

LITERARY ART IN DIGITAL PERFORMANCE

Case Studies in New Media Art and Criticism

Edited by
Francisco J. Ricardo

2009

The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

www.continuumbooks.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-0-8264-3600-9 (HB)

ISBN: 978-0-8264-3680-1 (PB)

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER ONE

What is and Toward What End Do We Read Digital Literature?

Roberto Simanowski

The Exterminated Reader

Imagine a reader reading a story about an adulterous couple planning to kill the woman's husband. This reader is completely engrossed, reading about the planned murder from his comfortable chair by his fireplace gives him an almost perverse pleasure. Reading the description of the house the murderer enters, he thinks of his own house. Then he reads that the man enters the room in which the husband's character is sitting by the fire; it's too late for him to avoid the knife his wife's lover rams into his chest.

This reader exists. In a short story by Julio Cortázar: *La continuidad de los parques* (The Continuity of Parks) of 1964. Cortázar is not the only writer who tried to turn the reader into a character. Italo Calvino, in his novel *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, gives the reader the main role in the book, and narrates in the second person. In Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the protagonist finds a book entitled *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and reads it until he comes to the page in which he is reading the very same book. There have been many such experiments in late modern or post-modern times. After the all-knowing author of the nineteenth century had long been dismissed, authors fantasized about regaining omnipotence by exercising direct impact on the reading situation.

Now, in the cases of Cortázar and Márquez the reader is himself part of the text which another, real reader is reading. And in Calvino's case, the *illusion relies* on the reader's willingness to be addressed. Unfortunately, or rather, fortunately, it is not possible to literally draw the reader into the story. The author has no way of directly killing the reader. Sure, one could poison the paper, as in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. But the poison is not applied by the author and is not part of the text. Literature cannot bridge the gap between the world of the narrative and the world of the recipient. Conventional literature cannot. Digital literature can.

Real Clocks and Virtual Hand Grenades

In the first half of the nineteenth century, it was popular to integrate a tiny mechanical clock in paintings at the spot where there would be a painted clock. The clock in the

painted interior hence presented the real time and thus belonged to the world of the spectator. The world of the painting and the world of the recipient were bridged. But the bridge was broken when, for example, the painting was of a dinner scene but the museum closed at noon. Rather than being drawn in, the viewer was thus pushed away into a mode of meta-reflection reaffirming the gap between the painted world and the real world.

Digital media are more successful in connecting the viewer's time and the artwork's time. In the German collaborative online writing project *23:40*, for example, one can write a text recalling a particular moment and specify the time when this text will be presented on the website each day. The bridge between text time and reader time works pretty well because the writer knows what time the reader sees his text and can determine whether the description of a romance is available only at 2 a.m. or at noon.

John McDaid's 1992 hyperfiction *Uncle Boddy's Phantom Funhouse* contains a link to a level that the reader does not have permission to access. If the reader nonetheless clicks the link, a message appears declaring that the reader has to be killed for trespassing. Although it's the program that is then *terminated*, the reader is indeed killed as reader in so far as there is no reader without text.

The killing is easier the other way around. In Susanne Berkenheger's 1997 hyperfiction *Zeit für die Bombe*, the reader encounters a situation where the character, Iwan, opens a stolen suitcase that turns out to contain a time bomb with a button to arm it. The text reads:

Don't we all always want to push, turn or click something to make something happen without any effort? This is the best. Isn't it? Iwan, come on, do it, *push the little button*.

It is up to the reader to push the bomb's button by clicking a link. This naturally upsets Iwan, who starts insulting the reader for sitting comfortably in her chair by the fireplace pretending compassion but really deriving excitement from watching him run through freezing Moscow carrying a time bomb. Iwan then threatens the reader: "Look," he warns, "what I have here in my hand. Do you see my little hand-grenade? Now you can have compassion for yourself." While the bomb finally explodes, tearing Iwan apart, the hand-grenade is never used, not even to shut down the program. Lucky reader. He benefits from the early days of digital literature when authors didn't know how far they could go when entering the readers' world. After all, they wanted their text to be read. And how many readers would try again after the programs shut down? Thus, the author leaves it at the allusion to Aristotle's concept of catharsis and does not program any fatal links or send any dangerous viruses.

Killing the Text

However, the killing is not over. Berkenheger's hyperfiction links to another kind of killing; this time the opponents are not author and reader but the different media involved.

After the reader arms the time bomb, we encounter the following text: "And the *bomb* ticked" with the word "bomb" blinking. This exemplifies what additional means

digital literature possesses in contrast to print literature: Time. The text becomes what Kate Hayles "eventilized."¹ The text is based on code and this code not only makes the word "bomb" appear on the screen but also interrupts this appearance.

This sentence also points to some core questions for digital literature. Why is "bomb" blinking? Shouldn't the verb blink since it's the one that signifies the action? But a blinking verb would only translate its message into another language. The version the author chose is correct from a logical point of view; *processing* the action signified requires the *agent* to blink. From an aesthetic point of view, however, its redundancy is problematic. The word "bomb" is blinking, so why do we also need the verb "ticked"? There are two languages here: the linguistic language that denominates an action and the language of performance that presents it. It is as if the stage directions of a play were acted out and also spoken.

The author could easily have had the two languages cooperate: "And the *bomb*." Since the signifier for "bomb" already presents the action of the signified, the verb is actually dispensable. Of course this is not the end of the alteration and adjustment of language in digital media. The next step could be to use the icon of a bomb, the step after that to make the signifier honest and have, rather than a blinking icon, a ticking sound.

To generalize, what we have here is the elimination of the text, its substitution by image, sound, and action. Such operation is a common feature in digital media. In many cases the operation looks like a mere supplementation of the text. But supplementing text with an image *does* actually mean eliminating the text, for what is shown as an image does not need to be described with words. The paradigm of expression changes from creating a world in the reader's *imagination* based on a specific combination of letters to *presenting* a world directly to the audience through extralingual means.

Actually, this substitution of text is the justification of digital literature. If an object only consists of static letters it does not really need digital media and hence should not be called digital literature even though it may be presented on the internet. By definition, digital literature must go beyond what could be done without digital media. By definition, digital literature must be more than just literature otherwise it is only literature in digital media. This would, no doubt, also be very interesting from a sociological perspective. Think of all the text presented on websites and blogs, bypassing any police of the discourse and any publisher's evaluation. However, that is another matter and another book. My concern here is not about who writes literature but about how the materiality of literature changes when the digital technology is used for aesthetic reasons and not just for distribution.

Two aspects of the change from literature to digital literature should be clear by now: In digital literature the reader of the story can kill the character in the story, and the bomb can blink, tick and—in the form of a virus or a shutdown—also "explode." There is a third aspect that should be stressed: Digital literature is only digital if it is not only digital. What do I mean by this?

Almost ten years ago, John Cayley's essay *The Code Is Not the Text (Unless It Is the Text)* described alphabetic language as a digital structure since it consists of a small set of symbols that can be endlessly combined and recombined. Instead of analog elements

as found in painting, we have distinct linguistic units that are either there or are *not*, with no option in between. In her essay *The Time of Digital Poetry* Hayles reminds us of Cayley's notion and concludes that the computer is not the first medium to use digitized language but rather "carries further a digitizing process already begun by the transcription of speech into alphabetic letters."²

I agree that literature was digital even before it extended into digital media. In digital media, literature is digital in a double sense: It uses a small set of distinct, endlessly combinable symbols, and those symbols are now produced by binary code. The first sense of digitality refers to the semiotic paradigm of the material (the distinct units), the second sense of digitality refers to the operational paradigm of the medium (the binary code as basis for all data in digital media). If we agree on the criterion that digital technology is used for aesthetics, not just for presentation, then being digital in this double sense is not enough to be considered "digital literature." Or actually, I should say: that's one "digital" too many, because using the old system of symbols in a new medium only creates literature *in* digital media, but not digital literature.

Obviously one doesn't need digital media to create text consisting only of re-combinable linguistic units, but if the text blinks or disappears, if it is an *event* rather than an *object*, then it really needs the screen rather than the page. When text is "eventitized" it also stops being purely digital in the semiotic sense, since, in contrast to alphabetic language, the language of performance, sound and visual signs does *not* consist of discrete units. Non-linguistic signs are, as Roland Barthes phrased it in his essay *Rhetoric of the Image*, "not founded on a combinatory system of digital units as phonemes are." This notion insists on a more precise concept of text in the heyday of an extended concept of text 30 years ago. As Hayles argues in her essay on *slippingglimpse*, in digital literature the inscription of verbal symbols shrinks "to a subset of 'writing' in general." Hayles puts the word "writing" in quotation marks suggesting that this kind of writing produces a kind of text that also needs quotation marks: text that is not *really* text or not *only* text. What, however, is the text in digital literature?

Digital Hermeneutics

As I mentioned, John Cayley gave one of his essays the programmatic title *The Code Is Not the Text Unless It Is the Text*. For him, code is only text insofar as it *appears* as text. An example is *Perl Poetry*, a genre in which natural language is mixed with the syntax of Perl code in a kind of insider poetry for programmers. If, in contrast, the code runs to *generate* text, the code itself is not text. This is true with respect to the *linguistic* concept of text to which Barthes refers. If we use Hayles's broad concept of writing, the code is the text even if it is not the text; the effect of the code—making a word blink or tick, for instance—is part of the "text" and needs to be "read" alongside the blinking, ticking word itself.

Whether we use the broad, figurative concept of text—enclosed in quotation marks if necessary—or whether we insist on the *linguistic* quality of text, it should be clear that when it comes to digital literature we need to "read," or let's say, to interpret, not just the text but also what happens to the text. As a rule of thumb one may say: If

nothing happens to the text its not digital literature. As a result, when we read digital literature, we have to shift from a hermeneutics of linguistic signs to a hermeneutics of intermedial, interactive, and processing signs. It is not just the meaning of the words that is at stake, but also the meaning of the performance of the words which, let's not forget, includes the interaction of the user with the words. We should always explore these different elements and their possible connections—though there may not be a significant relationship between them.

One could argue that a hermeneutics of digital signs requires a completely new methodological approach. However, it is probable that the discussion of digital literature ought best to be a combination of new and old criteria. As Fotis Jannidis argues, genre theory is still a valid analytical tool for the discussion of computer games. The analysis can benefit from concepts developed in the past such as “story,” “plot,” and “character” or theoretical frameworks such as reader-response theory, formalism, and inter-discourse theory. And as Jörgen Schäfer's analysis of the interactive drama *Façade* shows, knowing genre history helps realize that this cutting-edge piece refers to the oldest and most traditional theoretical drama model.

Façade is also a good illustration of the fact that authors often make decisions about characters and plot based on technological constraints, as opposed to just artistic intention. For instance: though it's amazing how, as the guest in the two characters' home, you are able to “say” anything to them via your keyboard and influence the progression of their argument, sometimes the program can't handle your input, in which case the husband and wife seem to ignore you. This technical limitation is acceptable because the two are presented as self-absorbed, “difficult” people. Their personalities are not necessarily a choice of the authors; they are a requirement to keep the interaction plausible despite the technological challenge. A hermeneutic of digital signs has to take into account the possibility of such technological determinism.

So far I have evoked murder, adultery, time bombs, and hand-grenades. Let me talk now about . . . cannibalism. To begin, I'll borrow from Chris Funkhouser: his presentation at the Electronic Poetry Festival in Paris in May 2007 drew a connection between *creative cannibalism* and *digital poetry*, saying that digital poetry “devours other texts” by appropriating, transforming, and reconfiguring them. Funkhouser evoked ritual anthropophagy, the practice of killing and eating the other in order to inherit his qualities. A form of digital cannibalism can be seen in Camille Utterback's and Romy Achituv's interactive installation *Text Rain*, whose large screen shows letters rain down onto your projected shadow. As you collect them on your silhouette, the letters form words and sentences taken from a contemporary poem.³ However, as I experienced it, and as I saw others experiencing it, one mostly does not engage in the reading process, but rather plays with the rain of letters. The text has been transformed into visual objects. As Francisco Ricardo argues, the transmodal work exists as a series of several phenomenological moments of which the last brings back some of its lexical, linguistic character and, to say so, undo the cannibalism.

A very subtle example of text cannibalism is the installation *Listening Post*, which Rita Raley explores in her essay. Since it features a curtain of screens quoting from live internet chats, one would think it is all about text. But, stepping back from the screens to take in the installation as a whole, one is not really reading anymore; instead one

perceives this plethora of text as part of a trance-like experience. A very gentle form of "eating the text," that lies, in the end, at the feet of the reader.

Digital Humanities

At one point, Stephanie Strickland's video-poetry-collage *slippingglimpse* provides the following words:

I find myself kind of alone at the Academy
they're into turning out people
who can get jobs
in the animation industry

In the context of the conference "Reading Digital Literature" I organized at Brown University in October 2007, an underlying theme revolved around the inevitability of an evolving canon. Francisco Ricardo summarized it this way:

Now that the initial waves of enthusiasm, hype and counter-hype have given way to sustained creative production and critical inquiry, it is time to move away from highly generalized accounts into detailed and specific readings that account, in media-specific ways, for the practices, effects, and interpretations of important works.

How do close readings help develop *digital literacy*—to use one of the buzzwords of digital humanities?

They help insofar as digital literacy cannot be reduced to the competence in using digital technology but also entails an understanding of the language of digital media. Like cinematic literacy develops by understanding the meaning of techniques such as close ups, cuts, cross-fading, and extradiegetic music, digital literacy develops by exploring the semiotics of the technical effects in digital media. I think such "reading" competence in the realm of digital media can best be developed by talking about examples of digital *art*. Since art is by default always more or less concerned with its own materiality, it seems to be the best candidate for a hermeneutic exercise that aims to make us aware of the politics of meaning in digital media. However, we might consider that such close reading might not be limited to what is considered art but should also include pop culture, such as ego shooter games. After all, almost a century after Duchamp's first ready-made it has become more and more difficult to tell what is and what isn't art.

However, the difficulty in defining art is not the only challenge scholars of digital aesthetics confront. For one thing, most of the scholars in the field of digital aesthetics were born too early. During their formative years there was no curriculum that combined humanities and technology. We may wish we were able to create the sophisticated animations or interactivity we discuss. However, we are proud of what we bring to the table where the future scholars of digital humanities are educated: *reading* skills. It is for us something of a duty to ensure that the university turns out people who know not only how to generate impressive animation or program a specific grammar of

interaction but also—and perhaps more importantly—know how to read and understand such interaction.

Notes

1. N. Katherine Hayles, "The Time of Digital Poetry: From Object to Event," in *New Media Poetics. Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories*, ed. Adelaide Morris and Thomas Swiss (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 181–209.
2. *Ibid.*, 189.
3. The poem, *Talk, You, can be found* in Evan Zimroth, *Dead, Dinner, or Naked* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

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CHAPTER FOUR

Reading the Discursive Spaces of *Text Rain*, Transmodally

Francisco J. Ricardo

I begin with a basic claim—all literature has some relationship to imagery, and that the inverse is not true. Even the most extreme experiments of abstract poetry, or concrete poetry, even the most phonologically focused constructions cannot evade the perceptual intimation of sounds as aural imagery, or hypnotic trance, with which such sounds are instinctively associated. For despite the roil of new media and literary machines, of novel forms of expression and authoriality, the program of literature still remains to elicit resonances that emerge out of, but soon transcend, the literalized tokens of a text. And if this transcendence can be felt as a membrane that isolates two worlds—the literal world of phrasal reading from the interpretive world of the imaginal—the world between them, that is, the world of lexical tokens of phrasing from the much more extensive of fictive associations produced in the reader, then it is helpful, in the space of that intersection, to think of literature as a genre of text wrapped in mantle of imagery.

Without denying the importance of this aesthetic partnership, literary critics have harbored implicit views about the manner in which this relationship, this rapport between written and imagined, ought to stand. The text is to exist in physical form—written, inscribed, imprinted—while the image is left to occupy the confines of readerly imagination. What is preserved in this specific arrangement is the necessary stability and identity of the work with the equally indispensable need for individual, personal, purely idiosyncratic reconstruction of facets of the narrative. The critical bias for this specific partition of written from visual is evident in consistently held judgments of what is understood as “pure literature,” a term uttered in 1912 by Thomas Hardy on receipt of the gold medal of the Royal Society of Literature. He had little patience for anything outside the untainted use of well-formed textual expression over any other variant. In the Hardyian province of pure literature, even poetry kneels to the hegemonic strictures of decorous prose:

For my own part I think—though all writers may not agree with me—that the shortest way to good prose is by the route of good verse. The apparent paradox—I cannot remember who first expressed it—that the best poetry is the best prose ceases on examination to be a paradox and becomes a truism. Anybody may test it for himself

by taking any fine lines in verse and, casting off the fetters of metre and rhyme that seem to bind the poet, trying to express the same ideas more freely accurately in prose. He will find that it cannot be done; the words of the verse—fettered as he thought them—are the only words that will convey the ideas that were intended to be conveyed.¹²

One can scarcely suppose what he would have felt about images and text, blended together, being classified as anything like “literature.” Hardy’s is an emblematic judgment over what is considered “pure literature” that stands in opposition, for example, to the graphic novel or the spoken text of recorded books—these are presumably *renditions* of literature and not literature itself. It seems that the mantle of imagery surrounding the literary reading is as mentally essential as it is physically undesirable.

I don’t want to underestimate the word “essential” here, for texts without connection to such imagery, texts that include the journalistic article or the scientific monograph, might be appreciated as being erudite, inspiring, and even “literary,” but never understood as literature. One explanation for this is of course because these are non-fiction genres whereas literature dwells in the imagined and the imaginary. But again, we return to the link between literature and the image—imaginary here implies the dimension of vitally visual signs of the fictive and the quasi-real: visions, dreams, trances, reveries, epiphanies, contemplations, revelations, depictions, portraits, impressions, panoramas, and so on.

Consider the constellation of intersecting forms shown in Dick Higgins’s 1965 touchstone diagram; these were conceived at historically similar rupture points, not surprisingly at the height of Higgins’s Fluxus years and during study with John Cage. Higgins’s observation that “much of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media,”¹³ underscores the futility of unique or pure forms in which performing, literary, and visual arts are entirely separate for an age of growing fusion of forms.

Indeed, the graphic novel, the comic strip, and the illustrated story demonstrate that the banishment of the visual from textual literature is unrelated to the history of production technology and, conversely, to technical constraints on the medium of print. The verdict of literature as “pure,” as primarily textual, is rendered under attitudes that are doctrinal, not technological. Arguments for purity in literature on one hand and specific media for print and image production on the other evolved along entirely different historical tracks. This division will become central to works of digital art and literature whose media afford the processing and presentation of the textual and the visual with equal dynamic range and geometrical possibility. And it is precisely—and perhaps *exclusively*—because of those extratextual affordances that digital literature presents complex extensions over and against this conventional and problematic bias entailed in “pure literature.” For distinctions of purity can rightly be made in instances where media are simultaneously physically and virtually intermixed—filmic narrative, for instance, projected on a screen before which actors on stage are performing is quite opposed to “pure cinema” as defined by nonnarrative techniques such as the visual juxtaposition and montage of the Kuleshov effect. But to constrain literature to what is produced by the physical mechanism of the printing press would preclude prison notebooks, napkin-inscribed poetry, graffiti, textual decollage, and much more; this

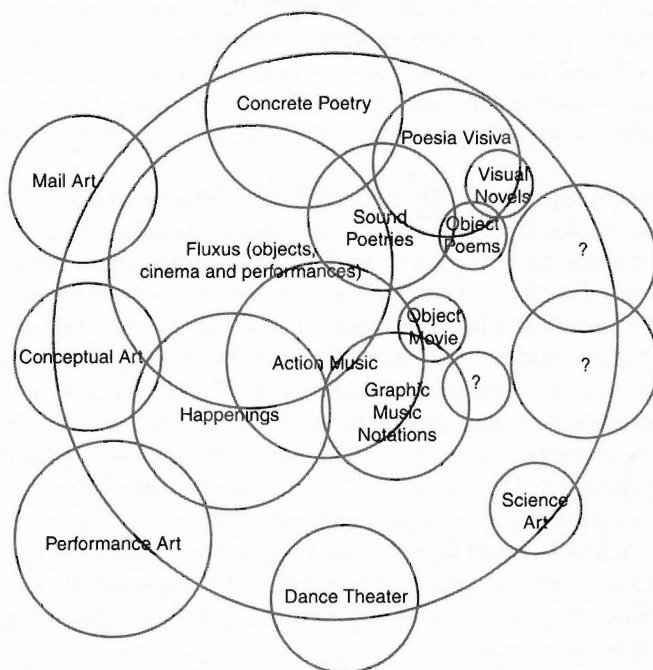


Figure 1. Dick Higgins,
Intermedia Chart,
1966,

Originally published in *Something Else Newsletter* 1, No. 1 (Something Else Press, 1966).

© 2009 Estate of Dick Higgins.

Permission courtesy of Hannah Higgins.

view is as narrow as limiting “literature” to what is hand-written. From these ambiguities of causality we know that literature’s central preoccupation with text does not, in contrast with electronic literature, satisfactorily extend to questions exploring *how* such literary text was created.

Reflecting the greater theoretical distance underlying my discussion are the distinctions involving essence, form and instance—three events of the ontology of literature. However one feels about ontological contentions, it is nonetheless true that essence, form, and instance are three indispensable attributes of *all* literary and aesthetic objects. This doesn’t imply that acknowledgment of *an* essence is equivalent to some *particular type* of essence, be it one claimed by Hardy, or anybody else. Existing without empirical proof, implicit, almost quasi-Platonic notions of the “essence” of literature have long been mentioned in aesthetic discussions deriving from strong Romantic and modernist roots. Its logic has been quietly imported from the literary tradition onto the visual arts; we might recall the art critics with professional beginnings in the literary world, including Clement Greenberg as literary critic for *The Nation*, and Peter Schjeldahl as poet and reporter.

Hardy, articulating literature's historical continuity, isn't entirely wide of the mark. The atemporal aura of literary essence, sustained as it is through writing's chain of epochs, accompanies and even nourishes, but does not totally fashion, expressive patterns understood as literary forms or genres—those are historically determined. And so, when we contemplate a work of electronic literature, we are tempted to look at its proximity to the logic that informs some kind of essence, form, or instance of what has come before, admissibly under the term *literature*, for why else evoke that classification if what is being cataloged within it is so new in medium, content, and form that no viable link with literature's history, which is to say, something of its established essence, can be made?

I have already discussed one problem involving that logic, captured in the conservatism of what implies "pure literature," which is to say, fictive text devoid of the contaminating co-occurrence of graphic accompaniment. That this is but a bias can be determined from our questioning whether such criterion of purity dwells in all conceivable universes of literary essence, or more narrowly, from the world of genres and conventions, that is, from literary *form*. Characterizing form offers an opportunity for any critic to advocate with consistency and clarity—the historical critic is the qualified expert on form in literature—but for essence, the logic becomes less patent, less compelling. For, who speaks for the essence of literature? Not form-specific, it rather approximates something analogous to what we imagine uttering the phrase "the power of literature," the source of which derives (necessarily) both from the textuality of any literary work and from the mantle of conceptual imagery that envelops it, given by the form of a work and the resultant reading. To estrange one constituent from the other is to attempt an obliteration, a de-synthesis of the literary phenomenon, one available in its own way to other visual forms and media—sculpture or more generally, film—or auditory ones—radio or more generally, music, for example. In the act of reading is born this unique literary imagination. Indistinguishable from what is presumably essential to any literary experience, this last word, *imagination*, implicates image-making directly.

I hope that this preamble has recalled the continual tension relating word to image within the literary experience, and how reconciliation of both is part of a necessary aesthetic cathexis challenging literature in a way not forced upon its visual partners, the photograph, the illustration, the image, which for their own part have no need to incorporate textuality. So it is that this synthesis, in the form of one particular work, the interactive projective installation *Text Rain*, extends an unequivocal reach into the imaginal whole of a particular literary instance, a poem, and simultaneously into the terrain of a literary essence of the new, as the nucleus of combined aesthetic experience. If it is worth remembering that a work by any other interpretation is just as literary, or visual, or performative, we might also bear in mind that interpretation is ancillary, rather than crucial, to the enjoyment and essence of any expressive form, something that by its all-ranging name, "expressive form," prefigures the instantiated: audience, setting, or message. Reaching for an apprehension of the larger sentiment, we might connect Susan Sontag's familiar claim that "the function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show what it means."² This "how it is what it is" marks the implicit line between *interpretation*, which can be conceived by any degree of familiarity with a work (including uninformed positions), and *close reading*, possible only through the scrutiny of rigorous analysis. But the avoidance

of interpretation also points us to non-interpretive, which is to say, principled, essential, *a priori* aspects of any work. This is the paradox then, whereby, uncovering underlying patterns, a close reading is synonymous with phenomenological investigation and is thus implicitly ontological, whereas an interpretation is not.

Having set out thoughts here from the basic assertion that literature embraces imagery, up through challenges against the idea of pure literature as an anachronistic formalism, I could now be blamed for having taken a sudden and seemingly incongruous turn, in the literal sense, against interpretation. What then of the multimodality of imagery and text that new expressive forms and media have attained, all the re/mediation to use another phrase,³ all the convergence? Why all of this if not to take the receiving audience to new landscapes of imagination, and therefore interpretation? Ought we reasonably disallow the greater contemporary need for new interpretive positions in light of media, products, and works that bring novel sensory impetus and user participation? These questions which cannot be answered separately, derive from



Figure 2. *Text Rain*,
Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv
Text Rain,
1999.
Interactive installation,
custom software, video camera, projector, computer
Image courtesy of the artist.

a common source, a reference to epochal change in the way that art has integrated with technology at all stages and moments of its being, which is to say, not merely the end presentation of art but the actual creation itself. Less tritely put, the change to consider revolves around how the voice of artistic effort emerging from the author, painter, poet, filmmaker, orator, or sculptor is to accommodate within the presence of expressive mechanisms that produce projective imagery, sensory activation, and selective immersion of their own as instrument of creation that complement, or perhaps compete with, received notions of artistic expression. The production, therefore, of imagery as extension to or evolution after the staunchest formalism, to include arguments for pure literature, can not be distanced either from the *literary*—as abstraction, as ontological characteristic however defined—because that quality cannot be defined as either image-free or imagery-free. And in similarity with previous intents like the Dada collage, the reading of the image and the visualization of the word apparent in digital art and literature render the traditional separation between the literary and the aesthetic newly immaterial. Sontag's caveats on the question of interpretation refute anything in literature other than the fullness experienced in the reception of a work, rather than something to be seen as having an *a priori* moral, or an allegorical subtext, or perhaps even as something valuably pluralistic to multiple readings because of its inherent intertextuality. These are all forms of interpretation that prove problematic not because they appear to make a text render a larger story, but because their logic repositions the text toward the opposite direction, given the subtle reductionism that any interpretation imposes. Here I refer to the linguistic turn itself, of seeing less something of the whole than an array of itemizable constituents whose sense is uncovered by means of quasi-grammatical rules of transformation and exchange (read, simplification) so that, if, in Sontag's words, "the task of interpretation is virtually one of translation," the danger of such reduction is perhaps doubly true for digital works whose components can be that much more clearly isolated, dissected, and destructured from their integrative Gestalt. Nor need one concur with anything like Clive Bell's formalism via his signature assertion that "to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions,"⁴ a claim that proves the folly of overlooking the shared horizon of understanding, the "range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point"⁵ that Gadamer spent six decades educating. In closing this line of reasoning, I hope to have made clear that I am speaking of a structural ontology, resembling neither Greenberg's normative characterizations nor Husserl's transcendental ruminations. In considering ontological clarifications as important for the work of the new media critic, theorist and historian, which includes imagining what is common to all or much electronic work, I am addressing challenges to *framing*, not to value. Such work has no place for presumably objectivist/exclusivist systems of qualitative valuation: given the dynamic nature of experiences in new media art and literature, judgments are likewise contingent, ultimately possible only to each mutuality of artist, user, and instance.

What one is to make of this literary-aesthetic synthesis will remain one of the vexations of electronic criticism. From the outset, the constitution of a work as a primarily textual object constrains and dictates the direction of approach for its readerly construal.

Presenting itself independently of one's reading, whether motivated by interpretation, critique, or formal comparison, one's engagement with the text emerges from nothingness through the anatomy of the word. In the matrix of the textual page, it asserts all hegemony for meaning and the basic method for that experience, beginning as a lexical reading, almost invariably conforms to motion from an identifiable starting point to at least one destination any number of lines, verses, or pages away. By contrast, that "reading" an image is entirely distinct from this textual approach has been widely established; what bears repeating is the visual command of the image, as it eclipses the word when both cohabitate the same perceptual plane. There is no word worth a thousand pictures, except perhaps love, but how can it be experienced prior to the image of its affection?

Instinctual primacy moreover prioritizes our sensations, in the startling flash of any surprise; we hear before reading, and look before unraveling what is heard. That seeing presignifies reading or hearing has been evident to art history, which records and embraces more of the literary than has been commonly accepted. Any work or event of visual composition, regardless the extent of its literariness, is of interest to the art historian, critic, or philosopher. And the auditory, sensorily subsequent to the visual, also participates in the chronicles of art. Thus Rosalind Krauss, opening a discussion of the readymade with a theatrical performance of a literary work, recounts openly what the histories of literature and of theater have scarcely documented:

One evening in 1911, four members of the Parisian avant-garde attended a bizarre theatrical presentation: Marcel Duchamp, Guillaume Apollinaire, Francis Picabia and Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia went to see *Impressions of Africa*, a performance based on a novel by Raymond Roussel. "It was tremendous," Duchamp was later to say of that night. "On the stage there was a model and a snake—it was absolutely the madness of the unexpected. I don't remember much of the text. One didn't really listen."⁶

Experiencing this similar sensory selectivity, Duchamp's relative inattention to the text is symptomatic to the sensory montage of multiple modalities, and to the dominance of action in the visual field, despite the fact that it is orchestrated from textual origins. It is for this phenomenological reason that we must now consider the electronic, projective, interactive, poetic reality of *Text Rain* as a both a completely visual work and a completely sovereign text; it contains a textual work in itself that orchestrates its visual possibilities, and because of its insistently combined textuality and visuality, the work as a whole (not merely as a text) is amenable to the kind of close reading that a literary text can sustain, but not in an exclusively textual manner—something that offers challenge and potential for critical reception. The work, in fact, presents several discursive spaces or moments of being, revealing themselves in gradual fashion. Patterns emerge from these discursive spaces, by which I mean aspects of the work that interact with the user's evolving response through a dialogic circle between user and work. And we can interrogate the patterns to expose aesthetic functions of the work as more than a phenomenal reality. *Text Rain* is motivated by a reach for connection, not merely by what emanates in the optic flow of its movements, but also by the text it fragmentarily presents. And that connection need not be reduced to a mapped or literal interpretation in order to be ascribed meaning. In all of this, we may take as our point of departure the work's

character as neither entirely visual not textual, enveloped neither in an arrangement of lexical tokens nor in a visual stream. Of particular note, however, is the tenuous manner in which the poem is presented. Gone is the implicit anchor of text, the baseline. As the guide for setting the horizontal axis of reading, the baseline is as invisible as it is indispensable. It may be angled or skewed, as exploited in Futurist and Dada texts that seem to be performing their own media-archaic renditions of text rain.

Manifestly evident in such works where text is more than textual is how directly the readerly function is challenged. When the baseline wanes, text appears visually, not lexically. As something beyond an expedient design strategy, de-anchored text wants to refute the rational assumptions that frame reading, supplying in their place a means for keeping attention vigilant: does a word mean what it normally means when it appears upside down? But in its dual existence as textual and visual sign, this type of work conveys a multimodality that is unsettling and refuses reduction

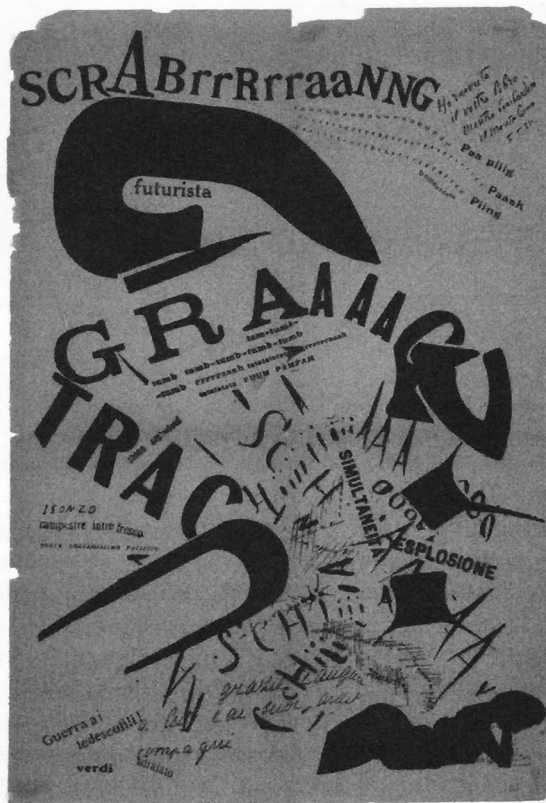


Figure 3. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti,
In the Evening, Lying on Her Bed, She Reread the Letter from Her Artilleryman at the Front,
1919,

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The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Photo credit: The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource

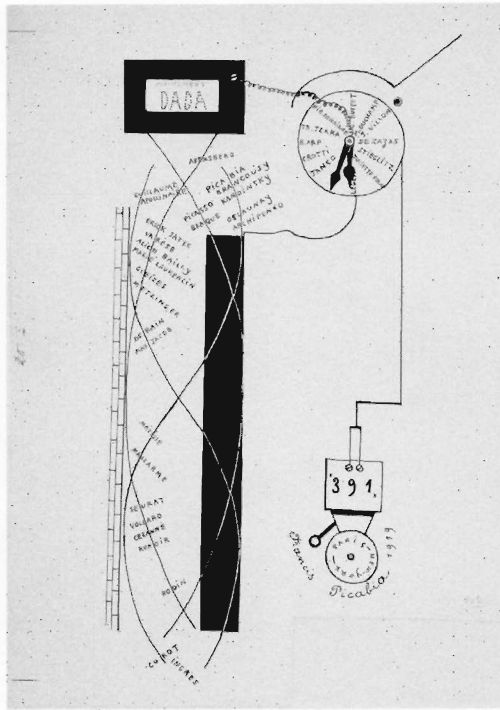


Figure 5. Francis Picabia,
Dada Movement,
1919,

Pen and ink on paper, 20 1/8 x 14 1/4".

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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That *Text Rain* is thoroughly transmodal is additionally evidenced by considering it ontologically, as it exists, or perceptually passes, through a series of more or less distinct phenomenological stages, lives, or moments. In the initial observational encounter with *Text Rain* the work presents itself as a letter-based cascade. In this motion, interpretation is challenged: the work carves up a primary division between the audience that perceives the work as a text versus that which does not; there is no perceptual consensus on the letterfall at the outset. For, to a first approximation, *Text Rain* is exactly and no more than that—a torrential letter flux that, grasped in this preliminary phase, impedes experience of it as literature; none of the projective motion is evident as part of any narrative. But this first moment of its being comes to its close when the work, redefined on the subsequent discovery that it is interactive in a personally engaging way, yields another phenomenon. One could rightly deduce that participants are at first as much absorbed by the peculiarity of their own reflection on a wall, as they are attentive to a peculiar descent of letters. And, as true as it is with a lively toddler who first learns by doing, the synchrony of this particular work makes play precede

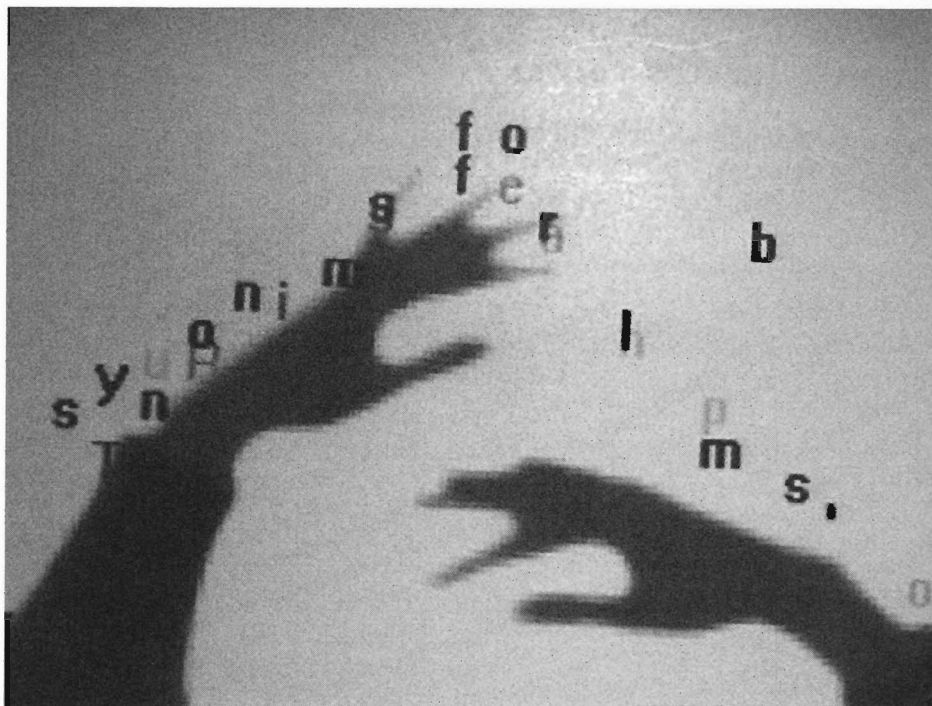


Figure 6. The transmodal evanescence of *Text Rain*.

Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv

Text Rain,

1999.

Interactive installation,

custom software, video camera, projector, computer.

© 1999 Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv.

Image courtesy of the artists.

reading. In the next moment of its being, as it were, the work will reveal the poem that alludes directly to this very interplay. But at first, during play, the collusion and collision between elements in the work and reflected human image on the wall instigate questions of entailment, specifically, whether the work's cascading elements are projected onto a real, physical world, or, symmetrically, whether the real, physical person belongs in the work of art.

From this kinetic adjunctness of worlds emerges a new life or phase in the possibility of reading a poem out of *Text Rain*. Since participants' motions are unrestrained, this discovery remains as potential experience, not inevitable outcome of the work. For to locate a poem in the visual kineticism *Text Rain* requires one to behave, move, travel, in a wholly different way, directed toward piecing together a selection of the lines and yearnings in the Evan Zimroth poem, *Talk, You*.⁸ In the fifth, concluding stage or ontological mode, then, *Text Rain* unfolds at the moment the viewer reflects on how his or her motions have in fact been a relational dance more or less predicted by its poetic

stanzas. These are three—each comprising five short lines—outlining the motivated symmetry of two bodies in desirous connection to each other:

I like talking with you,
 simply that: *conversing*,
 a turning-with or -around,
 as in your turning around
 to face me suddenly . . .

At your turning, each part
 of my body turns to verb.

We are the opposite
 of *tongue-tied*, if there
 were such an antonym;

We are synonyms
 for limbs' loosening
 of syntax,
 and yet turn to nothing:
 It's just talk.

In this physical sense, it is worth noting that the first application of *Text Rain* was as a support to dance performance. Conceptually born in a series of theatre and dance collaborative workshops produced in New York City beginning in 1997, the work's original idea was not to inject a poem into the work but instead to superimpose an early art historical treatise on visual perspective on and around the stage performers in motion. So from the earliest, the sense of a projective text was there, but its dialogue was with the notion of space, not with the dancers themselves. With dance being the most transmodal of the arts, and borrowing from theater as much as poetry, the resulting work reflects a variegated, multimodal lineage quite distinct from that of any enacted deployments of literature. Perhaps sculptural poetry might be the apter term here, and it is in a poetic frame that we ought to consider the final moment of this work's genesis.

It is in the second-person's direct form of address that the poem establishes an I-Thou connection aligned with the thought of Martin Buber, particularly his *Ich und Du*,⁹ the "I and Thou" call for a post-dialectical intimacy, a relation of directness that transcends the prevailing objectification of one's alienated state with things—a problematic relation he termed "I-It." *I-Thou* is deeply personal, yet more than personal; for Buber, as a theologian, *Thou* addresses not only the immediate you, but other forms of *you*: the unconditioned you that lives without boundary, the *all-of-you-here* collective second person, the transhistorical *every-you* that has always been and will potentially be, and the ultimate *You*, entailed in dialogue with the highest self, with God. *Thou*, translated from the German familiar second person *du*, depicts both this otherness and, simultaneously, the *familiarity-with* that evinces the connective intention. The poem's explicit yearning for engagement, the "I like talking with you" that is its opening line, underscores how *Text Rain* operates in this subject-to-subject manner: beginning with dialogue or "simply that: *conversing*."

I opened this talk alluding to the problematic relation between work and image in text, an unresolved cadence in the corpus of literature. From the numerous ways to escape being rendered entirely in one or another modality, works of literature call on text to evoke imagery, a translation that is evident in *Text Rain*; observe how the literally dialogic of *conversing* immediately recodes into the visual act of *turning—with or—around*, ironically unfeasible in the two-dimensional context of this projection.

Without retreading already covered ground, one new point worth making relates to loss of baseline. Starting with the Dada and surrealist examples cited earlier, the visual break with typographic conventions pursued two forms, angularization and skewing of textual baselines, irregularizing distortions in letter shape. *Text Rain* effects the first of these transformations—variations in textual anchor—but not the second—variations in textual shape. This selective change ostensibly renders it a more legible work than its avant-garde antecedents. But no, printed matter can exploit visual deformations without loss of readability because, of course, the content is fixed, static. Once the content moves, as it does continually in *Text Rain*, the poem is fundamentally illegible as a whole. The rearrangement that subverts the attempt at a complete reading is twofold. Vertically, the letters are in motion, but horizontally, they never provide a clear simultaneously visible line; as soon as letters come to rest on the captured silhouette of an external person or object, they evaporate, and since this dissolve is timed to every letter's individual moment of collision rather than to the appearance of a whole stanza or a complete line, the constituents of multiple lines appear and vanish together, so that at any moment,

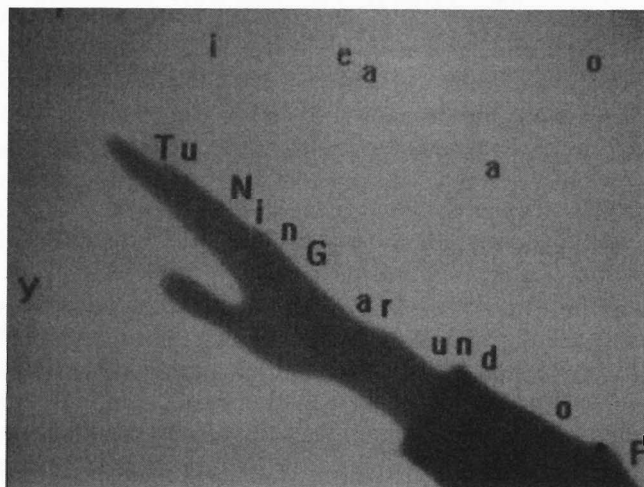


Figure 7. Text Rain, "Turning around"

Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv

Text Rain,

1999.

Interactive installation,

custom software, video camera, projector, computer

© 1999 Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv.

Image courtesy of the artists.

one's reading encounters only a selective sample of various lines. An empirical analogy of this is of multiple orators reciting a single poem together, each from a different point, each uttering and self-silencing at random points, like the traditional nursery rhyme, *Frère Jacques*, of which we can see four distinct ontological moments below:

Frère Jacques,
Frère Jacques,
Dormez-vous?
Dormez-vous?
Sonnez les matines!
Sonnez les matines!
Din, dan, don.
Din, dan, don.

The *Frère Jacques* poem, monologically.

The staggered exposure of a nursery rhyme, performed in a round of three singers, produces an aural experience that is simultaneously disconcerting and engaging, as it



Figure 8. *Frère Jacques*, Musically



Figure 9. *Frère Jacques*, in Round of three

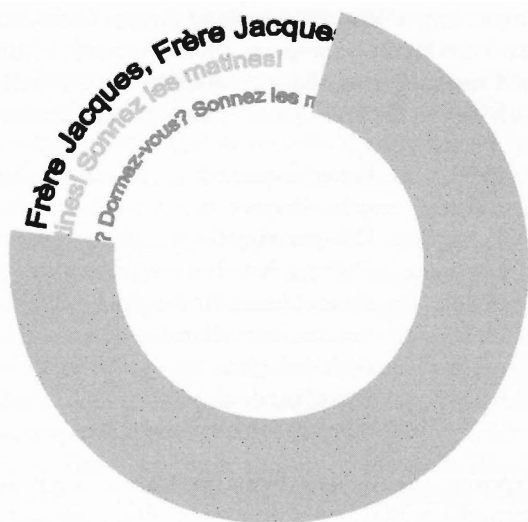


Figure 10. *Frère Jacques*, a performative point in the round

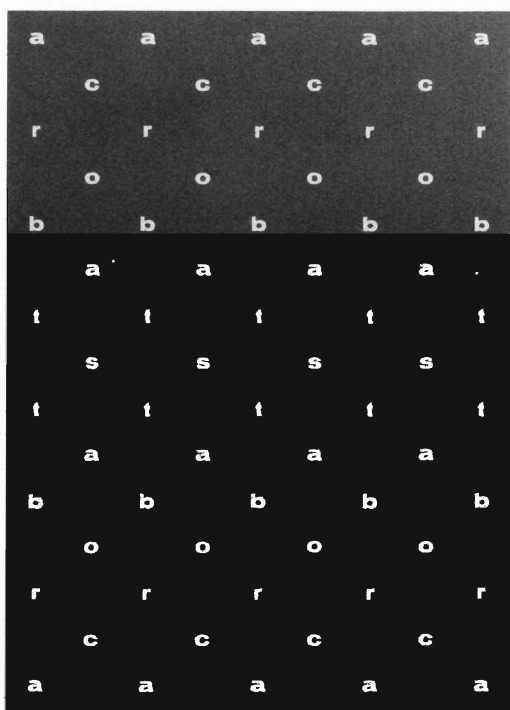


Figure 11. Ian Hamilton Finlay,
Acrobats,
1966,
Screenprint on paper. 388 x 279 mm.
Tate Gallery, London, Great Britain
Photo credit : Tate, London / Art Resource, NY
© Copyright 2009 Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay

would be to discern a poem under conditions of layered visuality. In *Text Rain*, literature's complicated rapport with the image is not outside the interpretive conventions of much concrete poetry, including historically recent work, such as that of Ian Hamilton Finlay.¹⁰

The famous musical round becomes familiar to singers once they have sung it through, realizing that there in fact is a perceptually abstract "center" as there is to a circle, but not to the plane as we assume the ground of text to be. In these cases, it is no longer correct to speak of images and text together, as implied in the relationship with which I opened my discussion. *Text Rain* instead belongs to that tradition where the text *is* the image and vice versa, so that neither is fully itself autonomously, separately, individually. Here, against the modernist notion of the categorically pure, materializing neither specifically out of literature nor of visual art, but rather as something performative, expressive, and differentiated in multiple vantages and distinct moments of being, is the radiating expressiveness of the transmodal work of art.

Notes

1. Dick Higgins and Hannah Higgins, "Intermedia: Synesthesia and Intersenses," *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (2001 [1965]), 49.
2. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966).
3. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
4. Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1913).
5. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1996/1960).
6. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 71. Quoted in Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 69. The event, and a photograph of it, appear in RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006 [1979]), 76.
7. Francisco J. Ricardo, "Until Something Else: A Theoretical Introduction," in *Cyberculture and New Media*, ed. Francisco J. Ricardo (Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi, 2009).
8. For *Text Rain*, Utterback and Achituv edited, abridged, and reworked a subset of the poem. For reasons semantic and lexical, lines in stanza structure would need to be distended to the dimensions of a projection screen. Personal Communication, Camille Utterback, email, February 11, 2009.
9. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970 [1923]).
10. Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Acrobats* (or similar works, like *Star*) circles toward the same question as Rosalind Krauss examined of the grid: where is the center of gravity in such works? Cf. Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, no. 9 (1979).

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Post-Chapter Dialogue, Kwastek and Ricardo

FJR: Contemporary criticism and history of art and literature have evolved in response to the emergence of new expressive practices. Braque could not be analyzed from within a pre-Impressionist sentiment, nor could Ernst, Picabia, or Duchamp. When Minimalism emerged, Rosalind Krauss introduced Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as critical optic. Your essay likewise makes an implicit case for the intersection between diverse disciplines analyzing the same digital phenomenon. That Schemat's work, for example, can be understood both through a game paradigm and within literary studies, where it can be addressed as a dramatic production, is not typical of new media scholarship, and you construct a rubric of shared understanding. Teri Rueb's work is more expansive, transcending even these approaches. You correspondingly add that "each of these disciplines can offer pertinent perspectives on the work, although each reaches disciplinary limits in interpreting it." I'm wondering whether multidisciplinary meta-analysis, while enlightening, isn't too unwieldy for new media art, and wonder whether you see, from each of these methodologies, the possibility of one unique or unifying voice of analysis that reflects the structural, experiential, the phenomenological, and the immersive uniqueness of artistic directions in new media. I might add that this is not limited to locative art or geopoetics, since highly transmodal work of artists like Kelly Dobson is equally opaque to established critical epistemologies.

KK: I am skeptical of attempts to establish universal methodologies for the analysis of specific art movements. This is all the more true for art genres—and I consider new media art a genre and not a movement. Certainly each art genre has characteristic formal features, that guide their analysis. One common feature of new media art (beyond its use of electronic media) is its foundation both on process and Gestalt. It is astonishing that in a society defined through more and more complex and interrelated processes, the aesthetic implications of this situation are largely neglected. What I find necessary is a new focus of the humanities on process aesthetics. While, for example, with sociology, an autonomous discipline has been established to describe societal processes and while informatics and information theory place great emphasis on developing and describing processes algorithmically, there is no sufficient vocabulary, let alone methodology, to describe the aesthetic of processes.

Nevertheless I would not advocate singular interpretive perspectives that could characterize any genre as heterogeneous as new media art. Of course specific movements within new media art, such as locative art or geopoetics, share common features, as I argued, but in the end, the works are unique pieces with very different artistic strategies. If one's focus is on singular artworks, they can never be embraced by one theoretical approach, and any analysis risks becoming fragmentary if done by one author alone. They need complementing and even contradicting perspectives to enfold their reflective potential and openness to subjective interpretation. Methods are important

for identifying tendencies and relating works to philosophical trends, but for close readings, I prefer keeping the framework open, as artists don't create either "phenomenological" or "semiotic works," and within new media art they mostly don't even create "literary" or "visual artworks." Of course this does not exclude concentrating on special features of works, which is often highly informative; I would just not claim any one universal methodology for their analysis.

FJR: You make clear in this essay that some of the significant originality of any art that is digital or electronic in nature lies in the possibility it holds out for *creative inversions, transformations, or variations* of various kinds. One of these is in the inversion of literature's traditional morphologies. Eight decades after its publication, Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* is still relevant, even clairvoyant, as a roadmap to the forms and pathways of contemporary written and filmic narrative. But in digital media, Propp seems less relevant. In the narrative tradition, the diegetic world is where action happens; the extradiegetic, being what lies outside the frame, observes invisibly. Your observation, however, that in Schemat's locative fiction, "The visitor becomes the physical, conceptual and executive center of the work," whereas "its fictional center, the missing woman, remains hidden" locates just such a creative inversion of traditional form entirely absent from Propp's schema. There is in this inversion a categorical shift: the reader becomes the effective protagonist of the story, seeking, within a fiction, a character who herself is a fiction, for she never speaks, never appears, never leaves trails of her own existence. As a snare, she provides leverage for effecting the shift that conscripts the reader into the story's dimensions, that permits the reader to be plausibly addressed in the second person, and even to be assigned direct orders. The reader, once addressed from within the story by a character in it, crosses the conventional status barrier of readership and becomes a character (already) in the story.

And this is not the only kind of shift that takes place in locative art. In another, the medium itself becomes distributed to a dynamic backdrop, and, rather than being moored to a specific mechanism—a screen, a wall, a printed page, or any device—the story is instead dispersed across the openness of spatial dimensions, and the visitor's physical movement then influences its narrational exposition over that field. As an overloaded sign system—simultaneously a narrative field and a seaside field—the medium itself undergoes an inversive shift of signification against literature's communicative architectures. It matters little that the story is centralized, archived in a backpack—its narrational genotype is encoded with the global coordinates that the visitor will, by entering, trigger, allowing its fictive skein to unfold.

Finally, as if to subvert conventional structure even more, we have your second case study, Teri Rueb's *Drift*, in which the mapping of texts and locations is itself constantly changing. This is akin to the radical geography of the inner self that is experienced in the dimensionless void of a dream state; hearing echoes of site that, on returning to the place where they were first uttered, are now elsewhere, or not at all.

It seems to me that all of these inversions are incredibly helpful in destroying certain fixities to which we have been conventionally bound. In the external world, the permanence and fixity of place that is the monument's signified is precisely what is most distinct from what we experience within the inner subjectivity of creative reverie. It appears that

locative media art is bringing out subjective being into the physical world, annihilating the inner/outer, subject/object divide that the West adulates, but which other cultures, among them the Australian aboriginal worldview, have never quite endorsed.

And so, I don't have a confining question, but feel rather that you have opened the door to an understanding of artistic expression wholly outside of Cartesian thought: merging both objectivist methodology and subjectivist awareness, there is now an extended consciousness of the works, since the approach considers the projective, the aleatory, the physical, and the participatory; and I wonder if this experience of deep meaning, after such close reading, also insinuated itself to your intuition and sensibilities, as it did to mine. Do you feel the rustle?

KK: I definitely do, also in a very practical sense, as challenging common notions and disciplines always prompts not only enthusiasm, but also skepticism and criticism. That is, the "rustle" is present in exhibitions and conferences within the artistic and scientific community of new media art. Also artists themselves still confront these challenges: whereas I consider Schemat's and Rueb's pieces as successful, mature works of interactive new media art, it is obvious that they are dealing with very complex artistic, aesthetic, and technological issues with high standards of artistic production.

To proceed to the core of your statement: I absolutely agree that this artistic approach indicates a key shift within cultural production, due to the location of aesthetics within process and action. It marks a further step in the development from representation to presentation that can be observed within the arts of the last 100 years—though it does not replace the former with the latter but rather combine them in a highly complex interchange of the processual, the material, the subjective, and the symbolical. locative art practices in particular re-implement art not only within public space, but within our social networks and build a bridge from the reflection and distance-based aesthetics of the art world to the everyday processes of aisthesis. As you emphasize, an important artistic strategy at stake is the implementation of inversions. Their complexity is due to the fact that, though they are consciously provoked by the artist, they are not fixed within a representative scheme but grow from within the visitor's experience. The visitor of Schemat's work does not necessarily become a character in the story; she is invited to do so, but may at the same time remain distanced. Therefore I prefer to describe these experiential processes with the notions of oscillation and ambivalence. You might even compare these artistic strategies to deconstructivist tendencies, though I consider the works too much grounded in materiality (and deconstructivism too negligent of actual reception processes) to use this term in my writing.

I absolutely agree that the destroying of fixities is a tendency that is fostered by digital media and reflected within new media art. But of course this reflection is not confined to new media art—as interactive art is not confined to new media art, either. The specific achievement of interactive art is that it allows for an actual and active experience of this situation, whereas non-interactive art is usually confined to representing these tendencies. The two examples I dealt with combine new media technologies with interactive strategies and with a breakout into public space and can therefore not only enhance the interactive processes embedded within the work, but also integrate the complex layers both of everyday life and of digital data/networks within their artistic interpretations of contemporary culture and society.