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TEXT-SOUND ART:

A Survey

Richard Kostelanetz

(This is the first part of a two-part essay. The second section will appear in the Winter issue of PA)—Editors.)

I

The art is text-sound, as distinct from text-print and text-seen, which is to say that texts must be sounded and thus heard to be “read,” in contrast to those that must be printed and thus be seen. The art is text-sound, rather than sound-text, to acknowledge the initial presence of a text, which is subject to aural enhancements more typical of music. To be precise, it is by non-melodic auditory structures that language or verbal sounds are poetically charged with meanings or resonances they would not otherwise have. The most appropriate generic term for the initial materials would be “vocables,” which my dictionary defines as “a word regarded as a unit of sounds or letters rather than as a unit of meaning.” As text-sound is an intermedium located between language arts and musical arts, its creators include artists who initially established themselves as “writers,” “poets,” “composers,” and “painters”; in their text-sound works, they are, of course, functioning as text-sound artists. Many do word-image art (or “visual poetry”) as well, out of a commitment to exploring possibilities in literary intermedia.

The term “text-sound” characterizes language whose principal means of coherence is sound, rather than syntax or semantics—where the sounds made by comprehensible words create their own coherence apart from denotative meanings. A simple example would be this “tongue-twister” familiar from childhood:

If a Hottentot taught a Hottentot tot to talk 'ere the tot could totter, ought the Hottentot to be taught to say ought or naught or what ought to be taught 'er?

The subject of this ditty is clearly neither Hottentots nor pedagogy but the related sounds of "ot" and "ought," and what holds this series of words together is not the thought or the syntax but those two repeated sounds. It is those sounds that one primarily remembers after hearing this sentence read aloud. As in other text-sound art, this language is customarily recited in a voice that speaks, rather than sings. Thus, the vocal pitches are non-specific.

The first exclusionary distinction then is that words that have intentional pitches, or melodies, are not text-sound art but *song*. To put it differently, text-sound art may include recognizable words or phonetic fragments; but once musical pitches are introduced, or musical instruments are added (and once words are tailored to a pre-existing melody or rhythm), the results are music and are experienced as such. Secondly, text-sound art differs from "oral poetry," which is syntactically standard language written to be read aloud. These exclusions give the art a purist definition, I admit; but without these distinctions, there is no sure way of separating text-sound art, the true intermedium, from music on the one side and poetry on the other.

The firmest straddles I know are the records made by a changing group of New York blacks calling themselves "The Last Poets," whose lead voice chants incendiary lyrics to the accompaniment of pitched background voices and a rapid hand drum, which seems to influence verbal rhythm (rather than vice versa, to repeat a crucial distinction); and *Philomel* (1963), by Milton Babbitt and John Hollander, where the text is syntactically fragmented and aurally multiplied in ways typical of sound poetry, but the sounds in most of the work are specifically pitched, rather than unpitched.

"Text-sound" is preferable to "sound poetry," another term for this art, because I can think of work whose form and texture is closer to *fiction* or even essays, as traditionally defined, than poetry.

One issue separating work within the art would be whether the sounds are primarily recognizable words or phonetic units. Pieces with audible words usually have something to do with those words, which are meant to be perceived as certain words, rather than as other words. Poems without recognizable words are really closer to our experience of an unfamiliar (i.e., "foreign") language. An example is this passage from Armand Shwerner's *The Tablets* (1971):

min-na-ne-ne Dingir En-lil-ra mun-na-nib-gi-gi
uzu-mu-a-ki dur-an-ki-ge

Such words need not be "translated," because the acoustic experience of them is ideally as comprehensible to one culture as to another.

"Morse Code" is not text-sound art, even though it communicates comprehensible words to those who know its language; it is a code whose rhythm cannot be varied if communication is to be secure.

In my opinion, the better work in text-sound art emphasizes identifiable words, rather than phonemes; but it would be foolish, at this point, to establish blanket rules about the viability of this or that material.

One could also distinguish pieces which are performed live from those which can exist only on electronic recording tape; those which are multi-voiced (and thus usually canonical in form) from those which are uni-voiced; those which are texts composed exclusively of words from those which add scoring instructions; those which involve improvisation from those which can be repeated with perceptible precision.

Though superficially playful, text-sound art embodies serious thinking about the possibilities of vocal expression and communication; it represents not a substitute for language but an expansion of our verbal powers.

One major factor separating present work from past is the text-sound artist's increasing consciousness of the art's singularity and its particular traditions.

II

Though text-sound art is, in its consciousness of its singular self, a distinctly new phenomenon, it has roots in the various arts it encompasses. On one hand, it extends back to primitive chanting which, one suspects, was probably developed for worship ceremonies. One extension of this tradition is non-melodic religious declamation in which the same words are repeated over and over again, such as Hebrew prayers which are spoken so rapidly that an observer hears not distinct words but repeated sounds. (Harris Lenowitz calls them "speed mantras.") Modern text-sound art also reflects such folk arts as the U.S. tobacco auctioneer's spiel, the evangelical practice of "speaking in tongues," and *Ketjak: The Ramayana Monkey Chant*, in which several score Indonesian men rapidly chant in and out of the syllable "tjak." (This last, which is available on a Nonesuch record, is a masterpiece of the art.) To Charles Morrow, a contemporary practitioner, these folk text-sound arts exemplify "special languages for special communication." However, one critical difference between these precursors and contemporary practitioners is that the former do not consider themselves "artists."

In the history of modern music, text-sound art draws upon an eccentric vocal tradition, epitomized by Arnold Schoenberg's *Sprechgesang*, in which the singing voice touches a note but does not sustain the pitch in the course of enunciating the word. In practice, this technique minimizes the importance of musical tone (and, thus, of melody) and, by contrast, emphasizes the word. One measure of this shift in emphasis is the sense that language in *Sprechstimme* is usually easier to understand than that in music. This technique also appears in Chinese and Korean opera, which may have influenced Schoenberg, and in German cabaret singing, which probably did. Survivors of the latter include Ernst Toch's *Geographical Fugue* (1930), which is composed of place names spoken in overlapping rhythms; and the patter-song, in which words are spoken while instruments play melody in the background (e.g., in *My Fair Lady*, "I've grown accustomed to her face . . .").

In visual arts, text-sound work draws upon the development of abstraction, or non-representational art, and the initial figures in adapting this aesthetic idea to language were Wassily Kandinsky and Kurt

In "Zang-Tumb-Tu-Tumb" (1921), Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, initially a poet, invented onomatopoeia to portray the sounds of weapons and soldiers: "flic flak zing zing sciaaack hilarious whinnies iiiiii . . . pattering tinkling 3 Bulgarian battalions marching crooc-craaac . . ." Hugo Ball's most famous poem (1915):

gadji beri bimba
glandridi, lauli lonni cadori
gadjama bim beri glassala
glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim
blassa galassasa tuffm i mimbrabim . . .

meant to realize a universal language, exemplified the phonetic-unit poetry of such pioneer Dadaists as Raoul Hausmann and Richard Hulsenbeck.

In Russian literature just before the Revolution, Alexei Kruchenyk created a fictitious language, which he called *zaum* (a contraction of a longer phrase, *zaumnyj jazyk*, which can best be translated as "transrational"). Kruchenyk's most audacious manifesto declared, "The word is broader than its meaning." His colleague in Russian futurism, Velimir Klebnikov, by contrast, favored recognizable words for his non-syntactic poems, rationalizing that "the sound of the word is deeply related to its meaning." In the 1920s, the Frenchman Pierre Albert-Birot added footnotes to specify how his neologisms should be pronounced. He is also credited with the profound adage: "If anything can be said in prose, then poetry should be saved for saying nothing."

In American literature, the most prominent precursors are Vachel Lindsay, a troubador eccentric, whose most famous poem, "The Congo" (1914), emphasizes heavy alliteration and such refrains as "Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, boom"; and e.e. cummings, whose second poem in *Viva* (1931) begins:

oil tel duh woil doi sez
dooyuh unners tanmih eesez pullih nizmus tash, oi

In American prose, the preeminent precursor is, of course, Gertrude Stein, who wove prose tapestries based upon repetition, rather than syntax and semantics: "In saying what she said she said all she said and she said that she did say what she said when she was saying what she said, and she said that she said what she said in saying that she said and she was saying what she said when she said what she said." ("Two: Gertrude Stein and Her Brother," written 1910-1912). One successor to Stein, in post-WWII American literature, was Jack Kerouac, not in his most famous books, to be sure, but in short prose pieces like "Old Angel Midnight," which initially appeared in the opening issue of *Big Table* (1959).

Spat—he mat and tried & trickered on the step and oosteped and peppered it a bit with long mouth sizzle reaching for the thirsts of Azmec Parterial alk-lips to mox & bramajambi

babac up the Moon Citlapol—settle la tettle la pottle, la
lune—Some kind of—Bong!

What unifies this collection of semantically unrelated words is, of course, the repetition of sounds not only in adjacent words but over the paragraph; but one quality distinguishing Kerouac from Stein is that, at least to my ears, the former sounds more literary.

In English literature, the principal progenitor of contemporary work is, of course, James Joyce's polylingual, neologicistic masterpiece, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), which is, incidentally, like Stein's work, closer in form and tone to "prose" than "poetry."

III

One post-WWII development that had a radical effect on text-sound art was the common availability of both the sound amplifier and the tape recorder, and these two technologies together did more than anything else to separate "contemporary" endeavors from earlier "modern" work. That is, after 1955, a verbal artist, now equipped with sound-tuning equipment, could change the volume and texture of his microphone-assisted voice; he could eliminate his high frequencies or his lows, or accentuate them as well as adding reverberation. By varying his distance from the microphone and his angle of vocal attack, he could drastically change the timbre of his voice. With recording technology, the language artist could add present sound to past sound ("overdub"), thereby making a duet, if not a chorus, of himself. He could mix sounds, vary the speed of tape, or change the pitch of his voice. More important, he could also affix on tape a definitive audio interpretation of his own text. By expanding the range of audio experience, these new technologies also implicitly suggested ways of non-technological innovation. As Bob Cobbing judged, "Where the tape recorder leads, the human voice can follow."

Several Europeans now about fifty in age established themselves in the 1950s, each developing a characteristic style. Henri Chopin, a Frenchman presently living in England, records his own vocal phonetic sounds which are then subjected to several elementary tape manipulations, such as overdubbing and speed-changing, usually producing an abrasive aural experience that reminds me less of other text-sound art than John Cage's fifties music for David Tudor. Since Chopin starts not with a verbal text but with a limited range of specified vocables, and then electronically manipulates these initially vocal sounds in ways that disguise their human origins, his work is perceived as music, rather than as text-sound art—more precisely, as a "musique concrete" that uses only natural sounds. If only to acknowledge its author's professional origins in poetry, perhaps this might better be classified as "sound-text" or, as Chopin himself calls it, "poesie sonore" (poetic sound), as distinct from sound poetry.

Francois Dufrene, also a Parisian, is best known for is "cri-rhythms," which is his term for his art of extreme, hysterical human sounds (rhythmic cries). As Bob Cobbing describes them, these pieces "employ the utmost variety of utterances, extended cries, shrieks, ululations, purrs, yarrs, yaups and cluckings; the apparently uncontrollable con-

trolled into a spontaneously shaped performance." A piece like *Crirhythme pour Bob Cobbing* (1970)—the best of the several I have heard—sounds so extraordinary on first hearing that one can scarcely believe a single human being is producing such audio experience, even with the aid of microphones. Perhaps Dufrene's text-less art is really a species of vocal *theatre*, to introduce yet another categorical distinction.

Bernard Hiedsieck, also a Parisian, works, by contrast, with recognizable words, either spoken emphatically by himself, or collected on the street and off the radio. These words are edited into rapidly paced, rhythmically convulsive aural collages which not only join language with non-verbal noises but also combine linguistic materials not usually found together. His term for this work is "poesie action"; and several examples strike my ears as mixing a newscaster or other loud-speaker voice with a more intimate narrator (apparently Hiedsieck himself) against a background of miscellaneous noises. Though his works appear to satirize or editorialize about current events, their syntax is essentially collage, which, though once extremely fertile and also conducive to audiotape, has by now become hackneyed. Nonetheless, Hiedsieck's pieces are more charming than Chopin's or Dufrene's, as well as considerably richer in audio-linguistic texture. Of those I have heard, my favorite is *Carrefour de la Chaussee d'Antin* (1973).

Another member of the Parisian scene, the Englishman, Brion Gysin, favors linguistic permutations, as with *I Am That I Am*. All the possible combinations of these five words are then subjected to speeding, slowing and/or superimposition. The verbal text for this work appears in *Brion Gysin Let the Mice In* (1973), and the audio version, made at the BBC in 1959, is reproduced on the initial *Dial-A-Poem* record (1972). An intimidating audiovisual rendition of both the text and tape is included in my Camera Three-CBS television program, *Poetry To See & Poetry To Hear* (1974). *I Am That I Am* is one of the indisputable classics of text-sound art.

Among the other notable contemporary European text-sound artists are the Englishman Bob Cobbing; the Scotsman Edwin Morgan; the Belgian Paul de Vree; the Czech Ladislav Novak; the Frenchmen Gil J. Wolman and Jean-Louis Brau; the Austrian Ernst Jandl; several Swedes associated with Stockholm's Fylkingen group (including Bengt Emil Johnson, Sten Hanson, and Bengt af Klintberg); and the Germans Ferdinand Kriwet and Hans G. Helms. Kriwet has edited U.S. news broadcasts of both the 1969 moonshot and the 1972 American political campaigns into first-rate English-language audio collages; and Helms wrote *Fa:m' Aniesgwow* (1958), a pioneering book-record which resembles *Finnegans Wake* in realizing linguistic coherence without observing consistently the vocabulary of any particular language. More specifically, through attentiveness to the sound of language, Helms creates the illusion of a modern tongue:

Mike walked in on the : attense of Chjazzus as they sittith soft-
sipping sweet okaykes H-flowered, purrhushing 'eir
goofhearty offan-on-beats, holding moisturize'-palmy sticks

clad in clamp dresses of tissue d'arab, drinks in actionem
fellandi promoting protolingamations e state of nascendi;
completimented go!scene of hifibrow'n . . .

The most interesting of the others, in my experience, is Jandl, a Viennese high school teacher of English, who works exclusively in unaided live performance (the pre-WWII way), declaiming published phonetic texts, mostly in German but sometimes in English, which are usually inventive in form and witty in language. In New York, Spring 1972, he did an exceptional performance of a long poem, "Teufelsfalle," which also appears in his book, *Der Kunstliche Baum* (1970). "Beastiarim," the last piece on his record, *Laut und Luise* (1968), is a vocal tour-de-force. However, in part because of his anti-technological bias, Jandl's work seems to terminate a style, rather than suggest future developments.

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CODE: * = text ✓ = record or audiotape # = videotape

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