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Experimental Poetry and the Aesthetics of Resistance in Agitated Times

Fernando Pérez Villalón

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Résumé de l'article

Le présent article propose un aperçu de certaines pratiques de la poésie expérimentale chilienne récente qui partagent une exploration des diverses dimensions et limites du langage en tant que médium, remettant ainsi en question ce qu'Ulm et Martoni ont appelé nos « rituels de perception ». Ces oeuvres de Martín Gubbins, Felipe Cussen et Pía Sommer explorent non seulement les potentialités acoustiques, visuelles, performatives, matérielles et intermédiaires de la langue et de la littérature, mais elles les amènent également au point de crise, par exemple en produisant des oeuvres qui abandonnent le langage verbal dans son ensemble, ou des oeuvres qui résistent obstinément à la transmission du sens comme fonction principale du langage verbal. Cet article décrira certaines de ces pratiques et en proposera une interprétation esthétique et politique selon les lignes avancées par des théoriciens comme Gumbrecht (production de présence), Rancière (distribution du sensible), Perloff (écriture non créative), Lazzarato (sémiotique a-signifiant).

Experimental Poetry and the Aesthetics of Resistance in Agitated Times

FERNANDO PÉREZ VILLALÓN

The present essay proposes an overview of recent experimental practices in Chilean poetry that shed new light on the relationship between poetry and an aesthetics of resistance, while also inviting us to rethink the definition of those terms. I am therefore not interested necessarily in literary practices that thematize politics as a subject matter, but in the political and poetical implications of literary practices that question what it means to say something. The literary practices I will analyze here often expand or reject altogether conventional literary procedures rooted in the use of language as a medium, while exploring new forms of artistic expression that often involve excursions into other media. Their tension between medium specificity and intermediality is doubtlessly related to the use of digital tools and multimedia platforms for publication, but it is also rooted in a long tradition of poetry interrogating the possibilities and limits of language as a medium. These works, regardless of whether they use verbal language or not, often struggle to avoid the communication of contents, or the expression of meanings to be deciphered by a receptor. The tendency of all poetry to use language as a plastic or musical medium rather than as a means to transmit information is exacerbated by these experimentations, which thus may be said to belong to a regime of production of presence rather than the production of meaning, to put it in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's terms.¹ The resistance at work in the experimental practices I will discuss is also a resistance to the social imperative of saying something that makes sense, and I will attempt to understand the political implications of such a stance through an engagement with what Maurizio Lazzarato calls "a-signifying semiotics."²

1. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Palo Alto, California, Stanford University Press, 2004.

2. Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2014.

Given all of these characteristics, the consideration of these experimental works as part of the field of literature might seem dubious, and indeed it is probably meant to be at least ambiguous. Nevertheless, all of these works originate in recognizable traditions within the field of experimental poetic production; they all retain some kind of link with writing in their creative process or in their reception; and, last but not least, they all undoubtedly enrich our discussion of literary aesthetics. In an exhibition that I helped curate at the Chilean National Museum of Fine Arts,³ we decided to call these practices “*poesía en expansión*” (expanding poetry), by analogy with the notion of expanded cinema⁴ and Rosalind Krauss’ reflections on “Sculpture in the Expanded Field.” Krauss’ essay helped understand many practices that fell outside of what would normally be considered sculpture, but nevertheless continued this medium’s interrogation of the relations between volume, space, place, and temporality.⁵ Just like the complex works considered by Krauss, these experimental works seem to be addressing questions that were central to the literary tradition but that cannot continue to be understood through conventional literary composition. Moreover, their use of means of expression other than the printed word often comes from a desire to explore more deeply the features of language as artistic medium rather than a mere desire to leave it behind.

The Brazilian concrete poets of the neo-avant-garde *noigandres* group proposed a clear model to understand this exploration in labelling their work “verbivocovisual”⁶ to underline their ambition of activating language’s semantic, aural, and visual potential (logopoeia, melopoeia, fanopoeia, in Ezra Pound’s terminology).⁷ Just like concrete poetry, the works that I will consider often explore the visual and sonorous dimensions of language, even to the extent of excluding or severely diminishing the importance of its semantic dimension. These practices are often studied by specific fields, under the categories of sound poetry, visual poetry, e-poetry, audiovisual poetry, but such an approach tends to obliterate the extent to which these experimental

3. See the webpage of the exhibition: <https://www.mnba.gob.cl/noticias/poesia-en-expansion> (accessed 21 October 2021)

4. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, New York, P. Dutton & Co., 1970.

5. Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October*, vol. 8, 1979, p. 30–44.

6. Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos, *Teoría da poesia concreta: Textos críticos e manifestos 1950–1960*, São Paulo, Ateliê, 2006, p. 216.

7. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, New York, New Directions, 1968, p. 25.

practices explore several of those fields at the same time (or in successive stages), in a transmedial gesture the importance of which should not be underestimated.⁸

I will address these questions through a commentary on the work of three Chilean authors: Martín Gubbins (b. 1971), Felipe Cussen (b. 1974), and Pía Sommer (b. 1981). In the case of the first and last authors, I will describe and analyze one specific work (Gubbins' book *Cuaderno de composición* [*Ruled Copybook*] and Sommer's poem *El frente de los geranios* [*The Front of Geraniums*]), while in the case of Cussen, I will show recurrent compositional procedures at work in several related pieces. Martín Gubbins' work will be useful for tackling the political potential of poetry that avoids the communication of meaning altogether while exploring the possibilities of several media. Felipe Cussen's work will allow me to explore the relationship of experimental poetry with the online platforms that he uses as a literary and artistic medium. Finally, in Pía Sommer's case, I will discuss a poetics of the voiced text and of the performing body, mediated through techniques of audiovisual reproduction.

All of the materials analyzed in this essay, as well as its first draft, were produced before the great social upheaval that took place in Chile in October 2019. The events that took place during those days, as well as during the following period, and which are still unfolding, have compelled writers and critics to rethink the relationship between poetry and politics, but those reflections would require a different essay, which I hope to write in the near future, and will therefore not be included here.

The first work that I would like to address is Gubbins' *Cuaderno de composición* (2014).⁹ It is originally a book, but it also exists as a sound performance accompanied by a video animation, and it served as the starting point for an installation at the Contemporary Art Museum in Santiago where several artists were invited to propose sound responses to it (see Fig. 1).¹⁰

8. I discuss this transmedial transformations in my "Formas, fuerzas y transformaciones del poema: notas a propósito del Festival Poesía & Música PM," Alex Martoni and Adalberto Müller (eds.), *Rituais da percepção*, Rio de Janeiro, Oficina Raquel, p. 130–149.

9. Martín Gubbins, *Cuaderno de composición*, Santiago, Libros del Pez Espiral, 2014.

10. All of these versions, as well as a PDF of the book, can be accessed at the author's website: <https://martingubbins.cl/cuaderno-de-composicion/> (accessed 21 October 2021), whereas the program of the installation and the series of performances that accompanied it can be found here: <http://mac.uchile.cl/exhibiciones/e/cuadernos-de-composicion> (accessed 30 January 2022).



Fig. 1. Martín Gubbins, *Cuaderno de composición*, cover.

Cuaderno de composición is mostly a non-verbal book: its only linguistic texts are its title, the author's handwritten name, an extremely brief colophon ("This copybook was printed"), and the publication's information on the last page. The interior of the book reveals a succession of identical facing pages covered in horizontal parallel lines that go from the regular look of a ruled notebook (without margins), through a series of variations in the distance between the lines (always remaining parallel to each other), towards a progressive reduction of their number, until arriving at a blank page (see Fig. 2 and 3). The book comes with a pencil and eraser, perhaps as an invitation for readers to intervene on its surface (an invitation that apparently intimidates readers: I have not heard of anyone actually inscribing anything on the book's pages).

This work confronts us with the grid that precedes and predetermines any written inscription, the almost blank surface where graphic gestures could unfold (writing or other kinds, though this kind of copybook, as its title intimates, is normally reserved for written composition). Its series of variations lead us to a white page, which could denote silence, void, emptiness, nothing. This gesture can be interpreted in a number of ways: as a critique of language, as a mystical exploration that points beyond (or



Fig. 2. Martín Gubbins, *Cuaderno de composición*, pages 4–5.



Fig. 3. Martín Gubbins, *Cuaderno de composición*, layout of all the pages.

beneath) it, as a minimalist or conceptual work, or as a transgression of the limits of literature, going over into visual arts.

These possible interpretations have been developed by the book's critical reception. Felipe Cussen, in the book's presentation, affirms squarely that it is a book of poetry, in the tradition of Ulises Carrión's *El arte nuevo de hacer libros* (2005) and of a-semantic visual poetry, while placing it among copious examples of similar literary practices. But he then reads Gubbins' gesture as a liberation from the burden of writing that leads him to a search for silence and absolute whiteness.¹¹ Riccardo Boglione places the book in a tradition of wordless books while focusing on its invitation to its readers to intervene on the lined pages.¹² Carla Carrasco offers a detailed description of the book's operation, including not only its printed but also its performative version, in the context of the author's complete output to date. For her, the poem functions as an experience of nothingness that opens up questions about the nature of literature, poetry, reading, and the book as a material object, on which the experience of this work is focused rather than on anything that might be said.¹³ Juan Carlos Vidal Becerra proposes that it should not be considered a book of poetry, but rather something else, and declares himself incompetent as a reader to confront this work.¹⁴

All of these interpretations, and several others, are possible and plausible, but rather than proposing a new one I think it is important to acknowledge as a symptom the withdrawal from the use of language as a medium, and thus from the regimes of the sayable, communication, production of meaning and sense, towards a realm that closely corresponds to what Gumbrecht calls a "production of presence": all kinds of events and processes in which the impact that "present" objects have on human bodies is being initiated or intensified.¹⁵ When confronted with such a work it may be more productive to ask what kind of object we have in our hands rather than what it means,

11. Felipe Cussen, Discurso de presentación de *Cuaderno de composición* de Martín Gubbins, <https://letrasenlinea.uahurtado.cl/discurso-de-presentacion-de-cuaderno-de-composicion-de-martin-gubbins/> (accessed 30 August 2020).

12. Riccardo Boglione, "Cuaderno De composición (2014) De Martin Gubbins & Explicit Content (2015) De Felipe Cussen". *Tenso Diagonal*, no. 01, April 2016, p. 257-61, <https://tensodiagonal.org/index.php/tensodiagonal/article/view/233> (accessed 10 December 2021).

13. Carla Carrasco, *Formas del no decir: procedimientos experimentales para una poética de Martín Gubbins*, Master's thesis, Universidad de Chile, 2018, p. 106-115, <https://repositorio.uchile.cl/handle/2250/169818> (accessed 23 October 2021).

14. Juan Carlos Vidal Becerra, "Cuaderno de composición de Martín Gubbins," *La Calle Passy 061*, blog, 10 July 2014, <http://www.lacallepassy061.cl/2014/07/vol-cuaderno-de-composicion-de-martin.html> (accessed 30 August 2020).

15. Gumbrecht, 2004, p. xiii.

since it is a work that struggles to avoid any kind of transmission of specific meanings. In a second moment, however, it makes sense to return to the task of interpreting, since the work's gesture of rejecting meaning invites us to engage in it: as Gumbrecht himself put it, these objects oscillate between presence effects and meaning effects, and in the case of a work of art the gestures that discourage interpretation can always be subjected to it.¹⁶ Rather than giving up interpretation altogether, Gumbrecht suggests, we should understand that it is not the only mode of approximation to artistic practices, and that the emphasis on presence opens up a whole new field for critical thought.

Another important observation is that, as I already pointed out, this work is not *one* object, but rather a cluster of related objects in multiple media (printed book, sound performance, video, collaborative installation and performances), including other future possible versions as well. In this sense, as Cussen has stated, it might be fruitful to think of the printed work as a kind of score, as an open set of instructions for multiple stagings of the work.¹⁷ This book includes the possibility of being performed in a variety of ways by its readers, thus requiring a kind of interpretation in the musical rather than the hermeneutic sense.

The gesture of rejecting, abolishing, or at least complicating the production of meaning has become so common in recent experimental poetics that it could almost be treated as a trope. As I already stated, it can often be analyzed as an exploration of the graphic and sonorous aspects of language in detriment to its semantic charge. This gesture of exploration of a-signifying semiotics, in Lazzarato's terms, does not come necessarily from a desire to abandon language altogether, but rather from a rigorous engagement with all of its dimensions, which leads to the discovery that it includes non-discursive zones central to poetic production.¹⁸ It could also be understood as an attempt to work with a logic and a *logos* that are different from those of articulated

16. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

17. Felipe Cussen, "Poemas como partituras: Augusto de Campos y Caetano Veloso," *Pores. A Journal of Poetics Research*, London, Birbeck College, no. 5, 2016, <http://letras.mysite.com/fc300710.html> (accessed 30 August 2020).

18. Maurizio Lazzarato, 2014. Lazzarato reflects on the ideological regime of contemporary capitalism as one defined by the combination of strategies of social subjection and machinic enslavement, which entail multiple intersections between discursive and non-discursive fields. The latter are structured in what Lazzarato (following Félix Guattari), calls "a-signifying semiotics."

language, along the lines suggested by Gottfried Boehm, for whom images make sense but in a way that is irreducible to a linguistic or semiotic model.¹⁹

A well-articulated and highly perceptive critical reading of recent experimental poetic practices in Latin America has been advanced by José Ignacio Padilla in *El terreno en disputa es el lenguaje*, where he proposes, in dialogue with Franco Bifo Berardi's and Paolo Virno's ideas, that this irruption of the unintelligible works as a kind of resistance to the unlimited legibility of multinational capitalism as an economic system.²⁰ This hypothesis is seductive and astute, but at the same time highly problematic when viewed from the perspective of Lazzarato's characterization of capitalism, in the wake of Félix Guattari, as a system characterized by the convergence of semantic/subjectivation and a-signifying/desubjectivation strategies. The definition of capitalism as a regime of complete legibility and full communication without any kind of opacity or ambiguity does not seem convincing, nor does the notion that any interruption or disruption of the logic of normal communication should be understood as a kind of resistance to this economic system. Furthermore, it seems more productive to consider the relation between poetry and capitalism as one that includes not only operations of critical opposition but also of mimesis, reflection, distortion, deformation, and expression, to use Walter Benjamin's suggestion.²¹ This becomes very clear when we consider the relation of recent experimental poetry to digital technology.

One can easily access most of these recent works in online versions: it is enough to Google their authors' names in order to arrive to their personal websites and to their profiles in multiple social networks or platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Bandcamp, Youtube, Vimeo, among others. This fact, far from being an accessory, is vital to understanding the production and circulation of these works, and very linked to their transmedial nature. The exploration by writers of audiovisual formats

19. Gottfried Boehm, *Cómo generan sentido las imágenes: El poder del mostrar*, Mexico City, Ediciones Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2017.

20. José Ignacio Padilla, *El terreno en disputa es el lenguaje: Ensayos sobre poesía latinoamericana*, Madrid, Iberoamericana, 2014.

21. "The question, in effect, is the following: if the infrastructure in a certain way [...] determines the superstructure, but if such determination is not reducible to simple reflection, how is it then [...] to be characterized? As its expression." "Convolute K", Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [1982], trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 392.

is obviously linked to the relatively low-cost availability of the necessary hardware and software: what not so long ago required expensive cameras, sound-recording equipment, and montage facilities can now be done with a cell phone after acquiring the minimal technical competences through online tutorials. This situation lends itself to discourses of technological optimism and democratization²² as well as more paranoid positions about the Internet as a sophisticated surveillance and control system (positions that increasingly seem less paranoid than simply realistic), as a seductive simulacrum destined to ensure the omnipresence of the society of spectacle, as what Giorgio Agamben has called an apparatus (“anything that has the power to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings”²³). Regardless of the position one adopts, it must be acknowledged that we live in a world thoroughly permeated by digital culture, where even printed texts are produced through computer interfaces and where even its critique is carried out by digital means.²⁴

The inescapable mediation of artistic production through digital culture applies to any contemporary work, but I am interested in addressing here the case of Felipe Cussen, who engages directly with the implications of social networks for poetry and aesthetics. Although at first sight his work appears more humorous and gleefully ironic than critical, I will argue that it nevertheless produces an acute social commentary due to its rigorous exploration of the implications of the many technological interfaces with which and through which we interact on a daily basis.

Felipe Cussen’s website offers, in its upper left corner, a menu of possible platforms (Dropbox, Bandcamp, Youtube, Academia), through which we can access his production in PDF, MP3, or other formats, thus sharing the transmedial character of Gubbins and Sommer’s productions. *Las instantáneas del poeta Felipe Cussen* [*Poet Felipe Cussen’s Instant Photos*] (2018), originally published as Instagram/Facebook

22. Loss Pequeño Glazier’s Digital Poetics can be considered an example of an enthusiastic and optimistic approach to the possibilities of the web “as a space of poesis.” *Digital Poetics-Hypertext, Visual-kinetic Text and Writing in Programmable Media*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, University of Alabama Press, 2008, p. 5.

23. Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus & Other Essays*, Palo Alto, California, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 14.

24. For a discussion of the implications of this, see N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 2008. Carolina Gainza’s *Narrativas y poéticas digitales en América Latina* (Santiago, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2018) offers a useful and thoughtful overview of recent practices connecting literature and the digital world in Latin America.

postings, but now available also as a self-published book in PDF or as printed postcards contained in an envelope, are a series of selfies accompanied by phrases invariably starting with “El poeta Felipe Cussen...” [“The Poet Felipe Cussen...”] (see Fig. 4).²⁵

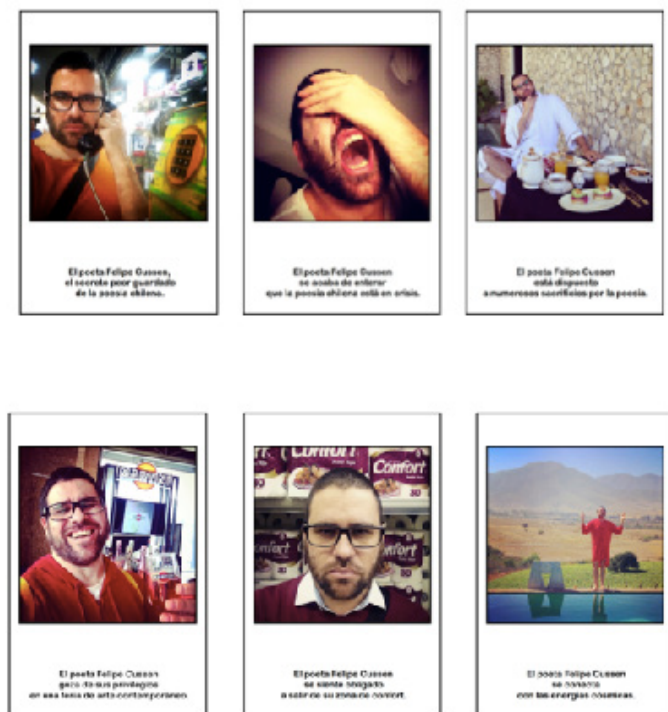


Fig. 4. Examples from Felipe Cussen, *Las instantáneas del poeta Felipe Cussen* (2018).²⁶

25. Though some of the pictures featured in this projects are not exactly selfies in the technical sense (since they were taken by somebody else, whereas the definition of the selfie consists of a portrait photograph shot by oneself), they nevertheless function as such in that it is their subject who decides how they should be taken, even if he does not press the shutter button, thus fulfilling an authorial function.

26. The translation of the captions of this photos is the following “The poet Felipe Cussen, Chilean poetry’s worst kept secret,” “The poet Felipe Cussen just found out that Chilean poetry is in a state of crisis,” “The poet Felipe Cussen is willing to make numerous sacrifices for poetry,” “The poet Felipe Cussen enjoys his privileges in a contemporary art fair,” “The poet Felipe Cussen feels obliged to get out of his comfort zone,” “The poet Felipe Cussen connects with cosmic energies.”

These posted pictures are easily readable as a parody of (his own and everybody else's) literary poses and self-promotion through social networks, as well as a shameless exploration of the author's obvious social class privileges (or rather, those of his homonym and alter ego, "the poet Felipe Cussen," who should not be immediately conflated with the natural person behind it). The uncomfortable ambiguity, however, stems from the fact that it is not clear whether the pictures are proposing a critical perspective on these phenomena or a cynical and hedonistic exploration of their space, in a pop key, since at the same time that these postings make fun of the social images of poets, they also obviously serve the function of self-promotion that they supposedly criticize.

Cussen's ulterior work goes further in the same direction: *This Is Me* (2018) consists of the acquisition of 1,000 random comments on social networking platforms by fictional users (bots), such as those commonly used by political or marketing campaigns. The work's PDF includes a copy of the invoice through which the transaction was formalized and a series of screenshots of the laudatory comments (see Fig. 5 and 6).



Fig. 5 *This is me*, cover page

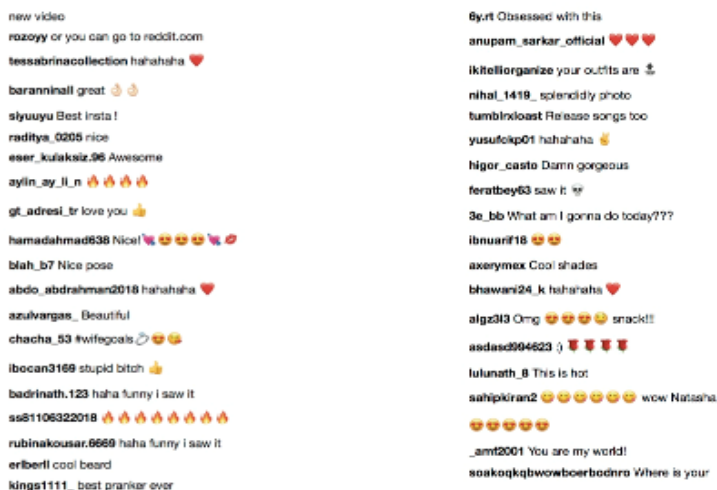


Fig. 6 *This is Me*, sample pages

It is interesting to note that this is one of several works by Cussen to be published in English instead of in Spanish, his native language. This is partially an indication of the fact that he is conversing with the international circuit of Conceptual Poetry, a school that Cussen has been very active in disseminating and promoting in Chile through his teaching and publications as an academic as well as through invitations of important figures in this tradition, such as Craig Dworkin, Rob Fitterman, Marjorie Perloff, and Riccardo Boglione, among others. The decision, however, also stems from the fact that it is a book that does not require any particular linguistic skills, since it was not actually written but only commissioned by its author, along the lines of what Kenneth Goldsmith has called “uncreative writing.”²⁷ Nor is it actually supposed to be read: like many works in this vein, its reception consists in understanding the gesture that it enacts, not in going through its 143 pages and reading every single comment.

Marjorie Perloff, in her *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (2012), surveys some of these non-creative writing practices that often work with appropriated text in terms of the debate around the death of the author, as

27. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Writing in the Digital Age*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011.

well as a postmodern questioning of the importance of the notions of originality and innovation.²⁸ It is, of course, paradoxical that these works, which are supposed to annihilate individual authorship and renounce originality, are often promoted as innovative and serve the purpose of consecrating their author's name. A work such as *Las instantáneas del poeta Felipe Cussen* can be seen as an exploration of that uncomfortable fact, similar to Vanessa Place's controversial self-promotion experiments. The rise of Conceptual Poetry in the U.S. has been accompanied by polemics, many of them centred around its ideological status and its canonization mechanisms, which this is not the place to revisit. It may be interesting to wonder, however, where does the political nature of these gestures reside, what is their potential for resistance.

In Latin America an interesting movement of more explicitly politicized and committed conceptual poetry has emerged (of which Carlos Soto's work can be considered a clear example). Cussen's work, however, does not exactly fit within this line of poetry, but rather stays within a zone of ambiguity that in principle is incompatible with any kind of explicit political commitment. He seems to be exploring the political potential of ambiguity: at least some of the uncomfortable feeling this work generates has to do with the fact that it employs a kind of irony in which the real position of the author is not easy (or maybe even impossible) to determine. It is clearly not classical irony (meaning the opposite of what one says), but it is not exactly romantic irony (saying something while hinting that I may not mean it to produce an infinite field of interpretive possibilities). It may be described as a kind of self-annihilating irony that consists in saying what one means even if it seems that one might not be meaning what one says.

If Gubbins' example resisted legibility by renouncing language, Cussen's work seems to be using language in a way carefully crafted to bracket its supposedly normal functioning, while mimicking its operation in the world of social media, algorithms, likes, and digital forms of self-fashioning. What all of the above have in common is that they function ostensibly as what Lazzarato calls "means of subjectivation" (defining the place of subjects in a social structure by generating identification and interaction in terms of gender, professional status, elective affinities, class sensibilities, and so on), while actually operating according to a logic where subjects do not matter in their

28. Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, Chicago, Illinois, University of Chicago Press, 2012.

individuality but only as input for machines processing information. Cussen's playful work actually functions as a rigorous exploration of how these normally invisible strategies function.

I would finally like to consider Cussen's book *Pages*, a PDF containing an amount of blank pages calculated so that the program is unable to open the file due to its excessive size. In this case the illegibility of the work seems to function not in terms of any reading subject but in terms of the programmed collapse of the software itself. This is therefore a work that cleverly exposes the limits of the machines through which we access any kind of document, often forgetful of their mediating role. As opposed to the cynical, humorous, and conceptual/pop sensibility pervading the two previous works, this one proposes a relation to the unreadable/unsayable that is closer to the mystical tradition (of which Cussen is a serious student, often proposing comparisons between strategies of illegibility in contemporary art and various religious practices or texts in his academic research work), while also opening up the question of whether works like this are even aimed at human readers.

It is tempting to propose that these practices call into question the discursive apparatuses through which subjectivities and intersubjective relationships are constituted in the age of digital media through the resources of parody, iteration *ad absurdum*, defamiliarization, and other strategies, but it is also necessary to ask ourselves whether it is the author, together with us as readers, who is actively contemplating and reflecting upon these aspects or rather being passively subdued and formatted by them. German media theorist Friedrich Kittler has suggested that rather than media being extensions of humanity (as Marshall McLuhan famously claimed) we are now extensions of the very media that we think we critically engage, utilize, deconstruct, study, or analyze. Is Cussen's work a critique of digital media, virtual reality, online social networks or a symptom of our total immersion in those realities to the extent that no critical viewpoint can be adopted? In other words, are these gestures of resistance or of surrender? The impossibility of answering these questions is doubtlessly one of the virtues of this body of work, which can perhaps help us reframe the questions not in terms of us *versus* technical media but of a subjectivity that is inseparable from them.

If many cases of recent experimental poetry draw inspiration from a dialogue with new technologies and media, in other cases the relationship with these formats is combined with the use of other techniques, which we could call archaic, implying a return to the body, rituals and performance, orality and the voice, as well as the tactile materiality of the physically printed word on different supports. Just as the proliferation of reading practices on digital devices has produced a sometimes nostalgic or fetishistic return to artisanal printing, and the universal availability of online streaming platforms has brought with it a return to the cult of vinyl records, the omnipresence of digital modes of production goes hand-in-hand with the exploration of pre-digital techniques (even if they are often shared, paradoxically, on digital platforms). This coexistence produces a strong tension between the erasure of authorship implied in many of these practices and the exacerbation of their authors' actual bodily presence, for example in live performance.

In the final section of this essay, I address some of the problems associated with the technology of the voice, its use as a medium, in tension with both the written word and the various modes of processing and reproduction of vocal sounds. For this I will focus on the case of Pía Sommer, an artist formed at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso School of Art who transitioned from visual art to sound art, with incursions in the fields of live performance, sound/phonetic poetry, and printed poetry. Her poem *El frente de los geranios* was published in 2018 as an artisanally printed plaque, but it also exists in audiovisual format, and I will focus on the latter.²⁹

With the screen still dark, we hear a dirty buzzing noise like that caused by an electrical interference in an audio circuit, or like the background hiss in low-fidelity recordings. It is a vibration, a drone that often comes up in sound poetry performance, as if it were the unformed ground from which words or more definite non-verbal sounds will emerge, and to which they return at the end. That is precisely what happens here, when above the plane of that crepitating, crackling background the voice of the author emerges, reciting a text, while the screen starts to show the image, in colour, of a beach, with the line of the sea far behind and a wooden dock that does

29. Pía Sommer, *El frente de los geranios*, Málaga, Spain, Francisco Cumpián Maestro Impresor, 2018. A PDF of the plaque can be accessed at Pía Sommer's website (<https://piasommer.com/>), where the whole video can be found as well. It can also be accessed on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=s_B43YTpaHI&feature=emb_logo (accessed 22 October 2021).

not reach it in the middle (see Fig. 7). The image becomes black and white, and at its centre, in a medium shot, we see superimposed the image of Sommer, her eyes and mouth shut, her ears covered by voluminous headphones (see Fig. 8). Once this image fully replaces the previous one, her eyes open and she stares intensely at us before disappearing as the screen goes dark again.



Fig. 7. Pía Sommer, screenshot of *El frente de los geranios*, video, Chile, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_B43YTpaHI (accessed 23 october 2021).



Fig. 8. Pía Sommer, screenshot of *El frente de los geranios*, video, Chile, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_B43YTpaHI (accessed 23 october 2021).

I am particularly interested in the way in which this video plays with the tension between absence and various modes of presence, with the alternating display and disappearance of the body, and with the phantasmatic character conferred to it by digital film. Throughout, there is a deliberate refusal to let image and sound coincide, while the body from which the voice emerges is never shown in the act of emitting it. Sommer appears at several points in the video holding two technical devices to amplify and record sound, a megaphone and a tape recorder, near her mouth or at the end of her extended arm, but her mouth never opens. Her voice instead arrives from offscreen space, functioning thus as an acousmatic sound, a sound whose origin we cannot see or identify with certainty. We cannot know whether the voice we hear belongs to the body we see unless we have heard Sommer speak and recognize the voice as hers.

Much of the theory that explores the place of voice in cinema and video focuses on this acousmatic, disembodied condition, since even with synchronic sound the image of the mouth that speaks is not the point of origin of the sound that we hear, which comes instead from a speaker. Film theorist Michel Chion has dwelt extensively on this split between the visual image and sound, especially the speaking voice, and the many suturing strategies to make spectators forget it.³⁰ For some theorists of the voice, furthermore, this acousmatic condition is characteristic of the voice itself as an object, even when we hear someone who is physically present before us. According to Mladen Dolar, the voice never fully coincides with the body from which it emerges, since it comes out of an interior that remains invisible and it moves away from the body, acquiring independence from it.³¹ In contrast with this position, philosopher Adriana Cavarero has explored from a feminist perspective the political possibilities of voice as a place of co-appearance of singular subjects in public space,³² while Brandon Labelle has defended that, even though the voice never fully coincides with the body whence it comes, it never completely separates from it either, since it retains the reference to a specific corporality.³³

30. Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* [1982], trans. Claudia Gorbman, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999.

31. Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2006.

32. Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Palo Alto, California, Stanford University Press, 2005.

33. Brandon Labelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary*, New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2014.

Sommer writes:

crane body
 steel body
 hook body
 sword body
 grenade body
 winged body
 bang bang body [...]
 shelter body
 night body
 African sun body
 depraved missile body³⁴

This fragment of her poem captures well the tension between an appeal to the body and the awareness that it is always caught in a network of devices, technological mediations that determine it, invade it, expand it. Later in the video, Sommer's image disaggregates in a multitude of phantasmatic doubles superimposed on it, while the voice reads:

hundreds of us were the shrapnel
 the word sprouted from disgust
 the word sprouted from abandonment
 the moaned word of joy
 the word gained at the counter
 the word with cut tongue
 shoot from the mouth!³⁵

The convergence between an army of phantasmatic clones and this appellation to the mouth as a kind of weapon, as a place of pleasure, disgust, abandonment, violence, symbolic and physical exchanges between body and world cannot be casual. The voice that we hear vibrates with affective intensity and urgency in her reading of the poem, but the face remains calm, impassible throughout, as if collected and absorbed

34. "cuerpo de grúa/cuerpo de acero/cuerpo de enganche/cuerpo de espada/cuerpo de grana-da/cuerpo alado/¡cuerpo bang bang bang! [...]/cuerpo de amparo/cuerpo de noche/cuerpo de sol africano/cuerpo de misil depravado." Sommer, 2018, p. 4, (our translation).

35. "cientos fuimos la metralla/la palabra brotaba del asco/la palabra brotaba del abandono/la palabra gemida del goce/la palabra granada en la barra/la palabra de lengua cortada/¡dispara por la boca!" *Ibid.*, p. 5, (our translation).

in a gesture of deep listening, as if acknowledging that she who speaks out is always somebody else. The poem concludes on a cautiously optimistic note:

we go to the front
these geraniums live
from this
and this
is more
is bread
is peace
it is
black
faith³⁶

After this passage the image quickly rewinds, retracing its steps and collecting its thread back again, folding in onto itself, back to the starting point, a black screen where the video's credits slowly appear, bearing witness to the collective and collaborative dimension of this work. This gesture can be read as a reminder of the fact that audiovisual media not only register time but can also alter and transform it, as several media theorists (from Gilles Deleuze to Friedrich Kittler) have pointed out.³⁷

The three poets whose work I have addressed here propose three different modes of resistance to writing but also through writing: Martín Gubbins renounces words in favour of the book as an object whose presence as a thing in the world affects us, functioning as a comment on our relation to writing and reading, but also generating multiple possible versions. *Cuaderno de composición*'s production of presence through absence (the absence of words and the absence of any marks at its end) invites many other possible forms of presence: from the author's audiovisual performances to a museum installation and to the readers'/writers' intervention on its pages.

36. "vamos al frente/estos geranios viven/de esto/y esto/es más/es pan/paz/es/negra/fe" *Ibid.*, p. 7–8, (our translation).

37. As Sybille Krämer points out, this is a central and highly problematic argument in Kittler's analysis of film as a medium. "The Cultural Techniques of Time Axis Manipulation: On Friedrich Kittler's Conception of Media," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 23, nos. 7–8, 2006, p. 93–109.

While Felipe Cussen also renounces words (and any kind of inscription) in his *Pages*, he does not seem intent on a production of presence but rather in confronting us with the impossibility of a presence (the file that we download but cannot open), as a way to make visible the interfaces through which we access any kind of content in the digital era. In *This Is Me*, the words not written but purchased by him also call attention to another feature of our online social life, plagued by non-human entities that engage us in fake dialogues, interacting with us in ways that blur the distinction between human beings and software. Finally, *Las instantáneas del poeta Felipe Cussen* include words and images referring to their author's persona in a clever enactment of a series of strategies of posing and self-promotion in social media that parody those behaviours while guiltlessly indulging in them at the same time, as if there were no pure outside of the digital spectacle through which we fashion ourselves nowadays. The political potential of these works lies in the ways in which it exposes the dynamic between subjectivation and desubjectivation strategies through which capitalism currently operates: precisely there when we think we are sharing what makes us unique as subjects, we occupy a pre-determined place in a grid of machinic enslavement where we are no more than anonymous input for an algorithm constructed to furnish us with a sense of self while also depriving us of our subjective place.

Of the three poets studied here, Pía Sommer is the only one who does not give up the exploration of a lyrical register (perhaps because she comes to poetic practice from a training in visual arts, which paradoxically liberates her from the imperative to give up words, from the logoclastic impulse of many avant-garde poetics). Her text fits more or less the traditional description of a poem, but it also exists in an audiovisual format that explores the interplay between “primitive” technologies (such as the voice and the performing body as a physical presence) and digital video recording and editing, the production of phantasmatic images that mediate our access to the voice and body as such, while retaining a strong link to them. Her work illustrates the political potential of a return to articulated language combined with bodily and technological means for channeling it.

These three authors are producing what Florencia Garramuño has called a literature “outside/beside itself” (“*fuera de sí*”).³⁸ For her, the hybrid and often

38. Florencia Garramuño, “La literatura fuera de sí,” *Mundos en común: Ensayos sobre la inespécificidad en el arte*, Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina, 2015, p. 43–57.

inter-, multi-, or transmedial works defying classification that have emerged in the last decades on the edges of literary and artistic practice destabilize the notions of specificity, autonomy, and belonging that grounded modernist aesthetics, while proposing new forms of relation amongst ourselves and with the world around us, new ways to inhabit together the world that we share.

Even if we do not find engaged discussions of current political events in the works discussed here, their aesthetic explorations, in their resistance to being reduced to pure form or content, open up new forms of self-fashioning and encounter with others within and without language, in the meeting point between different media, between language and material objects, immaterial networks of symbolic and a-signifying exchange, and performative techniques where the body (dis)appears under a new light.

Experimental Poetry and the Aesthetics of Resistance in Agitated Times

FERNANDO PÉREZ VILLALÓN

UNIVERSIDAD ALBERTO HURTADO

ABSTRACT

This article proposes an overview of practices in recent Chilean experimental poetry that explore the diverse dimensions and limits of language as a medium, thus bringing into question what Ulm and Martoni have called our “rituals of perception.” These works by Martín Gubbins, Felipe Cussen, and Pía Sommer not only explore the acoustic, visual, performative, material, and intermedial potentialities of language and literature, they also bring them to the point of a crisis—for instance, in producing works that give up verbal language altogether or works that stubbornly resist the transmission of meaning as the main function of verbal language. The article describes some of these practices and proposes an aesthetic and political interpretation of them along the lines advanced by theoreticians such as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (production of presence), Jacques Rancière (the distribution of the sensible), Marjorie Perloff (uncreative writing), Maurizio Lazzarato (a-signifying semiotics).

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article propose un aperçu de certaines pratiques de la poésie expérimentale chilienne récente qui partagent une exploration des diverses dimensions et limites du langage en tant que médium, remettant ainsi en question ce qu’Ulm et Martoni ont appelé nos « rituels de perception ». Ces œuvres de Martín Gubbins, Felipe Cussen et Pía Sommer explorent non seulement les potentialités acoustiques, visuelles, performatives, matérielles et intermédiaires de la langue et de la littérature, mais elles les amènent également au point de crise, par exemple en produisant des œuvres qui abandonnent le langage verbal dans son ensemble, ou des œuvres qui

résistent obstinément à la transmission du sens comme fonction principale du langage verbal. Cet article décrira certaines de ces pratiques et en proposera une interprétation esthétique et politique selon les lignes avancées par des théoriciens comme Gumbrecht (production de présence), Rancière (distribution du sensible), Perloff (écriture non créative), Lazzarato (sémiotique a-signifiant).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Fernando Pérez Villalón (PhD in Comparative Literature, New York University) is a faculty member in the Department of Language and Literature and the Arts Department at the Universidad Alberto Hurtado in Santiago, Chile. He is currently the Director of the Arts Department. His research focuses on intermedial relations between images, sounds, and texts. He has published numerous critical essays, several books of poetry, object books, and a volume of translations from classical Chinese. He is part of the Orquesta de Poetas experimental collective.