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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.¹ 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 Amirkhania 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.² 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.”³ 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.⁴ 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,”⁵ 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.”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.”⁸ 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....”⁹ 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*⁴⁰ 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 Prigogine⁴¹ 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. Manifest 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>
- 3 Zumthor, P. 1992. In Bologna, C. *Flatus vocis*. Bologna, Il Mulino, 9-12.
- 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.

•• 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.