"Distribution is the Key": Transatlantic Networks of Audiopoetry in the Postwar Era

Ulla Stackmann

ABSTRACT: This essay carves out a transnational network of postwar audio publishers invested in the idea to distribute spoken poetry and performed art via LPs and cassettes. To exemplify the strategies and practices of labels, it presents a case study of the German *S Press Tonbandverlag* and its correspondence with the audio magazines *Black Box* (Washington, D.C.) and *Audio Arts* (London, UK). Thereby, it delves into the formation of a postwar audio scene (c. 1950s-80s) whose meanings and significance for literary history has so far received relatively little attention within the field of literary studies.

KEYWORDS: Midcentury; Poetry; Sound; Audio Media; Media Shift; Audio Publishing; Audiopoetry

> With the fifties, however, came the gift of an external revolution: the availability of the tape recorder to sound poets made audio-technological advancement of the art form a reality. To summarize the several revolutionary capabilities that tape allowed: the transcendence of the limits of the human body.
>
> (McCaffery 10)

Press Play: Introducing the Postwar Audio Scene[1]

Beginning in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s and -80s, poets and artists in Europe and North America worked with audio technologies to create poems and performances that combined elements from popular music, visual arts, and poetry.[2] Together they set up projects that encompassed compilations, hotlines, labels, and audio magazines. They devised

[1] I would like to thank Marc Matter with whom I have had many vital conversations that partly inspired this article and my considerations regarding the North American and European audio scene.

[2] Of course, poets and artists worked with audio media before and after this period. However, I maintain that the midcentury was a particularly prolific era because historical and cultural circumstances sparked an enthusiasm for audio mediation. For one, the introduction of the vinyl long play record (LP) on a large scale and of the portable tape recorder propelled the work with audio media (Shaw 35-40; Parry 170-71). Equally, the phonocentrism I describe in this paper contributed to an enhanced use of audio recording in relation to poetry production. This philosophical view valued the spoken word as particularly intuitive, immediate communicational means, and as the superior form of transmitting language in comparison to writing.

approachable formats that circumvented the traditional institutions of the cultural field, such as major print publishers and museums. The works created within this audio scene [3] transgressed national and disciplinary boundaries in different ways. For one, recordings of poetry traveled across national borders by way of a network of international audio publishers that introduced audiences to different kinds of poetry on sound carriers, i.e., audiopoetry. Additionally, the work with audio mediation undermined the separation between poetry, visual arts, and music, enabling artists and poets from these fields to collaborate and develop new practices. In the 1970s, an increased work with performative modes of expression in the visual arts and poetry propelled interest in popular and rock music since concerts offered compelling examples of performative virtuosity (Goldberg 152-53; Fischer-Lichte 21-26). Sound carriers as a medial form were associated with music and, concurrently, could be used to record performances. Hence, audio recording became a nexus for music, visual arts, and poetry.

My historical investigation suggests that the audio scene was guided by the questions of how to reach audiences most effectively and how to develop more intuitive forms of poetry and art. These two issues connected the audio scene in the postwar era (c. 1950s-1980s) since the actors, organizations, and poetry circles associated with it insinuated that audio mediation could generate less elitist and more immediate forms of art and poetry. These two issues also linked the audio scene to very early experiments with poetry and audio recording, such as Kurt Schwitters' shellac record *Merz No. 13* (Matter).[4] Thus, it is not surprising that North American and European poets working with audio recordings saw themselves indebted to the concrete and sound poetry associated with modernism. Hugo Ball's Dadaist performances or the works of Russian futurist Velimir Khlebnikov, who chiefly engaged with the phonetic quality of words, were often cited as precursors by postwar poets. Additionally, the concrete and sound poetry following World War II was closely associated with poetry that appeared on vinyl LPs and cassettes. Nevertheless, my perspective draws less on formal similarities among literary streams or the pre-history of postwar audiopoetry. Instead, I outline how the construction of

---

[3] I take the term "audio scene" from an event that the Austrian gallerist Grita Insam organized in 1979: *Audio Scene '79*. She invited a group of international artists to participate in an exhibition and a symposium on audio art in Vienna. The event was remarkable because it hosted many driving forces of the audio scene such as Michael Köhler, Hank Bull, and Bill Furlong. Among those participating were the artists Laurie Anderson, Michael Brewster, Terry Fox, Hank Bull, Maurizio Nannucci, Peter Weibel, and others exploring audio mediation and performance as art forms (Bull and Adrian). I use the term "audio scene" as it is, on the one hand, a term that was used within artistic circles and refers to a historically significant event. On the other hand, the term captures the loose character of the audio circles in that they constituted a scene, i.e., a temporal and spatial constellation and not a fixed group or movement.

[4] Schwitters published the 13th issue of the avant-gardist magazine *Merz* as gramophone record. It is one of the earliest examples of self-published audiopoetry and, thus, is frequently cited as prefiguring the later experiments in the postwar era.

a European sound poetry heritage served as a legitimization for audiopoetry in the postwar era and how a focus on the material practices connected with audio mediation and poetry.

To substantiate the claim that the audio scene pursued a form of poetry populism, my paper explores postwar poetics and its mystification of the spoken word. A range of postwar poets, e.g., the Beats, assumed that speaking and performing were the most intuitive and, seemingly, authentic ways of transmitting poetry. This suggestion led them to work and experiment with audio recordings. In this context, small audio publishers and labels sprang up in the US and Europe to distribute these novel audio works. They formed a network of loosely connected audio publishing projects, which provided a platform for the audio scene. Introducing them, I clarify how these publishers operated in Europe and North America. To exemplify these findings, I then analyze the correspondence between *S Press Tonbandverlag*, a small German label, *Black Box*, a US audio magazine, and *Audio Arts,* a British audio magazine. This case study lays the foundation for my final remarks regarding the status of the postwar audio scene and its meanings for future literary research in relation to audiopoetry.

Transnational Concerns with Non-Semantics

The transatlantic network of audio enthusiasts ushered in a shared mystification of the spoken word as an immediate and intuitive medium for poetry. In the 1960s and -70s, this mystification manifested itself in a validation of poetry performances, e.g., by the Beats, by feminist poets, and by the Black Arts Movement (Athanases 120-24). These groups revived an interest in performed poetry that had soared in the nineteenth century and declined with the New Critics' emphasis on silent reading (Wheeler 6; Camlot 124). The revival of performative poetry was indicative of perspectives that centered on the non-semantic qualities of spoken language since, as some poets and commentators assumed, these conveyed something that was vaguely framed as livelier or more vivid and was missing from apparently dead print. "Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings," poet Charles Olson accordingly noted in his now infamous essay "Projective Verse" (386). His remark demonstrates the tendency in the postwar era to view poetry as something that must be composed on the basis of sound rather than traditional rules. Consequently, and in a similar vein, Amiri Baraka, then still working under the name LeRoi Jones, asked in 1959: "HOW YOU SOUND?" (424). For him, the sound of language expresses an individual "grasp on, say: […] [o]urselves (which is attitudes, logics, theories, jumbles of our lives & all that)" (424). Thereby, Baraka underlined that spoken language, in his opinion, does not only transport the semantics of language but also social, cultural, and individual realities that are engrained into the sound of speech. Such views explain why poetry reading as a format gained currency in the postwar era; it was the ideal platform to practice the phonocentrism partly inherent to the poetics of the time (Davidson 196). Phonocentrism prescribes that speaking is immediate whereas writing is a poor approximation to sounded

language. Against this backdrop, poets increasingly developed an interest in audio recording and mediation since poetry readings were frequently documented by tape recorders (Allison 30). Therefore, and due to the general popularity of audio media, poets, along with visual artists, discovered labels as means to distribute their works in a new way. "For the time of the tape is upon us," poet Donald Hall, thus, proclaimed (297).

This brief and condensed outline of postwar poetics illuminates the sociocultural climate in which poets and those interested in poetry and sound began to produce audiopoetry in the postwar era. It suggests that the practice to record and publish poetry on sound carriers was closely connected to phonocentric tendencies within poetry circles at the time. Yet these considerations were not entirely new, as Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin point out:

> From the Prague School to Ludwig Wittgenstein to Tel Quel, modern philosophers of language have described poetry […] as a kind of text that deviates from conventionally utile language by self-reflexively foregrounding elements other than the referentially communicative. Poetry, in these accounts, calls attention to structures such as sound while damping the banausic, denotative impetus of language. (10)

Perloff and Dworkin note that there was a diverse group of philosophers, poets, and linguists who, in the twentieth century, began to investigate the relationship between poetry, referentiality, and sound. They contemplated what the sound of language expresses apart from "the referentially communicative," and how poetry might be able to unearth whatever lies beyond semantics. Moreover, Perloff's and Dworkin's comment highlights that the interest in spoken language and poetry was not limited to North America but was pervasive in many regions. Most prominently, European modernists and philosophers had raised similar issues before and North American poets appreciated them as trailblazers. For example, among others, Olson names Ezra Pound as a significant influence in "Projective Verse" (386). However, most strikingly, the Canadian poets Steve McCaffrey and bpNichol captured the tendency to construct a genealogy between European sound poetry and North American performance poetry in *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue* (1978), compiled on the occasion of the eleventh *International Sound Poetry Festival* in Toronto, Canada. The volume contained a historical survey of sound poetry, statements by poets, a detailed discography of contemporary audiopoetry, and short biographies of the participants. In the first section, McCaffrey presents his version of a historical outline of sound poetry that, in his mind, encompasses three phases. The first describes "the vast, intractable area of archaic and primitive poetries" (6). The way he describes this first phase contains a form of primitivism common to imaginaries of orality. Frequently, they problematically differentiate between the "naturalness" of apparently primitive oral cultures and the artificiality of literary cultures. Walter Ong's description of primary and secondary orality is a well-known example of such a stance (Ong 3, 82). Stereotyping and reducing Indigenous peoples to illiterate and, thus, "natural" communities is inherent to such views. An undercurrent of racism reveals itself as McCaffrey claims that the first phase's "many instances of chant structures and incantation, of nonsense syllabic mouthings and deliberate lexical distortions [is] still alive among North

American, African, Asian and Oceanic peoples" (6). Thus, McCaffrey implies a binary between the apparently primitive orality of Indigenous peoples and the literacy of white cultures in the Global North.

Moreover, the affirmation of the Global North's hegemony also underlies McCaffrey's second phase of sound poetry, which covers roughly the period from 1875 until 1928. McCaffrey notes that "[…] sound poetry's second phase […] manifested itself in several diverse and revolutionary investigations into language's non-semantic, acoustic properties," quoting Russian Futurism, Italian Futurism, and Dadaism as examples (6). Thereby, McCaffrey reproduces a common genealogy that traces the very beginnings of sound poetry to European modernism and, more specifically, to a set of key figures: Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Wassily Kandinsky, Hugo Ball, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Raoul Hausmann, and Tristan Tzara (6).[5] This predominantly Eurocentric canon of sound poetry is often referred to as the origin of experimental sound and performance poetry in the twentieth century. It is important to recognize this discourse to understand the transatlantic structure of the audio scene in the postwar era. Sound and performance poetry created a niche where poetry was considered an inherently transatlantic form. This imagined history of sound poetry ushered in the idea that the sound of words figures as an immediate medium overcoming language barriers. Thus, the predominant reception of sound poetry does not adhere to a national canon but to a transnational notion of sharing the universal intelligibility of sound. Along with establishing a transatlantic understanding of history, the idea of non-semantics partly freed poetry from the constraints of meaning and, thereby, the idiosyncrasies of national language. The imagined emotional value and potential immediacy of spoken language shaped this argument, enforcing the view that sound and performance poetry can connect a transnational audience. Certainly, the emphasis on this idea varied according to context. Yet, it motivated poets, artists, and audio enthusiasts to found small labels that provided a publishing platform for works on sound carriers and put the "new oral impulse" (Davidson 196) into practice. As a result, a network of audio publishers sprang up in Europe and North America. To give an insight into their operations, the next section presents a number of projects that ushered in the wake of phonocentric tendencies within postwar poetry circles.

[5] It is significant that this genealogy does not apply to all forms of modernism. Michael Davidson, for example, argues: "Olson's concern for the virtues of hearing is part of a pervasive phonocentrism that dominates contemporary poetics. For poets of the 1950s and 1960s, a new oral impulse served as a corrective to the rhetorically controlled, print-based poetry of high modernism" (196). Hence, the model of sound poetry I evoke here is a selective one drawing on particular poets and poetics that seemingly rely more on the audible qualities of language. Thus, in my view, Davidson's argument that postwar poets countered "print-based" modernism could be refined by considering the modernist figures that postwar poets acknowledged as forerunners.

Postwar Audio Publishers

In *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*, McCaffrey stylizes the use of tape recording as progress in poetic practice: "With the fifties, however, came the gift of an external revolution: the availability of the tape recorder to sound poets made audio-technological advancement of the art form a reality" (10). The phrasing immediately conveys the entrepreneurial enthusiasm with which the members of the postwar audio scene approached the new technologies. McCaffrey credits the French experimental poet Henri Chopin with the first attempts to fully realize the potential of the tape recorder (11). Furthermore, he adds poets from Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Austria, Germany, Canada, and the US—among others—to the list of actors engaging with sound technologies and poetry (11-18). His enumeration underlines his awareness for a transatlantic audio scene sharing poetics based on sound. Moreover, the cast of poets participating in the *International Sound Poetry Festival* reflected McCaffrey's multinational outline (104-11).[6] Thus, the relationships and connections he describes were not only theoretical constructs but were put into practice at the festival.[7] Events like this figured as networking platforms for poets, labels, and an interested public, creating a physical space for organizing the audio scene. However, more flexible venues to distribute audiopoetry were mostly small, specialized spoken word labels that published poetry on cassettes and LPs (cf. Matter). Most of them were run by poets and artists. Literary scholar Marc Matter notes:

> Sound Poetry is not only a practice that manifests itself in performance but also in publication, although somewhat lost between the worlds of books (= literature) and records (= music). Publishing Sound Poetry is a reality since Kurt Schwitters published Merz Nr. 13 as a shellac record in 1925 (containing parts of the Sonate in Urlauten) and had it's [*sic*] zenith in the 1960s throughout the late 1980s with artists-run publishing projects on a D.I.Y. basis […]. (Matter)

Again, Matter draws attention to the relationship between European modernism and publishing audiopoetry in the postwar era. Moreover, he points to an important aspect of the audio scene, its "D.I.Y. basis." Much like avant-gardist little magazines, i.e., small, experimental literary magazines, the fact that they were mostly run by poets differentiated these labels from more established, tendentially commercial spoken word labels that also published audiopoetry by mostly modernist, canonized authors (Parry 170-72). To envision the practices of the audio scene, it is useful to refer to the criteria Sophie Seita has suggested for characterizing (little) magazines: "provisionality, periodicity, multiple authorship,

---

[6] Ilmaar Laban, Charles Levendosky, Jackson MacLow, Aarigo Lora-Totino, Greta Monach, Charles Morrow, Owen Sound, Sean O'Huigin, Jerome Rothenberg, Steve Ruppenthal, R. Murray Schafer, Ann Southam, and Larry Wendt are listed as participants.

[7] Grita Insam's *Audio Scene '79* provides another example. It is beyond this paper's scope to give a detailed account of the numerous festivals and events that hosted the audio scene. Nevertheless, investigating their history would be an immense contribution to the research on sound, audio-, and performed poetry.

heterogeneity of contents" (11). She points out that these features are helpful insofar as they avoid a reduction of avant-gardist little magazines to fixed expectations regarding their constitution and style. Similarly, the cassettes and LPs of avant-gardist labels provisionally captured a moment in time of the contemporary poetry scene. Thus, they were not meant to give a comprehensive outline of a specific poetry school. For example, the small Nashville-based audio magazine *Poetry Out Loud* (1969-77) published a selection of ten LPs containing improvised and experimental audiopoetry with no agenda except currency (Haruch). In regard to periodicity, some labels tended to publish audio magazines and, thus, attempted to attain periodicity while others stuck to issuing several LPs or cassettes irregularly, emulating the strategies of music labels. In New York, for instance, the poet John Giorno ran *Giorno Poetry Systems* (GPS), one of the longest-running avant-gardist labels in the US, which published vinyl compilations of poetry from c. 1972 until the 1990s. These contained poems, songs, and audio works from a varied group of poets, artists, and musicians. Considering the style and presentation of the LPs, the label attempted to appropriate strategies common in pop music (cf. Kane 145-71). Yet, most importantly, these small labels frequently presented a heterogeneous sample of poets and artists. More often than not, they disregarded conventional differentiations between music, poetry, and art, issuing compilations with a multi-faceted set of available contributors.

Next to GPS and *Poets Out Loud*, the audio magazine *Black Box* (Washington, D.C.), the small publisher *Panjandrum Press* (San Francisco), *Broadside Voices* (Detroit), music producer Alan Douglas's label *Douglas* (New York), and the *Widemouth* label (Baltimore) were among the tendentially avant-gardist publishers and labels issuing audiopoetry in the US. In Europe, Marc Matter accounts for a network of small labels issuing similar publications: the *OU review* in France, the *Fylkingen* society in Sweden, *Balsam Flex* in the UK, *3vitre* in Italy, and *S Press Tonbandverlag* in Germany. Since audiopoetry constituted a niche at the margins of the literary field, LPs and cassettes traveled via the informal channels of the poetry scene, reaching audiences "over the years by word-of-mouth, lending copies, usage in universities, exhibitions, and presentations or re-issues in new contexts" (Matter). Certainly, this marginality propelled exchange in transnational settings as it connected like-minded poets, artists, and producers of audiopoetry. To exemplify this practice, I delve deeper into the histories of the British imprint *Audio Arts*, the German publisher *S Press*, and the US audio magazine *Black Box* by recounting the correspondence between them. Analyzing their exchange enlightens how they collaborated and supported each in their endeavors.

Audio Publishing and Transatlantic Collaborations

S Press Tonbandverlag operated from 1969 until 2005 (PennSound). The imprint's catalog included a diverse range of poets and artists like Raoul Hausmann, Otto Nebel, Patti Smith, John Cage, Henri Chopin, and also John Giorno, founder of GPS (Matter). Thanks to the work of Marc Matter, the history of *S Press* has been rediscovered from a scholarly perspective and,

in 2020, *PennSound*, the world's largest online archive for audio recordings of poetry, made *S Press*'s recordings available online (PennSound). The audio publisher was founded by the student Angela Köhler (who later became a gallerist, among other things), the artist Axel Knipschild, and the educator Nikolaus Einhorn in Hattingen, located in Germany's industrial Ruhr region. In 1972, Köhler's brother, the Americanist Michael Köhler joined the venture, establishing contact with John Cage, who taped a cassette for *S Press*. Additionally, during a research stay at Yale University, Köhler managed to persuade a host of US poets to record their works for *S Press*—among them were Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Larry Eigner, and Clark Coolidge (Matter). Despite the label's focus on sound poetry, the Indigenous civil rights activist Clyde Bellecourt also contributed a speech to *S Press*'s catalog (Matter). Along with publications by US poets and audiopoetry by German authors, *S Press* also planned—but never realized—cassettes by the French poet Pierre Albert-Birot and the Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov. Thus, while *S Press* was only partly run by artists, its catalog displayed a form of heterogeneous and provisional publishing common among what I call avant-gardist labels.

S Press's discography features many poets that kept appearing in catalogs; among them were Beat poets like Ginsberg or Ferlinghetti, or other household names like Giorno, who was also featured on GPS compilations. This goes to show that audio publishing in the 1960s, -70s, and -80s revolved around a small circle of US, Canadian, French, Austrian, Italian, and German-speaking poets like Viennese sound poet Ernst Jandl, whose works were less text-based than auditory and, thus, prone to audio publishing.[8] *S Press*'s catalog shows that the audiences interested in audiopoetry were also ready to engage with works from different countries and in various languages. For example, *S Press* featured Giorno's poetry in English alongside Maurizio Nannucci's *Testi Sonori and Radiopoems* (PennSound). In some cases, the nationality of the poet played a minor role because their work was based on the non-semantic play with sound bites, like Charles Amirkhanian's *Five Text-Sound Pieces* (PennSound). Considering the cultural capital of some of these poets, the decision to include them in a discography of audiopoetry may not come as a surprise. However, it seems highly unusual to publish foreign poetry without any in-depth comment or translation. Yet, *S Press* included short-liner notes or no guiding text at all. This practice also underlines the peculiarity of audiopoetry whose audience, it seems, was either so familiar with the transnational canon of sound poetry or nurtured such a highly specialized interest that language barriers seemed surmountable.

Equally, the correspondence between *S Press* and other audio publishers demonstrates a keen interest on both sides of the Atlantic to share and distribute the works of other imprints. *S Press* was in touch with the US audio magazine *Black Box*, which belonged to the larger organization *Watershed Foundation* in Washington, D.C. *Watershed Foundation* ran *Black Box*

[8] In this regard, McCaffrey's and bpNichol's *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue* provides an in-depth insight into the relevant poets and circles for audio publishing from a North American and European perspective.

and hosted a variety of poetry-related projects, such as *Watershed* tapes and several radio shows (Pearse 112-13). From January 1974 until March 1975, Michael Köhler (*S Press*) corresponded with *Black Box* editor Alan Austin. They exchanged tapes and considered issuing a twin-cassette box entitled *Breathing Space*, which would be "exclusively devoted to experimental sound-poetry and tape-poetry" (Köhler, *Correspondence with Watershed/Black Box*). Austin suggested that *S Press* distribute the series in Europe, while *Black Box* would cater to US audiences. It is not entirely clear what became of Austin's proposal since only three letters of the correspondence between Köhler and Austin are preserved in Köhler's personal archive. Yet the letters indicate that Austin considered distributing tapes by German poets in the US. Köhler enquired how to proceed with translations, suggesting to include a written English text "where the pieces are not sound poetry strictly speaking, that is, where the reading is based on a written text" (Köhler, *Correspondence with Watershed/Black Box*). Hence, resonating with the imagined transnationality of sound, Köhler insinuates that, in some cases, the pure sound of poetry is enough to comprehend it. Although there is no evidence that the collaborations proceeded, the correspondence illustrates that discussing, sharing, and distributing each other's works was part of the practices of the small transnational circle of avant-gardist audio publishers. According to two letters by salesman Liam Rector from 1978, it seems that the *Watershed Foundation* later distributed *S Press*'s tapes in the US. Rector primarily sold *S Press* tapes to colleges, libraries, and archives (Köhler, *Correspondence with Watershed/Black Box*), as was common in relation to audiopoetry. The letters do not indicate what selection of *S Press* cassettes he distributed, whether they were in German or English. Nevertheless, Rector's inquiries emphasize the willingness of the audio publishing community to share distributional channels and support each other in exporting audiopoetry to foreign countries.

S Press's contact with *Audio Arts*, a UK-based audio magazine, equally suggests the extent to which the transnational collaborations played a role within the audio scene. The British artists Bill Furlong and Barry Barker established *Audio Arts* in 1973. Unlike *S Press*, the magazine focused more on visual arts in their catalog, including Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, and Tracy Emin, but the difference between audiopoetry and visual art seemed fluid. Postwar poets, musicians, and visual artists like Laurie Anderson, Vito Acconci, Patti Smith, or Giorno published a great variety of works under the label poetry, not paying much attention to potential disciplinary boundaries. The US performance artist Acconci, for example, began his career as poet and also published audiopoetry. Among other things, he contributed to the 1969 compilation *Tape Poems* (Costa et al.), before turning to performative art. His biography exemplifies a generation of artists and poets who took interest in the possibilities and limitations of performances. Their shared turn toward less conventional formats led them to

collaborate and contemplate the nature of sound and language.[9] Thus, despite *Audio Arts*' focus on visual arts, *S Press* and *Audio Arts* moved within a similar orbit of poets, performative artists, and audiophiles. Accordingly, audio publishing was as much transdisciplinary as it was transnational. The circumstances under which Furlong and Köhler got in touch illustrate this peculiarity: they first met at *Audio Scene '79*, an event organized by the Austrian gallerist Grita Insam. Next to an exhibition and a series of performances, Insam hosted a symposium that invited artists, poets, and audio publishers to regard the current state of audio art (Bull and Adrian). On this occasion, Köhler and Furlong met and established a correspondence afterward (Köhler, *Correspondence with Bill Furlong/Audio Arts*).

Despite the different foci of their imprints, Köhler and Furlong considered collaborating on a cassette of John Cage's *Empty Words* for the New York-based label *Tomato Records*. Indeed, *Tomato Records* published the vinyl LP *John Cage* (TOM-7016) in 1978. However, it is not clear if this publication relates to Köhler's and Furlong's operations. It seems that their project did not materialize.[10] Yet, their exchange regarding a possible publication underlines the willingness on both sides to share recordings and resources. It insinuates that publishers did not raise claims concerning specific poets or artists. Rather, if the possibility arose, they sought to issue recordings. Moreover, the correspondence between Furlong and Köhler relates several occasions when either one presented tapes of the other label. For instance, Köhler offered to represent *Audio Arts* at the *Frankfurt Book Fair* in 1979 (Köhler, *Correspondence with Bill Furlong/Audio Arts*). Furlong, in turn, asked for *S Press* tapes to include them at a three-day presentation at the *Riverside Studios* in London. Thus, they both generously attempted to support the other label by sharing resources and information. Similarly, Köhler accounts for his visits to the US in his letters to Furlong (Köhler, *Correspondence with Bill Furlong/Audio Arts*). On the one hand, Köhler's references imply that he assumed Furlong's familiarity with the US audio scene. Hence, they indicate that both kept track of the US scene

[9] Accordingly, the sound poet Paul Dutton emphasized in *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*: "Let's not imprison poetry on the page. Let's liberate it on the page. Let's liberate it off the page. As music incorporates language (in the works of John Cage, R. Murray Schafer and others, historically and contemporaneously), let poetry incorporate music. As visual art incorporates language (Ben Shahn, Greg Curnoe and others, historically and contemporaneously), let poetry incorporate visual art. Many are doing or have done either or both of these: bp Nichol, John Furnival, Dom Sylvester Houedard, Bob Cobbing, Steve McCaffery, Jackson MacLow, Tom Phillips, among others" (40).

[10] As with most small, avant-gardist labels, there is no definite discography of *Tomato Records* that has been compiled by a scholar or an official institution. Since most small spoken word labels were rather provisional endeavors, their histories are usually not well documented. Although colleges and libraries acquired publications by more established spoken word labels, they often did not pay attention to the publication contexts of particular vinyl LPs or cassettes. Hence, they did not necessarily buy all the publications of one label and their holdings only offer incomplete evidence of discographies.

and had established contacts within it. On the other hand, they underline Köhler's and Furlong's willingness to assist each other in establishing a network.

In this context it is also interesting to note that there is evidence that poets similarly fostered transatlantic networks. For instance, in 1968 William Burroughs wrote to poet Giorno:

> P.S. I would like to send your tape on to Carl Wiesmann in Germany who is doing tape recorder experiments to see if we can't get an international exchange of experimental tapes going. Is this O.K. with you? (Burroughs)

Burroughs' comment shows that poets were aware of similar efforts with tape experiments across the Atlantic and, possibly, in other regions. It exceeds the scope of my paper to delve deeper into work with tape by poets and its materializations in recordings. Yet, it is important to note that poets evidently exchanged and compared their audiopoetry with others pursuing similar approaches.[11] Thus, audiopoetry labels and poets concurrently built transnational networks sharing resources. These networks were intertwined and represented an important element of poetic practices.

The correspondences between *S Press*, *Audio Arts,* and *Black Box* indicate that the niche market for audiopoetry and art was not necessarily organized along national lines but rather along a tendentially transnational and flexible network of audio enthusiasts. Audio publishers constituted nodes in this network that connected artists, poets, and actors interested in working with and sharing audio recordings. "Distribution is the key," intermedia artist Hank Bull accordingly announced in a lecture-performance at *Audio Scene '79* (Bull). Thus, small labels contributed an important element to the audio scene as they provided platforms to publish and reach audiences in a new way. In addition, they carved out a space for transnational collaborations connecting actors across disciplines and countries. These observations pose the question of how to position these heterogeneous networks in relation to literary history and how scholarly work might engage with it. The last section is dedicated to this task and points out future research directions.

A Loose Community of Audio Enthusiasts

The midcentury work with audio media was shaped by a drive to connect audiences and poets and produce approachable poetry for a general audience. Issuing cassettes and LPs could, it seemed, provide a way to circumvent institutions like print publishers or museums that controlled the access to audiences and poets/artists. By establishing D.I.Y. labels, poets and

[11] I discussed and analyzed an audiopoetry anthology, *Tape Poems* (1969), in more detail in *Schreiben, Text, Autorschaft I*: *Zur Inszenierung und Reflexion von Schreibprozessen in medialen Kontexten*. The anthology was compiled by the Argentinean conceptual artist Eduardo Costa and the US artist John Perreault. It speaks to the relationship between US audiopoetry circles and the work of Costa, who also contemplated the spoken word and its relevance for poetry and art. In the introduction to the anthology, he and Perreault, for example, point to the significance of tape recording for poetry and art (Stackmann 195-97).

audio enthusiasts like Köhler and Furlong provided informal platforms that broke down apparent barriers between audiences and poets. The practice of frequently recording on-site at readings or in the homes of poets instead of in studios, for instance, was meant to generate a feeling of intimacy (Matter). Although such arguments may seem illusionary or easily rejectable, they speak to the urgency many artists and poets assigned to the issue of institutionalization and elitism. This recognition, I suggest, applies to the North American as much as to the European context. Poets and artists in both regions shared the perception that audiopoetry might enable them to directly reach audiences and immediately communicate with them in a more "natural" way, i.e., through spoken language. Austrian gallerist Grita Insam, for instance, saw the circumvention of institutions like galleries or museums as the chief purpose of audio art (Insam). Similarly, US poet Giorno wrote on the cover of an LP which his label published in 1972: "At this point with the war and the repression and everything, we thought this was a good way for the Movement to reach people" (*The Dial-a-Poem Poets*). The unspecific use of "people" underlines that he had a general audience in mind and that this way, i.e., publishing poetry on an LP, seemed an especially useful way to interest this generally conceived audience. In this case, the capitalized "M" of movement indicated Giorno's connection to the counterculture and the political affiliation of his label. Although Insam did not reference any explicit political belief systems, she similarly indicated that galleries and other institutions needed to rethink their functions, considering the artists' will to reach audiences more directly. After all, the hope to establish a direct connection with a general audience inevitably meant that established institutions like museums, major print publishers, or galleries seemed obsolete. In a similar vein, Canadian audio artist Hank Bull stated in his lecture-performance at *Audio Scene '79*: "Because sound is difficult to present in a museum, teach in a school, or sell in a gallery. Because it breaks down the barriers, not only between the arts, but also between art and life, sound, and all intermedia activity, lead us away from art institutions" (Bull). I do not agree with Bull unreservedly since artists and poets continued to collaborate with well-established institutions like museums and print publishers. Additionally, cassettes and LPs were still sold in stores. Yet, I suggest, his observation reveals how audio technologies provided a platform to rethink conventionalized artistic practices in the second half of the twentieth century. Audio technologies, on the surface, seemed like an exit strategy in a time when the wariness regarding state-run institutions and established distribution channels increased in the wake of the emancipatory movements of the 1960s in North America and Europe.

The audio scenes that formed in Europe and North America, I put forward, were intertwined and partly felt indebted to the same Eurocentric, mostly white, and male tradition of sound poetry. Despite repeated claims regarding the audio scene's outsider status, white male poets dominated it and reproduced a problematic primitivism concerning seemingly pure, oral cultures. Phonocentrism also created a paradox since the tape, i.e., a technological device, should recover the immediacy of spoken language. Similarly, literary scholar Michael Davidson identifies this paradox by comparing it to Cold War surveillance culture:

> The connection I would establish between the worlds of surveillance and poetics is that the virtues of orality become increasingly significant in a world where technology is capable of separating the voice from speaker, conversation from community. Apprehension of this alienation animates the writing of many writers during this period. But far from rejecting the tape recorder as an agent of reification, they embraced it as an accomplice in the recovery of more authentic speech. (203)

In line with Davidson's comment, I suggest that enthusiasm for the capacities of the tape recorder sometimes concealed a questionable belief in technology's authenticity or objectivity. Moreover, the high degree of intellectualism prevalent in the audio scene poses the question if poetry of its members was as approachable as some claimed. Scholars like Davidson have, time and again, pointed to these inconsistencies in discourses on audio media in the postwar era.

However, the histories and efforts behind small labels like *S Press* have so far been largely overlooked by researchers in literary and art history. Researching and understanding these smaller imprints can widen the scope of reception that has mostly focused on singular figures like Laurie Anderson, Vito Acconci, or Patti Smith. These renowned figures partly emerged from the audio circles. They overshadow the material and cultural contributions of those, like Insam, Köhler, Austin, or Furlong, who built artistic platforms for the audio community. Considering these platforms lays bare contexts and connections that transgress disciplinary and national boundaries, as I posit. My propositions are not meant to present poets working with audio recording as a stable, closed literary stream or movement but as a loose community of audio enthusiasts. Thus, my paper sheds light on a literary and artistic network creating a prolific environment for collaborations, theories of poetry, and publishing projects. Forming this network opened up a space to experiment with less conventionalized formats. While this development dates back fifty years, the lack of research regarding audio publishing underlines that literary research in relation to media shifts and poetry production can still explore a wide range of practices contributing to the medial realignments of poetry in the twentieth century. Digital and video formats similarly played into this development and relate to the postwar audio scene in that they demonstrate the formal flexibility of poetry. Thus, exploring audiopoetry publishing can complement preexistent perspectives on intermediality and poetry. Additionally, it draws attention to the precarious collaborative work that provides the infrastructure for literary and—in particular—poetry production, from which literary studies profit but which they rarely acknowledge. After all, Köhler, Furlong, and Austin invested time and money to build labels that were hardly profitable (Köhler, *Correspondence with Watershed/Black Box;* Matter). Yet, projects such as theirs built vital spaces for artistic and literary production next to more commercially oriented or established institutions like publishers or museums. Recognizing such precarious forms of community work can complement existent perspectives on literary production.

Works Cited

Allison, Raphael. *Bodies on the Line Performance and the Sixties Poetry Reading*. Univ. of Iowa Press, 2014.

Athanases, Steven Z. "When Print Alone Fails Poetry: Performance as Contingency of Literary Value." *Text and Performance Quarterly,* vol. 11, no. 2, 1991, pp. 116-27.

Burroughs, William S. *Correspondence with John Giorno*. One letter to John Giorno. April 6, 1967. William S. Burroughs Papers, Series III Correspondence, box 78, folder 3, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

Bull, Hank. "Boy Can See with His Ears" performed 1 Jan. 1979, *Audio Scene '79*, 30 Apr. 2004, http://kunstradio.at/HISTORY/TCOM/AS/boy.html. Accessed 10 Feb. 2022.

Bull, Hank, and Robert Adrian. "Sound on: Audio Scene '79 at Modern Art Galerie*,* Vienna*.*" *Audio Scene '79*, 30 Apr. 2004, http://kunstradio.at/HISTORY/AUDIOSCENE/. Accessed 10 Feb. 2022.

Camlot, Jason. *Phonopoetics: The Making of Early Literary Recordings*. Stanford UP, 2019.

Costa, Eduardo, et al. *Tape Poems (1969).* Edited by Eduardo Costa and John Perrault. *ubuweb:Sound*, https://www.ubu.com/sound/tape_poems.html. Accessed 10 Feb. 2022.

Davidson, Michael. *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word*. Univ. of California Press, 1997.

Dutton, Paul. "A Preface to 'Right Hemisphere, Left Ear.'" *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue.* Edited by McCaffery and bpNichol. Underwhich Editions, 1978, p. 40.

Fischer-Lichte. *Ästhetik Des Performativen*. Suhrkamp, 2019.

Goldberg, Rose Lee. *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. Thames & Hudson, 2001.

Hall, Donald. "Poets Aloud." *Poetry,* vol. 139, no. 5, 1982, pp. 297-305. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20594431. Accessed Feb. 10, 2022.

Haruch, Steve. "With a Digital Reissue, the Experimental '60s Spoken Word Series *Poetry Out Loud* Looks Back on a Revolution." *Nashville Scene,* 8 Mar. 2012, www.nashvillescene.com/arts_culture/with-a-digital-reissue-the-experimental-60s-spoken-word-series-i-poetry-out-loud-i/article_bf4ad3a1-0e32-504d-b0d1-a7d5c882b7f9.html. Accessed 3 Feb. 2022.

Insam, Grita. *Preface to Exhibition Booklet.* 30 Apr. 2004, http://www.kunstradio.at/HISTORY/AUDIOSCENE. Accessed 8 Feb. 2022.

Jones, LeRoi. "How You Sound??". *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960.* Edited by Donald Allen. Univ. of California Press, 1999, pp. 424-25.

Kane, Daniel. *Do You Have a Band? Poetry and Punk Rock in New York City*. Columbia Univ. Press, 2017.

Köhler, Michael. *Correspondence with Watershed/Black Box.* Two letters from Alan Austin, Two letters from Liam Rector, Three letters from Michael Köhler. Jan. 13, 1974 to Aug. 13, 1978, Michael Köhler (edition S Press), Köhler-Michael 162, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin. https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/2676126.

---. *Correspondence with Bill Furlong/Audio Arts.* Five letters from Bill Furlong, four letters from Michael Köhler, Nov. 17, 1977 to Jan. 4, 1978, Michael Köhler (edition S Press), Köhler-Michael 147, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin. https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/2676055.

Matter, Marc. "Edition S Press Tonbandverlag: Publishing Sound Poetry and Acoustic Literature 1970-2005." *PennSound,* June 2020, https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/S-Press/text/Matter-Marc_Introduction-to-S-Press_June-2020.pdf. Accessed 10 Feb. 2022.

McCaffery, Steve. "Sound Poetry: A Survey." *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue.* Edited by McCaffery and bpNichol. Underwhich Editions, 1978, pp. 6-18.

McCaffery, Steve, and bpNichol, editors. *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*. Underwhich Editions, 1978.

Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse." Allen, *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. Edited by Donald Allen. Univ. of California Press, 1999*,* pp. 386-97.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Routledge, 2002.

Parry, Sarah. "The LP Era: Voice-Practice/Voice Document." *ESC: English Studies in Canada,* vol. 33, no. 4, 2007, pp. 169-80.

Pearse, James A. "Nonprint Resources." *Literature in Performance,* vol. 4, no. 1, 1983, pp. 112-13.

Perloff, Marjorie, and Craig Douglas Dworkin. "Introduction." *The Sound of Poetry, the Poetry of Sound*. Edited by Marjorie Perloff and Craig Douglas Dworkin. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 1-17.

Seita, Sophie. *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazine Communities from Dada to Digital*. Stanford UP, 2019.

Shaw, Lytle. *Narrowcast: Poetry and Audio Research*. Stanford UP, 2018.

"S Press." *PennSound,* June 2020, https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/S-Press.php. Accessed 10 Feb. 2022.

Stackmann, Ulla. "The tape recorder is already as necessary as the typewriter"– Schreibprozesse im Kontext US-amerikanischer Audiolyrik." *Schreiben, Text, Autorschaft I:*

zur Inszenierung und Reflexion von Schreibprozessen in medialen Kontexten. Edited by Carsten Gansel, Katrin Lehnen and Vadim Oswalt. V&R unipress, 2021, pp. 195-212.

The Dial-a-Poem Poets. Vinyl LP, Giorno Poetry Systems, 1972.

Wheeler, Lesley. *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*. Cornell UP, 2008.