

ALTERNATIVE MATH

Canada Choate on the writings of Catherine Christer Hennix

IN HER 1979 TREATISE on language's limited capacity for communication, "An Inscription /// A Work in Progress," Swedish-American polymath Catherine Christer Hennix invokes Sylvia Plath's radio play *Three Women*: "It is these men I mind. They are so flat that they want the whole earth flat." Such resistance might well characterize Hennix herself, whose work, spanning mathematics, music, sculpture, and poetry, is anything but one-dimensional. Though she played a central role in the development of minimalist music in the late 1960s, Hennix has neither performed nor exhibited much since 1976, when Stockholm's Moderna Museet hosted a Hennix-curated ten-day festival of new music, at which her group the Deontic Miracle played for the first (and last) time. For the next four decades, Hennix continued her explorations in sound, objects, and writing with little institutional support, until the exhibition "Catherine Christer Hennix: *Traversée du Fantasma*" (Crossing Fantasy), presented at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in early 2018, started to turn the tide. Throughout, Hennix's primary focus has remained the fusion of semantics, ethics, and ontology, manifested in forms as multifarious as logical proofs, sine-wave compositions, long-form prose, sculpture, and haiku. As she asked in 1985, framing her own practice for her reader, "How can the philosophical task of ordering letters of our alphabet be but *kakotechnie*?! " A desire to subvert such "artful knavery," both by getting outside of language and by burrowing in deeper, continues to drive her intermedia investigations.

This spring, Blank Forms Editions will publish *Poësy Matters/Other Matters: Selected Writings of Catherine Christer Hennix* (2019), two volumes of texts written between the early '70s and 2016, most of which have never before circulated. The books were assembled with Hennix and philosopher and musician Henry Flynt, her longtime collaborator and advocate, following her mandate that "everything must now be mixed together," but also categorizing her work to help the reader make sense of her heterogeneous output. *Poësy Matters* collects Hennix's poetry (broadly defined to include her Noh dramas), while *Other Matters* brings



Catherine Christer Hennix performing at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, Portugal, April 3, 2016.

together her musical scores, semantic diagrams, and program notes from her live performances, here beautifully reproduced.

Hennix does not create her dense, demanding pieces with accessibility in mind. An undergraduate symbolic-logic course might open up the inscrutable chains of symbols she employs in texts like "Infinitary Compositions" (1973) and "Hilbert Space Shruti Box" (2007), but one needn't understand the difference between *union* and *intersection* to feel flummoxed by such paradoxical proposals as "the eternal presence being constantly controlled or determined by what is

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eternally absent," as she describes the logical system behind *The Electric Harpsichord*, 1976, her best-known composition. It is precisely because Hennix mistrusts notational systems as carriers of significance—"the injection of meaning into a (syntactically) ordered set of terms must always be conceived of as an act of sorcery and destabilization," she wrote in "Poetry as Philosophy, Poetry as Notation: On Poësy" (1985)—that she is able to employ them so deftly and interchangeably. In "Brouwer's Lattice," originally published as the program for her presentation at the Moderna Museet, Hennix included short texts by esoteric turn-of-the-century mathematician and logician L. E. J. Brouwer alongside her own writings, providing a reference point for her notion of how infinity relates to modal music. Brouwer located the essence of mathematics in the dialectics of time: The present slips into the past but is retained by the memory, resulting in an eternal void, the awareness of which proves paramount. For Hennix, the experience of listening to durational music composed according to Brouwer's "intensional logic" opens up a temporal and spiritual space in which "*gratifying feeling[s] of one's own dignity* can be obtained." While Flynt desires avant-garde art to become "*veramusement*" (pure recreation), Hennix creates in pursuit of unalloyed self-awareness.

Although it may at first confound, Hennix's work, given the deep engagement it requires and deserves, opens up a philosophical and spiritual bounty for her readers. *Poësy Matters/Other Matters* constitutes a major historiographical contribution to our understanding of experimental music post-John Cage, but Hennix's oeuvre, and the importance of her thinking, can't all be taken in at once. As she explained to an interviewer in 1976, "Length has to do with space in society. . . . This is how musical performance connects with ethics. There are obstructions for these long style performances and our music documents the overcoming of those obstructions." For a time, the obstructions had the upper hand. For the public to experience Hennix in all of her infinite dimensions, we must continue to tear them down. □

CANADA CHOATE IS A CRITIC BASED IN NEW YORK.