

## ELECTRONIC POETICS

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*Bruce Andrews*

Going electronic. Radical or so-called innovative literary writing faces (& that means faces up to) the facts of life in the digital age. If you have been committed to foregrounding the processes by which language works, to the unsettling & detonation of an established medium – what then? How simpatico is this potential cyberworld as a staging area & as a reading environment?<sup>1</sup>

Raw material: if you use language in its “unfinished” (less thoroughly socialized) state or at a molecular level, the project lends itself to the jammed, disjunctive situations of the screen with its striking dispersions or overlaps. Densities of significance can become visibly spatial, programmatically animated or varying or self-mistranslating. So at least the electronic realm can show the dependence of sense & meaning on technical mechanics, even if not on an encompassing social system of language. Can we lay out – sometimes keeping them present as separate & navigable layers – the alternative choices & building blocks of discourse as an array of hypermediated ready-mades, with the bleed-throughs of palimpsest-like sense solicited by the reading process?

If editing is a dimension of reading; if reading *constructs*.... Can the electronic process of writing offer us an active enough editing, involving us – but with some critical distance – in the aberrant, nonnarrative wanderings of textual sense? As prescribed menus & fixed choices & coherences of branching give way, a directive gets issued for choice: order off the menu! Spatially, to make a freed-up connectionism, once incessant comparisons & linkings are given a physical presence on the screen, externalizing the associations but keeping intact much of the (nonhierarchical or unimposed) experience of hypertextual (& Web) surfing. Couldn't the screen become all middle, all between, back & forth, side by side,

fostering an experimentalism of interpretation & processing, without a smoothness of the surface or familiar signposts to plausible and/or psychologizable depth? Even conventional link-node hypertext can build some of this directly into the writing's physique. And, in hypermedia, given the lure of image & sound & layering, programmable variation or retranslation as well as interactive navigability, both normative syntax & literary convention stop being the obvious way to organize the microscopic bits of language material.

How else can an electronic poetics emerge out of such "agrammars" of collage & multiple sequence, such "workings" of nonidiomatic, labyrinthine difference? The central emphasis on (inevitably social) Language (with a capital L) among literary practitioners in recent decades offered a way out of the autonomizing moves of earlier modernisms. Does the electronic world tempt us back into another version of that autonomizing? Stripping away these humanist touches (& personality signatures) of the author, we can end up with the computational logics & resistance to rhetoric of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Of course this allows for faster & more dazzling unseatings of "the personal," for mechanizing & de-authorizing the writing process. Yet the "event" of language – & the time of its literal work & play – can threaten to disappear when it gets subordinated to fixed procedural systems. Hypermediated readership may run the same risk of enthrallment to an AI model that we sometimes find in conceptual art.

As with procedural writing in general, the textuality of this electronic art may "thin out" the complexities of reception or undercut the (constitutive) emphasis on active readership – on reading as much more than the sensation of being caught up in (or cannibalized by) an algorithm. Can we banish the author as a dictatorial pseudo-presence, without reducing the mode of reception to a minimalist/behaviorist schematics?, to the coerced trip or grammar of a hidden code, a secret logic of citation & refiguration? Although textual space may get fixed or objectivized through the use of deductive systems or formalization, texts' meanings do not magically acquire autonomy. Textuality does not operate "in itself." Signification depends on readerly experience in time & space. And so, a timely electronic textuality may ask us to move beyond: not only the personalizing projections of conventional literature, but the reductive spectacles of artificially intelligent net art & the automatisms of prescriptively procedural coding; to let its space remain the staging ground for interactive trajectories of *reading making sense*.

The linguistic or semiotic “object” is a present tense “event” activated by the reader, made into an active accomplice of textual meaning. This occurs by memory & association & by the game-like play of teasing out implications: qualities that reading shares with the work performed on data by computer users – searching, linking, exchanging, classifying, resizing. But why virtualize or automatize this already navigational space of reading according to a preprogrammed taproot? Why put all this elaborate audiovisual & shape-shifting & spatially remaneuvering apparatus in the service of a straitjacketed or passive reading style? Thinking about the computer’s interface & mode of address, the distinction between *looking through* or *looking at*, between the beholder’s immersion & the reader’s active use is still (unfortunately) relevant.

I’m struck by the recent arguments of Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media*. He highlights the current trends in the cyberworld (& more so in its commercial precincts) toward reinstating a traditionally cinematic (or centrifugal) experience of immersion – of video playback, in psychology-centered & storytelling forms; a 3-D virtual simulation made from compositing, instead of the raw edits & exposed boundaries of the vectors of meaning created by montage. A montage aesthetic can give way in the face of a deceptive visual blend (or eye candy), a glorifying of seamless continuity & psychological captivation with an illusion of plausible depths. In the “fourth wall” traditions of VR just as much as in sentimentalizing “scenic” & imagistic literature, absorption is at the heart of fiction (& its fingerpuppet, “workshop poetry”). If we add, to this programmed calming & unshocking, the pre-set trajectory or assembly line of sequencing within an imaginary plane – (maybe even with digital immediacy fostering fantasies of relinquishing control) – we get something similar to those troubling social processes of interpellation, hailing, recruiting. As if the electronic media were ventriloquizing speech. And readers were its dummies. (Is the ghost in the machine the sum of its *receded* possibilities?)

However fashionable these trends may be, we can still highlight the other dimension of what the cyber realm offers up to contemporary writing: the “Database Logic,” as Manovich calls it, in contrast to the narrative & illusionistic form privileged by conventional cinema. Viewers’ Perception/Representation sits on one side, Users’ Control & Agency on the other. In the latter, a *database*, a structured collection of events of sense-making, is spatialized as Control within Reception of a body of material on which you can perform various operations. Here the *screen* is designed

neither to be looked through, nor looked at from a (comfortable) distance. Language on the desktop becomes an interface to an elaborate multimedia database, with huge responsibilities (for semiosis, not just information) placed at the users' fingertips. The database itself can take precedence over any prefixed menu or imposed selection. Reading's task: to reentangle, rather than decipher; you don't decipher a labyrinth. Your clicks of attentiveness pile up into a density. An opaque screen becomes an action-oriented control panel, no longer colonized (as so much traditional literary pagespace is) by 3-D illusion. You want to intensify the reading action to the point where you abolish that auratic distance which absorption into the spectacle requires.

Instead of the ribbing of a story, space turns more explicitly into a flattened navigable datasphere, an information space & more: affective, semiotic, multimediated, no longer abstracted into the blind machinations of programming or backgrounded by engrossing distraction. Resonances can be scored spatially, & not just in the layers to which clear-cut visibility succumbs.<sup>2</sup> Taking away some of the narrative coerciveness of temporal sequence, this spatializing helps to dehierarchize material, reframing & resizing its semiotic spelunking into huge leaps & shifts of scale or into the frame within frame concentrics of cascading style sheets or hypermedia stacks. Readership operates more like a search engine, with the production of meaning as the reprocessing or tactile "working" of information from a database – nonidiomatic, outside of any imposed narrative or fixity or genre. Instead of a looping or sequential preprogrammed unveiling of sense, we get Random Access Memory; outside of the prefixed trajectories of much hypertext, with the reading experience a bit homogenized, formulaic (made to fit the "little form"), something more generative appears.

We can think of the textual surface as an instrument panel, the screen as a flat & opaque workspace, given enormous fluidity, activating the user's body. *Action* replaces both the passive *representation* of conventional literature & the passive *spectacle* of animated, programmed work.<sup>3</sup> It embraces navigation, micro-evaluations, conceptual animation, freeze-framing, editing, blending, filtering, subliminal cut & paste, time compressions & expansions, frame resizing: practically everything we need to sidetrack closure. Here the aggressively focused gaze may be as out of place as the yearning for the iconic which has bedeviled visual poetry. Instead, we want an active mapping – with "map" as a verb instead of an imposed noun.

Since *relation* is what counts within this nonlinear space, we want language able to highlight (in a literal way) its intertextual webbing of sense. The intertext is not a prescribed quest, an odyssey of replacement choices, of shutting out the margins to create some (virtual) forward momentum, as it is in some hypertext fiction. That compulsory sequencing can seem weirdly “off point” when the electronic databases give us the possibility of a more spatialized simultaneity & density. “Database and narrative,” as Manovich puts it “are natural enemies” (2001, 225). Precomputed trajectories & preselected viewpoints amount to *decisions*. By leaving them open to choice, user multiplicity opens up. It can make literature more like the composition of an online encyclopedia, of an archive – with the paratexts, the margins, the bibliographic coding included as a vertical dimension, a positioning or layering of the language material within outside contexts of implication. (McGann 2001.) Beyond the cannibalisms of metaphor, we get something more like a viral metonymy.

Reading, more like software extensions do, “performs” instead of appearing as the deductive end-product of AI logic. Of course, *surprise* can be programmed, just as it is with chance-generated procedural texts or the heavily constraint-based texts of OULIPO or its progeny. But self-created individualized surprise, which we value from our literary reading experiences (whether these are trained on sophisticated poetic texts or on the detritus of the urban flaneur) gets us beyond this. *Sound* offers examples: we have no way to capture sound in an instant; it can’t be static the way that a photo snapshot can be. And so the acoustics of electronic textuality seem obtrusive because we can’t pinpoint it in time & thus control it. Sound thus probably requires more of the specific user controls of software to make a polyvocal ventriloquism out of its raw materials. (Area for future research: a hypertextual sound poetry.) From this vantage, *software* offers a model for *reading*, & not only for the determinate proceduralisms of writing. Readership is reimagined as software use & not just as the target of programmed sequences & puzzle-solving.

Even though the meanings of language often seem more like an afterthought than the organizing principles in the digital domain, sense & its production (both narrowly linguistic & more broadly semiotic as well as social) remain key – beyond decorative (even if kinetic) visuals & sound. Language’s social resonances still need center stage, choreographed to implicate situations beyond the immediate GUI (Graphic User Interface) & to “remind” us, by interpretable social choices (& the social force) of

language, of the world(s) beyond. Semantic relations (with arrangements of time & space & grammar & typography & sound as vehicles) still top the hit list of socially relevant material. An immersive virtual space may encourage us to forget this, to vaporize everything outside the frame. If language is social, how can we make it resistant to a VR set-up? How to get beyond the razzle-dazzle (or comforting aura) of absorption, or of programmed works that make the prior socialization of the material (& the social antagonisms or dissonances built into them) seem to vanish. If the osmosis of meaning is inherent at the barest denotative (or protosemantic) level (McCaffery 2001), an algorithmic work could allegorize this in production. But *reception* carries other demands. Meaning grounds social address. Social address reconfigures meaning. If we want to probe the hailing or interpellation of social address, how can we do so in our electronic work? (Not just with avatars!)

One agenda item of radical imaginative writing continues to be to forge some *distance*, to aerate, to help readers avoid being sucked unawares into the textual dynamics. To maneuver its raw materials of language into a showing or theatricalizing of the ways that meaning is produced. To “lay bare the device” involves more than the technicalities of permutation or the long “advertisements for myself” of recitals of deterministic procedure. The *contextual* is a social arena, not a matter of machinic specification. And so we need to focus on the social horizons of the language – in the lexical choices, the grammatical choreographing of the scope & shifts in scale of relationism. A Brechtian-style distance *at the semantic level* is still valuable. (Andrews 2001.) The aim is not just a referential sociogram, a mesh of social connections among the things represented. We’re not asking for a transparent reflection of socially charged material. The task is to gain a sense of words as interfaces, implicated in prior (& *future*, imaginable) social coding. The readers’ map becomes the intertext, letting underlayers of significance show through. Sense is an elastic social game world. If you want to create a social connectionism, it has to be between the social tilts & volleys of the language; it has to reverberate off of the reader. The pleasures of anti-illusionism require active work. Reading, put more directly in charge, is intertextual. The reader is the (modifying, reconfiguring) playback device, not the target of it.

Reading style can be exploratory, as long as we’re within a navigable space more hospitable to multiple simultaneous screens or “accounts.” Without as much of a preimposed logic, or absorptive strategy, or obtru-

sive hyperlinks, the realm of *tactics* expands. Certainly the computer world offers new opportunities for nonrepresentational fragmentation, for a close-up encounter with particulars, an orgy of unfixing, or incompleteness & interferences, of simultaneity or collaged noise – made from a density of micro-referencing & intimations which can be defamiliarized, detoured, re-backgrounded & networked. Density can make for a new visual & aural immediacy, for the artful choreographing of a semiotic value coming in & out of focus. Software on the reader's side can bring this fluidity of the units to the front, to make "sense" a performative (or public relations) technology. Reading must be granted its rights to "teleaction," to control over the remote layers of significance & their opportunities for recoding. *Tactics* here might include taking active charge of the margins, the paratexts, to pop their bibliographic codes & contexts in & out of sight, earshot, hand.

Meaning's activation makes an *architecture*. So why not make full use of digital software in fabricating it? In a space less fixed by the needs of representation, subtleties in animation or design will make for an architecture liquid or dynamic enough to accommodate the text's contagion. In a vicarious way, we would reenact the production process – through the layerings & driftings of sense, not just through some phantasmagoric spectacle. We improvise an (incremental/paratactic) domicile or habitation which can "contextualize" the lyric in the form of a hypermediated Web site, actively crafted & open to user transforms or even to reader-customized markup language. To let meaning on the reader's side, beyond the mathematicizable simulations of the "Turing Man," create an architecture of difference & hybridity. The automatisms of proceduralism or algorithmic processing give way to the desktop as reader's navigation control panel.<sup>4</sup> We revisit the moment-to-moment focus of gameplay, but now without even a hyperlinked net underneath us. Our only protection is intertextual & thus generative or promiscuous: we're only "secured" by the proliferation of possibilities, side by side; by the explanatory & positioning force of the words.

What types of action does this suggest? The multiple & simultaneous commands & desktop options within software programs (or software prostheses) offer up a parallel – closer to the experience of reading, for example, so-called Language Writing than of sitting still for streaming (& maybe ambient) video. For texts, look at what comes loaded with word processing programs like Word. For visual images, look at the simpler controls

over JPEG images or MPEG files with QuickTime or Acrobat's PDFs. For sound, look at the simpler controls that come with RealAudio playback or over MP3 files. Later: imagine controls & filterings & transforms as complex as those of PhotoShop or ProTools audio software or MAX/SP programming or Action Scripts in Flash. For combined text & sound & visuals, we find ourselves with Web site design as a model – in this case, the design of a pattern of multiple (possible) trajectories through a body of language, socially charged & layered, treated like a searchable database. We start to erase the line between writing & “desktop publishing,” between usability studies & the poetics of hypermedia.

In the digital domain, how would writing build its authority? (Instead of an incessant virtualizing or dazzling automaticity, wouldn't it come through the micro-referentiality of the language? through representational detail, at the word-by-word level or below in the “factory” of letters & syllables?) Electronically, scaleable, writing helps us work in miniature, not to negate these semantic “surface-charges” or powers of language, but to reactivate them at a micro-level. Should we let a vaguer overall vibrancy replace the narrower-scaled duties of reference or protosemantics? Does elaborate overdetermination & density make for visceral immediacy, or even strangeness – by close-up? Can physical movement in space replace the simulations of monocularity & psychological movement? In some depsycho-logicalizing combination of the literal & the virtual, could *user control* create enough reflexivity to suggest transparency, semblance, mimesis? The imperious subject, no longer upholstered by its typical personalizing projections into a familiar pagespace or strata of possessible meaning, could be made *object*. But as a reading protocol & not only as a writing designed to program the subject into an algorithmically skeletal shape.

One result: to allow the self to be shattered – but by *meaning*; to be laid bare as its device: by multiplicitous positioning, sensory overload & excess & special effects, with radically disjunct material, words empowered by a spatializing, by superimpositions & links & scrolling. After all, how fixed are the units & elements we want to juxtapose? Electronic writing can more readily show the mutually shape-shifting & charging & impinging & implicating of units cross-dissolving together in a collage's mutational vibration. Not: the self-scrolling & morphing text based on the prior programming of an overarching structure working its way from the top down (to “us”) – & often meant to be “impressive” rather than “readable.” But instead: an inductive experience of mutational reading, a forging of rela-

tions from the bottom up. An unprogrammable gameplay, partly because the stitches show, in a corrosive closeness of complicity & investment. Without the detachments of aesthetic distance or seamless compositing or of being “remote controlled,” we appreciate the surprises of anti-narrative. Isn’t it all about reconstellation, reconnectionism; to set words & phrases into a spatial *redialog*, based on a hybridity of multitasking: layers & stacks, switchings, multiple windows, concentric circles of significance & emblematic implicationism, a post-behaviorist arena of multimediated flesh rather than just of mathematical computation. If “Software = Us,” we move from nonreferential formalisms & procedural formalizations to a *social informalism*.<sup>5</sup> A *future* – unplanned, full of inventiveness – opens up.

## NOTES

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1. See Stefans (2003); Goldsmith (2001); Glazier (2002); Ryan (ed.; 1999). In particular, I'd like to warmly thank Kenneth Goldsmith, Loss Pequeño Glazier, Darren Wershler-Henry, and Brian Kim Stefans for helping me start to dip belatedly into digital waters. These skeletal remarks also carry forward some of the argument in my September 2001 talk in the Textual Operations series, "The Poetics of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" (which is available online at Goldsmith's *Ubu.com* as well as on Darren Wershler-Henry's *Alienated.net* Web site; forthcoming on my *Electronic Poetry Center* Author Page).
2. See Drucker (2002) on the digital remediation of Charles Bernstein's *Veil*.
3. "Conversely, computer poetry that makes use of flash technology – although providing a certain degree of reader of interactivity essentially turns the reader into a passive video-viewer of predetermined authorial intentions." (Osman 2002, 369.) As Stefans notes, even as a form of "Civilized Dada," "the CP [Computer Poem] may, by inflicting its rules on the user, transform the reader into the paranoiac." (2002) To imagine a readership less vulnerable to the impersonal machinations of algorithmic processing, he calls for ways to hook into convention & the everyday, the emblematic & the game, dissimulation & metastasis.
4. Manovich (2001); also Bolter (1984). And notice Rem Koolhaas's contrast between urbanity & architecture, quoted in Scholder & Crandall (eds., 2001).
5. See Andrews 1996; Andrews (2002); Andrews (2001); Andrews (1998, also included on my Author Page at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/andrews>).