

"We have to preserve poetry's flow of oxygen, its ability to act as a mirror where anyone can see themselves..."

Bernard Heidsieck

Interviewed by W. Mark Sutherland

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W. Mark Sutherland: You began creating the *Poème-partition* in 1955, and by 1959 the tape recorder was your primary compositional and re-transmission tool. As one of the first artists to link literary experiments to technology, please elaborate on the early influences and reasons that guided this decision.

Bernard Heidsieck: In order to answer this question, we have to place ourselves back in the 1950s, which was a disastrous decade, at least in France, in terms of poetic creativity. We were seeing the last gasps of Surrealism, accompanied by a nauseating inflation of images and metaphors, as well as the appearance of the opposite, of *Poésie Blanche*, a word here, a word there, a word per page, etc. Poetry was in a ghetto, at a dead end, and no one was reading it. The poem, passive, at the very depth of the page, was waiting for a reader who had become increasingly hypothetical. In 1955, the publisher Seghers had just brought out a small book of mine called *Sitôt dit*, and I saw first hand what the circulation of poetry was: i.e. nil!

If we still believed in poetry at all something had to be done, which was overturn the order of the factors: from the *passive* that it was in, it had to be made *active*, that is, it had to be brought out of the paper and the book and projected into space, reconnected to society, *read* before an audience, to the public.

Therefore, in 1955, I made the difficult decision to radically change my way of writing. I titled these first texts *Poèmes-partitions*, in a clear reference to music, where a work, which exists as a score [*partition*], is not really itself, is not fully alive, until this score is performed. The same is true for me with poetry, insofar as the poem, set down on paper, like a simple score, supplies me with rhythms, intensities, paces, etc., and therefore only exists fully as a poem when it is recited aloud publicly.

During that time, I was enthusiastically attending the concerts of *Le Domaine Musical* that were organized by Boulez, and each time I discovered music that was all new and unexpected. At one of these concerts, when I first heard a work of electronic music, namely *Der Gesang Der Junglingen* by Stockhausen, where the music, without performers of course, was swirling in the room, I immediately said to myself: "This that we have to do with poetry, project the words into the space (obviously without being drowned out by the music!)."

The purchase of a tape recorder in 1959 was a turning point in this direction. I started first by recording all the *Poèmes-Partitions* ["Score-Poems"] that I had written since 1955

(which allowed me to find my voice, to learn to “read”, and to learn this new practice). Of course tape recorders at the time were very basic, mono and did not allow for much. But in 1961 I realized that it was possible to make changes on the recorded track with scissors (for example, to speed up a text by editing out the breaths, etc.), making collages by introducing exterior elements into the text, and so on and so forth ... until I bought a new tape recorder, a Revox A700, the Rolls Royce of tape recorders, which was a small factory in itself and made many things possible.

That was what was going on at the end of the 1950s and why things happened as they did.

However, I want be clear that I was not the only one to take this turn. Indeed, there were four of us in Paris who, without knowing one another, were using tape recorders in the 1950s to “make” poetry, namely François Dufrêne, the first, from 1953 on, and then in 1959, Henri Chopin, Brion Gysin and myself.

WMS: Please elaborate on the differences and similarities between the *Poème-partition* (1955-65), *Biopsies* (1965-69), *Passe-partout* (1969-80), and *Derviche/Le Robert* (1978-86) and how each of these stylistic developments are circumscribed by your definition of *Poésie Action*.

BH: I have explained above the reason behind the term *Poème-Partition*. In medicine, as we know, a *Biopsie* is the act of taking tissue samples to examine the constituents, and thus possibly the virus, etc. In the second half of the 1960s I created a whole series of poems, which were often short, by lifting out elements not from the human body but from the body of society. Sometimes these were types of “*Poèmes Trouvés*” [Found Poems], found around me, in the economic, administrative, or social spheres (professionally, I was the Assistant Director of a major bank). This world was a mine of information, commonplace or routine, and sometimes fascinating in its stupidity, its impact, its role, its playfulness, its effectiveness, and its usefulness. I have often written that I wanted to make *Poèmes Serpillières* [Mop Poems], *Poèmes Attrape-Tout* [Catch-All Poems], and *Poèmes Caniveaux* [Gutter Poems] to try and distill the commonplace, the ordinary and the meaninglessness, which form the fabric of everyday life that each one of us experiences.

In 1969, I changed the term *biopsie* to *passe-partout*, very simply because *Biopsie 13* was dedicated to a very good friend – the poem in question was *Portrait-pétales* – when he died, while he was learning to fly, with his instructor in a small plane, over the Atlantic near Dakar. I did not want him to be just a number in a series. Therefore, I substituted the term *passe-partout* for the word *biopsie*. This suited my purposes since a *passe-partout* is a key that opens any door (this function thus connects somewhat, indirectly, with the notion of *biopsie*/biopsy).

Moreover, the word *passe-partout* implies anything neutral, undifferentiated, without individual characteristics, which fits in with the commonplace, and dovetails, as previously indicated, with anything and everything, with the gutter.

After that came the series *Canal Street* (35 poems), about communication, *Derviche/Le Robert* (26 poems corresponding to the 26 letters of our alphabet, each poem being constructed from the first ten words of the *Grand Dictionnaire Le Robert* dictionary whose meaning I did not know) and finally, *Respirations et Brèves Rencontres* [Breaths and Brief Encounters] (60 poems, i.e. 60 fictional meetings with poets or writers, all deceased, whose actual and authentic breathing we hear in the recordings, while I am briefly speaking to them).

I said at the beginning of this interview that I had wanted to make the poem “active”, by taking it out of the book, by in some way “standing it upright”, in space, facing the audience (which is not to say that the poem must necessarily be recited standing “upright”, it could be recited on bended knees, seated, while walking, ...). The “spoken” poem may involve an “action” but that action should be minimal. Action, in reality, consists in physically absorbing the text and in projecting it into the space, towards the others, breathing into it the energy that is essential for enabling it to reach and captivate the audience.

WMS: Unlike many of your sound-poetry contemporaries from the 50's, 60's and 70's, I believe that your creative practice (sound poetry) is not Dada dependant. Would you agree?

BH: I agree. Totally. But!

First, you know that André Breton and Surrealism deliberately obscured Dada, which meant that it did not really begin to reappear until the 1970s, with a small exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne, in Paris, with articles in magazines, the reprinting of manifestos, etc.

So this was like reuniting with parents who had been far away, with whom one feels the joy of “reunion”, an instant affinity and understanding. Indeed, we find that their practice of poetry, 50 years before us, was similar to the one that we were striving to establish, to reinvent, after a fashion, without knowing it, namely, that of presenting the poem live, trying it out, physically, concretely, at a specific point in time, to an audience, and thus to society. That being said, the historical conditions were not at all the same. Indeed, if Dada sprang up in a country that was neutral, in Zurich in 1917, it was with a spirit to rail against the carnage and horror that was raging in Europe, all around Switzerland, and thus against the rationalist mindset that gave rise to, permitted and did not oppose this state of affairs, this massacre. It was in this spirit, and it was for this reason that Dada insulted his audience, offended it, to jolt it awake. As for us, we were not at all in similar historical conditions. We had no reason to insult our audience. On the contrary, instead, what we wanted to say to it was: “We are all in the same boat, I have no solution, here is one that I am suggesting to you, do with it as you will.” Similarly, when Dada presented simultaneous texts on stage, it was to say that everything has the same value, that nothing has any importance, that a text can be recited by one or two or three or four people at the same time, and that it is of no importance, for us – and for myself, having widely

practiced simultaneity, using a tape recorder – it was not at all in the same spirit, but rather out of a desire to try, using technology, to highlight the simultaneity of sensations, ideas and challenges that we experience in our daily lives.

WMS: The accumulation and negation of semantic values through the use of repetition, ellipsis, nonsequiturs, exclamations, etc. punctuated by sonic ruptures and interruptions create the rhythmic structure in both your recorded work and in your live performances. Do you improvise in live performance or is your live performance always based on maintaining the integrity of the text?

BH: Is there any improvisation in my live performances? None. Often I superimpose my own live voice with the microphone over the same (or another) text, pre-recorded on the tape, which passes through the speakers into the room where I am reading at the same time, and gives me, if I wish it, at that moment, the possibility of departing somewhat from the pre-recorded text, thus doubling in duration and in space the impact of the words.

WMS: Throughout your career you created visual poetry and edited many visual poetry anthologies. What is the relationship between visual poetry to sound poetry and action poetry?

BH: My *Écritures/Collages*, which were produced, often in series, from the 1970s onwards, belonged, in parallel or in complement, to the path of my *Poésie Action* since 1955. Indeed, there is a close symbiosis between my *Poèmes-partitions*, *Biopsies*, *Passe-partout* and other sound pieces, and these *Écritures* [writing] panels to which are added “Collages” of various origins.

The first series was the one of *Cent foules d’octobre 1970*. The challenge was to produce, in one month, 100 panels of writing relating to photographs of crowds. Given the time limit that I had set myself for this work, it was ultra fast, quasi-automatic writing that was inscribed in the speech bubbles popping up from one or another of the people featured in these photographs of crowds. It so happens that my recorded poems abound with the sounds of crowds.

The following year saw the creation of *40 Machines à mots*. As a banker responsible for, among other things, the machine tools sector, I used photographs of machines, from professional magazines, and made them cough up words. Many pieces in my recorded texts sound as if they are delivered by robots.

Walking on Canal Street in New York in 1974, I bought a whole series of old integrated circuits for a handful of change, with the idea of using them upon my return to France, to produce a series of *Écritures/Collages*. I made 50 panels, revolving around the general theme of communication, because of the function of these integrated circuits, their origin, Canal Street being an important communications artery in lower New York I also introduced magnetic tape, my working tool, onto these panels. Once completed, these 50 panels ended up at the bottom of a large trunk. Two years later in July 1976, after buying

a Revox, I took out my 50 panels again, to make a recording of their texts, which were actually summarized in 35 sound poems that were each recorded in a different way. *Canal Street* was released as a boxed set of 3 vinyl LPs, and later as a book published by Al Dante, which included 2 CDs.

In 1989 and 1990 successively, two printings of *Circuits integers* were published by Francesco Conz, in Verona, Italy, and then in 2006, 19 panels, *Ici Radio Verona* [*Radio Verona*] made out of radio tubes from old radio stations, and in 2007, 8 panels, along the same lines, called *Radio Valescure*.

To complete this sketch of my work on *Écritures/Collages*, I will cite *Mon Frigo a rendu l'âme*, 23 panels produced in 2002, panels for the limited editions of my books by different publishers, and lastly, starting in 2004, the production of 6 different *Abécédaires*, each of which consist of 26 panels.

WMS: It was an honour, privilege, and pleasure to have been given the opportunity to exhibit my visual/sound poetry alongside your *Abécédaires* series in the recent exhibition *Poetische Positionen II* at the Kasseler Kunstverein in Kassel, Germany. Tell me more about these delightfully beautiful visual-poems. How were they created?

BH: In the catalogue for the exhibition “*L’un pour l’autre, les écrivains dessinent*” which is currently being held at the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine, near Caen, Jean-Jacques Lebel, the curator, writes about my *Écritures/Collages*: “This term reflects the hybrid nature of Heidsieck’s activities, which are simultaneously sound (he has presented 540 public readings of his texts in about twenty countries), writing, physical and plastic, where the recorded magnetic tapes are used not only as sound material but also as visual material and constituent elements of the collage.”

These *Abécédaires* [Alphabet series] are composed of letters, of course, but also often of fragments of magnetic tape. Each one of them, a true stylistic exercise that has to be resolved / analyzed / unfurled, should be different than the others, and each Letter must be distinct from the others in the same series, while preserving the style and the spirit of the *Abécédaire* of which it is a part.

Thus these *Abécédaires* do not ultimately have significance other than that of the very nature of their abstraction and only find their fragile existence definitively in the variety of the play that sets them in place, its desired tension, its variety and, we hope, its fantasy.

WMS: As one of the first artists to create technologically driven literary-experiments in the late 20th century, what does the future of innovative visual and sound poetry look like in the 21st century?

BH: I am not a prophet and I try to stay away from predicting what could happen with respect to poetry in this new century, which is already rich in continuous and rapid innovation.

Still, one observation: pervasive computing must be exorcised, and in order to achieve this, penetrated by poetry. There are already efforts in this direction. Embryonic. Sometimes successful, sometimes disappointing. But we have to give it time and above all remain optimistic. It is an exciting challenge. We must keep at it constantly.

One hope, however: it is crucial that technology be controlled. It should not be about being consumed by it, using it merely for the sake of using it. It is critical that we know what to do with it and why we are using it. It should be used as a simple tool, because it is appropriate, whose purpose is to facilitate highlighting the subject that we want to address, develop and raise awareness of. Simply in order to better reveal its relevance. It is important that this technology, current or future, does not plunge poetry back into a new ghetto, accessible only to a small elite, a ghetto from which we have succeeded, I believe, and not without difficulty, in extracting it, in order to put it out in the open, without false modesty, upright, to enable it to be displayed, to be recognized and accepted as it is. That it not be monopolized again, in rarity, by a few specialists, at the risk of becoming a kind of new scholasticism of the 21st century, unknown and dead to all. We have to preserve poetry's flow of oxygen, its ability to act as a mirror where anyone can see themselves, and remain familiar and present for everyone, regardless of the degree of technology that it thinks or will think it should incorporate. The risk exists. It is there. It is there. I know it well. It is knocking at the door.

Beware!

Bernard Heidsieck is a French poet, artist, performer, and essayist. He pioneered a new form of sound-poetry through the use of 20th century recording technology and proposed the poetics of *Poésie Action*.

W. Mark Sutherland (wmarksutherland.com) is a Canadian intermedia artist. He shared the stage with Bernard Heidsieck at Viatage a la Polinesia Sound-Poetry Festival (Barcelona, Spain, 1999). He has exhibited with Heidsieck in Poesia Totale (Mantova, Italy, 1998), Ad Libitum (La Spezia, Italy, 2003), and Poetische Positionen II (Kassel, Germany, 2006).

Interview translation by **Noa Lior**