

Typography and Bird Sounds

Min Choi, Seoul, 2013

Astrid Seme's sound work *Urbirds Singing the Sonata* was developed from her interest in Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonate* (1922–1932): an early example of sound poetry that the artist would perform during his *Merz* years, devoting the last issue of the journal (no. 24, 1932) to a complete transcription of its final draft and having it designed by Jan Tschichold. At the crux of this experiment was one of the fundamental questions of typography: the relationship between spoken words and their visual representation/notation. How does visually articulated text spatialize and order the seemingly uncontainable sound? How does the structure of spoken words motivate their typographic arrangement? And how precisely can they correspond to each other? These are formal questions, quite independent of the question of literal meaning, and they are made even more acute as many of the “words” used in the *Ursonate* are nonsensical, almost abstract clusters of phonemes/graphemes.

Seme seems to address some of these questions via a renewed consideration of Schwitters's work, by relocating the *Ursonate* in a soundscape that cannot normally be regulated by any notation systems.

“There has never been a full agreement as to what were the key influences on Kurt Schwitters when he was preparing the *Ursonate*. There is one myth that claims he was inspired by bird sounds. I strongly believe this to be true and bring the birds their *Ursonate* back, their primordial song. *Urbirds Singing the Sonata* narrates what Kurt Schwitters might have heard when he wrote the poem.” [Astrid Seme, 2010]

Seme recreated the entire *Ursonate* by carefully assembling samples of bird-songs. Working with an ornithologist at the University of Vienna and using as a guide *Die Stimmen der Vögel Europas* (2008), which contains 2,200 sonograms, she analyzed the bird call recordings to discover patterns suggesting similarities with the graphemes of the *Ursonate*, in order to ultimately arrange the clips to a multi-channel recitation of the poem. Whether this particular realization is closer to what Schwitters originally envisioned might be difficult to prove, but it may not be a point. Birdsongs have always been a part of the primordial soundscape surrounding human beings, and people have tried to understand and read into them, transcribing the undecipherable aural signals and projecting their own meanings and orders onto them. Now it might as well be the birds' turn to do the same with human typographic marks.