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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.



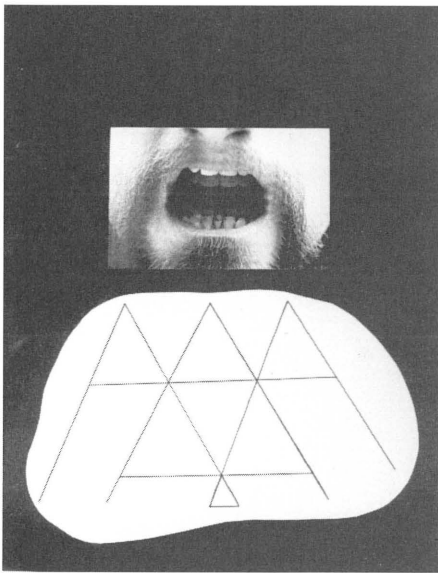


FIGURE 4  
Enzo Minarelli *L'Alfabeto*, sample page, 1979.

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

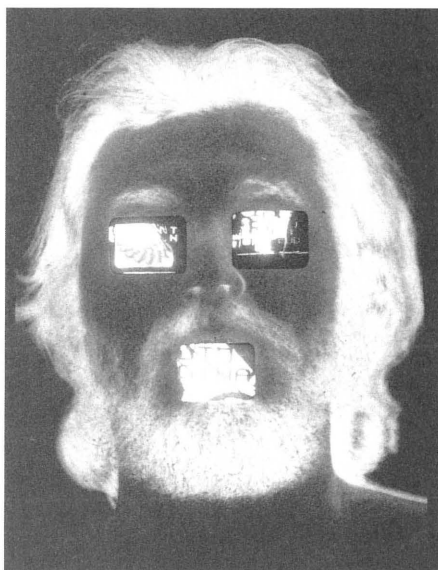


FIGURE 5  
Enzo Minarelli *Volto Pagina*,  
sound poetry video installation, 1985.

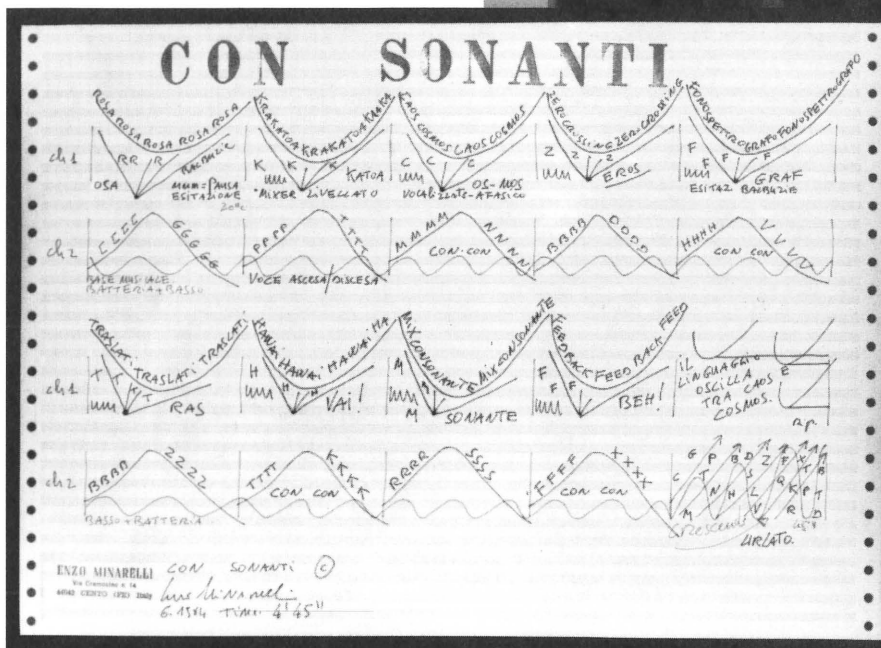


FIGURE 6 Enzo Minarelli's *Con Sonanti*, scores for sound poetry, 1984.

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





**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.



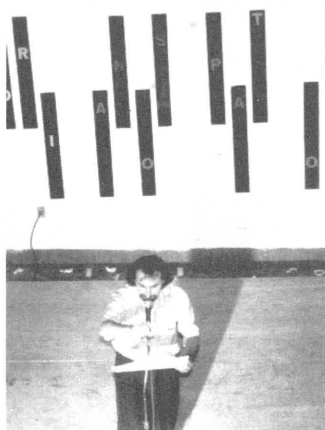
**FIGURE 10**  
Miroslaw Rajkowski, V Festival di Poesia Sonora di Bologna, San Martino Theatre, 1998.

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>

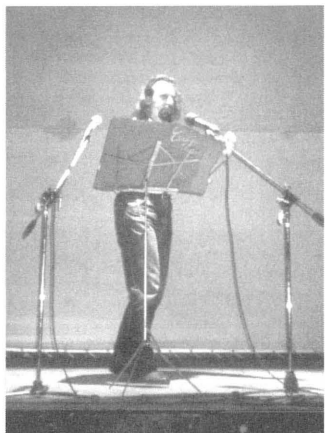
Focusing attention on videopoetry, the work is marked by highly professional materials and individuals. For example, there was the possibility of attending a workshop in February, 1998,

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.

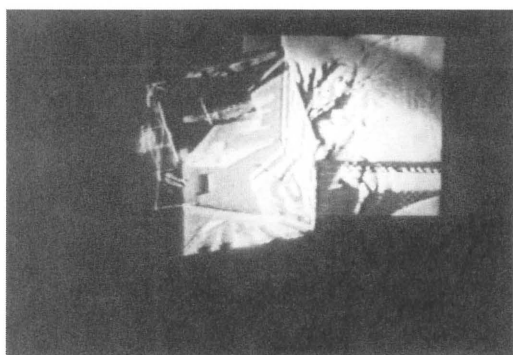
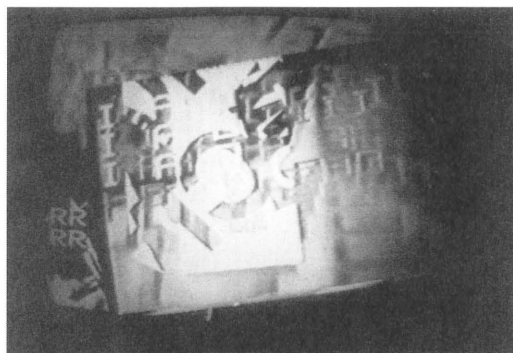


FIGURE 14+15  
Enzo Minarelli, *Volto Pagina*, videopoem, 1986.

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.