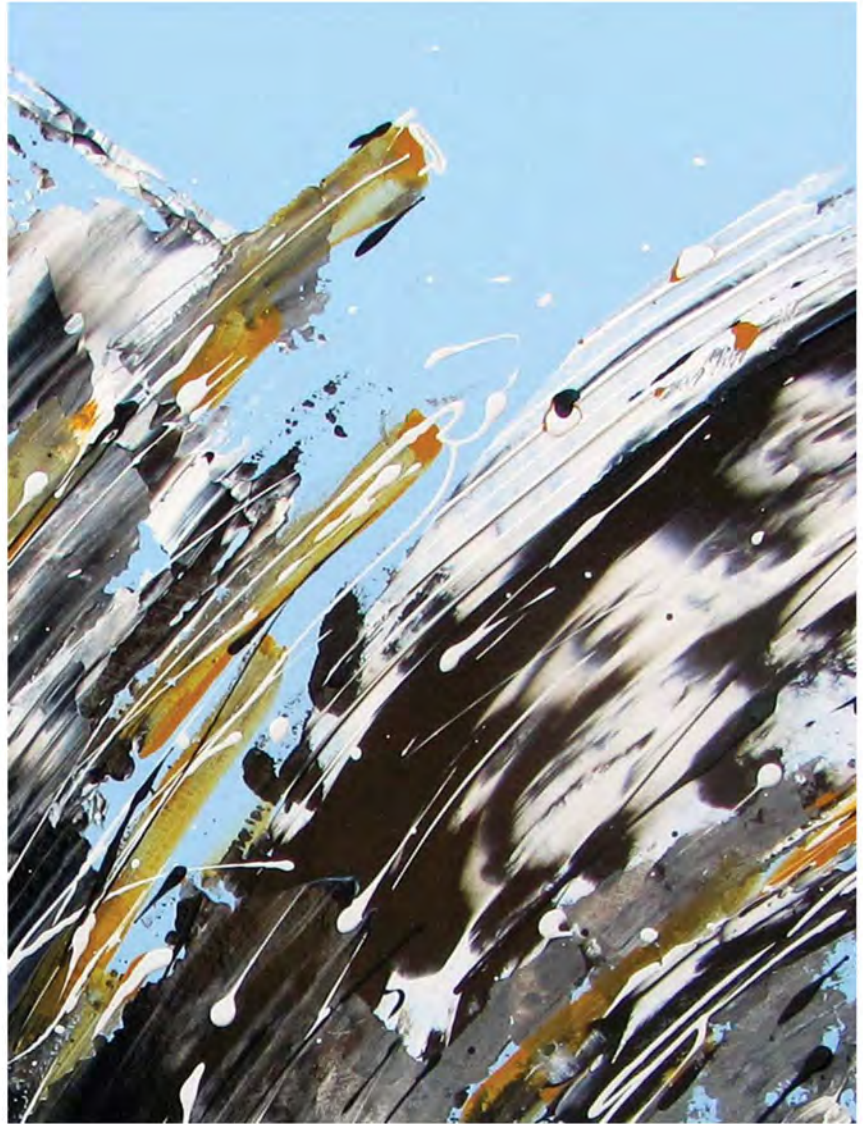


Performing/Transforming

Transgressions and Hybridizations Across Texts, Media, Bodies



edited by

Floriana Puglisi

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Collana Arti e Comunicazioni

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From Page and Print to Voice and Computer Screen: Charles Bernstein and the Performance(s) of the Poem

Charles Bernstein is one of the most compelling characters in the contemporary scene of American experimental poetry. His work, which includes a large body of poems and theoretical essays, criticizes the restricted, hegemonic view of conventional representations – the fruit of capitalist bourgeois society – and explores innovative forms that might instead embrace multiplicity and difference; a poetry of dissent that “makes sounds possible to be heard that are not otherwise articulated” (Bernstein, *A Poetics* 2). Writing “difficult poems,” poems that are “hard to read” for their “constructed style” (Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 5), he moves against the “artifice of absorption,” which is triggered by the illusion of immediacy, where the word is one with its referent/meaning. Rejecting “This dream of an art with no medium, of a signified with no signifiers” (Silliman 14), which secures harmony and consent (“belief, conviction, silence”), he makes language opaque to achieve the opposite value of “impermeability,” which favors skepticism, doubt, noise, and resistance and involves readers in the active production of sense (Bernstein *A Poetics* 29-30).

This attention toward the material aspects of production, toward the process of signification rather than meaning, raises a special interest in and awareness of the medium – or media – in which the text is conveyed.¹ Interested in the social and textual dimension of writing, Bernstein explores different forms of inscription as well as other instantiations that release the text from the page. “But is it even the ‘same’ text?” – asks the poet in “Every Which Way but Loose,” which he wrote in Word for Windows 95, can be now accessed in printed book form, and might come back to the digital environment if put on the web and reproduced in html version. “The new technology” – he adds – “has radically altered the material, specifically visual, presentation of the text” (Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems* 83-84). Furthermore, since virtual textuality implies the possibility

1. Literally meaning “middle,” “interval,” “interspace,” and generally defined as “a channel for the mediation of information and entertainment” (Elleström 13), medium implies a complex notion involving multiple aspects: technical (the mediating physical object, phenomenon, body), modal (material, sensorial, spatiotemporal, semiotic), and qualifying (contextual and operational aspects). An inclusive view highlights media relationships and similarities instead of separation and difference, for, even if to a different extent, media share the four basic modalities. As the properties of media partially intersect, any mediality is therefore inherently intermedial (Elleström).

of novel reconfigurations every time a product is displayed,² the computer screen offers “*a stage* for the transformation of texts into works” (85, my italics).³

Bernstein makes this point clear in “An Mosaic for Convergence,” a digital composition whose internal structure is reorganized each time it is executed by the computer machine. The work is composed of 24 texts or ‘tesserae’ that come up in an always-different succession when the “next page” button is clicked. At every reading, the software generates a new sequence after an automatic and random process. Different readers, therefore, will never experience the same work; nor will the same reader at any new reading since it changes every time it is performed.

Although limited to the computer screen, Bernstein’s stage metaphor foregrounds the intrinsic performative aspect of the work, which admits more or less extensive transformation at each presentation. Due to their material conditions, in fact, literary embodiments are never identical to each other. Bernstein calls these varieties “textual performances” (*Close Listening* 8), identifying them even in the medium of writing, which is typically associated with stability. This is indeed the case with manuscript drafts and/or different issues of a printed work, but greater variation is clearly involved when the poem shifts from the older print-analog context of the page to the new context of digital media (where change concerns the technical medium), or when it is remediated from writing to orality (where change involves the modal and qualifying levels, too), as with the practice of poetry reading or the technologically mediated audio text.⁴ Sound archives like PennSound, which Bernstein co-founded in 2003 with Al Filreis, SpokenWeb, UbuWeb, and St. Mark’s Poetry Project Archive are documenting this return of poetry to the oral,

2. Cf. Drucker: “The dynamic capacity of display modes and the mutable nature of all files and browsers suggest a continual reconfiguration of most files in their reading and display, rather than a final, fixed, and static format” (“Intimations of Immateriality” 162).

3. Bernstein would be evoking Barthes’ distinction between “text” – a “methodological field,” a “process of demonstration,” open and plural, beyond filiation and classification, practicing “the infinite deferment of the signified,” “play” – and “work,” the finished object that can be seen, closed on a signified, ascribed to its author, and “consumed” rather than “played” (157-162). To explain this performing/transforming potential of the text, I find Gunder’s distinction of further help. Gunder describes the work as a more general, abstract entity that can be accessed only if it is performed as text, i.e. “through the specific sign system designated to manifest a particular work.” Therefore, “to perform a work is to form a text” – which implies choices concerning materials, storage, and presentation – “and to form a text is to perform a work.” The text is as abstract as the work for it concerns the sign structure, i.e. “signifying elements in any form arranged in any way,” which are then embodied into physical signs. Consequently, a text can circulate in different sign systems and media with a certain range of variations.

4. Bernstein actually considers differences among writing, recorded voice, and live performance “not so much ones of textual variance as of ontological condition,” which raises new questions of poetic nature and authority (“Hearing Voices” 142). Given the increased reproducibility – and at the same time instability – of texts that shift from one medium to another, Perloff has coined the expression of “differential texts” for “texts that exist in differential forms, no single version being the definitive one” (146).

acoustic dimension and, preserving what is ephemeral like voice and sound, are contributing to a novel scholarly interest in practices of performance that are not new.⁵

What is changing is the status given to this oral instantiation of a text: no longer intended as ‘secondary’ and ‘derivative’ but one more manifestation of a work that takes place in a different mode, activating different perceptive and cognitive modalities that trigger new insights and interpretations.⁶ This implies the dismissal of the copy/original dichotomy, which privileges the written forms: open to multiple performances and “mutual intertranslatability,” each work has “a fundamentally plural existence.” Indeed, to conceive of the poem not only in (the poem *is* performance) but also *as* performance⁷ is to deny the idea of the poem “as a fixed, stable, finite linguistic object . . . its self-presence and its unity” (Bernstein, *Close Listening* 9). The text is undermined by new (and discrepant) embodied forms that displace the others instead of replacing them, hovering “around an original center in a complex of versions that is inherently unstable.” A center that is “empty” or a “blank space,” which implies “the possibility of freedom” (Bernstein, “Hearing Voices” 148).

Stressing the ductility of the poem, which can assume different aspects, and testing the limits and opportunities of old and new media, Bernstein rejects traditional notions of textuality, which rely on originality and permanence, for a performance paradigm that privileges process, change, collaboration, and participation; aesthetic as well as social concerns. Implying action, doing as well as re-doing, performance emphasizes method over content, the ‘how’ instead of the ‘what’ (Schechner, *Performance Theory* and *Performance Studies*). Given that “performative,” in linguistics, defines expressions that alter the state of things, “performing” is also “transforming.” Richard Schechner’s notion of “restored

5. In the USA, poetry recitation practices were common in the 19th century, in educational contexts as well as in domestic and public settings. It was in the 1920s and 1930s, however, that the poetry reading as now intended, i.e. the reading of poems by their own authors in front of an audience, emerged (Wheeler 3-13). Associated with protest and dissent after the Beats in the 1950s, it was eventually institutionalized once embedded in the academic environment but still offers an alternative means of circulation among non-mainstream circuits (Lazer 47-54). For new approaches to poetry, which focus on the material properties of sound (beyond conventional metrical studies), performance and poetry reading, sound technology and reproduction, cf. Khan and Whitehead, Morris, Bernstein 1998 and 2009, Middleton, Perloff and Dworkin.

6. Since the verbal medium is “a bivalent or double medium” – it can be both heard (aural) and seen (visual/graphic) – the written and the oral texts are “two versions of the prior, originary, abstract entity called ‘the poem.’ Neither has ontological precedence. Rather they are, irremediably, two – interrelated, certainly, even deeply and complexly, perhaps even unstably” (Preminger and Brogan 939-940).

7. The distinction *is/as performance* includes under the category of performance both practices and events (theater, dance, rituals, civil and political ceremonies, etc.) that are prepared, rehearsed, and reiterated (*is*) and cultural productions like “texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of art or culture” that are considered “not in themselves, but as players in ongoing relationships” (*as*). Emphasizing process, *as performance* implies all that “is regarded as practices, events, and behaviors, not as ‘objects’ or ‘things.’ This quality of ‘liveness’ – even when dealing with media or archival materials” (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 2).

behavior” – which describes actions that are rehearsed and repeated, “not-for-the-first-time” or “twice-behaved” (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 29) – foregrounds its radical character because the repetition of a given form or behavior requires adaptations, in the light of the new context, that may result in unsettling revisions (Carlson ix).

In this larger framework, where performance involves repetition and performativity covers “a whole panoply of possibilities opened up by a world in which differences are collapsing” (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 123), the live/mediated dichotomy that has fueled the debate around the nature of performance is no longer acceptable. Contesting the position represented by Peggy Phelan, Philip Auslander maintains that liveness cannot be considered an ontological condition of performance but rather a contingent value that is determined by a precise cultural-historical situation. Suggesting a complementary relationship, he observes that an event is not ‘live’ unless it is within a system that includes technical reproduction (37). Furthermore, given the contamination between liveness and mediation in a society that is increasingly mediated and technologized, “all performance modes, live or mediatized, are now equal: none is perceived as auratic or authentic; the live performance is just one more reproduction of a given text or one more reproducible text” (55).

In Bernstein’s case, digital technology plays a central and complex role in the shift to a performative poetics, both as a means of reproduction and as a means of production. In the first case, it remediates texts for preservation, storage, and distributing purposes. This process includes texts that migrate from their original analog context to the new digital environment and involves printed texts as well as audio texts, which cover the analog recordings of voiced texts⁸ as well as audio and audiovisual recordings of poetry readings. In the second case, moving beyond mere preservation and storage, digital technology influences the performance of the text,⁹ which can now also rely on vision as well as on sound, on a wider display of material features (as to color, type and dimension of fonts, layout), on movement and animation. Whereas analog systems implied the separation of

8. Since poetry is traditionally identified with voice (‘poetic voice’), Wheeler employs the label *voiced texts* for poems that are “recited, read aloud, performed by authors, actors, students, and others” to distinguish voice as performance (literal voice) from *textual voice*, i.e. voice as figure (2). Following John Miles Foley, Novak refers to texts that are performed and received orally, but which are previously composed. Usually parallel to print versions, they are “relatively stable” (63). Here I am referring to Charles Bernstein’s early experiments with the recording of his voice, which eventually culminated in *Class* (1983), a cassette release of poems read by the author. The whole body of his homemade tape experiments is now available on PennSound (<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bernstein-1975-76>).

9. Digital technology is indeed intrinsically performative for it relies on code that needs to be ‘executed’ by the software to be turned into readable signs. At issue is a double process of performance involving the machine as well as humans: “The performativity of digital code acts is a consequence of the fact that at the machine level, writing and reading operations are executable behaviors performed by code . . . Material instantiations of visible, listenable, touchable, and readable forms result from the performance of the code at the machine-processing level. In turn, these material forms offer themselves for a perceptual and reading performance, suggesting the dual dimension of the performativity of electronic codes as a series of injunctions that links machine and human performance” (Portela 67).

media, digital technology fosters intermediality (Portela 297-307), i.e. hybrid “semiotic complexes or entities” (Herman, Jahn, Ryan, eds.) where different codes – each on an equal stance – collaborate in the construction of meaning.¹⁰ Transgressing media borders, these hybrid constructions are themselves inherently performative since they create new products that bring about change (Ljunberg 84-85).

Considering this intrinsic performativity of a work, what happens, therefore, to the text that is re-produced in different contexts, media, and forms? What occurs to the poem that circulates out of its supposedly original or natural context of the page (an idea established with the hegemony of print culture) and what other configurations – beyond the poetry-reading event – can the voiced performance of poems take when aided by the new digital technology? Bernstein’s chameleonic production clearly attests the “persistently ‘multimedia’ character of poetry” (Reed 272) and offers a wide spectrum to investigate creative and performing practices that are launching new venues for poetry. In the following pages, I will therefore consider some of Bernstein’s poems that vary from writing – on both page and computer screen – to oral re/production and study the transformations these textual performances entail in terms of voice (from metaphoric poetic voice to uttered speech), sensorial and cognitive experience, audience participation, access and circulation.

Charles Bernstein’s Veils

The transformative and regenerative potential of the text in Charles Bernstein’s work is most explicitly exemplified by his *Veil* series, which evolves from the analog print medium to the digital context, from a visual work, whether in the analog or digital version, to an acoustic product. The first *Veil* goes back to 1976; typewritten and printed by Xexoxial Editions in 1987, it is now available online in both pdf format (of the 1987 edition) and html EPC (Electronic Poetry Center) edition. The second series, issued in 1996, was directly produced in digital format (html). There follow a few isolated texts, typewritten – “I became a consultant to the world outside” and “Horizon” – and digital-born – “Window’s Ends” (2005). The series eventually includes a digital audio text, “Crazy of Objects (Veil)” (1999/2014), which is matched by the visual representation of its sound waves (“Waveform Veil,” 2014) – both available on PennSound.

10. If production and criticism in the *ut pictura poesis* and *sister arts* traditions implied notions of medial purity, separation and competition, Intermedia Studies since the 1980s, stressing collaborations, similarities, and relationships, has instead dismissed the analysis of products in isolation to consider them as/in medial networks (Rippl). Kattenbelt, for instance, employs “intermediality” for “those co-relations between different media that result in a redefinition of the media that are influencing each other, which in turn leads to a refreshed perception.” This redefinition implies that “previously existing medium specific conventions are changed,” transforming traditional modes of perception (25).

The inspiration for Bernstein's "most visually oriented work" (the 1987 printed edition of *Veil*) comes from Morris Louis's "Veil" paintings (Bernstein, "An Interview with Manuel Brito" 31), a series of abstract pictures where stains of colors are covered by the superimposition of successive stains. At the edges, however, the brightest nuances of the suppressed colors still shine through, providing a trace of the inner layers. The title is also evocative of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil," which is quoted in the epigraph: "'There is an hour to come,' said he, 'when all of us shall cast aside our veils. Take it not amiss, beloved friend, if I wear this piece of crape till then.'" In Bernstein's use, the veil image allows him to unmask the opacity of words and break the illusion of transparent and direct communication. "Our language is our veil," he replies to Brito, "but one that too often is made invisible" (32). To make it visible, therefore, he must foreground the materiality of the sign, its texture. Conceived as a visual emblem, *Veil* is paradoxically revelatory of its opacity: the visual properties of the text enact its meaning; concealing, which takes literally place on the page, is revealing. As words overlap, the text is on the verge of illegibility for the letters cannot be sharply identified, risking erasure under the overlaid elements. Reading and understanding, however, are seriously defied but not absolutely prevented. If sight is strained and time taken to inspect the shapes of black ink, letter-by-letter words can be eventually identified and sentences reconstructed. Since a veil is a piece of transparent cloth, which hides as well as reveals, readers can 'see through' this intricate web of writing. This is explicitly suggested at the end of a hard-to-read passage, where the sentence "all trace of not felt behind LARGE SCREENS I see dimly through & later" suddenly appears, exceptionally unobstructed to the view (Fig. 1).

The reading experience, however, ceases to be automatic and to lead directly to a common meaning, one that is shared by every individual. The (presumed) direct movement from word to world, from language to referential meaning, is continuously hindered by the physical properties of the text, which, from overlapping to typographic and font size variations, swerves attention away from a supposedly transcendent abstract content, away from any ready-made meaning, and drives it back to its material embodiment and sematic potential. Instead of allowing readers to consume content, it delays meaning construction, which might happen in different ways and take different times, according to the individuals who are involved. Typography, therefore, enacts a visual performance of sense that requires from readers strengthened concentration and active participation. In these circumstances, the visual and material properties of the text work like voice, a theatrical script, or musical score (Drucker, *Figuring the Word* 103). In Bernstein's own terms, this type of writing would "acknowledge its own materiality and acoustic density/destiny, its visible aurality" ("An Interview with Manuel Brito" 28). It provides "acoustic staining," an expression clearly inspired by Morris Louis's stains of color, "but also, as in biochemistry, the stain allowing you to identify otherwise invisible substances" (i.e. language as medium) ("An Interview with Manuel Brito" 31), that suggests the conflation

If the conversion of the printed work into html format can already attest its transforming potential,¹¹ deeper changes are involved in the series of digitally born *Veils* and in the audio *Veil*, where the new media context determines different embodiments of the same inspiring concept, offering “a useful contrast between the two materialities” (Drucker, “Intimations of Immateriality” 166). The digital *Veils*, for instance, employ alternative strategies in comparison with the former “acoustic stains.” Larger portions of the text are legible but language is not the only code. Just as the materiality of ink and typography had been previously emphasized, other visual elements, from the use of colors (in direct opposition to the black ink of the typewritten series) to design and greater variation of fonts call for attention. Overlapping is still employed but to a lesser degree.

This technique is mostly used in the poem that is appropriately called “Veil,” signaling a closer link to the printed antecedents (Fig. Q). Differences, however, abound. Once the typewriter is replaced by the computer, the black “stains” are replaced by colors, which, in this case, are limited to white, black, and grey (whether white is used on black/grey and black is used on white, grey is employed only for the background). Collage-like, the composition consists in the superimposition of several textual layers: each layer contains a smaller portion of the same text that lays at the bottom. Some of these sections are clearly delimited by red lines. Other areas can be distinguished by color variation (the square box with darker grey background at mid-height toward the left, whose first line reads, “Also when there;” the one with white background, whose first line reads, “Awash awash”) or pattern variation, with the use of square (above on the left and below on the right) and striped motifs (below on the left and above on the right). The square and striped areas on the right are not regular, which suggests the physical action of having them torn – despite their digital, virtual environment – from their original context.¹² In any case, unlike the printed series, overlapping prevents readers from seeing through. Whereas the typewriter had allowed the poet to rewrite the text over a previous layer operating some misalignment, which made the underlying text partially visible, in the new digital

11. Referring to the three samples that are reproduced in html version at UBU Web, Golding observes that “*Veil* literally fades in its rematerialization.” Blaming poorer resolution, he finds them harder to read than their print equivalents, which intensifies issues of materiality in such a shift from print to electronic textuality (273). To him, in fact, Bernstein’s *Veils* represent “transitional materialities,” texts that, shifting from page to screen, “interrogate the material limitations of the page-based, word-centered poem and look forward to the possibilities and achievements of digital poetics – and that often position themselves self-consciously as points of reciprocity between the print and digital environments” (252).

12. Even if intrinsically immaterial, the electronic environment offers the traces of materiality through the visual display of its contents, which explains the impression of such a tearing. As Drucker states regarding the letters reproduced in digital contexts, “We perceive the visual form of the letter on the screen as fully material – replete with characteristics, font specification, scale, and even color – even though the ‘letter’ exists as a stored sequence of binary digits with no tactile, material apparency to it in that fundamental condition” (“Intimations of Immateriality” 171-172).

environment each superimposed layer totally obscures the former.¹³ Some other strategies are therefore devised to reproduce the veiling/revealing effect of the first series. Often, for instance, there is no space between the lines, so that words aligned in succeeding lines touch each other suggesting some overlapping (see the small box with grey background starting with “Also when there,” but the practice is intensified on the right side of the central black section). In the striped sections, on the other hand, the use of white font over a white and grey background hinders a clear discerning of the words, parts of which become invisible when laid on white.

Showing greater heterogeneity, different strategies are employed in the other poems of this series. In “Illuminities” (Fig. R), for instance, the superimposition of textual layers no longer implies the obliteration of the elements that lie beneath. Here, the underlying text – white font on blue background – crosses the box delimiting the fully visible and readable text. In tune with the title, which recalls the brightness of color that, in Louis’s “Veils,” offered the marks of preceding brush strokes, this prolonged visibility evokes the translucency of a veil. Yet, the use of a smaller-sized and nonalphabetic font still prevents readers from a full discernment of any piece of writing. Impossibility of decoding and emphasis on the other material properties of shape, color, and graphic design makes language one more visual element among the others, a visible rather than a linguistically signifying object. The ‘main’ text – the portion that is legible, containing the title-word – is preserved but the reading is distracted, or disturbed, by the series of visual elements that intersect the box and/or lie in the background.

“Crazy of Objects (Veil),” finally, offers an aural equivalent of the first series. This audio text, in fact, overlaps fragments from a reading that Bernstein held in 1999 in Vancouver. Just as visual decoding is severely compromised in the first series, so is listening strongly inhibited here. Just as, in the printed *Veil*, a few words clearly emerge from the ‘stains’ of overlapping textualities, here, too, a few utterances remain disentangled from the phonic clash and can be exceptionally discerned, up to the climactic sentences “I go crazy” and “before I go crazy of objects/subjects,” which are repeated more than once. Mostly, however, since words and sentences, even when discerned, cannot cohere into discourse, they lose some of their linguistic, signifying function; what you hear is voice, voice that is eventually perceived like sound, Roland Barthes’s “grain of the voice.” As listening, which is psychological, is reduced to hearing, which is physiological, the audience shift from the ‘oral’ to the ‘aural’ dimension of language. Relying on breath, voice, and speech, orality would “valorize speech over writing, voice over sound, listening over hearing.”

13. Drucker identifies a “loss of information” due to the immateriality of the digital code: “The immaterial substrate, a mere display of code, has eliminated the production history and process This is a new *Veil* . . . between text-as-image and the graphical end result of a series of now fully absent manipulations whose trace is the result but which are not recorded in the material of the text. The palimpsest is both real and illusory. In the immaterial condition, it lacks all recoverable dimensionality” (“Intimations of Immateriality” 166).

Aurality, on the other hand, refers to the body, “what the mouth and tongue and vocal chords enact” (Bernstein, *Close Listening* 13). The first would point directly to the poet and to authorial presence; the latter does instead relate to the poem itself: embodying its sound, it offers “a performative sense of the ‘phonotext’ or ‘audiotext.’” To Bernstein, it is the negation of orality, or “*a/orality*,” in the alternative spelling he suggests (*Close Listening* 13). Developing *aurally*, therefore, this voiced text problematizes the category of voice and its related aspects.

Traditionally, voice is associated with ideas (and ideals) of spontaneity, naturalness, self-expression, self-presence, and authorship, which are commonly questioned by “language poets” like Bernstein in the larger frame of post-structural criticism. Its metaphoric meaning as a marker of identity and agency has obscured its primary and literal sense – sound produced by the vocal organs – and denigrated sonic and material properties, which are given a secondary status and a disruptive function. Since the dichotomy signifying-authorial voice/bodily-material vocality, where the first is the privileged category, runs parallel to other (related) binaries – referential meaning/other processes of signification, content/form, human/non-human, language/music, male/female – voice must undergo a process of denaturalization that might overturn hierarchies and their tacit ideologies (Weidman 233-234). The new technology is here employed to this purpose. The overlapping of fragments from recorded speech creates a reverberating effect that amplifies, or multiplies, Bernstein’s voice. The deceleration of the vocal articulation allowed by digital manipulation (starting from 00:05:56) deforms it to the point it sounds alien while non-melodic electronic sounds (from 00:06:57 to the end) further contribute to such effect. Contrary to the principle of fidelity, which, making the medium invisible, aims at ‘natural’ speech as a sign of originality and authenticity,¹⁴ this technique of digital audio editing abandons the linear semantics of the analog production technology for a nonlinear poetics that attacks voice and/as speech, values mediation over immediacy, and favors new modes of listening – of listening digitally – that extend beyond the traditional sharing of

14. Since the advent of sound reproduction technology, the aspiration to fidelity – of the reproduced sound to its phonic source – has resulted in efforts to hide technology, to turn it into a “vanishing mediator.” The opposition between ‘original’ (live sounds) and ‘copy,’ where only the former has prestige, has denigrated reproduced sound as ‘copy.’ Sound fidelity has therefore provided a gold standard, “the measure of sound reproduction technologies’ product against a fictitious external reality.” Fidelity implies a perfect correspondence between representation and the object of representation. Its loss, which is proportional to the perception of mediation, amounts to “a *loss of being* between original and copy.” Whereas analog recording technologies preserve a direct link with the ‘original,’ because sound is causally related to the analog recording, digital recording, where sound is converted into series of zeros and ones before it is recomposed in the phase of reproduction, is “more ontologically distant from live performance” (Sterne 218, italics in the source). As Spinelli further observes, since digital technology was employed to replicate old forms instead of experimenting with the new, it was also directed to reach maximum fidelity by “silencing technology” and to obtain “more direct access to human voice, less noise, less distortion, less evidence of process” (103). Hence his plea for a non-linear digital audio editing that might explore new possibilities outside the concerns of analog recording.

semantic contents (Spinelli 106-109). To support this unique acoustic experience, the audio text is deprived of any transcript – which might have restored linear semantics. In its place, on the other hand, the PennSound web page includes another version of the text that renders the sounds produced visible. With a picture of the sound waves, which digital technology manages to show, Bernstein also offers a visual performance of what is instead invisible, appealing to the eye as well as to the ear although, stimulated by different texts, visual and acoustic perceptions remain split from each other.

Reading Poetry: From Live Event to Digital Mediation

In line with the development of the *Veil* series, Bernstein has been promoting alternative forms of poetry ‘off the page’ that, foregrounding its material properties, whether visual or acoustic, emphasize its performing character. The new digital environment is clearly favoring greater textual fluidity, adaptability, and change thanks to its higher potential for manipulation and freedom to exploit extra-linguistic codes, which have a more consistent share in the process of signification. As such, it is favoring practices of remediation and/or production that allow the poet explore the new frontier of phonotextuality.

Bernstein’s interest in the voiced text, which has manifested since the 1970s with his homemade tape experiments, has been reinvigorated by his regular commitment to poetry reading both as a performer and in a critical perspective.¹⁵ In the context of his experimental poetics, which rejects the expression of persona and persona-ism as well as the illusion of directness and spontaneity, readings might be ambiguous or suspicious. Having a poet read his/her (previously written) work in front of an audience, in fact, would exalt the author and generate the illusion that the text is created at the time of its delivery. “A specter is haunting poetry readings,” writes Peter Middleton. “The ‘dead author,’ risen from the text again . . . claims to be the originating subject from which poetry is issuing in front of your eyes. . . . The poet *performs* authorship” (Middleton 33, italics in the source). Although Bernstein himself would privilege the performances of poets reading their own poems, where the music of words is saved from the eloquence of acting (cf. *Close Listening* 11), he warns against the “fetishizing” of the author and the author’s voice (“Hearing Voices” 142). Re-enacting the poem, the performance has “the potential for shifting frames,” where “the shift of frame is itself . . . a performative gesture” (“Hearing Voices” 145).

15. Bernstein’s serious concern for the sounding of poetry can be traced in a series of editorial and curatorial projects that resulted in radio programs (*Close Listening* and *LINEbreak*, The Segue Reading Series, with Ted Greenwald at the Ear Inn, 1977), the edition of the Segue CD (*Live at the Ear Inn*, 1994) and of the volume *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998). For a discussion of Bernstein’s early tapeworks, cf. Hennessey.

To readings that might promptly turn into a performance of authorship, Bernstein prefers “minimalist,” “anti-expressivist” and “anti-performative” modes that reject the conventions of representation – which rely on sight and distance (of the I/eye from the seen object) – and traditional theatrical performance – which relies on character, personality, setting, gesture, and drama at the expense of words (*Close Listening* 11) – and focus on voice as such. Free from staging elements,¹⁶ voice would develop an autonomous existence, as if it were separated from the body (“disembodied”), reaching the audience in an “uncanny” and “hypnotic” manner (*Close Listening* 10). This path, originally explored in his early tapework experiments, revived in “Crazy of Objects (Veil),” and investigated in critical writing, is more directly matched and developed by the new product of the audiovisual poem, rather than by the poetry reading as a live event, which, incrementing the constellations of textual performances – written as well as oral – helps revising poetic economies. The small number of examples than can be identified so far – “On Election Day,” *The Answer*, *Pinky’s Rule* – shows a poet experimenting with always novel forms of aurality that comprise oral presentation and inscription, immediacy and mediation, event and text.

“On Election Day” offers a paradigmatic case. Collected in *Recalculating* (2013) but also accessible online in both audio form (the audio recordings of different poetry readings) and as an audiovisual product, it evolves differently according to the means of production and reproduction. On the page, the text offers a series of independent sentences and phrases, each one usually providing a line of its own. Repetitions abound, as with the reiteration of “on election day” at the end (mainly) or at the beginning of several lines. The poem develops as a litany, evoking the rhetoric of the sermon. Preacher-like, the speaker addresses and involves the national community in the political event of US presidential elections on November 4, 2008. Form and lexicon mimic biblical expression: the paratactic structure, rich in parallelisms and “Let” constructions, is filled with religious, bible-related words like “promise,” “miscreant,” “saint,” “brother,” “sister,” “lamb,” and apocalyptic tone (“The men prepare for dying”). Bernstein’s readings restore the poem to the oral dimension evoked on the page.

The MP3 versions that are available on PennSound – the reading of March 14, 2009 at the Bowery Poetry Club, New York City; the reading of June 21, 2009, at 21 Grand, Oakland, Calif.; the reading of October 5, 2009, at Harvard University – deprive the performance of its immediate context but still provide a unique auditory experience. The

16. Bernstein considers the poetry reading as “radically ‘poor theater’ in Jerzy Grotowski’s sense” (*Close Listening* 10). Unlike traditional theater, it does not aim at aesthetic illusion, avoiding costumes and props, and does not perform an ostensive function. It does not deny the presence of the audience; it does not promote any identification between performer and fictional character (the poet is always him/herself) and does not intend to show an action through gesture or staging. Instead, it relies to a greater extent on the spoken word, which is a central element (rather than simply one among the others) to convey images and narration (Novak 58-59).

place and time of the event are merely suggested by a descriptive caption. Abstracted from the larger context of its delivery – the series of other poems read on the same occasion (except for the event on June 21 at 21 Grand in Oakland) as well as any noise due to the social circumstance – the poem is cleansed of any sound that is not just the poet's voice. In the reading of March 14, the final applause (signaling the co-presence and participation of an audience, that is the reading as event) is cut after a few seconds while no hint remains in the October 5 record. The black screen – it hosts only the control bar – fosters the intimacy that is typical of the listening activity. Whereas vision detaches the subject from the object of perception, in the listening experience sound and listener are interconnected and interdependent: “the object does not precede listening. Rather, the auditory is generated in the listening practice: in listening I am in sound, there can be no gap between the heard and hearing” (Voegelin 5). Having separated the voice from its embodied source, the audio text allows the listener “to enter,” in Bernstein's words, “into a concave acoustic space rather than be pushed back from it.” And again, “When a poem has an auditory rather than a visual source (the heard performance rather than the read text), our perspective on, or of, the work shifts. Rather than looking at the poem – at the words on a page – we may enter into it, perhaps to get lost, perhaps to lose ourselves, our (nonmetrical) ‘footing’ with one another” (*Close Listening* 11). The shift from the live to the recorded event strengthens this condition since hearing is the only sense to be excited. A link to the written poem is exceptionally given in this case, but this separation from the audio file (the link directs to a different webpage) mostly prevents its reading at the same time the text is being played; reading and listening activities, the visual and the aural, tend to remain split from each other. Once the poem leaves the page, once it turns from the ‘fixity’ of writing to the fluidity of speech, with the modulations of tone and pace, it allows room for some improvisation. If you listen to the recorded performances, it is possible to discern a few variations not only from the written text¹⁷ but also from each other,¹⁸ which destabilizes the notion of a permanent text. Still, something more radical occurs in the audiovisual version of the same poem, which makes a further step.

17. “Mars had fallen into Earth” (on the page) becomes, in the oral performances, “Mars had fallen *to the* Earth.” In the Harvard (and then in the video) performance Bernstein reads at the end, “but I can't wake up” (with the first-person pronoun) instead of “but can't wake up” (on the page). In the New York performance, the poet introduces the phrase “on election day,” absent from the page, between “fiery and irreconciled” and “torrid, / strummed, on election day.”

18. At the Bowery Poetry Club in New York City, Bernstein reads, “Let him” (in “Let him who is without my poems be assassinated!”) twice instead of just once as in the Harvard performance. In both the Oakland and the New York performances, there are missing lines. In the first case, Bernstein omits “The morning hush defends its brood, on election day. / So still, so kindly faltering, on election day.” In the second, he omits “The men prepare for dying, on election day. / The morning hush defends its brood, on election day.” All these lines are instead reproduced in the Harvard performance (and in the video).

Here we find a truly intermedial product where voice, text, image, and sound converge and collaborate in the construction of the message. The product is a 4:27 minute video filmed by Gabe Rubin (2012) that shows Bernstein reading the poem. Since he holds the book in his hands – *Recalculating*, as clearly indicated by its dust jacket – the written text enters the new performance in its most official and ‘legitimate’ form of the printed poem. Yet, despite this privileged status, despite the tradition and authority of the book, this reading alters the poem on the page and takes its distance from the other oral performances in the context of the more conventional poetry reading. Given that, in the new guise, the written text is now empowered on the visual and auditory dimensions, the transformation has to do with the manipulations that take place on those two levels. In its reliance on voice, sound, and (moving) image, together with the possibilities offered by digital technology, the new version somewhat disturbs the linear flow of the written poem.

In this audiovisual rendering, Bernstein is filmed while reading the poem on the streets of Brooklyn, New York. The scene, however, keeps changing since he is shown in different places but always outdoors: before a playground; close to a watercourse; with a fence behind his back. The various shots are linked paratactically: there is no progression but juxtaposition of scenes. If space is not continuous, neither, eventually, is Bernstein’s performance, which is affected – or more properly enhanced – by the ‘tricks’ of digital technology. The reading is in fact amplified by the overlapping of the poet’s own voice declaiming the same lines, which, as a digital sound track, can be manipulated at will. The intimacy established by Bernstein’s delivery at the very beginning is disrupted when, starting from the fourth line (“The dead unleash their fury, on election day”), utterance is doubled, with a resulting echoing effect. Despite the absence of an attending audience (a few people happen to walk their way in front of the camera but no one lends an ear to the poet), this vocal proliferation eventually suggests a larger sense of communality and participation that are typical of oral-based events. The double repetition of “on election day” at the end of each line does in fact evoke the collective reply of the call and response structure that is typical of the sermon, where an audience answers back to the request solicited by the preacher. On the other hand, the intermittent intrusion of a ‘second voice,’ given by the overlapping of the poet’s recorded voice on the main track, creates a peculiar rhythm that emphasizes artifice and foregrounds the splitting of the subject, who is literally divided into two selves. As the authority and singularity of voice are undermined by this split, so is eventually the subject.

Unlike “On Election Day,” *The Answer* and *Pinky’s Rule* were not (or not originally as concerning *Pinky’s Rule*) released in the written form (or, when *Pinky’s Rule* was eventually printed, it was deprived of the contribution from the visual arts). *The Answer* is a video poem of 3 minutes and 32 seconds starring Charles Bernstein a cappella and accomplished through the collaboration of different artists: Lars Movin and Niels Plenge at the camera;

Thomas Thorah as boomer. The video shows Bernstein in Riverside Park, Manhattan, delivering his poem. The sequence, however, is intermittently broken, which results in abrupt stops and starts. The audio track – consisting in Bernstein’s voice, electronically generated sounds that are mixed to it, and the sound of a jet plane occasionally flying over Manhattan – offers fragments of speech that has been cut and restored in pieces, with words that are themselves broken or separated from their larger syntactical chains and reduced to mere sounds. The practice is clearly suggested by the very word “cut,” which is cut from its context of utterance and overlaid on the other fragments. As the procedure slows down and the flow of speech is partially recovered, listeners can eventually hear the full sentence “cut the sound,” which now patently describes the ongoing process.

Once split, or disarticulated, words lose their linguistic content and turn into pure sounds. A pause, given by the interruption of vision (the screen is black and/or imageless), divides the video into two distinct sections. The second part shows Bernstein in the same setting (the park), talking as if answering to an interview. His voice mixes with fragments from the first part (words as well as sounds), which results in the same cacophonous effect and, therefore, in stylistic continuity. Here, however, the clutter of sound remains in the background while the poet utters a now clearly perceptible sentence, “The answer is not in our technology but in our politics.” The sentence is repeated several times but with different intonations that shift emphasis and redistribute value – even among function words like “in” – and meaning. A variation is also manifested on the level of morphology as “technologies,” in the plural form, replaces “technology.” Repetition, therefore, implies change.

At this point, it seems that this audiovisual text is enacting a pair of verbal-visual digital poems from “An Mosaic for Convergence,” namely “Politics” (Fig. S) and “Politics 2” (Fig. T). The two screen pages show the same sentence, which is repeated over and over again: “For all the utopian promise of technological optimists, *the answer is not in our machines but in our politics*” (italics added).¹⁹ Only the main sentence remains in *The Answer*, although “machines” is here replaced by the variant “technology.” In “Politics,” the sentence is not contained in the same line but finishes in the following. As it starts again and again, repetitions are distributed differently along the lines, so that each one ends on a different portion of the same clause. The process stops when the new line happens to start with the final four words of the sentence (“but in our politics”), which, no longer followed by other replicas, are given prominence. The sequential reading, furthermore, is hindered or slowed down by the emphasis on texture. Since each letter has a different color, reading lingers on every one of them instead of flowing fluidly. Readers perceive the single letters, the alphabetic medium that is employed to convey content, before they realize the way they combine with each other to form words and sentence.

19. A proceduralist adaptation of the line from *Julius Caesar*, “The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves” (Golding 275).

This disturbance of discursive linearity is then increased in “Politics 2,” where lines also happen to overlap and the sentence now multiplies into a varying number of panels, depending on the screen zoom level that readers might alter (three panels with a level of 100%; more – with a consequent loss of discernibility – if the level is reduced; fewer if increased). As the colored letters are now on a white background, the black ovals and semicircles further interrupt the flow of reading and call for attention on the constitutive elements – the alphabet letters, lines, colors, and layout – rather than on the content.

Providing one more version of the same work, therefore, *The Answer* performs the text by other means – aural instead of visual. By fragmenting Bernstein’s voice, digital audio editing achieves the same effect of the digital visual texts: disrupting discourse linearity, it emphasizes the materiality of the medium. As the letters and words, in the two versions of “Politics,” lose some of their linguistic potential to join other letters in words and sentences, so here too, reduced to almost pure sound except for a few cases, they are liberated from linguistic signification. Bernstein’s other discernible sentence – “You can cut it. The sound. It doesn’t even have to sync” – further describes the method. The lack of synchronization, whereby the soundtrack no longer fits the movement of Bernstein’s lips, further exposes construction vs. the idea of immediacy, spontaneity, naturalness, and presence associated with oral delivery; it shifts attention to method (over content) and foregrounds artifice. Despite the performer’s presence on the scene, there follows a divorce of voice and body that, making the former autonomous from the latter, ultimately displaces the subject as referent.²⁰ Separated from the body, the voice is “profoundly physical;” it is experienced in itself rather than referring to the subject and/or being purely expressive (Durand 108-109).

Pinky’s Rule is a seven-minute animated drawing produced by the collaboration between Bernstein and visual artist Amy Sillman. First presented at the Bowery Poetry Club in New York, it is now distributed online through *BOMB Magazine*. Words and images combine in ways that exceed traditional relations in well-established literary genres. Here in fact, relationships usually reflect hierarchy and power (of the verbal over the visual) – whether in the form of the poem replacing and enhancing the work of art (ekphrasis) or of the image serving the word (illustration) – and raise issues of origin: what comes first and what is secondary or derivative. *Pinky’s Rule*, on the other hand, develops as a dialogue between the two artists, between the verbal and the visual, where primacy is no longer at stake: “In making the work, the collaborators went back and forth, toggling from image to poem and poem to image, so that it is impossible to say which came first.

20. Focusing on the apparatus or “disposition” of voice, not only an instrument to reproduce a prior text but also an independent element with “its own effects” and “resonances” (99), Durand finds in certain cinematic productions, where voices do not match the visible speaking subjects, attempts to “deconstruct ‘theatrical’ space, filmic and narrative order (hierarchies of images and sound, linearity of images, the role of bodies and voices), to alter the relation between writer, words, and reader, to cancel, displace, the subject as referent” (110).

All the images bounce off the poem and the poem is constantly grappling with and extending the graphics" (*Jacket2*). In the exchange that took place, therefore, Sillman made her pictures as a reply to Bernstein's lines while Bernstein wrote his lines to comment on Sillman's pictures. The final product is a complex, intermedial text that simultaneously relies on and develops from both verbal and visual codes.

The pictures were originally made on an iPhone, with the artist using her finger (her pinky finger?) on the display, and then printed for the project by Nathan Baker as inkjet on archival newsprint (*Jacket2*). The verbal dimension, on the other hand, involves the oral delivery of the poem, which provides the video's audio track. Yet, there is a double twist from the conventional expectations of a reading performance, for the poem is twice removed from its author. What we hear is a voiceover – hence voice that is definitively detached from (the image of) its originating body – and it belongs to Amy Sillman, thus avoiding any direct association with Bernstein. Likewise, we do not see Sillman, not even her hand, tracing the marks that gradually make the pictures. The images rather seem to be forming out of themselves, to be self-manifesting, and to develop – since there is no static, finished picture – according to the verbal text they converse with. In the video, in fact, the marks on the surface accumulate up to the completion of the drawing, which, as soon as it is created, dissolves to be replaced by the other marks building other images and so on, as the oral delivery of the poem develops.

This verbal-visual connection can be seen on different levels: on the one hand, it is foregrounded through self-referential words and sentences; on the other, it is discerned in the peculiar relationship that takes place between the two categories. Words like "encounters" and "undeniable / resemblances," for instance, suggest a deep and complex relationship between factions that are traditionally rival to each other. Potential conflict as well as interdependence are suggested by the lines, "The picture can / say only what / the words tell / it not to" and "The picture / can tell only / what the words / hide and the / words are hiding / for their lives." Images stem from words that pursue them in their turn: speaking from and for them, intimating while mating. This convergence reduces the gap between the two as images can "say" or "tell you" – which would be the prerogative of verbal language – more than the words themselves.

Since the two systems – the verbal and the visual – co-exist in time, as they enter into dialogue with each other, their "undeniable / resemblances" imply analogy within difference, which prevents the reduction of the one into the other. Their relationship is instead governed by complementarity and cooperation, for words and images deliver the same contents, each in its own means, redoubling and augmenting the message; hence, the revelatory power of images that, counter-balancing the intrinsic obscurity (the "veil") of language, "can tell only / what the words / hide." If the limit separating the visible and the articulable is also "the common limit that links one to the other, a limit with two irregular faces, a blind word and a mute vision" (Deleuze 65), the two dimensions are

inextricably bound – and contribute – to each other. In the place of power relations, they “overlap and spill into one another” in order to form knowledge, which, in Foucault’s view, implies the combination of both (Deleuze 51, 61).²¹

Whereas the verbal text, reproduced orally, remains invisible (it can only be heard), the visible elements are not objects of representation but rather “actions and passions, *actions* and *reactions*, *multisensorial* complexes which *emerge* into the light of the day” (Deleuze 59, italics added). The images, in fact, are self-forming. Viewers do not perceive a finished visual product, which implies a representing subject and a represented object, but the process of an image that gradually composes itself – as a manifesting subject (giving also the absence of a tracing hand) – or emerges from its background of invisibility (which is also the background of words). Furthermore, the “picture” here is not still but a motion picture, which emphasizes progress and development. Terms like “filmy” (“your filmy / inconsequence”) and “shooting” (“the name I / find when the / shooting’s over”) point to the animated character of the work, which combines spoken language and moving images. If painting freezes (“in freeze / frame”), filming escapes from such a containment to convey process, thought, and vision as they unfold. This tension between movement and arrest is suggested at the beginning through verbs and nouns signaling change (“starts,” “begins,” “shift”), opposites (“fast,” “unwinding”), conditionals (“as if”), and adverbs pointing to something indefinite (“almost,” “nearly”). All of them offer an equivalent to the evanescence of images that form progressively and, when completed, undo themselves to leave room for the other visual formations. Embodying the same ideas, words and images, voice and vision, hearing and seeing converge or “spill” into each other, developing synesthetic relationships. As is stated in one of the central sentences, in fact, “it hears / and what it / hears it sees.” Synesthetic experience, for instance, is most explicitly achieved through the simultaneous mention and appearance of colors, whereby the sound of the word-color is matched by the splashes of colors it evokes, from the crimson bars to orange and green, white blue, red, and aquamarine.

As in the previous cases, *Pinky’s Rule* has plural forms of existence for the images and words are split from each other and circulate on their own. Some of Sillman’s stills were exhibited at the art gallery,²² whereas Bernstein’s poem was eventually printed. While this version can also be accessed online, a reading performance by the author himself can be found in David (Jhave) Johnston on Vimeo (“Charles Bernstein reads

21. This “spilling” derives from breaches, in both the saying and the visible, that allow infiltrations (of the one into the other and vice versa). Reading Foucault, Deleuze describes the two forms as heterogeneous but similarly structured for both include a condition (language, light) and a conditioned element (statements, visibilities). Since “the condition element does not ‘contain’ the conditioned element but offers it in a space of dissemination . . . it is between the visible and its conditions that the statements glide . . . It is between the statement and its condition that visibilities insinuate themselves” (66).

22. Campolo Presti, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 23 April - 23 May 2015, London, <https://www.campolipresti.com/exhibitions/the-pleasure-of-the-text> (accessed 11 March 2021).

‘Pinky’s Rule’”), which offers a counterpart to Sillman’s reading. The life of the work is therefore more complex and diversified than conventionally expected. Each version can be enjoyed independently from the others but comparisons emphasize the achievements of the interart collaboration. If enjoyed in isolation, outside the network they eventually constitute as a group, they lack the dialogic character of the collaborative work as well as process – the experience of the work unfolding before us – and synesthetic experience. The images, which, in the video, are done and undone trait by trait, are turned into still images; the moving picture is replaced by mere pictures, by fully-formed static images that are now caught and arrested in time. Deprived of the interaction with the words, they also lack any link with each other because they have no common narrative. The poem on the page, on the other hand, retains some kind of visual power in its vivid descriptions and mention of colors – a trace of the original dialogue between words and images – but must rely only on the evocative power of (written) language.

Bernstein’s reading performance, finally, presents fundamental differences from Sillman’s. Removed from the broader context of a video interview by David (Jhave) Johnston, this excerpt shows Bernstein reading his poem while sitting at his desk, which establishes a direct link with the written form and eventually reconnects the text to its author. This improvised performance is more traditional than the joint work of the two artists. The focus is now back to Bernstein as the (here) visible performer of the poem; since no drawing is produced, the poem is experienced only on the auditory dimension, for any visual element – the image of the poet reading his work and the immediate environment (the bookcase at his back) – offers only contextual information. Yet, this more standard performance is disturbed by the occasional incursion of (supposedly) Bernstein’s wife (her face is not visible for the close up on Bernstein prevents a larger framing), who happens to cross the room (00:01:52) and would be responsible for the noise (probably from the opening of a door) coming soon after from another room in the house. Furthermore, for a few seconds toward the end (00:07:15-00:07:19), the screen remains imageless (it is obscured) so that we can only hear but cannot see Bernstein. Producing brief moments of distraction, these elements prevent the listeners’ full absorption into the text and attenuate any ‘performance of authorship’ that might be triggered by the poet’s monumental presence on the scene. Whereas, in the former cases, collaborations with other artists and professionals lead to sophisticated products that exploit the creative possibilities of the digital medium, this version employs the digital medium only for recording and distributing purposes. Whereas, in the previous cases, the manipulation of digitalized contents disrupts the linearity of speech and foregrounds the means of production, here conventionality is defied by the unstudied appearance of casual elements, which break the boundary between the work of art and everyday life. The technological mediation turns a private event – the solitary poet reading in his domestic environment – into a public one once

the record is shared on the web and, freely accessible online, circulates on its own, outside of any official circuit.



Far from being a self-enclosed entity, a unique or original creation, every poem examined here expands and exists in a constellation of texts. Free from the context and material constraints of its first release, the “twice” – or more than twice – “behaved” work moves within a system, showing the condition of transitivity described by art scholar David Joselit. Tracing this quality in the production of Amy Sillman, Joselit implies “the status of objects within networks – which are defined by their circulation from place to place and their subsequent translation into new contexts” (128). Moving from one environment to another – as with temporary installations – the work would in fact adapt to the new circumstances and gain new configurations. “Transitive painting,” Joselit explains, “invents forms and structures whose purpose is to demonstrate that once an object enters a network, it can never be fully stilled, but only subjected to different material states and speeds of circulation ranging from the geologically slow (cold storage) to the infinitely fast” (132). In this way, it escapes commodification and reification, which occur when the object’s circulation is instead arrested, when “it is halted, paid for, put on a wall, or sent to storage, therefore permanently crystallizing a particular social relation” (132).

Bernstein’s textual performances clearly evade any crystallization; as they move within a wider network, they acquire different forms of display and dissemination. Each new performance involves a varying degree of transformation that is deeply influenced by the technology of re-production. As a single poem has plural lives, the means of creation, circulation, and consumption change, increasing participation and fostering a “new dynamic user culture” (Ernst, “Radically De-Historicising the Archive” 15) outside the institution of print culture. The preservation of oral/reading performances through digital recording and open online accessibility as well as the new audiovisual texts that have been discussed are rivaling consumption through traditional reading practices and the cultural monopoly of writing. Digital platforms, which rely on “dynamic exchange” and “permanent transfer” of products beyond official channels (Ernst, “Cultural Archive versus Technomathematical Storage” 60), are fostering a high level of participation by a new and heterogeneous community of users (Ernst, “Cultural Archive versus Technomathematical Storage” 136-137). Here in fact, consumers can not only listen to the audio files but can also download, save, and share them, create their playlists and compilations, enjoy a certain level of textual manipulation, and offer their feedback via email or in online chats.

On the other hand, in line with the visual experimentation of the *Veil* series, the shift from writing to orality, from merely evoked sounds to sound, from metaphorical to literal voice, is contributing to the decentering of vision and representation that is shared by the performing arts and Performance Studies, which criticize the ocularcentric paradigm

of Western culture and the centrality of the written text (Laudando 16). Whereas ocular vision frames, arrests the flowing of bodies within definite borders, sound is unstable, fluid, and ephemeral: hence, potentially unsettling (Vogelin 12). As it unfolds (unlike the object of vision, which is already given), it challenges expectations and habitual perceptions and escapes the limits of the image (Voegelin 24).

Prepared by the progress of *Veil* from visual to acoustic textuality, the audiovisual products, where sound (the poet's physical voice) is reconjoined with vision (the poet's body and setting), overcome this dichotomy through the manipulation of the visual elements consented by digital technology, which resists any framing effect. If, in "On Election Day" and in *The Answer*, this is achieved by the cutting and juxtaposition of the moving images, in *Pinky's Rule* the represented, finished image is replaced by the self-forming and self-manifesting image: exceeding freezing frames, the visible acquires the same dynamism and ephemerality of flowing vocality. Instead of 'sight,' which is extratemporal, focuses on the object, and has a singled perspective (Bernstein, *Content's Dream* 137), products like these, which unfold, offer Bernstein's idea of 'vision:' "the engagement of all the senses, and of thought, beyond the readily visible, the statically apparent" (139); "not sight of a world already totalized or complete but vision as a process of constituting and reconstituting the world" (141).

Dismissing sight, Bernstein also dismisses 'insight,' which is its correlative – from "a world of constituted objects" to "a constituted self," i.e. the idea of a unitary subject – and a poetics of insight, which relies on "confessionalism, 'persona-ism'" (*Content's Dream* 139). His penchant for anti-performative and anti-expressive readings, which shift attention away from personality – the character or the author (especially if he/she is reading his/her poem) – has found its most effective achievements in audiovisual experimentation rather than in his more conventional poetry readings. From "On Election Day" to *The Answer* and *Pinky's Rule*, in fact, Bernstein's authorial presence has been reduced rather than enhanced. As with the acoustic *Veil* ("Crazy of Objects (Veil)"), the poetic voice/persona – and underlying notion of the individual self – is undermined through the manipulations of the voice track. Fragmentation, overlapping, and slowing down of pace, as a matter of fact, together with the manipulation of the visual sequences, definitively break the illusion of spontaneity and immediacy whereas the disappearance of the bodily presence of the reader-performer in *Pinky's Rule* (with the silencing of the poet, whose words are uttered by Sillman) further distances the poem from the poet.

Bernstein's achievements show in fact that poetry in the new media eventually disrupts the lyric tradition and the interior self it sponsors. Combining two types of discourse, the late romantic print lyric and the networked programmable poem, new media poems attack the characterizing aspects of the lyric: the uniqueness of authorship and of the work of art, self-examination, self-justification, and self-restoration, control of distribution through restrictive copyright laws and expensive print editions (Hayles 19-20). Not

only are they often the fruit (as in Bernstein's case) of collaborations – between writers, artists, and programmers; free online distribution also releases them from the publication and print industry and the commodification of culture, an aspect that they share with live performances. Relationships within a network – relationships among different reproductions of a work – are characterized by reciprocity rather than by hierarchy (implied by the original-copy model). In Bernstein's words from "An Mosaic for Convergence,"

Poems exist much more crucially in a social, in the sense of interpersonal, space than is often acknowledged. We have less single lyric poems than interactions and interconnections among many poetic sites of production. The meaning of the work is interconnectivity and not in any single site.

The poem is no longer either a single or a finished object. As shown by its multiple performances, it slips away from the enclosure of definitive forms and manifests in always-different ways, each time only a stage in a process that never ends:

We used to say the artist would drop away and there would just be the work. Can we go further and say the work drops away and in its place there are stations, staging sites, or blank points of radical metamorphosis? Only when we experience this as an emplacement of textuality into material sensory-perceptual fields – turning even further away from ideality in the pursuit of an ultimate concretion. (Bernstein, *With Strings* xi)

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Floriana Puglisi

From Page and Print to Voice and Computer Screen

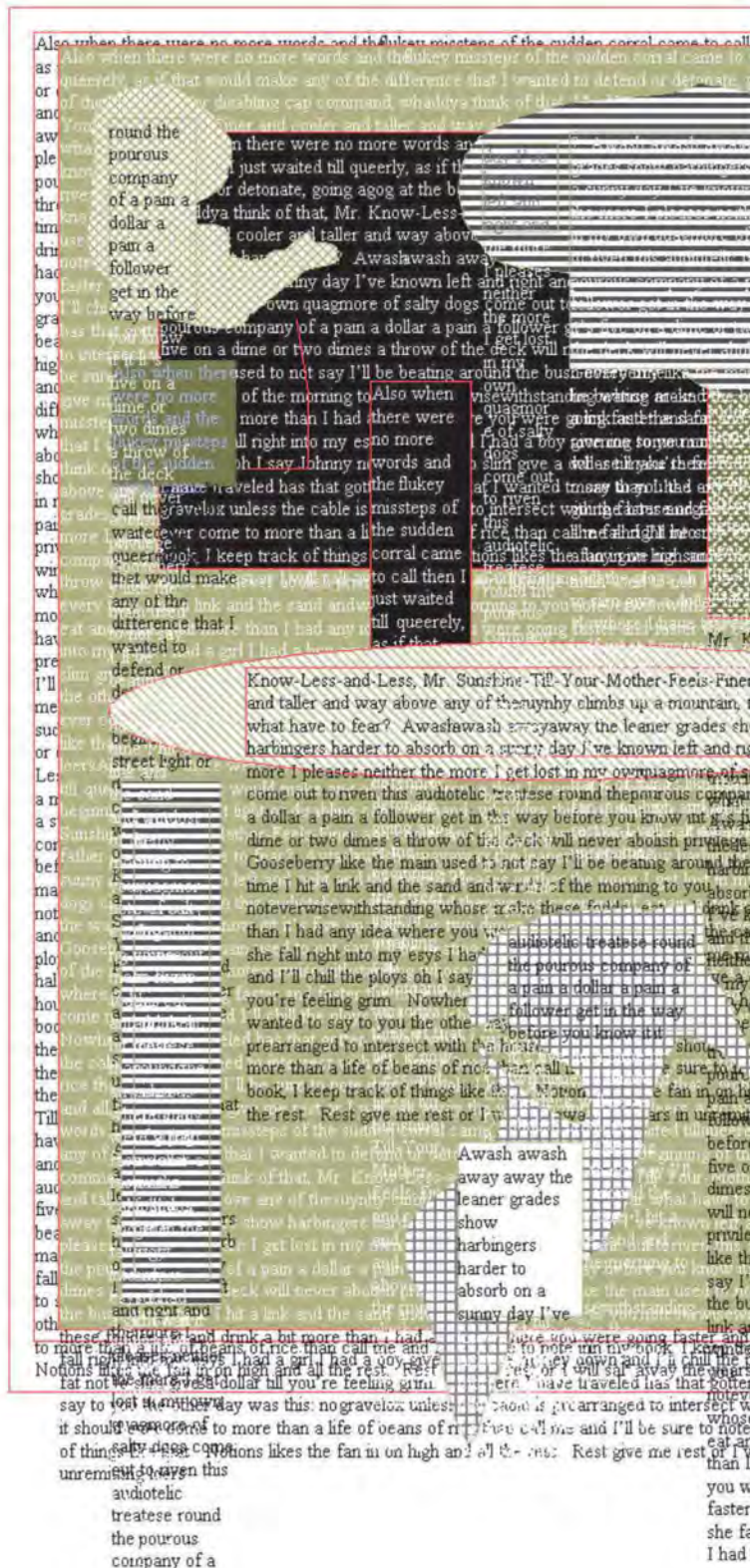


Figure Q. Charles Bernstein, "Veil," from *Veil* (1996), online version. Courtesy of Charles Bernstein.



Figure R. Charles Bernstein, "Illuminosis," from *lei* (1996), online version.
Courtesy of Charles Bernstein.

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