

Post-Digital Writing

ebr electronicbookreview.com/essay/post-digital-writing

12 december 2012

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12-12-2012

This essay was peer-reviewed.



Florian Cramer's essay reframes debates on electronic literature within larger cultural developments in writing and publishing. On the one hand, he shows the commitment of the field of electronic literature - as found in universities or in organizations such as the ELO - to a "literary" intermedia writing for electronic (display) media. On the other hand, he emphasizes a wide-ranging post-digital poetics defined by a DIY media practice rather than the choice of a particular medium, a poetics which is broadly orientated towards writing rather than literature. At stake in this opposition is the larger

question of literary studies in a world of creative digital industries.

Originally given as the keynote lecture at the Electronic Literature Organization conference, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, June 22, 2012

Disclaimer: This lecture was written after having been out of touch with the field of electronic literature as it is represented by the ELO for half a decade. The author's work has shifted from literary studies to applied design research, and towards modes of electronic publishing where the experiment lies in production and distribution, such as in Libre Graphics and open source book sprints. Nevertheless, this might help to reframe electronic literature within larger cultural developments in writing and publishing.

1

By the mid-1990s, thanks to the pioneering work at Brown University, electronic literature had established itself as a field in Pierre Bourdieu's sense, i.e. as an area of production and discourse with intrinsic distinctions and authorities. Net.art as represented by the early Nettime mailing list and by artists such as Vuc Cosic, Alexei Shulgin and jodi, was the new kid on the block. Next it turned to experimenting with Internet servers as artist-run spaces, and began to playfully experiment with the textual codes of the Internet; which made McKenzie Wark and others pitch it against established hyperfiction and electronic literature writing. McKenzie Wark, *"From Hypertext to Codework," Hypermedia Joyce Studies, vol 3, issue 1 (2002)*. Later, artists like mez breeze and Alan Sondheim were at home in both worlds.

Net.art brought a fresh air of everyday culture and the digital vernacular: the languages of spam, chat bots, viruses, browser crashes, debugging messages, blue screens and 404 codes - a language that was much more rampant in the 1990s than in today's iPhone, iPad, Facebook and Google world with their sanitized operating systems and app stores. And it was a largely non-academic movement whereas electronic literature was, and continues to be, as closely tied to literature departments as composed computer music is to research lab-style university studios, at least in Northern America. On top of that, the critics were often the same people as the artists in those two academic communities.

In countries where literature departments are as scholarly constrained as the social sciences and therefore do not include literary writing in their curricula, electronic literature has practically disappeared as an artistic practice. My home countries Germany and Netherlands are good examples. In Germany, Internet-based hypertext/multimedia literature boomed in the late 1990s mostly because of an award granted by a major newspaper, and faltered as soon as this award was discontinued. Most German-language scholarship on electronic literature still focuses on a handful of - rather marginal - writers and works from that period. In the Netherlands, the same is happening to the arts as a whole: as public funding is being slashed, a lot of artistic practice and cultural activism that had depended on it, simply disappears.

By the 2000s, net.art had become just as historical as hyperfiction. But it provided the breeding ground for at least two significant tendencies in contemporary art: the media activist art of groups like the Yes Men or the Institute of Applied Autonomy, and digital pop from 8-bit music to Cory Arcangel's modified Nintendo game. A number of critical books on net.art have appeared in the last couple of years, most significantly perhaps Josephine Bosma's *Nettitudes*. Josephine Bosma, *Nettitudes*, NAI Publishers 2011. Reading Bosma, it becomes apparent how the consensus on which early net.art seemed to have been built its community, might actually have been fictitious, and there appears to have been a rift between two ideas:

- The Internet, or the networked computer, as an alternative space for artists' production and distribution, in the tradition of community spaces, yet with the promise of even more radical experimentation with aesthetics, politics and economics than in brick-and-mortar spaces. While these politics were often vague, they become more focused towards hacktivism and copyleft in the course of the 2000s. By the 2010s, they had become popular mass culture with the Anonymous movement and, in Europe, the Pirate Parties.
- The Internet as new artistic medium, or more specifically: a new medium to be explored by artists, in the same way in which artists had, since the 1920s and 1960s, emancipated photography, books, film and later video towards means of artistic production. Even until a decade ago, the mainstream art system accepted these media only for the reproduction, but not original production of art works. Internet-based works are still hardly accepted in contemporary art except in the (separate) media art system.

In some cases, both ideas overlapped, for example when Nam June Paik appropriated video as a medium for visual art, but - with McLuhan's media theory as an analytical blueprint - also subverted its function as a mass medium. In other cases, the same practices could have the opposite implications: When George Maciunas opened the Flux Store in New York's Lower East Side to sell multiples and artists' books, he intended to shift artists' production towards low-cost, mass reproducible, unpretentious items that could be afforded by anyone. Maciunas' inspiration was the revolutionary socialist politics of LEF, the 1920s Soviet Left Front of constructivist artists around El Lissitzky. The socialist idea of democratic, affordable and mass-produced art - which also did away with the distinction between fine and applied art - had been continued in a reformist (rather than revolutionary) manner by the German Bauhaus and Dutch De Stijl. Next to Russian constructivism, they drew on the socialist politics of the British Arts & Crafts movement. Even the European Situationists saw themselves indebted to the constructivist heritage of doing away with the difference of art and design in order to open it up for everyone. Among others, Asger Jorn had founded a "Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus" that became part of the Situationist International.

Around the same time in the 1960s, other Fluxus artists factually undermined Maciunas by making books and book-like objects as auratic, collectible objects. They thus claimed a fine art domain within contemporary book culture and production. With bookstores such as Printed Matter in New York, Other Books and So in Amsterdam, and Motto in Berlin, the artists' bookstore was born and became, which each new generation, more like a gallery. There is now, just at the same historical point where electronic books and periodicals are eclipsing print, a massive renaissance of artists' bookmaking. It emphasizes, if not fetishizes, the analog, tangible, material qualities of the paper object. While this certainly is a counter-reaction to the digitization of media, these contemporary artists' books do preempt the future of the print book in general once books have largely migrated to electronic reading devices: the print book will survive in a crafty niche of the book-as-tangible-object. The renaissance of printmaking therefore is one indicator that the post-digital media age has begun: an age where, on the one hand, "digital" has become a meaningless attribute because almost all media are electronic and based on digital information processing; and where, on the other hand, younger generation media-critical artists rediscover analog information technology.

2

If we map 1960s artists' book culture to today's electronic publishing, the following question arises. Does electronic literature stand for the culture of fast, almost cost-free, globalized publishing on the Internet, i.e. the Maciunas model of avant-garde popularism? Or does it represent the opposite: a digital boutique and gated community of literary writing inside a sea of digital ephemera, a fine art white cube safely shielded from the digital trash?

In a conversation on this issue I had with Kenneth Goldsmith five years ago in Rotterdam, Kenneth pointed out how he had become more interested in the file sharing cultures of avant-garde sound, images and text than in the field of hypertext and multimedia literature.

UbuWeb closely resembles a 21st century version of the Flux store and its avant-garde popularism, yet with two significant differences. Firstly, it provides mostly historical instead of cutting-edge contemporary material. Secondly, it is not grounded on an economic model for artist's production aside from the classical academic one: teaching at a university, and publishing your work open access because you are working in a reputation-based, not a paid product-based economy. But isn't the same true for the electronic literature represented by the ELO? Why maintain a fine art niche when it is, unlike the white cubes and gallery spaces of contemporary visual art, not driven by pure economic necessity of selling products?

And what does the term "electronic literature" ultimately signify? If we take the word literature literally, as everything written with letters, then electronic literature today is no longer the exception but the norm. Paper publishing has largely become a form of Digital Rights Management for delivering PDF files in a file sharing-resistant format (but also, a more stable form of long-term storage of digital content than electronic storage). In the age of smartphones, tablets and e-readers, reading has largely shifted towards electronic media if we consider all writing that an average person reads per day. Is this the electronic literature we mean?

From an ELO perspective, it could of course be argued that this reading culture is too boringly conventional in its use of the medium as just remediation - as an electronic display of the same pages that were previously read on paper. But this would be the same kind of fundamentalist argument with which composers of generative computer music may dismiss mp3. I would agree with other Internet culture critics (certainly including Kenneth Goldsmith) that the digital revolution of music has been mp3, not Max/MSP or Pure Data. In e-book culture, we are now witnessing the mp3 revolution all over again: on the Pirate Bay, in underground download libraries like aaaaaarg.org and Monoskop, and the recent hacker efforts to turn the Open Source e-book software Calibre into a peer-to-peer e-book sharing network. This culture is currently not included in the domain and research of e-literature at all, but shouldn't it be?

Not only the culture of reading but also the culture of writing has changed profoundly. In a pragmatic definition, the field of literature revolves around published writing. And within published writing, there is the classical differentiation between fiction and non-fiction. Literary studies and criticism has taken "belles lettres," fiction, for "literature" as a whole, although there has never been a good reason for this, and although this separation is as dubious as the one between fine and applied art. This limited notion of literature in literary studies is purely a legacy of 19th century romanticist philology that has survived till today.

But in the 21st century, even the primal criterion of literature has become obsolete: that of being published. In the age of homepages, blogs and social networks, the classical distinction between non-published personal writing and published writing is moot, and with it the distinction between everyday communication and publishing. For example, the question of whether a diary or a correspondence was literary used to be simply a question of whether

or not to publish it; a criterion that is no longer meaningful in the Internet. If there ever has been a clear divide between amateur and professional writers at all, now it has collapsed completely. (Bloggers are just one example.) Of course, there are historical precursors such as in published correspondence and diaries, and from a materialist perspective, the differentiation between literary writing and everyday writing has always been artificial. Foucault's attack on the notion of the literary oeuvre, in *Archeology of Knowledge*, reads dated today:

does the name of an author designate in the same way a text that he has published under his name, a text that he has presented under a pseudonym, another found after his death in the form of an unfinished draft, and another that is merely a collection of jottings, a notebook? [...] And what status should be given to letters, notes, reported conversations, transcriptions of what he said made by those present at the time, in short, to that vast mass of verbal traces left by an individual at his death, and which speak in an endless confusion of so many different languages? *Michel Foucault, Archeology of Knowledge, Routledge 2002 (1969), 26.*

The answer of modern critical text philology would be: yes. The critical text edition of Kafka, for example, now even includes the notes and letters he wrote on behalf of his insurance company. *Franz Kafka, Amtliche Schriften, Kritische Ausgabe, S. Fischer 2004.* For edition philologists, it is a completely unresolved question what needs to be done with the electronic files, notes, Internet communication snippets of literary writers in the future.

Looking back at ELO initiatives like ***Born Again Bits*** and ***Acid-Free Bits***, as laudable as they are, it is striking how they are fixated on a notion of electronic literature as self-contained works where each work is a file. This seems to be a legacy of the 1980s and pre-Internet times: of HyperCard stacks, Storyspace and Macromedia Director files. This seems like an artificial preservation of a notion of oeuvre that Foucault had dismissed even for print culture. Or is this notion simply a side effect of electronic literature being the product of literature departments where, just as with a term paper, a self-contained work with an unambiguous author signature is the precondition for assessing a student? That would also be a pragmatic explanation why the more radically ephemeral, distributed net.art practices, or netwurks (to use the terminology of mez breeze), never were widespread in the Electronic Literature field; works that never existed as files, but only as communication streams. (Alan Sondheim is another writer who understood and practiced electronic text as streaming very early.)

Lastly, the difference between written language and the style of spoken language has largely collapsed in the Internet where all kinds of writing circulate in one and the same medium. For the first time in human history, there is a large repository and plunderground of popular written language - a medium that James Joyce, Kurt Schwitters or William S. Burroughs could have only dreamed of. But the question is again: Is electronic literature as represented in the ELO embracing this, or is it opting for the opposite, creating islands of literary works

within the massive writing/reading streams of the Internet? This would be a position close to that of Adorno and the Frankfurt school, and their defense of fine art as resistance against the industry model of music and film mass entertainment.

Nevertheless, Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry from the 1940s no longer matches what is now called creative industries, at least where I work, without any negative implication. Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique was based on a strict producer-consumer dichotomy. Contemporary "prosumer" culture has profoundly changed music and video production; writing no less if we look at the Internet. But how is it possible that media studies of audiovisual media prosumerism abound while they are virtually absent from literary studies? Why isn't the academic field of electronic literature studying the forerunners of such research? Or is it just the opposite: established notions of literariness and the literary work are being preserved in order to filter the sea of digital communications? But even with such a curatorial model, there remains a crucial question: isn't this critical filtering artificially constrained to writing that bears the tag "literary" conveniently upfront, instead of dealing with electronic writing at large. (Codeworks artists, for example, did just that.)

3

What happens if we dispense of the notion of literary writing?

In his book *Uncreative Writing*, Kenneth Goldsmith quotes Brion Gysin's famous statement that literature was "fifty years behind painting". *Kenneth Goldsmith, Uncreative Writing, Columbia University Press 2011, 11* Nowadays, one would say that it is fifty years behind the visual arts. Goldsmith's notion of uncreative, anti-expressive and conceptual writing rests on this hypothesis. Gysin referred, in the late 1950s, to the collage and montage techniques of Dada and surrealism that were the forerunners of his and William S. Burroughs' cut-up texts. Goldsmith writes from the perspective of a creative writing professor who rebels against the unbroken romantic subjectivism in contemporary poetry and psychological realism in prose writing. In that sense, most literature is now running 100 years behind the visual arts while e-literature - just like sound poetry and visual poetry - keeps up rather well.

But Goldsmith advocates more than simply collage, but an aggressive plunderphonics. It is media pirate writing that, while firmly rooted in a Western avant-garde canon, takes more from the Situationist detournement than from Picasso's or Schwitters' classical collage. Goldsmith advocates a "post-identity literature" (85), yet he does not, for example, include Internet culture like the memes and image/text "macros" of 4chan and the Anonymous movement in this example. Where is the philology and iconology of the grotesque visual poetry of 4chan image macros, a subculture arguably as vital and, on closer look, complex as punk and post-punk culture in the 70s and 80s?

Goldsmith's book reads much like a postmodernist writing manifesto of the Internet revolution. In that aspect, it surprisingly resembles Mark Amerika's 1993 "Avant-pop manifesto" - which it doesn't refer to - and Raymond Federman's "play-giarism," one of Amerika's pre-Internet sources. Amerika's point of departure, however, was prose writing and the Brown University school of hyperfiction, Goldsmith's poetics on the other hand is founded on experimental poetry and a post-Fluxus tradition of intermedia arts. Neither of the two writers answers the question that John Barth brought up in his 1967 manifesto "The Literature of Exhaustion," i.e. whether it wasn't more elegant if a prose writer like Jorge Luis Borges simply imagined and fictionalized these poetic practices instead of actually performing them - like the writers of Dick Higgins' Something Else Press that Barth criticized. The ultimate uncreative writer would therefore be Pierre Menard, the man who literally rewrote the Don Quixote in Borges' short story from 1939 (Goldsmith, 109–110). Unlike Goldsmith's students who had to do the same in class, the mere fiction of the act is more economical - and, as a metatext, actually closer to (instruction-based) conceptual art.

Goldsmith's poetics has two shortcomings: Firstly, it risks treating the Internet as a poetic plunderground without really feeding back into it (despite contrary claims on page 202). Thus remaining in a safe distance, it doesn't actually question the ontological status of "literature." Secondly, "uncreative writing" boils down to the dialectical opposite of creative writing. As a mere negation, it does not ontologically question creativity. From my practice of teaching at an art school, I can report that most artists and designers despise the word creative; "uncreative" would force them back into a wrong frame of reference just as "unpainting" would not be a desirable description for contemporary visual artists. The German visual artist Gerhard Merz said in 1991 that "creativity is something for hairdressers." *"Ich habe mich immer gegen Selbstverwirklichung in der Kunst und gegen Kreativitaet gewandt. Ich habe immer gesagt: Kreativitaet ist was fuer Friseure"* ("I've always spoken up against individual fulfillment and against creativity in art. I've always said: creativity is something for hairdressers"), *Gerhard Merz in the documentary Measure Color Light, 1991, quote at 3'41"*. The people calling themselves creative would be either naive artists - decorative potters, wildlife painters and the like - or creative industries executives, from creative directors in advertising to creativity coaches for corporate executives.

But lately, there has been a shift of meaning in the word "creative" triggered by Richard Florida's concept of the "creative class" and the European, increasingly fuzzy notion of the creative industries: "creative" has become an umbrella term for any kind of professional artistic work, no matter whether applied or fine art. To use a piece of anecdotal evidence, the editor-in-chief of a commercial magazine for Super 8 filmmaking for which I am occasionally freelancing, now differentiates between classical home movie amateurs (typically men in their 60s and 70s) from young "creatives," a notion that encompasses experimental artists, visual designers and advertisers, who use Super 8 as a post-digital medium. In Europe, the notion of "creative industries" is now gradually replacing that of arts and culture. It simultaneously encompasses the arts, commercial design and media technology. This is a

textbook example of how neoliberalism can be brutally progressive. What Russian constructivism, Bauhaus, De Stijl, Fluxus and Situationism tried but failed to accomplish, to do away with the difference between fine and applied arts, is now done by globalized capitalism for even more materialist reasons.

It is tempting to maintain notions of “literary writing” or “(un)creative writing” out of resistance to these developments. This would be the same conservative-dressed-up-as-progressive resistance that Adorno and Horkheimer had in the 1940s when they lived in Hollywood and wrote the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. Even the “creative” in “creative industries” remains a piece of romanticist legacy. If all contemporary concepts of literary, creative and uncreative writing were abandoned, this could bring back the notion of creativity to its original meaning, clever inventiveness - where a fraudulent tax return qualifies as a piece of creative writing but not a novel by Toni Morrison.

4

Goldsmith’s “Uncreative” poetics reads, in large parts, like Andy Warhol’s pop art recipes applied to writing. Warhol’s art, however, reflects a 1960s consumerist culture, programmed by the old media and creative industries that is now retro fiction on *Mad Men*. Goldsmith is well aware of this issue when he writes that “I’m part of a bridge generation raised on old media yet in love with and immersed in the new. A younger generation accepts these conditions as just another part of the world: they mix oil paint while Photoshopping and scour flea markets for vintage vinyl while listening to their iPods” (226). It is the same trend as in the contemporary boom of artists’ handmade books and zines - the post-digital trend that is just as thriving among my own art and design students in the Netherlands.

The word “post-digital” was coined by the Canadian composer Kim Cascone in 2000. In his paper “The Aesthetic of Failure,” he referred to the “emergent genre” of electronic glitch music as

“post-digital” because the revolutionary period of the digital information age has surely passed. The tendrils of digital technology have in some way touched everyone. With electronic commerce now a natural part of the business fabric of the Western world and Hollywood cranking out digital fluff by the gigabyte, the medium of digital technology holds less fascination for composers in and of itself. Kim Cascone, *The Aesthetics of Failure: Post-Digital Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music*, in *Computer Music Journal*, 24:4, 2000, 12–18 (Alessandro Ludovico, publisher of *Neural* magazine, explores this issue for the area of publishing in his book *Post-Digital Print*, Onomatopoe, 2012).

In the 2010s, this phenomenon has solidified into a renaissance of vinyl and of cassette tape labels in music, of Super 8 and VHS in film and video, and of DIY risograph printmaking with in graphic design, visual art and poetry. The DIY aspect is most crucial here, and explains why this is more than a retro phenomenon: The analog media that are newly being

embraced are those that are the most tangible and most easily self-makeable. In that sense, the digital maker movement (manifesting itself, among others, in Fablabs and the magazine **MAKE** published by O'Reilly Media) and the neo-analog media DIY are one and the same post-digital culture.

Conversely, with the rise of Web 2.0, social media and mobile apps, “user-made content” has been locked into corporate templates and data mining systems. While the World Wide Web had been a DIY publishing medium in the 1990s, digital DIY has become difficult in a medium defined by only four corporate players (Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook) just like TV had been defined by a few networks in the past. The publishing of self-made books and zines thus becomes a form of social networking that is not controlled or data-mined by those companies. On top of that, the system crisis of global capitalism and rise of highly diverse forms of activism world wide, has phased out the Warhol paradigm of happy consumerism and replaced it with a DIY ethics and maker culture particularly in Western countries.

These developments give the word “post-digital” a more profound meaning than in Cascone’s paper. Cascone drew on a **WIRED** column by Nicholas Negroponte from 1998 which stated that digital technology was no longer be futuristic and revolutionary because it had become ubiquitous: “Now that we’re in that future, of course, plastics are no big deal. Is digital destined for the same banality? Certainly. Its literal form, the technology, is already beginning to be taken for granted, and its connotation will become tomorrow’s commercial and cultural compost for new ideas. Like air and drinking water, being digital will be noticed only by its absence, not its presence.”

5

Today’s artists’ books and zines indeed reflect digitality by its absence. A good example is Annette Knol’s self-printed booklet **Colors - Simply Hiphop**. Knol is a member of Kotti Shop, an artist collective that runs a small DIY printmaking space at Berlin’s Kottbusser Tor, the most troubled part of the Kreuzberg neighborhood that is comparable to New York’s Lower East Side in the 1980s. Just like other artist-run printmaking spaces, Kotti Shop works with a Risograph stencil printer whose use for carefully crafted, multi-color DIY art publications had been pioneered by the Dutch artist and printer collective Extrapool.

Colors consists of a montage of single lines from hip hop songs in which one or more colors are mentioned. It is a simple but effective piece of conceptual poetry, a perfect example of Kenneth Goldsmith’s poetics of uncreative writing. If this booklet had appeared in the 1960s, using rock and roll instead of hip hop lyrics, it would also have been a perfect candidate for inclusion in Maciunas’ flux store, as an affordable, accessible, working class and popular culture-conscious piece of contemporary art.

In 2012, however, the meaning of such a book has shifted just as much as that of Pierre Menard's Don Quixote as opposed to Cervantes' Don Quixote. Nowadays, the medium of the paper book printed on a Risograph is no longer chosen because it is the most simple and inexpensive means of democratic mass reproduction, but on the contrary because it embodies craftsmanship, materiality, tangibility and personal exchange. This book is a book because it's intentionally not a web site or a blog. Its choice of the medium makes it a fine art (or fine art graphic design) product. It is graphic design in the anti-industrial tradition of the Arts and Crafts movement, not in the industrial tradition of Russian constructivism, Bauhaus and De Stijl.

At the same time, **Colors** is a piece of electronic literature. Its text has likely been assembled through keyword searches of online song lyrics databases. (In this sense, a lot if not most contemporary art has become Internet art; which video artist doesn't steal from YouTube?) The stencil printer has the same function as the servers of online communities like The Well or EchoNYC in the 1980s and 1990s: it is a DIY community-building tool. While Apple went from its first computer sold as a DIY construction kit in the Whole Earth Catalogue to the opposite extreme of mass-produced shrink-wrapped consumer gadgets that can't be opened, and while the online community concept behind The Well turned into the monster of Facebook, the DIY printmaking communities goes back to where home computing began, and to home pages in the literal sense of the word.

Such developments put electronic literature as it is practiced by the ELO at a crossroads between two tendencies: literary intermedia writing for electronic (display) media in which work like **Colors** has no place or a post-digital poetics defined by a DIY media practice rather than the choice of a particular medium, and which is broadly orientated towards writing rather than literature. The larger question is whether literature studies in general shouldn't change in the same way in which visual culture studies developed from art history - which, as they have demonstrated, can be done without tossing out the baby of arts (and, by analogy, poetics) with the media and creative industries bathwater.

Cite this Essay:

Cramer, Florian. "Post-Digital Writing", Electronic Book Review, December 12, 2012, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/post-digital-writing/>.

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This essay was peer-reviewed.