

Performance Poetry

New Languages and New Literary Circuits?

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Performance poetry in the Western world is a complex field—a diverse art form that has developed out of many different traditions. Even the term *performance poetry* can easily become misleading and, to some extent, creates confusion. Another term that is often applied to such poetic practices is *spoken-word poetry*. At times, they are included in categories that have a much wider scope: *oral poetry*, for example, or, in the Spanish-speaking world, *polipoesía*. In the following pages, I shall stick with the term *performance poetry* and briefly outline some of its major characteristics.¹

One of the most obvious features of performance poetry is the poet's presence on the site of the performance. It is controversial because the poet, by enunciating his poem before the very eyes of his audience, claims authorship and takes responsibility for it. Some critics experience this as disempowering for the audience, an argument that is frequently made by taking recourse to theories of the "death of the reader" (Barthes). Other critics and audiences experience the poet's presence as empowering. They argue that the personal presence explodes the traditional conception of the poet as being above his community; he is now a member of it, and his authority can be addressed, questioned, and redefined (Keane).

Another important characteristic of the poetry performance is the importance of the site of the performance. A community center will encourage a different dynamic between poet and audience than a theater, or a political rally, or a school, or a

festival hall. A poem will be performed differently if, for example, the poet knows the audience or is familiar with their context. Finally, the use of public spaces for the poetry performance makes a strong case for poetry being a public affair.

A third characteristic is the use of vernaculars, dialects, and accents. Usually speech that is marked by any of the three situates the poet within a particular community. Oftentimes, these are marginalized communities. By using the accent in the performance, the poet reaffirms and encourages the use of this accent and therefore, of the group that uses it.

Finally, performance poems use elements that appeal to the oral and the aural, and not exclusively to the visual. This includes music, rhythm, recordings or imitations of nonverbal sounds, smells, and other perceptions of the senses, oftentimes performed simultaneously with other elements of signification. In order to account for the simultaneity of the performance of different elements of signification, I will use the terms *sonic layering* and *layers of signification*.

The latter two elements have been particularly useful for performances that integrate the sounds and languages of different cultures and of different places, or for performances in urban settings in which several things take place at the same time. Conversely, one can say that the performance of poetry has been developed in such contexts because traditional poetic language was considered to be inappropriate for the representation or performance of life in multicultural urban settings.

¹ A much earlier, slightly different definition of these characteristics can be found in Beasley, "Vive la différence!"

A Lack of Language

If I rephrase the last sentence of the above section I might say that those who lived in marginalized, multicultural urban communities found themselves without a language. At the same time, a lack of language actually encourages reflection on language. Why does the language we have at our disposal not correspond with our experience? Who introduced this language? How can we develop an alternative? Such questions are conducive to the writing of poetry as an experimentation of and inquiry into language as it is and into its possibilities. In this section I want to briefly address two such projects from the United States. The first is the Black Arts Movement.² The second is the work of the Nuyorican poet Willie Perdomo.

In the words of Amiri Baraka, the Black Arts Movement was looking to enable the expression of experiences of African Americans, which could not be expressed through the language available at the time. Baraka writes:

We had evolved through our practice a growing rationale for what we felt and did. We wanted Black Art. We felt it could move our people, the Afro American people, to revolutionary positions. . . . We wanted Black Art that was (1) *Identifiably Afro American*. As Black as Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday or Duke Ellington or John Coltrane. That is, we wanted it to express our lives and history, our needs and desires. Our will and our passion. Our self determination, self respect and self defense. (2) We wanted it to be a *Mass Art*. . . . We wanted a mass popular art, distinct from the tedious abstractions our oppressors and their negroes bamboozled the "few" as Art. (502)

² For a more detailed analysis of poetry recitals in the Black Arts Movement, see Thomas, "Neon Griot."

Poets like Gil Scott Heron or The Last Poets, among others, developed their poetics out of such an impetus. Such poems as Scott Heron's "The Revolution will not be televised" or "Whitey on the Moon" intend to make listeners aware of their social and political situation, and persuade and convince them of the necessity of revolutionary change. The rhythms of their poems reaffirm these convictions: they are pronounced and captivating but repetitive, thus giving space to the words while at the same time maintaining the fast speed of the recital. In live performance, the repetitiveness of the rhythm allows for improvisation and possible interjections from the audience, which the percussionist could incorporate easily, then leading back to the rhythm of the poem. The emphasis on the voice encourages the listener to focus on the voice's tone, intonation, inflection, timbre and tonality.

The influence of the likes of Baraka, Scott Heron and The Last Poets is clearly noticeable in much of contemporary performance poetry. What has changed, however, is the quest. The poetry of Willie Perdomo is a case in point. Perdomo, who grew up in Spanish Harlem, writes about the young men who live in this neighborhood. While he searches for and develops a language that corresponds with their experience, he does not seem to share a belief in the social and political efficacy of language and art that was so characteristic of the sympathizers and adherents of the Black Arts Movement. Personal expression is disconnected from concrete political, cultural or social demands, and precisely because of this disconnection, poetry seems to offer some respite and consolation from a difficult situation.

I do not mean to judge this perception. Rather, I point it out as an important development that especially theorists, cultural analysts, and literary scholars should pay close attention to. My observation also demonstrates the responsiveness of performance poetry to the social and the political spheres, and its expressiveness of the impact (or lack thereof) that art has on the social and political spheres.

Alternative Literary Values, Alternative Literary Circuits?

I want to look at this development from a different analytical angle. In the previous section I focused on performed poems as texts. Now I briefly want to turn to the context in which these poems are performed: the literary circuits of performance poetry.

When performance poetry started to become popular in the 1960s and 1970s, performances mainly took place in cafés or other small, alternative venues. At the time most publishing houses would not have published an art form that was often times considered scandalous or simply not art. Also, poets felt connected to communities that did not have large, well-established venues or publishing houses at their disposal. Finally, a poem that mobilizes different layers of signification simultaneously cannot be contained by the page, especially not if music and other sonic elements are involved. As performance poetry has become more accepted, this situation is slowly changing.

Poetry slams have played an important role in creating venues for performance poetry, mainly in bars and clubs, and sometimes in community centers. In recent years more traditional venues like universities, literary festivals, small theaters, and small concert halls have opened up to poetry performances. Some publishing companies have started to publish performance poets. Some of them recognize the importance of the sonic element of the poetry performance and are publishing books that are accompanied by CDs. Also, a few publishing companies and record labels have been funded with the aim to publish performance poetry.

These developments have opened up more spaces for poetry performers. Therefore, it has become somewhat easier at least for some of them to live off of and concentrate on their art. However, the introduction of performance poetry into the traditional literary circuits also threatens to take the edge off some of its more controversial performances and more radical demands; an art

form that is accepted into a literary circuit can only with difficulty call for the radical reconsideration of the norms and values of this circuit.

What I have just said is applicable to the Anglo-Saxon world and to parts of Europe. In other parts of the world, performance poetry is taking a different turn. One example is the Mexican Internet-based collective publishing site *La Tortillería*. The site works with creative commons licenses. This means that all members of the site can download, print and record the work of any other member into the booklets that are made available on the site. They do have to acknowledge the author.

The creators of *La Tortillería* pursue their own cultural politics with the project. They outline them in the programmatic part of the page, entitled "Why can your mom publish in *La Tortillería*?" In this text they differentiate between professional and amateur literature, and clearly align themselves with the latter:

Accidental or amateur literature does not need many copies, but many titles. It is not concerned with the best work getting to the people, but it wants many works to exist, works that reach a small public, for which the work is of great value. Also, since the work is available, the possibility exists that some works might be selected and professionalized. (www.tortilleria.vientos.info)

The editors of *La Tortillería* see the Internet as the ideal tool to cope with the mass of the "many works":

For this reason, Tortillería Publishing since its very beginnings has used a large part of its resources for the development of technologies that allow to turn "the said into the done," that is to say, virtual reality into "real reality," electronic publications into books. (www.tortilleria.vientos.info)

The makers of *La Tortillería* conceive of the Internet as a way to make works of nonprofessional literature available to the wider public. Importantly, the Internet does not have any effects by itself: people have to use it. In the case of *La Tortillería*, the editors do this by developing software, the aim of which is the transcendence of virtual reality. This is an important point because it contradicts analytical approaches that argue that the Internet by itself has a subversive character. *La Tortillería* do not replace “real” reality with virtual reality; rather, they encourage their members to make use of the possibilities of digital media and technology in order to impact on the “real” reality.

La Tortillería explore the potential of the Internet for the creation of an alternative, not-for-profit and anticapitalist “publishing industry.” The performance of poetry in this case does not only create texts in which power relations are renegotiated and new expressions are to be found. Performance poetry is in this case linked up with the construction of an alternative literary circuit. The question that still remains to be answered is what will happen if “some works might be selected and professionalized.”

Conclusion

Performance poetry is a rich and complex art form, precisely because many of its creators have always positioned themselves at the intersection of social, political, and literary spheres. The art form is also at a crossroads, possibly because the concepts of the political and of identity that performance poets used to rely on have changed in such a dramatic way since the early 1990s. I hope that in

this very brief essay I have been able to illuminate some issues that are controversial at this moment in time, or that might become controversial, and that I have given readers some incentives to listen to—and to interact with—poetry on the different levels of engagement that the art form solicits and inspires.

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