

Edition S Press Tonbandverlag – publishing Sound Poetry and Acoustic Literature 1970–2005

Sound Poetry is not only a practice that manifests itself in performance but also in publication, although somewhat lost between the worlds of books (= literature) and records (= music). Publishing Sound Poetry is a reality since Kurt Schwitters published *Merz* Nr. 13 as a shellac record in 1925 (containing parts of the *Sonate in Urlauten*) and had it's zenith in the 1960s throughout the late 1980s with artists-run publishing projects on a D.I.Y. basis: the periodical *OU* review (FR/UK) contained 10" vinyl records with all forms of sound poetry; the Fylkingen society (SWE) accompanied their annual festivals with LP records of so-called Text-Sound Compositions; Giorno Poetry Systems (NYC) published compilations of various artists and collaborative projects, as well as mass media projects like *Dial-A-Poem*; Balsam Flex (UK) focused on instant-published readings and happenings as well as editing poetic media-alchemy on audio-cassettes; the Widemouth (USA) label put out an impressive amount of releases that combines spoken word, text-sound, noise-collage and mail-art with sound poetic approaches; and 3vitre (IT) compiled thematic collections of international sound and polypoetry on vinyl discs and CDs.

In Germany three young people aimed for publishing acoustic works of literature: The educator Nikolaus Einhorn, the artist Axel Knipschild, and the German studies student Angela Koehler founded Edition S Press to publish different kinds of ›akustische Literatur‹. They met Gerhard Rühm in the fall of 1969 and took him to their small self-run S Press gallery in Hattingen near Bochum. Rühm introduced them not only to his own approach in the field of Sound Poetry, but also to some of the forerunners of the genre – especially to the work of ›dadasoph‹ Raoul Hausmann and the expressionist poet, artist and actor Otto Nebel. Many first-wave avant-garde artists and their work had to be actively rediscovered after WWII because they had been banned or destroyed by the Nazis, disparaged as ›degenerate art‹. Otto Nebel, who had fled Nazi-Germany and therefore lived in Berne (Switzerland), welcomed the three young publishers just a few months after they had learned about his work from Rühm. They brought a tape-machine to record the early conceptual poetry of Nebel and publish it as the first releases of Edition S Press, or S Press Tonbandverlag (tape-publisher). A few months later they travelled to Raoul Hausmann in Limoges (France), who provided them with a recording of his own recitations of sound poems composed between 1918 and 1946 which had been committed to tape by peer-publisher and sound poet Henri Chopin a few years earlier. These

recordings, published on audio compact-cassettes and, like most of S Press' early releases, additionally on reel-to-reel tapes in handmade boxed sets, made the foundation for the publication of nearly one hundred titles over the coming years. Since the whole publishing concept was to carry out the most comprehensive documentation of acoustic literature and its precursors, to realize work due to the intentions of the authors, and to further present an international selection, this was to mark just the beginning. The main idea was to present the spoken word in its original form, which was emphasized with a quote by Emily Dickinson on one of the publishers' catalogue-leaflets: «A word is dead when it is said, some say. I say it just begins to live that day.»

In 1972 Angela Koehler's brother Michael joined the publishing project by virtue of his contact with John Cage, who was in Berlin that summer for the performance of his newly created conceptual text collage, *Mureau*. For this, Cage had processed those diary entries of Henry David Thoreau addressing music, sounds, and silence chosen at random to produce a chiming lingual composition. The day after the performance, he recorded them once more in spoken form onto a tape recorder for S Press. Two years later, research at Yale University for a planned dissertation on Charles Olson took Michael Köhler to the US, where he travelled extensively with his tape recorder to visit and make recordings of poets at public readings or at their homes. The authors told him they would rather read in an informal setting, such as in their apartments or other quiet places, than in a professional studio. They were afraid that the unusual situation in the studio might have an oppressive effect on their readings. The following recordings thus appeared in quick succession in the S Press line-up: Beat Poetry by Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, John Giorno, and Anne Waldman; proto-Language Poets such as Larry Eigner, Clark Coolidge and Robert Creeley; minimalist «lexical-composer» Charles Amirkhanian; not to forget Michael McClure with *Ghost Tantras*, Jerome Rothenberg with *Horse Songs & Other Soundings*, or Ted Joans with his *Jazz Poems*.

Contributions to the S Press catalogue from German authors included those by Friederike Mayröcker, Matthias Jenny, and Konrad Bayer, who merely read their own work. Ernst Jandl's *13 Radiophone Texte* was produced by the BBC in London using electronic sound effects. Concrete Poetry also found its way into the programme, in the form of *Konstellationen* by Eugen Gomringer, for example, and Helmut Heissenbüttel's collection *Texte* – although both have first and originally

been produced in book form. It is thanks to the vision and ambition of the S Press editors that poets were approached to come up with an acoustic version of their formerly printed work, if only by reading it themselves. In contrast, many of the works published by S Press had originally been conceived for an acoustic realization, like the electroacoustic one-word piece *Arbeiten* (*Working*) by S Press co-founder Nicolaus Einhorn. It is an example of simple but strong conceptual sound poetry that consists of the title word being spoken by the author in various technically treated variations such as slight changes of speed or pitch. Whereas *Der krimgotische Fächer. Lieder und Balladen* (*The Krimgothic Fan. Songs and Ballads*) by Oskar Pastior is conceived as being within a type of poetic private realm which exploits the sound shape of its verbal deductions and neologisms, recited by the author himself. A release in German with a trace of Swiss accent came from the surrealist artist Meret Oppenheim, drawing on dream-logic and introverted gestures. Other S Press releases featured Italian language by poet Arrigo Lora-Totino (*Trio Prosodico*) and (media-) artist Maurizio Nannucci (*Testi Sonori And Radiopoems 1965–1972*) as well as Russian language by Dimitri Prigov (*Azbuki Alphabete*). Rather unusual releases were the poetic texts of teenage grammar school pupils that appeared as *Gedichte sind gemalte Fensterscheiben* (*Poems are Painted Window Panes*), as well as a published speech of Clyde Bellecourt, co-founder of the American Indian Movement, *To Understand What We Are Fighting For*. The idea behind looking at indigenous North American culture, for which recordings were also planned for release on S Press, was to trace right back to the source, when works were passed on orally. Titles that had been announced in S Press' catalogues or on cassette-sleeves but have never been released include a compilation of poems by expressionist poet August Stramm, works by french poet Pierre Albert-Birot, zaum texts by Velimir Khlebnikov, sound poetry by Bob Cobbing, works by American authors Bobbie Louise Hawkins and William S. Burroughs, cut up works by Carl Weissner, or the live reading at the Cambridge Poetry Festival by Rolf-Dieter Brinkmann.

For Edition S Press, publishing on audio tape was not a mere economic decision allowing a print-on-demand practice – the very nature of audio tape made it significantly easier in production and more accessible compared to the more intricate vinyl pressing. It was seen as more democratic because anybody could record and re-record on tape at home with comparably small expenses. Tape also lends itself as an instrument of poetry, as spoken material can be processed further due to the possibilities of the medium: it can be spliced, cut-up and re-arranged, it can be frequency-filtered and equalized, the playback speed can be

altered, and several sound layers can be copied onto another. The imaginations of some of the authors were excited by all these possibilities, artists like François Dufrêne, Henri Chopin, Bernard Heidsieck, Brion Gysin had revelled in experimenting and came up with sound poetry using tape and the tape-machine as an instrument and a means for poetic creation, and all of them released works on S Press and other above-mentioned publishers of sound poetry of the time. An exception were a few publications on paper, like the folder *Serigraphien* (1972) containing original screen-prints by co-founder Axel Knipschild or the hybrid publication *Kulturpalast* (1984) containing an audio cassette, a book and a selection of cards featuring Russian avant-garde artists, and a small booklet accompanying a video art exhibition (*Moskau. Moskau. Aktion. Kunst. Poesie*, edited by G. Hirt and S. Wonders) featuring Russian artists' group Kollektive Aktionen. But the original and most important focus was literature to listen to («Literatur, die man Hören muss» = literature to be listened to, was one of S Press' slogans).

As for circulation figures the bestsellers were the above-mentioned forerunners Hausmann and Nebel as well as releases by international stars like Patti Smith (reciting some of her lyrics as poems in a gallery in Cologne) or John Cage, reaching a run of a few hundred copies each. Yet the channels were certainly few and far between, which is why the works were distributed by enthusiastic peers and volunteers over the poetry scene network. The cassettes did find their way to a public audience though, as they were presented on an international level at art book fairs, public events and festivals, played on the radio, or discussed in daily newspapers and periodicals. According to poet and publisher Henri Chopin, some of the niche-productions of so-called experimental work might reach many, many people over the years by word-of-mouth, lending copies, usage in universities, exhibitions, and presentations or re-issues in new contexts. S Press also benefited from the fact that, especially in Germany, some editors of public radio stations actively promoted the development of acoustic art called «Neues Hörspiel» («new radio drama»). Some of Gerhard Rühm's Hörspiele commissioned for radio broadcasting were published by S Press (*Abhandlung über das Weltall*), as were radio works by Bazon Brock (*Hörstücke: Des Kaisers kleinste Grösse / Triumphe des Willens*), Schuldt (*Deutschland aufsagen, Deutschland nachsagen*) and the before-mentioned 13 *radiophonic texts* by Ernst Jandl (recorded by the BBC).

Given their wide range, covering the most varied modes of recording of acoustic literature and sound poetry, the publications of S Press represent a great documentation of some experimental and conceptual

approaches in poetry that otherwise might not have been released in their originally conceived audio form. Michael Köhler continued to manage the publishing project right up to his death in 2005, but the most interesting and active period of S Press was throughout the 1970s until the early 1980s. Later on, Köhler got interested in artistic photography as well as following the idea to organize a big exhibition about the work of William Burroughs in Germany. Nikolaus Einhorn is living in Düsseldorf as a therapist; his work *Arbeiten* was re-issued on vinyl a few years ago. Angela Koehler is living in Zürich and is occupied with her own artistic work and taking care of the heritage of her (and Michael Köhler's) father Reinhold Köhler, who was an artist connected to the «Nouveau Realisme» movement and worked with palindromes as a poet, although his once announced tape release on S Press, *Contratexte in X Lektionen*, has never been released. Michael Köhler's and S Press' bequest is held and can be accessed in the Literature Archives of Akademie der Künste, Berlin.