IN SEARCH OF NOVEL POETIC TERRITORIES

On Media Poetry. An International Anthology

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Digital Poetry, E-Poetry, New Media Poetry and Media Poetry are some expressions referring to the expanded concept of poetry, reaching beyond the printed page and shaped by (new) media. It seems that these terms do not precisely match the very nature of such textual practices. For, there are several other names invented by the authors and scholars in this field (e.g. literal art, software language art, code poetry), which try to name various, often mixed, aspects in the area of digital experimental writing, such as hyperpoetry, net art, media art, text generators, digital animated poetry, text-based installation art, and software art (e. g. code works). On closer inspection, such poetry turns out to involve several experimental projects, which are articulated as hybrid entities devoted to in-between cultural, literary and artistic spaces. Rather than being a continuation of print-based poetry-as-we-know-it, it is a novel tex-tual and meta-textual, linguistic and not-just-linguistic (or post-linguistic) practice, which is shaped within the key paradigms of contemporary (new) media art. Modern print-based poetry high-lights the issues of verse, strophe, rhythm, and very special lyrical atmospheres associated with the poet's highly emotional, even passionate responses to events or occasions, meaning that such poetry is mostly about the feelings, emotions and sensations of the lyrical subject. But in the off-the-printed-page poetry shap-ed by (new) media, the key concern is innovative approach to *cyber*language[1] itself under the condition of (new) media arts and culture. The very nature of a media-shaped word, and even the letter itself, are questioned in an experimental practice. This foregrounds

the materiality as well as the physicality of words arranged with regards to both spatial and temporal grammar.

When talking about this form of text, we may find its nature as poetry questionable. Many of the crucial features of modern print-based poetry are lacking, and there are no consensual decisions about the formal requirements of pieces in this field. The definition of how the off-the-page poem (articulated in various material and non-material bearers and designed by almost all media) should look like, seems to be an extremely difficult affair. Any piece of this poetry functions within the field of (new) media art (e. g. digital or web-based textual installations, digital video and animation art, software and generative art, in addition to poetic performance art), meaning that we are facing a practice, which intersects various fields, disciplines and procedures. In short, such poetry is not a safe field; its cards are shuffled anew, and a big part of this uncertainty is caused by the omission of the poem's organization shaped by the

Figure 1. JooYoun Paek: *Powersoccershoe_02*

printed page. The moment that the demands of the printed page are left behind, there are several possibilities being opened up for (new) media poetry. These range from Eduardo Kac's holopoetry to poetry objects included in the concept of *sport poetry*, designed by JooYoun Paek (born in Seoul, working in New York City). Paek argues that sports tool poetry promotes self-expression by modifying sports gear – helmets, goggles, soccer boots, boxing gloves and golf putting mats.

It is self-evident that such neo-concrete poetry is beyond the verbal. Here, the term poetry refers exclusively to a very special atmosphere, which accompanies a piece of today's art, shaped with the surplus of imagination needed for transforming a common athletic object into its artistic double. Paek's intention, however, demonstrates a broader scope of creative possibilities, which are opened up to the non-textual and off-the-page poetry within contemporary art.

What is an author's basic activity in this field, really? Rather than making digital poems as stable pieces of textual art, she is challenged with the destiny of the word itself and the verbal shaped within a (new) media condition; shortly, she is undertaking research into *cyber*language. Paek is interested in how the word behaves the moment that it ceases to be tied to the printed page and enters media communications. Rather than a creator of (digital, media) poems in the stable sense, within a particular genre, the media poet can be considered a researcher in the emerging field of *cyber*language.

One of the most recent books referring to this emergent field, which finds its predecessors in historical and neo-avant-garde (e.g. Visual and Concrete Poetry and other experimental practices impacted with Marinetti's notion of *parole-in-libertá*) is *Media Poetry: An International Anthology.* This is a collection of essays by the poets themselves, which includes critical examinations. For the project, internationally renowned media artist, scholar and bio art pioneer (e.g. *GFB Bunny* project) Eduardo Kac, invited key authors

in the field to contribute their reflections on digital poetry, multi-media poetics as well as historical and critical perspectives, placing crucial emphasis on poetic language-making in the media shaped condition.

Such a selection means that we face, first of all, the book of authors' explanations referring to their own creative approaches to this poetry. There are only a limited amount of essays regarding digital literary criticism, meaning that the very content of the papers placed in this collection is poetics (as a genre of its own, which differs from digital literary theory and criticism). Such an approach seems not to be an extravagant one. For, just two years before Kac's anthology was launched, a very similar collection including both old and new authors in this field had been published *(New Media Poetics,* edited by Adalaide Morris and Thomas Swiss). This means that even in terms of the most recent theory, the author's very individual account of media shaped language is crucial for our basic understanding of what this field is about. When studying the *New Media Poetics* collection, the readers can even find three of the contributors of Kac's *Media Poetry* (Stephanie Strickland, Giselle Beiguellman and John Cayley).

Media poetry: An International Anthology is a revised and enlarged edition of its first publication in 1996 (as a special issue of the journal *Visible Language*, volume 30, number 2), which was launched under another title, *The New Media Poetry: Poetic Innovation and New Technologies.* The editor has explained this change in the title by arguing that while "new media is often associated with digital technology, 'media' is broad enough to also encompass photonic and biological creative tools as well as non-digital technology" (7). Such a change enables the inclusion of several technology and media shaped verbal and post-verbal practices (not limited to the most talked about new media). This is in addition to a broader field of text-based installation art, which is to a certain extent pushed aside in *New Media Poetics.* Further, such a decision is rooted in

Kac's own approach to off-the-page poetry, which is formed in the novel practice of holopoetry. Rather than referring simply to digital poetry, as done in *New Media Poetics*, the *Media Poetry* takes into account various novel, even marginal poetical practices, including videopoetry, generative poetry, holopoetry and biopoetry.

However, in her essay *Nomadic Poems* included in this collection, Giselle Beiguelman argues that "we have updated McLuhan. The medium does not count. In these days of nomadic words, the interface is the message" (103). This author did not take the further step of naming her practice as interface poetry, although such a term fits well with her art-making practice in terms of it practically being tied to the new generation of nomadic screenic devices (PDAs, cell phones, consoles, portable players, navigators). Her *Code movies* (2004) opens up possibilities of non-verbal contemporary poetry, which is made with hexa, ascii and binary codes extracted from selected scenes from Antonioni's movie *Blow up*. A similar attempt to that found in beyond-the-verbal poetry is also seen in her *Poetrica* (2002) series, based on the patterns of non-alphabetic fonts. "These works undo verbal and visual ties through the combination of fonts and numbers, languages and codes. They investigate and explore the interconnection of networks and media, resulting in visual meanings independent of textuality" (102).

Bill Seaman, another author of this anthology, seems to enter into an implicit dialog with Beiguelman's claim by arguing that, "central to my techno-poetic device is the potential to transcend the use of words as a means of discourse, to enable the exploration of media experience in and of itself" (161). The poetry directed beyond the textual and verbal (in terms of discourse) is also familiar to the anthology editor Kac. He considers paraverbal and non-verbal creations in the field, which is shaped by the use of biotechnological advances (e. g. proteopoetics, bacterial poetics, and agroverbalia[2]). In *Media Poetry*, the "Introduction to the First Edition" (1996) is republished, with Kac's important claim that experimental poetics

is a field, in which (new) media poetry is included due to its very nature in abandoning print-based textuality, searching for the possibilities of new storage media.

Rather than arranging lyrical atmospheres (and dealing with the intimate account of the lyrical subject), the pieces of media poetry are about research into the language, shaped within non-trivial environments and media. This is demonstrated by the editor's own approach to the field, which is tied to the project of holopoetry, representing a significant move towards the expanding concept of poetry. "A holographic poem, or holopoem, is a poem conceived, made and displayed holographically. This means, first of all, that such a poem is organized non-linearly in an immaterial three-dimensional space and that even as the reader or viewer observes it, it changes and gives rise to new meanings" (129). The syntax of such a poem is organized in discontinuous space, and its structure demands novel ways of dynamic reading. The reader must move around a kind of textual installation of the holopoem, and catch the meanings and the relations that the words establish spatially with each other. Kac argues that "a holopoem must be read in a broken fashion, in an irregular and discontinuous movement, and it will change as it is viewed from different perspectives" (131).

This book seeks to broaden the conceptual space of media-shaped off-the-printed page poetry through a ground-up conceptualization, drawing inspiration from various poetics based on an experimental approach to language. These are, in turn, placed at the intersections of various fields, media, materials, and disciplines. Among the poetics essays, there are also some articles which belong to the genre of literary criticism, e.g. Eric Vos's "Media Poetry – Theories and Strategies", Philippe Bootz's "Poetic Machinations", and Friedrich W. Block's text on the evolution of experimental media poetry. Although this anthology is more consistent and thoroughly prepared than the *New Media Poetics*, the authors of these essays do not adequately foreground the poetic nature of their pieces. They

do not posit the question as to whether there is any point in insisting on such a controversial naming of this field, as poetry seems to be. However, their research in the media, verbal and post-verbal, demonstrates that they are aware of the crucial demands provoked by contemporary language art. It is exactly under such risky conditions and through such non-self-evident accounts and explorations, that the strengths and challenges of this field are found, stimulating novel explorations.

Notes

1   The neologism *cyber*language refers to the language generated and shaped in on-line communications, programming and scripting languages, and cybercultures.

2   These expressions have been coined by Kac himself.

References

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Morris, Adalaide & Swiss, Thomas (eds.)(2006) *New Media Poetics. Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories*. Cambridge, MA & London, UK: The MIT Press.