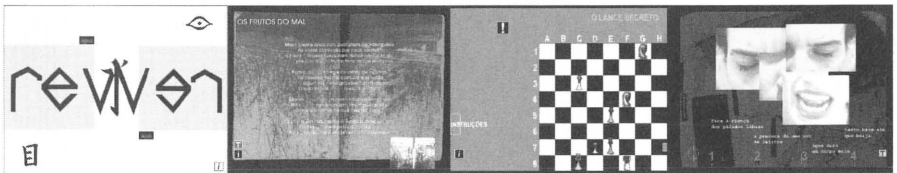


PHILDELPHO MENEZES

Rua Caiubi 342/82
CEP 05010-000
São Paulo SP, Brazil

Visible Language, 35.1
Phildelpho Menezes, 64-75
© *Visible Language*, 2001
Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

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.¹

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

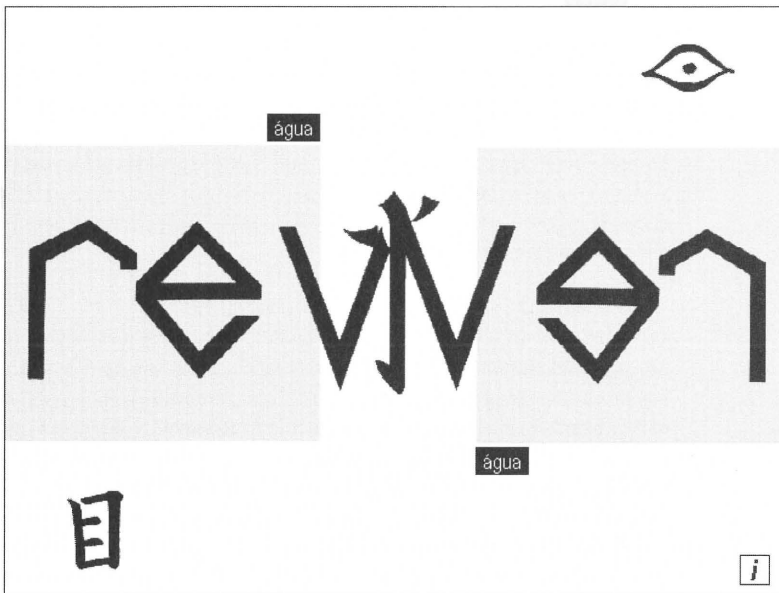


FIGURE 1
Philadelpho Menezes' "Reviver," a poem from an Interpoetry CD-Rom. Using ideograms, plays upon words and sounds of nature, the path through the poem is chosen by the user.

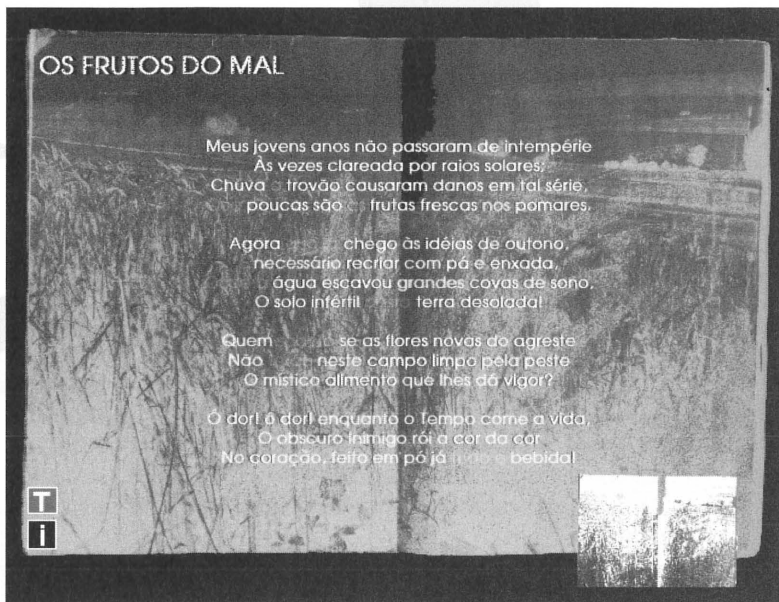


FIGURE 2
Philadelpho Menezes' "O inimigo" (The Enemy), a poem from an Interpoetry CD-Rom. Based on a Baudelaire poem, the words disappear from the screen as they are transformed in an oral reading, thereby producing a phonetic sound poem by the action of the user.

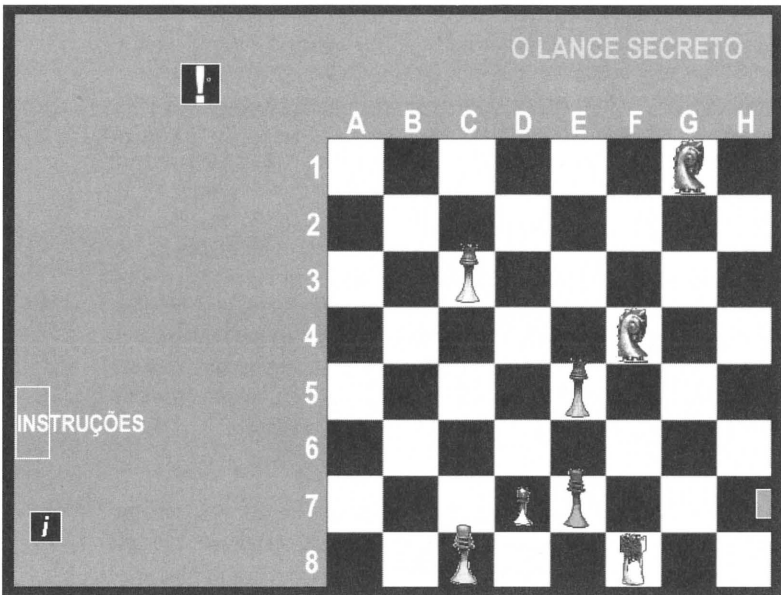


FIGURE 3
 Philadelpho Menezes' "O Lance secreto" (The Secret Move), a poem from an Interpoetry CD-Rom. Paths cross sound, verbal and visual information on Mozart, Cortázar, Duchamp and Lewis Carroll, artists who mixed game, art and life.

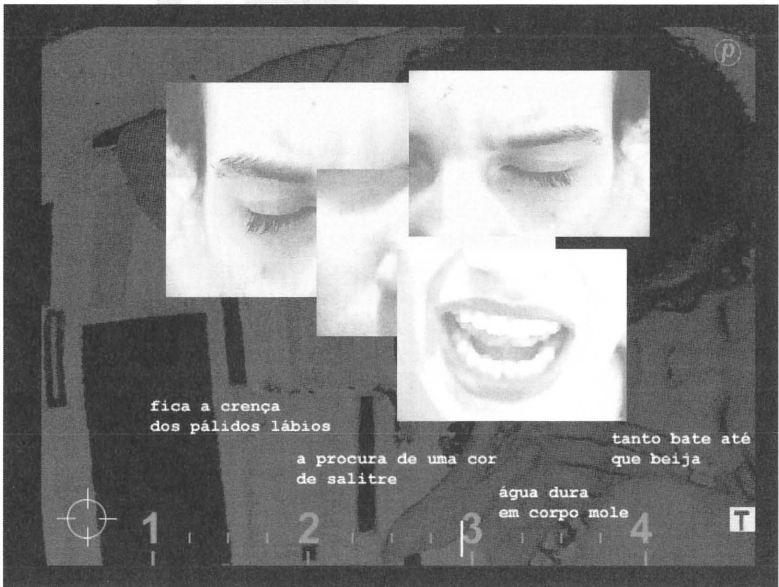


FIGURE 4
 Philadelpho Menezes' "Lábios" (Lips), by Wilton Azevedo, a poem from an Interpoetry CD-Rom. Voice and images of faces are chosen by a radio dial by the user.

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.²

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).³

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/poetry⁴ 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

Written in collaboration with Prof. Dr. Scott, Dublin, Spring, 2000.

REFERENCES

- Barras, Vincente and Nicholas Zurbrugg, editors. 1992. *Poésies Sonores*. Paris: Contrechamps.
- Bolter, Jay David. 1991. *Writing Space – The computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Chopin, Henri. 1967. "Open letter to aphonic musicians." *Ou – Revue de poésie évolutive*, 9-15.
- Chopin, Henri. 1979. *Poésie Sonore International*. Paris: Jean-Michel Place.
- Greenham, Lily. 1975. *Internationale Experimente der 50/60er Jahre*, Long-Play. Frankfurt: Hoffmann.
- Higgins, Dick. 1997. *Essays on Intermedia*. San Diego: San Diego State University Press.
- Landow, George. 1992. *Hyper/Text: the Convergency of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lanham, Richard. 1993. *The Eletronic Word - Democracy, Technology and the Arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Menezes, Philadelpho, editor. 1992. *Poesia Sonora – Poéticas experimentais da voz no século XX*. São Paulo: Educ.
- Menezes, Philadelpho, editor. 1996. *Poesia Sonora – do fonetismo às poéticas da voz hoje*, CD. São paulo: Fapesp/LLS.
- Menezes, Philadelpho, editor. 1998. *Sound Poetry Today – an international anthology*, CD. São Paulo: Fapesp/LLS.
- Menezes, P. and Wilton Azevedo. 2000. *Interpoesia – Poesia Hipermedia Interativa*, CD-ROM. São Paulo: Fapesp/EPE/Mackenzie.
- Minarelli, Enzo. 1997. *Poesia e Vocalità*. Reggio Emilia: Elytra.

CATALOGUES

- Poesia Intersígnos, Centro Cultural São Paulo, Philadelpho Menezes, organizer. São Paulo, 1985.
- Poesia Intersígnos – do Impresso ao Sonoro e ao Digital, Paço das Artes, Philadelpho Menezes, organizer. São Paulo, 1998.

- **Philadelpho Menezes** teaches at PUC in San Paolo (Brazil). He is a scholar of new media and an experimental poet and visual and sound poet as well. He has organized many events and published books regarding the visual-verbal dimension as applied to the process of making poetry. Recently, he has become involved with performance.