



Blekinge Institute of Technology
School of Planning and Media Design
Department of Culture and Communication

AN ANGEL PASSES BY:
POSTHUMAN AND ACOUSMATIC VOICES IN DIGITALLY
MEDIATED CONTEMPORARY LIVE POETRY

Thom Kiraly

2012

BACHELOR THESIS
B.A. in English and Digital Media.

Supervisor:
Maria Engberg

Bachelor's Thesis – EN1403

Thom Kiraly

May 17, 2012

Maria Engberg

An Angel Passes By: Posthuman and Acousmatic Voices in Digitally Mediated

Contemporary Live Poetry

Introduction

From live poetry performances through the tape poetry experiments of the mid 20th century and to today's use of digital technology in performance poetry, the voice has always been a central component of live poetry. With the introduction of consumer grade technology for recording, transmitting, and receiving voices, the traditional notions of the voice as an ephemeral, temporarily borrowed medium with full presence were put into question through experimentation and research. It also made the physical origin of the voice much more uncertain and hard to identify. In some of these cases, the voice can best be described as having become posthuman.

In this essay, I analyze how two poets use digital technology to push their voices into the domain of the posthuman. The specific works of digitally mediated contemporary live poetry that I will examine are *Frikativ* by Jörg Piringer and *This Loud* by Amy X Neuburg. Both poets and their works will be put into their historical, practical, and theoretical context drawing on the broad fields of poetry and voice studies. In my analysis, I will examine the ways in which these poets use technology in their live performances to challenge traditional notions of the human voice. My main claim is that their different modes of asserting control over their voices ultimately serve the same purpose: establishing the voice as a relationship between speaker and listener, a phenomena rather than a discreet object or bodily organ

possible to observe on its own.

In sound poetry, the voice is used to underline its own acoustic and material features rather than only its capacity for meaning-making. It can also be used to highlight and explore some of the often-overlooked aspects of the human voice, such as breath. Sound poetry can thus work with, through or against its own sounds and utterances to create works outside the reach of conventional poetry. Once tape recorders became readily available in the 1950's, sound poets were, unsurprisingly, among the first to experiment with them in a poetic context. These experiments and techniques did not only change the way poetry was performed, read and received in general, they also affected the way scholars and authors came to view the voice (and especially the tape(d) voice) as not only serving a function as an expressive tool under the subject's control, but also as having a subjectivizing function in itself. This turn towards an embrace of technology in poetic practices and the effects it has had on the works created has been well documented by three scholars: N. Katherine Hayles, Steve McCaffery and Michael Davidson.

Digitally (or simply electronically¹) mediated live poetry performances always entail some transformation of the voice of the performer, the most basic transformation being the one performed by the microphone connected to an amplifier and a public address (PA) system: that is, an amplification. There are, however, more intricate ways in which a performing poet may alter his or her own voice than by simply standing in front of a microphone. By engaging with the rich tradition of sound poetry while using new kinds of digital real-time modifications of audio in live performances a poet can reach beyond the everyday capabilities of the human voice, into the domains of the posthuman; multiplying, dividing, distorting or situating it to serve his or her purposes.

1 It is sometimes overlooked that not all electronic equipment has digital circuitry and that analog electronics have been around for longer than digital ones. The word *electronically*, here, is therefore acknowledging analog audio equipment.

In Jörg Piringer's *Frikativ*, all sounds and images are generated and altered in real time by processing the input and immediately sampling it, thus further increasing the effect of the signal processing. Through custom-built software, that signal is then analyzed and transformed to finally generate visuals that are projected behind the performer. Following the tradition in sound poetry, the voice is not used primarily to convey a message, but to explore, highlight and transform the material qualities of the voice itself.

Amy X Neuburg's *This Loud*, is, by contrast, a work aimed at controlling the voice and its every utterance. Neuburg composes all her works ahead of time, writes the lyrics, perfects her performance and ends up with intense poetic and musical shows wherein live-looping is used to multiply her own voice through continuous overdubbing. Practically nothing is left up to chance and, unlike Piringer, Neuburg makes sure to let the audience see as much of the live process involved in creating the work at hand as possible.

Looking closer at these two works, I use the concept of the acousmatic voice as defined by Mladen Dolar in his *A Voice and Nothing More*. The acousmatic voice can most simply be described as "the voice unseen," the origin of which is difficult or impossible to locate. Dolar, examining the voice from a psychoanalytical and sociological perspective, is of course highly interested in the qualities of the voice which can be viewed through those particular lenses, i.e. the object voice, the voice of the subconscious etc. His historical account however, stretches from Pythagoras (who allegedly used to teach his probationary pupils from behind a curtain for five years before allowing them to actually see him as he taught, thus prompting people to call those students "the acousmatic") to the gramophone, but does not go much further. In this essay, I will extrapolate the notion of the acousmatic voice and discuss how it can be viewed in connection to the digital technologies of today, to conclude that all posthuman voices, including those of Piringer and Neuburg, are necessarily also acousmatic in that their origins always remain undetermined.

Both *Frikativ* and *This Loud* address and employ the voice in a way that moves it into the domain of the posthuman. In Piringer's case this is achieved by distorting, sampling and looping the voice and by transforming its signal input into visuals. Neuburg, meanwhile, makes her voice posthuman by way of multiplication and discipline, achieving an effect impossible for a single human to produce even by way of echo.

As previously mentioned, both of these works employ a technique known as live-looping. Live-looping can best be described as a technique in which the performer records snippets of audio, which are then temporarily stored in a computer or on tape and immediately and continuously played back as loops. Following this playback, the performer adds new audio onto the already existing loop in order to further expand it, work against it, build harmony or simply create a wall of noise. Live-looping is used in the moment as part of live performances and should not be confused with the repetitive playing of prerecorded loops that a DJ or an electronic musician might employ. In order to more closely examine this technique and how it relates to poetic practices, I turn to Gilles Deleuze's 1968 book *Difference and Repetition*. In this book, Deleuze puts forward a perhaps counter-intuitive idea of repetition, namely that repetition requires replication and likeness, but that this very likeness and its every repetition gives rise to a distinct sense of difference. In live-looping, I argue, this is crucial in considering both the origin of the voice and the multiplication of voice and meaning involved in the practice itself. Deleuze's concerns are, admittedly, different than those of this essay as he is mainly dealing with philosophical ideas and their reliance on difference as a constituting element rather than as a relation between prior, already identified ideas. However, live-looped poetry proves especially interesting to analyze using his concepts as it so clearly exemplifies a structure of difference (language) put into repetition (looping) without forcing those loops having to simply exist as "not-utterance X", but instead allowing them to exist as part of the performance in their own right.

My assertion, that the voice should be viewed as a relationship rather than as a discreet object, draws heavily on the writings of Karen Barad. More specifically, I use her notion of posthumanist performativity to examine how the voice might be understood in a contemporary poetic context featuring posthuman voices. To further elaborate: I argue that the voice is not a particular organ inside our bodies, nor is it simply the sound emanating from our mouths. The voice is always, by necessity, a relationship contained within itself. That is, in order for a voice to exist, it must first be recognized as such by either the speaker and/or the listener, be this speaker or listener human, machine or other. Thus, the voice is an instance; an ephemeral and temporarily borrowed medium that escapes as soon as its physical properties forces it out of the human range of hearing.

Having argued that the two works produce posthuman voices and constitute their own phenomena, I will end by situating the voices of *Frikativ* and *This Loud* in relation to each other rather than to specific concepts. In doing so, I will compare Piringer's and Neuburg's works at the level of linguistic content and the messages they manage to convey. The two works ultimately handle meaning quite differently: Neuburg bombards us with multiple messages through her own multiplied voice; Piringer bombards us with what seems like mere nonsense and noise. They also use different strategies when it comes to asserting control over the voice in their performances. I argue that these strategies are used deliberately in order to achieve specific and quite different effects on meaning-making and the voice-as-relation in the interaction with their audiences.

A note on my primary sources; though my main interest in *Frikativ* and *This Loud* lies in the ways in which they handle the voice in a live poetry performance situation, my access has been through video documentation. Studying the ephemeral qualities of a poet's voice this way may seem paradoxical, but this is my only access to the works at this point. A

positive effect of using documentation is that I can pause, rewind, replay etc, which, as a spectator, would have been impossible in a live situation. I claim that these possibilities of manipulating the works to facilitate my viewing of them have helped my analysis. I do, however, wish to stress that this mode of reception is limited.

Frikativ and This Loud

Jörg Piringer is a poet, musician and performer currently living in Vienna, Austria. His work as a poet ranges from sound poetry performances to the creation of applications for mobile devices. These performances and applications frequently deal with the materiality of both speech and written text, often in conjunction. Piringer's mobile applications usually allow the user to manipulate letters, bounce them off the edges of the screen, set their trajectories across it or have the words of microblog posts fall apart and end up at the bottom of the screen once they've been read. This manipulation is almost always accompanied by the letters triggering sounds to be played back by the device, lending the letters a quality of being alive and reacting to their environment. In the case of Piringer's sound poetry the engagement with the materiality of language very much follows in the tradition and history of sound poetry in general.

Piringer's *Frikativ*, then, is a sound poetry performance using the processing power of computers to digitally alter the poet's voice in real time. These alterations are both audible and visible in that not only the sound of the voice is altered, but also its visual manifestation. A projector displays images behind Piringer as the performance progresses and the visuals displayed change as the input from the poet changes, i.e. as the voice changes tone, character, intensity etc. and also as the poet inputs data into the computer by pressing buttons on a controller. The visuals projected look quite similar to those of Piringer's mobile applications: a plain, white background over which black sans serif letters swirl, converge, scatter and

bounce as dictated by the performer's input and the computer's processes. This can for example mean that as the signal's volume grows, more letters appear on screen, or that when the computer recognizes transients (short, sharp spikes in the waveform of a sound), it changes the direction, size, speed etc. of letters related to what those transients happen to sound like. Apart from this visual element of *Frikativ*, there is, of course, also an aural one. The vocal input produced by Piringer is fed through the computer's signal processors in the shape of filters, samplers and effects (delay, reverb, compression etc.). This means that the vocals have been significantly altered once they are put out through the speakers. Since a computer is used to alter the signal input, it also means that the input is, at least, temporarily stored on the machine and this brings us to the use of live-looping in *Frikativ*. While the computer outputs processed sound it also stores snippets of that sound to be played back at a later time as the performer sees fit. Both long, continuous loops and separate, individual samples are stored and replayed as part of *Frikativ*. Looping the vocals introduces a repetitive element in an otherwise ever-changing and chaotic performance. It serves to, in a sense, grab a hold of a sound and keep it tethered instead of letting it escape only to be replaced by the next variation of the signal. The triggering of samples to be played allows Piringer to bombard the listeners with his own, multiplied voice at will.

The only actual word which is part of *Frikativ* (and only paratextually so) is its title. This name lends a dimension to Piringer's work which is not necessarily apparent in the performance itself. Fricatives are, as Piringer writes on his website, "consonants produced by forcing air through a narrow channel made by placing two articulators close together". This definition does not only tell us what fricatives are, it also points to where Piringer chooses to put his emphasis in the performance. Looking closer at the two parts of the definition reveals something about how one might read the piece. First of all, air is supposedly forced through a narrow channel. The way fricatives are ordinarily discussed, this narrow channel is made up

by the parts of the speaker's mouth and vocal tract used to produce fricative consonants. In the case of *Frikativ*, however, the narrow channels can be compared to the channels the audio travels through in order to get to and through the computer and speakers. Secondly, this "narrow channel" is produced by two articulators being placed close together. What, then, are the articulators in the case of *Frikativ*? One could argue for several pairs serving as articulators. The performer and the computer would form one of those pairs. After all, they are interdependent as far as the production of the sound goes and the performance requires them to interact for it to take place. Another pair of articulators are the visual and aural manifestations of the poem being performed. The screen and the speakers each project their part of *Frikativ*, effectively creating a narrow channel through which a spectator may receive the work.

An intense and tightly focused poetic and musical performance, *This Loud* by British-born U.S. performer Amy X. Neuburg uses the layering of voices afforded by live-looping to create a work dealing with the fallout of a relationship after it has ended. The performance is structured in a commonplace verse-chorus-verse fashion familiar to anyone who has ever listened to pop music. Where Neuburg's performance differs from the everyday pop song, however, is in her layering of verse and chorus on top of each other by looping. Pop songs (especially songs composed electronically) feature loops all the time and are to some extent loop-based, but the sections of lyrics are most often kept apart for the sake of clarity. In *This Loud*, Neuburg is not as concerned about clarity as she is about building a audio backdrop consisting of her own vocals for her to perform over. This process of live-looping the verses to, for example, overlay the chorus, goes beyond a mere effect and instead ends up working in tandem with the lyrical content to emphasize the feeling of being stuck in a loop after having gone through a break-up (i.e. repeatedly going over what went wrong in the

relationship; what should have been said, what shouldn't have been said etc.). Live-looping, in fact, quite literally allows one to dwell on subjects and make their presence all the more palpable by forcing sounds to return time and time again. This becomes perhaps most apparent in the very last moments of *This Loud* as all regrets, mistakes and accusations return in full force in the shape of all previously recorded loops while Neuburg delivers the last word of the piece.

Accompanying the vocals of Neuburg is a piano sound generated by her computer and controlled by her hitting a rack of large, digital drum pads using drum sticks. Some of the pads trigger the aforementioned piano sounds while others control the loop Neuburg builds throughout the performance. This very visible manner of manipulating her voice is in line with Neuburg's philosophy when it comes to showing the audience the process of creating her performances. In the case of *This Loud*, Neuburg strives for transparency by performing in a well-lit room and by using clearly visible pads and drum sticks to control the loops and sound effects that make up the work.

In *This Loud*, much like in many of her works, Neuburg pays close attention to the interaction between spoken and sung words, looped and live elements of the performance and musical and non-musical aspects. Her works are meticulously planned and composed ahead of time and not much room is left for improvisation. This differs somewhat from the early composers of traditional live-looping works (Smith 3). One reason behind this need for planning is if a word is looped, it has to either fit within a sentence (if the aim is to make sense) or at least be allowed to be spoken from beginning to end. If it is not allowed to do any of these things we are no longer dealing with words, but rather vocals and utterances closer to those of *Frikativ*. A note, on the other hand, can be stretched or cut off much more readily than a spoken word can and since these early live-looping compositions were mainly instrumental musical ones they did not have to take into account the somewhat more static

nature of spoken words. Hence, these works lent themselves to improvisation in a way they wouldn't have done had they involved spoken words. This combination of the musical and linguistic elements of *This Loud* gives us a hint as to Neuburg's education: musical voice studies, linguistics and electronic music.

Sound Poetry, Tape Poetry, Tape Loops and Live-Loops

Sound Poetry

The involvement of technology in *Frikativ* and *This Loud* does not mean that the two works are situated outside of poetic practices, quite the opposite. There is a long and fairly well-documented history of sound poetry, tape poetry, and live-looping to draw on in analyzing these works. Both performers engage this history in their performances.

Not all live poetry performances involve an exploration of the human voice. In fact, some of them do not feature a single spoken word and instead rely on visuals to achieve the desired effects. Out of those live poetry performances that do, however, involve a voice of some kind, sound poetry has come to stand out as the poetic orientation most interested in exploring and complicating our relationship to the voice. According to Steve McCaffery, sound poetry's goal is "the liberation and promotion of phonetic and sub-phonetic features of language to the state of materia prima for creative, subversive endeavors" ("Voice in Extremis" 163). Simply put, what is at stake here are those very parts of the voice not used to express meaning. This claim is closely related to Mladen Dolar's "provisional definition" of the voice as "what does not contribute to making sense. It is the material element recalcitrant to meaning, and if we speak in order to say something, then the voice is precisely that which cannot be said" (15).

What, then, is actually being expressed in sound poetry, if not meaning through the use of words? How are messages being conveyed? The solution to conveying messages in

sound poetry is often what is nowadays commonly referred to as “showing, not telling”, a concept that is often misunderstood. It can be described as the strategy of using mimesis (imitating) instead of diegesis (reporting) to convey a message. In the case of sound poetry, this means that the poet, instead of telling the audience what having, or not having, a voice can entail, she “shows” by performing sounds meant to convey this without using actual words. In regards to actually making sense, it is hard to make the argument that sound poetry makes much of any easily appreciated sense at all. At the same time, one would be hard pressed to claim that sound poetry lacks meaning, that it is meaningless. Sound poetry instead seems to operate somewhere in between sense and nonsense in an area of expression I would call the parasensical. That is, sound poetry is a kind of conveyance moving alongside common sense, not wholly devoid of it, but also not fitting into the category of “making sense”. Its very refusal or inability to make sense is exactly the sense it makes.

As a piece of sound poetry, *Frikativ* does not aim to convey any straightforward message. Instead, Jörg Piringer uses the combined capabilities of his equipment and body to end up in the same parasensical territory as other sound poets before him. This refusal to convey a message is further underlined by the amplification, multiplication and diffraction of his voice. *Frikativ*, instead of telling the audience what using a voice can bring with it, shows it by forcefully pushing at some of the voice’s weak points: those elements of the voice not signifying anything in particular on their own. Piringer also shows (not *tells*) us the complications that can arise in a heavily mediated culture where many of the spoken conversations are dependent on digital technology. The interferences and disturbances in *Frikativ* are much like those found in a malfunctioning digital system for oral communication.

This Loud is not as closely related to the tradition of sound poetry as *Frikativ*.

Neuburg, in her performance, instead focuses on the musical aspects of her voice and on getting all of the pieces of the performance to fit in and fill their purposes while still complementing each other. The one connection which could be made to sound poetry is the cacophonous effect achieved at the last moment of the performance. At this moment, all layered loop voices have to compete with the live performed voice of Neuburg to be heard.

Tape Poetry

As tape recorders became available to the average consumer in the mid 20th century, poets were quick to adopt this new technology to create new kinds of poems, performances and even, if we are to believe N. Katherine Hayles, new subjectivities (“Bodies out of Voices: Audiotape and the Production of Subjectivity” 94). Tape poetry often involves sound poetry (as is the case in poet Henri Chopin’s experiments in tape recordings. These often dealt with what Mladen Dolar would most likely term “ ‘prelinguistic’ and ‘postlinguistic’ phenomena, the voices beneath the signifier” (23)), but the two are not essential to each other. A tape poem may very well involve reciting a specific text using clearly identifiable words and sentences without having to move into the domain of sound poetry. Such is the case with *Echo* by Steve Benson, described in Michael Davidson’s *Technologies of Presence: Orality and the Tapevoice in Contemporary Poetics*. In his tape poetry performance, Benson records and plays back his own voice to achieve an effect of a multiplied presence. He also uses the played back voice as one side in a sort of conversation wherein his looped reading from just a moment earlier is commented on by him in the present. Together, the comments and recordings are, once again, recorded and played back to restart the process. This produces the possibility for a practically infinite number of potential readings. *Echo* is however, according to Davidson, not a random or chance-based performance:

Benson is not trying to circumvent intentionality through randomness but to

show one sort of intentionality thwarted by another. Nothing is random in the performance, since every new element is based on something that has already appeared. The audience witnesses a person trying to stay on top of an accretional information overload that threatens to overwhelm him. (118)

Recognizing the fact that *Echo* is a performance that builds on itself is essential to also understanding the role live-looping plays in *Frikativ* and *This Loud*. While *This Loud* may be the work more closely related to *Echo*, *Frikativ* is not at all based on chance. The input from the performer sets off the chain of events constituting the work. That input, in turn, builds on and adapts to the way *Frikativ* is manifested at any given moment. This is quite similar to the reciprocal way Benson and other loopers work with their many voices or sounds.

Tape Loops and Live-Loops

Poets weren't the only ones who spent parts of the second half of the 20th century experimenting with the capabilities of tape recorders. In San Francisco, at a place called the Tape Music Centre, avant-garde musicians were specifically looking into tape loops and the ways in which they could be used to compose new kinds of music (Smith 9). Several musicians from the Tape Music Centre would go on to play a crucial role in the formation of what today is known as musical minimalism. One of them, Pauline Oliveros, who was among the first people to use digital tools to create live-loops (Smith 35), taught Amy X Neuburg when she studied composition at Mills College in Oakland, California. Part of minimalism was a technique wherein a tape recorder was used to record and instantly play back what had just been recorded, thus creating a loop; a live-loop. Live-looper and musician Geoff Smith writes in on live-looping: "it is difficult to state an absolute inventor of Live-looping [. . .] because of the nature of the sharing and creation of so much innovative music by this group

of people at that time. However out of all of this it was Terry Riley whose early contribution to Live-Looping clearly stood out as being the most prominent” (9).

In live-looping, the voice cannot be split up in the way it can if it is recorded onto a tape to be played back at a later time. A tape recorder and the person having recorded a voice on it can part ways, but for the live loop to exist it needs to, in fact, be live. The live situation, apart from forcing the performer to be present at the event, also brings with it several characteristics not present in a pre-recorded version of a piece. First of all, not using prerecorded material means that the musician has to create a unique piece of music in front of an audience at the location in time and space where it is actually being performed. Another aspect is that the audience gets to follow a piece of music from the very start up to a piece of layered music previously impossible to achieve by a single performer. Amy X Neuburg expresses a similar sentiment in a public television feature on her: “Part of what really interests me about the live-looping is that the audience is drawn into the creative process. They hear me sing the first line; it’s recorded. They hear me sing the second line; they see me hit a pad to trigger the recording. It all makes sense to them” (“Amy X Neuburg”). This way of performing and using tape delay, Smith claims, “redefined the role of the solo performer” (13).

The *looping* part of *live-looping* is significant in its own right, especially when considering poetic works like *Frikativ* and *This Loud*. As previously mentioned, a poetic live-looping performance, if it is based on spoken words and sentences, may not be quite as malleable as its musical counterparts. The reason is that a loop works in two ways at the same time. First, it compartmentalizes distinct sets of aperiodic sounds, i.e. sounds signifying by being different from other sounds in the same set, not repeating themselves as, for example continuous notes. Secondly, these sets of aperiodic sounds are repeated and forced to fit into

a signification based on repetition rather than on difference. This means that, by its very nature, i.e. returning over and over at regular intervals, a loop also forces the performance to obey a certain rhythm not necessarily commonly found in works of poetry other than those based on meter. The poet is thus constrained by the loop in a way the musician is not.

Gilles Deleuze's ideas in his 1968 book *Difference and Repetition*, may help in articulate the relationship between the differentiating ability of language and the repetitive aspect of loops. Deleuze argues that ideas do not acquire their identity by simply being different from other ideas, but rather that their difference is always-already embedded within them, forming multiplicities within themselves rather than unified, static concepts. For the purposes of this essay, however, Deleuze's ideas prove most useful in examining the live-loop's relation to the listener and to itself. A loop, in the context of a poetic performance, serves the parallel functions of introducing difference and repetition into the work at the same time; both concepts are symbiotically connected. The perceived difference is perceived precisely because of the repetition performed by the loop. Repetition, it turns out, does not remove loops from serving as generators of differences. Rather, every repetition carries with it a differentiating function in that it changes the perception of the previous repetitions. Once you hear a loop, the next return of the loop is going to be influenced by and will influence the perception of it. Live-looping relies on this symbiosis between difference and repetition to create its layered, repetitive and sometimes chaotic effects. Thus, difference is arrived at precisely through repetition itself; it does not change the original, but our relationship to it. In other words, the repetition is not a constant, unchanging return, but a return that forces a retroactive alteration of the perception of the original.

What separates poetic live-looping practices from musical ones, in particular, is that they often involve words, that, unlike musical notes, carry within them very specific connotations and associative connections unique to each person hearing them. This becomes

evident in the different ways Piringer and Neuburg use live-loops in their performances. Neuburg uses them to create noise out of sense (a wall of almost indistinguishable sounds arising from what were previously clear and understandable sentences) while Piringer foregoes words and sentences altogether to instead increase the intensity of the noise already present in *Frikativ*. The looping techniques used by Neuburg thus differs from those used by Piringer in one crucial way: Piringer does not necessarily use them musically, that is allowing them to build on each other in a strictly structured way. Instead, he triggers them at will and switches between and layers them in a chaotic fashion. Neuburg, on the other hand, meticulously constructs her loop to create layers on top of each other without any part of the loop dominating the other parts. In Neuburg's case, the loops are constrained and the final moment where they are all unleashed to create a climactic ending stops just as abruptly as it started.

The Acousmatic Voice

The displacement of voices into machines through loops and samples allows for a poetic performance where the origin of the voice becomes unclear or impossible to identify. In his book, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar builds on the concept of the acousmatic voice first proposed by Michel Chion (who, in turn, borrowed the term *acousmatic* from the musicologist and composer Pierre Schaeffer (Dolar 61)) in 1982 as an addition to film sound theory to describe voices situated off screen. Originally, however, the term seems to have its roots in the way in which Pythagoras taught his students. For the first five years in studying under Pythagoras, the students were relegated to only hearing their teacher's voice; his body concealed behind a curtain. These students were known as *the Acousmatics* (Dolar 61).

Perhaps one of the most famous examples of an acousmatic voice in literature can be

found in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In one of the book's climactic scenes, Dorothy and the others have just entered the wizard's throne room. His manifestation, however, is not what they had expected. In fact, the only perception they have of him is his voice filling the room. As Dolar points out, the acousmatic voice is not uncanny only by having an obscured, removed or hidden origin; acousmatics also endows the voice with a sense of omnipresence and, ultimately, omnipotence (62). L. Frank Baum seems to have picked up on this as well in writing the aforementioned throne room scene:

They looked again in every part of the room, and then, seeing no one, Dorothy asked, "Where are you?"

"I am everywhere," answered the Voice, "but to the eyes of common mortals I am invisible." (Baum ch. 15)

Dolar also uses *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as an example, but his final conclusion is not that the voice of the wizard is acousmatic only until he is exposed as the man behind the screen. Instead, Dolar claims the voice never really breaks out of its acousmaticity and that:

there is no such thing as disacousmatization. The source of the voice can never be seen, it stems from an undisclosed and structurally concealed interior, it cannot possibly match what we can see. This conclusion may seem extraordinary, but it can be related even to banal everyday experience: there is always something totally incongruous in the relation between the appearance, the aspect, of a person and his or her voice, before we adapt to it. [. . .] The fact that we see the aperture does not demystify the voice; on the contrary, it enhances the enigma. (68)

Thus, all voices are always already acousmatic, their origin impossible to pinpoint. It does not matter whether or not they are technologically mediated, thought of as divine or ethereal, or if they are simply ordinary voices. They do not originate from any particular organ, nor are

they simply made up of the sounds emanating from a speaker's mouth. If the voice were indeed able to serve a sort of presence-function, reassuring the listener of a human body's presence behind the voice, its acousmatic properties would nonetheless work against it. Even in the case of a face-to-face conversation between two people a slight uncertainty as to where and what the voices exchanged really are may make itself known. The voice, in the words of Dolar, in this way becomes "an effect without a proper cause" (70).

In both *Frikativ* and *This Loud*, the performers are clearly visible to the audience. In fact, as previously pointed out, Amy X Neuburg makes an effort to show the spectators as much of herself and her process as possible during her performance. Piringer's performance, meanwhile, does admittedly take place in a darker room than the one *This Loud* is performed in, but the screen behind him and what is already in the room provide enough light for the audience to see what he is doing. So, while the voices of Amy X Neuburg and Jörg Piringer may not be strictly acousmatic on their own, apart from the ways in which all voices can be argued to be acousmatic, their pairing with the technologies used in the two works transform them into new voices in new bodies, whose origins are much more difficult to determine.

Posthuman Voices, Posthumanist Performativity

Posthuman Voices

How are we to understand the voices of *Frikativ* and *This Loud* as acousmatic? What Pythagorean curtains do they pull between themselves and their spectators? Surely, the performers are clearly visible, but their voices; multiplied, distorted, displaced and transformed, make us doubt that the performers are, in and of themselves, the true origins of these sounds. Jörg Piringer cannot, by himself, be the origin of the noise created as part of *Frikativ*, nor can Amy X Neuburg layer her voice in the way she does in *This Loud* without

the interventions of digital technologies. In their applications of these technologies they both move beyond the reach of ordinary human vocal expression and enter into a new kind of posthuman embodiment where, as N. Katherine Hayles writes in her *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, “it is not a question of leaving the body behind but rather of extending embodied awareness in highly specific, local, and material ways that would be impossible without electronic prosthesis” (291).

Returning briefly to the topic of the acousmatic voice; thinking of *Frikativ* and *This Loud* as employing the posthuman strategies of not “leaving the body behind” recognizes and acknowledges the posthuman bodies created in these performances and also, along with them, the posthuman voices. In a mirroring of the anticlimax in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, this realization does, however, not mean that the voices stop being acousmatic, even after the bodies they supposedly are connected to have been revealed.

Though technology plays an important role in both *Frikativ* and *This Loud*, a voice can, nonetheless, be considered posthuman without the aid of technology. In his essay “Vocalizing the Posthuman,” Philip Brophy lists several procedures available in the creation of posthuman voices in popular music, poetry and performance art. The examples presented by Brophy for each of these procedural subsets range from the hi-tech (e.g. Kraftwerk’s *Musique Non Stop*) to works performed almost entirely without the help of technology (e.g. John Cooper Clarke’s poem *The Psyche Sluts*). Not all of the examples discussed by Brophy rely on technology to make their vocalizations posthuman (or even “inhuman”), though. In describing the opening of the song *I* by Swedish metal band Meshuggah Philip Brophy writes that “the machinic precision is inhuman because it is performed by humans” (371). This is very much in line with Hayles’ argument in *How We Became Posthuman* where she posits that posthumanist subjectivity is not dependent on technology or implants to exist.

it is important to recognize that the construction of the posthuman does not require the subject to be a literal cyborg. Whether or not interventions have been made on the body, new models of subjectivity [. . .] imply that even a biologically unaltered *Homo sapiens* counts as posthuman. The defining characteristics involve the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of nonbiological components. (4)

Recognizing the posthuman voices in *Frikativ* and *This Loud* only serves to further complicate all attempts at locating them and forces this analysis to move beyond the single, unified and static human body in its search for it. Rather than putting all focus on the performers' bodies and the sounds created during the performances, a broader view is needed, of the entire situation of speech acts in general and the performances by Neuburg and Piringer in particular. What enables us to recognize the voices in *Frikativ* and *This Loud* as such even after we have come to the conclusion that their origin is impossible to locate when they can no longer fulfill their presence-functions?

Posthumanist Performativity

What are we to do with the conclusion that the voices in *Frikativ* and *This Loud* are posthuman? How are we to understand and differentiate their voices from those of a person engaged in an everyday conversation? In order to answer these questions we may turn to Karen Barad and her 2003 article "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." Barad engages in a phenomenological inquiry into the practices of scientists. Drawing on concepts from quantum theory, she criticizes the way scientists have taken themselves and their own acts of observation out of the equation when performing empirical studies. Barad argues that the "observed object" and the "agencies of

observation” (814) (e.g. photons traveling through double slits being observed by scientists through measuring instruments) are inseparable and that they, together, make up a phenomenon in its own right. This inseparability is what she calls intra-activity.

Understanding the voice in general, and the posthuman voice in particular, requires us to accept this notion of entanglement, of intra-activity. If the voice is truly acousmatic, even when the human or posthuman body behind it has been revealed, the only way to really grasp the voice is to understand it as an ephemeral presence, soon to be replaced by a new one. We must also recognize that our understanding and acknowledgement of it is part of what constitutes it. The voice, then, must be viewed as a phenomenon, putting the listener and speaker at the same level of importance for it to exist. As Barad explains:

phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of “observer” and “observed”; rather, phenomena are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting “components.” That is, phenomena are ontologically primitive relations - relations without preexisting relata.” (815)

Much in the same way as Barad here describes phenomena, I suggest that we view the works by Piringer and Neuburg as phenomena, as “relations without pre-existing relata.” That is, in order to understand them as having specific voices of their own we must also be able to look at them as entities in their own right; entities in which spectator, voice, performer and machine all enact “ontologically primitive relations” in order to constitute what we call *the voice*. This *voice-as-relation* provides valuable insight into the process of receiving a poetic work, especially complex and highly mediated ones like *Frikativ* and *This Loud*. It not only helps us see what the performers are doing in order to fulfill their role in the work, but it also says something about what the role of the spectator is and should be. A certain amount of frustration may arise from receiving the noise and chaos of *Frikativ*, but viewed as a relation, the voice involves the spectator as well as the performer and his machines, trapping them in a

kind of affirmative loop. What is then at stake is maintaining this relation by repeating its instantiation, by looping its sounds over and over again. In the case of *This Loud*, there is a similar tendency towards repetition as respiration (i.e. keeping the voice alive), but where the voice in *Frikativ* stays alive thanks to repetition, *This Loud's* voice rather mutates and changes direction throughout the performance thanks to it. The relationship to the voice in *This Loud* is more stable than the one in *Frikativ*. What is problematic is not the maintenance of a relationship per se, but rather the establishment of one single voice as the authoritative one. When the audience is confronted with multiple utterances overlaying each other, they have to decide whether to treat them as separate voices or as one, multiplied voice. Regardless of their decision, the result is going to be one or several voices-as-relations more stable than the one in *Frikativ*.

Control, Destruction and Multiplication

In the concluding remarks of his essay, Philip Brophy states: “In one sense, posthumanism is very simple: it is all that has ever been described, proscribed and inscribed as being indelibly human - erased” (378). What parts of “all that has ever been described, proscribed and inscribed as being indelibly human” do Neuburg and Piringer erase in their performances? How do they assert control over the voices and bodies in their works? Piringer and Neuburg handle the creation of the voices and in their works quite differently, and to different effects. The same goes for the ways in which they assert control over them.

Though his performance may look and sound chaotic, Jörg Piringer in fact controls and constrains his voice in several ways. The sound input Piringer generates with his body travels through the mic into the computer, where it is processed according to rather specific parameters dictated by, among other things, the software he has built for the specific purpose of being used in *Frikativ*. Samples of sounds are saved to be played back at will and at a later

time, visuals are generated on screen etc. the sound generated is hard to divide into distinct parts but rather blends into a continuous churning. Piringer is reluctant to let go of the voice and exerts himself and his equipment in trying to keep what voice there is left coming back over and over. The voice is essentially trapped in the performance, unable to break free to establish a stable relationship to the audience. Piringer works against the listener trying to establish this stable relationship to the voice in *Frikativ* by displacing it both aurally and visually. In doing so, he utilizes the alienating and elusive effects of the acousmatic voice as well as the transformation of sound into visuals carried out by the computer. As the voice becomes readable text on a screen, it becomes more difficult to determine cause and effect in the performative chain of *Frikativ*. Piringer is violently sabotaging every attempt at establishing his voice as a voice and instead forces it into sounding like noise.

Amy X Neuburg, compared to Piringer, trusts herself enough to produce a steady, stable voice that she gives it freer reins. She does not alter the sounds she generates in any significant way; in fact, the only intervention she makes at the technological level (apart from the standard equalization one would expect) is looping parts of the verses in *This Loud*. This is done not as much to be able to keep the voice as it is to release it, multiplied, at the right moment. This refusal to store the voice, except as live-loops, requires her to be much more meticulous in her planning of the *This Loud* than Piringer has to be in the planning of *Frikativ*. The control of the voice takes place largely through Neuburg's process of setting up and rehearsing the work before the event. Every utterance and loop cue is rehearsed and timed so that when the time comes they can be performed without a glitch.

In *This Loud*, the audience is invited to recognize and affirm the existence of Neuburg's voice primarily through the several methods she uses, which I previously discussed (i.e. clearly showing the process of building the live-loops, using very visible equipment such as red drumsticks etc.). Being aware of what is going on and seeing the work

being built also brings a sense of security and trust in the poet; a sense one would be hard-pressed to find in *Frikativ*. By emphatically and rhythmically pronouncing the words in *This Loud*, Neuburg invites the audience to focus on the sense conveyed by the voice and the assurance this understanding brings with it. Although her methods, i.e. live-looping and using digital instruments in a poetic work, may be out of the ordinary, the audience can nonetheless recognize the tropes of a poetry reading and an art music performance in *This Loud*.

Conclusion

Recognizing the voice-as-relation in *Frikativ* and *This Loud* helps us situate them historically as well as grounded in their praxis as complex poetic works enabled by digital technology. It also allows us to understand how they fit into and build on much older traditions of poetic creation as well as what parts are to be considered “new”. Contemporary poetry does not necessarily mean “uniquely new” poetry and the examination of the voice-as-relation does not originate in *Frikativ* or *This Loud*.

Closely examining the acousmatic voices in the two works helps us situate these works, not historically, but in relation to ourselves as well as to other acousmatic voices. A work involving an acousmatic voice by necessity puts its spectators into a position of having to consider the origin of the voice. If the origin of a voice is not immediately apparent, the first impulse is to seek it out. When the origin remains hidden, the listener is subjected to the perceived omnipresence and omnipotence of the voice.

Finally, live-looping in a poetic work makes specific demands on both the performer and the audience. The performer has to be skilled enough to set up and handle the technology involved in creating live-loops. He or she also has to be aware of the purposes these loops can serve. They can for example create loud, hyperactive performances like *Frikativ* or well-timed and highly structured ones like *This Loud*. The audience, on the other hand, must work

harder when experiencing a live-looped work than if they were listening to a more conventional work not involving live-looping and only featuring one speaker. The returning utterances of the live-loops ask the audience to reevaluate their relationship to the poets' voices and thus also, by extension, their own.

If the study of voices in a poetic context is to be undertaken in a serious manner, we must recognize how these voices are created. When the voice is taken for granted, crucial clues pointing out the performative entanglements of the audience, the performer, the technology etc. are overlooked. A scene from one of the more poetic parts of the restored and extended version of the film *Apocalypse Now!*, written and directed by Francis Ford Coppola, provides an illustrative example. In this scene, Captain Willard, the film's main protagonist played by Martin Sheen, dines with the residents of a French plantation in Cambodia. During the dinner, one of the women of the family, Roxanne, sits down at the table and, clearly showing her effect on Willard, he falls quiet along with the rest of the table. For a moment, there is an awkward silence until Roxanne announces, in French, that "an angel passed by." Hubert, the head of the plantation, makes a joke in French and in explaining this joke in English tells Willard: "Oh, I'm sorry, Captain. It was just a little story about Paris and people starving during the war. They were all around the table, and there was a silence, somebody said: 'An angel is passing by.' So somebody said: 'Let's eat it!'" It is significant that this story is told at a point where an awkward silence has just occurred. There is a palpable lack of voices in the scene, a silence that speaks loudly for everyone present at the table, eventually prompting one of them to use an old, familiar saying to jumpstart the conversation.

In *Frikativ* and *This Loud*, the case is reversed; the angel is not silence, but the voices created in the performances. When we act as if these voices are clearly definable, permanent and signaling presence, we behave like the starving people around the table in the joke.

Pairing the concept of the acousmatic voice with the notion of “relations without pre-existing relata”, I argue that this reaction is insufficient when it comes to analyzing, criticizing and creating complex poetic performances such as *Frikativ* and *This Loud*. Without understanding that an angel is in fact passing by, and that our relation to it is inextricably linked to how we perceive and act upon it, the angel would simply pass by without anyone noticing.

Works Cited

Frikativ. Dir. Jörg Piringer. *Vimeo.com*. 23 Feb. 2012. Web. 29 Feb. 2012.

<<http://vimeo.com/37311066>>

This Loud. Dir. Amy X. Neuburg. Perf. Amy X Neuburg. *Amy X Neuburg*. 10 Dec. 2006.

Web. 12 Feb. 2012. <<http://amyxneuburg.com/video/Loud.mov>>

Amy X Neuburg. *kqed.org*. March 2007. Web. 22 April 2012. <<http://www.kqed.org/arts/programs/spark/profile.jsp?essid=14800>>

Apocalypse Now! Redux. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Martin Sheen, Aurore Clément and Christian Marquand. Sandrew Metronome, 2001. DVD.

Barad, Karen. "Posthuman Performativity: Towards an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal for Women in Culture and Society* 28.3 (2003).

Print.

Baum, L. Frank. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. 1 Feb 1993. Project Gutenberg. Web. 12 May 2012. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/55>>

Brophy, Philip. "Vocalizing the Posthuman." In *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*. Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, and Theo Van Leeuwen, eds. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2010. Print.

Davidson, Michael. "Technologies of Presence: Orality and the Tapevoice of Contemporary Poetics" *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*. Ed. Adalaide Kirby Morris. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997. Print

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Print.

Dolar, Mladen. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006. Print.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1999. 1-24. Print.

---. "Voices out of Bodies, Bodies out of Voices: Audiotape and the Production of Subjectivity." *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*. Ed.

Adalaide Kirby Morris. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997. Print.

McCaffery, Steve. "From Phonic to Sonic: The Emergence of the Audio-Poem." *Sound*

States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies. Ed. Adalaide Kirby Morris.

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997. Print.

---. "Voice in Extremis" *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.

Smith, Geoff. "A History of Live-Looping" *livelooing.org*. March. 2005. Web. 12 March.

2012. <<http://web.archive.org/web/20101114065555/http://livelooing.org/research/paper/index.htm>>