

L I S C O S T A

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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.

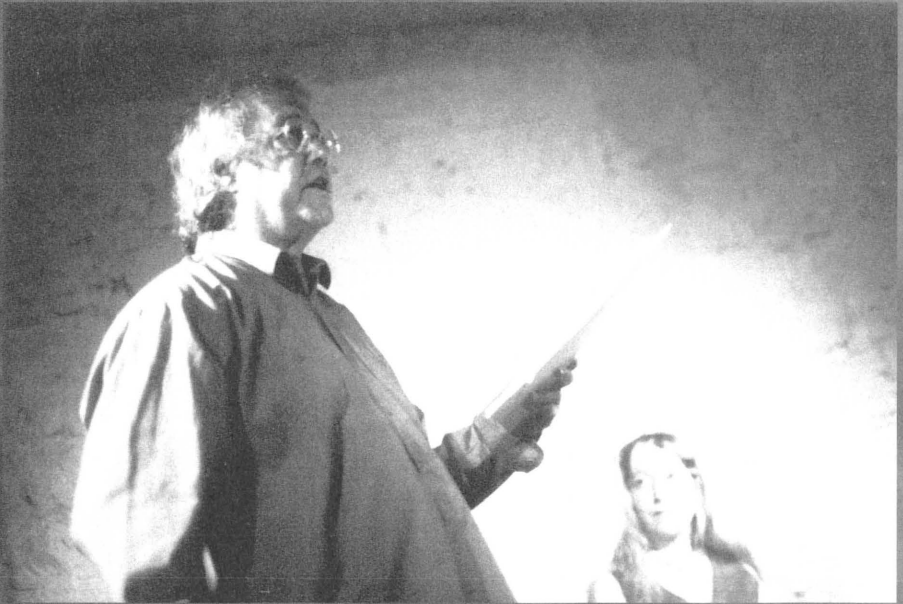
In June 1989 in the Artual Gallery of Barcelona, the “Concentració de Poesia Total” (Total Poetry Concentration) took place. Carles Hac Mor, a poet formed in conceptual art and member of the “Grup de Treball” during the 1970s, was one of the organizers. In an article of *El País* about the event, Hac 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 “Paraparèmies; 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.

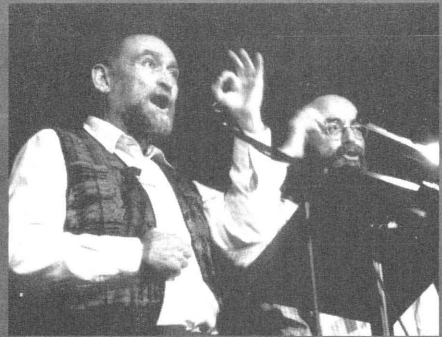


FIGURE 4  
Performance of Llorenç Barber and Bartomeu Ferrando.

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

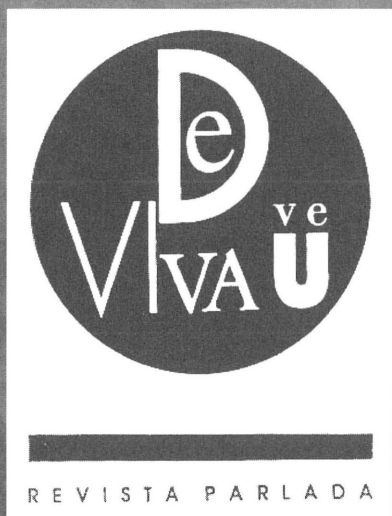


FIGURE 8  
Logotype for Revista Parlada.

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

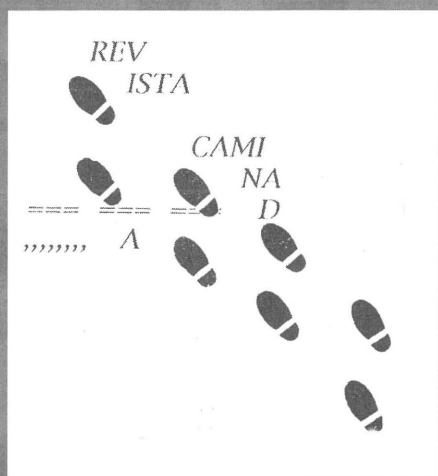


FIGURE 9  
Brochure detail for *Revista Caminada*.

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

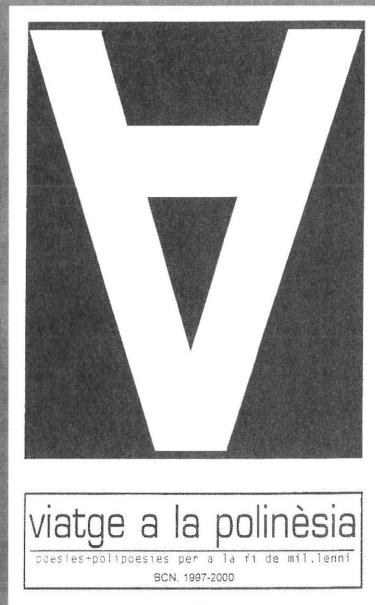


FIGURE 10  
Logotype for *Viatge a la Polinèsia*.

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

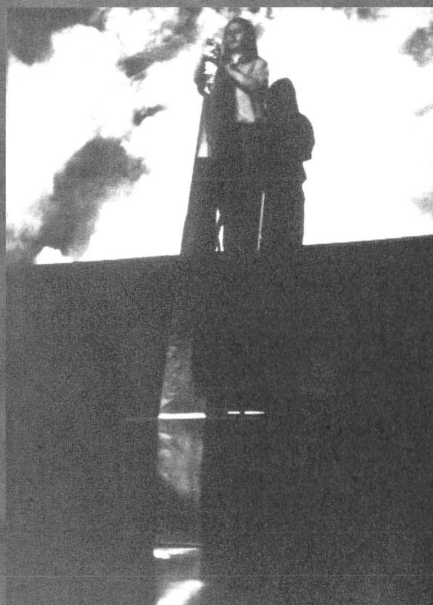


FIGURE 13  
Performance of Joan Casellas.

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.

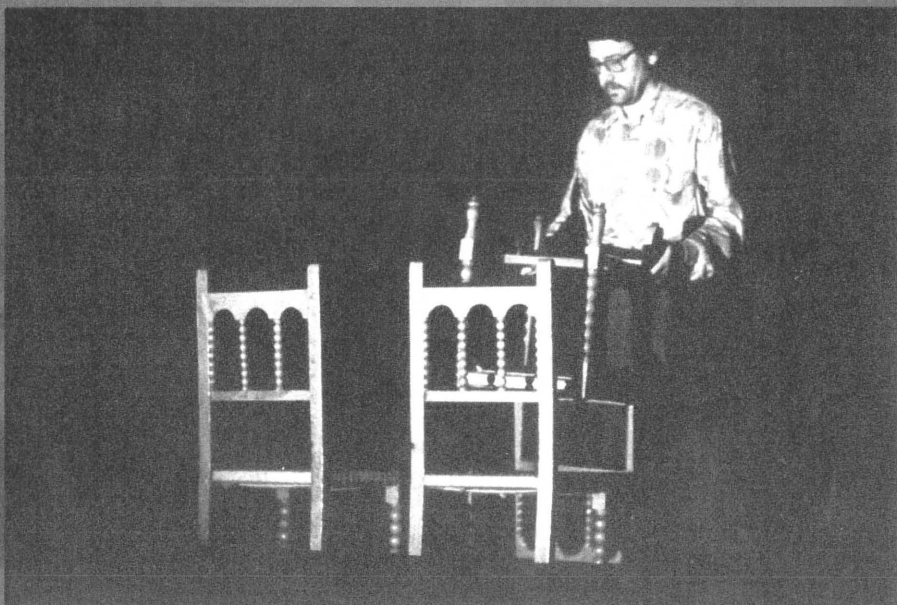


FIGURE 14  
Performance of Josep M. Calleja.

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.