, Italy.

## 2d Enzo Minarelli

“Manifesto of Polypoetry” (1987)

“Only the development of the new technologies will mark the progress of sound poetry: the electronic media and the computer are and will be true protagonists.”

“Polypoetry is devised and realized for the live show; it gives to sound poetry the role of prima donna or starting point to link relations with musicality (accompaniment or rhythmic line), mimicry, movement and dance (acting or extension or integration of the sound text), image (television or slide projection, picture or installation, by association, explanation or alternative and redundancy), light, space, costumes and objects.” (figure 4)



FIGURE 4 Enzo Minarelli, *Videogrammi*, video cover 1998. Archivio 3Vitre di Polipoesia, C.P. 152 44042 Cento, Italy.

#### **Interview with Martin Thomas (1994)**

“It was not a matter of me reacting against theatre, but really coming from the visual arts and not being satisfied with traditional modes of expression like painting and sculpture ... Conceptual art had played itself out — so then what were you left with? Nothing but your body.”

“When I went to Japan ... I became increasingly interested in connecting body gesture and posture with sound. The idea of amplifying a muscle signal came to mind. Now, if I make a movement, I twist my arm, flick my fingers, contract muscles and electrodes are stuck on the skin, I can pick up the signal, pre-amplify and process it. Initially the laser beams were reflected off small mirrors stuck on the eyes. Later, they were directed by optic fibre cables... I could scan the space with my laser eyes and, by blinking and moving the muscles of the face, I could actually scribble in space.”

“At the same time that I was doing laser projections with the eyes, I was making internal probes into the stomach, into the colon, into the lungs. I’ve filmed three metres of internal space. The events around 1975 were titled events for internal and external probes ... Piercing the space with laser eyes was a metaphor for probing the body itself.”

#### **Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1995)**

“Any form of life, whether it be carbon chemistry or silicon-chip circuitry — any form of life that can perpetuate these values in a more durable or a more pervasive form — should be allowed to develop.”

“There’s no blueprint and there’s no methodical research directed into any one particular area.... These performances aren’t shamanistic displays of human prowess. They’re not pseudo-medical scientific research. They’re not yogic feats of fine-tuning to attain higher spiritual states... They’re simply works of art, exploring intuitively new realms of aesthetics and images.”

“A general strategy of extending performance parameters by plugging the body into cyber-systems, technological systems, networks, machines that in some way enable the body to function more precisely or more powerfully.”

#### **Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1998)**

“Can we consider a body that can function with neither memory nor desire?... Is it possible to navigate the world, to operate effectively, sense and communicate, in these kind of cool spaces displaced from the cultural spaces ... of emotion and of personal experience?”

“You become an agent that can extrude awareness and action into another body elsewhere. Your realm of operation goes beyond your biological boundaries and the local space that you function ... the realm of the open, of the divergent rather than the convergent, where what you’re creating are contestable futures, not utopian ideals.”

“Although the Internet data is controlling my body movements, and inadvertently also constructing the choreography of images and the composition of sounds, electrodes on my abdominal and leg muscles are in fact activating my third hand, so although the internet controls me, I control my third hand. And so it’s a kind of split physiology, voltage in on

the left side determining the body's movements, voltage out from the electrodes allowing me to activate my third hand."

"The body acts as a more complex entity with a split physiology, interfaced and engaged in a multiplicity of aesthetic tasks. It structures the performance initially through its hardwiring, and of course, it's aware of what's going on during the performance and it's able to make small adjustments within the flow of activity and images that's occurring."

"New technologies generate information, and generate new models and paradigms that weren't applicable or possible simply by the imagination alone."

"Alternate operational possibilities ... create new desires and new ways of interfacing with the world." (figure 5)



FIGURE 5 5 Stelarc, *Fractal Flesh* CD cover, 1999.  
NMA CD 9902, NMA Publications, PO BOX 5034, Burnley 3121, Australia.

### 3. TECHNO-HYBRIDS: TECHNO-POLY-POP PERFORMANCE

As Chopin suggests in an interview of 1992, technocultural practices permit an art of "synthesis" advancing "towards the future, while at the same time remaining aware of everything that has been written." Younger visionaries like the American video-artist Bill Viola, similarly note how "fascinating relationships between ancient and modern technologies become evident." For Viola, the best new forms of "poly"-art explore "the edge of things, doing something that no one else is doing, putting two ideas together that haven't been put together before."

Since the '80s, many artists working with materials appropriated from popular mass-media culture — such as the American artists Robert Wilson and Nick Zedd and the French body-artist Orlan, have

increasingly employed relatively commercial iconography with some of the concerns explored by the more austere research of artists such as Chopin and Stelarc.

One way or another, Wilson, Zedd and Orlan typify the ways in which recent hybrid multimedia research orchestrating the signs and sounds of the body appear to be at once populist and avant-garde, powerfully auratic and self-consciously trivial, pornographic and prophetic, illuminating and obscene.

Should we celebrate — or should we regret — the ways in which avant-garde artists such as Robert Wilson and Orlan have infiltrated the entertainment industry, in order to undertake expensive projects? Has the avant-garde betrayed its ideals by working with mass-cultural iconography?

Has the avant-garde betrayed its ideals by refining highly ambiguous spectacles? Or is ambiguity also a source of artistic “strengths” as Wilson and Zedd suggest?

And need the avant-garde necessarily follow the paths of transgression and blasphemy, advocated by Zedd and Orlan? Or is the avant-garde a way of rediscovering “the classics,” as Wilson suggests? How “poly” can avant-garde experimentation become, before it ceases to be authentically avant-garde?

Not surprisingly, perhaps, these questions still await answers in the late 1990s.

### 3a Robert Wilson

#### Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1991)

“I don’t want to draw any conclusions, and I’d rather process it in time, as something you think about, that’s a continuum. When the curtain goes down, you don’t stop thinking about it. You go home and still think about it. It’s part of an on-going thing, it’s a continuum, it’s something that never, never finishes. Why do we go back to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*? Because we can think about it in multiple ways. It has no one way of thinking about it. It cannot be interpreted.”

“I think that new technologies help us to destroy our codes, to find new languages, and rediscover the classics.”

“I like the fact that William Burroughs is not afraid to destroy the codes in order to make a new language. The language becomes more plastic, more three-dimensional, like molecules that can bounce, combine and are reformed.”

“Essentially that’s what all artists do. One invents a language and then once this language becomes discernible, we destroy it and start again. A series of movements becomes a language, and once that’s discernible, then I change it, and destroy it and add something else.”



### 3b Nick Zedd

#### Interview with Nicholas Zurbrugg (1995)

"I always enjoyed Andy Warhol's films, especially the ones with Paul Morrissey. But I felt that the elements could be integrated in a more powerful way, in a more confrontational manner, that they could be more succinct in a different style. I think the music of punk rock and No Wave had some kind of influence — the songs are really short and direct and loud, and that's the way the films ... should be."

"That's the challenge, to always go further ... I think the next step is to go beneath the surface of the bodies, beyond pornography, into internal organs. I met a forensic pathologist in a bar and he said he does autopsies and that I could shoot the corpses ... I think it's arbitrary that only the outside of the body is seen as erogenous. Maybe people will be turned on by internal organs."

"Ambiguity has strengths too. There are different levels of interpretation that occur and it can be thought-provoking for people to try to decipher the meaning. I don't want to have to lower myself to the lowest common denominator and pander to a general audience. I think it's more fascinating when there's a mystery involved."

"There'll always be misinterpretation. And if there wasn't any misinterpretation it would be propaganda, and I'm not going to make propaganda — I am against that."

"I resist putting it into words. I think putting it into words limits it."

### 3c Orlan

#### "Conference" (1996)

"I am a multi-media, pluri-disciplinary and interdisciplinary artist. I have always considered my woman's body, my woman-artist's body, privileged material for the construction of my work. My work has always interrogated the status of the feminine body, via social pressures, those of the present or in the past."

"As a plastic artist, I wanted to intervene in the surgical aesthetic, which is cold and stereotyped, and to confront it with others: the decor is transformed, and the surgical team and my team wear clothing conceived by established fashion designers ... Each operation has its own style. This ranges from the carnivalesque ... to high tech, passing through the baroque, etc."

"My work is blasphemous. It is an endeavour to move the bars of the cage, a radical and uncomfortable endeavour!"

#### "Carnal Art" Manifesto (1998)

"I can observe my own body cut open without suffering ... I can see to the heart of my lover ... Darling, I love your spleen, I love your liver, I adore your pancreas and the line of your femur excites me."

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N I C H O L A S   Z U R B R U G G

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**Visible** Language,  
**Audible** Language,  
**Inarticulable** Language  
and  
the **“Supplementary  
Signifier”**

An examination of the writings of multimedia practitioner Henri Chopin and the critic Roland Barthes form the core of this essay. Both question the limits of language and the ineffability of human experience. The role of the technological is contrasted to that of the body itself.

— *Shift Linguals* — *Cut word lines* —

— *Photo falling* — *Word falling* —

— *Towers, open fire* —

Burroughs (1964: 75)

The most distinctive quality of tape-recorded and tape-orchestrated sound poetry is not so much the way in which it routinely *breaks up* the lines, phrases, words and syllables of grammatical writing in the traditions of stream of consciousness prose, simultaneous declamation and automatic writing, as the unexpected way in which it still more strikingly *breaks out* of textual line into the technocultural realm that the French sound poet Henri Chopin associates with “millions of sonic variations.” (1998: 10)

But what are the precise quality of such sonic variations? According to the Swedish text/sound composer Sten Hanson, the “supremacy of sound poetry over most other forms of expression open to modern man” derives primarily from the way its “combination of the exactness of literature and the time manipulation of music makes it possible to penetrate and influence the listener more deeply and more strongly than any other artistic method.” (1982: 16) Sound poetry, Hanson suggests, is therefore best defined by combined analytical paradigms, drawing upon the conventions of text *and* sound, poem *and* composition or literature *and* music.

In turn, the French sound poet Chopin’s writings similarly observe that sound poetry effects the “union of the two great languages of poetry and music.” (1998: 13) But far from conceding that sound poetry’s most distinctive energies lend themselves to adequate analysis in terms bricolaged terms combining such familiar concepts as the “exactness of literature” and the “time manipulation of music,” Chopin argues that sound poetry’s innovative “sonic variations” exist “beyond the traditional rules of diction and music,” (1998: 10) and therefore require entirely new categorization.

At this point, the theoretical implications of sound poetry — (like those, as we shall see, of certain kinds of photographic and filmic imaging) — offer extremely interesting exceptions to the traditional rules of early text-based structuralist theory. According to Roland Barthes’ essay “The Death of the Author” (1968), for example, all written texts — and by general implication, all kinds of “cultural texts,” be these written, performed, photographed, filmed and so on — are fundamentally a “tissue of quotations.” For Barthes, such texts inhabit “a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.” Here, Barthes concludes, writers simply mix writings, and at best “only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original.” (1977: 146)

Were this really the case, then Hanson’s and Chopin’s general suggestion that sound poetry simply combines, unifies or mixes literature and music seems entirely convincing. To the question What is sound poetry? — one can confidently respond: A partially unfamiliar multidimensional space in which sound poets mix and blend familiar anterior literary and musical gestures. And to the question: How can one analyze it? — one can equally methodically respond: By mixing and blending familiar anterior literary and musical concepts.

For Chopin, however, sound poetry's most distinctive vocalic qualities are far more complicated. On the one hand, quoting the mediaevalist Paul Zumthor, Chopin provocatively argues that, when considered in terms of its most ancient forms, poetic orality is "anterior to language," (1998: 7) and therefore irreducible to familiar linguistic paradigms.

On the other hand however, Chopin still more challengingly identifies the post-linguistic vocalic impact of the multimediated *audio-poésie* that his "Open Letter to Aphonic Musicians" defines as "made for and by the tape-recorder," as "a matter of vocal micro-particles rather than the Word as we know it," and as recorded compositions "more easily codified by machines and electricity ... than by any means proper to writing." (1967: 11)

In much the same way, Barthes' subsequent essays "The Third Meaning" (1970) and "The Grain of the Voice" (1972) identify the extra-textual impact of equally heightened imaging and articulation. Against all structuralist odds, "The Third Meaning" argues that the distinctively filmic energies of Eisenstein's stills constitute a surprisingly authorial "new — rare — practice" empowered by a kind of *supplementary signifier* (1977:62-3) that exists both "outside (articulated language)" and "within interlocution." (1977: 61)

In other words, whereas "The Death of the Author" insisted that textual culture's almost axiomatically unoriginal "tissue of quotations" can be traced to a ready-formed textual and theoretical dictionary (1977: 146), "The Third Meaning" concedes that the highly original — and one might add, highly authorial — *supplementary* impact of Eisenstein's imaging "cannot be described ... because in contrast to obvious meaning, it does not copy anything." (1977: 61) Accordingly, while "born technologically" and "aesthetically," it "has still to be born theoretically." (1977: 67)

At this point one glimpses threefold parallels between Chopin's and Barthes' most lucid insights. Both visionaries successively question the text-based rules of "basic literary ideas" (Chopin, 1992: 51) and "obvious meaning" (Barthes, 1977: 61), emphasize the intensity of those poetic or iconic *signifiers* manifested whenever multimedia most impressively "open fire," (Burroughs, 1964: 75) and outline the ways in which postmodern culture's most original *supplementary* energies urgently require commensurately original *supplementary* categorization.

More often than not, of course, most mainstream critics instinctively resist the challenge of multimedia innovation by protesting: That's not art! That's not poetry! or That's not music! Indeed, as the multimedia poet and artist Brion Gysin recalls, even the dadaist veteran Tristan Tzara grumpily deployed monodisciplinary categories in order to defuse Gysin's enthusiastic accounts of the mid-fifties avant-garde's pioneering "use of tape-recorders to make Sound poetry," contending that such work was not so much poetry as Music? (1982: 76)

As Gysin points out, the inflexible either/or logic behind Tzara's distinction between poetry and music seems to typify the way in which "Dada, French Surrealists and later Existentialists, Situationists, New Philosophers, *et al*, have always abominated music" because it lacks the "ratiocination to which the French language lends itself only too easily." (1982: 76) One way or another, one might also now add, structuralist and poststructuralist theory has endlessly insisted that language — rather than music, sound, photography or multimedia performance — conditions us, controls us and (so the theory-story goes) "speaks" us.

But as Barthes' "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1966) indicates, such claims usually hinge upon the assumption that all writing can be analyzed in terms of the structural cha-cha-cha steps of a "logic there exposed, risked and satisfied." (1977: 124) Radically qualifying this claim, Barthes provocatively posits that "What takes place" in narrative becomes far more complicated, once one concedes that logical textuality alternates with the kind of orgasmic textual ecstasy that he evokes as "the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming." (1966: 124)

But what happens when language — according to this translation — "comes?" How does language "come?" And when language "comes," is it still language? Or do the orgasmic energies of the text ejaculate — so to speak — beyond the structural logic of the printed page into realms of intertextual or extra-textual bliss? And if so, how might we define this process? As one hears the earth move, or at least hears language "move," does spasmodic language cease to be language and mutate, for example, into music?

Barthes' later essay, "The Rustle of Language" (1975) certainly toys with this possibility. Positing that "The rustle is the noise of what is working well," be this the rustle of "happy machines" or the rustle of "bodies whose amorous sites are carefully adjusted to each other," Barthes initially answers the question "can language rustle?" negatively, given that "there always remains too much meaning for language to fulfill a delectation appropriate to its substance." (1986: 76-7)

Reassuring himself, however, with the consoling thought that "what is impossible is not inconceivable," Barthes enthusiastically speculates that in its "utopic state," "language would be enlarged" into what he conceives of as a "vast auditory fabric" in which "the semantic apparatus would be made unreal" and "the phonic, metric, vocal signifier would be employed in all its sumptuousness." (1986: 77) Here we surely find an almost direct counterpart to Chopin's discussion of the way in which his successive audiopoems tangibly reveal the "unknown or supposedly unknown forms of orality, especially those of the *voice* ... beyond all the laws of versification and prose" (1998: 24) and beyond all "ancient semantic values." (1998: 10)



Significantly though, Barthes discusses these possibilities as a more or less impossible dream, at best exemplified by “certain experiments in rustling” that he vaguely evokes as “certain radiophonic researches” and “certain productions of post serial music.” Undeterred by his inability to exemplify rustling more comprehensively, Barthes optimistically concludes: “This is a utopia, no doubt about it; but utopia is often what guides the investigations of the avant-garde.” (1986: 78). Utopian ambition is indeed what guides the investigations of the avant-garde, but utopian creativity is what tangibly realizes this ambition. Here, as on other occasions, one wonders how and why Barthes’ writings remained so silent or so ill-informed regarding the tangible utopian creations of his avant-garde contemporaries.

Discussing the utopian energies of photography more precisely in *Camera Lucida* (1980), just a year after Chopin published his pioneering history of sound poetry, *Poésie sonore internationale* (1979), Barthes observes how the “unlocatable” (1983: 51) effect of photographic images, such as Robert Mapplethorpe’s self-portrait and his joint portrait of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, mysteriously rustle their way out of the “civilized code” (1983: 119) of intertextual quotation, generating this or that “floating flash” (1983: 53) of “photographic ecstasy.” (1983: 119) One way or another, Chopin and Barthes conclude, the finest new wines of postmodern sound and image cultures need far more flexible categorization than the civilized binary bottles of either/or categorization.

Emphasizing how avant-garde twentieth century poetics has always been allied to avant-garde imaging, music and performance, Chopin typically observes: “Luigi Russolo was a painter, a composer and an inventor. Pierre Albert-Birot was a typographer, a sculptor, a poet and a dramatist. Arp was the same — several disciplines. Seuphor too. Throughout the twentieth century, all of these categories have exploded.” (1992: 53) Not surprisingly, Chopin answers the question of whether he should be “categorized as a composer or as a poet,” by dismissing it, reasoning: “the best critical solution seems to be to suggest that as a result of this research the frontier between poetry and music no longer exists.” (1992: 53)

In turn, arguing that “The lines separating music and poetry, writing and painting, are purely arbitrary,” and noting how Chopin’s use of “ever-expanding technical facilities” creates “effects that have never been produced before,” thereby “opening a new frontier for poets,” Burroughs similarly contends that to the question “as to what line can be drawn between music and poetry . . . the answer is that there is no such line.” Assuming that there are also no such lines between a poet’s prosaic, poetical, artistic, musical or performative work, Burroughs concludes that “sound poetry is precisely designed . . . to free poetry from the printed page without dogmatically ruling out the convenience of the printed page.” (1979: 9)

Confirming this argument, Chopin acknowledges that while he is “a sound poet who has broken with writing” and “a visual poet who has broken printed semantic values,” his book *Les Riches Heures de l’Alphabet* (1992), co-authored with Paul Zumthor, at least partially reconciled him to the printed page. (1993: 371) Conceding that “Writing” is and remains necessary, he insists that it is no longer “exclusively so,” (1998: 20) once one discovers how the supplementary energies of sound poetry reveal realms of “vocal and physical sensoriality” that writing can never attain. (1998: 10)

For Chopin, in other words, sound poetry is primarily a verbal, extra-verbal gestural, corporeal and partially musical art, orchestrating poeticized vocal and physical sensoriality, and culminating in recordings and performances interweaving live and multimediated verbal, vocal and physical micro-sounds. As such, his practice is almost wholly abstract and extra-semantic, although as he also notes, such abstraction simultaneously evolves both *from* and *beyond* semantic communication. All vocal energies, Chopin concludes, constitute “an infinite field far apart from conventional language,” even though initially emerging from “such language.” (1998: 10)

In this respect, sound poetry presents a curious chicken and egg dilemma. Which comes first? Sound or Poetry? Language or Vocalic Energy? Performance or Score? On the one hand, if multimediated sound poetry makes language more abstract, by generally refining semantic referentiality into post-semantic or extra-semantic “vocal and physical sensoriality,” (1998: 10) then it surely adds what Barthes calls a “third meaning” (1977: 64) to ordinary language.

But on the other hand, as Chopin suggests, if it is the case — as Paul Zumthor posits — that “Poetry, considered in its first evolutionary phase, is anterior to language, and that there need be ‘no exclusive or absolutely necessary link between poetry and language’” (Zumthor quoted in Chopin, 1998: 7), then sound poetry’s explorations of sonic abstraction can also be defined as a multimediated return to realms of pre-semantic primordial *first meaning*.

Paradoxically then, Chopin defines sound poetry in terms of two quite different cultural traditions. Viewed retrospectively, he suggests that sound poetry’s abstract orality can be traced back to the pre-technological and pre-writerly vocalicity that he equates with “*incalculable* millennia of unrecorded orality.” (1998: 7) But viewed futuristically, multimediated amplifications and orchestrations of this same orality invite definition as a distinctively post-writerly vocalicity facilitated by successively new technologies offering innumerable vocal variations. (1998: 24)

Not surprisingly, Chopin’s harshest comments are reserved for those of his contemporaries who fail to share his commitment to those realms of almost wholly extra-semantic musical abstraction where he believes that “vocal sounds . . . discover their integral independence.” (1998: 11) Speaking from the perspective of a poet compelled to “reinvent the voice of the sound poet — as music,” (1998: 9) Chopin

singles out the American John Giorno and the Frenchman Bernard Heidsieck as well-known poets whose work has never fully entered the world of sound. (1998: 11) In much the same way, Malevich's equally passionate defense of painterly abstraction in *The Non-Objective World* (1927) prompts his parallel contention that "the naturalism of the Impressionists, Cézanneism, Cubism, etc." has "nothing to do with ... the heights of nonobjective art." (1968: 341-42)

Both Chopin's and Malevich's claims refine distinctions between rarefied degrees of abstraction and nonobjectivity; a complicated realm at the best of times, as Hans Richter emphasizes when discussing the subdivisions between dada's different abstract agendas. Recalling how the trees along Zurich's *Bahnhofstrasse* prompted both his own analytical enthusiasm for the "powerful melody" of their "living skeleton," and Hans Arp's more tactile admiration for the surface qualities of their "skin," Richter memorably concludes: "Both of us were right; our attitudes, opposed as they were, belonged together. The difficulty was semantic rather than real. The fault lies with language, and as language is the tool of thought, the fault lies with our way of thinking." (1970: 60-61). In turn, the fault lines in most acrimonious discussions of sound poetry, similarly result from needlessly over-literal responses to monodimensional polemic.

Contemplative visionaries attempting to articulate what Malevich and Chopin define as pure feeling (1968: 344) and universal orality (1998: 28) may well need to create such landmark iconic or sonic abstractions as the suprematist square and the *audio-poème*. But there is no more need for all postmodern poets to explore abstract *audio-poésie* than there was any need for all modernist artists to paint suprematist squares. Rather, what really makes writing, performance or imaging successful — and what allows divergent innovative practices to "belong" together — are what Jean Baudrillard thinks of as the shared kinds of "Viral," "erotic" and "poetic singularity" (1996: 103-4) contributing to the "event" of verbal and photographic "magic." (1996: 58)

In turn, John Giorno notes how such amazingly powerful poetic magic culminates in the "great moment in performing ... when you and every individual in the audience become one." (1989: 19) Dismissing the various ways in which "All those fucking sound poets have had so much to say about me over the years," Giorno pragmatically concludes: "I have done just what I want to do, and now I'm doing music. I don't care what they think!" (1989: 18)

All the same, in an era of technologically transformed performance, it is surely crucial that audiences and critics — as well as poets, artists and techno-performers in general — should also *re-think* past cultural categories, and as Bernard Heidsieck notes, these diversify into predictably "parallel and contradictory" (1998: 51) alternatives. "Certain a-semantic sound poets juggle with phonetic effects or with vocal and buccal exercises; others by contrast, retain semantic values and work

with language, with or without recording technologies,” and “Others, pushing electronic technologies to their extremes, explore the frontiers of music.” (1998: 51) Whereas Chopin’s abstract compositions fall into to this partially musical category and lead him to work with vocally, corporeally and technologically *poeticized sound*, Heidsieck’s meticulous montages of fragmentary words and vocal and non-vocal sounds culminate in a kind of *sounded poetry* self-consciously conserving much of conventional poetry’s textual and semantic specificity.

For Heidsieck, the sonic energies of sounded language differ primarily from the silent energies of visible language in terms of their supplementary performative dynamism. Preceded by scores “to be read in public with the support of pre-recorded tapes,” and to be printed in multimedia formats such as his recent 3-CD book, *Respirations et brèves rencontres* (1999), this kind of performance offers the distinctively post-typographic impact that Heidsieck describes as the “public tape/reading (based upon written texts conserving semantic contents).” (1998: 53).

From this perspective, what sound poetry reveals — (and what monodisciplinary cultural categories conceal) — are the kind of *supplementary signifiers* (1977: 63) that Barthes’ discussion of Eisenstein’s stills identifies outside culture, knowledge, information, (1977: 55) in “that region where articulated language is no longer more than approximative and where another language begins (whose science, cannot be linguists, is soon discarded like a booster rocket).” (1977: 65)

In turn, Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* (1980) describes the *punctum* of individual photographs as equally inarticulable images, far from the “usual blah-blah” defining conventional photographic Technique and Reality. (1983: 55) When “tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits,” Barthes observes, photo-imaging remains within the codifiable confines of tame realism. But at its more absolute and original extremes, Barthes suggests, it attains a “mad” or “intractable reality,” (1983: 19) far removed from the pseudo-grammatical categories (1977: 109) outlined in his introduction to structural analysis.

Like many other postmodern visionaries, Barthes successively discovers seemingly inarticulable realms of extra-grammatical and extra-linguistic creativity, welcomes extra-textual revelation, forsakes what Burroughs calls the “Word-God,” (1986: 103) and progressively extricates himself from what Chopin calls the “empire of words.” (1998: 17)

But whereas Chopin’s audiopoems tangibly suggest imponderable discourse, beyond “all measure and all law,” (1998: 18) Barthes’ challenges to such laws are conceptual rather than creative. Accordingly, his theoretical and speculative insights make best sense when complemented, consolidated and generally supplemented by the still more specific theoretical and creative insights of multimedia practitioners such as Chopin.

On the one hand, for example, Chopin's theoretical discussions of unknown realms of oral energies "beyond all the laws of versification and prose," (1998: 24) usefully confirm Barthes' sense that cultural theory should extend its agenda to include the kind of extraverbal performative energy "outside of any law," that "The Grain of the Voice" (1972) locates in terms of his "erotic" response to "the body of the man or woman singing." (1977: 188)

But on the other hand, Chopin's multimediated performances also offer Barthes' theories still more concrete confirmation in practice, as the American concrete poet and fluxus artist Dick Higgins perceptively indicates when discussing Chopin's sonic and iconic presence in terms of "the erotic vitality of his performing with the microphone, the curious abstraction of his sounds which transcended specific reference but always maintained their intensity." (1992a: 23)

Observing "nothing malignant" in Chopin's gestures, but finding himself at a loss for words before the particularity of Chopin's performative aura, Higgins dramatically likens it to that of "a powerful vampire, a super-Dracula" (1992a: 23) and of "The golem in the text." (1992b: 23) In turn, Barthes' awe before the collective vocal "rustle" and filmic images of a group of Chinese children prompts "The Rustle of Language" (1975) to forsake the confident objectivity of his earlier analyses of written language's "tissue of quotations" (1977: 146) for the utopian subjectivity of the following evocation of this "immense tissue of sound" or *immense tissu sonore*. (1984: 94)

*The other evening, watching Antonioni's film on China, I suddenly experienced ... the rustle of language: in a village street, some children, leaning against a wall, reading aloud, each one a different book to himself, but all together ... the meaning was doubly impenetrable to me, by my not knowing Chinese and by the blurring of these simultaneous readings; but I was hearing, in a kind of hallucinatory perception ... the music, the breath, the tension, in short something like a goal.* (1986: 78-9)

Pondering this experience in still more detail (somewhat like Proust's Marcel, after his first involuntary memory), Barthes remarks how Antonioni's filmic *son et lumière* is simultaneously visual, verbal, extra-verbal, sonic, musical and performatively "erotic" in the sense of constituting what Baudrillard terms a perceptual "event" (1996: 58) and what he himself equates with moments of perceptual "discovery."

*Is that all it takes — just speak all at the same time in order to make language rustle, in the rare fashion, stamped with delectation, that I have been trying to describe? No, of course not: the auditory scene requires an erotics (in the broadest sense of the term), the élan, or the discovery, or the simple accompaniment of an emotion: precisely what was contributed by the countenances of the Chinese children.* (1986: 79)

Despite his reservations before contemporaries working in traditional “choral groups,” (1982: 74) Chopin similarly traces the origins of his sonic sensibility to his encounters with the “infra-language or ultra-language” (1993: 362) of the songs of the Serbs, Croats and Slovaks that he heard in Czechoslovakia during the second world war. Such early experiences, he notes, gradually led him beyond very basic literary ideas, towards the discovery of “new values” manifested by “new technologies.” (1992: 51)

Chopin’s poetics, in other words, derives from a distinctive empathy with both the primitive abstraction in unmediated ultra-languages, and the futuristic abstraction of those high-tech corporeal ultra-languages orchestrated by postmodern multimedia. As Barthes notes in an interview of 1975, Surrealism, by contrast, remains too close to basic literary ideas, offers *too much* literature, and *falls short* of the body (1981: 230). In turn, Haraldo de Campos suggests that Surrealism evinces the kind of “small committee baroque” mentality that he contrasts with the “furious baroque” (1993: 387) sensibility prompting the call for “*verbivocalvisual*” (1968: 71) creativity in the Brazilian concrete poets’ Pilot Plan.” (1958) Arguably, Chopin refines precisely this kind of furious poetics in “work with the word, with orality, with song, with dance ... beyond written poetry.” (1998: 7)

What still seems most difficult to categorize, however, is the precise quality of this kind of extra-textual poetics, or what one might more frivolously think of as the precise quality of the kind of multimediated “wild thing” that makes even the most cynical postmodern theorist’s “heart sing.”

Variouly evoked as a kind of *grain* thing, *music* thing, *machine* thing, *viral* thing, *delectation* thing, *erotic* thing, *ecstasy* thing, *coming* thing, *punctum* thing, *floating* thing, *rustling* thing, *sumptuous* thing, *furious* thing, *mad* thing, *vampire* thing, *golem* thing, *third* thing, *infra* thing, *ultra* thing, or ‘*verbivocalvisual*’ thing, the most utopian energies of the postmodern multimedia arts repeatedly emerge, converge and diverge, between, across and beyond words, orality, song, dance, image and poetry, re-articulating auratically auditory, iconic and gestural variants of what Malevich calls “absolute, true value.” (1968: 346)

As Chopin’s writings, performances and recordings suggest, sound poetry’s purest supplementary signifiers command attention in terms of the ways in which their threefold energies blend and clash, referring back to language’s “abyssal” origins, referring sideways to familiar practices and facilitating such convergences as the “union of the two great languages of poetry and music,” (1998: 13) and referring forward to those still untheorized multimediated realms which, for the moment at least, remain “imponderable, and independent of all measure and all law.” (1998: 18)

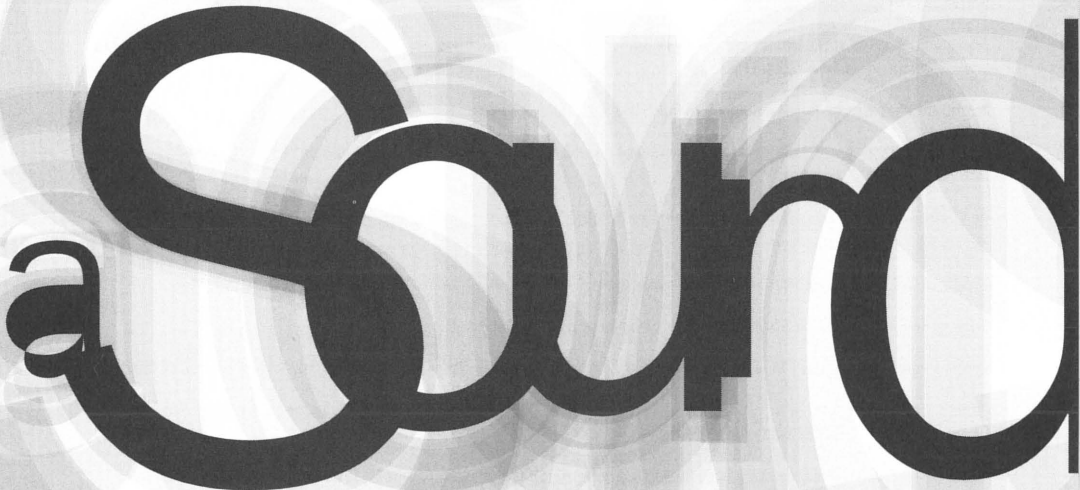
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The image features large, bold, black lowercase letters 'a s r o' in a sans-serif font. The letters are set against a background of numerous overlapping, semi-transparent concentric circles in various shades of gray, creating a complex, layered visual effect. The circles vary in size and opacity, some appearing as thin lines and others as solid, light gray washes. The overall composition is minimalist and graphic.



# Scape

## of Contemporary Hungarian Poetry

Arguing that modernization of expression is indispensable to modernization of perception, the author locates the origins of sound poetry in dada and futurism. While a precise definition is impossible for sound poetry, the problem of visual representation of sound or other sensory modalities, other than the visual, is examined. All this is by way of preamble to a discussion of Hungarian poetry's long history of musicality in which particular poets are cited. The context of avant-garde development, as colored by politics, both hot and cold, is also explored.

**With the paradigmatically complex** and quite often very specific developments of twentieth century's poetic practice, poetic activity continuously rediscovered the potentiality and efficiency of the oral and vocal dimension of language and expression. Evidently, as it is usual in the history of art and mankind's spiritual self-expression, the exploration of the huge field of vocality included experiments and experiences which not simply preceded, but even came to full bloom together with the process of articulation of the expression itself. The exciting and interesting *ancestral symbiosis of perception, cognition and expression* makes this discourse much more complicated, but as we have not sufficient space to develop this in detail, for now we state that the modernization of expression is indispensable to the modernization of perception. Meanwhile, at the same time and evidently, the continuous articulation of the supply of expressive forms articulate the capacity and the special sensibility of perception and cognition as well.

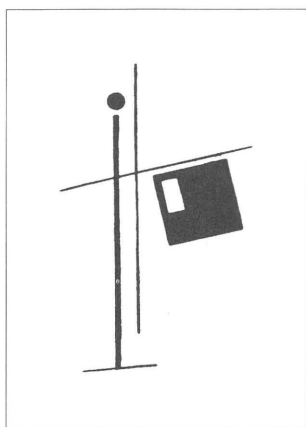
This heroic period of the radical modernization of poetic language is attached, as it is quite well-known, above all to *futurist and dadaist experiences* (not undervaluing other sources of renewal). There was an extremely important precedent produced by *symbolist poetry*. It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of the recognition of the deep spiritual identity of poetic and musical experience (conceptualized vigorously in Verlaine's famous *Art poétique*). Intuition leads to the theoretic separation of the language of poetry, on one hand, and the language of prose forms, on the other hand. It means that "literature" as an entity missing any essential link with musicality, will be separated from "poetry" which is identified more and more with music. This conception is materialized, in a way, in the vocal practice of *futurist declamation* and *dadaist lautgedichte*, and all the history of twentieth century poetic experimentation shows somehow the functionalization of musical parameters inherent in language, which earlier were neglected and taken as accidental or as less than secondary factors of linguistic expression. Futurism and mainly Marinetti's declamation harshly revitalize intonation, timbre, rhythm, volume and onomatopoeism. Dada's sound poetry eliminates the nearly obligatory semantic automatism in poetic communication, and focuses on the phoneme and letter as basic elements of the language of poetry. Later on, radical poetic experiments, engaged in sound experiences, tried and succeeded to penetrate the phoneme itself (see some congenial inventions of *Isou*) and/or functionalized the extralinguistic domain of speech activity (such as inspiration and expiration noises, articulation noises, groaning, sighing, whispering, howl, etc.). See for example, the heroic poetic efforts of *Artaud*. With the continuous development of the technical basis of civilization and, consequently, of artistic activity, the range of sound expression forms and possibilities and the domains to be yet explored have been incredibly widened. All the artists, poets and musicians, and all the participants and theoreticians of present day culture are or, if not, should be well aware of what has happened in this large field outlined by poetic, musical, artistic, performative activities. As a result, it is really difficult to qualify generically (within traditional categories), if a sound art work should be considered music, poetry, performance or a conceptual piece. (Many can find a generic identification in the intermedial range based on the conceptual symbiosis.)

That's why sound poetry has such a large number of identifying aspects — from the relatively purist tendencies of *phonetic poetry* (the early Heidsieck or Garnier, Rühm or Rotella) or *minimalistic vocal poetry* (Spatola or Lora-Totino) through Chopin's or Cobbing's or Dufrêne's or The Four Horsemen's *vocal noisism* or Rothenberg's or Morrow's *chanted poetry* and through Blaine's or Minarelli's *actional sound poetry* up to clearly *musical sound poetry* (Amirkhanian, Stratos, Arcand, Fontana, Moss) or even to music engaged in linguistic experiences (Cage, Ashley, Bertoni-Serotti etc.), there is an abundant variety of genres and manners of expression in sound poetic activity. For this see, among others, Minarelli's articles and papers on the concept of *polipoetic genres*.

The process outlined above with regard to the development of vocal and sonoric functionalization of the language of poetry is encoded by the problem of visual components and carriers. On one hand written language — even as a score of human speech activity — serves as a two-dimensional starting point for vocal reinterpretation in oral poetry or declamation, which is already a three-dimensional creative action. Then in the process of this three-dimensional (re)creation, beyond vocal and musical parameters inevitably appear visual (*gestual*, ambient, scenic etc.) codes as can be clearly seen in the futurist declamation programme (*Declamazione dinamica e sinottica*) or in Ball's memoirs on the early formation of *dadaist lautgedichte* (*Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, Luzern, 1946). So modern sound poetry was born organically in a total space of creativity characterized by the simultaneous presence of linguistic, vocal-sonoric, *gestural* and *actional* elements.

A well-known question which has a paradigmatic evolution in recent art history, is this: how to restore the link backwards from acoustic codes to visually — how to note a complex vocal-sonoric-actional art work with visual signs. Evidently, it is a question far beyond the problem of notation: visual scores evoking the original artistic act are more than a simple diagram or visual description. Visual notation must be an autonomous reinterpretation of the original artistic act, exactly the way declamation or sound poetry action was or could be a recreation of a written poem or of a visual work. The autonomy of single artistic spheres, connected by the processes of medial reinterpretation and recreation, is dialectically completed by the special creative nature of the intermedial artistic mind. The verification of this reciprocal continuity of medial reinterpretation and recreation can be seen in the practice of futurist *parolibero* and *tavole parolibere*, as autonomous visual poems often have their acoustic parallels in declamations which are often visually recoded in *tavole parolibere* as visual scores.

Since the question and its artistic solution is the problem of modern music's notation — which produced a highly interesting domain of intermedial contacts of "pure" modern music and visual art (see for example, some scores of Ligeti, Stockhausen, Xenakis, Boulez or others) — is relatively well-known. At this point we look to more radical steps in intermedial artistic concepts and in their linguistic and structural consequences: to Cage's conceptually redefined musical or performative instructions, to Higgins' conceptual scores interpretable both in a visual-conceptual and a musical-actional way.



**FIGURE 1**  
Lajos Kassák, “Bildarchitektur,”  
from *De Stijl*, 1922.



**FIGURE 2**  
Lajos Kassák, paper collage, 1926.

After having outlined, even if in a summary way, the basal developments of the vocal-sonoric rearrangement of poetry and its visual consequences, let's see what has been going on in Hungary in the last few decades. As a short prehistory, we recognize that Hungarian poetry had a long tradition of — musicality — even virtuoso musicality. Great Hungarian poets such as Bálint Balassi in the sixteenth century or Mihály Csokonai Vitéz at the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth century, or János Arany in the second-half of the nineteenth century worked out an almost perfect sound for the language of Hungarian written poetry. Still, the conceptual recognition of the organic identity of poetry and music, and, together with that, the conceptual separation of poetry from “literature” realized by French symbolist poetry (evoked initially with Verlaine’s famous poem) was not conceptualized at that time in Hungarian poetry. Nevertheless post-symbolic musicality was developed to an extensive level by the poets of the review *Nyugat* (West), which was a forum for the modernization in literature during the early twentieth century, in the poetry and in the rich translation activity of Dezső Kosztolányi, Árpád Tóth, Mihály Babits. A totally new, proto-avant-garde sensibility and an adequate primary musicality of poetic language was found in the poetic work of one of the greatest Hungarian poets of all times, Endre Ady. This perceptive and linguistic modernization has an interesting parallel in the early music of Béla Bartók, essentially during the first two decades of the century.

These, events suggest a reciprocal co-penetration of music and poetry that might have consolidated in a rich generic range as in the case of futurist or dadaist practice, yet didn't. Furthermore, the first strong wave of historical avant-garde was signaled by the outstanding poet, writer, *Lajos Kassák*. He is better known in Europe as a painter, great organizer and editor of important reviews such as *A TETT* (The Action), *MA* (Today), *Munka* (Work), *Dokumentum* etc. These took their first decisive inspiration from German-Austrian expressionism and, on the other hand, from cubism and, a bit later, from

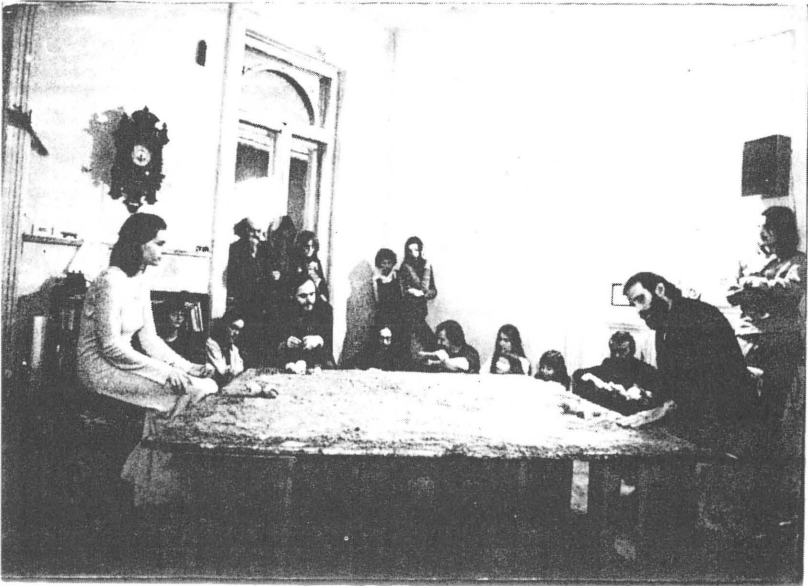


FIGURE 3 Kassák Stúdió (later Squat) at work, 1974.

constructivism. These were relatively purist tendencies, as they influenced almost exclusively fine arts, or — as in the case of expressionism — had a quite intense influence on artistic intentions and dynamism, but didn't radically upset the whole structure of poetic language. Kassák and his colleagues (such as Róbert Berényi, Sándor Barta, Béla Uitz, Róbert Reiter, Erzsébet Újvári, or for a period László Moholy-Nagy) formed a new artistic vision, launching a new practice in applied arts, typography, cover-design etc., but essentially didn't integrate the asyntactic and asemantic use of poetic language. So, regarding the acoustic aspect of poetic language, instead of initiating any kind of vocal-sonoric poetry, the only relevant step done by them in this field, was the interesting practice of choir-recital of poems, an activity which had a progressive relevance both in cultural-sociological and in an artistic sense.

After the Versailles-Trianon peace treaties and, in a longer perspective between the two wars for a long list of historical reasons that cannot be detailed at the moment, this first strong avant-garde wave practically stopped: because of an immense variety of consequences including the fatal mutilation of the country, the forced emigration of most of the avant-garde artists (even Kassák went on with his activity for years in Vienna, where he had a memorable meeting with Marinetti) and the strong oppression of the then-new right-wing regime (most of the avant-garde artists were engaged in more or less radical leftism).

After the second world war, Hungary experienced a new oppression, in the form of Stalinist dictatorship, when neither moderate nor conservative spiritual positions were tolerated. Despite the overtly oppressive nature of the Stalinist dictatorship in the 1950s, and then the increasingly disguised oppression of the long Kádár-era, due also to a complicated texture of various (sociological, political, cultural, etc.) effects and the new winds of the 1960s in Europe (which did not penetrate the frontier),

nevertheless, a highly intensive new wave of neo-avant-garde thought developed in the late 1960s and in the early 1970s. The most progressive outcomes were in the field of experimental theater (see the extensive example of Kassák Stúdió, later, in emigration, Squat in New York) and in progressive pop music (see the multiple examples of Kex and János Baksa-Soós), but in fine arts and poetic practice important results were achieved. Still, the most important influence of this new wave was the pre-forming of the artistic mind of the young generations, because of which from the late 1970s through the 1980s an over-all effective “parallel,” independent, over-underground culture and art practice developed outside the official, monolithic institutions of the regime.

Perhaps for the first time in the history of Hungarian avant-garde movements, the dominating artistic trend was exactly this over-all view of art, the total co-penetration of poetic, musical and artistic ideas. That's why music became so decisive for poetry as well as for art. The concert-theater situation and the relative freedom offered by the means and effects of the same situation, produced a new space for artistic-poetic-musical experimentation. A number of relevant groups formed — and worked or have been working intensely — artists, poets, musicians and all kinds of performers such as Bizottság (Committee), Konnektor, BP Service, Lois Ballast, Art Deco, Jugó Tudósok (Yugoslavian Scientists) and so on.

It seemed evident that musical and visual space could have a strong influence on the use of poetic language, first on the level of vocality and then on the level of sonority and conceptuality. Nevertheless, real Hungarian sound poetry was put in motion outside Hungary.

In modern Hungarian poetry, between the two wars and after the second one, until the 1960s, the only poet who occasionally went beyond the semantic border of language — from poetic musicality moved on towards abstract phonic possibilities inherent in language — was one of the greatest poets of this century, Sándor Weöres. Hungarian sound poets of the first generation made sound tributes to him: Tibor Papp in his *Pagan Rhythms* and Katalin Ladik in her *Group of phonemes* or *Panyigai*, for example.

Katalin Ladik, poet, performer, actress, born in 1942 in Novi Sad, was a Yugoslavian citizen till the end of the 1980s. She published several books (both in Hungarian and in Serbian-Croatian) and had innumerable performances in Europe. But her most outstanding artistic expression is vocal art and sound poetry. Her international fame is due to her exceptional vocal capacity and voice training, and of course, to her deeply original poetic inventions in vocal expression. In her sound poetry activity an atavistic richness of body language sublimated in voice meets a folkloristically deeply colored linguistic background and an up-to-date modern sensibility. It is not surprising that her sound poetry works attracted the attention of *Henri Chopin* in 1979, in his monograph on international sound poetry (*Poésie Sonore Internationale*, Jean-Michel Place editor).

Tibor Papp was a 1956 refugee, living subsequently in Paris. In the first period of his sound poetry activity he concentrated mainly on verbal rhythms and the alternative or simultaneous adoption of French and Hungarian languages. He developed a large-scale cooperation with emigrant Hungarian avant-gardists (in Paris, with Pál Nagy and Alpár Bujdosó, edited for decades the most important review of Hungarian neo-avant-garde: *Magyar Műhely /Atelier Hongois/*), and similarly with French avant-garde artists, collaborating in Polyphonix group, with artists such as Jean-Jacques Lebel, Charles Dreyfuss etc. Since the 1980s he has been engaged in computer poetry and created some original poetic programming software such as *Distichon Alfa* which can generate an almost endless number of distichons. At the same time he became a theoretician of computed-generated poetic language.

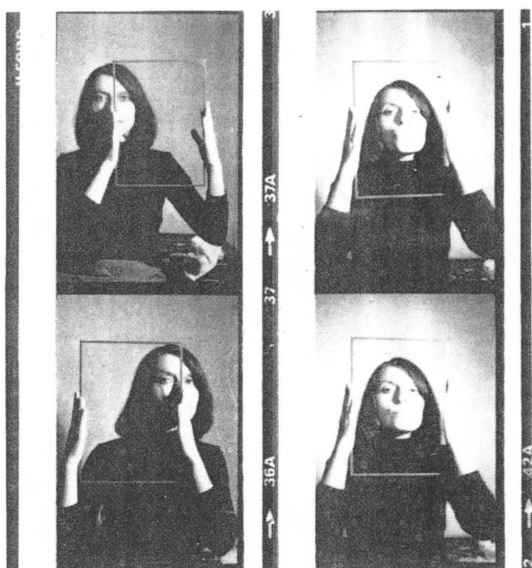
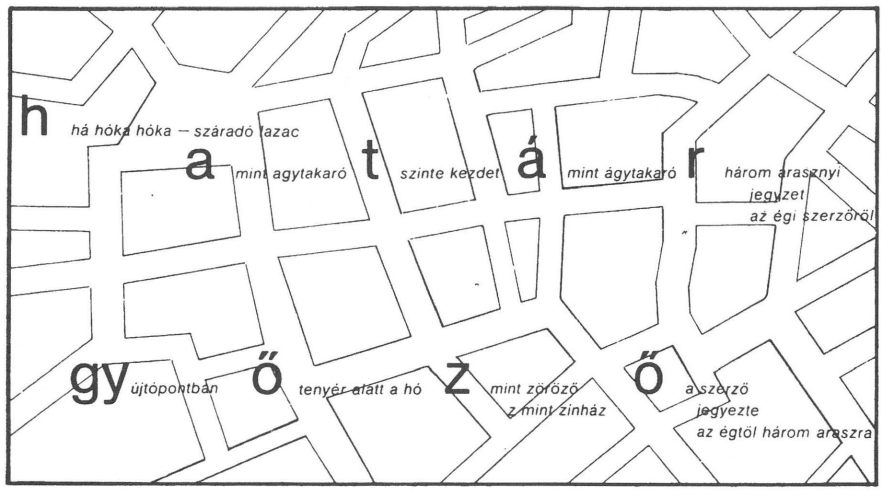


FIGURE 4+5 Katalin Ladik in performance, mid-1980s.

**á** mint agytakaró  
**b** ha lóhálorpássz szállj le a lóról  
**c** comme bákóm  
**d** in succés in succés /pn'la desastrul final  
**dzs** mint hárisnyatarló fellegek csak-nehezébb  
**f** csak hanu rab  
**h** stende nobis Domine  
**m** lék-betétkönyvek jobbára kis példányszámban mondhatni titkos értékük túlmutat a szűk szakmai körök kívánalmain  
**ma** mint agytakaró  
**g** mint géhás  
**e**



**n** apon papír kráteres tölgyeket árnyaló keleti fal  
**e** csak-nehezék  
**k** ell mint iszákos embernek a nagy tavak  
**l** locsogási tilalmat rendeltek el augusztus elejétől a főváros minden kerületében  
**ly** a veszélyeztetett  
**sz** száradt szárazszálon gyöngöző pirából  
**u** like who  
**zs** ézsus-mán tányéron an az ablak mán mán egy  
**j** é ny leszedik viseltes vargúnyánkat  
**ty** ogurk. työgünk bunós akarattal  
**ü** ke modus rectum  
**ü** is szobor de  
**x** ilon k helyett p-vel  
**í** és ii – acélsőből egy töltemény  
**s** a láthatár behorpad  
**v** izes a fedőlap  
**p** ha öháton jössz szállj le a lóról

FIGURE 6 Tibor Papp, Map-scores, mid 1980s.



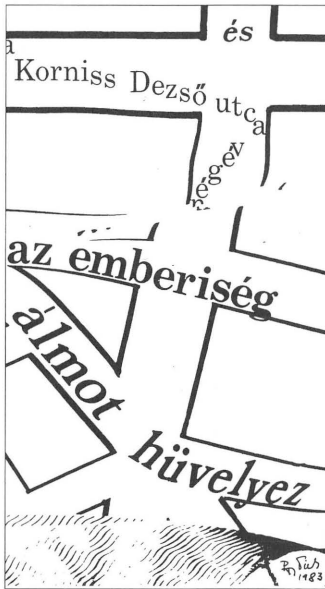


FIGURE 7 Tibor Papp, Map-scores, mid 1980s.



FIGURE 8 István Kántor (Monty Cantsin) in performance, mid-1980s.

Inside Hungary, in the 1970s more Hungarian poets — usually working in other forms of poetic self-expression as well — started a real sound poetry practice, in which the inspiration and the influence of avant-garde movement of previous periods were quite decisive. One of them was yet more or less a foreigner: István Kántor, for decades more known by his artist name Monty Cantsin. In the mid 1970s, he left the country and lived primarily in Canada. He is a performance artist, musician, composer, with a profound sound poetic inspiration. In his songs, multimedia performances or other works vocal and verbal expression remains decisive.

Ákos Szilágyi's sound poetry is inspired by the gap between the semantic and the phonetic level of language. He creates a permutative oral poetry in which the consistent alteration of the sound form of the same words or phrases leads to the continuous modification of semantic meaning. Using this method, the parallel development of the semantic and phonic modulations, inserted always in a very characteristic rhythmic composition, creates a deeply grotesque effect, which is, at the same time, full of existential anxieties.

My own sound poetry activity which started at the end of the 1970s. In the initial period, musical inspiration was very strong in both in verbal/vocal and compositional sense. I worked out a sort of abstract sound poetry in which musical cues are decisive. The voice often ends up becoming sound with the sonority or musical complexity of the piece always important. I've been working continuously with bands (Szkárosi&Konnektor, Spiritus Noister, or even the English group Towering Inferno), consequently my poetry usually has a strong intermedial and/or performance character in which visuals and action — even if recently in a minimal way — become components of the whole (sound) poetic composition.

*Hal hálaimja*

Hol ő hol én hal ő hal én  
in éhen haek imhol im hal im  
hol im hal...

*Szilvi Álos*

## HAL HÁLAIMÁJA

Halleluja

Hallátógásra

hol ő hol én  
hal ő hal én  
ha ő hal én  
éhenhalok  
imhol im hal  
imhol im hal

hol ő halál  
hol én halál  
halál hala  
ha halra lel  
haláira hal  
hal hal halált

halál lohól  
a hal sehol  
sehol halál  
halál sehol  
seb hol halál  
halélausz  
hal visszausz

én hallom őt  
őt hallom én  
halam halam  
én hallak ám  
hallá halok  
halál okán

hallom hallám  
hallám hallám  
hadd lám halam  
hadd lám halam  
hullám-halom  
hullámon át  
hullámon

hullámaim  
a láma – im  
imára hiv  
imára ám  
imám e hal  
halái-imám

hullám-halom  
hullám-halom  
Allá' ilah  
Allá' ilah  
alárom  
hullám alá

Alláh ilah-  
halál illan  
halálaim  
halálaim  
halleluja  
halleluja

hol ő hol én  
hal ő hal én  
elhullik őn  
elhulló őn  
elhull a hal  
hathulla hull

a hála im  
halálom ám  
náiam e hal  
hal-hála lám!  
halleluja  
halleluja

ha hallal hál  
halálal hal  
hal áttal hal  
hallal ha hál  
elhál elhal  
elhál elhál

jón lóhalált  
s hal halhalált  
miféle hal  
ha itt meghal?  
halleluja  
halleluja

ha hallja s él  
elhül e hal  
hátom halál  
én lenn a hal  
hal én hal én  
alé! a hal

hol itt halál  
hol ott halál  
holott holott  
halott halott  
hal villan ott  
halon halál

halleluja  
halleluja  
halleluja  
halleluja  
hej a halál!  
hej a halál!

FIGURE 9+10 Ákos Szilágyi, Thanksgiving Prayer of the Fish, mid-1980s.

Following these poets which started their activity in the 1970s, András Petőcz began to work with sound poetry in the 1980s, as one of the (then) young poets inspired by the more and more assiduous presence of Magyar Műhely in Hungary. Petőcz's poetry essentially is based on the tradition of French phonetic poetry: the strong role of repetition is combined with a poetic language constructed of phonemes, syllables and relatively few words. He has been collaborating with the outstanding Hungarian composer, László Sály.

In the 1980s, too, artists and poets of other genres begin to work in the framework of sound poetry as well. Gábor Tóth was known as a visual poet when he discovered for himself the language of vocality and sonority, creating a special mode of verbality and gesturality in his poetry. Recently he involved noisism in his practise as well and makes a sort of noise-dj-poetry. As for noisism, one of the most original creations of the Hungarian avant-garde in the last decades is related to the activity of a self-made artist. Since the early 1980s, Viktor Lois has been constructing mobile sculpture-instruments from old household machines, waste and refuse. These constructions are, on one hand, authentic sculptures, on the other hand, they are moveable and in some way soundable as wind, plucked or percussive instruments. Their sound is electrically amplified. In order to explore the exciting possibilities of composition with these self-built instruments he has formed various groups (the best known is Lois Ballast) with which he participated in several festivals and tours in Europe. In recent years he has composed real songs using this instrumental basis with vocal contributions.

Evidently, the concept and even more the practice of sound poetry is extensive, and artists arrive in this field from various directions, from different studies and different experiences. Among sound poets,

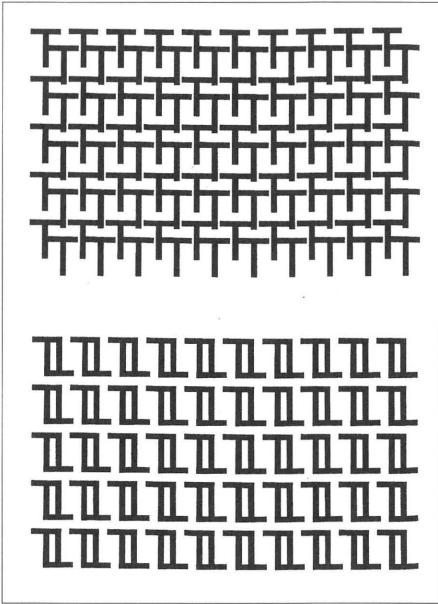


FIGURE 11 Gábot Tóth, Score, mid-1980s.

some arrive from textual poetry, some from fine arts and so on. It is obvious that a number of musicians have continuous contact with sound poetic activity, working in both fields (which often are not really separable). Such is the case of well known composer László Hortobágyi, whose music has a very strong individual character, synthesizing in its language high-tech contemporary expressive forms, deeply transposed ethnic instrumental and vocal traditions and new inventions based on much musical experience. It is the consistent presence of archaic and hypermodern forms of vocality in his compositions that make his work relevant from the standpoint of sound poetry.

Reviewing the development of Hungarian experimental culture as a whole from the mid 1970s, the strong and decisive presence of musical expressive forms is more than characteristic. A number of new formations, forums, ways of expression and many artists form their thoughts and practice on

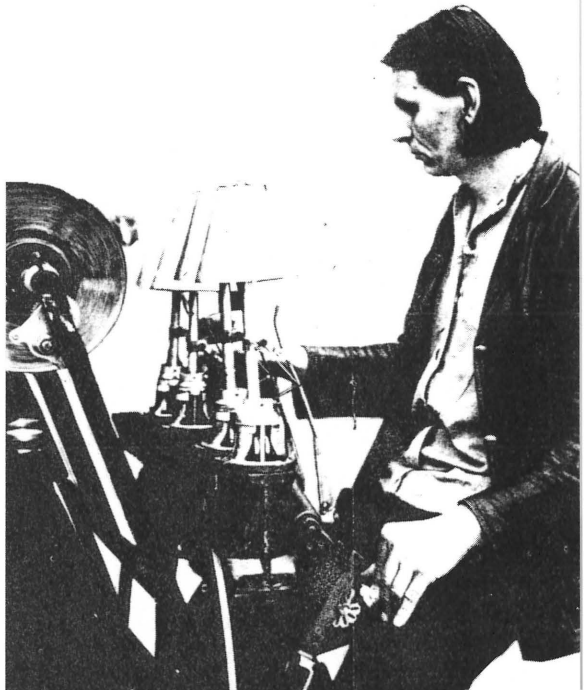


FIGURE 12 Viktor Lois in concert on his sculpture-instruments, mid-1980s.

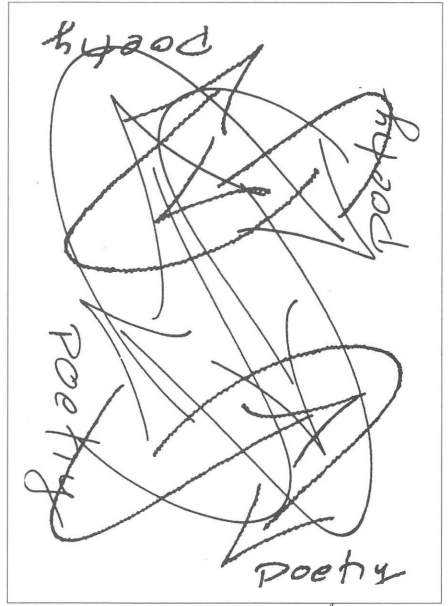


FIGURE 13 András Petöcz, Poetry, mid-1970s.

the basis of musical experiences, using musical forms or inserting them somehow into their artworks. The analysis of this phenomenon could be the subject of a separate paper. But it is worth mentioning that in the 1990s this organic complexity of poetic experience seems to disappear in specialization: meanwhile artistic experiences (musical, actional, multimedia or intermedia activities) are involving more and more a verbal conceptuality, the so-called poetic activity turns back to linear forms. Interdisciplinary-minded artists who work with text, language or with any form of verbal expression, or poets who work in musical, visual or intermedial context, more and more consider themselves simply to be artists. They don't define themselves as poets. Is it the sign of a conceptual separation between two concepts of artistic praxis and existence: a traditional one and an experimental one? Will Verlaine's idea of the basic identity of poetry and music be revised?



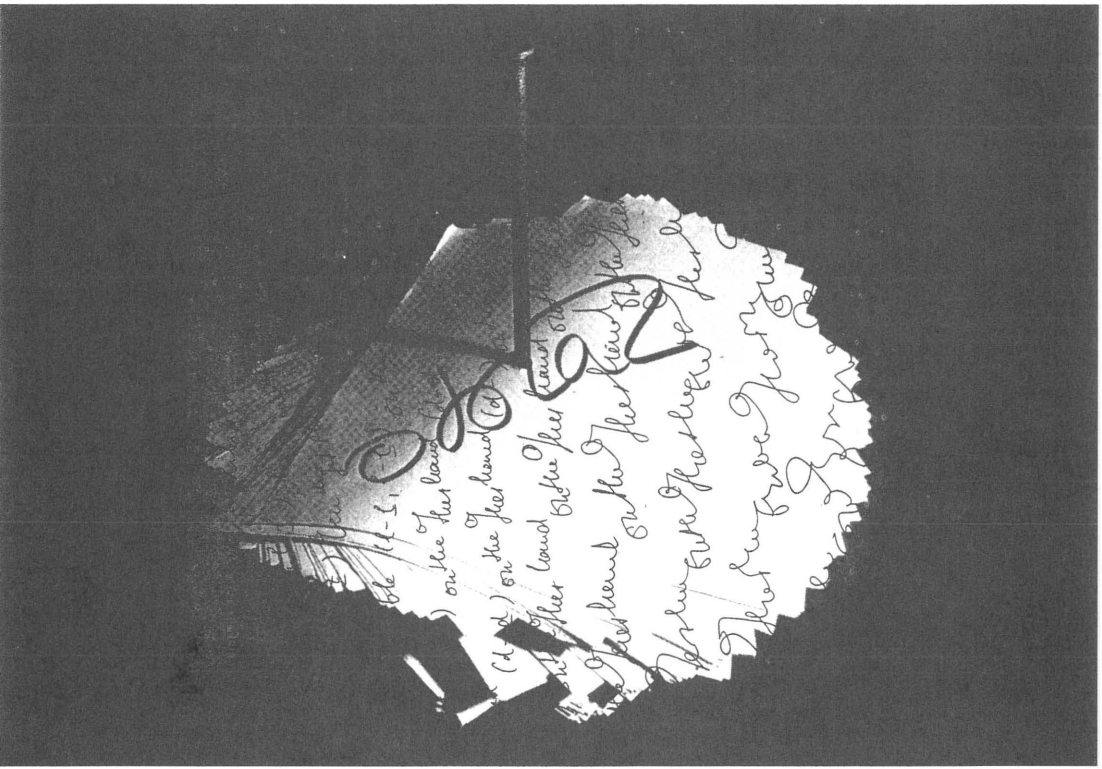
FIGURE 14 Viktor Lois in concert on his sculpture-instruments, mid-1980s.

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**FIGURE 15**  
 György Galántai's "Annihilator,"  
 a visual interpretation of a soundpoem of  
 Endre Szkarosi, mid-1980s.



**FIGURE 16** Enzo Szkarosi's "The Hobo Baron," visual script of a sound poem in Dutch and English, 1987.



FIGURE 17 E. Sz's "Súlyos csiszár," notation and visual interpretation of a sound poem, mid-1940s.

ÖLJ MEG MEG  
 ÖLJ MEG MEG

FIGURE 18 Enzo Szkárosi's "Kill me again," poem-score, mid-1940s.

FOLYÓALÓ HELLENY  
 HASS, ALKOS, GYRAPOD

FIGURE 19 Enzo Szkárosi's "Bulletproof Space" (Impress, create, multiply), poem-score, mid-1940s.

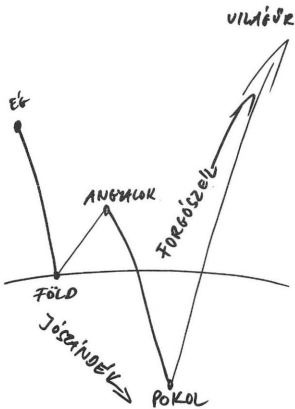


FIGURE 20 Enzo Szkárosi's "Goodwill and Whirlwind," poem-score, mid-1940s.

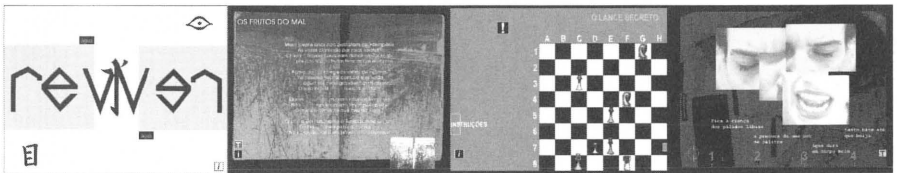


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# Experimental Poetics







based on  
**Sound Poetry**  
**Today**

After providing three “anti-definitions” which locate sound poetry by specifying what it is not, a new term is introduced, “intersign.” Intersign poetry does not privilege sound, but focuses on new integrative sound-vision presented by technology through digital means. Technology-based poetry is traced to French experiments in the 1950s. Following a brief history of poetic development, intersign poetry is contrasted with sound poetry and positioned relative to multimedia and hypermedia. The engagement of the audience is viewed as a critical component in exploring meaning and sensory development.

This text deals with three trends of experimental poetics based on sound poetry today:

- 1) The return to acoustic experiments;
- 2) The presence of the body;
- 3) Hypermedia techniques which develop new ways to construct poems as a mix between sound, verbal and visual elements.

To understand the trends of experimental poetics based on sound poetry today, it is necessary first to understand in general what sound poetry is, if not by exactly defining its field, at least by defining what is not contained within it.

- 1 Sound poetry is not a declamation of a written poem, even if the declamation is an oralization of an experimental written text, for instance, a visual poem. Sometimes a visual poem is taken as a basis for an experimental way of reading aloud that has a distant connection with the visual features. So the reading must be considered a new poem created by the speaker, as in some performances by Lily Greenham. To summarize: sound, in sound poetry, is not the same as the auditory aspect of verbal discourse.
- 2 Sound poetry is not a text-based poem, where text is conceived as a complex of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels of verbal signs. Even when the reading of a text has as background musical elements disrupting normal oral reading, it is not sound poetry. In another way, it could be said that sound poetry is not a musicalization of a poem. To summarize: sound, in sound poetry, is not an extraneous element of a verbal poem, inserted as a background to its reading; nor is its function to reinforce the text meanings or to illustrate a reading of the text.
- 3 Sound poetry is not a performance of poetry with decorative sounds derived from the performance. This means that a performance could never be considered as a sound poem when the sound aspects of presentation work only as a collage with the rest of the elements, without a formal organization or a function within the performance.

These anti-definitions come from analyzing sound poetics, theoretical statements, manifestos, critical essays on the subject from the nonsense poetry of the end of the nineteenth century to the many types of experimental poetry of the twentieth century. If, however, it is difficult to use the above points to define precisely what sound poetry is, at least they might be useful in distinguishing good from bad sound poems.

Nevertheless, maybe as a term, “sound poetry” is to be put aside if we intend to make clear distinctions between a poem that has sound as an internal structural element or a poem in which the sound aspects are simple derivation from the verbal signs or incidental and dispensable elements. It may be a fact that “sound poetry,” as formulated by Henri Chopin in the 1960s and widely used all over the world, is losing its capacity to define a poetics.<sup>1</sup>

1 Henri Chopin wrote in an article published in his magazine *Ou*, in the 1960s, that sound poetry “is a matter of vocal micro-particles rather than the Word as we know it, as far as the art of the voice and the mouth are concerned, this art can be more easily codified by machines and electricity and also by mathematics.”

Many poets of different countries have adopted it to name their poems, most of them, applying it to poems that could be included in the three categories noted above. In Brazil, for instance, after my introduction of sound poetry in the beginning of the 1990s, with a book (1992), poems (1993/94) and radio broadcasting series (1994), sound poetry as a term provoked controversial disputes between visual poets who intended to demonstrate how their visual poems were “potentially” sound, even if printed (and silent). Some poor presentations have been made of them, which have had strong repercussions in the Brazilian media, establishing the term sound poetry simply as a new name for declamatory poetry, sometimes using noises of musical instruments as a background or a distant reference to the field of experimental art. Perhaps it is correct to leave the term “sound poetry” free to be used without definitions to avoid worthless disputes.

I prefer to introduce the concept of *intersign poetry*, which I developed in 1985 to define a new kind of visual poetry. The idea of intersign poetry was, in the beginning, used to define a sort of visual poem in which visuality was neither the visual features of the verbal sign (as in the old figurative poem, from *carmina figurata* or pattern poem to the Apollinaire’s calligrams or in concrete poetry), nor the illustration extraneous to the verbal mode (as we see in the illustrated poems of William Blake or the Italian visible poetry of

the 1960s). The concept was of a poetry that carries out a formal integration between visual elements (photos, drawings, numbers) and verbal signs, each species with its own semantic information, merged in order to produce a whole to be deciphered in the pragmatic action of reading or observing the poem. The same approach could be considered as applicable in understanding sound poetry (here already is a generic term in which many forms of auditory poem can be included). It could be said that an intersign sound poem deals with the sound neither as a declamation of verbal discourse, nor as a dispensable sound used to reinforce and illustrate the verbal declamation, as in a poem set to music. It is a poem where sounds of any species (phonetic, bodily noises, especially from a vocal tract, noises of natural or artificial origin, daily life auditory elements), are put together, formally related to each other, constructing a whole meaning or sense of the poem to be understood by the audience.

The conception can be extended to a wide field of contemporary technologies. Indeed in 1998, I organized an exhibition where I tried to put together visual poems, sound poems, object poems, live performance and computer poems where the same idea of intersign poetry is present. The exhibition was called "*Intersign poetry* — from visual, to sound and digital poetry." What interests me is to discuss how we could understand and explore the passage from traditional bases and media, like orality and visuality, to new technologies, where the space is conceived as an environment to mix sound, visual and verbal signs. If we approach new technologies with old techniques and obsolete ways of combining the three different sign systems (visual, verbal and sound), we are using old forms in new media, that is, old languages in new technologies, but not exploring the possible new languages suggested by new technologies. To submit visual and sound elements to the axis of verbal signs is to use new technologies as a printed page and, more than that, as a mentality constructed by the text. The possibility of a new language, that is, a new way of combining signs, or new forms of organizing signs, seems to me to be opened up by the technologies of hypermedia, as a radical extension of the hypertext.

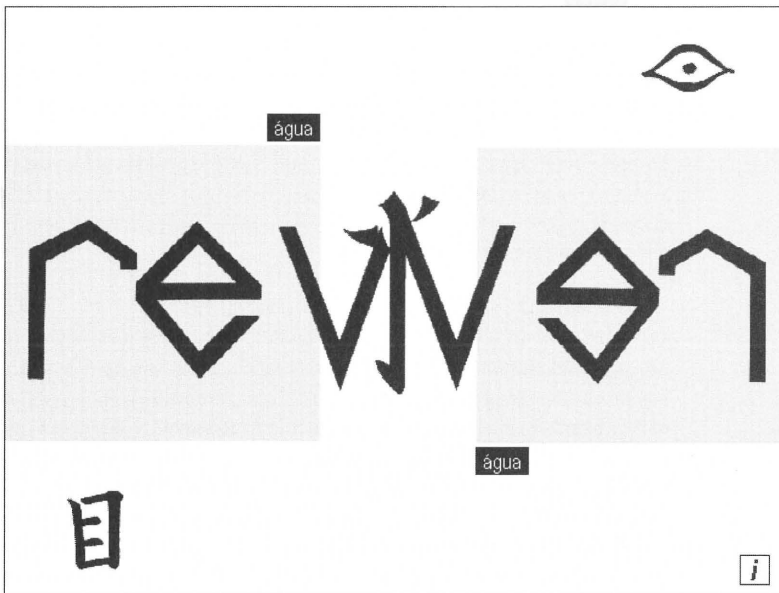
On the one hand, it is necessary to distinguish the experiments of computer graphics from the new possibilities of hypermedia. In computer graphics, the poem is essentially visual. Features which distinguish it from the printed poem, such as the movement of letters, the kinesthetic sensation of the passage of time, a non-linear trajectory of the eyes, are not unimportant. But in any case, computer graphic poems are visual and, in many cases, a sort of externalization of a latent movement in the printed poem. And as a visual poem, computer graphic poems are deaf and mute. Despite the fact that the techniques of video and computer are fundamentally multimedia, the sound is included *a posteriori*, as an appendix, reinforcement or illustration of what

is shown by the visual development of the poem in a video or computer screen. Often the video poem is a computer version of a conventional visual printed poem where the suggestion of movement was implicit in the visual structure of the poem, as in the computer or holographic versions of concrete poems. So new technology does not allow us to state that the presence of sound in kinesthetic poems (be they computer-based or in video) leads us to a realm of new language in which the integration of visual, verbal and sound signs is different from the old printed visual poems.

On the other hand, it may be ridiculous to affirm that a simple movement of the eyes, different from when they are reading a poem printed on the page, has such an important role that video, computer or holographic poems produce more interactivity than a stable fixed page. Even in verse poetry, the movement of the eye is different from reading prose, as the repetition of phonetic figures requires an attentive and circular reading of the poem. The slight movement of the eye to follow a kinesthetic poem (whether in video, computer or in holography) is not *far* from the movement of the eye and the hands leafing through the pages of printed poems, particularly in the case of books of visual poetry, where the linear development of the text is neglected and it is sometimes necessary to change the position of the book to see the poem.

The sound aspects of experimental poetry are so misunderstood that, despite the fact that the first manifestations of post war technological poetry were made in a sound laboratory, the history of technology-based poetry is still seen as a development of visual poetry. This misconception seems to be based in part on the emphasis on the presence of visual elements in debates on the mass media and its derivations in experimental poetry. Mass media studies point to the fact that we live in a visual environment, in a civilization of the image. It fails to take into consideration that one of the first modern mass media was the radio and the main distinction between the mass culture in the twentieth century and in the previous century is based on the reintroduction of the oral culture within the modern culture. When cinema became auditory, the speech deconstructed the mute narrative, preparing the coming of television language, evidently oral as well as visual. The next step which is taken by computer systems of communication is to overcome the keyboard, based on the visual typewriting system of the visual culture of the last century, in order to introduce the oral dialogue between the user and the computer. And due to an old mentality, the approach towards new technology is always done on the development of deaf and mute poems.

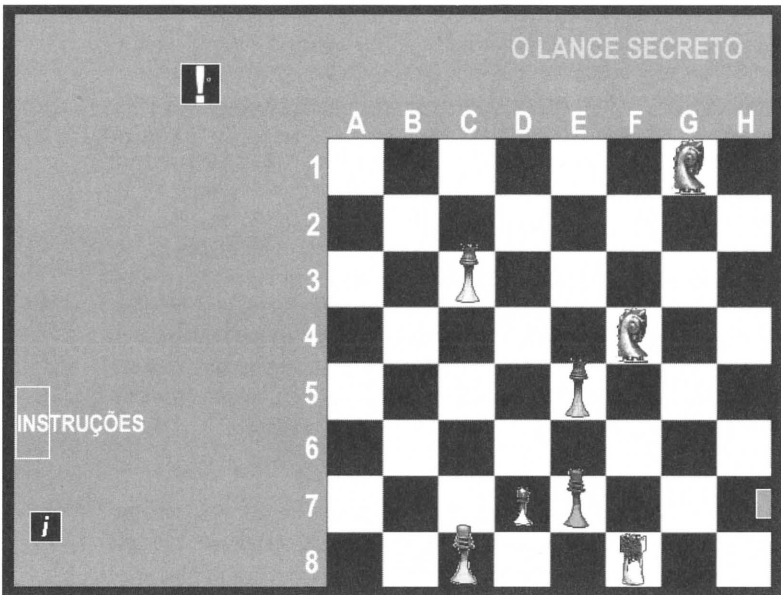
The two last movements of experimental poetry are both part of the visual tradition of contemporary art. *Poesia visiva*, in Italy, concentrated on the deconstruction of magazine and newspaper information and took over the



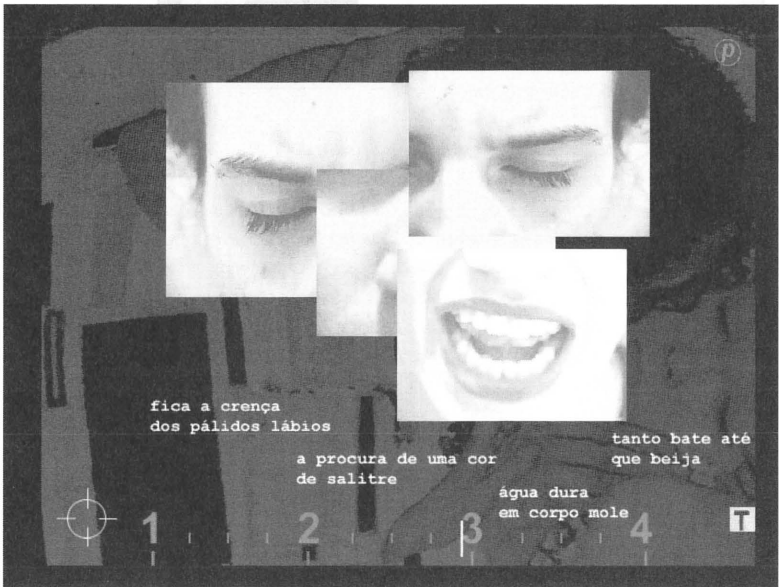
**FIGURE 1**  
Philadelpho Menezes' "Reviver," a poem from an Interpoetry CD-Rom. Using ideograms, plays upon words and sounds of nature, the path through the poem is chosen by the user.



**FIGURE 2**  
Philadelpho Menezes' "O inimigo" (The Enemy), a poem from an Interpoetry CD-Rom. Based on a Baudelaire poem, the words disappear from the screen as they are transformed in an oral reading, thereby producing a phonetic sound poem by the action of the user.



**FIGURE 3**  
 Philadelpho Menezes' "O Lance secreto" (The Secret Move), a poem from an Interpoetry CD-Rom. Paths cross sound, verbal and visual information on Mozart, Cortázar, Duchamp and Lewis Carroll, artists who mixed game, art and life.



**FIGURE 4**  
 Philadelpho Menezes' "Lábios" (Lips), by Wilton Azevedo, a poem from an Interpoetry CD-Rom. Voice and images of faces are chosen by a radio dial by the user.

tendency towards a visual approach. The other movement, concrete poetry, sometimes tried dialogue with sound features, but its characteristics as a visual poetics preclude any such dialogue. Concrete poetry had everything to do with concrete fine art and nothing to do with the concrete music. Its conception of form and the use of the space and time was completely derived from the rationality and geometric abstraction of the concrete visual art of the 1930s and 1940s. On the opposite side is concrete music, based on the free organization of auditory elements, taken from the chaos of daily life or produced as pure effects in the sound laboratory. Creating dialogue with concrete music, and far from concrete art and concrete poetry, French sound poetry of the 1950s was the first movement of technology-based poetry. And when at this moment we have an opportunity to think through the ways opened by the new technology for experimental poetics, we are forced to revisit the experiments of sound poetry in these last decades.

A first period of a proto-sound poetry was marked by phonetic experiments. But these were created under the influence of radio broadcasts and the internationalization of the communication system passing through the radio waves. The optophonetic experiments of dada, the onomatopoeic of Italian futurism are the most impressive production of this phonetic moment. Following the war, when the first concrete musicians were experimenting in sound laboratories, French poets were doing the same and often together, opening a new world of sound effects to the human ear. The performances included techno-sounds and the recordings sometimes reached such a high technological level that was it impossible to identify the human voice in it. The return to acoustic elements was a trend founded by performance poets in order foreground the human voice and the body that produces it. In performances many other elements are involved with the poem as an inextricable part of it: position and expressions of the body, face and hands, video images in the background, light, rhythm of the event, direct contact with the audience. Sound signs keep their position as a central element in the poem, but due to the fact that the poem is presented alive in front of an audience, the poet has two options with regard to how to make the other elements work as a reinforcement of the sound poem; 1) **make the other elements work as a reinforcement of the sound poem**; 2) **make the meaning of the other elements contrast and combine with sound elements**. The latter requires from the audience an attentive deciphering approach towards each element of the scene. The first option gives us a sound poem as performance. The second one presents an *intersign poem* live.<sup>2</sup>



2 A poem of mine that could explain this conception of intersign poetry applied to performance of poetry is entitled "Future." First issued in a CD (Menezes, 1996), "Future" was presented live for the first time in Portugal (*Festival de Poesia Sonora*, Guarda, 1999). The sound poem is the word "future" in Portuguese, stretched out for two minutes by the deformation of the voice in a sound laboratory. The word loses its phonological timing and, consequently, its identity as a lexical item, dropping its meaning in the process. Live, the poem is presented in complete darkness. While the poem sounds, the poet, using a little flashlight, writes the word "future" in the air as an ephemeral sign of the passing time.

The performance of experimental poetry offers us some bases on which it is possible to debate hypermedia poetry, a new kind of technology-based poem. When presented live, many sign components must be involved in the poetic situation in an intersemiotic-based poem. A distinction must be established between two different approaches to technology. So, we must consider "multimedia" a term which does not deal with a process of combining different sorts of signs, but it is a term related to an environment in which those signs appear. This technique can be used following three different stages:

1. **Multimedia**, as a general concept, is exemplified in some artistic production: signs of different sorts are put together in a system of collage, in which the association between them is due to the fact that they are present in the same space. In spite of this, the relation between them is not based on any formal integration, but the fact that they are next to each other, inhabiting the same space. It is a concept that comes from fine art installation whose goal is to produce sensorial impact on the observer.
2. **Hypermedia**, as a computer system applied to informative products, is characterized by signs of different species that are offered as options to the user. Deriving from the hypertext system of links, hypermedia offers linkages between visual, verbal and sound signs, as options of each other. These options are presented as complementary or illustrative information. Normally the verbal sign conducts the complex of signs; the visual and sound signs work as optional illustration which can act as substitutes of the verbal sign.

3. **Intermedia**, understood not only as a system, but as a process, is derived from hypermedia and carried out in a multimedia system. But intermedia has some particular characteristics: it is not a free space where the integration between different signs is given by their simple proximity (as in multimedia); it is not a system of options between signs of different species (as in hypermedia).<sup>3</sup>

3 | Intermedia is a term coined in the 1960s by the North American poet Dick Higginns (1987) before the coming of multimedia as a term used in computer systems. But Higgin's conception of "intermedia," as we see in the fluxus movement, is more related to the conception of multimedia as developed here than properly to the "intermedia," as it has been developed in this text.

Intermedia is the conception of interpoetry applied to technological-based poetry, carried out in multimedia environments, structured on a hypermedia system of links, but based on the principle of formal integration and semantic composition between signs of different sorts, as an integrated process of meaning to be attentively considered by the user during his or her reading. So the pragmatic aspects of communication exercise a fundamental role in the intermedia process. Intermedia/poetry<sup>4</sup> emphasizes the necessity of participation on the part of the user (reader/observer), because the poem must be constructed, in its many available paths, by the action of the user, in the countless features that different sequence of paths can produce.

4 | A first experiment in interpoetry was carried out in Brazil by me in collaboration with the designer Wilton Azevedo. It has been shown since 1998 in international exhibitions, conferences and biennales in many cities in Brazil as well as in Los Angeles, Barcelona, Bologna and Lima (Peru),

Effective interactivity works as a game to be played by the user in his or her intuitive action of constructing the poem. The poem is not available as a whole, as an integral unit which must be completely read to be understood, but as ways of reading to be reconstructed by the user. At the same time, the action of constructing the interpoem is also an investigation through the paths, directed by the intention of discovering the complex of meanings hidden in each path available. Play, research, reading, sensorial effects, decision of the reader, are pragmatic elements suggested by the intermedia way of combining sound with image and text, in formal relations and semantic combinations as a poetic process.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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*The path that represents the experimentation of poetry enriched with other elements,  
gathering literature in a space that will transcend the traditional literary code,  
we do not know where it can take us, but what makes it interesting is the surprise of creation.*

Joan Brossa

# Experimental Poetry

## in Barcelona during the 1990s

**Under the label of experimental poetry**, a lot of poetic tendencies are fostered: sound poetry, phonetic poetry, concrete poetry, visual poetry, object poetry, video poetry, action poetry... in conclusion, poetry. It is a poetry that tends to blend more and more different artistic disciplines and delete the presupposed frontiers with which orthodoxy resolves to speak about art. Maybe that is why the term “polypoetry” has had such influence in Catalonia during the 1990’s, since 1987, the year in which the Italian poet Enzo Minarelli first published the “Manifesto of Polypoetry” in the catalogue *Tramesa d’Art* in València. Because polypoetry is conceived and carried out for live performances and because, taking as a basis sound poetry, it represents the inter-related starting point between this and all other remaining forms of art.

The fact that this article focuses on experimental poetry in the city of Barcelona (implying the rest of Catalonia as well), specifically during the 1990’s, has two basic premises. First of all, Barcelona has always had an important poetic activity. Secondly, the last decade has seen a great momentum for expansion of this type of activity marked by two constants: the mixing of artistic disciplines and the aim to spread poetry so that it can reach a live audience. It is significant, in the year 2000, to give a panoramic vision of the ten previous years in the field of the poetic experimentation, focusing on live performances.

Looking specifically at experimental poetry in Catalonia during the past decade, the author pays particular attention to live performance. The variety and liveliness of the poetry events described portray a vital community of poetic interest and action. The chronology describes events and participants.

The 1990s were an expansive decade, but it must be emphasized that the beginning of this period of experimental poetry progress lies in the work carried out by previous poets, some with certain recognition such as Joan Brossa, Guillem Viladot and even Carles Hac Mor, and others more underground, without well-known publishers and with no media attention. This is the case of Xavier Sabater,<sup>1</sup> diffuser of polypoetry in Catalonia and in Spain, or the poetry group made up by Enric Casassas (*figure 1*), Jordi Pope, Jaume Sisterna, Joan Vinuesa, Albert Subirats, and others, closely related to libertarian tendencies, who represented the alternative to the official poetry. They have made up for difficulties in publishing by bringing poetry to the people, holding readings in bars, theaters or prisons. It is worth mentioning that this poetic period of progress during the 1990s took place thanks to the initiative of some of the same poets, who were organizing the meetings, recitals and poetry series/cycles, carrying out publishing projects and magazines, and encouraging diffusion of the poetry.

In order to give a global vision of this full-of-intersections decade, some of the most significant events follow.



FIGURE 1  
Performance of Enric Casassas.

<sup>1</sup> HIPERVÓNICULO <http://www.lanzadera.com/attractions> <http://www.lanzadera.com/attractions>. The Web of Xavier Sabater. Contains his poems, a list of the books published by Sedicions, information on all the Polypoetry Festivals in Barcelona, theoretical texts and several links.

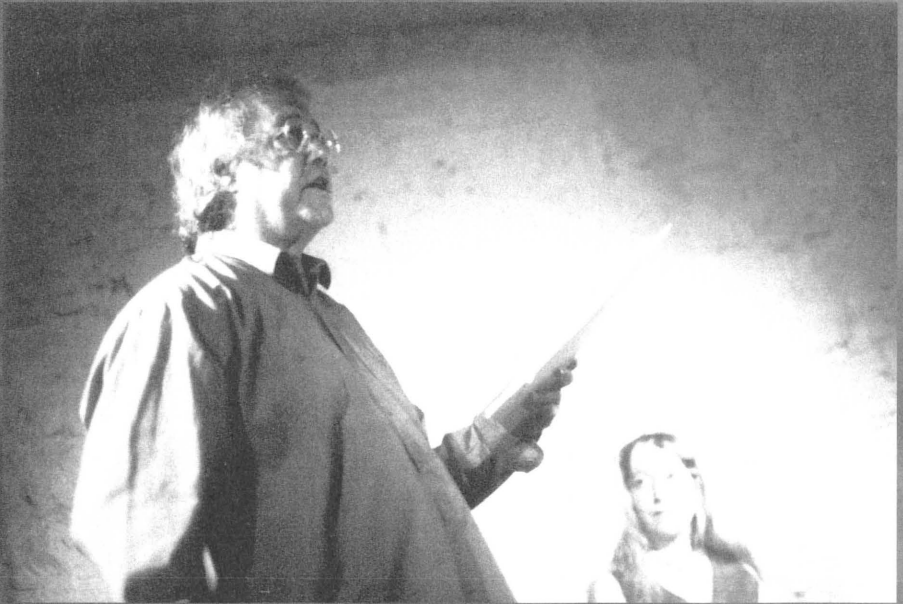
In June 1989 in the Artual Gallery of Barcelona, the “Concentració de Poesia Total” (Total Poetry Concentration) took place. Carles Hac Mor, a poet formed in conceptual art and member of the “Grup de Treball” during the 1970s, was one of the organizers. In an article of *El País* about the event, Hac Mor summarized the philosophy that motivated it and forthcoming ones: the participation of many people belonging to different generations, spontaneity, improvisation, approach, exchange and relation between those working in plastic arts, music, performance and word.

*Through a card widely issued by the Artual Gallery, four poets have invited everyone to participate in a Concentració de Poesia Total that will take place there, summoning publicly about 70 poets, ex-poets, dis-poets and para-poets. All this illustrates a good example of total chaos, not frightening, and either wished or not wished by the organizers. What's more, they think that, even though the Concentration does not rule out serious performances at all, the main performances will be humorous, absurd, maybe some of them will become true nonsense [...]. Currently, only one intervention is certain: Xavier Guijarro will tattoo a line in his thighs during the Concentration. And, most likely, the female nihilist protopoet, Esther Xargay, will direct a very brief peripathetic piece aimed at warming up the audience, whose reaction will be videotaped by artist Benet Rossell. In any case, dealing with similar*

*projects, many times the layout and the concept are so interesting that the final result is not important anymore. Nevertheless, the creative sparkles usually shine before, during and after the act, which is only an excuse to provoke small or big epiphanies that are not always easily captured by the audience, who are in fact manipulated as a catalyst. Total Poetry does not admit the passivity of fools.*

CARLES HAC MOR, EL PAÍS. JUNE 1989.

It is evident that Hac Mor (*figure 2*) has not given up his organizing activities, or his creative ones. On one hand, he has published a dozen books (a couple of them co-written with the female poet Ester Xargay) where he puts into practice what he calls paraparemic writing, defined as “a non-automated version of automatic writing and free surrealistic association, as well as the rage of the immanent soul of first romantic feeling, as in Novalis.” On the other hand, he has multiplied his public performances, in which he frequently combines sound poetry with images and action, such as in the show “Poesia plàstica-visual-culinària” (Plastic-visual-cooking poetry), collaborating with the plastic artist David Ymbernon and the actor Carles Sales. Another example of a sound and image combination is the CD-ROM “Paraparèemies; desplaçaments; cosificacions” (Paraparemic; shiftings; thingifications), where texts of Hac Mor and Xargay are blended with music of Barbara Held and images of Adolf Alcañiz. And,



**FIGURE 2**  
Performance of Carles Hac Mor and Ester Xargay.



in another format, his texts have been exhibited in the Art Gallery 44 in Barcelona together with images created by plastic artist Francesc Vidal.

Simultaneously, Xavier Sabater (*figure 3*) continues with his polypoetic restlessness. If during the 1980s, he published alternative magazines, organized periodical readings about futurism and auditions of phonetic and sound poetry as well as experimenting with sounds, noises and words, during the 1990s, he has extended this line of diverse activity. He has inaugurated the publishing house Sedicions, specializing in poetry books and tapes, where he has published, for instance, *Polipoesia. Primera antologia*, a book compiling the previously mentioned manifesto and a selection of works illustrating this trend, reproduced as well on tape. There are works of musicians and poets such as Llorenç Barber, Josep Manuel Calleja, Enric Casassas, Bartolomé Ferrando (*figure 4*), Carles Hac Mor, Fátima Miranda, Josep Ramon Roig and Sabater himself, all conceived as sound poetry, to be performed live, with musical support, taped sounds, images and all the possibilities that new technology provides.



**FIGURE 3**  
Performance of Xavier Sabater.



**FIGURE 4**  
Performance of Llorenç Barber and Bartomeu Ferrando.

In 1991 Sabater created the first Barcelona Polypoetry Festival, in which around fifty poets, Spanish and others like Bernard Heidsieck, Henri Chopin, Mark Shuterland or Giuliano Zosi participated. A total of seven editions have been realized. Also in the early 1990s, he often organized readings such as the famous meeting of polypoetry at the “Glacià” bar, in the Plaça Reial in Barcelona, where action poets meet once more: Carles Hac Mor, Ester Xargay, Benet Rosell and Josep Manuel Calleja, the oral poet Josep Ramon Roig (*figure 5*) or the dadaist dance of Ina Dunkel. Some months later, he inaugurated the Sala multimèdia La Papa. L’Associació de Performers, Artistes i Poetes Associats (Multimedia Workshop “La Papa.” The Association of Performers, Artists and Associated Poets), in Gràcia — a neighborhood in Barcelona — where a lot of auditions, dance, video poetry shows, readings, visual poem exhibitions, object poems, mail art and copy art take place. In December 1993, Josep Manuel Calleja organized there the exhibition Poesía experimental - 93 produced by Xavier Sabater, who published, by his own publishing house, a book with the same title which compiles a selection of forty-two authors from the exhibition, among them the organizers themselves as well as Joan Borda, Xavier Canals, Carles Hac Mor, Guillem Viladot, Ràfols-Casamada, Josep Sousa (*figure 6*) and Joan Brossa.



**FIGURE 5**  
Performance of Josep Ramon Roig.



**FIGURE 6**  
Performance of Pere Sousa.

Currently, Xavier Sabater has published three books and has participated in many national and international exhibitions and poetry festivals. As a polypoetry practitioner he alternates and combines phonetic and video poetry, electronics, action and images. In May 2000 he shared the stage with Enzo Minarelli in the cycle “Barcelona poesia. Set dies de poesia a la ciutat” (Barcelona poetry. Seven days of poetry in the city), where both gave polypoetic readings.

Following this, in June 1992 in Reus (Tarragona) the monograph entitled “Audiopoètiques” in the magazine *Fenici*, was published by Comissariat, an entity directed by Francesc Vidal, a plastic artist from Reus.<sup>2</sup> This magazine, entirely dedicated to poetry, contains theoretical articles, interviews and poems of all those who move in the Catalan poetic arena, some of whom perform for the occasion: Hac Mor with Ester Xargay and Benet Rossell, Accidents Polipoètics (figure 7), Xavier Sabater, Macromassa, the Italian author Enzo Minarelli, Josep Ramon Roig and Enric Casassas, one of the most praised poets of this decade. Besides the quality of Casassas’ texts, in live performance he shows an excellent control of voice, gaze and gesture, together with the use of a prodigious memory. He has a strong link with music, to the point of writing thanks to the punks and troubadours and working frequently with musicians.



FIGURE 7  
Performance of Accidents Polipoètics.

<sup>2</sup> “Fenici” Audiopoètiques. Number 8, 1992. Reus (Tarragona). In December 1999 another monograph dedicated to poetry was published, called Audiopoètiques 2. In situ.

A few months after the meeting in Reus, in October 1992, in the setting of the exhibition of Arthur Cravan, poet and boxer, in the Virreina Palace in Barcelona, Carles Hac Mor, Ester Xargay and Vicenç Altaió provoked another multidisciplinary and multigenerational meeting given that they, as curators of part of the exhibition were in charge of creating a space, the Alí-Dadà cave, where plastic artists, such as Eugènia Balcells, Jordi Benito, Francesc Vidal, Xavier Manubens or Francesca Llopis, and video artists Maite Ninou and Vicenç Vacca, exhibited their works as a homage to Cravan. Moreover, for the poetic concentration they gathered dozens of artists to perform in the ring-stage which was installed in the central area of the Virreina Palace, grouping those artists that carried out performances during the 1970s and the 1980s, such as Àngel Jové, Zush, Pere Noguera or Xavier Canals, together with ones initiated more recently: the group C-72r, Borja Zabala, Oscar Abril Ascaso and so on.

The public success of these acts reveals the existence of a great poetic agitation. Because of that, Hac Mor and Xargay, after they were invited to participate in the “Revue parlée” of Beaubourg in Paris, decided to start a new project in April 1993 called “*De Viva Veu. Revista Parlada*” (Living Voice. Spoken Magazine)(*figure 8*) a magazine with a paper-published magazine structure, but in this case the edition is spoken, ephemeral and changing. In contrast to the French edition, which is only literary, this one

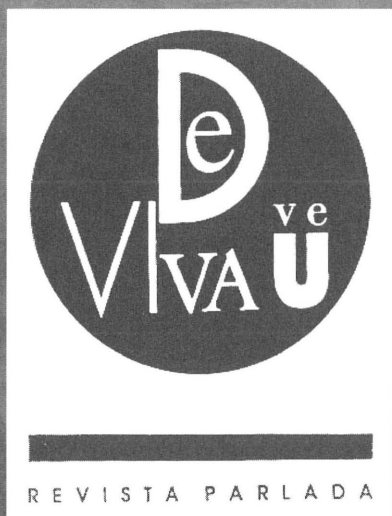


FIGURE 8  
Logotype for Revista Parlada.

allows any type of activity: action, theater, poetry, narrative, journalism, video art, cinema, music, chant, painting, sculpture, installations, interviews, advice column, anodyne conversations, ads, complaints and protests, sleight of hands, entertainment and so on. People are gathered through the telephone and a little brochure designed by one of the participants and it changes stage and setting for every issue: a bookstore, an artist working space, an art gallery. Fifteen issues were made in two-odd years, until June 1995, and as a whole around five-hundred people participated, without any type of previous selection or direction or organization. Hac Mor prefers, appreciating and promoting anarchic development, tumultuous, occasional and ephemeral acts, where spontaneity plays an important role.

“*Revista Parlada*” (Spoken Magazine) was followed by “*Revista Caminada*” (Walked Magazine) (figure 9), with identical spirit, but with the characteristic that the different sections in every issue took place in different places, lots of them in the same street. The route was followed as marked in the brochure. Most important again was the interaction with people. The last issue took place in Celrà (Girona) in June 1996, just when the organization was taken over by Marta Pol from Girona, who made an annual publication. The reason why Hac Mor and Xargay decided to not organize the “*Revista*” anymore was the attempt at institutionalization that some participant members wanted to carry out, establishing

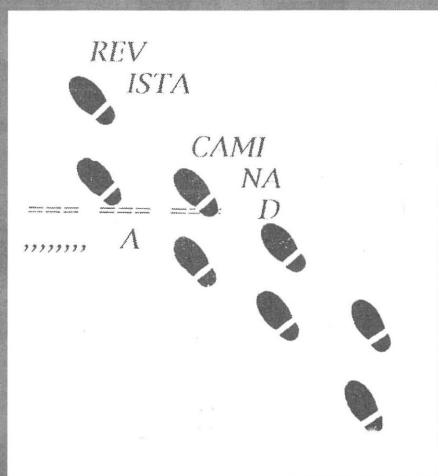


FIGURE 9  
Brochure detail for *Revista Caminada*.

criteria, selecting collaborators, organizing meetings, etc. These things were contrary to the non-intentionality and the original anarchic spirit in which the magazine was created. When it finished, Hac Mor and Xargay stated: “*De viva veu. Revista Parlada* made clear that art is born from the blow on the head of the unwillingness to consolidate anything and that art is against art and against the waiters of art that want to serve it as the food for culture.”

In any case, they did not stop their activities. In early 1996, Hac Mor and Xargay made an alliance with Eduard Escoffet and Dídac P. Lagarriga, two young poets that they met through the “*Revista Parlada*,” and organized the “*Àgora Indisciplinària*.” These were sessions that followed the line of “*Revista Parlada*,” with debates, oral poetry, video and performances, taking place in the *Metrònom* art gallery in Barcelona all that year.

Then the PROPOST association — *Projectes Poètics Sense Títol* — (Poetic Projects without Title), led by Escoffet and Lagarriga from the year 1993 on, which carried out the edition of two poetry magazines — *Sense Títol* and *Ars Vituperat* — and organized acts dealing with risky types of poetry, started in January 1997 a poetry cycle called “*Viatge a la Polinèsia*” (Trip to the Polynesia) (*figure 10*). According

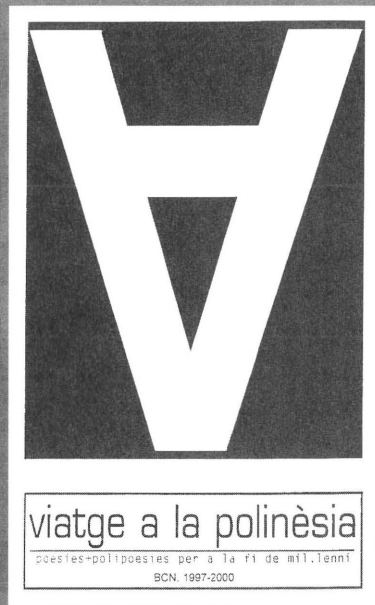


FIGURE 10  
Logotype for *Viatge a la Polinèsia*.

to Escoffet, the cycle poses as a reference to the poetic actions of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, i.e., the first readings of the poetry group “O així” (Or like that) — Enric Casassas, Jordi Pope, David Castillo, etc., the polypoets inspired by Xavier Sabater and the exorbitant anarchy of Hac Mor. Opposed to these, who had a more underground approach, “Viatge a la Polinèsia” tries to adapt to the new times, where everything is more institutionalized, as it struggles to achieve more distribution and infrastructure.

This cycle, that has represented a more regular and steady program of experimental poetry, was born with an expiration date, January 2000, and during its three-year life has had twenty-five editions, with approximately one-hundred-fifty participants, from the most veteran to the most recent. The main characteristic was the variety of projects, due as much to the places where they were carried out as the artists that performed. Every edition was dedicated to a different poetic expression: sound poetry, video poetry, action poetry, dance poetry and so on, with a majority of Catalan participants and some foreign artists. It concluded with a heterogenic session at the CCCB (Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona), where phonetic poetry, action and polypoetry were combined by John Giorno, Paolo Albani, Christian Ide Hintze, Hac Mor, Escoffet (*figure 11*), Benet Rossell and others. PROPOST continues



FIGURE 11  
Performance of Eduard Escoffet.

in action with a new interdisciplinary programming called “Micronèsia” and with the preparation of “Proposta. Festival Internacional de poesies+polipoesies” scheduled for December 2000.

In addition to these “steady” cycles and activities, there are many independent entities, such as G’s Club, Heliogàbal, Container and Conservas in Barcelona, and Talp Club in Reus, that organize poetry events frequently. Here one can see performances by the likes of Enric Casassas, Dolors Miquel, Gerard Horta, Joan Vinuesa, Jaume Sisterna, Juan Crek, Noel Tatú, Josep Ramon Roig, Pau Riba (*figure 12*) and Accidents Polipoètics, all word poets, who put a special emphasis on pitch, gesture and rhythmic aspects of language.

Some of them such as Crek, Tatú, Riba or Accidents Polipoètics take into account the mise-en-scene and use of static and moving images, as well as abundant props, lighting and music. On many occasions, they made collective readings and they managed to organize a tour — coordinated by PROPOST and Container — that performed in the summer of 1997 in many Catalan towns. Many of these poets published their works for the first time during the last few years, the majority in independent publishing houses such as Container, El Khan, La Sopa Negra, Cafè Central and so on.



**FIGURE 12**  
Performance of Pau Riba.



On the other hand, many artists that intensively practice sound or visual poetry find their meeting point in action. In this field, some important events have taken place during the last decade, for instance the “L’acció contra l’acció. Teoria i pràctica d’un llenguatge artístic sense codi” (Action against Action. Theory and Practice of a non-codified artistic language), a three-day conference, discussion and actions taking place in the Virreina Palace in January 1996 where the majority of Catalan artists from the 1970s could express themselves. In November 1998, the “Art en acció. Festival d’acció off MACBA” (Art in Action. Action Festival off MACBA) took place, organized by XAGBCN (Aire, Merz Mail<sup>3</sup> and Stidna!), a performing week with more than twenty action specialists: Xavier Canals, Noel Tatú, Lluís Alabern, J.M. Calleja, Joan Casellas (*figure 13*), Oscar Abril Ascaso, Sergi Quiñonero, etc.

As a result of the poetic activity in the city, Barcelona was chosen to celebrate the 30th Polyphonix (Festival of sound, music and performance poetry) in May 1997, organized by the poets Jean-Jacques Lebel and Jacqueline Cahen. This takes place in a different city every year and gathers different artists from around the world. On this occasion, apart from international artists such as John Giorno, Julien Blaine and Linton Kwesi Johnson, Catalan artists like Joan Brossa, Carles Santos and Accidents Polipoètics, a duet formed by Xavier Theros and Rafael Metlikovec who say they make poetry for people

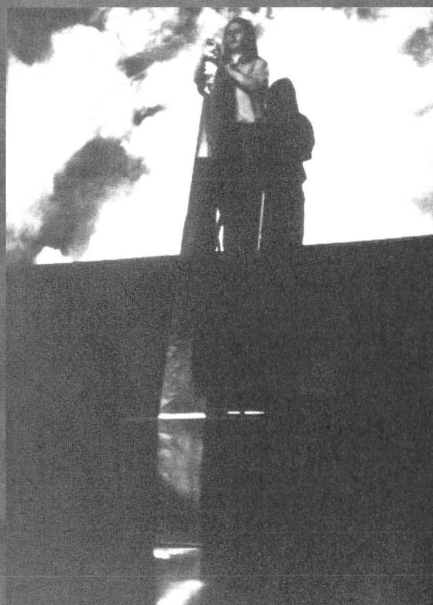


FIGURE 13  
Performance of Joan Casellas.

3 HIPERVÏNCULO <http://www.abaforum.es/merzmail> <http://www.abaforum.es/merzmail> Web of Merz Mail-Pere Sousa.  
Contains articles on experimental poetry, lots of information about mail art and various links.

that do not read poetry, were also invited. Accidents read poems in Spanish for two voices, based on everyday life and employing a grand register of humor ranging from the most corrosive and vulgar, sometimes with great doses of sarcasm, to the most absurd and surreal, based on linguistic games and word associations. The staging, with use of props, lighting and music is very important in all their performances, especially in their recent lecture-performances on different topics such as Garcia Lorca and bachelorhood.

Dealing with visual poetry, the “Poesia visual catalana” (Catalan Visual Poetry) was inaugurated in January 1999 in the Art Center of Santa Mònica, curated by Josep M. Calleja (figure 14) and Xavier Canals,<sup>4</sup> putting together the work of the main visual contemporary poets, from Joan Brossa, Guillem Viladot and Iglesias del Marquet to younger ones such as Abel Figueres or Eduard Escoffet. In May of the same year, artists such as Joan Brossa, Joan Simó, Hac Mor, Xargay, Canals (figure 15) or Bartomeu Ferrando (visual and sound poet and the only university professor of performance and actions in Spain) participated in the sixth edition of the “National Award of Visual Poetry” that has taken place in Vespellà de Gaià (Tarragona) since 1993, as well as the National Award of Artistic Actions, celebrated from 1996 on.

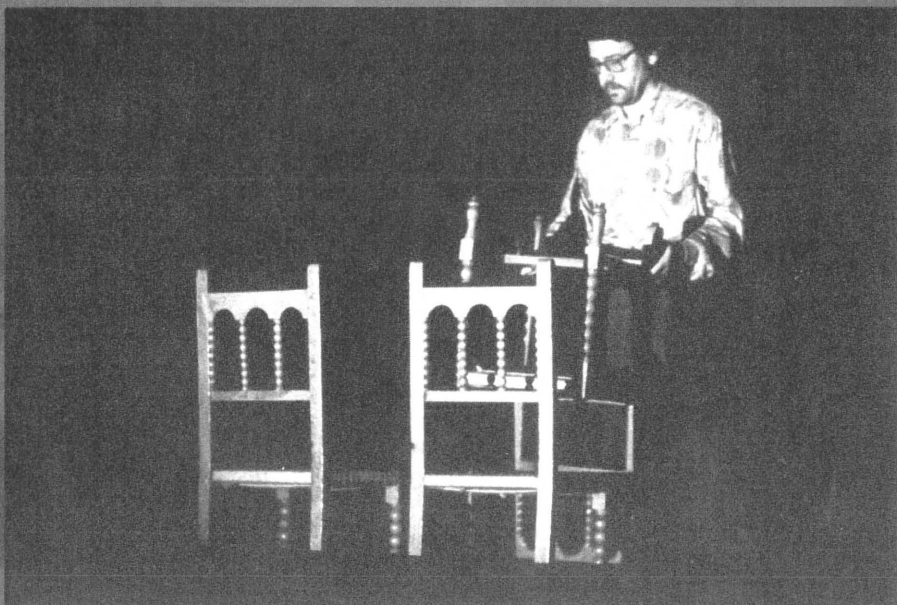


FIGURE 14  
Performance of Josep M. Calleja.

4 Diverse authors. 1999. *Poesia visual catalana* (Catalan visual poetry). Introduction by Xavier Canals. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya.

5 HIPERVÏNCULO <http://www.cornermag.org>  
<http://www.cornermag.org> American Web with information about Catalan experimental poets.

Finally, in August 1999 and at the same time as the seventh Polypoetry Festival organized by Xavier Sabater, the First International Congress of Polypoetry was convened, also by Sabater, in the Contemporary Culture Center of Barcelona. He organized it together with different poets and critics from around the world and it is planned to reoccur every two years in a different city, the next one being Bologna. As was announced in the congress motto — “21st Century Poetry. Tendencies and Technology” — critics, poets and organizers discussed the future of poetry, the role of new technology and perspectives. Moreover, the voices of Enzo Minarelli, Philadelpho Menezes, Nicholas Zurbrugg, Fernando Millán, Fernando Aguiar, Josep M. Calleja, Josep Ramon Roig or Xavier Canals could be heard and there was a wide range of video poetry displays and another of cyberpoetry.

During the last decade, what was a minority trend in experimental poetry became the main literary point of interest. Projects explored all types of poetic trends. Frequent recitals were programmed. Poetry tours around Catalonia were mounted. Many books were published in independent as well as major publishing houses and singular exhibitions were organized. It is obvious that the spread of poetry has increased and, more than ever, a mixing of tendencies, the intersection of artistic projects and, consequently, the fusion of techniques and languages that characterize experimental poetry<sup>5</sup> has taken place.



FIGURE 15  
Performance of Xavier Canals.

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Translated from catalan by Núria Segarra, Sílvia Mestres & Mark Cunningham.

All the photos, except that of Xavier Sabater (photographer unknown), are by Xavier Moreno.

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Relations Between **Sound Poetry** and **Visual Poetry**

# The Path

from  
the Optophonetic Poem  
to  
the Multimedia Text

A brief history of the development of scores for sound poetry during the twentieth century is presented. The work of Hugo Ball, Raoul Hausmann and Kurt Schwitters is the focus for the early part of the century. From mid-century to end, the work of Franz Mon, Carlfriedrich Claus and Valeri Scherstjanoi is the focus.

**Any attempt to distinguish between sound poetry and visual poetry** is extremely difficult, for according to Reinhard Doehl's definition visual texts are sound texts without a sound. In other words visual texts are a sort of orchestral "score" for a sound text.

Futurist and dadaist sound poets have rightly stressed the difficulties to represent sound texts, as they approach the border of a semantic absence of meaning with regard to the nuances of sound.

*But it was not until the invention of the tape recorder (in the fifties) which paved the way to solve the problem how to represent sound texts. The tape recording makes the original repetition of a once formed, perhaps even spontaneously formed, sound event available to us and offers the sound poet new methods of composing his texts similar to the methods of creating a film. After all the authentic sound poetic work only does exist in a tape recorded form.*<sup>1</sup>

The techniques of computer sampling in the area of sound and refined video techniques in the visual area brought an enormous increase of audiovisual methods to recording. Nevertheless German sound poets hardly make use of these techniques today.

The aim of this essay is to present an annotated historical survey regarding the "scores" of sound poetry. But in doing so Bernd Scheffer points out a restriction: It's rather pointless to talk continuously of wordless, pre-verbal or nonverbal perceptions within a visual area.

<sup>1</sup> Mon, Franz. 1994.  
*Franz Mon: Essays.*  
Berlin:Gerald Wolf  
Janus Press, 318.

## The syntax of the visual area

In 1910 Guillaume Apollinaire propagated the use of phonographs to record the voices of poets. The Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti developed his strategy of “liberation of words” (*parole in libertà*), which was expected to produce the following effects:

- to set free words and sounds on the surface of a sheet of paper or in acoustic space
- to rediscover the spoken word for poetry and
- to use sounds of the world around us (onomatopoeia).

In the wake of Stéphane Mallarmé, Marinetti revolutionized typography. The visual organization of the *tavole parolibere* was characterized by “freely” spreading out scraps of sentences, single words and asyntactical groups of words or isolated letters. The arrangement produced the effect that those scraps of sentences, single words, etc. fit into expressive and often semantic, pictorial configurations — the spatial constellation produced the meaning and the context. Traditional grammatical syntax is replaced by spatial syntax.

As the antitraditional and revolutionary use of typographic design produces a peculiar visual effect of expression — containing also acoustic qualities — the text is approaching the picture and the musical “score” thus transcending the borders of music and pictorial and fine arts.

- 2 Ball, Hugo. 1963. *Gesammelte Gedichte* (Collected poems). Zurich: Verlag der Arche, 28.

- 3 Reprinted in Arp, Hans, and Richard Huelsenbeck, Tristan Tzara. 1957. *Dichtungen der Gründer / Dada Gedichte* (Poetry of the originators / Poems of the Dadaists). Zurich: Verlag der Arche, 43.

- 4 Adler, Jeremy and Ulrich Ernst. 1988. *Text als Figur. Visuelle Poesie von der Antike bis zur Moderne* (Text as shape. Visual poetry from the beginnings to the modern times). Weinheim: VCH, 265.

## Sound poems: Hugo Ball

The dadaist poet Hugo Ball knew the first examples of the *tavole parolibere* of the Italian futurists. Yet the “typographic revolution” was not reflected in his poems. On July 23, 1916 he recited for the first time his “Karawane” (Caravan), also called “Elefantenkarawane” (Elephant Caravan), together with other sound poems in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. The different written versions of this sound poem were only authorized in the typescript, which is included in the manuscript edition of the *Gesammelte Gedichte* (Collected Poems),<sup>2</sup> whereas Ball didn’t authorize the two “extra” elaborated versions of this poem for the publication in *the Dada-Almanach* planned by Kurt Wolff and in *the Dada-Almanach* edited by Richard Huelsenbeck and published by Erich Reiss, Berlin, in 1920.<sup>3</sup>

The visual version of the sound poem “Karawane” (*figure 1*) is characterized by its headline, which seems to be in motion, and the use of different types of writing in the seventeen lines of the text. According to Jeremy Adler and Ulrich Ernst a sort of undulatory motion is produced by the alternative use of italics and roman type, while the left column produces a soothing effect by using a homogeneous type and small letters, thus bringing about a classical balance in the whole composition.<sup>4</sup> But the visual arrangement (for instance concerning the dynamic process) is not a good start for the interpretation of this sound poem. Any interpretation must start with the title which alludes

to the recipient's imagination, thus giving him the impulse for the onomatopoeic effect.<sup>5</sup>

### **The optophonetic poem: Raoul Hausmann**

Raoul Hausmann saw the lack of suitable means for recording sound poems and so he tried to solve this problem by creating his "optophonetic poems." In 1918 he started writing his "Plakat" and "optophonetische Gedichte" (Poster and optophonetic poems) — a unique poetic product of his creative activities. Hausmann approached the methods of the plastic and graphic arts by creating the optic and the acoustic dimension of the words and — with the help of typography — created his "abstract poems," which were expected to disclose the meaning inherent in the letters.

Inspired by a reading of August Stramm in 1915, Hausmann's reflections on the "creation of an energetic diction" first resulted in a new typographic development of the "modulation of speech." He was then aware of the new quality of the futurist typography, which made him realize that "reading or the communication of sound can only take an effect as an optical impression."<sup>6</sup> "The new typography was an optical support" for the "purely phonetic poems."<sup>7</sup> As Hausmann's poems were created in a printing-office by a purely accidental lining up of different letters in a row, he also called the poems letter-poems, phonetic poems of letters or letter-posters.

5 E. g. Ball, Hugo. 1978. Karawane, performed by "EXVOCO" (FUTURA. poesia sonora. Arrigo Lora-Totino, editor. Milan: Cramps Records, 7 LPs. For further details about Ball's sound poetry see the author's website: <http://www.fen.baynet.de/christian.scholz> (including comments on Hausmann's, Mon's, Claus's sound poetry)

6 Hausmann, Raoul. 1933. "Typographie." In: Hausmann, Raoul. 1982. *Texte bis Vol. 1*. Munich: edition text + Kritik, 183.

7 Hausmann, "Typographie," 183.

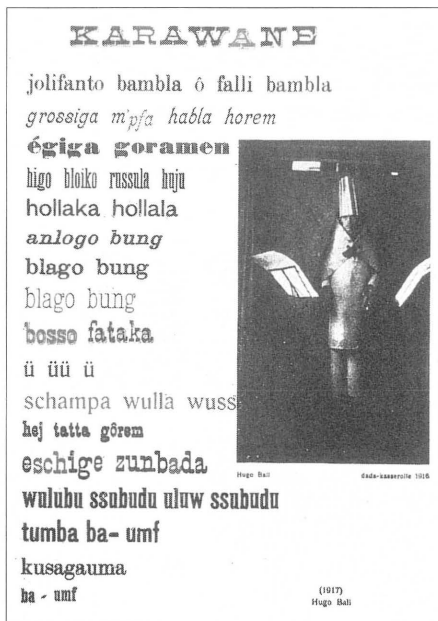


FIGURE 1  
Hugo Ball's "Karawane"  
(Caravan), 1916.

Two of his first “letter-poems,” both from 1918, “fmsbwT” and “OFFEAH” (figure 2), accidentally created in the letter-case (probably as a mere proof), do not yet show the proclaimed visual qualities which the *tavole parolibere* that the futurists had already achieved in 1915. Hausmann’s printing-system was still characterized by straight lines, the retention of writing left or writing right and the simplicity and monotony of the chosen letters. Because of the mainly accidental construction of the poster-poems the consonants of the letter-case dominated. The use of vowels and of consonants and the forming of syllables of vocalic and consonantal elements were evidently reduced.

*The accumulation of these vowels and syllables, connected with punctuation marks (hyphen, full stop, question mark), which appear to be significant, is a real nuisance to the reader and — because of the lack of well-known words and associations of words (interpretation of the sound) — prevents intelligibility. These poets consciously denied the use of language as a means for discursivity. Hausmann’s revolt against normal listening and reading habits jeopardized the familiar relation between writing and meaning.*

8 Hausmann, Raoul. 1958.  
Poème phonétique.  
In Hausmann, Raoul.  
*Courrier Dada*.  
Paris: Editions Le Terrain  
Vague, 63.

But this chance operation was not the only principle of creation. By replacing single letters for the sake of certain acoustic qualities in “OFFEAH,” Hausmann showed his intention to form his material. “I had four different copies of these poems printed. Because of the tone colour I later eliminated the m ü of the first poem and replaced it by the qu i ié of the second.”<sup>8</sup> Hausmann also used vowels mainly to comprehend the sound forming course of motion in all phases of modulation.

In 1918 or 1919, Hausmann created the sound poem “kp’erium” (figure 3), in which he continued the compository tendencies of the two former poster-poems and widened them out into the “optophonetic poem.” The visualization of the letters on the surface of a sheet of paper caught the spectator’s eye. The typographic arrangement approached the *tavole parolibere* of the Italian



FIGURE 2  
Raoul Hausmann's  
“OFFEAH,” 1918.



futurists who for instance tried to express the loudness and the pronunciation of their combinations of letters by capital letters or bold type. According to Hausmann the reader was expected to hear the intended sounds with the help of the optical structure of the poem. “The letters of a sound poem are arranged in such a way that they convey the sound.”<sup>9</sup>

The flowing of the vowels evidently seems to be stopped by the static character of the consonants. By itself their graphic variety provides our interior ear with familiar signals which can easily be transformed into phonemes by our memory of communication and illustrates the transition of sound to word, of lines without a meaning to writing. Hausmann’s reading of his sound poems, “kp’erium,” for example, is available on records of the fifties and sixties.<sup>10</sup> But they do not really represent the “original” sound of the dada years, as the reading is hampered by an antiquated usage of speaking. “Associations of sounds — almost audible onomatopoeica, reminiscences of foreign languages”<sup>11</sup> — can be perceived. The consequence is that sound poets must give up the attempt to record sound poems visually in a kind of “notation,” which can be duplicated only by poets.

9 Hausmann, Raoul. 1969. “Recherches sur le poème phonétique” In *De Tafelronde* 14:3/4, 107.

10 E. g., digitally remastered recordings of the fifties and sixties. Hausmann, Raoul. 1997. *Poèmes Phonétiques*. Rochechouart: Musée Départemental d’Art Contemporain; Limoges.

11 Erlhoff, Michael. 1982. *Raoul Hausmann*, Dadasoph. Hannover: Verlag zweitschrift, 195.

**Comments: Kurt Schwitters’ “Ursonate”**

We know from Kurt Schwitters’s publications that he insisted on the sound recording of his works, especially of his “Ursonate.” Schwitters’s cooperation with the “Süddeutscher Rundfunk Stuttgart” (South German Radio Stuttgart)

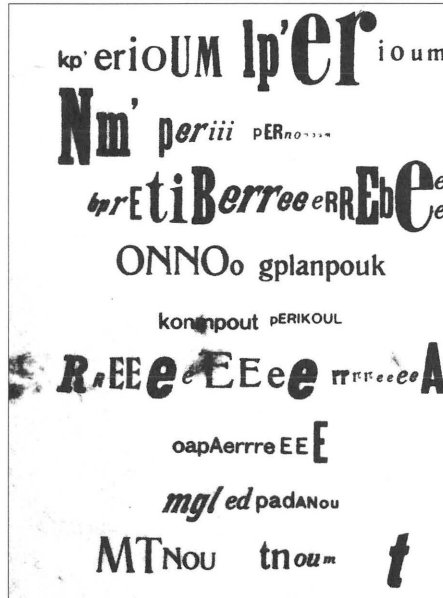


FIGURE 3  
Raoul Hausmann's  
"Kp'erium," 1918.

- 12 Schwitters, Kurt. 1932.  
Scherzo der Ursonate  
(5. Mai 1932).  
In "Lunapark 0,10."  
Marc Dachy, editor. 1999.  
Brussels: sub rosa (SR 80).  
Schwitters, Kurt. 1993.  
Ursonate. Original  
Performance by Kurt  
Schwitters. Mainz:  
WERGO records (WER  
63042).

- 13 Scholz, Christian. 1989.  
"On Kurt Schwitters's  
URSONATE (1932)."  
In *Musicworks* 44, 7-23.

- 14 Mon, Franz. 1959.  
artikulationen. Pfullingen.  
(Without pagination).
- 15 Mon, Franz. 1960.  
[statement]. In Mon, Franz,  
editor. *Movens*. Wiesbaden:  
Limes Verlag, 113.

- 16 Mon, 111. Franz Mon  
"aus was du wirst,"  
artikulationen. Pfullingen.  
Also in Mon, *Movens*, 113.

- 17, 18  
Mon, 111. Franz Mon  
"aus was du wirst,"  
artikulationen. Pfullingen.

- 19 Mon, artikulationen.  
Pfullingen, 31.

in the year 1932 is preserved in the German Radio Archive in Frankfurt / Main. A few years ago the complete reading of the "Ursonate" (with a reading time of about forty-one minutes) was published by WERGO, Mainz.<sup>12</sup> The long process of coming into being of this sound poem — Schwitters started writing it already in 1921 — shows the poet's difficulties with the written version and the publication of this sound poem. The complete version of the "Ursonate" appeared in 1932 (*Merz* 24), typographically prepared by Jan Tschichold, as the cooperation of El Lissitzky failed.

Kurt Schwitters's "Ursonate" does not show the high visual qualities of Raoul Hausmann's "optophonetic poems." This is the result of Schwitters's specific method of composing and creating neologisms. Unfortunately space prevents going into details<sup>13</sup> and analyzing Jan Tschichold's typographic version of Schwitters's "Ursonate" as compared with Schwitters's "score" of the "Ursonate" which does exist. Excerpts of the notation, respectively the "score" of the "Ursonate," which would be of interest for this essay, have not been published up to now by the publishing houses Arche, Zurich, and Haymon, Innsbruck. The existence of a "score" shows, however, Schwitters's hope that other interpreters would recite his "Ursonate."

### Articulations: Franz Mon

"(A)rticulations"<sup>14</sup> from 1959 was Franz Mon's first publication, containing texts, essays and some sound poems. "Articulations," reflected phonetic experiments of the 1920s. Of course it was — according to Mon — problematic to fix an "articulation" in writing, for it was in the poet's view an acoustic presentation. It was hardly possible to reproduce in writing the "complete movement of the articulation, the range of articulation between the extreme poles of vocal sounds and the consonantal plosives."<sup>15</sup>

There was, however, a special course of articulation that was connected with the written and graphic presentation. A typical example for this form of presentation is the sound poem "aus was du wirst" (of that which you consist) (*figure 4*), contained in the volume "articulation" and in the anthology *Movens*.<sup>16</sup>

*Indeed there are several variant readings for this "articulation," but only one of them is really striking, namely the variant which must be read diagonally from top to bottom and must be duplicated in an "attempt of concentration" by the recipient-reader-viewer.<sup>17</sup> In this we can see that the alleged "simultaneous pattern" offers relations in every possible direction provided the spectator is willing to use the time to develop an intentional understanding of a special kind of speaking beyond the normal way of speaking.<sup>18</sup> Thus, "speaking immediately along the axis of articulation in the form of a dance of the lips, the tongue and the teeth."<sup>19</sup>*



**FIGURE 4**  
Franz Mon's "aus was du wirst" (That of which you consist), 1959.

The creative object is formed by the spectator's endeavor — the noted down text is only "a rough copy, an instruction for what cannot be fixed since beyond the stream of meditation."<sup>20</sup> The recipient must set the "tremendous complexes (of the simultaneous pattern) into motion,"<sup>21</sup> contained in the totality produced according to strict rules with a clear reduction of semantic meaning.<sup>22</sup>

**20, 21, 22, 23**

Mon, Artikulationen, Movens, 111.

In the "articulation" "aus was du wirst" the course of the articulation is already mentioned in the title: "Its identity is preserved by changing the well-known into the similar and so on."<sup>23</sup> The single syllables which the recipient-reader-viewer is expected to pick up are specified on the coarse-meshed raster. In the process of articulation the initial form "rakon" develops — about the remembered syllable of "kram," "hare," etc. — into the final form "drustar." The same can be applied to the sequence of sounds in the lines above, but with certain restrictions: The sounds develop in a different way, i. e., sometimes without a widening effect ("egs," "drie," "odt"), sometimes by way of variations ("kram," "kras," "kars"), by polishing ("tar," "usd") and reducing ("md," "rd," "hn") respectively they become "rigid" in the final point.

Carlfriedrich Claus was "a performer" among those readers who accepted the exercises to duplicate the "articulations" "aus was du wirst," "sinks" and "fast durchlässig" with the help of their own organs of speech. As "a performer," he describes "his experiences with the speech in a review of Mon's book "articulations": *Speech is here in its microscopic aspect (the transparency of the single phonemes concerning the gestures and tininess behind) and the macroscopic aspect of the multilateral processes. On different levels different processes are happening. The structures of time of these processes differ: They proceed 'simultaneously' but at a different speed. In addition there is the primary moment that typographies are concerned. By way of distribution and by the arrangement of the substance of writing the typographies start in the spectator's mind an optical process (because: letter is equivalent to acoustic signal) which produces respectively [or] initiates an acoustic effect first, then a mental effect....*<sup>24</sup>

**24** Carlfriedrich Claus. 1960.

"Sicht-, hörbare Phasen umfassender Prozesse" (Visible and audible phases of comprehensive processes). *Nota* 4, 42.

**“Konstellative Artikulationen”  
(articulations in the form of constellations): Carlfriedrich Claus**

25 Carlfriedrich Claus's discourses with Christian Scholz. 1990. Chemnitz-Obermichelbach, tape.

About 1954 Carlfriedrich Claus tried to record certain experiences or perceptions of speech (events or productions of the speech) and natural experiences “in pure forms of sound”<sup>25</sup> and to provide a written notation of “sound texts” like “tong tong”<sup>26</sup> (figure 5).

26 Carlfriedrich Claus. 1991. “tongtong.” In Carlfriedrich, Claus. *Erwachen am Augenblick* (To be roused by the instant). Sprachblätter. Karl-Marx-Stadt, Munster, 54.

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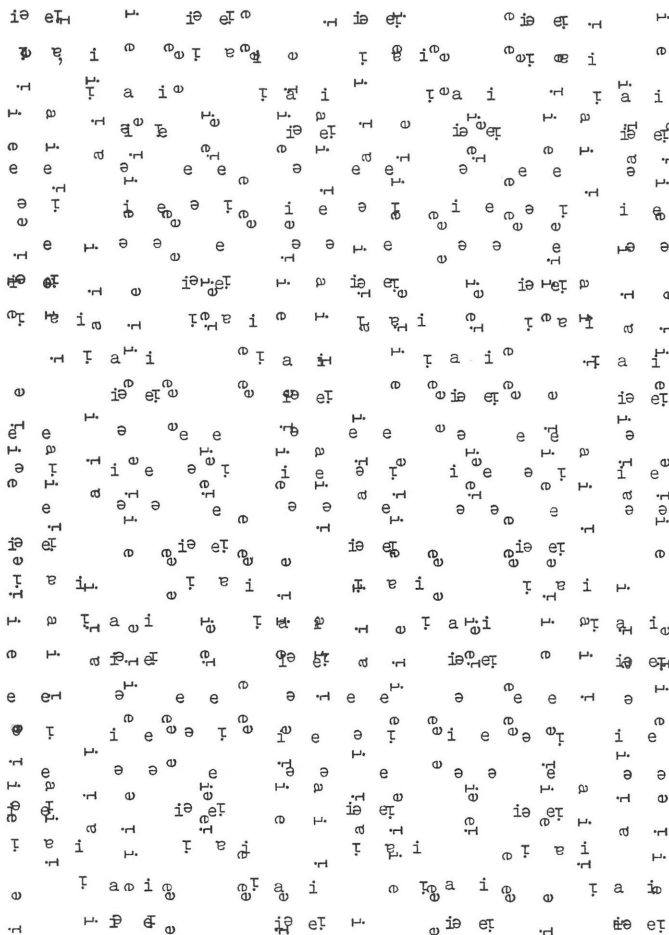
i  
öi-i

tongtongtongtongtong

FIGURE 5  
Carlfriedrich Claus'  
“tong tong,” 1954.

27 Lora-Totino, Arrigo, editor. 1978. FUTURA. poesia sonora. Milan: Cramps Records, 7 LPs.

In 1959 Claus made experiments with his so called “Letternfeld” (a field of letters)<sup>27</sup> (figure 6). A “Letternfeld” is an arrangement of vocals or vocals and consonants in typescript. In his “experiment” Claus tried to transform his “Letternfeld” into his “konstellative Artikulation” (articulation in the form of a constellation). For this purpose Claus made use of a microphone, a stop-watch and the trick button of a type recorder (switching off the erase button during the process of recording), which made it possible for him to interrupt recordings with other recordings on the same sound track.



**FIGURE 6**  
 Carlfriedrich Claus'  
 "Letterfeld" (a field of  
 letters), 1959.

The constellation of the two letters "i e" was recited several times and in a sort of temporal phase displacement thus producing a "konstellative Artikulation" (articulation in the form of a constellation) with a simultaneous and/or alternative "flashing" of the two vowels "i" and "e."<sup>28</sup> Because of the restricted possibilities of a tape-recorder, planned for simpler needs at home, the experiment was only to an extent successful. Claus's sound poetic work, which he has created since 1959 is based on spontaneous improvisations of speech (respectively sound) or noise. These improvisations were recorded and transformed into sound texts, later broadcast by the West German Radio (Cologne) and the Bavarian Radio (Munich).<sup>29</sup>

**28** Carlfriedrich Claus. 1991. "Letterfeld." In Carlfriedrich Claus. *Erwachen am Augenblick (To be roused by the instant)*. Sprachblätter. Karl-Marx-Stadt, Munster, 113.

**29** Carlfriedrich Claus. 1993. "Lautaggregat." WRD Cologne: Studio Akustische Kunst. Chemnitz: Städtische Kunstsammlungen. 1995 (001-95-CC). Carlfriedrich Claus. 1996. *Basale Sprech-Operationsräume*. Bavarian Radio, Munich.

30 Scherstjanoi, Valeri.

Interview.

<http://www.dickinson.ed/departments/germnglossen/heft9/valeri.html>

### Graphic representations of sound poems: Valeri Scherstjanoi

Valeri Scherstjanoi, born 1951 in Kazachstan, has lived in Germany (East) since 1979 and made friends with Carlfriedrich Claus. Deeply influenced by the Russian futurists, he uses Russian *and* German vocabularies and phonemes (respectively microparticles of phonemes)<sup>30</sup> which can be seen in his “Bavarian sound poem” (1998) (*figure 7*) and various notations of sound poems using Russian and German phonemes “Die Enge” (The narrowness), 1996 (*figure 8*).

FIGURE 7

Valeri Scherstjanoi's  
“Bayerisches Lautgedicht”  
(Bavarian sound poem),  
1998.



FIGURE 8

Valeri Scherstjanoi's  
“Die Enge” (The narrowness),  
1996.



31 Scherstjanoi, Valeri. 1996.

In “den Rhythmen der Sprache oder wie gehe ich an die Produktion meiner Lauttexte heran?” (In the very rhythms of the speech or how I approach the creation of my sound texts?) Berlin, April-May, manuscript, 2 pages.

*Scherstjanoi opposes the merely vocal improvisations that avoid any form of written notation of sound poems and tries to replace the notation of sound poems with the help of mere electro-acoustical methods of production. Scherstjanoi thinks that mere electro-acoustical methods of production tend to develop into sheer abstractions of sounds.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Scherstjanoi tries to keep a certain sound idea within its own limits, to put it down in writing and even to learn it by heart. For Scherstjanoi sound poetry must remain poetry, a mixture of sound and meaning.*

The author describes the creation of his sound texts as follows:

1. *Noting down — pronouncing the sounds in a loud or a slow voice, reading — taping — speaking (saying) etc.*
2. *Speaking — taping, listening to the recorded sounds — saying, listening to the recorded sound — noting down — saying....*  
*As reading as I have written ... The hand-written texts are sound texts. The eyes see what the ears have heard ... The ears 'hear' the atmosphere of writing.*<sup>32</sup>

*With full concentration, the recipient-reader-viewer is able to re-enact in his mind the sound ideas which Scherstjanoi is performing on the stage. Cooperating with artists like Zoro Babel (percussionist) and video artists like Peider A. Defilla, Scherstjanoi's video performances increase the perception of the sound ideas. Apart from this effect, the visual level of the video films reflect Scherstjanoi's special kind of articulations. In this way the genius of both artists is maximized in their output.*<sup>33</sup>

### The multimedia text

*Already in 1984 the Canadian author BP Nichol adapted some visual poems for the Apple-Computer.<sup>34</sup> This software makes the texts visible in a temporal course on the screen and reminds us of the reduction of animation of letters in the visual sphere. The development of computer technology gives us a chance to adapt poems, i. e., the combination of texts, graphics, sounds, video clips etc. Experiments of this kind are emerging.*<sup>35</sup>

Sound poetry is an art full of vigor which changes continually. The future of visual and sound poetry lies according to the author, on one hand, in the possibilities of computer technology (digital recording, adaptations, integrations of different texts, etc.). But it is not until new digital recording possibilities and the appearance of people who manage without the burden of the past (futurism, dadaism, concrete poetry), that new perspectives in the future will open. On the other hand, this development will proceed only by means of the genius of sound poets exploring the form of speech and the "alchemy of words" (Hugo Ball) on a sheet of paper and on stage without using any technical aids, to demonstrate the flexibility of the letters, the words and the microparticles of speech.

32 Scherstjanoi, "den Rhythmen der Sprache," 1

33 Scherstjanoi, Valeri. 1999. "Zwischen Herz und Hirn" (Between heart and brain). Video Performance by Valeri Scherstjanoi and Zoro Babel. Video Camera by Christoph Wirsing. Munich: B.O.A. Videofilmkunst Peider A. Defilla, July 16.

34 Nichol, BP 1984. "First Screening." Toronto: Underwhich Editions (Underwhich Software Series 1).

35 Wendt, Larry. 1995. Narrative and the World Wide Web. *Art & Design*, 45, "The Multimedia Text," 82-91.

•• **Christian Scholz** is a scholar of sound poetry. Since the mid-1970s he has been a publisher of this form of oral research. Additionally, he has published books about German sound poetry and edited radio programs on the topic.

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# The Singing Blackbird

voice, images, technology in polypoetry

*"If you believe it is not there, there is,*

*if you believe it is there, there it is not."*

*from a zen koan*



## Quality and virtue of the performing voice

The performing voice is the sum of so many voices:

it is authentic, archetypal, bewitching, it comes directly from the deep interiority of the body and through the body from the beyond, metaphysical, ontological voice, a voice dialectic forever, a critical voice in its social integrity, an electronic voice in its intermediality, natural and artificial, the murmur of the mouth to regenerate and to deform; a distorted voice, phonetic stream like a God's word to be accepted without any opposition, royal voice, superior voice, in its oneness, voice of vitalism, maybe a voice of utopia.

Inside the practices called polypoeury,<sup>1</sup> sound poetry,<sup>2</sup> the voice builds up its supremacy against writing — an absolute, unmistakable primacy, never debated, whether or not technology is used. The voice is the center of being operative, it is the pivot around which the whole wheel turns, the first motor that drives everything. Such a primacy is not directly tied to the chosen medium. The primary medium is the mouth, slot with an intermittent opening, guided by cerebral energies, by the soul's energies. The mouth discharges clouds of white smoke, untouchable, impregnable, only kissable. Corporal voicing, unlike urine and excrement which isolate and reject, is capable of making a union, enchanting and provoking a shock.

Not writing but voice is the essence of polypoeury or sound poetry — the voice with its direct, organic possibilities of expression whether technologically amplified or manipulated or not.

Focusing on live performance, the inter-relatedness of audience and poet is essential. While the voice is primary, the interaction with image is also essential. The author avoids “fusion” in which the identity and character of various poetic components become confused and lost.



**FIGURE 1**  
Enzo Minarelli *Poematica*, videopoem, Ferrara, 1980.

**FIGURE 2**  
Adriano Spatola, *Luxson 2*, experiments of poetry between sound and light, Rocca di Stellata, 1985.

One has to understand, starting from the incontrovertibility of such a statement, that the poet thinks of his work only for the purpose of an oral processing-performance-fruition. He or she is the producer-maker of the verbal message; he has planned it and he performs it live, only then, is the receiver (the audience) allowed to see, to listen. All takes place inside the components of space and time, the poet acts in a context, say, a theater stage, an art gallery, an auditorium, a square and it is exactly in these places that the performing event of the poem happens.

The sound poem is therefore performed in real time, and this is the unique chance the audience has to enjoy it correctly. In a way, there is only this single event, as the live intervention. Although the sound poem is always the same, it has some unrepeatable background (the local-humoral co-ordinates).<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, a good performance is the direct consequence of a perfect, symbiotic balance between audience and performer. It is the answer to their own dialogue, an inter-connection. Where the voice of the poet runs as a fluid, sprinkling the faces of the spectators, the voice of the performer and the ears of the audience play really hyper-active roles to reach the desired climax of the total acoustic comprehension. Such a crescendo-coupling does not always happen and is not to be taken for granted. It is the opposite of Brecht's so called denouement. On the contrary, this climax is a cybernetic process where three

poles turn continuously, exchanging their roles: the audience re-sends its own signal into the circle of the communication, as does the poet, the message. The performance message, a poetic ping-pong ball, is thrown from one side to the other. The poet's warm breath, which comes from his interiority, from his deep spiritual breath, re-makes the message, giving it that ethereal imprint which will be absorbed equally by the audience, who, in turn, do not re-transmit the message through an oral form, but through their silent auscultating state, re-send the corporal vibrations, magnetic waves due to the excitement of their being there to hear. The audience, willy-nilly, suffer changes of skin, of emotion. The audience alters during the performing intervention. There is a modified state due to the dynamic energy left in the air by the poet-performer, who receives feedback as a further input to improve himself, to do better, to exhibit the muscles of his own spirit.

The voice of the poet is able to veil, to cover poetic contents as if with a soft layer of transparent dew, allowing everything to be seen, a psycho-visual enchantment, an epiphanic dew. The audience themselves are the first to catch the core of the message, to see it, and they are quick to take possession of it. But they are unable to keep it because during the performance, their pores are so enlarged that they are obliged to emit it anew. This means that the sound poem is successful — going straight to the

FIGURE 3  
Enzo Minarelli *L'Alfabeta*, book with audiocassette, 1979.



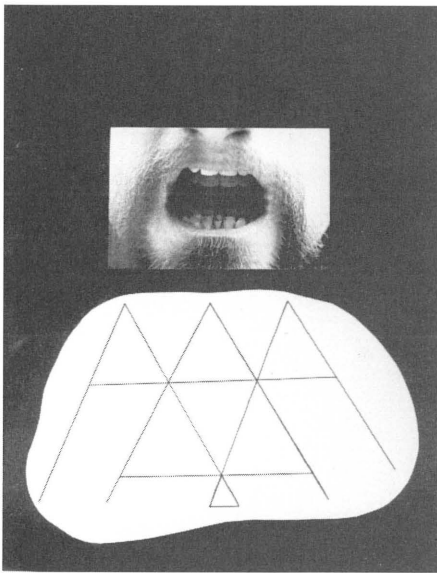


FIGURE 4  
Enzo Minarelli *L'Alfabeto*, sample page, 1979.

conclusion of their orgasm in unison with the audience — not unlike the utopian belief in transubstantiation.

### The images of the image

To keep an open dialogue with the media, means to open a line of research towards what is now, generically, the image. We know that the sound poem is the first product, it is the first step towards the polypoetic act, and only afterwards, the most suitable, visual, support is looked for. From this point of view, throughout the 1980s, the slide was the favored medium. Indeed, the visual impact was charming; a carousel display created a positive air. Strips of colorful lights covered the performer on the stage, in a perfect correspondence between what the voice was about to develop and the image itself which was capable of relating to it in some way, by redundancy or analogy or metonymy. The slide set up an environment. It possessed the typical static quality of the enlarged, written page, but, unlike it, there was the novelty of projected light.

We recall the written page as the physical act of writing has been often brought to the stage. So many times we have seen performers write on the stage, on pieces of papers stuck to the walls, on the body itself, on the walls, on blackboards, or on the ground, also using the body as a human pen,

until a real, visual poem was built up. The best example of such work has been given by the Portuguese poet Fernando Aguiar. Nobody can deny that the act of writing has been often performed on the stage, related to the voice that has always kept its role of protagonist. The act of writing reminds us of a special state of isolation, of privacy, of contemplation; suggesting one who writes and lives in peace with himself. Exhibiting it in a public space means behaving bravely, a denouement, as it happens in a contest that generally does not belong to an action aiming to re-value and amplify the text.

If we had to stress the ideal status of such a spectacular form, although it does not belong properly to the field of sound poetry, we should mention the work of Robert Wilson. Reviewing his important career, from *Einstein on the Beach* onwards, in his latest work *The Days Before Death, Destruction & Death III*,<sup>4</sup> we see that what we have called an open dialogue with the media has been developed starting from perfect premises, excellent synchronisms of method and technique between the video-images and the spoken text of the actors. Soft entrances just for the pleasure of the eyes, delicate exits well balanced by a perfect direction that matches the oral, visual rhythms. And it is completely true that in some parts of this work sound poetry itself appears. For those who have seen the performance, we suggest section VI, titled *The Box*, where it is very easy to identify all the

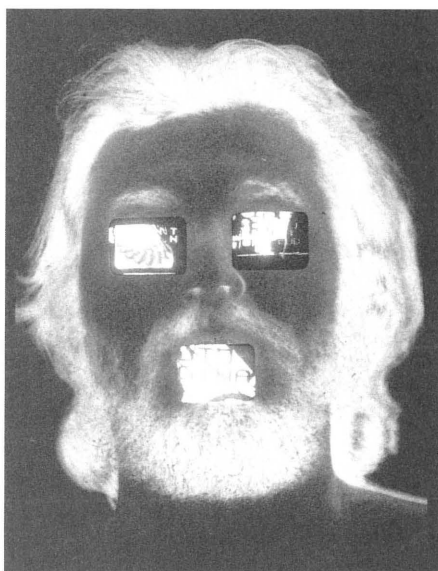


FIGURE 5  
Enzo Minarelli *Volto Pagina*,  
sound poetry video installation, 1985.

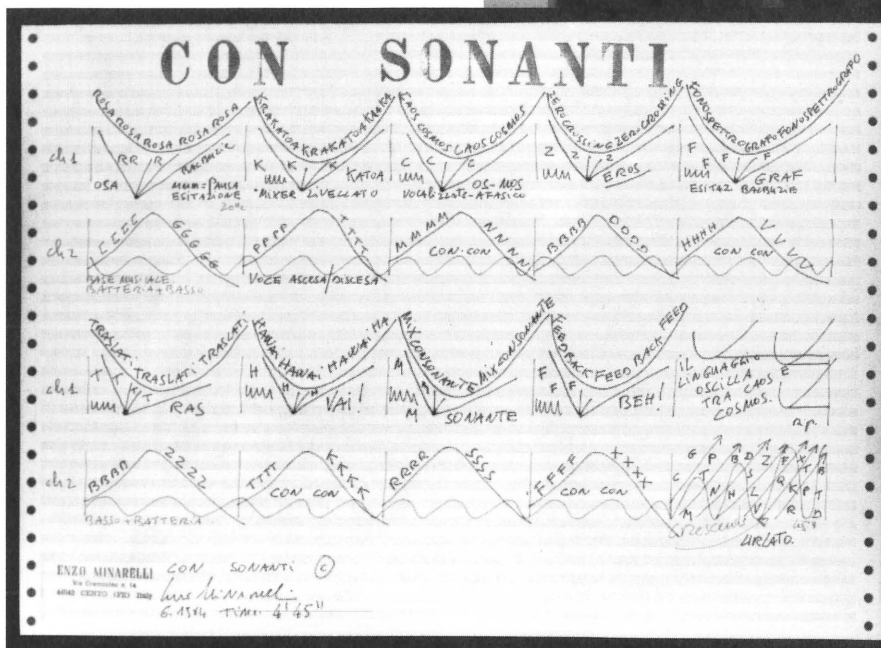


FIGURE 6  
Enzo Minarelli's *Con Sonanti*, scores for sound poetry, 1984.

typical aspects of sound poetry. That's the total experiment of vocality and orality mixed with dance, movement, space, light and technology. Perhaps, this represents the ideal status, the final goal, the mandala of sound poetry.

It's only in the 1990s that the video-image starts to be used in polypoetry, as a substitution for the slide. But first, we need to step backward, to recognize that since the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, there was a discrete development of the discipline called videopoetry. Before going into the close relationship of video-image and sound, one should again note that the television message is eighty percent composed of images, and only twenty percent of sound. Therefore, we strictly follow such a

# LABIRINTO



FIGURE 7  
Enzo Minarelli's *Labirinto*, scores for sound poetry, 1984.

short path represented by hearing, to understand how to proceed. We need not debate how the poet is able or unable to relate him- or herself to the video-image. On the contrary, we must establish that the difference between a videopoeem and a video sound-poem is given essentially by the sound, which, in the first case, is the simple, normal reading of a poem, whereas in the second one, we have a sound poem.<sup>5</sup> This is a crucial difference, because whoever is rightly considered the forerunner of these videopoeetry experiments since the mid-1960s writes about the core aesthetic problem: "sound, as music, human voice or noise, is part of the videopoeem. It makes a counterpoint to the visual images and to create an atmosphere that facilitates reading."<sup>6</sup> Apart from the



**FIGURE 8**  
Julien Blaine, V Festival di Poesia Sonora di Bologna, San Martino Theatre, 1998.



**FIGURE 9**  
Massimo Mori, IV Festival di Poesia Sonora di Bologna, Teatro San Martino, 1997.



**FIGURE 10**  
Miroslaw Rajkowski, V Festival di Poesia Sonora di Bologna, San Martino Theatre, 1998.

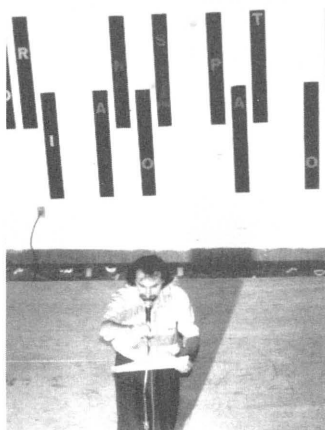
general terminology of videopoem, the sound track cannot be reduced to the function of didactics. Of course, all that happens through the usual broadcasting of commercial television, but it can't be reproduced inside the field of the creative experiment. Again, the above definition of videopoetry is similar to that given for videoart or the musical videoclip. This happens because one remains within the ambiguity of general terms such as music, sound or noise. Finally, such a statement does not take into consideration the value of poetry as such. A clear, direct reference to the domain of poetry does not exist. It's not enough to add, afterwards, "on the whole a verbi-voco-sound-visual-color-movement complex and animated image is created calling for a total kinesthetic perception."<sup>7</sup> One enters into the unpleasant reality of the "fusion," a term we totally reject because everything gets confused and disappears, losing weight and personality. As Italo Calvino refused the idea of totality reachable only through language,<sup>8</sup> so we say that totality can't be reached through the television screen, without the live presence of the poet-performer on the stage. The use of the word "totality" is not coherent, it does not create impact but carries the risk of generating the negative formalism of past avant-gardes.<sup>9</sup>

Focusing attention on videopoetry, the work is marked by highly professional materials and individuals. For example, there was the possibility of attending a workshop in February, 1998,

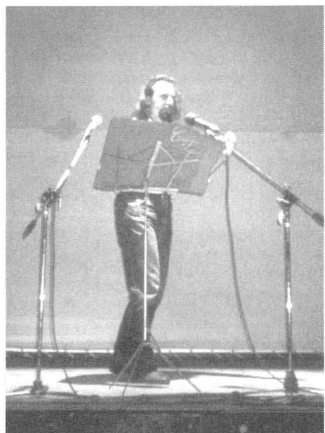


held at the Teatro Due in Parma, conducted by the Italian director Bertolucci regarding his videowork *The departure of the ceremonious traveller*, freely taken from the poems of the Italian poet Giorgio Caproni, produced in 1989 with the help of the students of the Milan Theater Academy.

In videopoetry, one immediately notices an expert in the role of director, because of the perfect use of light and photography; the poetry of the cinemagraphic image is at its best. Also, visual editing is done to stress the poetic word, thanks to the static, almost motionless camera used just as in the old silent movies, so steady that one cannot perceive its presence; it works as if it were recording a stage play. What the actors perform are Caproni's poems, which are the true protagonists, helped in this by the technical structure of the image of photography. Rarely have I seen such an accurate way of shooting the images, since videopoets generally prefer more hurried approaches as their background is not cinema but the world of poetry. I am persuaded that in true videopoetry, the image which is so prevalent, must be put at the service of the word, which never happens in the movie, and rightly so. Bertolucci, an important director, has chosen here to make a videopoem and not a movie of poetry, which means the word is prevalent, or at least, it plays a much more important role than the image itself, which is moved by the poetic text.



**FIGURE 11**  
Enzo Minarelli, III Biennial de Poesía, Mexico City, 1990.



**FIGURE 12**  
Enzo Minarelli, Polypoetry Festival, Budapest University, 1992.



**FIGURE 13**  
Enzo Minarelli, City Hall Theatre, Cascais, Portugal, 1996.

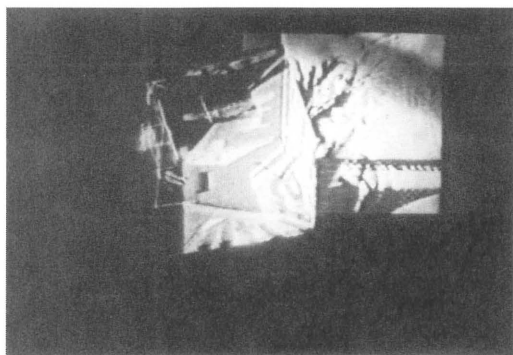


FIGURE 14+15  
Enzo Minarelli, *Volto Pagina*, videopoem, 1986.

Video reading, the video recording of a poet reading in front of a camera, or the video performance, a performance or an event related to polypoetry, goes beyond what can be covered here. But this short essay cannot conclude without mentioning the image that the poet's show provokes in the mind of the spectators. The body of the poet on the stage is important, but also the image of his entire show is part of the delivery of his message. Such an image has its greatest impact on the audience due mainly to the poet's body (along with all that he thinks necessary to keep with him on the stage), which is why such an image must be looked at carefully. Such careful examination does not always happen with the same amount of professional care. That's the why Wilson's work is so impressive. To get the effect, one needs to work basically through lights, all the different shades of lights. They are the real soul to create the "image" of the show. During more than twenty years spent performing throughout the world, I have seen it done only by the Catalan artist Carlos Santos at Valencia in 1987 in a performance called *Arganchulla, arganchull-gallac*, produced by Berlin DAAD.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 See Minarelli, E. 1995. *Vocalità & poesia*. Reggio Emilia: Elytra, 75-89.
- 2 See Chopin, H. 1979. *Poésies sonore internationale*. Parigi: J.M.Place.  
Kostelanetz, Richard, editor. *Text-sound texts*. 1980. New York: William Morrow.  
Menezes, Philadelpho, editor. 1992. *Poesia sonora*. San Paolo: Educ.  
Barras, V. and N. Zurbrugg. 1993. *Poésies sonores*. Ginevra: Contrechamps.  
Hultberg, Teddy, editor. 1993. *Literally speaking, sound poetry & text-sound composition*. Goteborg: Bo Ejeby Edition.
- 3 See Millán, F. 1998. *Vanguardias y vanguardismos ante el siglo XXI*. Madrid: Árdora, 23.
- 4 June 15-19, at the Modena Town Hall Theatre — the first official show took place on the July 7, 1999 at the Lincoln Center Festival New York State Theatre.
- 5 Minarelli, *Vocalità & Poesia*, 89-101.
- 6 de Melo e Castro, E. M. 1996. Videopoeetry in New Media Poetry: poetic innovations and new technologies. *Visible Language* 30.2, 143.
- 7 Melo e Castro, Videopoeetry in New Media Poetry, 143.
- 8 Calvino, I. 1994. *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. Milano: Mondadori, 212.  
See also Calvino, I. 1993. *Lezioni americane*. Milano: Mondadori.
- 9 Barriggi, R. Lo Stato dell'arte nell'epoca Postmoderna, conference at the Modern Art Museum São Paulo, May 1998.

- Enzo Minarelli is a scholar, publisher, organizer and performer, working on manifold aspects of poetry since the mid-1970s. He has just finished a work called CDRem, a synthesis of his experimental research.

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## The Manifesto of Polypoetry

Ten years after its writing, the Manifesto of Polypoetry is examined anew. The original goal of the manifesto was to theorize the performance of sound poetry. Six statements from the manifesto are examined in the context of a decade of change and development. The importance of technology is restated along with a discussion of time, editing, rhythm and poetic practitioners associated with excellence in various techniques or perspectives.

THIS ATTEMPT CONSISTS, AFTER MORE THAN A DECADE, IN RENEWING THE POINTS OF THE MANIFESTO.<sup>1</sup> THE NEED TO THEORIZE THE PERFORMANCE OF SOUND POETRY, STILL EXISTS. NOBODY, SAVE IN A VERY FEW CASES, HAS FELT THE URGENCY OF MAKING CLEARER THE PROCEDURE OF A MATTER STILL PRACTISED. PERHAPS IT'S DIFFICULT TO FIND THE NEW PRACTITIONERS, AS NOWADAYS IT SEEMS THAT ONLY THE MOST SOPHISTICATED HYPER-TECHNOLOGY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST THE BODY ITSELF (ALSO TRANSFIGURED OR CREATED THROUGH GENETIC MANIPULATION) ARE THE UNIQUE, AUTHORIZED WAYS OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH.

THE INTENTION IS TO HELP THOSE WHO ARE EXPERIMENTING WITH PERFORMANCES OF SOUND POETRY, TO A BETTER AWARENESS OF WHAT THEY ARE PRODUCING. SUCH AN IMPRESSION IS STILL VIABLE TODAY. BY AWARENESS I MEAN THE CAPABILITY OF A PROJECT ABLE TO ORGANIZE A SERIES OF INTERVENTIONS AROUND THE NUCLEUS OF THE VOICE INVOLVING OTHER MEDIA WITHOUT GOING TOWARDS PERFORMANCE ART, EXPERIMENTAL THEATER, CONCRETE MUSIC OR, WORSE, THE MERE READING OF A POEM FROM THE PAGE. IT WAS NECESSARY THEN, AND A HIGH LEVEL OF CONSCIOUSNESS IS STILL REQUIRED NOW, TO MANAGE SUCH A COMPLEX OF MULTIPLE ELEMENTS.

# *1 Only the development of new technologies will mark the progress of sound poetry: electronic media and computers are and will be the true protagonists.*

This was an easy prophecy! During the 1950s, the invention of the recording technique and its immediate commercialization deeply influenced and accelerated the transition from phonetic poetry to sound poetry, or better said, the change from the typical letrist approach to a more spatial, electromagnetic sound. The same can't be said after the appearance of the computer on the art scene towards the end of the 1980s. No doubt production times are neatly shortened, it's easier to work with special effects, to control sound waves. But the final product, the sound poem, has not been improved either in structure or contents.

The end-of-the-century big-computer-bang has not provoked a wave of "new" sound poetry. Those who have always used technology for the composition of the poem, still go on exploiting it, maybe in a more sophisticated way (see Larry Wendt, Charles Amirkhanian and Sten Hanson, for example). Or one might mention the extreme technological coherence of a Henri Chopin who, at least for forty years, has been proposing a rarefied style, not so far from a phonetic "rumorismo." Other poets who first denied their involvement with hyper-tech recording studios, now are not afraid of it and click the mouse to select their recorded voice finally visualized on the screen.

Still convinced that the fundamental help of technology is necessary to the cause of sound poetry, this is the winning instrument. The sound poet must be prepared in the face of rapid electronic development, but must also experiment with the new media for the progress of the sound poem itself. In other words, the sound poet must consider the poem under the auspices of the new technology. We ought to avoid that unbearable situation so typical of controlled freedom, where we seem to do whatever we want to, but we do nothing of any interest or better yet we do only what others allow us to do. That's why we appreciate those poets or investigators who have been able to set up their own software, Tibor Papp, Jacques Donguy, Fabio Doctorovich or those who can wholly dominate the program they are using, exploiting it for an original process, Mark Sutherland, Philadelpho Menezes, Takei Yoshimichi, Suzuki Takeo.

Finally, some thoughts about the Web, which is not yet ready to be exploited for the creative purpose of producing sound poetry. The Internet has been a medium used to spread news, to abolish distances and to communicate among people, rather than for artistic projects.

Speaking as an Internet producer and navigator, our website (<http://www.iii.it/3ViTre>) is four years old, and has been visited by more than 6,000 people, which is nothing if

compared with industrial sites. But it is a great success if you think of its not so visible product. Experience indicates that the Internet is not yet sufficient for the practical needs of a sound poet. We are still faced with a medium used more for the diffusion of the products, than for the building up of the poetry itself. Of course such a virtual existence seems like real life itself, as we exist only if we exist on the Web.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, the world has become smaller and smaller or more huge, so that we are unable to distinguish what is real from what is virtual, and vice versa. The “local” which used to be our daily routine, has become rapidly “global” thanks to technological progress. This new state of the “glocal” attracts us, at the same time it causes anxiety.

## ***2 The object ‘language’ must be investigated in all its smallest and most extensive segments. The word, basic instrument of sonorous experimentation, takes the connotation of multi-word, penetrated all the way in and re-stitched on the outside. The world must be able to free its polyvalent sonorities.***

This is the age-old problem of the word “poetry.” Because the starting material is language, we have always believed, by convention, to accept the definition of sound *poetry*. There is no fear if the word “poetry” disappears. The work still belongs to language, to that language brought forth by the voice in that dual meaning Paul Zumthor introduced clearly: “I define orality as the working of the voice as it brings language, vocality as the whole activities and values which are its own characteristics, apart from the language.”<sup>3</sup> This summarizes all the research of sound poetry. It’s a dialogism that provokes others regarding “signifier-signified,” where orality stands for the signified as vocality stands for the signifier. Again, orality relates to the morpho-syntactic chain as vocality relates to phonetic “*rumorismo*.”

The aspects of the multi-word are fundamental. It is not only the old idea of the portmanteau introduced by Joyce, although it was confined to the prison of the written page, but the use under the perspective of *vocorality* (a fusion of vocality and orality) of the word itself. After the great seasons of the “*rumorismo*” of the 1980s, where language was exploited vocally, 1990s pursued the integrity and integrality of the word. A vocal word is able to free that “polyvalent” energy repressed at the level of writing, energy that comes out under the shape of phonemes, above all, by means of permutational methods

or reduction techniques, and under the form of word sequences developed in their normal fashion.

This still seems up-to-date. The word must become really multi-word, directing itself towards manifold areas, creating the right background for multiple meanings, and thus for its media expansion, related to the new tools of communication. "A great amount of work addressed towards the word includes the final target of going beyond the word itself. One gets rid of language, not by denying it, but through a continuous act of making it more and more perfect.<sup>4</sup> Along this path, the most interesting poets are Clemente Padin, Julien Blaine, Serge Pey, Bernard Heidsieck, Bartolomè Ferrando, David Moss, Anna Homler, Franz Mon, Josef A. Riedl, Ide Hintze, Philippe Castellin.

### ***3 Sound elaboration admits no limits, it must be pushed beyond the sole of the pure "rumorismo," of a significant "rumorismo": the sonorous ambiguity, both vocal and linguistic, has a meaning if it fully exploits the instrumental apparatus of the mouth.***

Instead of "linguistic" we could have written "oral," in order to be coherent with what is said above. The instrument "voice" is the main base thanks to all its anatomic aspects, and it is evident that its stream is vocal. From this point of view, the old idea pursued by lettrist, and earlier by the futurists and dadaists, was a winning one, a steady starting point. The novelty here consists of not setting limits or borders. The much-loved language, so loved to be destroyed, is directed to inflict a torture to the solid ideology of traditional sonority, to betray the rule, to install the arrogance of its "sound" pleasure, pursued at any cost, practically a transfer of de Sade's philosophy at the level of phonetics.

Demetrio Stratos used the instrument-mouth like nobody had done before, reaching unbelievable results. His sounds were able to defeat the resistance of his body. He intended to breach the wall separating what is possible from what is impossible thanks to the voice. Even more, his "rumorismo" had first abolished any control of reason, running free, his throat linked to his soul; an act of noise-instinct, but rooted from the inside of his most interior "ego." A literary comparison is to the automatic writing in Lautrémont, first, and then the surrealist poets. In this area of research, Stratos takes the lead, but one can see other poets who are going along on the same line of development, Jaap Blonk, Valeri



Scherstianoj, Brenda Hutchinson, Mirosław Rajkowski, Christian Prigent, Giuliano Zosi, Katalin Ladik, Nobuo Kubota, Chris Mann, Makigami Koichi, Paul Dutton and Américo Rodríguez.

An extreme level of vocal sound can also be reached exploiting the digital process. A very important step is the natural aspect of the voice produced by the mouth, which means avoiding the use of artificial voice. The electronic approach pushes the voice into a ground where it is unable to recognize itself. It starts as voice, it arrives as sonorous piece, “rumorismo.” There is a stubborn attempt to destroy the sound code, getting shorter and shorter the thickness of the denotatum, till it is reduced to a deformed mass, useless in communication.

Today, the threshold is continuously crossed thanks to the powerful softwares. Technological progress breaks record after record. The poet must not passively follow the latest device, to be too dependent. That’s why the compact structure of the project plays an important role, it is the best guarantee for consciousness in doing a poem.

## ***4 Rescuing the sensitivity of time (the minute, the second) beyond the canons of harmony and disharmony, since only editing is the correct parameter of synthesis and balance.***

Importantly, this establishes the success or the failure of a sound poem. It’s not by chance minutes or even seconds are mentioned. We always want to know the reason why a poem lasts  $x$  minutes and not  $y$  minutes. Such a statement is directly connected to the previously mentioned prevalence of the project and its awareness. It means that when the sound poet is working, he controls all the elements, he dominates their use and function, for the purpose of achieving the desired effects.

It is not always necessary to prepare performances based on the idea of time, as in the work of Gerard Rhum, Josè Calleja, Maria Teresa Hincapie. Performing time is different from that of the audience. The performing time must be supported by the structural needs of the poem itself. We do not mean to fill time at any cost. We are talking of a justified time. Kirsten Justesen included in a performance huge cubes of ice which are expected to melt, giving the temporal rhythm of her intervention. This is an example. Even if the sound research seems to appear weak, the same problem has been addressed by some fluxus artists like Dick Higgins, Allan Kaprow, Alison Knowles, Eric Andersen, Charles Dreyfus.

The best approach to the performance never focused primarily on time and ignored editing. Much is unavoidable if the poem structure has minimal complexity. But usually a good poem needs editing. Today, the editing of an oral poem can be done easily on a computer screen, moving only the hand on the mouse, whereas, editing required one physically to cut the tape and splice the pieces back together. From bricolage to the computer, such easy technique has not provided better editing, proving once more that technological development is not enough to provide quality in a poem.

Poets like Paul de Vree, Bob Cobbing, John Giorno, Fernando Millàn, Gianni Emilio Simonetti or Joan Brossa especially in his theater “Strip-tease” always seem to completely control the element of time during their performances. Editing is a necessary step towards the homogeneous organization of the poetic material. Multiple tracks record the voice, accumulating more and more material, like an electronic madrigal. In contrast, multiplay systems avoid editing, joining what is far or separating what is closed. Both solutions move in the same direction: a rational approach to time, to plan it and to exploit consciously.

Finally, there are poets who, without great theories about time, without editing, operate with a sort of mental editing, better defined as a cerebral-vocoral one. During their performance they feel the weight of the flowing time, so that their own bodies are like clocks to determine time’s movement. Individuals with this ability are Llorenç Barber, José Iges, Pierre André Arcand, Amanda Stewart.

## ***5 Language is rhythm; tonal values are real units of significance: first the rational act, then the emotional one.***

This is the idea that neatly establishes the prevalence of *vocorality* against writing. The signifying tone, almost morpho-syntactic structure is full of meaning. Demetrio Stratos used to say that “the rhythm develops the raising of the physiological conscience,”<sup>5</sup> stressing perfectly that universal-holy aspect the voice gets during its rhythmic evolutions. The language as corporal instrument, is comparable to a finger, an arm, a penis, and it is able to imitate all of them, producing sonorous movements rich with energy and impact towards audience. The voice can be uttered through the breast, the head, the diaphragm, it does not matter. It counts the rhythm pattern inside which it is developed. It can be violent or a charming caress. The rhythm must be decided consciously. The rhythm must be heard inside the body of the performer. It is a signifying rhythm because it is the rhythm of the poet’s body. The voice is his visible extension, as in the Egyptian hieroglyphics, when the voice was represented as a cloud of signs. Getting the rhythm of the poem means managing the prosemic lines. Wise sound poets possess this quality: Chris Mann, Amanda Stewart, Allan Vizens, Richard Kostelanetz, Carlos Estevez, Rod Summers, Dmitry

Bulatov, Agostino Contò, Juan José Díaz Infante, Pedro Juan Gutierrez and Rosaria Lorusso. I am deeply persuaded that such a choice must be done rationally and not left to the dangers of improvisation. Rightly John Cage said: “if you are non-intentional, then everything is allowed, if you are intentional, not everything is allowed.”<sup>6</sup> To re-affirm that intentionality is the first step toward decision or non-decision, the sound poet does not work in a jazz session (with all due respect for this totally democratic, musical style). As I am placing polypoetry at the very opposite of improvisation, I extend rationality to the whole structure of the poem, following a lesson of Sartre who in turn learned it from Hegel “the true is the whole.”<sup>7</sup> Only totality is true, and only in front of the whole, is one able to reach the truth. The whole is polypoetic, which is connected to the world of media, beyond the totality of the body (mind, thought, heart). The polypoetic act uses a rational approach to reach its own truth. Reason allows us to go towards a real, concrete direction. Gadamer, via Descartes, thought “all that is rational is real, and all that is real is rational.”<sup>8</sup> Polypoetry is so real that it goes on performing. August 17, 1999 performance number 200 was held at the Theatre Acidh, Barcelona.

***6 Polypoetry is conceived and made actual in the live show. It trusts sound poetry as the prima donna or point of departure in order to build a relationship with: musicality (accompaniment, rhythmical line), mime, gesture, dance, (interpretation, extension, integration of the sound poem), image (television, color transparency, association, explanation, redundancy, alternative), light, space, costumes, objects.***

Before developing the sixth and last point, a short quotation about Lied: “What in Lied is *fused* [author italics], is not music and poetry as abstract entities, but a word and a melody which move themselves round a lost subject....”<sup>9</sup> Not by chance is the verb “to fuse” emphasized, because all the experimental production of performance, from the beginning of the last century (futurism, dada) up to the recent intermedia work, crossing through lettrism (from Artaud to Paul de Vree), operates as a *fusion*, mixing up various media, so that they lose their own characteristics and get new ones. This is not so far from the concept of *imbrication* introduced by the Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan.

Polypoetry, far from criticizing past theories, clarifies performing actions. It was born just to be performed in front of an audience. It is an unavoidable dualism, in this it is dialogic. It deserves an active audience, an open-minded audience as said years ago, but not yet inter-active. It has provoked the birth if not of a group, at least of a nucleus where many performers mirror their activities. Polypoetry does not operate at all through *fusions* or *ibridations*, but keeps visible the role of protagonist belonging to *vocorality*. Sound poetry establishes dialogue with other media, without losing its own specificities. Mathematically, sixty percent belongs to *vocorality*, the remaining part to the other elements involved. Such a dialogic link (that is sound poetry-vocorality versus other media) has to be developed from powerful positions, and Gadamer, thanks to his *phrónesis*<sup>40</sup> helps us, showing how the road of rationality must be pursued by means of all available instruments including tenacity and perseverance .

From this point of view, a statement of Ilya Prigogine<sup>41</sup> fits the argument regarding the fact that classic science was based on balance, on stability; now, all levels of observing events are involved, and we find ourselves in fluctuation, bifurcation and processes of change. Fluctuation and bifurcation are typical of a polypoetic research inside a line which is rigorously vertical, unlike the horizontal one, which represents historical experimentalism. Seen in context of polypoetry, this means that sound poetry must keep its primary role during the process of getting possession of media. Such an enterprise has to be done, cynically, without any prejudice, using also, if necessary, an excess of cacophony and disfigurement as they are antidotes to meanness, to superficiality, to the emptiness of life. How all that happens, it is an open question. All the most daring experiments are welcome inside that level of percentage we have listed above.

This practice is represented by Xavier Sabater, Fernando Aguiar, Endre Szkarosi, Clemente Padin, Miroslaw Rajkowski, Laura Elenes, Michael Lentz, Anna Homler, Wladislaw Kazmierczak, József Rocco Juhász, Magnus Palsson, Enzo Berardi, Luisa Sax, Tomaso Binga, Felipe Ehrenberg, Massimo Mori, Rod Summers, Philadelpho Menezes, Maria Teresa Hincapie, Eduard Escoffet, Seiji Shimoda, Mark Sutherland, Ide Hintze.... On analyzing their work, they are going in the same direction; because their performances are based more on mathematical speculation than on spontaneity, more on electronic structure than on elementary ideas, more on excess or exuberance than on simplicity.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Minarelli, E. 1987. Manifesto de la Polipoesia. Valencia: Tramesa d'Art.  
What was written in the Manifesto was at that time positively valued by Paul Zumthor who understood its theoretical-practical importance. He often suggested we go beyond this — to create a more formal group. Well, a group in a way has been created through the chain of international festivals (Bologna, Mexico City, São Paulo, Budapest, Montevideo, Athens, Barcellona...). Our editions in records (almost twenty records produced during ten years) have correctly supported theory. Various articles, essays, catalogues and anthologies have been created. The phenomenon exists; it is perfectly recognizable; it attracts new followers. In view of the new millennium, it is one of the experimental possibilities still worth development without running the risk of getting out of date, especially if the dialogue with media is kept alive.
- 2 Virilio, P. *Speed and information: cyberspace alarm!* In CTheory, <http://www.ctheory.com>
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- 4 See Bachtin, M. 1997. *Estetica e romanzo*. Torino: Einaudi, 44.
- 5 Stratos, D. 1979. Diplofonie e altro. *Il piccolo Hans*, 24, Bari, Dedalo, october-december, 85.
- 6 See Burroughs W. and J. Cage. 1988. *Chance encounter*. Leicester: De Montfort University, 7.
- 7 See Vattimo, G. 1983. *Dialettica, differenza, pensiero debole*, in AAVV, *Il pensiero debole*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 17.
- 8 See Bastos, F. 1997. Crise da razão, desconstrução, tecnologia e falência da estética. In Menezes, P., editor. *Signos plurais*. São Paulo, Experimento, 120.
- 9 Donda, E. 1999. Schubert's lieder. *Il Piccolo Hans*, 139-140.
- 10 See Gadamer, H. G. 1985. Verità e metodo. Milan: Bompiani, 43-47, 346-375.  
Gadamer, H. G. 1995. Verità e metodo 2, integrazioni. Milan: Bompiani, 275-284.
- 11 See Prigogine, I. 1999. In Romano, G. *Digital touch*, Juliet Photo, 93, Trieste, June 4.

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