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*Claudia Benthien &  
Wiebke Vorrath*

## **German sound poetry from the neo-avant-garde to the digital age**

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## Abstract

*This article gives insight into German-language sound poetry since the 1950s. The first section provides a brief historical introduction to the inventions of and theoretical reflections on sound poetry within the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century. The second section presents works by Ernst Jandl and Gerhard Rühm as examples of verbal poetry of the post-war neo-avant-garde. The following two sections investigate contemporary sound poetry relating to avant-garde achievements. Section three deals with two examples that may be classified as sound poetry in a broader sense: Thomas Kling's poem broaches the issue of sound in its content and vocal performance, and Albert Ostermaier's work offers an example of verbal poetry featured with music. The fourth section presents recent sound poetry by Nora Gomringer, Elke Schipper and Jörg Piringer, which are more distinctive examples relating to avant-garde poetry genres and use recording devices experimentally.*

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## Introduction

The article will investigate different periods and types of German-language sound poetry from the post-war era to the present. It is intended as an overview with several short close-readings of different sound-poetic works. To start with a working definition: 'Our understanding of sound poetry is a poetic work that renounces the word as a bearer of meaning and creates aesthetic structures (sound poems, sound texts) by methodologically adding and composing sounds (series or groups of sounds) driven by their own laws and subjective intentions of expression, and which requires an acoustic realization on behalf of the poet' (Scholz, 1992, p. 63). This definition emphasises how sound poetry *strictu sensu* only exists in its recited, acoustically realised form, and not as written text (cf. Schmitz-Emans, 1997, p. 132). Poetry written for performance and therefore containing cues to its vocal realisation can be denoted 'audioliteral writing' (Jäger, 2014, p. 235). Sound poetry is considered a 'performance intermedium' where 'sound for its own sake becomes the principle expressive medium, sometimes even at the expense of lexical sense' (Higgins, 1993, p. 1182). Taking this into account, the German intermedia artist Ferdinand Kriwet has remarked that sound poems 'do not describe actions but are themselves acts of speaking'. He argues that their performance 'is bound to the moment, a one-time occurrence, and a realization that cannot be repeated', and this is why speech texts 'are not able to be reproduced'. The speaker becomes both the 'interpreter' and the 'composer' (Kriwet, 1970, p. 44). As the speaker and the author of the text are the same person, it is useful to mark this double role, characteristic of sound poetry, with a specific term, as Julia Novak has suggested with her notion of the 'poet-performer' (Novak, 2011, p. 62).

A basic feature of sound poetry is its foregrounding of the phonetic dimension of speech instead of its semantic and syntactic values (cf. Scheffer, 2003, p. 383). However, meaning is usually not neglected altogether – in practice, it is more about an aesthetic tension or shift between materiality and meaning: ‘Where sound poetry begins to appear as a genre in its own right and name, it is not conceived as an “actual” return to a primary, pre-linguistic stage [...]. Rather, it constitutes itself as the secondary poetic *reflection* on an empirical origin in which the contours of human speech arise’ (Wilke, 2013, p. 665; emphasis in original). Apart from the fact that sound poetry often transcends the syntactic and semantic relation of ‘natural’ languages, the counter-criterion still applies – that it must fulfil the formal requirements of a poem: brevity and verse with a possible rhyme, metre and stanza (cf. Kemper, 1974, p. 150).

Contrary to the German usage of the term *Lautdichtung* the English equivalent ‘sound poetry’ seems to cover, in general, a somewhat larger spectrum of acoustic poetry types. Whereas the German term is more closely associated with extreme variants of experimental poetry that overcomes words and sentence structures altogether – and therefore fundamentally provokes and questions understandability – the English term also incorporates forms of acoustic poetry that still rely on grammar and conventionalised meaning. To take this into account, both notions of sound poetry – the stricter and the broader – will be combined here, based on the assumption that acoustic poetry, due to its foregrounding of linguistic material, often invokes alienation and estrangement, even though the poems are based on established languages. Among other things, the brief presentations of artists and works below will focus on the following aspects and characteristics of sound poetry: a tension between materiality and meaning, estrangement as an aesthetic device, iteration of linguistic features, rhythm as a constructive factor and significant differences between the oral performance and the printed text.

## 1. Sound poetry: A historical and theoretical overview

The historical avant-gardes (cf. Bürger, 1984, pp. 15-20; Keith, 2005, p. 21f.) developed literary devices that accentuated the materiality of language, and this greatly influenced neo-avant-garde art movements after World War II, such as Fluxus, concrete poetry, Beat literature as well as the later Spoken Word Movement. Although some predecessors do exist – e.g. the sound ‘painting’ and sound symbolism of the German Baroque, especially the so-called *Pegnitz-Schäfer* of Nuremberg (cf. Scholz, 1992, p. 67; Ernst, 2002, p. 273), the writing of pure sound texts that downplay the roles of meaning and grammar is largely a 20th-century phenomenon. Sound poetry was explored by the Italian and Russian Futurists (cf. Ziegler, 1984, p. 359) and Swiss-German Dada Movement (cf. Scholz, 1992, p. 64) and was theorised by the

Russian Formalist critics in the early 20th century, mainly with reference to Russian Futurism. In Russian Futurism sound poetry gained prominence within the poetic concept of *zaum*. This term, coined by the poet Alexej Kručěnych, 'designated a special tongue that defied the rules of common sense: transrational language' (Steiner, 1984, p. 144). As a neologism, *zaum* covers several notions such as 'something non-understandable', 'nonsense', 'something that transcends the logical and clear' or 'something deliberately complicated' (cf. Ziegler, 1984, p. 358). 'Transrational language' focusses on the acoustic dimension of literature: 'in *zaum* sound always is greater than meaning' (Steiner, 1984, p. 145). Several grammatical or structural techniques are dominant in *zaum* texts, such as syntactic collision, neologism, word-like composition, disintegration of and into phonemes as well as sound series containing individual sounds that are difficult to articulate, irregular or even unfamiliar (cf. Hansen-Löve, 1978, p. 102; Ziegler, 1984, pp. 360-361). The oral presentation of *zaum* by the poet must be highly expressive. It exposes the phonetic dimension, and this 'act of making conscious the "material" side of the speech act' provokes a 'primary A-effect [alienation effect] in the exposure of the new sighting of a [formerly] mechanical linguistic equipment' (Hansen-Löve, 1978, p. 108).

Formalist and Structuralist scholars often apply the opposition between 'standard' and 'poetic' language in their arguments (cf. Mukařovský, 2007), the former being considered a 'means of communication', the latter a 'language as a self-valuable end' (Steiner, 1984, p. 149). This dualism also applies to the opposition of meaning and sound, for example when the Formalist Lev Jakubinskij claimed that 'in practical language, the semantic aspect of the word (its meaning) is more prominent than its sound aspect [,] details of pronunciation reach our consciousness only if they serve to differentiate the meanings of words [...]. Thus, [...] in practical language, sounds do not attract our attention. It is the other way around in verse language. There, one can claim that sounds enter the bright field of consciousness and do attract our attention' (Jakubinskij in: Steiner, 1984, p. 149f.; emphasis in original). Peter Steiner has remarked that the 'interest in the articulatory aspect of language' shared by the Formalists 'was most likely triggered by the rise of *Ohrenphilologie*' ('philology of the ear'), a concept founded by the German literary scholar Eduard Sievers, his pupil Franz Saran and others: 'In contrast to traditional *Augenphilologie* ["philology of the eye"] which analyzed the text primarily as a visual or graphic manifestation, Sievers' "aural philology" emphasized the acoustic aspect of the text' (Steiner, 1984, p. 160; emphasis in original). As a medievalist, Sievers mostly analysed written texts and tried to decipher the inherent orality (rhythm and performance technique) of a given poet. Even though his 'philology of the ear' emphasised sound, it remained for the most part silent and visual. Nevertheless, his research in the early 20th century corresponds well to the newly awakened interest in oral poetry, which is now considered a counter-reaction to the dominant print and book culture.

The oral performance of texts in front of an audience was also a central element of Dada aesthetics – here the articulatory dimension of the live performance was constitutive, programmatic and highly provocative. Hugo Ball's poetry, for instance, 'stages, even in its written form, a successive foregrounding of the acoustic dimension of its "object." In doing so, it inscribes into the process of textual composition the primacy of the spoken word' (Wilke, 2013, p. 642). For and as a result of their stage performances, the Dadaists experimented with and developed different sub-genres of sound poetry – or 'phonetic poetry' (Scheffer, 1978, pp. 224-239) – among them the 'bruitist poem' and the 'simultaneous poem'.

The bruitist poem was invented by the Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck. In its aesthetic results it does not differ much from the Futurist *zaum'* poem, though based on a different concept. Italian Futurism developed the avant-garde notion of *bruitism* (originating from the French word *bruit* for 'noise'), where conceptual and contingent 'noise art' was given the same value as sound produced by musical instruments. Contrary to *zaum'*, the bruitist poem also works with acoustic representation and imitation of noise, sibilance and rhythmic combinations of syllables resembling exotic foreign languages (cf. Szymanska, 2009, pp. 45-46). In general, onomatopoeics and sound symbolism were highly relevant to German-speaking poetry and had an impact on Dada poetics (cf. Kemper, 1974, pp. 153-162). The semantic value of the sounds creates, as it were, a 'physical' relation to reality.

The simultaneous poem is a subgenre explored, among others, by Hugo Ball and Kurt Schwitters (the latter wrote and co-performed a sound poem of the same name: 'Simultangedicht', 1919). This is an experimental poetic text read or spoken in different 'sound tracks' or even in different languages at the same time, with the individual rhythm and tonality of the speakers and the languages used (cf. Scheffer, 1978, p. 230), creating an aesthetics of dissonance and chaos: 'The "Poème simultan" is about the value of the voice. [...]. The background is constituted by noise: the inarticulated, the fatal and the determining. [...] A typical reduction demonstrates the conflict between the vox humana and a threatening, entrapping and destructive world, whose tact and noise progression are inescapable' (Ball in: Szymanska, 2009, p. 47).

In Dada sound poetry fulfils the programmatic functions of the renewal and de-automatisation of poetic language. Onomatopoeics and sound symbolism are often used to the extreme, for example in Hugo Ball's famous sound poems 'Karawane' ('Caravan') and 'Wolken' ('Clouds'), both from 1916. In these 'poems without words' (Ball, 1996, p. 70), the poet uses the titles to open up an 'imaginary space', 'which the following sounds relate to and which they should recall' (Kemper, 1974, p. 165). For instance, with lines like 'wulubu ssubudu uluw ssubudu | tumba ba- umf | kusa-gauma | ba – umf' (Ball, 2007, p. 68), Ball seems to evoke the sounds of a caravan and 'images of surging and stamping, of dust and desert, of animals (elephants) and their drovers' (Kemper, 1974, p. 165), and he therefore uses compositional techniques

close to onomatopoeics, even if the concrete syllables and words are completely imaginary. Accordingly, Dada sound poetry may ‘simulate an unspent state of language’ without, however, being able to reach it (Kemper, 1974, p. 238).

To summarise, early 20th-century sound poetry emphasises the ‘vocabulary and phonetic material character of language’ (Scheffer, 1978, p. 34). Its use of language includes extreme forms of ‘foregrounding and scrutiny of the linguistic material’ and ‘the poetic act of cutting open and laying bare structures and properties of language at different levels of organization’ (Schaffner, 2005, p. 150). The more experimental these texts are, the more language disintegrates, with syntax and words collapsing. The poets may destroy the common language and apply techniques of cut-up, collage and montage with a playful intention or rather with the utopian impetus of renewal. The acoustic aspect of these phenomena is especially relevant since accentuating the sound of language is a specific feature of literariness. It is the poet-performer who creates this ‘transrational’ literary language through articulation, intonation and the execution of ‘articulatory gestures’ (Wilke, 2013).

## 2. The poetics of sound in the neo-avant-gardes

The utopian impetus of renewal was picked up in the neo-avant-garde movement, after the avant-gardes ceased as a result of the political changes that led to World War II. The rediscovery and advancement of the avant-gardes’ achievements ‘can now be conceived as another bearer of the flame of hope, re-igniting it and passing it on after a period of darkness’ (Scheunemann, 2005, p. 20). During the time of the neo-avant-garde movements of the 1950s the notion of *Konkrete Poesie* (‘concrete poetry’) gained prominence in German-speaking countries. Concrete poetry abandons traditional verse structure, metre and rhyme, the lyrical persona and the treatment of sentiment and moods. Instead, the acoustic and visual ‘concreteness’ of language and script is the main focus. Its goal is to accentuate the vocal and visual ‘figurativeness’ of language. Language itself – its possibilities and limitations, its peculiarities and paradoxes – is the central theme of concrete authors: ‘Insofar as the lingual-reflective moment is considered constitutive, concrete texts demonstrate something about language with language. Language itself is here called ‘concrete’ where it is turned into its own subject’ (Schmitz-Emans, 1997, p. 176). At times the attributes ‘concrete’ and ‘experimental’ are equated. In art theory concreteness figures as a counter-concept against abstract art. There are various types of concrete poetry, but a common feature is the self-reflexive foregrounding of the poems’ own structure. The two main strands are visual poetry and sound poetry, i.e. those working either with the optical or the acoustical dimension of language. Only the latter is relevant in this context. Sound poetry received new relevance within the international concrete poetry movement of the 1950s and its neo-avant-garde poet-

ics (cf. Scobie, 1974, p. 221; Ernst, 2002, p. 258), which at the same time constituted a rediscovery and elaboration of the historical avant-garde (cf. Schaffner, 2005, p. 159).

One of the most prominent authors of sound poems is the Austrian poet Ernst Jandl (1925-2000), who also dealt with the topic in his *Poetik-Vorlesungen* ('poetic lectures'), where he continuously links back to Dada and its influence on his writing (cf. Jandl, 1985, pp. 23-26, 75f.; Schmitz-Emans, 1997, pp. 131-173). Jandl differentiated between two forms of sound poems, which are the more general notion of *Sprechgedicht* ('spoken poem'), which needs to be spoken and heard, and that of the more specific *Lautgedicht* ('sound poem'), which relinquishes complete words and presents word-like entities instead (Jandl, 1985, p. 22f.; cf. Schmitz-Emans, 1997, p. 159; Lentz, 2000, vol. 1, p. 132). Whereas the former is still dominated by the word, by configuring sounds and syllables, the latter tries to do without, by 'working with all the possibilities presented by the voice and freeing it to the greatest possible extent or even totally from the chains of a language consisting of words' (Jandl, 1985, p. 23).

One of Jandl's most famous sound poems is 'schtzngrmm' (1957), which is in fact the first line of a title-less poem, an artificial word creation where all the vowels in the German noun *Schützengraben* ('trench') have been removed. All 35 verses of the poem are made of single, word-like creations consisting only of the consonants from the first line. They read, for example, 'tzngrmm', 'grrrrrrrrrr', 't-t-t-t', 'tssssssssssss' and 'scht' (Jandl, 1966, p. 47).



While deciphering the text in its printed version, the meaning is not immediately clear. This changes, though, when listening to Jandl perform the sound poem; most likely this audio file has been taken from the record *Laut und Luise. Ernst Jandl liest Sprechgedichte* published in 1968. The modulation of the voice, the whispering, hard, rhythmical and often staccato-like articulation and the iteration of verse make it obvious that Jandl is imitating the ‘sound of war’ by onomatopoetic means. Bangs, shoots, the flying of munitions and the crashing of bombs are all created with his voice. He does so with implicit reference to World War I, which was dominated by trench warfare. Many German Expressionist poets, for instance, were initially in favour of the passage of arms in 1914 and thought of war as an extraordinary, exiting event, transcending everyday life. The war was aestheticised and, as such, thematised in many Expressionist poems. However, after several authors have been wounded or even died, this affirmative attitude changed radically. Such an abrupt change in perception is also produced by Jandl’s ‘Lautgedicht’, a sound poem that evokes laughter at the beginning – as if children were ‘playing war’ – and shocks at the end, especially when the final two lines ‘grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr | t-tt’ are heard and the listener realises that the penultimate line onomatopoetically creates

the sound of a machine gun shooting incessantly, while the last – ‘dead’ (*tot*) – can be interpreted as a dry comment on the result, possibly uttered by the gunner himself.

A second exemplary poem by Jandl is ‘*ottos mops*’ (1963), a vocal poem employing only the vowel ‘o’ and solely monosyllabic words (quite rare in German), all written irregularly in lower case. The poem exists in print and as a live recording spoken by the author. The acoustic reduction to one vowel makes this text humoristic, a device that is likewise found in children’s wordplay or nursery rhyme. The first stanza, for instance, reads as follows:

ottos mops trotzt  
otto: fort mops fort  
ottos mops hopst fort  
otto: soso

(Jandl, 1970, p. 58)



An English translation goes as follows: ‘otto’s dog droops | otto: off old dog! | otto’s old dog tromps off | otto: oh’ (Jandl, 2000, p. 33; translated by B. Friedlander). As is clear from these examples, the poem consists of lines spoken by a narrator and other lines formulated in direct speech by the ‘protagonist’, a dog owner (here in lines two and four in the German version and in line two in the English version). In a recording from 1998 Jandl reads this poem in a sober, slow and toneless voice that gives it a resigned, almost depressive quality. This mood is partly created by the choice of the deep vowel. According to the early theory of sound poetry, different vowels are associated with different emotions and moods, but lack clear meaning (cf. Kemper, 1974, p. 161f.). The resigned tone of Jandl’s poem is contrasted at the end, where the *mops* – an unattractive, not particularly popular, slow breed of dogs – vomits (Jandl uses the German colloquialism *kotzt*, meaning ‘throws up’), and the respective line ‘*ottos mops kotzt*’ is spoken at a somewhat faster and louder – seemingly surprised – pace. This sudden colloquialism invokes laughter. Another humorous element can be found in the assonances and imperfect rhyme (e.g. ‘*hofft*’ and ‘*klopft*’) found throughout the poem. According to Jandl’s own classification, ‘*ottos mops*’, contrary to ‘*schtzngrmm*’, is definitely a *Sprechgedicht*.

Alongside Jandl, the Austrian poet Gerhard Rühm (b. 1930), who also experimented with various forms of sound poetry in the 1950s and 1960s, will also be introduced in this section. Rühm was a core member of the *Wiener Gruppe*, a neo-avant-garde group of poets and artists in Vienna who adopted submerged experimental traditions from Dada and Surrealism (cf. Ernst, 2002, p. 264) and mainly concentrated on the ‘exemplification of linguistic rules and structures’ (Schaffner,

2005, p. 164). Rühm introduced the term ‘sprechtexte’ (‘speech texts’) to describe his works and contrasted it with another genre of his which he called ‘radiophone texte’ (‘radiophonic texts’), here making use of the audio-technical possibilities of the recording studio in a functional way (Rühm, 1970, 51). He also coined the umbrella term ‘auditive poetry’ as a new genre in contrast to visual poetry, the other ‘concrete’ genre ‘that has to communicate information beyond its integral language-sound and which can only be received by the acoustic realization of the text’ (Rühm, 1993a, p. 73; cf. Lentz, 2001, vol. 1, p. 132f.). Both in his visual and acoustic poetry Rühm experimented with single-word poems by creating spatial-temporal constellations full of tension, self-reflexivity and wit. In a comment on his ‘auditory texts’ he poet gives the following example: ‘the acoustic ideogram of a touch is unfolded out of the term “touch” [*berühren*]. The words “to touch” [*berühren*], “touched” [*berührt*; both participle and adjective], “touched” [*berührte*; past tense] appear dissolved in their single phoneme components, each of them assigned a tone or sound interval. Gliding downwards in canon form, seven words overlap (“to touch” once, “touched” [participle and adjective] five times, “touched” [past tense] once), dynamically varied, where an intensive coming-together of all seven layers is achieved’ (Rühm, 1970, p. 51). As this complex quote illustrates, Rühm’s ‘auditory texts’ are intricate and unique compositions that bear in their structure of repetition and variation strong similarities to experimental music.

Another interesting sound poetic genre is Rühm’s ‘dialect poems’ (1954-1958), which he wrote and performed with a strong Viennese *Mundart* (‘dialect’). Rühm applied sound combinations typical of the Viennese dialect to evoke a ‘Paradewiener’ (colloquialism for ‘paradigmatic Viennese’; Scholz, 1993, p. 66), alternating ‘between servile attempts to curry favor with someone and vulgar aggressivity’ (Rühm in: Scholz, 1993, p. 66). In their written form, the mostly short dialect poems consist of words written in lower case in verse without any punctuation marks; none of the poems carry a title (cf. Lentz, 2001, vol. 2, p. 787). Three exemplary poems will be discussed here. The first consists only of six lines in two stanzas:

i wass ned  
i bin so valuan  
und sondoch is s  
reng wiad s  
i bin miad  
und mi gfreid nix

(Rühm, 1993b, p. 16)

(‘i don’t know | i feel so lost | and it’s sunday || it will rain | i am tired | and not pleased about anything’)



The speaker describes his state of boredom and melancholy on a lonely Sunday. The short poem builds its tension, on the one hand, through the poetic transcription of dialect into hybrid neologisms that alienate common words (the verb *verloren* is turned into “valuan”, the noun *Sonntag* into “sundoch” etc.), and, on the other hand, through Rühm’s somewhat exaggerated intonation in the mode of a Viennese petit bourgeois. The (literal) English translation is unable to transfer these dialect features sufficiently. Another meaningful example is a poem dealing with collective identity, whose first stanza reads:

mia san mir  
seids ia ia  
ia seids ia  
und ned mia

(Rühm, 1993b, p. 13)

(‘we are ourselves | are you yourselves | you are yourselves | and not us’)



This dialect poem – quite difficult to read and understand even for a German native speaker – offers nothing but tautological statements by applying a seemingly basic logic. Rühm’s verbal performance of this monotonous mono-rhyme piece (all 13 lines end on the double vowel ‘ia’, which is emphasised to the extreme) creates a self-assured persona, someone who claims to know his group identity, which is both repeatedly affirmed and strictly dissociated from the collective other. This nonsense discourse, verbally presented as an important statement, is humorous due to its banal and redundant statement. The third example of Rühm’s dialect poems is even more self-reflexive. The text ‘i sog eich’ (‘i tell you’) consists of only one long stanza in which the speaker repeatedly claims to be saying something – to be making a statement – without really saying anything at all. Again, we find a strong Viennese dialect that both alienates and manifests the absurdity of the statement itself:

i muas eich s sogn  
das I gsoggd hob  
das I eich sogn wea  
was I euch sogn wea  
das i eich sog  
was I eich sog

(Rühm, 1993b, p. 12)

(‘i have to tell you | that i have told | that i will tell you | what i will tell you | that i tell you | what i tell you’)



Quoted here is the middle passage. ‘i sog eich’ is a *Sprechgedicht* dealing with a (failed) speech act – a performative in the negative. Rühm employs linguistic reflexivity through his specific use of language, which displays its phonetic material (cf. Weiss, 1996, p. 7), but also its absurdity and its manipulative use.

Jandl and Rühm, both associated with the ‘concrete poetry’ movement, emphasise their individual approach to post-war poetry innovations. Not only did both authors write various forms of sound poetry, but also a number of poetological texts. These essays reveal a high level of self-reflexivity and a terminological effort to establish differentiated subgenres of sound poetry. Jandl and Rühm (as well as many of their contemporaries, who had to be left out here) experimented with and probed sound poetry in the stricter sense, both on the levels of composition and performance. This resulted in formal reduction of words, in restriction to consonants or specific vowels, in the absence of punctuation marks and partly also syntax, in experimentation with new forms of pronunciation and articulation and in integration and artful transcription of dialects and sociolects. Both poets also worked with iteration and rhythm. All of these poetic techniques lead to reflexive foregrounding of the linguistic material and to fundamental irritation among the audience – an estrangement effect achieved by both the aural and the written language.

### 3. Sound, noise and beat in contemporary poetry

The acquirements of the neo-avant-garde were carried on, among others, in performance art of the 1960s and 1970s and in the Spoken Word Movement that evolved in the 1980s. In contemporary acoustic poetry from the 1990s to the present these references are as relevant as the many implicit as well as explicit genealogic correlations to the achievements of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. They manifest mainly in an emphasis on sound in the poetic performance or in the content of the poem. On the other hand, literary devices such as montage and collage (cf. Žmegač, 1994, pp. 286-291) are utilised, as the following two examples will convey. At the same time, and especially due to the emergence of the spoken word and poetry slam scenes, researchers developed interdisciplinary approaches that included sound, performance, orality, voice and music in the poetic analysis (cf. <http://www.lyricology.org/>). In order to examine vocal performance in combination with content-focussed interpretations, Julia Novaks ‘articulatory parameters’ – rhythm, pitch, volume and articulation – which are based on tools of description from musicology and speech science (cf. Novak, 2011, pp. 85-125), will be used.

In his programmatic essay ‘Sprachinstallation’ (‘speech installation’), the poet Thomas Kling (1957-2005) – whose poetry and programmatic writing had a deep impact on many German poets of the following generation – declared that ‘[t]he poetry readings of the 80s must have been similar to the readings of the 70s. In the 80s they were certainly squeaky sounding and inhibited, but above all tantalizingly boring. Like most of the poems from the 70s the ones written in the last decade are downright meaningless; they exhibit a disrespect to language’ (Kling, 1997, p. 9). This is not meant as a criticism of neo-avant-garde sound poetry – Kling understood his work to follow in the tradition of Jandl (cf. von Ammon, 2013, p. 430) – but of the conventional declamatory readings that he considered to be outmoded. With his conception of ‘speech installation’ Kling also wanted to establish an alternative notion to what had been referred to since the 1960s as ‘performance art’, which he claimed was insignificant. In an interview the author underlined how from the very beginning he wanted his poems to be perceived aurally by the recipients. Moreover, the ‘actio of speech’ (Kling in: Balmes, 2000, p. 15), as he calls it – perhaps relating to Kriwet’s previously introduced ‘acts of speaking’ – was supposed to be present in the written versions. The following extract from ‘taunusprobe. lehrgang im hessischn’ (‘taunus sample. course in hessian’) reveals Kling’s specific spelling style and layout:

ssauntz. grölende theke.  
ATEM-SCHUTZ-GERÄTE-TRÄGER-LEHRGANG was  
für ssauntz! unter pokalen, fuß-  
balltrophäen die azurminiträgerin the-  
knblond.-GERÄTETRÄGERLEHRGANG IN A.

(Kling, 1991, p. 45)

(‘ssoundz. bawling boozier. | MOUTH-FILTERING-EQUIPMENT-USER’S-COURSE what |  
ssoundz! underneath trophies, soc- | cer trophies the azure-miniskirt-wearer bar- |  
blonde. EQUIPMENT-USER’S-COURSE IN A.’)

(this translation is partly taken from <http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/2379/auto/0/TAUNUS-SAMPLE-COURSE-IN-HESSIAN>)



Because of its idiosyncratic use of punctuation, upper and lower cases, line breaks and syllabification and its unique orthography and fragmentary syntax, the written version of the poem seems to be a score or ‘AUGN – FUNK’ (‘eye radio’; Kling, 1991, p. 45). In the sense of Sievers’ ‘philology of the ear’, Kling places emphasis on the articulatory aspects of the poem in its written form, which was composed with regard to its verbal performance, that is, as an audio-literal work. The written poem therefore contains oral attributes, and, inversely, the vocal utterance contains com-

plex literary language that greatly differs from conversational speech (cf. Vorrath, 2017a, p. 134f.). This becomes especially clear when we listen to the poem whilst reading it.

Kling's performance of 'taunusprobe. lehrgang im hessischn' was recorded in 1991 at a live event in Cologne, broadcasted the same year by the *Westdeutsche Rundfunk* and is now available as part of an extensive book and audio collection entitled *Die gebrannte Performance* ('The Burned Performance'; cf. Kling, 2015, p. 59 and audio-CD 1, track 18). As usual, Kling delivers his lines expressively and in a multifaceted way, making the poem dynamic in volume, pitch and rhythm. The word 'ssauntz', which we hear four times and which is written in 'a quasi-phonetic [German] rendering of the English word sounds' (Divers, 2002, p. 225), is shouted out loud. In contrast, the capitalised neologisms are articulated in a way that can best be described as staccato (separate articulation of each word) and is reminiscent of the style of a radio or TV sports commentator. The lower-cased lines, however, are articulated in different tempi and irregular rhythms. The motives and atmosphere of the poem's content are thematised and reinforced by the vocal performance. Sound, as the topic of this poem in the sense of background noise in a pub, is represented onomatopoetically. This resembles the bruitists' idea of the acoustic representation of daily noise scenery, but still retains lexically coherent semantics – the neologisms, however, have a touch of a foreign language (cf. Szymanska, 2009, p. 45f.). Contrary to what the title may imply, the poem is not about a course in the Hessian *Mundart*, but about pub culture in a local football club in the German federal province Hessen, portraying its regular guests, interior and soundscape. Through several insinuations the poem creates an entanglement of sexualised as well as soccer-related visual impulses (such as the football trophies and the woman wearing an azure miniskirt) to the backdrop of noisy sports shows and talk amongst the regulars.

Additionally, the poem contains allusions to historical poetry events as well as to German history. It begins with a motto from Stefan George's poem 'Burg Falkenstein', including the year it was written (1922) and the poet's name. George is particularly known for his solemn poetry readings in the so-called George-Kreis ('George circle'), and, as described above, Kling's own vocal performance may also be taken as a backlash to such ostentatious readings. In combination with 'Lehrgang', this reference also hints at George's position as the *maestro* of the poetry circle and his programme of cultural renewal (cf. Oelmann, 2011, p. 29). The structure and ideas of this 'secret Germany', as the members called it, are often related to the form of the National Socialist state with its *Führer* as the precursor to the so-called Third Reich (cf. Norton, 2011, p. 278f.). Kling links this knowledge not only to the distinctive political implication of discussions among regulars, but also to the exclamation of the 'straight arm Nazi salute' (Divers, 2002, p. 226), 'heil' and 'HEILHEILHEIL!!!!' (Kling, 1991, p. 45; Kling, 2015, track 18). The latter line is striking

because it is the only capitalised phrase not articulated in staccato but in legato (without any perceptible interruption) and crescendo (with a cumulative loudness), as if the speaker's self-assurance grows during the utterance. Kling's *œuvre* includes several poems that broach the issue of regional scenery with references to George and the subsequent knowledge of National Socialist crimes (cf. Hummelt, 2000, p. 34f.). The presented poem is a fitting example of Kling's works as medial collages of literary quotations, historical references, vernaculars and other intertextual methods (cf. von Ammon, Trilcke & Scharfschwert, 2012, p. 15f.). This approach merges with the author's understanding of what a poet must provide – he should be a 'Memorizer' or a 'guarantor of memory' (Kling, 1997, p. 16).

The next example is also highly intertextual and uses a montage of phrases – one could call them 'ready-mades' – as literary devices. Albert Ostermaier's (b. 1967) poem 'leitkultur' ('dominant culture') from his collection *Autokino* from 2001 consists only of German sayings, as this short extraction shows: '[...] es reicht nicht ihnen | den faust aufs auge zu | drücken [...]' (Ostermaier, 2001, p. 75). The author assembles the sayings in an artistic way that reflects reactionary and xenophobic structures in conventional language use. He interlaces the German phrase 'jemandem etwas aufs Auge drücken' ('to force someone to do something') with the phrase 'das passt wie die Faust aufs Auge' (this German saying can mean both 'that fits perfectly' and, on the contrary, 'that clashes horribly'), but uses the masculine accusative article 'den' instead of the feminine nominative article 'die' together with 'faust', which turns the noun 'fist' ('die Faust') into the title of Goethe's famous tragedy *Faust*. The eye ('Auge') in the two entwined phrases does not necessarily refer to reading, though this is the case when the naming of Goethe's play is taken into consideration, which here evidently stands for the 'dominant culture'. Both Kling's and Ostermaier's implementation of collage and montage techniques relates to the avant-garde notion that Peter Bürger referred to as 'a polemical attack on the individual creativity of the artist' (Bürger, 1984, p. 53). They use quotation, everyday speech, describe ordinary scenes etc., but at the same time create profound, artistic and unique poetic languages that moreover provide social criticism.



While sound is a content-related topic in Kling's poem, introduced onomatopoeically by the poet in his live performance, Ostermaier's recording of 'leitkultur' works differently; it was produced in a studio exclusively for an audio-CD and its listeners. Hence, there are significant differences between this poem's aesthetics and the recording of Kling's vocal performance at a poetry event. This audio poem is not a documentation of a transient event, but a self-contained artistic work. During the vocal performance the poet-performer and the audience were separated, and

the vocal utterance could be repeated until it had the form Ostermaier – or rather the producing team – wanted it to have, with the possibility of using sound technology, such as cutting and adjustment. The specific sounds we hear are volitional and intentional. Furthermore, the musician Bert Wrede features the poem with electronic beats and guitar samples. Whereas the audio poems of Ostermaier's publications *Solarplexus* (2004) and *Heartcore* (1999) are polyphonic – two or more speakers perform the poems verbally – the lyrics of *Autokino* are spoken by Ostermaier alone. It is a composite work by Ostermaier and Wrede that crosses boundaries between the arts. By definition, the pieces of this collection are similar to musical genres like hip hop, as they consist of rhythmical tunes and lyrical speech, but Ostermaier's intonation presents stylistic differences to rap (cf. Vorrath, 2017b).

The tonal atmosphere – in performance studies referred to as 'sonosphere' (Kolesch, 2004, p. 36) – can be seen as an interpretation of the poem. This is due to the semantic values of each utterance's individual characteristics, the paralinguistic features and the iconic values of the musical sounds. The prosodic performance structures the context, while the voice offers information about the speaker's attitude – the effect or impression can be highly controlled (cf. Finnegan, 2003, p. 385). Therefore, the influence on the listener's interpretation is stronger here than it would be if the written text was received on its own, as it is more ambiguous. For example, the structure of the following written extract differs greatly from its vocal performance; the line breaks here are unusual, against the syntactic units, and therefore hinder a clear understanding: '[...] ordnung | ist wenn nur die hälfte hier | leben bleibt da passe ich | mich ganz der mehrheit | an [...]' (Ostermaier, 2001, p. 75; 'order | is if only half | remain living here on this i adapt | to the majority [...]'). In contrast to the printed poem, the poet-performer's pronunciation is similar to how these phrases would be spoken in everyday speech and thus more comprehensible.

Ostermaier's vocal performance reveals his Bavarian accent and imitates a conversational tone. For these reasons the utterance exhibits dynamics in pitch, volume and rhythm; at the same time, there is a regularity in the intonation structure that is repeated constantly: Typically one phrase is articulated with a rising pitch and the following phrase with a falling pitch. The articulation can be described as generally slow and steady. The spoken text is repeated again in an undertone where the articulation can be designated as rather lethargic. Wrede's 'cool sound and impelling beat' (Ostermaier in: Vögele, 2002, p. 11) consists of a slow and constantly repeated (looped) rhythm that creates a monotonous sonosphere, but is sometimes overlaid with sharp guitar riffs that are intensified by the echo effect applied. In the first version the voice dominates the recording, as it has a higher loudness than the beat. However, in the second version the voice is turned down to the loudness of the beat – some words are hardly intelligible. The guitar riffs are dominant now, thus, they appear more strident and overpower the voice.

The vocal performance and the musical feature correlate with regard to repetition of phrases in everyday speech, repetition of the text of the spoken poem and the looped rhythm. Furthermore, the sampling technique can be associated with the literary practice of intertextuality: 'In musical production, sampling denotes the process of copying particular acoustic fragments from one context and replacing them in a different musical context' (Getmann, 2012, p. 61). Either way, the combination of the first conversational and then rather lethargic vocal performance and the constant beat with the high-pitched guitar riffs constitutes a disharmonic and oppressive sonosphere. This can be seen as a commentary on the reactionary and xenophobic structures of habitual language, which are then consolidated through the constant repetition (cf. Vorrath, 2017b).

The two examples presented in this chapter may be classified as sound poetry in its broader sense because of the equality of sound and articulatory dimensions as well as their semantics – they broach the issue of sound or use musical, rhythmic and sound features, but also exhibit lexical sense. By using montage and collage techniques, they create poetic languages that alienate standard language, the materiality of which – in the sense of prescribed structures – is foregrounded.

#### 4. Contemporary experimental sound poetry

As this article indicates, ever since the invention of audio recording various poets have documented their work acoustically. In the course of the intensified process of digitalisation since the turn of the millennium, poets have increasingly negotiated the technological reproductions of their vocal performances. The following examples are more experimental than the contemporary poems presented above, either in their exposure to digital media or in their use of language and sound. In this section the poems have been ordered according to their degree of estrangement, as an aesthetic device (from a lower to a higher level), not their dates of origin.

The first poem we will consider is 'Dich aus dem Leben lösen' ('To Dissolve You from Life') from 2008 by Nora Gomringer (b. 1980). The poet is one of the most successful young German authors today, renowned in particular for her unique vocal aesthetics and lyrical performances. As a distinguished spoken word poet, Gomringer designed several of her approximately 400 poems especially for live performances, poetry clips and audio poetry; she denotes them 'Sprechtexte' ('speech text'; Gomringer, 2011, p. 99), most likely with reference to Jandl's and Rühm's terminology mentioned earlier. Without exception, all of her poetry collections include a CD with recordings of selected speech texts.

The poem 'Dich aus dem Leben lösen' stands out in its written as well as spoken versions (Gomringer, 2015, p. 228f. and track 33). In the extensive book publication *Mein Gedicht fragt nicht lange* ('My Poem Does Not Ask for Long') it is the only piece

that is printed in landscape format, covering the centre part of a double page, with bold vertical bars that start above the poem, separating the verses, and end underneath it. Through the vertical bars the verses resemble *Langzeilen* (a long line with two halves and a caesura in the middle) often used in old Germanic poetry. When listening to the spoken version, it becomes clear, however, that the vertical bars divide the poem into two stanza-like parts which are juxtaposed on the page, and which we hear simultaneously as stereophonic sound. While the stanza on the left side of the page, emitted by the left loudspeaker, can be described as a listing or enumeration of things to do after a beloved one has passed, the apposed stanza contains common phrases of comfort and intimate thoughts:

Zwei, drei Koffer packen | sagen doch alle immer wieder diese Sätze:  
 Zwei, drei Menschen Bescheid | Schade, so ein Leben, wie schnell, so gut, so ein Guter,  
 Zwei, drei Stunden beerdigen | jetzt bei den Eltern, den Engeln, der liebe Gott ein Aug  
 auf

(Gomringer, 2015, p. 228)

(‘Packing two, three bags | but everyone always repeats these sentences over and over:  
 Letting two, three people [know] | It’s a pity, such a life, how fast, so good, such a good  
 one  
 Burying two, three hours | now with the parents, the angels, the loving god an eye  
 on’)



Gomringer’s articulation of the left stanza is steady and spoken like a mantra; the verses are all pronounced with the same pitch movement and rhythm, which relates to the theme of enumeration. The vocal performance of the right stanza (page and speaker) is more dynamic; the loudness of the first quoted verse is articulated in crescendo, whereas the following two are uttered much more quietly, in a fast and generally legato rhythm. The various thoughts and ‘voices’ (in a metaphorical sense) are therefore vocally shaped in diverse ways so that the poem appears polyphonic. This is intensified by the stereophonic sound through which one hears the words coming from different directions. All the impressions and feelings which the lyrical persona has to deal with also surround the auditor. Despite the overlapping of the lines, one can understand most of the words. Similar to the simultaneous poems by the Dadaists, different sound tracks with individual rhythms and tonalities are heard at once, but not in order to create dissonance and chaos of sounds. The aim here is to produce chaotic sensation. The last two confronted lines mirror each other: ‘Du aus dem Leben: ab jetzt | mein ich: schade, ab jetzt du aus dem Leben’ (‘You out of life: from now on | I mean: pity, from now on you no longer in life’). Different from the written version, the left verse is repeated three times

by the poet-performer, so that the third ‘ab jetzt’ is uttered simultaneously with the right side’s ‘ab jetzt’ and thereby reinforced. In contrast, the closing four words ‘du aus dem leben’ stand alone and are articulated with a falling pitch, indicating finality (cf. Novak, 2011, p. 107) and thus emphasising the awareness that death is non-reversible.

A second example in this section is the experimental sound poem ‘Faltung 2’ (‘Fold 2’; 2001) by the German author, musician and artist Elke Schipper (b. 1951), an intermedial artist producing both visual and acoustic poetry (cf. Engeler & Scholz, 2002, p. 441f.). Only a sound version of the poem has been published, and so a transcription is necessary. Despite stating earlier that sound poetry in the stricter sense only exists in its recited form, not as written text, there are authorised written versions of all other poems discussed in this article, which allows for a simpler analysis and presentation. The visual representation of sound poetry in written verse is considered a ‘score’ for the spoken word; however, as the quoted examples make evident, they often convey other dimensions as well. On the other hand, written representations of sound poetry are always subsidiary, because there are no scriptural signs for many para-linguistic sounds, although several different notation systems have been invented (cf. Lentz, 2000, vol. 2, pp. 832-837). For the following analysis, Schipper’s words will be transcribed using German orthography and syntax.



The poem is a two and a half-minute piece with Schipper’s voice articulating both words and word-like sounds. The poet-performer speaks at a high speed and with precision and starts with two lines of words containing vocabulary that seems to originate from the sciences: ‘Fläche vor Teilung nach Breite vor Länge | vorher, vorerst, zufoerdest, von daselbst, anfangher, hieraus, zunächst, vorweg, Zustand [...]’ (‘surface before division after width before length | before, for the time being, first and foremost, from that very place, from the beginning, from now, initially, beforehand, state [...]'). What we hear is, on the one hand, prepositions and descriptive terms used to locate something and, on the other hand, several words denoting the ‘beginning’ in a temporal and spatial sense as well as ‘origin’, some of them being neologisms. They are spoken quickly, one after the other and without any perceptible syntactical structure or logic, so that the seemingly precise language creates a highly illogical, non-Cartesian structure. After about one minute the word ‘Teilung’ (‘division’) is uttered again, followed by a growing number of words that are certainly not correct German, not even neologisms. They may be German words spoken backwards, words split in the wrong place with new syllables joined together irregularly, or they may be ‘words’ that have simply been invented. This remains ambiguous and cannot be deciphered due to the fast pace of the acous-

tic performance. All these possibilities, however, make sense in the context of the work's title, indicating a performative fold and turning (of language). The language increasingly loses its German features and sounds, which become more and more alien, and after one and a half minute Schipper's pronunciation appears foreign, perhaps even exotic, resembling Arabic with its many plosives and clusters of consonants. Towards the end of the sound poem more 'German' words can be identified between the para-words, and the textual 'fold' thus seems to open up – or unfold – once more. The sound poem 'Faltung 2' is highly experimental and open for interpretation. Due to its combination of previously existing and purely invented words, it is a good example for a contemporary examination of Dada sound poems and their relevance for today's poetics.

While some of the words in Schipper's poem can be understood, at least in the beginning, the poem 'die deutsche sprache' ('the german language', 1999) by the visual and sound poet Jörg Piringer (b. 1974) begins with sounds that are only identifiable as consonants and vowels. The first consonants 'd' and 'tsch' can be recognised as part of the word *deutsch* from the title, where only the vowel 'eu' has been omitted, comparable to Jandl's 'schtzgrmm' and to concrete poetry in general, where language itself is a theme. The poet-performer utters the chopped up sounds and in a fast, regular rhythm; the pronunciation can be seen as an extreme form of staccato. Through breathing pauses and the repetition of sounds, verses or rather sound units can be identified. Each contains sounds from the preceding line and has been extended by adding a consonant or vowel. The following extract from the written version of the poem, to be found on an Austrian writer's website, but not on Piringer's own ([http://www.gav.at/pages/mitglieder.php?ART=SHOW\\_TEXT&TID=169&ID=415](http://www.gav.at/pages/mitglieder.php?ART=SHOW_TEXT&TID=169&ID=415)), is an example of the staircase construction of the poem:

d tsch r g ah  
 d tsch r g ah u  
 d tsch r g ß ah u  
 d tsch r g ß ah u u  
 d tsch r r g ß ah u u



On the author's website the spoken version, which is two and a half minutes long, is allocated to the section 'soundpoetry'. From around the middle of the performance onwards a few words arise from the addition of further tones, at first short ones between the incomprehensible staccato sounds such as *ist* ('is'), which then continue until a full sentence occurs: 'die deutsche sprache ist sehr reichhaltig man muß sich eine anzahl wörter anzueignen suchen' ('the German language is very rich one needs to acquire a number of words'). The acquisition of the words is performed ver-

bally by the author in Austrian *Mundart*. It becomes clear that the poem works differently from German child play, in which one complete verse is sung initially, and with every new chant a sound is omitted until nothing is left. According to Piringer, the full sentence, which only appears at the end of ‘die deutsche sprache’, originates from an Austrian travel guide published around 1890. The poet, who holds a master’s degree in computer science, divided it into fragments using a programme which he developed with the computer language LISP. After the ‘dissection’ he combined the pieces again using the Fibonacci sequence. The successive development of the incomprehensible staccato sounds into the full sentence is therefore based on a mathematical formula. This piece can be said to constitute a composite work by the poet and his computer. Like the practices of the avant-garde and post-war experimental poets, the techniques employed here foreground the linguistic aspect by ‘cutting open and laying bare structures and properties of language’ (Schaffner, 2005, p. 150) – in this case consonants and vowels – but instead of letting the syntax and words collapse, they are assembled anew. A typographic example of such a technique of language dissection would be Cia Rinne’s multilingual poetry book *zaroum* (2001; cf. Benthien, 2017b).

All three poems discussed in this section use literary and digital techniques of estrangement and the iteration of linguistic features comparable to avant-garde practices, not to manifest a shift from meaning to materiality, though, but a shift from materiality to meaning. The contemporary sound poetry almost seems to be a counter-motion; revealing how language works, creating moments of irritation and experimenting with digital technologies are important for these works, which at the same time attempt to overcome dissonance and chaos. This is achieved in various ways and to different degrees: The words of the poems are either comprehensible from the beginning (Gomringer), transform from coherent semantics into alienated structures and then switch back to identifiable German words (Schipper) or, finally, language is dissected completely and recombined to form full sentences (Piringer).

This journey through German sound poetry from the neo-avant-garde to the digital age has revealed a vast range of acoustic poetry. Avant-garde techniques have been ever-present in the sound poetry of the last hundred years – not only in the neo-avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s, but also in contemporary poetic practice. Audio-literal writing has become a common device in composing poetry. However, it has become clear that the majority of the poet-performers discussed here have developed their own transcription and typography in order to reflect and represent the acoustic dimension of their unique performance style. Aesthetic strategies developed by the avant-gardes, such as emphasis on materiality and rhythm, repetition of linguistic elements, neologisms, alienated pronunciation and irregular script, have been adapted and enhanced by the later sound poets, partly through

interplay with media and new technologies. A common feature is the application of montage and collage – achieved through different linguistic styles, quotations and the insertion of proverbs. There is a notable recurrence of certain negative themes – death, violence and racism – across works and periods and of the topic of the German language as such, including humorous and witty wordplay and confrontation with (seemingly) ‘alien’ language. Several of the poets discussed here use Southern German or Austrian dialects and sociolects. This may simply be due to their personal and work environment; more relevant, though, is their intense expressivity and deviance from standard language, which makes these *Mundarten* especially suitable for the explorative use of language. All these traits and features, however, are completely unfolded and can thus only be recognised in the vocal performances.

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