

2018-08-02

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/16317>

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10.1080/13528165.2018.1464761

Performance Research: a journal of the performing arts

Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

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## Disrupting the Market in Echoes

Voice, body and technology in poetry and performance

by Hannah Weiner and Holly Pester

MARK LEAHY

### INTRODUCTION

This essay considers questions of writing in its relation to voice, technology and performance in voiced and printed work by Hannah Weiner and Holly Pester. The essay focuses on two works, Holly Pester's *Buddy Holly on my Answer Machine* (Pester 2011) and *RJ Romeo & Juliet* from Hannah Weiner's *Code Poems* (1982). These two pieces with their specific relations to performance, to technology, to voice and the body, are used to examine questions of the physical body and emotional affects in a context of commodification and exchange, and through this to consider relations of voice to authenticity. Interpositions of technology and bodies, marked and specific bodies (Pester performs her poem while hula-hooping, Buddy Holly was recognized for his trademark hiccoughs, Weiner's poems were performed by teams of trained signallers) complicate the reception of these texts, as texts, as communication and as events.

Through their complication of relations among and within, in the first place, the production of culture, and thence the reproduction of the body's emotional production, these works along with those of other practitioners in contemporary writing and performance call attention to a commodification of affects. Pester and Weiner disturb the presentation of love or desire or emotions as natural, as outside of commodity relations or potential for exchange, and bring to notice the double business of a 'true private authentic self' and the manner in which that self and its emotional labour and production participate in and are mediated by a market.

### FLAGGING UP SEEING AND HEARING

Hannah Weiner's *Code Poems: From the INTERNATIONAL CODE OF SIGNALS for the use of all nations* (1982) is a gathering for publication of material used in performance works in the

1960s and early 1970s. In her 'Introduction' to the collected texts or scores, Weiner explains that the found content is drawn from British and US nineteenth- and twentieth-century publications of the codes used as 'a visual signal system for ships at sea' (Weiner 1982: n.p.). Weiner's texts record an intersection of writing, bodies and technology, the machinery of the code and the tools for signalling, as the performances used semaphore signallers, semaphore flags, megaphones, flares, flashing light signals, alphabet flag hoists and the aid of the US Coast Guard. (Weiner 1982: Acknowledgements). The poem *RJ Romeo & Juliet* takes the acroponic letter names from the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) as a title, and then a series of one-, two- or three-letter codes from the 'Code of Signals' to develop a dramatic scene (aware of Shakespeare's play) between characters named for the letters. As the 'balcony' or garden scene (Act 2, Scene 2) of *Romeo and Juliet* revolves around questions of naming, identity, seeing and meaning, the business of communication is (at least) doubly encoded in Weiner's text. *Romeo and Juliet* are joined by a third player – Mike (the name of the letter M) – who leaves about a third of the way into the scene. Using the phrases and references of the international code, Weiner assigns text to these players – they are given short lines or lists – and this text is exploited for the unintentional humour and for the possibilities of misunderstanding despite the care taken to develop a clear communication system. An impersonal system for unambiguous exchange between trading and naval vessels is warped so that it generates emotions and affects. These inappropriate utterances or misreadings of purpose muddy the open water between emotional affective and abstract commercial systems.

In Shakespeare's play, the balcony scene depends on invisibility, on the heard and the not-seen. In a garden at night, the young lovers

# DRAFT

find each other, listen to each other, declare their passions and arrange to meet again. There is constant anxiety around being found, of being found out, and there are a number of interruptions (by the Nurse, from within and by Juliet leaving the window). The dialogue begins with the lovers speaking separately – Romeo describing Juliet, Juliet unaware of Romeo – and a consideration of the relation between name and thing, between sign and referent, between signal and message. Following declarations of love, of the hardship of love's obstacles and pledges to be forever true, the lovers separate, and then Juliet returns, to speak again to the invisible Romeo, and their exchange focuses on sound, on listening, on hearing the other's voice:

JULIET: Bondage is hoarse, and may not speak aloud;  
Else would I tear the cave where Echo lies,  
And make her airy tongue more hoarse than mine,  
With repetition of my Romeo's name.

ROMEO: It is my soul that calls upon my name:  
How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night,  
Like softest music to attending ears!  
(Romeo and Juliet, 2.2.170–6)

The restrictions of darkness, of separation, are celebrated by the lovers while they also bemoan their fate. They revel in the repetition of the other's name, and in hearing their own name in the other's voice. Physically apart, they get satisfaction from the exchange of vows, and in the play of language, of double meanings and associations; the physical act of love is written into the text of verbal lovemaking.

Weiner pushes this verbal play further in her poem, and brings the lovers to consummation. Mike, the third player, performs a role similar to Mercutio whose initial he shares; he encourages Romeo in pursuing Juliet, and then leaves.

EQO Mike: I decline to have anything further to say or do in the matter.

KUM Nothing to be depended upon beyond your own resources

DJX Farewell. Adieu (Mike leaves)

(Weiner 1982: n.p.)

Now left to themselves the lovers engage in a back-and-forth exchange that exploits all the possibilities of double entendre, of slang meanings of the code of signals vocabulary and

of possibilities for play within the text. The pair arrange a date, eat, find lodgings, have sex and fall asleep together.

|     |         |  |
|-----|---------|--|
| GIA | Juliet: | This is my best point                        |
| SHJ |         | Some swell                                   |
| XOR | Romeo:  | Thank you                                    |
| GDS |         | May I begin to?                              |
| GIT | Juliet: | The sooner the better                        |
| MFO | Romeo:  | Entrance is difficult                        |
| MFD | Juliet: | Try to enter                                 |
| KZU | Romeo:  | I am in difficulties; direct me how to steer |
| OOX | Juliet: | You should swing and enter stern first       |

(Weiner 1982: n.p.)

The letter codes are set in a column on the left, followed by the character names as in a playscript in the second column and the short phrases and words set in a third column. This formal arrangement, and the sense of distance between the opaque signal codes and the suggested passion of the intercourse allows the text in performance or in reading to explore the gap between a sign and its referent, between a coded message and its specific contextual meaning for those exchanging that message.

As the code poems demonstrate, connotative effects, whereby, to use Barthes's terms, the code refers to another code, may establish the main meaning of any utterance.... While the code scripts would seem to limit the kinds of information that would be communicable, connotation stretches these limits in ways that the fanciful names of the flags themselves suggest. (Goldman 2001: 126)

The letter codes partly operate as pet-names or code words may within a relationship; they can indicate emotion, suggest private intimate secret exchange and can operate to initiate, direct and recall sexual play. A system developed for communication at distance and across language boundaries to facilitate trade and commerce, is adopted or adapted to tell stories of the intimate, close contact of bodies. A means of communication developed by global trade for global business and expansion is appropriated, made messy by Weiner, who performs the political as personal, and makes the smooth flow of commerce sticky and sweaty. Living bodies, their emotional labour and their efforts at expression

of feeling are folded into and cut through the purportedly transparent language of the market.

The code of signals depends on visibility for communication; the signals must be seen by the ship signalled to. This displaces the primacy of hearing in the Shakespeare scene, where exchange depends on audible emotional texture. The language of the lovers in Weiner's poem is mediated by a technology of letter codes, the production of signals, and it requires numbers of signallers, signal readers and code books.

Untethering the naturalized relations between signifiers and signifieds, [Weiner] alters the message content by performing the code outside of the seafaring context, using antiquated editions of it, and employing media in excess of what is necessary for conveying the given content. (Goldman 2001: 126)

The act of sex is shown to be culturally loaded, with associations and expectations of exchange, and this exchange functions among a myriad of other exchanges, of trade, diplomacy and work. These exchanges seek to naturalize themselves while presenting sex as natural. They seek to screen the technologies and apparatuses they depend on. Weiner's sex play presents sexual intercourse as one mediated technologized exchange among others – and presents language as a technology for transcribing and scripting these exchanges.

Weiner's code poem experiments ... expose the incomplete maintenance of delineations between names, ordinary language, and metalinguistic functions in language, illustrating this slippage in levels of discourse most convincingly when using gender as an axis through which a syntactic principle inadvertently becomes thematic. (Goldman 2001: 128)

Weiner's reworking of *Romeo and Juliet* returns attention to the naturalizations at work in Shakespeare's text, where an immediacy is proposed for voice, where it is elevated above mediated modes such as writing or visual display. Reading or witnessing Weiner's performance text brings attention to the intersection of voice and technology, whether this is within an Elizabethan theatrical context of stage and play and their associated conventions, or in recordings of voice as tool or record of seduction. The private exchange of lovers, the individual voice, the emotional ebb and flow of a relationship, can and have all been incorporated into the commodity

machine. We are encouraged to identify a true self that is the site of these emotions, which is the producer of this voice, and at the same time, to acquiesce to the commercial exploitation of these emotions as detached from us and having value in the system of exchange. Holly Pester's 'Buddy Holly' texts can be read as investigating this from within popular music and its distribution and reception.

## TWO HOLLYS AND A PEGGY SUE

Buddy Holly's song 'Peggy Sue' is expanded and interpreted by Holly Pester in her poem *Buddy Holly on my Answer Machine* (2011). In its title, Pester's poem interposes technological mediation between our reading or hearing of her text, and the song it draws on. The song is on an answering machine, but we don't know at this point if this is a message from Buddy Holly or the greeting for those leaving a message for Pester.

My aim was for a work that sounded like a broken record player with distortions made present via the recognition of the tune of 'Peggy Sue'. (Pester 2013a: 71)

There is secondary or even tertiary recording here: Holly's voice in the recording studio in 1957 and the transposing of that to vinyl and that to a digital file, and then Pester's taking of that and resituating it to an answering machine.

I developed the initial version by phoning one phone with another (landline to mobile) and leaving a message. In doing so recording sung improvisations, adlibbing around the lyrics. (Pester 2013a: 71–2)

On listening to the Soundcloud file (Pester 2013b) I imagined the clunky sounds and crashes and repeated click to be a record of this awkward technology, pressing the record button, dropping a receiver. Then I read the track listing on the *Out of Everywhere 2 CD*, 'Buddy Holly (Performed while Hula-hooping)' (Pester 2015b) and those sounds gained a different set of associations, the hoop dropping to the floor, the swish as the hoop swings round again and again. The experience of reading the printed poem is very different from listening to Pester's recording of 'Buddy Holly (Performed while Hula-hooping)', where the effort of keeping the hoop spinning marks the texture of the performance, as it echoes the turntable,

the spinning disc of the vinyl record, the turning wheels of a tape-recorder and various repetitive circlings as the hoop drops or the breath slips out of sync with the song's rhythm. Pester takes one 1950s craze and passes it through the actions of another, appropriating the male rock star's persona and displacing his gendered display with female exertion. The bodily effort necessary to produce the vocals is highlighted, reversing the use of the adjective 'effortless' as a complement, particularly for female cultural labour including singing.

The source ('Peggy Sue' 1957) plays with repetition, fragmentation, the mixing of verbal and non-verbal utterance, and this is reflected (echoed) in the Pester version, where some of these aspects are exaggerated, extended, taken to excess.

I understand sung performance of a text and the shift from talking to singing, as a courting of sonorous excess through volume, pitch, melody. These things replace my somewhat limited vocal palate of accent, prosody, personality and significantly the level of physical exertion is heightened. But when I enter this mode I am not singing like a singer sings, I am imitating. I am generating a performance persona in the form of singing. (Pester 2013a: 70)

In Buddy Holly's performance, the emotional crack in the voice, the glottal stop of feeling erupting into the surface of the delivery, disrupts the verbal message, but adds other non-verbal information and meaning. This trademark hiccup carries both the emotional sentimental quality that Barthes criticizes as lacking *signifiance*, and the grainy value of bodily presentation or engagement (Barthes 1977). The hiccup operates as a sign of the genuine Buddy Holly, but not necessarily as an authenticator of emotion. It operates across a line of artfulness and artifice, of craft and gift. Pester is performing singing, using modes of vocalizing, of voicing that are specific to singing, or associated with the performance of songs, as a way of making sounds or delivering vocal content. There is a deliberate gap between the performance of a singer, and Pester's performance of 'singing'.

Pester's printed text represents some of the effects of Buddy Holly's delivery, attempting to present this on the page, to deliver a transcript that shows the reader how it sounds and how to

sound it. This score is also a score for Pester's performance, and a transcript of a performance by Pester. Pester's score notates the song, or notates Pester's interpretation of the song, with glitches and distortions, that echo transferences that operate between media, that record something of these translation effects as the song and support are shifted in time, in space and in material. Whatever its route to this hearing, arriving on this machine, the text (score or script) has been distorted and disrupted in its passage. As Mladen Dolar describes it, words 'sound alike, to a greater or lesser degree, which makes them liable to contamination; their mutual sound contacts can transform them, distort them' (2006: 140). He continues: 'In this contamination a new formation is born – a slip, which may sound like nonsense but produces the emergence of another sense' (ibid.). The non-verbal sounds, the phonemes and word fragments in the Pester poem parallel the broken sounds within the Buddy Holly song; they operate to transcribe them, to reperform them and also to spin off from them.

Distortions of Buddy Holly's lyrics accumulated through the recording and rerecording process, mixing 'mishearing' by the machine with misspeaking and deliberate mishearing by the singer, result in the generation of 'mondegreens'.<sup>1</sup>

Implanted mondegreens are like the inception of a bug in the operations, like germinating texts. In my poem 'eggs', 'sewing' and 'spewing' are the new vocal items encoded into the song, alien items that make new inferences and meanings, but themselves based on mishearings and letter switching. (Pester 2013a: 72)

The disturbance of the (Buddy) Holly song text by Holly (Pester) introduces alien content to the printed page. These directional arrows, underlines, slash marks and dashes act as directions to the reader, or as records of actions off the page, in performance. They also recall play and fast-forward buttons on a tape machine, perhaps indicating that the reader raises or lowers volume or changes pitch. The use of bold may indicate emphasis, and underlining may indicate a slurring. Pester doesn't provide a key to these marks, and on first encountering the page text, if the reader has heard the song, they may be guided by a recollection of Buddy Holly's performance.

<sup>1</sup> Near-homonymic mishearings of song lyrics of the kind collected in Kenneth Goldsmith's book *Head Citations* (2002).

Sound contaminations can be produced metonymically, on the axis that Saussure called in *praesentia*, by the sounds which are present in the current signifying chain; or the present words may be conflated with absent ones, on the axis in *absentia*, with those that are merely in the speaker's mind. (Dolar 2006: 140)

The printed poem, record of a response to listening or a record of a performed response, strays from the vocabulary of the lyrics, as new information is added. Some of these new elements are a record of how the singer delivers their text, jammed together to suit the rhythm – ‘alove’ and ‘wella’ indicate such a stitching, while ‘Anna wan chu’ is close to a phonetic transcription. From these instances where the transcription closely follows the acoustic information the poem text swerves off in places into associative play. Thus, ‘Well, I’ as sung by Buddy Holly, is heard as ‘wella’, and this mondegreen draws into the mix a hair products and shampoo brand, and lines such as these are generated:

Wella left ja girl - - - HAIR  
 Wella left ja hair hair girl  
 Peggy Hair  
 Peggy hair hair  
 Peggy  
 Who  
 (Pester 2011:9)

These passages and others in the poem text go off on side tracks, off-shoots that leave Buddy Holly behind and give Holly Pester room to play with echoes, with mishearings, and with possible representations of failure in the message, not getting through?, not making a connection.

My↑  
 crab ↓ ring  
 Ring ring?  
 My clunk. clunk clunk  
 (Pester 2011:8)

The machine asserts itself over the body, over the voice, the mechanical interrupting the emotional – the throat and vocal chords and breath and chest producing an emotional terrain that is cut across by an inanimate unconscious machine, generating a new feeling text from a site without feeling. Pester’s *Buddy Holly ...* presents a voice on the page, a transcription that uses layout and typographical devices to suggest a scoring of the text; as a transcription it can function

as a performance score, guiding the reader in (re)producing sounds, and as an inscription it records a previous – now finished – performance of the text. The page work sits as script between past iterations and potential future versions. A potential reading of this sees the unique voice, the trademark of Buddy Holly, become available for reuse or re-performance as part of the commons, available to all to sing, or speak. Popular music plays across this divide between the mass-commodity (the mass-produced copy of the song) and the rare commodity (the unique product of the singer). Pester’s texts and performances weave through this distinction, making a new score that can be re-produced by any, and a unique trace of specific readings of this text.

## MECHANICAL VOICES COMMUNICATING AUTHENTICITY

In a discussion of the Chuck Berry song ‘Maybellene’, released two years before ‘Peggy Sue’, Sean Cubitt finds in Berry’s vocal performance, and in others without a perfect trained singing voice, the ‘broken tones that seem to guarantee the emotive and erotic side of the auditory experience’ (Cubitt 1984:212). ‘[M]ore spontaneous and therefore more authentic’ these voices promise a ‘physicality that goes beyond what is available to the trained voice’ (ibid.). Extending Barthes’ distinction between the bourgeois, trained, academic, thinking voice of significance, and the popular, raw, unschooled, feeling voice of *signifiance*, Cubitt suggests an authenticity and depth of feeling that is offered by the grainy voice and missing from the other. This hearing of the body, the emotion, is possible through the technologies of recording, reproduction and broadcast or playback. To be experienced, the authentic is necessarily mediated, moderated by the machine.

In more recent popular music production, the artificial voice, the voice of the Vocoder, of the Autotuner, the synthetic synthesized sampled voice has been used across musical genres and styles. Joseph Auner in an essay exploring ‘posthuman ventriloquism’ examines this trend, and considers its relationship to questions of the authentic (2003). Auner proposes that the

use of synthetic voices, speaking computers, and voices manipulated or ‘corrected’ by technical effects, suggests a shift in the understanding of the voice as an authentic expression of the singer, as offering intimate access to the person of the singer as we hear the singer’s body in his or her expression. In some cases, the use of a synthetic voice may suggest an emotionally neutral effect, where affect is reduced or removed through the presentation of an unfeeling machine voice. In effect, the voice generates emotional responses, either through reaction to mispronunciations, stumbles and awkwardness; or through attention to an imagined subject (behind) (within) this flatly delivered text (Auner 2003: 115–16). Buddy Holly in his vocal performance on ‘Peggy Sue’ uses various vocal tricks, shifting into falsetto, and dropping into bass, as well as the hiccough, to ornament his presentation of the limited lyrics. This prefigures a mechanical impersonal music that shifts the locus of feeling from the narrative, from a sentimental delivery of a story, to a physical experiential associative whole.

The two texts examined in this essay with their interposition of voices, bodies, technologies and texts, may be seen as disrupting and complicating a world of exchange and communication presented as natural and transparent and, in this, they may be joined by others who torque language or tweak machinery towards related ends. The work of Caroline Bergvall (2013), operating across and within language (as) matter, or the performances of Hannah Silva (2013) using layered loop-pedal effects, or Ella Finer’s work (2012) with voice and sound and space may be considered among these practices. In Weiner’s *Code Poems* the technology, the apparatus of code signalling interposes between writing and writer and reading and reader as the emotional and physical business of sex is displaced by and displayed on the bodies of flag wavers and the flashes of lights. Holly Pester’s redistribution of the material of Buddy Holly’s ‘Peggy Sue’ acknowledges the various technical transcriptions that have intervened between his singing of the song and her vocalizing of a version or interpretation of it. Pester’s body actively engages in the delivery and shaping of the sung text, bringing a 1950s craze into play as her hula-hooping juggles the text as Buddy Holly’s

hiccough jiggles it. Pester’s associative play in and with the Peggy Sue text allows for additional voicing, for added content that is drawn into the mix of wordage, hearing words as Weiner sees them, verbal matter gathered from her environment and woven into the expanding text.

In ‘imitating’ singing Pester takes the codes of popular song and adopts them showing the constructedness of this communication system, its play of naturalness, of emotional display, of authentic feeling. In *Code Poems* Weiner takes the codes and treats them as personal, as belonging to and affecting bodies and persons. The body of the performer is present in both works, but the intervention of the codes undermines any perception that the text of the performance is personal. Weiner’s coded texts ‘displace’ the self, as Pester’s texts scatter the self across media and actions. Echoes operate to reiterate and to remove the personal and to disrupt any original representation. As Pester writes regarding Weiner’s work:

Echo is a deviation from self, and a noisy interference in the line of connection between an identity and its voice. (Pester 2013a: 118–19)

Technology facilitates the transcription of the seen and heard and felt text. Technological features allow for accurate presentation of the data, while also making possible distortion or disruption. A more accurate recording of a performance, a fuller capture of the words and their nuances is held out by the technology. Improved technology offers to preserve the grain of the voice, as inscription becomes ever more detailed conveying increasing levels of data, more significance, greater authenticity, and thus the better reproduction topples into overload, into excess, and the perfect echo tips into a mirroring pool.

This echo parallels the return of my emotional labour, my feelings and their affects as detached from me, as fetishized and returning as commodities, commodities I can deploy in the market, that I can use to raise my status, to improve my performance, to sell and to gain capital in the circling shifting space of mediated communications. Authenticity is offered as a commodity, a detachable feature of the affective event, framed in the hearing of the voice, in the experience of the performed text. This

authenticity is part of the commercialization of emotional labour and the commodification of the immaterial, of value, of experience over concrete labour or material goods. These affective features can be marketed as what the music fan desires, what the potential lover looks for in a partner, but they are also what I use to sell myself via a profile description on that dating app, or how my comments on a singer's website can get me the status of superfan. Pester, through her foregrounding of the authentic as performed, her re-enacting of the acted, brings into focus what is being sold to us, while the product slips around in its mess. Weiner messes up the system of trade exchange to flag up the transactional nature of love and desire as a business of commodified exchange.

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