

Michael Dean / BEYOND A THEATRE OF CRUELTY:
THE HORSEMEN & OWEN SOUND

In Toronto the character of Sound Poetry has been formed largely by the two Sound Poetry groups The Horsemen and Owen Sound. These groups can be called repertory sound groups in that they work in an on-going configuration of members (rather than altering their membership because of a particular performance requirement), and their performance pieces are written by the group and then selections from among these pieces are made for a given performance.

This mode of working in repertory has created a type of Sound Theatre in Toronto that often moves into a full-blown Artaudian style of Theatre of Cruelty/catharsis; so that Toronto Sound Theatre appears to be a romantic art form full of passion, eroticism and inspiration, the furthest thing possible from a formalist aesthetic (an aesthetic emphasizing the structural order of the work). Yet the basic structural gesture of Toronto Sound Theatre is formal.

The gesture is the fracture.

The fracture is the unifying gesture of all the avant garde. It is the same gesture underlying the energy in Cubism, New York colour painting and the conceptual performances of Dennis Oppenheim. The fracture is the gesture of reducing an art form to its component elements (the deconstruction of its traditional forms) and then reconstructing these elements in a new way.

For Sound Poetry in general, language has been fractured into its semiotic and phonomatic elements (whether the letter, the syllable or the glottal stop) then reconstructed acoustically in performance.

Because of the repertory nature of The Horsemen and Owen Sound, the process of reconstructing the linguistic fragments has taken on a social rather than a writerly context. The reference in the final work is not back to language and writing, but out to the audience and to the social context of language and communication in general.

Over the last few years, however, there is a sense that the members of the Toronto Sound groups have been looking beyond Sound Poetry for new performance contexts; that they have been looking, not for a new expression of the fracture, but for a new unifying gesture altogether.

The question has become: "Is the repertory sound group the best context for this exploration?"

The intermedia critics Richard Kostelanetz and Dick Higgins speak of a new 'intermedia aesthetic' based on writers/musicians/artists working in a 'post cognitive' event-oriented artform free of the boundaries of the traditional arts (and free therefore of the boundaries between the arts). They identify this new aesthetic as one no longer based on traditional criticism, but one based rather on an aesthetic that simply emerges out of the act (actions) of art.

The act of making art identifies the aesthetic of that art. You could call this "event aesthetics."

So, although the fracture is the unifying gesture in so much avant garde work, it also appears to be the gesture that separates performance work into two types: one that is amenable to traditional criticism (can be seen to be based on the deconstruction of traditional forms), and one that seeks its own criticism (cannot be identified as a response to traditional arts at all).

This separation can be reduced to whether or not a work confronts the formalist dictum: "The deconstruction of tradition can take place only in the presence of tradition."

Although The Horsemen and Owen Sound have been identified as working strongly out of the new intermedia aesthetic, their reliance on the fractural gesture has created a crisis in both groups: without the basic gesture of reconstructing the fractured linguistic elements into performance elements, their work can appear to be theatre (not Sound theatre, but just theatre), and without the repertory context, the individual members can appear merely to be repeating the explorations already exhausted by other solo sound poets.

The dilemma has been handled in different ways by the different members. Let's take two examples:

For Steve McCaffery of The Horsemen, the exploration of the video image in performance (distinct from video art which is something else again) has replaced the fractured formalism of Sound Poetry. McCaffery is exploring the presence of video on stage, and what video presence (both sound and image) reveals about performance (performance as 'audience-performer relationship'); so that, what McCaffery ends up with, is not sound-theatre or video-theatre, but a post-

modernist theatre that confronts the audience's hunger for image, and confronts the performer's self-image as the fatted cow readied for consumption.

McCaffery's performance work remains formal, however, relying as it does on the examination of the component elements of performance. But with McCaffery, performance has moved beyond language as the focus of performance and replaced that focus with performance itself. For McCaffery, performance is no longer 'the drama of language' but is a component element of the intermedia arts, a component part requiring examination. For McCaffery performance is what language was for the first Sound Poets.

Richard Truhlar of Owen Sound has turned from language altogether into performance. He has returned to music, exploring its equivalence to language when performed. The focus, again, is on performance.

For Truhlar (when performing Sound) the art of Sound Poetry was the energy generated by frustrated communication: Sound Poetry was the energy left over when communication was diverted from its intended receiver. But for Truhlar in music there is no frustration, because there is no attempt at communication, only an attempt at expression. The expression is clear.

In his musical work Truhlar relies on the audience to receive the expression. The art is not left-over but a clear connection with the audience. In this sense the work is informal. And yet the work seeks to identify an equivalence (in language) with musical expression. With Truhlar we see music presented as an equivalent to language as a performance vocabulary. Music is used as speech and speech is another element in musical composition. As with McCaffery, we see in Truhlar's work the writer-in-performance asking formal questions and coming up with 'romantic' (or audience-oriented) answers.

We saw this earlier in the way the repertory nature of the two Sound Poetry groups created an outward-looking theatre style Sound Poetry, that was rooted nevertheless in the formal base of the fracture. This mode of facing formal problems and coming up with romantic (performance) solutions has given a strong structural base to the performance work by the Toronto writers-in-performance. As these writers continue exploring performance 'beyond Sound Theatre,' (Sound Poetry as a theatre of cruelty), it will be interesting to watch this development, as well as the fates of the two groups, The Horsemen and Owen Sound.

