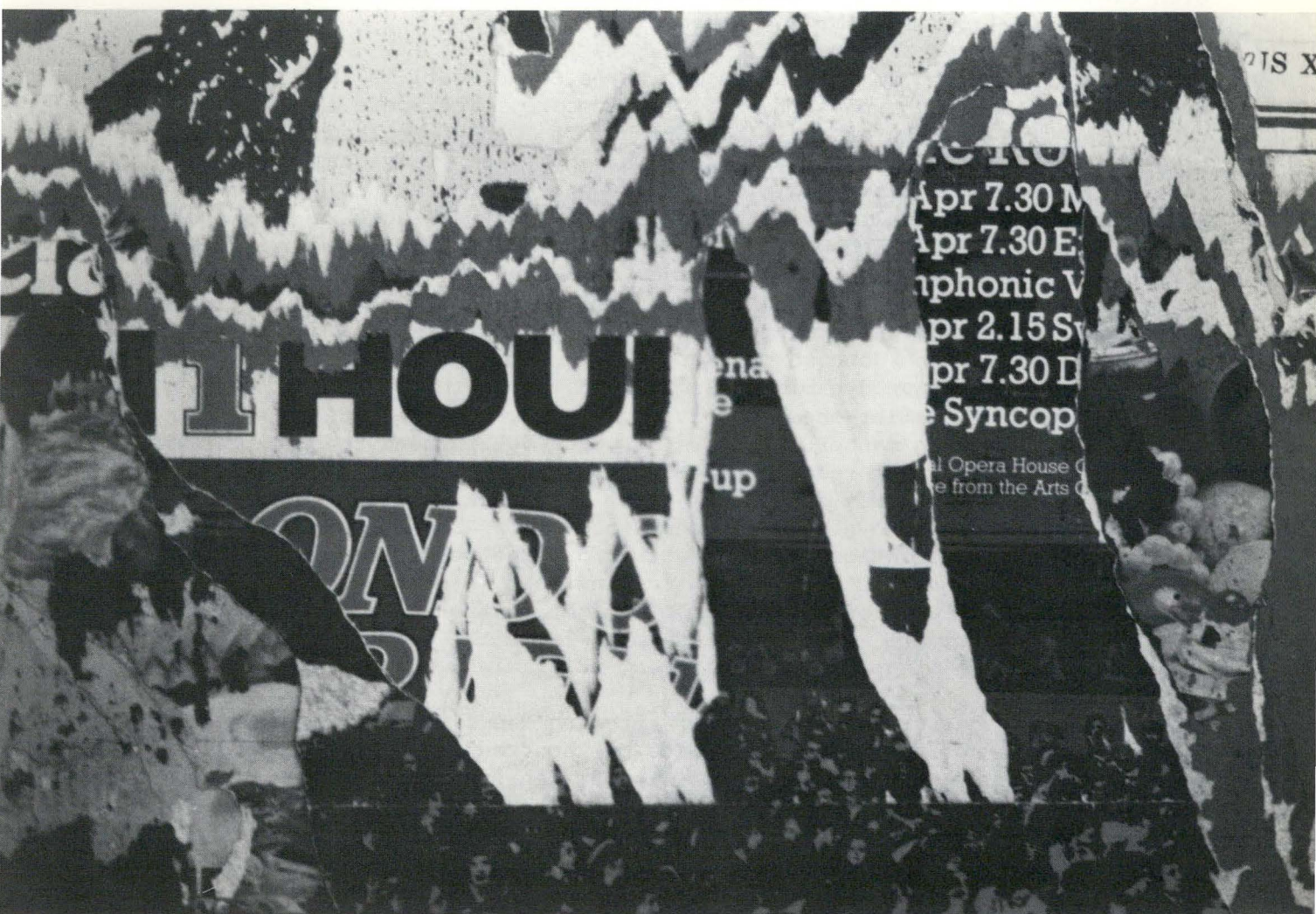


Steven Smith/ UNCONSCIOUS NOTATION

One aspect of many Sound Poets' explorations and performances, in both Europe and North America, is improvisation. By working this mode the Sound Poet develops a 'vocabulary' of expression for language in its fragmented and verbal forms. I refer to the principles that inform the extemporaneous structuring of sound derived from this vocabulary as 'unconscious notation;' a text of some kind may serve as a starting notation, and the performer rendering the text will create a transient notation; however, by 'unconscious notation' I refer to the embedded (and of course, changing) knowledge the Sound Poet feels secure (/insecure) in drawing upon while improvising. It is an informing notation that exists 'in state' and is reshaped at the same time.

A tangible score can exist as in the visual example shown, or simply as a vibration in the Poet's imagination. As an improviser, each Poet develops his or her own mode of interpretation and expression. British Sound Poet Bob Cobbing performs, almost exclusively, vocal interpretations of abstract visual scores. Henri Chopin, from France, now living in England, creates vocalizations often without any visual score, records these on tape, and manipulates them electronically creating dense sound constructions. The electronic treatment of the voice is another form of Chopin's improvisation. Canadian Sound Poets Steve McCaffery, Paul Dutton and Richard Truhlar are masters of interpretation of visual scores. In the case of Dutton and Truhlar, these scores are often relatively minimal, suggesting little of their dynamic interpretation. The dynamic notation in their cases, when performing their own works, resides in their minds; the text is merely used as a structural reference or as a starting point.

The visual notation of a sound poem is often not as specific as is standard musical notation, but is more akin to modern music scores that leave considerable room for the performer's interpretation. The text can be anything that sets up a sonic reverberation in the Sound Poet. Interpretations have been rendered of microscopic organisms and of the patterns on leaves by British Sound Poet Paula Claire; Bob Cobbing, P.C. Fencott and Bill Griffiths, also British, have interpreted dancers' movements; Steve McCaffery has re-interpreted pages of the telephone book. Many Sound Poets have improvised with Musicians. Sound Poets in a sense have "practiced" and hence developed the ability to interpret visual stimuli in a sonic manner; some



even claim to have this ability naturally; i.e. images have always had a sonic or musical quality for these practitioners.

Here I will attempt to illustrate one way a Sound Poet, in this case myself, might approach and perform a visual score. The score shown is a photograph of a section of a billboard found in London, England, hence the title, "London Visual Text 1." I photographed it for its visual and sonic interest. Meaning in the traditional sense was unimportant to me in the photography and is equally so in performance. The text suggests high energy, immediately. It is filled with pulsation lines and points. Comparatively, the verbal components have a static and, in places, a repetitive quality. The energy of the pulsations would likely affect the delivery of the verbal components and has in performances I've given of this text. Or the words, if delivered, might be done so in a quieter manner. Size of letters, or shape suggests relative dynamics. Simply put, large letters might suggest increased volume; smaller ones, a softer delivery. Fragmented letters may be delivered in a broken manner. Letters or words do not need to be expressed completely, as one might read the edges of letters, the spaces between them, read them backwards or not state them at all. The verbal message in this piece, if one chooses to seek one, seems to do with "time." This concept itself has many associations which might inform the performance. A play between prepositions might occur, contrasting "up" (near the centre), the fragmented "on" (lower left), and "from" (right centre). The word fragment "phonic" (middle right) might serve as emphasis in the sonic/phonic delivery. There is a feeling of up and down movement which might be conveyed by pitch.

The performer has great freedom when entering the field of the score. Sound Poetry is not necessarily hampered by the traditional left to right or even by top to bottom reading. The performer can start anywhere: in the middle; in the lower right; or, in a sense, everywhere, interpreting the overall feeling. In fact the text can be inverted or held vertically to create new visual, hence sonic perspectives. When performing in any of these manners, the Sound Poet also brings another form of unconscious notation to bear. This is an intuitive sense of composition, as unique as each performer. The Poet provides some sense of form, or non-form, structure or its apparent lack to the interpretation. This depends entirely upon the Poet's conscious or unconscious preference, or simply on the state of things inner and outer, at the moment of performance.

Silence must not be discounted here. A black section might suggest silence; the letter 'O' might indicate this; or perhaps silence will merely appear as a structural element determined by the Poet's sense of composition rather than by any visual stimuli. The piece might suggest a frenetic, violent reading at one time; a jagged, spacey reading, another; or a totally rhythmic interpretation. Performance will relate to the Poet's attitude, mood and energy at the time of utterance. As with any true improvisation, no two interpretations will be the same. If a reliance on interpretations that have worked before begins to predominate, the Sound Poet should retire the piece for a time, or hold it upsidedown, or resort to other means to struggle to find something new.

There is an intriguing and elusive process of acceptance and rejection that takes place during improvisation. Vocalizations rendered are not simply the first thing that pops into the mind. The experience is sometimes that of a series of relays that may or may not be tripped depending on the 'fit' of an impulse into the piece as it is taking shape. The rejection of the first impulses may provide challenge and tension for the performer. There is the matter of connecting the moment to what has gone before and to what might follow. And there are points where the piece performs the Poet, where what is happening is not processed in the mind but simply occurs, leading the Poet along. In these moments of release of control the Poet is on the edge not of chaos, but of creation. He or she is willing to let go, to ride without hands or eyes relying simply on some innate sense - an invisible connection, some unconscious knowledge or feeling or, as I call it, 'unconscious notation.'

It is the confrontation with the unknown, the spontaneous, that renders improvisation exciting. In it the music, energy, and dynamism of language at a molecular level that the everyday use and abuse of words often traps, will be released.

