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The Sound of Contagion: Poetry and Community in the Online Performance Series *Language is à Virus* (2020–2021)

Technologies, in mediating spatial relationships, change the physical character of voice and sound in poetry through altering modes of contact, proximity, intimacy and distance. While this tendency is as old as poetry, which may itself be regarded as a technology of the voice, the acceleration of digital technologies and increased reliance on virtual spaces, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, make this a striking aspect of contemporary poetry, and especially of sound poetry. This chapter concerns an example of how new technological affordances combined with the circumstances of the pandemic enabled the formation of a collaborative network of poets, musicians and artists through the *Language is à Virus* series co-hosted by Felipe Cussen and Martín Bakero. Jean-Luc Nancy's work on listening and community provides a framework in which it is possible to observe how new ways of being together emerge through sound poetry and improvisation, and why they are worth sustaining as the pandemic fades into collective memory. As technologies shift and change, poetry's orality takes on renewed significance, not as a retreat to its history as a primarily oral form, but as a catalyst for contemporary developments.

Claudia Benthien and Wiebke Vorrath observe that the meaning of the term *sound poetry* shifts in translation:

> 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. (2017, 6)

I will refer to sound poetry in this broader sense, while exploring what Benthien and Vorrath notice as an "aesthetic tension or shift between materiality and

meaning" (2017, 6), as well as the possibilities offered by this "performance inter-medium" (Higgins 1993, 1182), in which sound is the most important element in a configuration of performance approaches.

In a time of rapid technological adaptation, how do the sonic spaces of poetry react to or shape ideas of community? Jean-Luc Nancy's theorizing of community in *Being Singular Plural* (2000) is connected with his subsequent work in *Listening* (2007), where listening and community are linked in the idea of timbre. Timbre is described in terms of colour and texture of sound; it is informed by the other senses; it is what creates the unique character of a sound, but that character is plural, infected by something else:

> [T]imbre resounds with and in the totality of perceptible registers. In this resonance, the mutual *mimesis* of the senses, if there is one, is not distinguished from the already evoked *methexis*: participation, contagion (contact), contamination, metonymic contiguity rather than metaphoric transference. (Nancy 2007, 42)

Μέθεξις, or *methexis*, a term rooted in participatory forms of Ancient Greek drama, relates to both performance and performativity, the formation of community through contagious plural subjectivity. Nancy places sonic transmission at the heart of this process, and his note to the passage above shows him thinking about sound in spaces:

> More generally, we should examine those contagious referrals of timbre to the register of physical sounds (liquid, flow, rustling, banging, tearing), to that of animal voices (howling, growling, chirping, mooing), to that of materials (brassy, wooden), then to all the registers that the description of listening to instruments or voices seeks (what plucks or slides, what strikes, what vibrates) [. . .]. (2007, 84)

The social participation of *methexis* is grounded in its physical and material contexts; the self is imagined in terms of the "singular plural," which is a plurality that includes non-human animals and materialities as well as human others. Sound poetry, in its typical context of co-present live performance, emphasizes the sonic aspects of language so that the poet's voice is "contaminated" with these other registers. Extended vocal techniques may be used to produce sounds that are no longer tied to semantic meaning at all, but which explore the vast repertoire of vocal sound beyond language. The development of sound poetry alongside techniques of free improvisation in music has led to collaborations with musicians as well as other poets, since the abandonment of a singular lyric voice with a centralized locus of expression creates a space for more plural forms. Vadim Keylin foregrounds this plurality in the context of sound art, emphasizing the connection between "the sociality of sonic interactions and the material specificity of the sound medium in which they are realised" (2023, 3). His approach to

the "doing" or practice of sound-making, interpreted through pragmatism, brings these related aspects into focus, prioritizing collectivity over the boundary between subject and object, or between human and non-human actors (Keylin 2023, 3). A focus on practice similarly frames my argument here, since it is situated within my own participation in the events I will describe, which arose from effects caused by an extremely significant non-human actor, the Covid-19 virus. Under its influence, spaces, sounds and ways of being together were revealed and radically altered.

The genre of poetry reading or performance has proved highly adaptable to Zoom, and such events proliferated during the Covid-19 pandemic, connecting poets and audiences suddenly and globally in ways that would previously have required funding applications, substantial air travel and complex organization. However, this raises the question of what happens to communities in the flattened space of virtual communication, when embodied sound, with all the timbral richness of different physical spaces, is translated into digital signals. The apparent collapse of contexts not only challenges habitual frames of listening but demands a new understanding of poetry's relation to the world, of the materiality of its circulation and of its role in forming communities. Specifically, I am interested here in the circulation of sound poetry in experimental, avant-garde networks, rather than the concerns of mainstream publishing and performance, and in the cross-contamination of artistic forms, technological possibilities and multilingual practices that emerges most strongly in the intermedial traditions described by Higgins (1993, 1186).

As a language-based form, however far it departs from conventional uses of language, the performance of sound poetry raises questions about the self, voice, presence and meaning. For Nancy, the self is not a self-sufficient individual, but a singularity within a context that is always plural. His phrase "being-singular-plural" insists on the difference at the heart of togetherness, and on the space between singularities which is the common ground of community. If this space disappears in the complete fusion of beings, then so does the possibility of community. It is often distance, rather than proximity, that enables new understandings of community. In contrast to the closed or "immanent" communities defined by nationalism, in which poetry as individual expression is often seen as an articulation of essential identity, the "singular plural" enables us to think about the poem as inhabited by its others. In considering the distant, interrupted form of the online gathering, it takes on particular relevance. "There is no meaning if meaning is not shared," Nancy writes, suggesting, in *partagé*, both sharing as what is held in common and sharing as what is divided (2000, 2). He continues: "Meaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart [*se disjoint*] in order to be itself *as* such" (Nancy 2000, 2). The flicker and delay of the Zoom

meeting are literal reminders of the person-to-person distances that communities already inhabit, just as translation can be a reminder of the distances traversed in reading. Technology is already intrinsic to sound poetry, before the development of these virtual possibilities, since it is the awareness of recorded sound, the "secondary orality, founded on a graphism" that enables it to exist in its contemporary form (McCaffery and bpNichol 1978, 10).

Poetry's migratory evolution between orality, literature and the secondary orality of technology means that it shifts between contexts, often inhabiting several at the same time. Nancy's notion of community may appear to be in sharp contrast to the one outlined by Benedict Anderson, who shows how a national imagination is constructed through cultural forms (cf. 1983). Comparing the two, Pieter Vermeulen argues that they are complementary, because "the formal capacities of literature exceed its ability to formulate an ideological affirmation of the nation; rather, literature also offers a space where a different, non-national form of community can be imagined" (2009, 103). Vermeulen is referring to literature, and specifically the novel, because it can resist abstractions, but performance and exchange in poetry give even more concrete forms to cultural imaginings and alternative forms of non-national community. Sound poetry as it is known today, shaped by the sociality of the performance space as much as by concrete visual forms of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, has long produced alternative networks in resistance to national structures, although they have not been as intentional, structured or cohesive as traditional usage of the word "community" might suggest. As Jed Rasula has shown in his narrative history of Dada and its aftermath, these have frequently occurred through a pattern of accident, fracture and collision, from the wartime coincidence of the short-lived Cabaret Voltaire to subsequent eruptions of Dada in Berlin, Paris and New York (cf. 2015, Ch. 1). For example, the theatrical performance of Hugo Ball's sound poetry, multilingually fragmented and devoid of semantic meaning within any given language, responded to the international and mixed art-form context of the Cabaret; while distinct and original, it relied on the collective situation, which it, in turn helped to produce (cf. Rasula 2015, 18–27).

More recently social media networks have not only opened up the promise of global community, but also profoundly altered the individual's sense of self, as Roberto Simanowski argues, by encouraging an unreflective sharing of content and an outsourcing of memory that, as he sees it, results in losses for the self and society (cf. 2018, Ch. 2). While online "sharing" is part of everyday life, the word has taken on a new meaning in connection with distribution and promotion, as in the frequent request "please share widely in your networks." It does not refer to what is genuinely held in common; it is a mimetic duplication in place of the opening to otherness suggested by the contagion of *methexis*. Tony D. Sampson

revisits Gabriel Tarde's late nineteenth-century monadological vision of social relations via Deleuze and Latour in order to theorize contagion in an age of networks; rather than seeing contagion as a biological metaphor and a means of representation, he presents it in terms of the assemblage, which is relational at every scale (cf. Sampson, 2012, 3). Recognition of contagion's inevitability is contained in the idea of the singular plural, which is a relationality that cannot be reduced to the singular; all boundaries imposed by language, whether those of the individual or the nation, are sites of encounter and potential transformation. A discourse of fear surrounding physical or virtual contagion leads to an idea of "sharing" that is instead predicated on the replication of sameness.

Drawing on Nancy, Simanowski observes that much of the communication that takes place in the context of social networking is phatic, a means of "being-with" that is necessarily superficial, leading to a sense of community in which difficulties or differences are left unchallenged because it is not tethered to the material spaces of daily existence, and seems to transcend the political realities of living in a demarcated national space (cf. 2018, 131–149). In the sound poem, by contrast, the phatic function plays a different role as a commentary on its own construction. As G. M. Lang notes, "All agree that we are phatic when we confirm that a linguistic channel of communication is open with the um-hum's and and-uh's which so punctuate our speech" (1979, 104), and sound poetry often develops from this point. The metapoetic reflexivity of the sound poem inserts a distance in communicative channels, which are the same channels through which community is established. The performance of sound poetry online, particularly in collaboration with others, is therefore a means of "being-with" that can be distinguished from the phatic communication of social media. The recontextualization of voice as poetry demonstrates relationality down to the level of speech particles, where contagion rules and meanings multiply.

In the example I will discuss here, a community is framed and enabled by social media, but the imaginative misuse of Zoom videoconferencing enables a distinct form of *methexis* to take place. Language is à Virus began as an international group of poets, predominantly with an interest in sound, orchestrated by two Chilean poets, Felipe Cussen in Santiago de Chile and Martín Bakero in Paris. For 52 weeks, from March 2020, every Wednesday evening, an invited poet or artist presented their work on Zoom, either giving a live performance of recent or current poetry or sound art, or offering a retrospective gathering of previous work via recording. A discussion was led by Cussen and Bakero, and the final part of the session was dedicated to a sound improvisation, which enabled a more immersive experience. 2020 was significant for being the point at which new technological affordances, combined with the effects of previous decades of international contact, enabled up to forty sound poets to improvise virtually

across continents on a regular basis. Digital technology alone would not have produced these circumstances, or the commitment that kept the event running. Different networks of poetry and sound festivals across Europe and Latin America had enabled friendships and collaborations to develop over many years, and the sudden suspension of these activities in the pandemic created the time for them to combine and coalesce. Recordings of the events were made available on YouTube, creating a record of spontaneous conversation located in the problematics of practice and collaboration.

Cussen and Bakero share an interest in collective forms of art-making, which in Cussen's case extends to forms of conceptual and citational poetics that break down distinctions between poet and reader while relying on critical distance, irony, and often humour in the act of reading or listening. This critical element is further supported by Cussen's dual role of poet and academic, and his public persona, which self-consciously enacts the role of "el poeta Felipe Cussen" in Chilean political life, particularly through a series of provocative letters to newspapers; his doubled Felipe Cussen is a "singular-plural" position that addresses a critical collective in the public sphere through humorous yet purposeful confrontation. As curator or co-curator of numerous poetry events and exhibitions, he creates collective works in which his role is supportive, but critically framed and with an emphasis on dialogue. He is also a DJ with an interest in the poetics of sampling, which locates creativity in an organizational and recombinatory rather than expressive mode. Bakero's emphasis in sound performance is on the drone, on trance states that embrace performer and listeners in an embodied response to – and participation in – aleatory sound. His career as a sound poet in Paris, influenced by figures such as Ghérasim Luca and Henry Chopin, has gone hand in hand with his work as a therapist, where boundaries between the real and imaginary, or between sound and meaning, may similarly be explored. The dissociation of semantic meaning from sound takes on a psychoanalytical significance in his work, as in his immersive sound piece that morphs the word "problema" into "poema" (Bakero 2015). For Cussen and Bakero, curating is a necessary part of a creative act, and the making of a collective space is integral to the practice of being a poet. By combining their different approaches, the series was able to connect theoretical reflection, situated response and improvisational practice, revealing and transcending the limitations of the lecture room or the public performance as spaces in which poetry and its communities are formed. There was a sustained interest in wider contemporary politics: Carlos Soto Román presented work that addressed Chile's 1973 coup through his documental work *11* (2023), in which musical performance and erasure poetry were combined, bringing experimental techniques to bear on Chilean communal memory (cf. Bakero and Cussen 2020f). The meetings made reference to the Chilean constitutional referendum of

2020, the attack on the Capitol in 2021, and the final unravellings of the UK's membership of the EU.

The reference to William Burroughs in the name's guiding image is not accidental: to imagine language as a viral form is to see a non-human agency at work in its movement and spread, and to reframe human creativity in collective rather than individual terms. It draws on and develops a previous history of group interactions in and around poetry, particularly those linking Chile and Europe, as well as emerging landscapes of publication and performance in which the lines between authorship, curation and participation are blurred. The virus is a non-human entity that exposes the frailty of human bodies, as does technology, as the non-human presence through which virtual experience is filtered. The Austrian poet Jörg Piringer reminded the third session that new technology does not in itself necessarily lead to new poetic production (cf. Bakero and Cussen 2020b), but the series became a space for artists and poets to develop the creative possibilities of Zoom, often exploring the subtleties of an audio interface for live sound or the use of digital backdrops to layer visual effects. Most events were in English because of the mixed linguistic assemblage of the group, which included contributors from Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Mexico, UK, USA, France, Belgium, Germany, Austria and Slovakia. In embracing Zoom, which was built for business, it made the limitations of the platform visible, turning its affordances to creative use but also critiquing the illusion of immateriality created by virtual environments. Jennifer Scappettone, tracing links between copper mines and transatlantic connectivity, reminded her listeners of the "material substrate of the wireless imagination" (in Bakero and Cussen 2021b). Meetings included film, dance, installation art and music, expanding the reach of poetry but always coming back to the physicality of voice mediated by screen.

The different languages of the participants meant that elements of translation were integral to the proceedings, creating opacity as well as porous connection. Often the recordings reveal a tension between closeness and distance, a frustrated yearning to bridge geographical separation, but also a surprise at the possibilities of the virtual medium. The Nuyorican poet Edwin Torres begins his performance by reciting a cut-up of a review, disrupting his own presence on the screen by shining a torch on his face, then covering his head in wires. As a poet working between the two main languages of the group, Spanish and English, he performs an acrobatic Spanglish, using sound poetry as a resistance to settling in one language or another, the notion of "settling" itself unsettled by decolonial practices of translingualism (cf. Dowling 2018). In the ensuing conversation, Welsh poet Rhys Trimble draws out comparisons with his own bilingual practice. Performing bilingually in the context of Wales, where Welsh is a minority language, Trimble refers to his own sound-driven performances, in which a "vis-

ceral" sense of presence compensates for different levels of understanding on the part of the audience. How can this embodiment be transferred to a screen? Torres suggests that words can produce haptic affect if the performer can "believe in the microphone's ability to transmit words as touch" (in Bakero and Cussen 2020c). He relates this to "writing with the ear", suggesting that since sound and touch are on the same continuum of vibratory experience, the power of words to "touch" is not figured in terms of semantic meaning, but the point at which meaning between languages is disrupted into sound. Iranian-Canadian poet Ghazal Mosadeq reminds the group that on a screen, the primary sense is visual, while the UK-based Chilean poet Luna Montenegro points out that there is no eye contact on Zoom, which changes the body's response to others. Cussen notes that silence is also changed; whereas in person it might signal thoughtful reflection on the other's speech, the potential for digital delay and glitches makes this uncertain. This conversation, early on in the series, highlights the significance of these meetings as a context for discussing the channels of communication that were being used and the ways in which these were mediating interpersonal relationships as well as creating artistic possibilities.

The situation invited translingualism, not only because of the two dominant languages but because many, if not most of the participants foregrounded the presence of different languages as an aspect of intermedial creation. New York-based Puerto Rican poet Urayoán Noel's presentation is explicit in this respect, maintaining a rhythmical switching between Spanish and English. Code switching is usually subject to the subtle pressures of communities inhabiting embodied spaces but in the decontextualization of the Zoom meeting it takes on a more deliberate pattern. His performance begins with a series of anagrams on the screen from "RACIAL CAPITALISM" and "CAPITALISMO RACIAL," such as "CARPAL SAC MILITIA" and "OCCIPITAL MALARIAS." He announces that he is going to improvise: "You don't have to pay attention to the screen – why is attention something that has to be paid, anyway?" (Noel in Bakero and Cussen 2020h). His self-translations contribute to the reflexivity of a performance in which communicative modes and languages are multiplied, creating a distance from semantic meaning. Consequently, homophonic slippages of interpretation enter the monologue, for example: "digitality, by which I mean a digital tally of poetic actions" (Noel in Bakero and Cussen 2020h). As he continues, he comments on how digital space problematizes the idea of a community that, for a poet with a background in the Nuyorican performance scene, emerges from copresence. Referring to a Deleuzian poetics of digital folds and the porosity of the screen, he explains that his work is "digitally born," and that that his improvised online performance reflects the generative use of technology in its composition. He explains that he uses digital sound to add "texture and complexity" to embodied practice, aiming

to "complicate the immediacy and translatability of the body" (Noel in Bakero and Cussen 2020h). Building on his critical work on the poetics of diaspora (cf. Noel 2014), he proposes a poetics of porosity and of the diaspora, a "queer else-where" that is "diasporous."

Through a performance that, in the vein of David Antin, explores the sociality of "talk", Noel critiques ideas of community that come from too simple an identi-fication between voice, presence and belonging. Rather than amplifying an indi-vidual marginalized identity and extrapolating community from that, he grounds his performance in a plurality that includes technologies and spaces, both virtual and physical. The mediations of the screen and self-translation become a means of reflecting on presence, refusing what Nancy describes as "immanence" (2000, 32), an undivided community in which a collective thinks as one. In Noel's work, digital layers and refractions create a space for otherness and nuanced differ-ence. These improvised theorizations are put into practice through an enactment of Noel's "Wokitokiteki"[1] methodology, a series of improvised walking poems in which he speaks to camera. Rain disrupts his planned excursion around the South Bronx, so he speaks from his back garden, commenting on the autumnal leaves and their strangeness to a person from the tropics, the plastic umbrella produced and sold through migrant labour, and the "stereotypical suburban gringo" flamingos which were a gift from his mother. The props of an expressive diasporic poetics, such as "nature" and family memories, are playfully satirized. He plays percussion on a bird feeder and speaks through a loud hailer, decrying the "phony megaphone of magnified voices" typical of identity-based poetry (Noel in Bakero and Cussen 2020h). While his communication is a heightened form of sociality, a freewheeling chat and tour of his garden, its foregrounded relation-ship with materials and technology enables a depth of critical reflection and re-veals unequal racialized structures of capitalism.

Translation between languages, as an embodied act, parallels the mediations of technology, making bodies paradoxically present in different ways. German-Swiss sound poet Heike Fiedler's work is, like Noel's, concerned with technical mediation and the self-reflexive effects of speech in performance. While the uses of video back-projection as well as the precision of the electronic composition re-veal this as a highly constructed and prepared performance, it is adapted to the social and conversational space of the Zoom series in revealing ways. The begin-ning of her presentation, segueing out of unrecorded conversation with the meet-ing hosts, shows the merging of a phatic communicative context into that of the performance. She begins: "May I start? Do you hear me?", which is a ritual, prepa-

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1 https://www.wokitokiteki.com/ke-kosa.html

ratory statement, not requesting information as much as signalling that the speaker is relying on the attention of others; it establishes a relationship without taking it for granted. "May I start to do something? I don't know yet what what what [. . .]" She presents a short statement reflecting on her process: "Language is a challenge; it is a real challenge for me", which breaks down into stuttering phonemes as she brings in electronic sound with repetition of "dis-le" and "say it" (Fiedler in Bakero and Cussen 2020e). Layering different languages over each other, she creates a textured surface in which referential aspects of language are still present, but secondary to sound. These layers are complicated and developed by the use of video projection. The apparent indecision of the beginning creates a relationship with the listener, a frame that is broken and shifted as the performance continues. In the disembodied space of the virtual performance, fragmented images of a naked woman's body underscore the apparent vulnerability of the opening and its staging of hesitation, and draw attention to gendered expectations of language use. The images of a woman's upper body, overlaid by text, foreground the relationship between a body and the statements it can utter: the imperative "say it," in this context, suggests that gender, as well as translingualism, can create challenges for language and for speaking. The following section opens with a recording of acoustic guitar and a series of questions beginning "should she," which is the title of the piece in French available on her YouTube channel (cf. Fiedler 2019). The alliteration of "should she" is sonically effective, but the fact that the piece can be performed in French as "devrait-elle" shows that what is important here is the staging of gendered uncertainty; the phrase sounds inconsequential at first, but as it builds up, questions like "should she take a taxi?" expose the potential harm that can affect everyday decision-making for certain bodies more than others. The video, a close-up of a woman's shoulder as she stretches on the floor, underscores the blend of fragility and strength that typifies Fiedler's work. The gentleness of her vocal style contrasts with the more "visceral" translingual performances of Trimble and Torres, yet asserts its own politics through nuanced grammatical experimentation across languages and media.

A different approach to gendered spaces emerges in Zuzana Husárová's presentation, which begins with a piece that samples a child crying and what sounds like variants on a lullaby. We were all, at this time, used to inhabiting each other's domestic spaces, and the cry of a child has its own particularly piercing timbre; it is a demand that cuts through the communal space of the performance. Later in the conversation, Husárová elaborates on her choice of song: "Kom-kom-kominar," is a Slovak nursery rhyme that her daughter was demanding at the time on a regular basis. Husárova explains that what it means is, approximately "Chim-chim-chimneysweep," but that her daughter would mishear it as "konieja," which has no

meaning (in Bakero and Cussen 2020g). In Husárová's repetitions, the sound becomes *nie ja*, or "no me" – her response to her role as human jukebox, an erasure of the self in maternal labour. The intimate embodiment of a family relationship is sharply contrasted with the technological reproducibility of both the nursery rhyme itself and the technology Husárová uses to loop and repeat it. The contrast between the closeness of family relations and the distance of technological mediation is a source of humour in her presentation, but it also touches on the wider implications for gender equality of the collapse of boundaries between work and domestic contexts. The exploration of mishearing and misunderstanding in language learning as poetic resources aligns this work with Husárová's experiments in AI, also discussed during her presentation, and which are more connected with parenthood than may initially appear. Liza Gennart is a neural network she cocreated with Ľubomír Panák, given the persona of "a young intellectual woman in her 20s, who is a feminist, perhaps even a cyberfeminist, living in Vienna, of Slovak heritage" (Husárová 2022, 71). For the creators, it was an identity game in which Husárová was the "father" and Panák the "mother" (Husárová 2022, 72), a defamiliarizing inversion of the sentence investigated by Katherine Hayles in her book of that title, *My Mother was a Computer* (2014). As Hayles points out, language that extends kinship to computers through this kind of anthropomorphic projection obscures the way they function and carries the risk of "bring[ing] into question the extent to which human beings can be understood as computer programs" (Hayles 2014, 5). However, the increasing complexity of contemporary biological and technological relationships make explorations such as Husárová's all the more necessary in drawing attention to proximities and boundaries between different forms of subjectivity and embodiment, and these concerns reverberated throughout the series.

In the case of several presenters, a recording of a live event layered another space and time into that of the Zoom meeting, recollection of past shared inperson events reinforcing the sense of online belonging. The Chilean artist Anamaría Briede presented a 2018 recording from Festival PM (cf. SÓNEC 2021), where she is kneeling on a darkened stage and holding a sketchbook that is projected behind her. She performs the drawings and fragments of text, whispering over looped vocals. Then she grinds ink and paints with it, becoming the *voz de la tinta* or "voice of ink" (Briede in Bakero and Cussen 2020a). A pattern of words and phrases referring to face, mouth and mother tongue connect the embodiment of sound-making with the embodiment of mark-making, the fragility of the vocals echoed in tentative visual gestures. It is a performance of intimacy; the softness of the vocals and projection of the sketchbook give the sense of being admitted into a private space of kinship or friendship. At the same time, there is a clear gender politics at work: the presence of the body in her work is both resistant

and resilient; language is maternal but also estranged in such a way that its relation to the body becomes visible. The body asserts itself as the point at which signification dissolves, but in this performance it is also refracted through looped recording and projected image; its further recording for the online event only intensifies the technological mediation that is already present in the live performance. In several of the Language is à Virus meetings, Briede translated sound works into drawings, which themselves work on the cusp between writing and image. They mark the time of attention given to sound, making a responsive, interactive record of listening. This is an example of *methexis* in the sense of a contagion between art works as one gives form to another; the semantic openness of sound poetry is given a response that honours an open listening or *écoute*, in Nancy's terms, which does not settle into semantic interpretation (cf. 2007, 5–7). Rather, by accepting the range of impressions and timbral possibilities, her drawings respond by multiplying them further.

In a sound poetry improvisation, the singular voice, in reacting to others, takes on a viral, contagious multiplicity that disassociates structures, much as Burroughs' cut-ups do, whether on tape or in printed text. Each week, the speaker was invited to suggest a starting point for improvising, often in a way that emerged from their own presentation, for example working with the sonorities of different languages. Sometimes it erupted as a drone, led by sound rather than language; at others the emphasis was more visual. The Zoom improvisation promises the closeness of shared physical experience, but the thinness of sound and the acousmatic loss of reference reinforces distance. The promised fusion or closeness through sound is always at a remove, literally so in the latency of Zoom, but the performative action of making sound opens a communal space that allows for the cohabitation of languages and bodies. The US-based Chilean artist and poet Cecilia Vicuña invited participants to lean into the screen, to "disappear into each other electronically" and breathe (in Bakero and Cussen 2020d). As frequently in the series, the absence of bodies was what made the body central, since all the usual cues of live improvisation – sensing the room and the action of other performers – were absent. Zoom, designed to foreground the individual voice in a conversation, reacts to the loudest contribution, but it was otherwise difficult to gauge relative volume, or to sense the point at which sounds coalesced. The sound-making begins tentatively with body sounds that would normally be filtered out by Zoom's privileging of language, as all the instinctive aspects of "being together" in sound become conscious and dislocated. Looking back at the recording of this session is an entirely different experience from participating in it, even though the live experience was mediated through the same screen and digital technology as the recording. What was powerful in the moment, but missing from the recording, was the potential for interaction. Looking back with the

eye of the outside observer, no longer in pandemic isolation, the technical limitations are more evident. The sense of being surrounded by others, as if in a room with them despite being on either side of the Atlantic, was created not by immersion in the sound, which was thin and flat, but by the anticipation of response. The feeling generated by the communal space was in this sense a communicative rather than vibratory effect, but because the uses of sound were not governed by communicative language structures, they were unpredictable and defamiliarizing.

Bakero and Cussen comment on the unusual combination of individual, personal expression and collective potential that emerged in the improvisations:

> The improvisations of more than ten or twenty people that close almost all of the sessions were often described as a cathartic experience, evidently related to the conditions of isolation that we were experiencing at the time. But they also prove, on the other hand, the extreme flexibility that this form of interaction allows, where roles are often exchanged, different textures and forms of intervention are combined, and there is room for more pointed and intermittent interventions. (Bakero Carrasco et al. 2023, 10; trans. ZS)

In emphasizing the flexibility of roles and forms, they articulate the affordance offered to the individual participant, as well as the "singular-plural" composition of the sound-making community. While the global experience of the pandemic revealed the indifference of the biological virus, it focused attention on human relationships, illuminating the need for community, physical proximity, and being with others. Against isolation and isolationism, the improvisations often felt like a new way of listening to each other, and the improvisations were what set the series apart from other online meetings in social, artistic or academic contexts, as well as from social media.

While sessions of Language is à Virus were often framed by what seemed like phatic communication, enquiries after each other's health were, in the beginning, not necessarily purely phatic: the sudden fragility of health that is normally taken for granted creates a different relationship between embodiment and language. The virtual environment is often imagined as disembodied, as contrasting expressions like "in person" and "IRL" suggest, but the lack of "real life" contact in the pandemic accentuated the degree to which between virtual contact is mediated by time, space and non-human materialities. Nancy writes:

> If one can put it like this, there is no other meaning than the meaning of circulation. But this circulation goes in all directions at once, in all the directions of all the space-times [*les espace-temps*] opened by presence to presence: all things, all beings, all entities, everything past and future, alive, dead, inanimate, stones, plants, nails, gods—and "humans," that is, those who expose sharing and circulation as such by saying "we," by saying we to themselves in all possible senses of that expression, and by saying we for the totality of all being. (2007, 3)

In sound poetry, meaning is not conveyed through communicative statements that are meaningful; in that sense the sound poetry improvisations could be considered phatic, as an announcement of presence and togetherness. However, what emerges in Nancy's "meaning of circulation" is a performativity of meaning that connects the human with the non-human. In sound poetry, the extent to which language "loses itself" in the world is pronounced since it is, first and foremost, sound that emerges through interaction between body, air and spaces; it does not (or does not only) describe the world, but becomes part of it. The point at which semantic meaning gives way to sound is the point at which the boundaries between speaker and world become blurred.

Because it took place in a Zoom meeting, the circulation of the improvisations was quite different from the sharing described by Simanowski, even though it shared some phatic qualities. Firstly, and importantly, the meetings were intentional and prearranged, taking place in a virtual room set apart from the general flux of social media. Secondly, they involved a group of people who had decided to be present together for a certain period of time. Thirdly, technical limitations, like dropped internet connections, never being quite sure whose sound one would hear, or how one's own sound would balance with others in the group, were ever-present considerations that brought the physicality of the space into focus. Far from being disembodied, these improvisations were consciously and deliberately in dialogue with the material constructions that made them possible.

During the pandemic, it seemed that sound poetry, always so reliant on the closeness of bodies, had become a changed medium that had incorporated new dimensions of the technological potential that initially gave birth to it. There were some intentions to continue a second online series, but these did not materialize. What became obvious was that time was as much a barrier to collaboration as space, and that as soon as travel was possible, schedules resumed and the commitment of regular online meetings was harder to sustain. The group continued to communicate on WhatsApp and then Signal, sharing events, publications and news of its dispersed members, while a series of in-person events took place in various locations. The first of these was A Chile-Wales Sound Poetry Contagion in Bangor, Wales in March 2023, which echoed the form of the online meetings through a series of individual and paired performances, followed by a group improvisation in which the drone-based aesthetic of the online meetings was still clearly present (cf. "Language is à Virus" 2023). A collaboration with Poésie is Not Dead and the multimedia poetry journal DOC(K)S in Paris led to a second event in April 2024, this time a succession of short performances that revealed dynamic contrasts between sound in performance that had sometimes been muted online (cf. DOC(K)S 2024). In the variety of approaches and sounds, both of these events demonstrate the singular plurality that emerged from the series. At the same

time, they now exist on YouTube in the same online format as the Zoom series; an online video recording of a live event takes on the same mediated character as an event that was originally virtual.

A live event is one in which participation unfolds in real time, but the slight digital delay on Zoom means that "being-with" is never truly live, in the implied sense of being among live bodies, as opposed to material technologies. A live music event brings the possibility of human touch and breath as well as sound, these things often seeming intertwined, but on Zoom, social liveness is tempered by the absence of living bodies; even as it happens, it is already dead. Simanowski accurately describes the availability of recording as a deferral of the present, and it is deferred into a future that never arrives. "Une communauté se revant éternelle, instantanée et infinie est une communauté délirante," or in my translation: "A community that dreams of being eternal, instantaneous, and infinite is a delusional community," writes Francois J. Bonnet, warning of the 'synchronous community' that dangerously offers a means of forgetting our own mortality, the mortal body on which any viable politics must be based (2017, 64). The fragility of technology creates both a heightened desire for physical presence and an awareness of the inevitable loss of everything we make. Mexican digital artist Eugenio Tisselli remarks that Western cultures are not good at letting go of the past, commenting: "Because digital technologies are very unstable, they present an opportunity for learning how to let go" (in Bakero and Cussen 2021a). The limitations of technology, made audible in sound poetry, insert delay, distance and loss into collective interactions, creating new circulations of meaning and new forms of material connection. These limitations are themselves timbral; they create the sound through which we hear each other, becoming part of the "we," as a mesh of human and non-human interactions that constitutes a singular-plural community. At a time when the relationship between human creativity and technology is increasingly complex, sound poetry's emphasis on the materiality of voice allows a refocused awareness of the limitations of bodies and the different ways in which physical experience is situated. *Language is à Virus* showed how curation, with its etymological links to care and cure, can create sustained attention to artistic practice, making a space in which, to echo Bakero, problems might lead to poems, and in which the question of how to live with each other in changing technological contexts can be explored through ongoing poiesis.

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