

# Text as a Loop/ On the Digital Poetry

Janez Strehovec, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor at Academy of Visual Arts,  
University of Ljubljana, Slovenia  
E-mail: [Janez.Strehovec@guest.arnes.si](mailto:Janez.Strehovec@guest.arnes.si)  
+386-1- 4368-108

## ABSTRACT

Digital Poetry is a genre of its own, residing at the intersection of the Poetry Avant-garde and Neo-avant-garde, Visual and Concrete Poetry, Text-Based Electronic Installation Art, Concept Art, Net Art and Software Art. It includes kinetic and animated poetry, ergodic and visual digital poetry pieces, digital sound poetry, interactive poetry (with collaborative authorship), code poetry, poetry generators as well as digital textscapes and installations with features of poetry. It is of importance that this genre applies an expanded concept of textuality including symbols of netspeak and programming languages, which means that the ASCII language and HTML symbols are also involved in new poetic structures with striking visual, animated and even tactile features.

**KEYWORDS:** Kinetic Digital Poetry, Blanks, Loop Intervals, To-and-fro Movement, Risky Perception, Post-lyrical Poetry, "Mix, cuts & scratches Mind", Total Text-work, Expanded Concept of Textuality.

## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary art theory the question "What is art?", which has significantly marked philosophical art theories from Hegel to Heidegger and Sartre, as well as W. Benjamin's, E. Bloch's and T. W. Adorno's, withdraws, and the questions "When is art?" and "What conditions must be fulfilled that an event, a process or an artificial world as a complex structure of relations begins to function as an artwork?" arise. Today the enigmatic link to the ontological character of an artwork is considerably less significant than the questions of social power and its institutions, which authorize a certain object, process or event as an artwork, while disqualifying another into profaneness or even dump it. It seems that today digital arts and digital literatures are the only field of contemporary art that is still of interest to the theory dealing with the ontological surplus of arts. However, the enigmatic of this field no longer stimulates questions about, say, metaphysical features of art-making or its mysterious core; in other words, the question "What is art?" is replaced by "How does an artwork function?"

Today, digital poetry is a significant genre of digital arts and literatures. Specific for the understanding of this kind of creativity are also questions when such poetry is possible, how we know digital textscape to be poetry, and how it functions and how to perceive it appropriately. To

understand its specificity we should first attempt to answer the question "When is digital poetry?"

This kind of poetry is possible when a very special subjectivity is formed, together with the sensitivity and sensibility bound to it – the so-called trendy "mix, cuts & scratches" mind. This is the subjectivity of contemporary culture of mixing, sampling, composing and recombining, in which individuals search for the new, as bold a meaning relations as possible, abandoning the old ones. Different language patterns and also different language features are now available in databases as raw material for writing in the expanded sense, meaning that DJ and VJ procedures can also be applied to a new literary textuality, since sampling, cutting and mixing disqualify standard signification, and new cultural associations are created.

And digital poet is the one who is called upon to compose and invent a new language. This not only comprises Mez's texts but also research of new meaning relations and bold playing-around with text associations, contributed by various authors from Giselle Beiguelman and Miekal And to Komninos Zervos and Brian Kim Stefans. Persistence in digital word as a flexible and malleable signifier (L.P.Glazier's term from his "Digital Poetics") and introduction of an expanded concept of textuality into poetry are typical of procedures applied by the above-mentioned authors.

## TOTAL TEXTWORK

The subjectivity presupposing the digital poetry world is furthermore accompanied by another tendency – the forming of verbal objects as multimedia-arranged worlds, their basic structure being a word-icon-virtual body. That means that it has verbal, iconic and auditory qualities. Such a word is a basis of a total textwork (Ger. Gesamttextwerk), designed by the state-of-the-art software; at this point let me mention a characteristic example of a cube the sides of which are covered in writing and the reader-user is teleported into its centre, so she encounters text units beside, under and above herself. Only at this point (for example A. L. Dos Santos' digital poem "Cubo") we can say she is within the textscape (even in the sense of existential inclusion, of "being in" as emphasized by Heidegger's phenomenology). It is also essential for digital poetry that it is post-lyrical, for the lyric has deterritorialized (it can be found much more frequently in other media than in contemporary poetry, printed as well as digital).

Subjectivity at work in digital poetry is without doubt additionally stimulated by that contemporary cultural paradigm, which stresses simultaneity and co-existence, that is, a neutral, non-conflict accumulation of data from different sources, co-existing side-by-side, which leads to the aesthetics of information density (Manovics's term).

What does the question "How does digital poetry function?" reveal? We are not referring to any hardware conditions for production and reproduction of such texts, but to the mode of textual units organization – not to digital poetry in general, but its kinetic and animated genre (e.g. e-poetry pieces by John Cayley and Loss

Pequeño Glazier). It seems that the generation Flash (Manovich's term) is very active in this field of textuality, organized in the form of time-based audiovisual moving words sequences as well.

Economical use of language has always been essential for poetry, in other words, we are speaking of a tendency to compactly express as much as possible by means of as few words as possible. However, where there are few words, there are many voids, much blankness and whiteness. Quality contemporary poetry in the tradition extending from Mallarmé to Paul Celan (and also Edmond Jabès' poetry-philosophy) has efficiently used such blank spaces and included them into the signifying process. This idea is being used by kinetic poetry, too, restoring intervals of a hidden or merely indicated text instead of using blanks. Such a text runs somewhere in the depth of the screen and appears in the foreground only partially for a short period of time.

### BEING-IN-THE-LOOP

How is digital poetry organized? It runs in loops, the loop being the medium enabling the structure of verbal contents, namely their adjusting to the demand of text units organization in time-based sequences in a film way, which seems to be the mode best suited to the perception of contemporary individuals.

Loop-shaped movement presupposes economical use of space and time, and it is aiming towards condensation of various elements. (Contemporary culture enabled by new media is based on high-adrenaline effects, concentricity, and organisation of its spatial and temporal components into attractive units, where a user can get as much stimuli as possible in the shortest time possible. Music videos, advertisements, literary digests, as well as fast food, computer games, and activities within arcade simulators all aim towards similar packages of condensed stimuli.)

The shape of the loop seems simple but in fact is not. The loop's existence is not eternal. It has to begin at some point, for example when a straight line suddenly leaves its course and the plane it has been running upon. Loop as movement presupposes joint rotation between here and there, up and down, edge and centre. A loop is not a circle, it lacks the symmetry. And moreover, it can have several centres. Loop motion is not described only by space-syntax-based definitions, but also by temporal syntax. There is always a "before" and an "after", an interval between "not yet" and "not anymore", between "it was" and "it is now". The loop works according to a principle that is in a way similar to that of a machine: the more balance providing eccentric motors it has, the faster it can run. If one of the motors stops, another can start, and the looping continues. The form of the loop is also a playful one; it seems that Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion on the essence of the play as a to-and-fro movement (4) can also be applied to the loop due to its expansion forwards and backwards.

Is loop an adequate form for representing e-poetry? It appears so; since time-sequence based word-film entering the loop mode can best render the essence

of poetry, which lies in temporal editing/compositing of various poetic syntagms, verses, presupposed juxtapositions and separations, similarities and dissimilarities, tensions and releases. The tension between the written and the blank/void, between the told and the untold, between what is revealed and what is concealed, does not only apply to digital poetry but also to most of the modern and contemporary printed poetry. However, such tensions, contrasts, shifts, and dialogues can be more adequately expressed by the text-film. In this medium (of kinetic digital poetry) a text is divided into sequences of various lengths appearing on the screen at different intervals and from various directions. Both space and syntax are relevant here, as well as time and space editing/compositing, since the text-film can be simultaneously shown in different windows (e.g. in some of Alain Sondheim's pieces).

Looping stimulates a very complex activity; everything proceeds in linear intervals, but in fact does not. The loop can start to roll from one plane to another, it can horizontalize, or it can verticalize, so that the viewer sees sometimes only the up-and-down movement. Loop format is especially suitable in case the author uses digital morph to form a text so that it progresses from one verse to another. The text is circulating, joining, dividing. And this movement fills the reader with uncertainty as to which verse will appear in the next interval.

This paper section deals with text as a loop, so let us first take a look at loops of "The Dazzle as a Question" by Claire Dinsmore (3). The text-film in question is highly condensed and very short, made of "textual short-cuts" and makes use of space and time syntax. Visual effects also play an important role, especially the irruption of blinding light onto the screen, which occurs after 2 minutes and 40 seconds. The text is designed in the shape of moveable tapes entering the screen from left and right, and disappearing after a short interval. At one time a line makes way for another by skipping further up and in this way an association of meanings/thoughts is formed. A line of new text then takes its original position and the upper line is deleted.

In this text the loop is linked thematically to the creation of atmospheres of uncertainty, dazzle, and playing with identities. It is also present in the way the text progresses on the screen, which is realized by deleting and concealing. Part of the text is always missing and the reader-viewer is faced with a difficult task of reconstruction of the whole text-screen. To be perceived completely, "The Dazzle" has to be viewed several times. In addition, in order to approach the piece closer, even notes of the missing words have to be made and schemes of the structure and movement of the text have to be drawn, which demands a very sophisticated form of perception. The dazzling of "The Dazzle as a Question" is also connected to the feelings of 'uncertainty and vagueness'. Everything is based on shifts and deterritorializations. No wonder the author uses 'shift' as one of the most applied words. In encountering this textual piece one needs to emphasize that the loop principle is to be found also in the communication between the text-films and the viewers-readers-listeners.

We are talking about a series of loops, or looping, which serves as a basis for communication in the process of decoding the meanings, realized by a string of text-generated addresses on the one hand, and 'reader-constructed' replies on the other. Even the perception (seen as a hybrid reading-watching-listening) of such pieces includes playful to-and-fro movement, where the user is challenged not to choose a linear path between two extremes but is encouraged to try the more elegant loop, because only in this case she will be able to catch most of the hidden, non-displayed text. The latter is often the key point of those text-films, which seek to fulfil the demands of the cinema and new media aesthetics.

The loop form of text is found also in the poetry of John Cayley, one of the pioneers of (kinetic) digital poetry. In the accompanying statement to his "Riverisland", he describes this project as a navigational text-movie, which intertwines transliterary and literary graphic morphs. Cayley's poem is actually a research process directed towards the transformation of text in time. The sequence of 16 poems constituting "Riverisland" is designed in horizontal loops and intersected by poetic texts in vertical loops, so a complex mixture of times and their hybridisations is rendered possible. The time issue is found also in Cayley's "The Speaking Clock" poetry generator dealing with the subtle grammar of various times (of the smart machine itself as well as of the process of reading/listening/watching).

Poetry-as-we-know-it is also always connected with the whiteness, the absent, the untold. Hidden text units, that is, units not yet displayed on the screen, usually keep the readers in suspense. In the case of horizontal loop only a small part of the text is in screen focus, and there is no telling whether or not all the letters and words will appear in the foreground, meaning the reader is not safe. It is possible that the loop will rotate only a half or a quarter of a spin, which stimulates the reader to take the deterritorialized position somewhere behind the front string of words.

The loop is also found in the "Strings" (6) by Dan Waber (especially in pieces Youandme, Arms and Poidog). Here, the focus is set upon a writing hand, but most importantly, the viewer cannot, for most time, see what the hand has written. The writing is going on in the background, and by this, the author is trying to keep the reader in suspense, mostly because of the uncertainty of what is going to be written outside her field of vision, and what is displayed and what is hidden. Again, we are confronted with the to-and-fro movement mode, manifesting itself in the alternation of the seen and the unseen, between the already-written and the not-yet-written.

Loops (mostly just as an effect of surface event-space) are also used by Brian Kim Stefans in his e-piece "The Dreamlife of Letters" (5). Already in the author's statement the reader is informed about the author's decision to make the piece more like a short film and not so much an interactive artwork. At the end of the text he notes "thanks for watching", and not 'thanks for reading', which demonstrates the author puts watching, and not reading, to the foreground of the authentic perception of

this "cinematic piece". However, reading is nevertheless important: beside the strong visual effects we are also confronted with the effects of meaning manipulation and sense-making. And how exactly does the "Dreamlife of letters" work? A letter is in fact a material, an atomistic unit of e-writing, and with every letter we get a story consisting of words starting with that letter. Words are not arranged according to clause or verse principles; the verse is gone. There are only letters, syllables, and words, which are sometimes fragmented and sometimes functioning together. The meaning is thus created by quick transitions to anti-words, derivative words, and even non-words. Words (and letters) are moving in the background and in the foreground of the screen. Letters can fall onto the screen from above, or appear from below. The 'L' rotates and 'material' becomes 'maternal'; and when 'poison' and 'special' spin, the screen reads 'policy'. The verb 'read' is presented in the loop, which is in a way symbolical since in the environment of kinetic textuality the reading itself is confined to the laws of the loop. The word 'oedipolity' is designed in the same way. Reading/watching of such poetry (which is articulated in a language owing much to cinema and music video syntax, e.g.: suspense, short and fast cuts, surprise) implicates some essential changes on the level of its perception. Instead of the traditional reader, a text user is being constituted; she is abandoning the merely linear reading and is capable of a complex and as mobile perception as possible, which includes - when speaking of kinetic texts – the following perception and interpretative forms and modes:

- jumpy reading, full of forward glimpses and backward glances;
- viewing words as visual 3-d objects;
- tracking the movement of textual units (considering their intervals and anticipation of words-images that are still outside the visual field at a given moment);
- touching, zooming and entering 3-d textual objects through interfaces;
- "mouse reading" in a sense that clicking on the word can open a link or activate a computer programme;
- reading-viewing as programme decoding due to the programmable nature of the digital poetry object (the reader/user needs to take into account the software applied);
- perception of the whole mosaic-like screen in one quick snapshot;
- listening to the audio-stereo soundscape of the multimedia designed objects;
- navigating the spatial patterns of words-objects, images and animated objects;
- aesthetic attitude to textscape as an object that stimulates the senses.

These forms and modes are not hierarchically organised, and they do not occur within each perceptive act. What is of importance here is the fact that they are tied to the mosaic-like structure that frequently accompanies digital poems, because this medium is also influenced by the state-of-the-art web site design and net art visual culture.

## EXPANDED CONCEPT OF DIGITAL TEXTUALITY

Today digital poetry, too, - as a new medium with its own specificity - provides us with new, provocative, and challenging, to sensitivity even testing forms of experiencing. It is a medium that cannot be perceived as a mere continuation of Visual and Concrete poetry by other means, but can only be understood on the basis of analysis of the present world of the new media, and new perception forms, which originate in the interface culture. The problem arising here is in the poetic nature of digital poetry objects: traditional devices of literary theory, poetics, and literary criticism, developed through the works of the literary avant-garde, and neo-avant-garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are often less successful in describing and explaining digital poetry phenomena than theoretical devices of the new-media aesthetics and theory. The application of structuralist, and post-structuralist literary theory (Roland Barthes is a very frequently cited author among theoreticians of hypertext fiction) is also questionable in this field, for in their analyses authors such as Foucault, Barthes, Kristeva, and Riffaterre were not concerned with digital textuality and the Web. Besides the far greater competence of the reader-user of digital, literary-coded textuality, we are encountering a series of other problems concerning the genesis of e-textuality, wherein a computer as a smart machine is also participating with its programs. The key to creating digital textuality is namely a machine-generated code, and that is why authors are often stressing its "machine" nature already in the titles of their works (e.g. poetry generators, poetry engines).

When we are interrogating the poetic nature of digital poetry that presupposes the destabilization of verse by applications of non-linearly distributed verbal and non-verbal components, and frequent reduction of poetic language just to nouns, one needs to emphasize that the "poetic" is now beyond the lyric as understood by the movements of modern and contemporary poetry.

To summarize as densely as possible, the lyrical field is connected to sensations and atmospheres of the fleeting, the extraordinary, the tragic, the pain, the fear, the touching and the melancholic. It is without doubt a field of establishing an artificial world, veiled in elegies, pain and intense experiencing expressed through descriptions, images and metaphors, the typical qualities of which being colorfulness, melodiousness, assonances, harmonies and dissonances. And it is also the field of the romantic lyrical *subject*, who *dreams*, as well as the field of his modern subjectivity, which is increasingly surpassed and replaced by the "fractal subject" of the world of new media, technologies, cybernetics and information. In digital poetry, too, we can sometimes still discover the making of "poetic atmospheres" (for example in Miekal And's poem "Seedsign"), the tension between the said and the unsaid, the written and the whiteness (in kinetic and animated poetry, for example), now revealed through the loops between the text that is already in our field of vision, that is, displayed, and the text that is yet to appear. One of the striking features of this poetry is namely its inventive work in the field of broadening of concept of poetic language.

With the latter we refer to a language suited to post-lyrical sensations and attitudes of the post-lyrical subject and the subjectivity of the already mentioned "mix, cuts & scratches mind". What kind of language are we talking about? Is that the language created through the merging of programming languages and natural language? It is an expanded textuality based upon combining and upgrading of natural languages, net-speak, and scripting and programming languages, resulting in the usage of symbols, word conglomerates and textual devices, such as Mez uses in her mezangelle language or which some projects by Talan Memmoth and Alan Sondheim approach. Code poetry is, in fact, merely a technical term for some of the projects in this genre, since "code, imbedded in the interface text has ceased to be operative" (1). Yet in some texts, based upon expanded textuality, we nevertheless encounter the co-existence of signs pertaining to natural and programming languages, netspeak's emoticons and acronyms, brackets and other inserted symbols, leading to the play of meanings and thus more to the play within the signifiers than with them.

What else is typical of such textuality? The texts of the above-mentioned authors can be, especially when accessible on-line, interpreted also as a part of the net art due to the language specificity that is sometimes very close to the browser (net) art in the tradition extending from "Web Stalker" by I/O/D and some of Jodi's projects, to the more recent pieces such as Mark Napier's "Feed" and Amy Alexander's "BotimatiON". The mentioned projects direct us beyond digital cosmetics, web aesthetics of beautiful, and attractively designed screen contents. Especially in case of Jodi's projects, the screen changes into a rather unattractive scene of dark pictures, discontinuity, chaos, interruptions and mistakes; rather than depicting the glitter of the new media, these projects creatively reveal its mistakes, subversive processes, deconstruction, and the malfunctioning of the new technologies. Jodi has accompanied the discovery of the dynamic text with the following words: "We learned from our first web mistakes, that an error can be most interesting. If you forget a little HTML code tag, for example the bracket ">" then the text surface mixes with code and becomes liquid, it flows all over the screen. This type of dynamic, tactile text is different from hard copy. We can't accept that print design rules define also the layout on a computer screen. Most websites still look like print. The possibilities of code and text exchange are not used, because it's confusing, it is not readable. But these are the medium specific, digital material, new things."(2)

This tendency is of significance also to expanded digital textuality. Mez, for instance, uses a broad spectre of various procedures and textual devices such as ASCII characters, punctuations, interjections, abbreviations and mathematical symbols in order to introduce a new language, based on investigations of meanings, conditioned by artificial juxtapositions, syllable and letter parataxis and interjections of the words. By using interjected words set off in brackets, she also tries to demonstrate lots of new bold associations. By parenthetic splitting of words Mez changes the traditional way of reading and creates new polisemantic

structures within one word. Encountering such texts, one can find out that the splitting, fragmented and hybrid words are not beautiful, pure, smooth and harmonious, but the basis of a dark, maximally complex language of the textual uncanny, typically defined by instability and uncleanness of meaning, demanding difficult reading as well as a talent for exploring new meanings. The decoding of hybrid, distinctively artificial words-compounds interrupts the smooth immersion and „Einfühlung“, the reader must thus surf the text surface several times, and it is of the utmost importance that she has the mind for bold associating. And although a significant part of the kinetic digital poetry is programmed in the trendy Flash, it is not necessarily the poetry of pure aesthetics, but a poetry of semantic (and also emotional) instability, which is clearly demonstrated by the already mentioned „The Dazzle as a Question“.

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