

Dr. Shalini Sengupta

Universität Wien

“I Stop Being Human”: Tracing the Radiophonic Turn in Contemporary British Poetry and Performance

This paper analyses the electro-acoustics and innovative vocal performances of Hannah Silva—a British writer and performer who works across sound poetry, radio, and experimental non-fiction—to offer new ways of thinking about poetry in the digital age. I focus on Silva’s debut record, titled *Talk in a Bit* (2018), that weaves together poetry and taut electronica to experimentally explore the potentials of digital technology. Recorded during a week of free improvisation at the La Sauna Recording Studio in Italy, Silva’s debut splices words using a loop pedal and weaves together a lyric tapestry in which drums, vocals, noise distortions, electronics and music come together with tremendous yet elegant force. It is reminiscent, I argue, of earlier broadcast experiments surrounding poetry and electronic sound in England: particularly the ones led by experimental women poets and sound engineers like Rosemary Tonks and Delia Derbyshire in the 1960s. For the rest of the paper, I read Silva’s debut record and its techno-poetic environments alongside Tonks and Derbyshire’s forgotten sono-montage: their work with the legendary BBC Radiophonic Workshop in 1966 that made use of redundant tape recorders, mechanical reverberators, sound loopers and Shellac recorders to push the formal boundaries of live poetry. With an eye on what I provisionally term as the *radiophonic turn* in British poetry and performance, my paper concludes with the following questions: what does it mean to dethrone the human as the sole or primary agent of lyric production and transmission? How does the field of 21st century British poetics respond to the human’s complex, entangled relations with technology? How does contemporary British poetry and performance bring to the fore issues surrounding posthuman orality or posthuman knowledge production?