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ByMute Editor

Brian Kim Stefans on a recent anthology of writing on digital poetry

p0es1s: The Aesthetics of Digital Poetry, eds. Friedrich W. Block, Christiane Heibach, Karin Wenz, Hatje Cantz, 2004

Digital poetry is ‘emergent’: the geography of concepts and cross-discussions that is finely, fiercely mapped in p0es1s is at the stage where artists are talking to each other, often in tones that ache to resemble the chiselled concision of a Joseph Kosuth or a Guy Debord, the premonitory *kuhlheit* of a Walter Benjamin or Marshall MacLuhan, or even the comfort zone of the seasoned raver or the dry authority of a research white paper. Most of these writers – often in a good, invigorating way – suffer from a case of what John Cayley refers to as the ‘baroque euphuism of New Media.’

It’s no surprise that those with the most achieved prose styles also have the most to say as *artists*. The Brazilian artist Giselle Beiguelman exhibits a contagious fascination with the increased nomadic quality of (privileged bourgeois) individuals, investigating the poetics of writing for PDAs, cellphones and highway billboards. Additionally, the concept of digital translation and the ruin-less disappearance of digital products (turn off the power and it’s gone) is explored in her use of Wingdings to replace, and *inhabit*, poetry itself. Eduardo Kac from Argentina, perhaps most famous for his having genetically modified rabbits to glow in the dark, chimes in with an amusing, if cute, visionary manifesto advocating poems coded into DNA, one of several manifestations of which is ‘Luciferase signalling: create bard fireflies by manipulating the genes that code for bioluminescence, enabling them to use their light for whimsical (creative) displays.’ His version of ‘poetry’ is more pataphysical than anything likely to garner a Nobel.

The punchy essay by John Cayley, ‘The Code Is Not the Text (Unless it is the Text)’, is the centre of a certain hub in the latter half of the book, as he systematically, and effectively, disputes several concepts that have wended their way into digital poetics, such as that there is a homology (i.e. that by reading one you’ve read the other) between the ‘text’ of a program such as uncompiled C code and the text of a poem or the texts that govern culture, such as laws. He lambasts (politely) the radicality that some digital writers claim for themselves for ‘revealing the control structures’ of programs, as if they were all good Brechtians exposing the workings of capital through salty doses of the V-effekt, or good Foucauldians by foregrounding the workings of the competing (and fascistic) archaeologies of meanings. True, some of this could happen in the correct, university-nurtured interpretive framework, but because these hybrid languages – such as ‘Mezangelle’, the online creation of the protean Mez – are not the ‘pidgins’ and ‘creoles’ critics such as N Katherine Hayles claim they are (if only metaphorically), the horizons of their social-political, not to mention cultural, effects are limited to *those who care about what computers, were they to be human and were their use of English really how they talked to each other*, are thinking. Unlike pidgins, this poetics of the ‘reveal code’ just provides a new, wifi-enabled mirror so we narcissists can remain in the front row.

Which is where the writing of Mez, an Australian (née Mary Ann Breeze) who is probably the most prolific – if that’s a word one can apply to her peculiar brand of listserv logorrhoea – digital poet out there, plays a large role. Genesis P-Orridge of Throbbing Gristle fame made a basic play for singularity and collapsing the art/life divide by tacking an extra ‘e’ on the end of the word ‘the’ in all of his written communications – his latest band is called Thee Majesty. Like androgyny, making basic changes to one’s way of writing puts one at odds with much of the normal functioning of the world – imagine filling out a job description using ‘thee’ – but also re-places one, existentially, in the premise

of one's decision: counter-cultural agency is thereby systematically refreshed. Mez elaborates on this principle exponentially, creating a carnival of artificial modifications out of the 'restraint' of working in the ASCII set sans italics, justification or anything you won't see in a low-level terminal:

```
> [for instance, 1 email <tag> I have employed comes with the
> identifier|meznoma of _app][lick.ation][end.age_ which
> unpacks/translates in2 the tag|labels of _appendage_, app
> [abbreviation for application] end, _app.lick.ation_ etc – all
> avataresque names indicating segmented expressive allusions –
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Mez's project is engaging partly because of the rich surfaces – part freed-signifier and part charismatic tsunami – that she creates, but also her choice of venues: she has chosen to produce her work primarily in listservs, hence elevating the mundane commercial avenues of internet communication into an overstuffed, somewhat kitschy commune. She becomes the architect of the public square just by her propensity to embellish every dark corner.

The general thrust of French poet Phillippe Bootz's often inscrutable essay – that digital text objects have a different ontological character than print ones (i.e. they are not objects like a loaf of bread is), but are responsive to the whims and agency of the eye and can hence turn readers into readers of *themselves reading* by more fully 'accounting for the real functioning of the brain' in their responsive variability – is couched in so much verbiage (and absurdly detailed diagrams) professing infinitesimally fine knowledge of the inner workings of the mind, one is dissuaded from useful debate from what is the profound core of this idea: digital writing can *talk back*, and teaching it to talk back is one of the things a digital writer, rather than *write*, does – that is her contribution to culture. Whether they can cure depression or improve depth perception in the process is another matter.

Other notable contributions include editor Christiane Heibach's 'Synopsis' of the discussions that took place in 2001 in Erfurt between several of the contributors; this distillation of what appears to have been a highly fruitful, contentious meeting could set the stage for the next step in the discussion. Another editor, Friedrich W Block, makes a similar, air-clearing gesture in his 'Eight Digits of Digital Poetics,' speaking most importantly about the relationship of the 'digital poet' to the 'avant-garde.' He rightly argues that merely shouting out to esteemed predecessors like Apollinaire, Queneau or the Concrete poets does not allow the new media poet to robe himself in the Senate toga of the 'new' – Modernism is not 'bagged' so easily.

Throughout the book, one can sense an expansive, visionary quality competing with an attempt to reframe the debate and/or put the house in order. It is this dynamic that makes this collection of essays rich and important to anyone taking an interest in where this uniquely international, educated and proactive community of writer/programmers is going. There might not be any obvious reason for the use of 'poetry' over 'word art' to corral the range of theories and practices discussed in this thick volume other than that practitioners of 'digital poetry' recognise each other's names, attend the same conferences, and most likely get passed over in discussions of new media art, even as other work that relies on the skilled, hardly prosaic use of words (the amazing Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries being the most obvious example) is considered knowledge ready for prime time. It is this leap into the imaginations of the international art world – and not literature, given the constraints of translation and the conservative trends of literary culture world-wide – these artists might have to make for survival.

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