

SoundVision/VisionSound III

SoundVision/VisionSound III is the third in a series of exhibitions of Verbo-Visual Poetry, Performance, and Artwork that I have curated. The first two occurred in Buffalo, NY in the mid-1990's. SV/VS I was held at Anya Lewin's gallery *Cornershop*, and the second, SV/VS II, was held at my off and on space *Plan 9*. This exhibition brings together verbo-visual work that, by and large, has been produced since 2000 in an effort to investigate where—and in what modes—contemporary practitioners are exploring the conjunction between language, visuality, sound, and performance.

Verbo-visual artwork exists in the interstices. It is not really claimed by any of its aesthetic parents (Poetry and the Literary Arts, Music, the Visual Arts, and Performance). It is an intermedial practice, one that borrows from and exists along side many other more well recognized practices. It occupies the nexus of and edges into—two dimensional visual art and all of its instantiations, three dimensional visual art and sculpture, music, poetry, installation and environmental art, and performance and dance. Yet, to the aesthetic establishment it is at best the poor, red-haired stepchild of any of these areas of artistic endeavor, conveniently discounted and ignored

The term “verbo-visual” was coined by the poet Ezra Pound ([padin1.jpg](#), Clemente Padin's piece called “Noigandres,” a simultaneous nod to Pound and the Noigandres Group) to talk about poetry that worked visually for the eye as well as rhythmically and acoustically for the ear. Since the first half of the 20th Century when Pound started talking about this kind of work, not only has the term come to encompass a much wider range of undertakings, but the possibilities for the production of art, music, and poetry have multiplied as well. What the term has come to mean for contemporary practitioners is a kind of practice that explores relationships centered around how we experience of language aesthetically. We experience it visually—through reading and seeing letter forms, acoustically—through hearing things read and participating in conversations, and intellectually—through our thoughts and internal discourses.

Some months ago I asked Michael Basinski (<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/basinski/>) to produce a piece for the announcement card for this show, and he came up with the piece that you can see here, “SoundVision/VisionSound III” ([Basinski1.jpg](#)). One of the things that people first said to me about the image was “Don't you think he spelled ‘gallery’ wrong there?” This then in some ways is a very good introduction to what verbo-visual work is doing. What Basinski is doing here with his mis-spelled words and differently shaped letters, is playing with both his and our experience of language. The oddly shaped “e” in “Gallery” at the top left corner of the piece ([Basinski2.jpg](#)) is what Basinski calls one of his “letters of the night” in that they work differently than our regular alphabet; they work in a different light, a light that frees the letters from the rules of normative language (spelling grammar, punctuation, pronunciation, order, etc.) (Basinski, Basinski and Howe 7). In the detail we can see not only that he is playing with the shapes of letters (the “e” as well as the “y”) but with the surface of the piece, consciously collaging pieces of paper both as elements of the visual character of the piece and of the physical texture of the piece. The “e” in particular looks as if he has pasted in a piece of paper only to add a “mistake” on top of it. These mistakes are nothing of the sort, rather they are places where practitioners are aesthetically exploring language's visual medium, much like the abstract expressionist painters of the mid-20th Century were exploring the aesthetic, visual medium of paint on a surface.

Looking at a piece from John M. Bennett's (<http://www.johnmbennett.net/>) series *CLEEN* ([bennett1.jpg](#)) we can see a similar investigation of letter form and textuality with a marked echoing of a medieval illustrated manuscript. The visual element of this practice has its roots in the visual poetry of Apollinaire (<http://www.ubu.com/historical/app/app.html>), the concrete poetry explorations of the Noigandres Group of Brazil (this is a useful link explaining what the group was written by Clemente Padin, one of our artists <http://www.concentric.net/~lndb/padin/lcpconc.htm>), and the various concrete poets of Europe and the UK (a useful resource is Mary Ellen Solt's essay on World Concrete Poetry, <http://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/>). Infused into this mix is a healthy dose of the irreverence and game playing of the Fluxus art movement and the un-fettered imagination of pataphysics (the science of imaginary solutions to made up problems).

But there is more going on here than just meets the eye. The letters of the night for Basinski represent a way for “the things that are not definable” to come in to the work, for sound and movement to come into a work and “if you don't allow for that you lose levels of the matrix and since . . . and since all of it is vast you are cutting down on possibilities” (Basinski, Basinski and Howe 13). Many of the pieces in this exhibition are texts that are meant to be performed, and they are coming from a tradition of textual sound experimentation stretching back to Lewis Carroll on the one hand and the Dadaist experiments of practitioners like Hugo Ball (<http://www.ubu.com/sound/ball.html>) and Raoul Hausmann (<http://www.ubu.com/sound/hausmann.html>) on the other. Sound poetry, as this form of work came to be known, had its hey day in the late sixties and early seventies with performance groups like The Four Horsemen (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/horsemen/>) from Canada or Konkrete Canticle (<http://www.ubu.com/sound/konkrete.html>) from the UK. One avenue that sound poetry took was almost completely absorbed by new music and electronica, in that sound poets like Henry Chopin (<http://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/>) began working with magnetic tape recording and manipulating their voice and composing their works using recorded effects rather than attempting to produce the work orally. This kind of endeavor dropped the printed/visual element of poetry almost entirely, concentrating instead on the acoustic text as such, as music.

The visual pieces in this show represent where the other path of sound poetry has lead. These pieces work in many ways like LaMonte Young's short scores which Fluxus artists quickly appropriated. The texts have their own internal rules and logic, creating a pataphysical reality imagined by the artist. A piece that makes this somewhat more clear is Scott Helmes' (<http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/helm-a0.htm>) “alphabet haiku for 3 voices” ([Helmes1.jpg](#)). In the piece there are three colored paths across and through the alphabetic background—red, blue, and black—creating a kind of score. These colored lines are the paths for the three voices to take through the letter-field, and thus visually representing the movement of the piece. Presumably, for performance, Helmes would suggest to the performers at what end to begin and an idea for the duration of the piece.

Other pieces, like Amy Sara Carroll's “All things return to Ithaca” ([Carroll1.jpg](#)) or Things Not Worth Keeping's (TNWK's) “bury is a four letter word (edit)” ([TNWK1.jpg](#)) are performances in and of themselves. Through the use of visually rendered language, they transform our everyday environment into

a landscape of difference. Carroll's "EM-BARK" at once suggests a journey's start and its end in the woods of Ithaca while simultaneously pointing out the absurdities of language itself. TNWK's quotidian English street scene has been radically transformed by the digital insertion of the typography and diamond plate texture onto the roadside rubbish bin, and thereby visually closing the opening of the bin by floating "ANAL" across it (you can just see the head and shoulders of one of the artists, cris cheek (<http://www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc/poets/cheek.htm>), behind the "N"). Like many of their pieces, this comments on the nature of disposable culture and what is and what's not worth keeping.

jUStin!katKO's playing with the genre of the artist statement ([katKO1.jpg](#)) in many ways encapsulates the work of this exhibition: it blurs the boundaries between art and critical thinking, between language and art, between art and identity. But there is a consequence to this kind of cross generic, intermedial play. Without the convenient categories of genre to discuss and interpret the work, such a piece runs the risk of remaining opaque to audiences and critics alike. Poets and musicians are made uncomfortable by the work's reliance on the visual. Visual artists and visual critics are made uncomfortable by the work's reliance upon language and sound. And as a consequence the work is claimed, much less championed by none of these groups. Yet, it remains an avant garde practice worth experiencing, and it is my hope that through this exhibition and the scheduled performances by many of the represented artists (link here to the performance schedule, I have included an initial one, but it will need to be updated fairly soon) that we can come to a kind of understanding of Verbo-Visual work.

William R. Howe
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Somerville, MA

Works Cited

Basinski, Michael, Natalie Basinski, and William R. Howe. *Thoth Says: Reading Talking & Talking Reading with Natalie & Michael Basinski: An Examined Conversation*. Lubbock, Texas: Crapper Editions, 1999.