

Electronic Writing as Hypermateral Playground

Abstract

The text examines e-lit's potentials for reframing the question of digital materiality through playful poetic practice. To this end, the discussion reconstructs the genealogy between concrete poetry and electronic writing:

Digital structures, such as source code, programmable logic devices, neural networks, databases, and sensor readouts, accompany us continuously, yet remain annoyingly hard to fathom. Although we ceaselessly interact with them, it is hard for humans to relate to these materials, to shape or see them. However, as long as we allow the material reality of these structures to slip through the cracks of the collective imaginary, it remains easy for corporate actors to misrepresent the character and influence of coded infrastructures: Imbued with mystical qualities they appear to exist within a beyond removed from everyday existence and political struggle.

Electronic literature might offer attractive symbolic forms for understanding and questioning of these banally elusive materials. E-lit is not without its predecessors in this regard; practices such as concrete poetry (or concretist art more generally) have established creative forms of foregrounding the material basis of linguistic practices.

The text will retrace the social co-evolution of poetic forms and technological concepts through an analysis of the historical pathways leading from concrete poetry to forms of electronic writing. This historical analysis is employed in order to analyse the changing position of poetic practices that call attention to the material basis of the linguistic spaces they unfold in.

Introduction - The Question of Digital Materiality

Digital structures, such as source code, programmable logic devices, neural networks, databases, and sensor readouts, accompany us continuously, yet remain annoyingly hard to fathom. Although we ceaselessly interact with them, it is hard for humans to relate to these materials, to shape or see them. As long as we allow code to slip through the cracks of the collective imaginary, it remains easy for corporate actors to misrepresent the character and influence of coded infrastructures: They are imagined to exist elsewhere, in server farms, on the quantum physical plane of the infinitesimal, within the disembodied sphere of formal logic, but not among us, not as part of everyday reality. While its effects, social media platforms, word processors, smartphone applications, are part of our lifeworlds, its digital substrates seem not to be. Resultingly, code is allowed to have unobserved social effects. Those who control the conditions of its production and operation are free to deploy this invisibility for any strategic goal they see fit.

At the same time, digital materiality in itself is not as abstract as it might seem: Its effects are felt in real life, in the ways people move through urban space, are given or withheld employment, in the cost of products and mortgages, in the manner news items circulate through the sphere of social media.

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The Emergence of Concrete Poetry

There are countless ways to assemble the history of concrete poetry, some of which generously sprawl across the centuries, embracing medieval and ancient greek texts within a singular paradigm. In order to reconnect to the history of concrete poetry, the current text will focus on experimental literary practices undertaken in the 1950s and later.

As poetic movement in this sense, concrete poetry emerged at a historical moment when technological progress had culminated in unprecedented global disaster. World War II had hollowed out all promise of a unity of enlightenment values and techno-scientific advancement.

Instead of negotiating the possibility for articulation of past atrocities, concrete poetry sought to reconnect to the future through a rearticulation of disrupted avant-garde projects. It related itself to respective traditional modernist ideas of progress while at the same time embracing emerging global uniformity, mobilising the aesthetic practices of graphic design instead of refusing them due to their entanglement with mass culture. Remodulating it, the concrete movement aimed to construct the conditions for a global readership of poetry.

The emerging practices of concrete poetry were made possible by changes in practices of reading effected through technological change. Print based mass media accelerated processes of publication and reading, as legible material continuously proliferated, it was promoted by new technologies of attention direction: Catchy headlines, smooth layouts, cheeky slogans, efficient type face.

Constellation/Utopia/Disaster

The concrete poem, just as headline and tabloid front page, is designed in order to convey its effects rationally, elegantly, and effectively. Eugen Gomringer calls the resulting poetic forms "constellations", in a residually romantic reference to the celestial sphere (Gomringer, "From Line to Constellation").

As poetic form, constellations are presented as deliberately simplistic configurations. A constellation describes a group of words, arranged spatially. No superfluous design constraints such as metre or rhythm apply, thereby

affording efficiency to the composition and individuality to its elements.

This shift to simplicity in poetic forms effects an equally minimalistic concept of the material basis of poetic processes. As Gomringer puts it: "material means the sum of all the signs with which we make poems."("The Poem as Functional Object")

Regarding its aim of establishing a potentially global audience, the concrete project was helped not only by emerging mass media, but also by lingering threats of global destruction (Hilder). Technologies such as the nuclear bomb did part of the work for concrete poets by threatening to obliterate the whole of human civilization, irrespective of national borders or cultural specifics.

Linguistic materials are not the only ones concrete poets were interested in. The movement explicitly sought to recuscitate the avant-garde impulses of modernist architecture, blending images of elegant buildings made from reinforced concrete with elegant, efficiently designed poetry in a unified utopian vision. Planned cities and designed poems once more promise a world determined by a universal reason at once potent and playful.

In line with this vision, poems are imagined as "functional objects", engineered in order to attain trans-cultural intelligibility, "if possible, as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs"(Gomringer, "The Poem as Functional Object").

A Poetics of Information

Corresponding to this functional approach to poetry, is a practice of post-literary theory which construes poems as carriers of information. Theorists such as philosopher and electronic writer Max Bense, constructed poems in analogy to other perceptible artefacts (Bense).

Their informational content arises as the result of transmission from sender to receiver, as is the case with any other message. Consequently, the communicative value of the poem does not arise from preformed culturally dependent symbols, but rather is computed within a network of interconnected cognitive systems.

Poems become arrangements of linguistic material, while all material can be construed according to the universal medium of information. In turn the meaning of the poem becomes stabilised in a recursive network of self-observing processors.

We might contrast this construal with the approach of the other great german cybernetic thinker Niklas Luhmann's approach: In painful agreement with the concrete movement, Luhmann situates poetry within an art system which operates through self-differentiation (Luhmann). In order to understand poetry we have to ask ourselves how it remodulates the unity of difference between poetry and its environment, between poetry and non-poetry.

Poetry just like other meaningful forms, is part of an art system operating

through reduction of social complexity. Poems shed formal requirements such as verse in order to allow connections to designerly communications, at the same time they escalate their own minimalism in order not to bleed into communicative forms reserved for immediately commercial, coercive, or political communication.

This work of differentiation is not to be construed as merely one of exclusion. On the contrary, one of the main motivations of concrete poetry is to qualify communications as poems which previously would have been rejected as design, advertisement, fine art, as mundane or trivial objects.

At the pinnacle of its quest for universality, concrete poems appear as harbingers of a universal medium: information. In the course of their universalization they appear as dematerialised entities. Adhering to the language of messages, transmitters, and information source, they are treated not as objects possessing specific material qualities but as carriers of data. These construals are in line with tendencies of a dematerialization of art, in the form of happenings, performance art, or conceptual art (Lippard). However, at this point we would have to reconcile the characterisation of concrete poetry as expressive form interested in its material basis with the outlined effect of dematerialization.

Hypermaterialization – Collapse of Form and Content

French philosopher Bernard Stiegler provides a conceptual model for solving this apparent contradiction in the form of the idea of hypermaterialization. The respective analysis of materiality is grounded within a phenomenological analysis of everyday reality:¹

In terms of everyday life, we are not a part of a dematerialization at all but rather, quite to the contrary, a hypermaterialisation: everything is transformed into information[.] [...] As a result, matter is becoming invisible. (Stiegler et al.)

Building on this diagnosis of informational ubiquity, Stiegler mobilises phenomenological concepts in order to account for the social significance of digital materials. Following a post-phenomenological approach, he conceives of digital structures as part of a network of tertiary retentions. Within the phenomenological framework, primary and secondary retentions roughly correspond to the intra-psychic functions involved while perception gradually becomes memory. Objects become present to consciousness through the interplay of retention and anticipative protention.

Stiegler proceeds by diagnosing an exterritorialization of retention in the form of technologically augmented “tertiary retentions”. Tertiary retentions are archival memory functions which rely on extra-corporeal materialization. The structures however, that govern structuration and processing of information, what in the linguistic paradigm would have been the grammar, are formed in a way that partly occludes their visibility to cognitive systems conditioned by

¹ The quote as given here follows Paul's translation (2) of Stiegler's text.

them.

The diagnosis of hypermaterialization ultimately effects a collapse of form and content regarding the concept of information, thus sharply distinguishing it from previous theorizations:

I call hypermatter a complex of energy and information where it is no longer possible to distinguish its matter from its form [...] I call hypermaterial a process where information – which is presented as a form – is in reality a sequence of states of matter produced by materials and apparatuses, by techno-logical dispositifs in which the separation of form and matter is also totally devoid of meaning. (Stiegler et al.)

Crucially, information here presents itself as thoroughly voided of any utopian potential. The hypermaterialisation of the world transmutes every object, thought, and experience into a data point for an all-encompassing techno-capitalist apparatus.

Read against the outlined post-phenomenological conception of information, what appeared as a question of historic import, the status of material within concrete poetry now presents itself as contemporaneous problematic. In this sense, issues raised by concrete poetry appear strikingly current - by escalating an emphasis on form it makes tangible the collapse between form and its other. Readings of concrete poems as carriers of information prefigure phenomena of hypermaterialisation.

In any case the reference to structures of memory is a productive one. Concrete poetry itself can be constructed as complex mediation between practices of remembrance of past avant-garde promises and projection of utopian ideas into the future.

Electronic Writing - Playing with Information

If we indeed accept information as ubiquitous hypermaterial of our times, the question is not whether to repudiate or embrace it. Rather, a critical project has to reconfigure it as an element of creativity and play. Practices of electronic writing can, among other things, be conceptualised as critical projects in this vein, reacting to the escalating ubiquity of their medium.

Just as concrete poetry co-evolved with an emerging mass readership of print-based media, electronic writing emerged in tandem with the amorphous audience brought about by the emergence of the Internet. While neither programmatic nor overtly concretist, many forms of electronic writing pursued a latently concretist agenda: The otherwise transparent medium of source-code, computer-networks, packet-mediated Internet-ommunication becomes the focus of attention. Novel poetic forms focus on the materiality of electronic texts.

Both concrete poetry and electronic writing are directed against traditional national cultures of reading. However, they each construct a distinct novel space for their poetry. While concrete poetry celebrated a global readership,

the history of electronic writing is intertwined with the buoyant idea of *cyberspace*. Electronic writing thus becomes indebted to an utopian project of its own.

Early Internet culture however was not merely content with transcending national boundaries but instead sought to create a novel space beyond existing norms and limitations. It was conceptualised not as territory but as a previously non-existent possibility space.

Within the context of electronic writing, words and signs first and foremost perform the novelty of this digital space, they highlight the possibility of existing in the beyond of the Internet. Just like the constellations of concrete poems, their function does not consist in referring to or describing a pre-existing state of affairs, but of constituting a reality of their own. It is their sheer existence in electronic form, the celebration of their materiality, which carries semantic weight. Techniques such as substitutions and mutability are employed in order to cherish the newfound freedom of words from any static physical form. Anarchic and willful, they are calculated in order to frustrate any authoritative position of interpretation.

Works such as the “Dreamlife of Letters” (Stefans) revel in the graphemic fluidity afforded by digital materials. The Dreamlife presents a somewhat anarchic temporal succession of visual arrangements which individually can be read as constellations. Through the sheer amount of presented linguistic content, the poem evokes the sense of hyperconsumption of visual material afforded by the Internet. Its stylistic effect is not one of efficiency or elegance but of ostentatious overexcitation. Indeed, the poem might be less interested in effecting a playful process within a reader than about staging a celebration of its own whimsical playfulness.

Interventions such as Thornton’s *{poem}.py* directly address the hypermaterial commensurability of linguistic and economic values (Thornton).

Electronic Constellations

What emerges is a hypermaterial playground of electronic writing in the shape of a maze of potentials and limitations. It allows poetry to render the deep intertwinement of linguistic and economic space perceptible. Thornton’s intervention highlights the existence of point-to-point relationships between monetary value and linguistic elements. These are not constructed by the work itself, rather their symbolic articulation allows us to observe connections which have existed all along. Works such as the “Dreamlife of Letters” perform the concept of hypermaterial information by confronting the reader with a rapidly changing array of temporally ordered constellations.

We might be tempted at this point to speak of “electronic constellations” in order to highlight the symbolic transformations effected by hypermaterial conditions. Furthermore, the concept of electronic constellations could be employed in order to point to the intertwinement of human and non-human

elements within practices of reading. They thus would communicate with new materialisms (Coole and Frost; Bennett), in themselves a project of renegotiating the relationship of postivism, historical materialisms, and vitalisms.

The fact that technological signs or sign elements have invaded poetry, speaks of an ongoing complexation of the utopian and technological. The digital materiality of signs used to construct poems points to their function of mediating memory, expectation and thus experience. Poetic signs hence inadvertently act as bridges - mediating between possible futures and the memory of failed utopia.

Electronic writing thus can help us to productively reframe the question of materiality: We are not witnessing the aftermath of a dematerialization of art, rather, the concept of material is as elusive and overpresent as ever. However, the sites at which it can be perceived and contested are shifting continuously.

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