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For an Aesthetic of Digital Poetry

TREATING THE WORDS AS MATERIALS in the same sense the painters work with their materials» (Andrews, *Correspondence*). « Poetry, institutionalized little by little from the Renaissance, has been, since the end of the XIX century, the place of a deep renewal, i.e. poetry is progressively concerned about its form and its *material*, considering also the graphic and/or sonorous appearance of words (we can think, among the others, of Mallarmé or of Apollinaire, but also of (early) 20th Century avant-gardes like Dadaism and Futurism or of visual and performative, poetry, etc.).

The introduction of new technologies, however, has been imposing to art (and to literature), in the same way it has happened for daily use objects, continuous transformations and unforeseeable mutations. Thanks to easy access to technologies, for the last few years of the XX century, we have learnt to appreciate the development of a new kind of poetic text exclusively thought for the digital medium: a virtual text¹.

As such the degree of electronic poetic compositions, as far as support goes is absolute, the moment therefore of questioning this new support has arrived: what formal changes it involves and what new aesthetic effect does it create? Despite the use of the same medium, the final products vary among them and propose a different approach to reading, as well as a different aesthetic sense.

As it is known, computer-created poetry was born in 1959 at Stuttgart, Federal Republic of Germany, when the German linguistic

¹ Many words have been used to define these kinds of poetry thought for - and exclusively based on - a digital support: web-poetry, cyber-poetry, digital poetry, electronic poetry, hyper-poetry, etc.

Max Bense, with the aid of an engineer, Theo Lutz², succeeded to produce the first electronic free verses, using a machinery that was still called “calculator” and not computer. Thanks to the evolution in technology, in the following years other *electronic* poetry experiment started in Canada and in France where, always in 1959, a French engineer, François Le Lionnais, apparently convinced Raymond Queneau to found the “Séminaire de Littérature Expérimentale”, that in 1960 would be changed in the famous Oulipo, «Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle». As far as the Italian experience is concerned, we shall remember the poem *Tape Mark* by Nanni Balestrini, made in 1961 with an IBM calculating machine. In 1985, in occasion of an international exhibit held in Paris at the Centre Georges Pompidou, titled “Les Immatériaux”, the Alamo group introduced its first poems “generated” by a computer, which sanctioned the birth of a new form of visual poetry “animated” by this new medium.

To this technological revolution we should add another important step which took place in 1993, when the CERN's researchers of Geneva invented the technology that has made the net popular. It was from that date that a proliferation of web-sites of “cyber-poetry” began and, consequently, a new generation of digital authors was born. The advent of the net marks a breaking point with the past and opens up unexpected possibilities to literary creation as well: besides providing new chances to the literary (and poetic) productions, the WWW also allows being your own publisher. From then on, we have been witnessing an incessant multiplication of poetic creations published on the net.

Although “new” in technology has a very ephemeral life, with this work I would like to offer a critical overview on some new “European” digital poetic productions (by “new”, I mean “recent”), traceable on the net. I shall state in advance that I will not speak about text generators, because they would open other problems which, however interesting, I wouldn't be able to describe thoroughly in the space of this paper.

The examples I will show start with a macro-possible typology of the numerical poetic forms, which considers above all the form of the expression. Therefore, I will show digital poems built on links (in which thanks to the creation of links assembly is possible among their various space forms, pages, windows, frames and lexis) and digital poems based on morphological elements which we, according to the case, will specify to be segments (morphological elements without

² Almost concurrently in the United States, Brion Gysin was able to do the same thing.

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internal temporality, i.e. text forms, images, etc.) or sequences (characterized, on the contrary, by an internal temporality).

Il fiume delle Parole by Elisa Carlotti is the first poem which I would like to speak about. This poem is still a very simple example of digital composition: the text is formed only of graphic parts; however, it presents some interesting features. To be able to read the text, the reader must place the cursor on the arrows, in this way the text moves forward or regresses very quickly, up to the point of not having the time to read it):



Il Fiume delle Parole



E le Parole scorrono

come acqua del fiume

Ed a volte risalgono

come fanno i salmoni

dentro i vortici estatici

This poem, based on the above described typology, regarding the form of its expression, is a classical example of electronic writing formed from segments: as such, it lacks internal temporality and the reading-time is chosen, more or less, by the reader. Actually, once the slider is positioned on one of the two arrows, the text begins to scroll very quickly, becoming illegible: the reading-time depends on the readers' ability to dominate the mouse.

The text, anyway, doesn't interact at any level with the reader and, as far as the style of the poem is concerned, it reminds us of a "past style". The reiteration of both the nominal syntagm «parole» (5 times) and of the verbal one «scorrere» (it also appears 5 times: 4 declined at third person plural present indicative, one at the first singular person of the present indicative) aims to stress on the poetry's theme.

Furthermore, the internal rhymes, the alliterations, the reiteration of the morpheme /s/ (21 occurrences) and of the morpheme /r/ (39 occurrences) reproduces the sound of water rustling or flowing, sometimes whirling the deeper noise of a whirl (the liquid consonant /r/ recalls a series of Indo-European words linked to the idea of “flowing”, as the Greek verb: $\rho\epsilon\omega$). The verbs «scorrere» and «risalire» (the arrows allow to direct the reading in two senses: from top-down and bottom up, in the same way that the nominal syntagm «vortici» does, at last, show the metatextual function which is the poem's base. The flowing and going-up of words *physically* call both the poet and the reader: «e io scorro con loro», in a same space, in a time that does not stop, forced in true *whirlpools* (of sense) in which the words can materially become illegible (incomprehensible).

The second poem I would like to analyse is *Stillicidio* by Daniela Calisi, one of the most well-known Italian digital poetesses. On her site Content(o) design, introducing her works, she describes her poetry with these words:

Queste poesie indagano il comportamento e il mutamento del testo nel tempo: un linguaggio che non è lineare, ma che esprime una complessità di voci. La capacità del testo di mutare la propria forma: cambiamenti di visibilità, di posizione, di forma, dimensioni e colore. La capacità del testo di mutare il proprio significato: la parola unita alle altre parole da rapporti di trasformazione, mutazione, permutazione, anagramma. La capacità del testo di reagire alle azioni del suo lettore, ma anche, in senso più ampio, i modi in cui il testo configura e consente questo rapporto di azione e reazione; questi sono testi mutanti perché sono capaci di cambiare sotto i tuoi occhi, di reagire ai tuoi movimenti, perché si fanno più complessi o si spiegano man mano che esplori i loro diversi modi di apparire (Calisi).

Stillicidio is also a quite simple digital poetry example, entirely based on the graphic aspect, but it has a little more complex interactivity level with the reader than the previous text. In fact this text reacts to the reader's movement, who, sliding on the words, makes the other verses of poetry appear (and temporarily to disappear), also determining the time of their appearance: the faster the reader slides on the words, the faster the words will appear. This poem, however, is formed from sequences, but the time can be modulated also by the reader who, touching lightly the shown words, allows the text to [re]compose itself: it is a text which *materially* takes forms thanks to the reading process. As I said, this poem is composed only by a graphic text, which is static neither at the beginning, nor after that it has formed itself on the page. The slow time imposed to the text reflects the

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*tempo lento*³ declaimed by the text itself which, on the other hand, opposes to the idea of the *tempo feroce, atroce stillicidio dei pensieri/atroce lama dei desideri*⁴. The composition opens and closes with the same verse line: *lasciami il riposo*⁵, and the reader is almost cradled by the constant and repetitive movement of the words. Besides, playing on the spacing of the letters, the text emphasises the syntagm which already occupies the central place of the composition: *STILLICIDIO*⁶, which is also the poem's title.

At last, even if the sequences are introduced in succession, which still implies a linear kind of reading, the verse lines are mobile and can, with a simple gesture, vanish for a few instants: therefore, it is the reading practice to be, once more, strongly influenced.

*Cartografi*⁷, always by Daniela Calisi, presents in a much better way the evidence of how the poetic verse and the game of *entax*⁸ interact in the process of building the text.

What's more, this poem, whose electronic writing is based on segments, is written in free verses and its particularity resides in the fact that some verse lines, which are found partially indistinct on the background, come to the foreground, thanks to the reader's action, replacing and/or modifying the other textual segments, thus altering the structure and the sense of those verse lines. In this dialogue between two different perspective planes, the poetic text, in itself, loses its characteristic of a complete object in order to become an object in movement, which is transformed under the eyes of its readers', and at their will. The reading possibilities, in this case, are multiple: one can read it in the classical way, or intersect several segments, attracted, for example, by the largeness of the letters. The text, however, remains a kind of "j'accuse" against the school of the immobility and the enclosure and of the linear verse: «vi dà fastidio la disarmonia» or, rewriting itself, «e indegni vi dà fastidio la disarmonia». This poem brings to the foreground the reflection of the words on the graphic form: the differentiation between capital and tiny letters gives a different

³ Slow time.

⁴ Fierce time, atrocious *stillicide* of thoughts/atrocious blade of desire.

⁵ Let me be/let me rest my bones.

⁶ *Stillicidi*.

⁷ All these works are in Shockwave format.

⁸ If syntax covers the assembly operations of both figures and signs along the external space of a sign system, a word is needed to indicate the system of the operations which allows assembling the letters inside the figures: it is the *entax*. The *entax* chairs for example the combination of features, points, etc. which compose a letter or an ideogram. The *entax* extends its influence on interior space, *syntax* on external one.

impact to the same word. On the contrary, the text positioned at the centre of the page, in black, representing the classical text, becomes less attractive for the reader, likely to be captured by the other possible (subjective) paths.

The Haiku's project is instead a slightly more complex example of numerical poetry which combines, in the same space, graphic text and audio-visual images. I shall synthesize the project as it is described by its authors:

Il progetto **HAIKU** miscela emotivamente una componente semantica, emotiva, visuale, uditiva e ovviamente interattiva. **HAIKU** è quindi un progetto di new media poetry, che prende spunto dai dettami della poesia digitale attualmente in circolazione, per re-interpretarli e riscriverli prendendo spunto dalla struttura metrica ed emotiva propria dell'Haiku giapponese. **HAIKU** è quindi una poesia con una struttura metrica ben precisa, divisa in gruppi di strofe di lunghezza variabile, caratterizzata dalla ipernavigabilità verticale all'interno di uno stesso componimento poetico, ma dotata anche dalla facoltà di muoversi orizzontalmente all'interno di altri componimenti paralleli per creare strutture poetiche completamente nuove. **HAIKU** è infine un'esperienza multisensoriale e interattiva, in cui le parole dei componimenti poetici sono messe a confronto e raffronto con un'interpretazione visuale ed uditiva; l'**HAIKU** è in altre parole diviso e interpretabile secondo due modalità distinte e indipendenti l'una dall'altra, ma che nello stesso tempo si compenetrano e rafforzano il significato e l'esperienza emotiva l'una dell'altra. Il tutto determinato dall'interattività del lettore-attore che muovendosi all'interno dell'**HAIKU** potrà navigare, secondo differenti modalità, all'interno del componimento poetico (De Angelis, Mancuso, Minnone, Vescovo 2004).

The novelty consists in inserting a really dynamic dimension into the text: not only does the reader read, but he also moves and interacts with the reading space, since the poetic text is (scattered) in the space and the reader must move to rebuild it. He clicks on a text-segment and he jumps to another poem. This movement inside the textual tissue complicates the practice of reading. An action which is both spectacular and private, personal.

Some words are hardly readable in the graphic text; however, these are bound by iconic images and to a voice declaiming certain textual segments, but in English (while the written text is in Italian), that may superimpose one another if the reader moves around too quickly. Such a text is created not only to be read, but also to be seen and listened to. The reading path is still fixed for the reader: if reread, the text does not change and the passages follow one another with the same logic. However, it can still be considered a kind of mobile work in which the reader *bounces* from one text to another

looking for some sense: «cerco... cerco... cerco...». He feels, in other words, lost, come *penna/senza inchiostro [...] come foglio/senza parole/come libro/senza idee*⁹. The text repeats itself again and again and *lo sguardo affonda*¹⁰ into the textual tissue in a continuous research, in which, however, «[I] do not find answers».

Candles for a street corner (2004) is the result of a collaboration between Bob Kendall, one of most appreciated digital authors and Michele D'Auria. Collaborations have been very common so far in web-poetry. Single authors do not exist any more; moreover, the authors often come from different countries (so how can we speak of author's poetry or of national poetry in relation to web-poetry?).

Coming back to the text, *Candles*, like the previous example, joins a graphical text (in movement and static) to iconic and sonorous images. However, I will not talk a lot about the content, because I'd rather analyze the form of expression, which introduces other innovations regarding the shown typologies. The poem is recited, which helps the "readers", especially if they are not English-speaking, to trace the word- order and, obviously, the sense, moreover a sequence would be almost incomprehensible in its whole because unreadable (black color sequence). However, there isn't a perfect correspondence between what is declaimed by the voice and what the reader is invited to read from a careful use of *entax* and eerie font type (crenatura), etc. Normally, closely spaced lines are harder to read and when the text is too uniform, our eyes classify it as a single block of grey, and thus ignore it. In the page, we appreciate above all the contrasts between empty and full spaces. Consequently, if iconic images are stylized, the graphic part complicates the reading process, due to movement in some of its parts (even if the temporality allows an easy reading) and some text segments are written in letters too small to be read. The poem opens with a declaiming voice, the image of some sort of sad ghost, rotating on itself and a number: 32, which will be declaimed by a voice, the only associating element between what the readers are listening and what they are seeing. Also, in the last sequence any graphic text is absent, with the exception of the word "trust", kept in hand by the ghost: «trust» redoubles and mirrors itself. The third sequence is an indicative example of how we read: our eyes look for the declaimed word on the top right side, while actually the declaimed verse is on the left side: we look for «what a view» (which is written in capital letters, bigger than the other words, but the position is

⁹ Like a pen/without ink [...] like a page/ without words like a book/ without ideas.

¹⁰ Sight sinks.

deceiving) and we read: «From time that». The syntagms in the sequences are repeated, even if with some little changes, modifying the text and so rewriting it. Besides, some parts turn out illegible, because of their size, but their structure reminds one of the structure of the poetic verse. Some verses are not declaimed in the sequence they are written in; in fact they are anticipations of the following sequence or references to the previous one. For example, in «she can't see/but I can see» (4th sequence), «I can see» is performed by the voice as the first verse of the successive sequence, (5th sequence). Finally both verses «she can't see/but the can see» remain in the 6th sequence too, although they are not declaimed by the voice, then they disappear. Finally, a consideration about the chromatic aspect shall be made: it changes in every sequence to emphasize the passage from one passage to another, passage that, on the contrary, the narrating voice does not mark. It is a “flat” narrating voice which repeats, mechanically, the same verses, returning several times in the same as well as in different sequences (poetry can continue forever once it is started), while the image of the ghost keeps turning on itself, in a continuous repetition: «so we can get through another day».

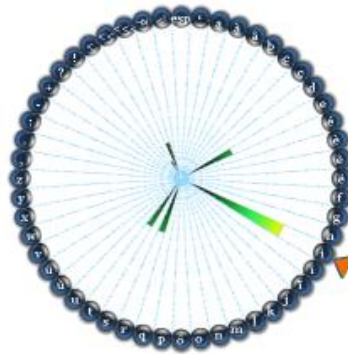
Digital poetry does not require, nor looks for a standard reading, rather it searches, quoting Balpe, «un effet de spectacle», since «elle est une littérature qui veut se déployer dans l'espace, le temps, l'interaction et le mouvement» (Balpe 1997).

Finally, I would like to mention another typology of digital texts, which opens new and interesting problems to the reading practices: the texts based on collaborative writing. The example I have chosen is original not only because reader collaborates in the poetic production, but also because reader collaborates in a “democratic” way.

This experience began in 2004, and the title seems to be explanatory: *Un seul crayon pour toutes les mains*¹¹. The aim, as mentioned, is to create a collective poetic text. However, unlike the collaborative texts based on wikis platform, and unlike the interactive writing in general, this project requires a letter-by-letter, atom-by-atom composition. The reader/participant has access to a circular virtual keyboard, containing all the signs of a normal keyboard (except the numbers). She votes by clicking the “keys” within this keyboard. Some of these keys have other functions, i.e. they allow to erase the last letter, the last word, or the last sentence.

¹¹ *One pencil for all hands.*

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The choice of the readers takes place in two steps: the first vote is «blind», while the second considers the results obtained by the various signs. The first vote is unalterable, while the second can be modified: «Ainsi, l'instinct personnel peut éventuellement rejoindre l'instinct communautaire». The text goes on through the validation of all the characters, one by one. The first character to obtain 12 votes is registered. At last, I would like to quote one of the “advices”, given by the text, which seems particularly significant:

Ayez en tête, le sens du texte déjà rédigé, le mot que vous aimeriez écrire et la phrase que vous pensez voir sortir. Débridez votre imagination, libérez vos rêves pour profiter pleinement de votre implication dans les votes et dans l'inspiration du texte (AA.VV. 2004)

In order to allow interactivity, once a syntagmatic unit is complete, it is necessary to intervene to make the text advance. This advancement can determine a change of image, of a sound, of a window, etc. The interactive text introduces a pragmatic narrativity of the receiver which is realized through his/her participation to the development, building or creation of the hypertextual process, like a series of actions enforced by their reading *practice*.

These originally virtual actions become components of the written text and it is just because of these requested actions that the reading practice undergoes a transformation. With the last kind of digital poetry proposed, besides, we have not only the “classical” problems of the interpretation, not only Eco's «*opera aperta*», but also what we may call the unpredictability of the work; every text, every practice of productive act will realize a single moment of the work. In these kinds of texts the involvement of the reader is increased to the point that his reading practice has to be converted into written practice so that the text perpetuates itself.

The reader is not simply “a participating subject” of a *becoming* text – as for example in *Stillicidio* – but an “involved subject”. Unlike participation, collaboration does not recall socialization throughout the plurality of the readers-spectators, but it recalls the implication of a set of unique subjectivity. Furthermore as far as numerical collaboration (as in opposition to participation) is involved, it does not mean to build a whole, nor to participate in a work in movement, but it deals with an “involved” subject to create the work, to create the movements of the work, the traces of the work, to re-write it so that it may keep on existing.

In the collective texts, therefore, an object is built through a dialogue which begins with an author, but he only checks it partially. In this kind of texts the “reader” is invited to take part in the process of text creation. According to Carlo Infante (2002-2003), collaborative writing on the net exercises a new sensitivity: i.e. to pass from the expressive dimension to an associated search. And this is the important element: in hypertextual writings (and also in those hypermedial and/or generative, we always remain within domain of the expression, while with collaborative writing there is evidently an advancement, in that we are faced with a new social paradigm of the act of communication: to be author is no longer the most important thing; on the contrary, the writing isn’t any longer developed vertically but horizontally.

To conclude, the digital poet is a creator of potentialities which are accomplished by the receiving act, the digital medium is no longer the medium which one writes on, but a medium that enables to create. The originality and the specificity of the electronic poetry are both in the reading and writing (programming) practices. According to J.-P. Balpe: «[...] l’informatique provoque des textes d’autre nature (mobiles, évanescent, multiples, variables, aléatoires...) qui modifient le statut même de l’espace littéraire» (Balpe 1991: p 10).

We have seen that in poetry resorting only (or mainly) to oral signs, the numerical practice has created a new *entax* that breaks the regular grouping of the segments, thus altering the order of the verses on the page and transforming the regularity of the characters. According to Zinna: «Scompaginato l’accorpamento delle strofe [...], abbandonata la linearità del rigo e con essa la modalità tabulare della lettura, sciolta perfino la proporzionalità dei caratteri nella parola, tutti gli elementi grafici del componimento sullo spazio della pagina possono allora essere sfruttati in modo espressivo» (Zinna 2004: p. 3)¹².

¹² When breaking up the strophes’ unification, and by abandoning the linearity of the verse line’s and with that the tabular mode of reading, and by destroying the

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The union of audio and video images and graphical text, the dynamism and the interactivity of some of the presented poems reconstruct the reading practice and the role of the reader who becomes reader-spectator-actor of the textual theatricality of the digital poetry.

At last, in searching for a place for numerical poetry today, Jacques Donguy's affirmation seems significant: «Nous entendons remettre la poésie au centre de la création artistique» (Donguy 2002). Poetry as centre of the artistic creation, idealist tradition concept, justified by the fact than poetry has been always considered as the art of the word. Digital poetry carries on what Roman Jakobson anticipated, i.e. that poetry would have been placed between the arts of the space.

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proportionality of the characters in a word, then all the graphic elements of the essay on the space of a page may be exploited in an expressive way.

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