

The Sound of Contagion: Poetry and Community in 'Language is à Virus'

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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. 'Language is à Virus' was a transatlantic series of 52 weekly performances, discussions and improvisations in 2020-21 curated by two Chilean sound poets, Felipe Cussen in Santiago and Martín Bakero in Paris. Reflecting longstanding international relationships, the series focused on sound poetry in its broadest definition and on its relationships with film, dance, installation art and music. Literal contagion gave the series its momentum, but contagion as figured in the title, derived from the word virus of William Burroughs, also offers a model for contact across languages and art forms. In Jean Luc-Nancy's discussion of timbre, he defines *methexis* as 'participation, contagion (contact), contamination, metonymic contiguity rather than metaphoric transference'. This term, derived from participatory forms of Ancient Greek drama, illuminates the 'singular plural' in a context that demonstrates the formation of community through contagious plural subjectivity. Nancy places sonic transmission at the heart of this process, creating an ambiguous tension between language and the physical effects of sound.

This tension is key to the work presented in 'Language is à Virus', both the performances by individual artists and the collective sound improvisation with which each session culminated, where shared sound became a means of reaching towards others despite the barrier of the screen. With reference to a range of international contributors to the series, such as Cecilia Vicuña (Chile/USA), Anamaría Briede (Chile), Heike Fiedler (Switzerland), Edwin Torres (USA), Jörg Piringer (Austria), Zuzana Husárová (Slovakia), as well as the hosts, Cussen and Bakero, I will explore modalities of voice and sound in relation to the closeness and distance between bodies, machines and languages. What kind of communities are formed through these practices?

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