

## SCRATCH by Paul Dutton

The art of W. Mark Sutherland operates at the intersection of three principal lines of creative activity—poetry, music, and visual art. He has said of himself that he makes “poetry that is visual art, visual art that is music and music that is poetry.” His output consists of soundworks (objets soniques is his preferred term), books (or bookworks, as he calls them) and visual art and artifacts (objets poétiques, in his lexicon). Sutherland’s individual creations occupy in varying degrees the three-way crossroads to which I’ve referred. A sound installation like *Scratch* pretty well occupies the whole of that metaphorical space, as does the CD-ROM *Code X*, while the published poems of *Notes and Songs from the Pan American Highway* sit more in the direction of the literary thoroughfare (though the writing is also presented in a soundscape compositional setting on CD and in a construction for gallery installation). Other of his books explore the visual dimension of language, following in the tradition of the concretists and other visual poets, or move between collage and verbal poetry. His solo CD *Oral Cavity* fuses the literary and the musical in sound poetry and verbal performance, while *Cross Rhythm and White Noise* veers more towards the path of music, offering free improvisational voicework in tandem with fellow border-defying artist Nobuo Kubota.

The point, of course, is not the assignment of categories but the fact that Sutherland blurs them. Being an intermedia artist, he moves among the boundaries of his chosen fields, drawing out and drawing on the integrative elements of his materials. Most pervasive of these materials are words and metawords (as his nonverbal utterances can be termed). While he does write lyric poetry, Sutherland also treats words as objects, both visual and sonic, within contexts that turn on their function as signifiers. For instance, in *Language Decoy (or 230 statements, 40 questions and several ideas)* there is a page with the word “BANG” in the middle of it,

and lower down the parenthetical directive "(look at this sound)." The pamphlet *round* has situated on each of its pages one word of a phrase loop, "words or space tracing words or space tracing ..." etc. It is a sensitivity to the space around words (emphasized in *round* by the one-word-per-page layout) that highlights their status as objects. The space may be visual, as in *round*, or it may be the sonic space of silence that occurs in certain of his verbal performance poems. Then, too, there are the metawords of Sutherland's oral soundworks, and the interstitial spaces (silences) that occur there.

While Sutherland will treat the word as an object, he will also treat the object as a word, as in the objet poétique *M:U:S:I:C: (Homage to John Cage)*, which presents the spectator with a tongueless bell in front of which is printed the phrase "is golden." Tongueless or not, the bell is silent and, placed in the linguistic context provided, constitutes an oblique concrete rebus for the word "silence" (which was the title of a seminal book of essays by John Cage).

The treatment of the word as object and the object as word is writ large in *Scratch*. On the floor, in the centre of a gallery space defined by an overlapped tiling of vinyl LPs, sits a portable lo-fi turntable, upon which another LP has been placed. The gallery-goer has two options (or, depending on the individual's personality, a dilemma): contemplate the prospect of traversing the space to find out what's on the turntable and see if the machine can be activated; or blaspheme commercial materialistic conditioning by simply walking across the records, which will almost surely damage them, to check out the situation. Those who take the plunge will find the word "scratch" emblazoned at the top of the label in capital letters. This is an ambiguous inscription. Is it label name? Title? Declaration? Command? Some might notice a number of scratches on the record, and those who do might be moved to examine the scratches more closely to discover that they are shaped to form the word "scratch" (the word, in fact, was etched into the master disc by the artist). Whatever

the case, the spectator is now physically engaged with the artwork and can choose to become more so by playing the record-- , which will oblige with a concert of clicks and silences that the viewer can engage with further by altering speeds mechanically or manually and by applying all the other techniques that turntablists have taught us. In *Scratch*, the word not only becomes object, visually and phenomenally, but produces sound objects. The word is also, most likely, enacted by the interacting viewer, whose footwear is apt to scratch the trodden copies.

In *Scratch*, space operates on several levels. There is the visual space around and within the word on the record grooves, the sonic space around the clicks, the physical space within which the installation resides, and the space that the artist affords the viewer for the making of her own choices., there being no overt invitations or prohibitions specified within or outside the work.

In addition to the triple-art-form exercise that is *Scratch*, the present exhibit offers *Code X*, which also fuses poetry, music, and visual art, but in a different way than does *Scratch* . First of all, the work occurs not in the tangible world of materiality, but the virtual one of digital representation. The mode of interaction is not arrived at through a confrontation of conventional proprieties, but by the now familiar, even ubiquitous, and somehow oddly comforting vehicle of the computer keyboard and mouse. With these tools the art appreciator enters a vocoverbovisual CD-ROM environment, where he may play an intricate, non-competitive, temporally liberated (because theoretically perpetual), phonic, patterned, linguistic game—or simply witness the game being played by the machine in exponentially varied, non-repetitive random mode.

The body of the game-work is a self-referential text, the letters, syllables, and words of which appear and withdraw in programmed disorder when the game is left in random mode, which occurs if the keyboard is left untouched for thirty seconds. Alternatively, letters can appear as they are input on the keyboard. In either case, the

text remains, for the most part, tantalizingly imminent. It can be viewed in its entirety by an undisclosed method that can be gradually arrived at, and kept on screen with another trick that has to be discovered. Overly coy? An elaborate tease? In any case, it is neither directive nor didactic, and in that it is consistent with Sutherland's core aesthetic stance.

The participating viewer needn't discern the text describing what she is doing in order to reap the ludic benefits of the work's flirtatious substance. And in addition to the constantly changing visual presentation, there is the poet's vocal play with the sound and/or name of each letter, which sonic element arrives and departs in synch with the respective letters, up to as many as four at a time. With practice, the game can be worked so that letters can be seen in their text-determined patterns and heard performed in solo, duo, trio, or quartet modes. Left in random mode, the holes (spaces, silences) in the text grid facilitate the player letting his eye rove over the field to pick out or fill in words, creating isolated phrases of poetically suggestive resonance ("noon moving on"; "sects driving form"; "pig dig the fight"; and so on). This activity is further facilitated by a second-colour highlighting of secondary, unrelated words that occur within the primary words of the text—another instance of Sutherland's treatment of words as objects.

Such treatment lends additional levels to the title *Code X*, as can be seen on the title page of the CD-ROM, where the term is shown to indicate more than just an anonymous code, a riddle to be solved. The last three letters of "code" are in red, drawing our attention to the poetic intent: an ode—"a lyric poem," the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* informs us, "usually in the form of an address, in varied or irregular metre." Not exactly what Sutherland has here, but close enough for intermedia. And further, we learn, an ode is "historically, a poem meant to be sung"—a relevant point given the quasi-musical effect of Sutherland's sound-poetry rendering of the letters of *Code X*. It is no accident that the title puns as "codex," which the *Canadian Oxford* has

as “an ancient manuscript in book form.” There is in this a dual irony, since the text in question is Sutherland’s own, rather than a legacy from antiquity, and the form is CD-ROM, a modern variant of the book, as attested to by its component parts being called “pages.”

*Code X*, the work, announces some of Sutherland’s major influences: Dadaism (especially Kurt Schwitters and Raoul Hausmann), Fluxus (with more than a touch of Emmett Williams), and such late-twentieth-century unaffiliated intermedia-ists as, for one, bpNichol. Sutherland shares with his artistic forebears an openness, a sense of play, and a determined earnestness in the establishment and practice of a vital, sensuously and intellectually integrative approach to creative expression.

**Paul Dutton** is a Toronto writer and musician. He has published numerous essays on artists working beyond the confines of a single artform. He is the author of books of poetry and fiction, and a performer of vocal sound art in concert and on record, solo and ensemble. Dutton was a member of The Four Horsemen and is currently a member of CCMC (Michael Snow, John Oswald, Paul Dutton) and Five Men Singing (with Jaap Blonk, Koichi Makigami, Phil Minton, and David Moss).

This essay is from a brochure produced for the exhibition *W. Mark Sutherland: Scratch, 2002*, curated by Carolyn Bell Farrell for the Koffler Gallery, Toronto. The essay has been reproduced with the kind permission of the Koffler Gallery.