

## THE MECHANIC EYE: NORTH AMERICAN VISUAL POETRY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper offers a revision of North American visual poetry from the contemporary perspective of the digital revolution. From the Native American chants to the digital poetry found on the Web, it will explore the internal drives of this sort of poetic manifestations that have endured through different time periods, aesthetic currents and cultural functions despite the various mediums employed for their production and dissemination. Digital poetry nourishes itself from previous literary traditions as well as from the multimedia convergence favored by the digital medium. We will analyze these influences, and the new reading strategies required to contextualize and make sense out of the digital work of poetry. As readers and writers reorganize their reading pacts, researchers of literature face a new challenge: the polymorphic and metamorphosing liquid text made possible by the digital language.

**KEY WORDS:** Visual poetry. Concrete poetry. Digital poetry. Navajo art. The Shakers. EE Cummings. Karl Kempton. Andrew Topel. Jim Andrews. Robert Kendall. Loss Pequeño Glazier.

### Introduction

“The Mechanic Eye” hopes to offer a revision of North American visual poetry from the contemporary perspective of the digital revolution. Visual poetry works of distant periods will be placed in a dialogic position with digital works of the last decades, with the double purpose of shedding a contemporary glance to the past - and thus reigniting visual poems that had become obscure for the general audience- and of understanding our present better, concretely the work of artists who create their poems as pieces to be read on the computer screen.

For centuries, creativity has undoubtedly led many authors to stretch the limits of the word, juggling with the dual dimension, iconic and verbal, of the poem, playing around with their medium of transmission, be it stone, papyrus, paper, sand, cloth, or computer screen, exceeding with their imagination the apparent limits of their canvass. As instants of playful escapism, poetic children games, visual poems have always been a mischievous yet innocent way of trespassing across generic

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and artistic frontiers, in ways that have often cast them aside the dominant and canonic forms of poetry. Yet in the digital literature youthful canon, visual poetry is inseparable from other forms of digital poetry, to the point that one wonders if the category “visual poetry” is functional within the field of electronic literature.

However, it is in the field of electronic literature that it becomes more necessary than ever the creation of a critical framework in which we integrate image and word. Visual poetry draws precisely on the relations that arise between voice, word and image, making apparent the artificial schism that has separated the visual arts from the written arts, forcing the viewer to see the poem and read the drawing, thus building bridges between all types of languages, including spoken language, sounds, phonetics, music, mathematics, etc. Before the advent of what we call “multimedia”, visual poetry was already structuring a poetic discourse where reading and looking formed part of a unique identical instant.

A study of visual poetry involves also an exploration of the material conditions of writing. I subscribe to Jerome McGann’s statement “poets understand texts better than most information technologists”<sup>1</sup>, and it precisely in this moment of transition from print to digital textualities that we need poets’ expertise. Coming to terms with visual poetry entails an understanding of the material transformations available to artists at a level never taken into account in other poetic genres. For example, it is difficult to understand the creative process of concrete poetry without knowing the existing text production and printing techniques of the time. A similar process is necessary when approaching digital poetry, one can never separate the analysis of the digital poem from how it is put together at the material level of writing, programming, one needs to go down to the code. Both visual poetry and digital poetry bring to the foreground the dual quality of writing, which is “both an object and an act, a sign and a basis for signification, a thing in itself and something coming into being, a production and a process, an inscription and the activity of inscribing”. (Drucker 57).

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<sup>1</sup> Quote by Jerome McGann (*Textual Conditions*) rescued by Glazier in his introduction to *Digital Poetics* (1).

One of the main problems, however, when trying to integrate Digital Literature inside the curriculum of educational institutions is that it is often perceived as a totally alien universe with respect to the print tradition. In this article, I wish to establish a dialogue between print and digital poetry, departing from the rich North American Visual poetry tradition. My aim is also to facilitate teachers the task of exploration and selection, so that poetry teachers and readers can overcome the information overload that inevitably afflicts those who venture in the wild waters of the Net without the appropriate filters.

A great advantage of our contemporary perspective is that the Web has become an infinite source of information, a sort of curved space which allows us to travel without moving through libraries and databases, perusing manuscripts and images located on distant servers. The Net already induces a mode of working, conflating past and present, center and margins, original and copy, aleatorily providing connections, black holes, disturbances. The present work suffers from all these synergies and also strives to make the most of them. We are greatly indebted to the work of other researchers (since digital technology *per se* does not do anything) that have made available online samples of early transcriptions, drawings, photographs, and recordings from distant, ancient, marginal cultures. Thus, we have been able to detain ourselves on less well-known areas of what could still be considered the history (or pre-history) of North American visual poetry, such as the artistic or esoteric outputs of Navajo Indians and Shakers<sup>2</sup>. *Vis a vis* the production of these once impenetrable cultures, the Internet has also provided our access to the most experimental poetry of the literary avant-gardes of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, fostering a dialogical perspective between past and present, making more conspicuous than ever the continuities and disruptions that different technologies have provoked in poetic traditions.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ethnopoetics* by Jerome Rothenberg, ubuweb.

## Between Tradition and Innovation. Visual Poetry in North America

As the poet Karl Kempton has observed in his brief work *Visual Poetry: A Brief History of Ancestral Roots and Modern Traditions* (2005), the objective history of American English Visual Poetry remains to be written (22). The usual story for the birth of American English Visual Poetry begins with one of the most influential events in the history of American art, the first major exhibition of European avant-garde works shown at the 1913 Armory Exhibition in New York<sup>3</sup>. The 1913 Armory show confronted provincial Americans to the effervescence of European experimentation, provoking admiration and repulse in equal shares but transforming forever the course of American artistic life. Among the art exhibited were examples of Symbolism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Orphism and Cubism, along with works by numerous American artists. Picasso, Kandinsky and Duchamp presented their work to American audiences for the first time.

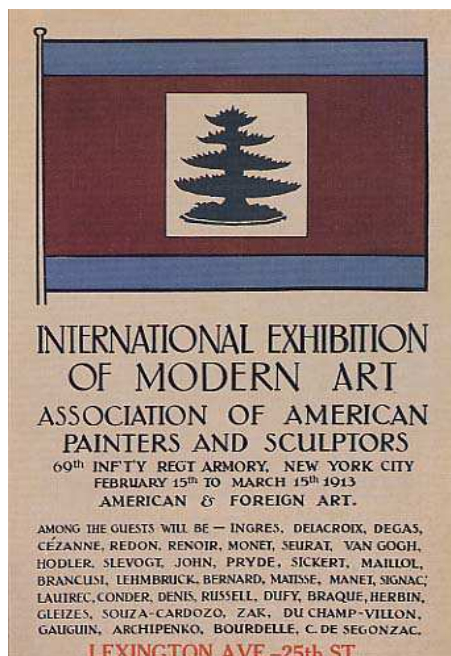


Fig. 1. Original poster of the 1913 Armory Exhibition.

A young attendee to the exhibit was the young poet and painter, ee cummings, who could see for the first time the transformations of cubism, the irreverent treatment of line, form and color of Fauvism, the lyrical abstraction of Orphism, and most importantly, in the first Gallery dedicated to French painting and sculpture, it could be seen. One of the first examples of the integration of letters in paintings in “L’Affiche de Kubelick” (1912), by Georges Braque, the forerunner of this sort of mixtures of text and painting that Futurists and Cubist would follow. Another crucial reference was orphic cubist painter Robert Delaunay, whose theories of color would greatly

<sup>3</sup> Available in: <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~museum/armory/armoryshow.html>> .

influence Apollinaire's conception of pure abstraction, the necessity of creating with totally new elements not belonging to the external world but to the internal<sup>4</sup>. e.e. cummings, who began creating visual poems around 1916, is usually considered the father of North American visual poetry in the English language, and an important predecessor of the American Concrete Movement. It is not hard to imagine the powerful effect of such an extraordinary collection in the mind of a young artist, his internal confirmation that the rules concerning language (punctuation, syntax, grammar) were as susceptible to be poetically broken and transformed as were contours, forms and color for the modernist painters. As it can be seen in the following example, "the sky was", the words of the poem are arranged on the page in the shape of a cloud of smoke spouting from the locomotive mentioned at the end of the poem. cummings' poem still reads from left to right and from top to bottom, but the structure of the words is broken to fit the shape he wants to draw. The words' meaning, however, accompanies the picture being described: the multicolored effects of light in the sky, and conjure up imaginary tastes associated with those colors. The reader engages in cummings' synaesthetic game, which retains a childlike capacity for wonder and play.

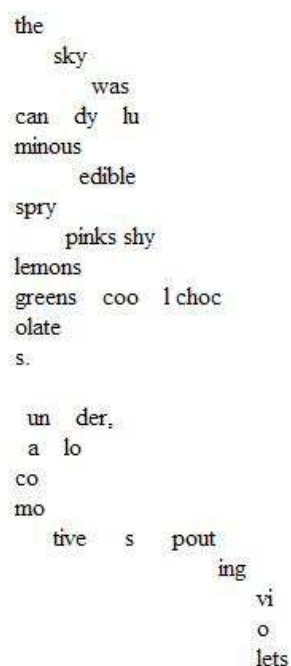


Fig. 2 "The sky was", *Impressions*, (in *Complete Poems*, 1991, 64).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the American Concrete Movement took up some of the strategies employed by cummings with a more intellectual approach, the Fluxus movement, Pop and Conceptual artists, would also become intrigued by the potential of language as an artistic form and would continue experimenting with

<sup>4</sup> In *Les Peintres cubistes* Apollinaire described Orphism as "the art of painting new totalities with elements that the artist does not take from visual reality, but creates entirely by himself. [...] An Orphic painter's works should convey an untroubled aesthetic pleasure, but at the same time a meaningful structure and sublime significance." *The Cubist Painters (Les Peintres Cubistes: Méditations esthétiques)*, Guillaume Apollinaire, 1913, translation by Peter Read, University of California Press, 25 oct. 2004.

production and reproduction technologies, an experimentation that has continued to evolve in the digital domain. As the very name suggests, concrete poets concentrated in the material dimension of language, the poem was an object in itself, disconnected from the psychological motives that had driven the poet to make it. The words, the syllables in themselves, were all there was to the poem. There was this common belief that in order to create some new relation with the poetic material, the old grammatical and syntactic laws had to be done with, since the circuit of thought was trapped by already made linguistic constraints. The word, the syllable, became atoms in the space of the page, liberated from their previous functions, acquiring new values, as the importance given to their sound, their musicality, disconnected from their meaning. There was a constant game between the dichotomy of order and chaos, sound and sense. Throwing a glance at the results, it is difficult to conceive of concrete poetry without its fundamental ally, the typewriter.

The American concrete movement, however, represent only a portion of what we could consider to be the field of visual poetry. Concrete poetry anthologies, Kempton argues, have left out important contributors to the field of visual poetry, such as Kenneth Patchen and Paul Reps, who had continued cummings' tradition of the picture poem, rooting their work in a poetic lineage that did not match the constraints imposed by the Concrete movement. According to Kempton:

The American Concrete Movement/Fluxus Movement (...) with its Hermetic inclinations, was generally apolitical, environmentally contradictory and used convoluted interpretations of Buddhist Dharma texts and teachings to inform theoretical approaches to their work, not transcendence (2005, p. 26).

There is an obvious reference to the visual poetry of John Cage, his series of "Mesostics"<sup>5</sup> for instance, which present innovation without much meaning, aside its intrinsic departure from conventional poetry. Nevertheless, what Kempton has denominated "the orphic lineage in visual poetry", as a tradition that conflates both

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<sup>5</sup> The mesostics were similar to acrostics, but instead of having a vertical phrase at the beginning of the horizontal lines of text, the vertical line intersects the horizontal one in the middle.

the aesthetic and the mystical connotations of the word “orphisim”, has endured until today. As we will see, both drives, toward nihilism or to transcendence, are present in contemporary visual poetry.

Nowadays many visual poets use the internet to disseminate their works, and some have turned to digital poetry creation. Frequently, kinetic/visual digital poetry pays homage to its predecessors by “remediating” it, incorporating it in new pieces, as does Alison Clifford with ee cummings’ poem “The Sweet Old Etcetera”<sup>6</sup>, which becomes part of an interactive visual poem in Flash, or Robert Kendall with Lionel Kearns in his work “On Lionel Kearns” (ELO Collection, Vol.1). The temptation to activate the visual poem’s internal drives, which are temporarily suspended in its print format, is another way to acknowledge the lineage and continuities between print and digital visual poems.

A good example of visual poetry digital remediation can be found at *E.Ratio*, New York poet Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino’s online journal, who has animated together with Mary Ann Sullivan, Apollinaire’s text “Il pleut”. The 2008 digital rendition is placed side by side the original manuscript version of the text written in 1916, and two typeset versions (1916, 1918).<sup>7</sup> In its digital version, Apollinaire’s poem does rain, the letters have been animated to appear progressively on the screen imitating the movement of rain drops streaking down a window glass, the sound of rain can be overheard. As Sullivan (2009) comments, in the same way that Apollinaire sketched by hand his poems and then visited a typesetter who would set the letters and words on the page following his design, nowadays poets can conceive animated poems and search for a collaboration with a digital designer to program the work.

From hot type (molten lead cast in letters and lines of type), to cold type (type set by computers and printed out of photographic paper to be pasted up into pages), from press type to photographic manipulations, and finally to the phenomenon of desk top publishing, visual poetry has always entailed the collaboration of

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<sup>6</sup> Available in: <<http://www.sweetoldetc.org/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Can be seen at <<http://www.eratiopostmodernpoetry.com/editor II Pleut.html>>.

imagination and technology. What has come to the surface, however, is the extent to which print technology has been naturalized to the point that the reader does not much ask how the letters have been placed on the page. The digital poem, on the other hand, still retains the innovative aura which triggers in the viewer the question: “how did you do this trick?”

### **Letter aesthetics and glyph mysticism**

One of the collateral effects of the 1913 Armory Exhibition, aside liberating American artists from prescribed notions of art, was that it also induced them to search for their own definitions, roots and influences, intensifying their interest in the art of ancient Native cultures. As the art historian Barbara Rose explains, “in their programmatic return to the art of the Shakers, Indians, and the Colonial primitives, American Artists of the twenties clarified their relationship to the American Tradition” (1967, p. 112). Americans found in native Indians the genuine quality of primitive art that Europeans had found in the African culture. Moreover, the rediscovery of ancient cultures’ relation to visual poetry also sprung from a methodic attack on poetic conventions. The liberation of the word, and then of letters, from the larger structures of language propounded by Italian and Russian futurist artists such as Filippo Marinetti, Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenyk. at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had met a millenary tradition across cultures that associated a wealth of aesthetic, symbolic and religious meaning to diverse sorts of linguistic and iconic signs in themselves, disconnected from their everyday function.

It was no coincidence that Native Americans also participated of the visual poem’s millenary tradition, a tradition that would take us back to the first forms of symbolic representation (such as rock art, proto-writing, hieroglyphs, and ideogrammatic or alphabetical writing), throughout various language families around the world, on different types of supports, and with numerous functions. In North America, approximately ten million Native Americans speaking three hundred and fifty different languages were living at the time of Christopher Columbus’ arrival. They developed their symbols of pre and proto-writing in rock art, into fabric arts and basketry, on pottery, wood, etc. Their symbolic systems later evolved through the



cross-fertilization of their cultures with each other and with the dominant cultures of English and French settlers. A highly stylized form of visual languaging is that of the Navajo weaving and ceremonial sandpaintings.

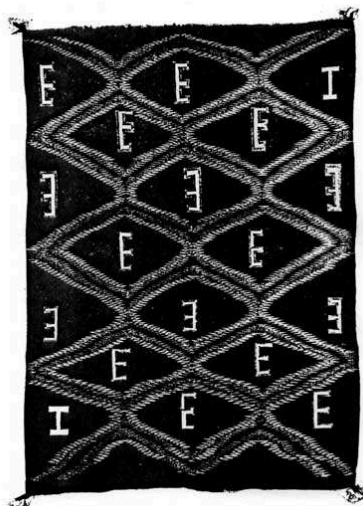


Fig. 3. Navajo  
(Anonymous), Eye-Dazzler  
1890-1900. Ubuweb.

Fig 3 is a rare form of alphabetic blanket closely resembling concrete poems of the 1960s/70s. In this example of Navajo weaving, selected letters of the Roman alphabet are used to play with the reader's expectations with respect to this traditional form of art, maintaining their interest in symmetry and visual effects. This Navajo rug has transferred to weaving a motif that seems out of place, since it belongs to the page. It evokes Lettrists' experiments with typography, alienating letters from their original function and playing with their material shape. The rug, like the

page, is an static medium, however, the letters have gained movement, they have been turned around, appear repeated, isolated without context, inviting the reader to figure out a logical sequence, inducing a mathematical, geometric reading.

A similar mechanism can be found in the work of contemporary poets Karl Kempton and Andrew Topel:

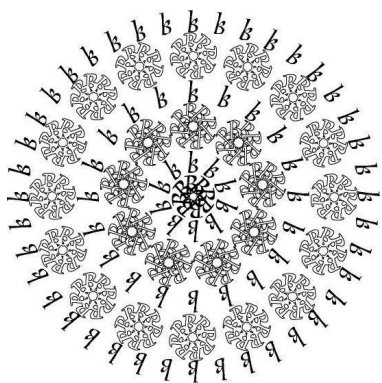
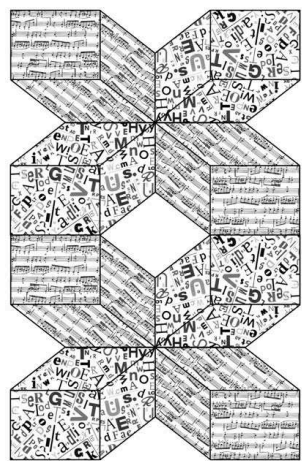


Fig. 4. Rune 10. Rose Window



Fig. 5. A Topel song for Karl Kempton.

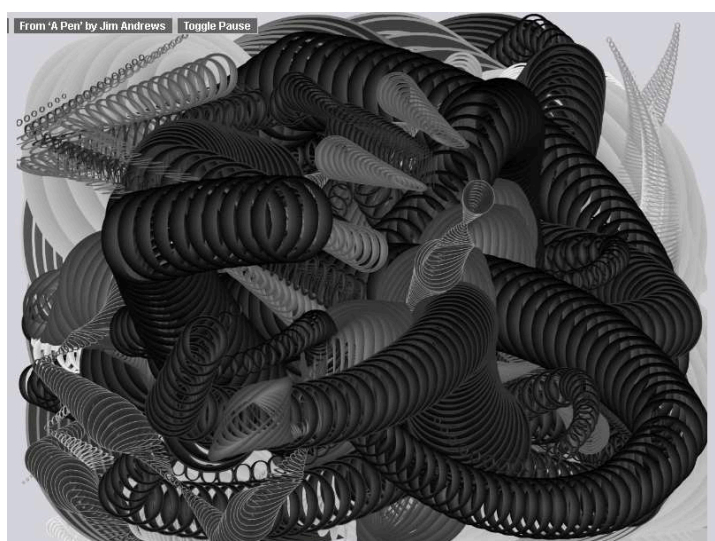


The geometrical arrangement of the letters and music notation empties the letters of their linguistic function and brings to the foreground their aesthetic value as forms. The reference to runes in the title of Kempton's composition shows his fascination with writing systems and other alphabets, in particular Rune 10 reproduces the letter "b" of the Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet, and the capital "R" of Rose to draw what could be a stained glass window in a cathedral.

The output in all three cases, being static and yet somehow dynamic, addresses a poetics of contemplation. In it the graphic signs become vehicles to a new mode of reception, the letters can not be separated from the visuals, there is no need to negotiate percentages, by using the letters to conform the image itself, the visual poem has already dynamited those considerations. The production process, however, has changed significantly. It is hard to conceive of such drawings without the help of a computer.

For many visual and experimental poets, computers play an integral role in the composition of their poetry. A seminal case in this field is Jim Andrews, many of whose works take the Lettrist tradition and push it a step further, making Apollinaire's dream of a mechanized poetry a reality. See, for example, his piece "0" from "A Pen" (Fig.6).

The computer allows the artist to break free from the bidimensionality of the plane of a page and explore the aesthetic dimension of letters in a three-dimensional space. Using the animation program Shockwave, the computer reproduces a choreography of types dancing in the screen,



leaving periodic traces of the space they occupy, hypnotizing the viewer with a new canvass of infinite writing space with which he can interact. Each image, frozen instant, is unique, irrecoverable, the image can never be recreated in the same way twice due to the program's aleatory working and the interactivity it permits. The original structure of the type is maintained, which allows the work to retain some meaningful reference to abstract concepts, for example the reference to the 0's productivity, omnipresence.

As we have seen, one of the continuous lines of exploration that runs through visual poetry across different times and places is a fascination with what we could call the glyph. We could use this term, with all its richness of meaning, to refer to letters or any other element of writing, but we could also underscore its typographic meaning – the specific shape, design, or representation of a character– as well as its archaeological one – a glyph being a carved or inscribed symbol–, which carries with it the mystery of ancient and distant cultures, emphasizing also the performative, ritual value of the act of writing. Writing code also retains that mysticism, through the inscription of lines of code things are done in the virtual space; writing and editing on the server itself becomes a sort of magic procedure that allows you to perform live on the Net. In some respects, we could say that the digital medium has recuperated the performative dimension of writing, akin to the ephemerality of lines drawn in the sand for a concentrated audience that will soon disperse and leave no trace, unless some body writes a record of the event, makes a photograph or a video.

### **The performative dimension of visual poetry**

It is impossible to understand a piece of visual poetry without interpreting the way in which the work performs itself on its canvass, be it the space of the page, the frame of the painting, or other medium. The viewer needs some training to be able to appreciate the theatrical potential of the visual text's performativity, even when there are no verbal analogues to the elements used in it. The performance takes place on the mind of the observer, through its "interior eye", or as Johanna Drucker would name it, "l'oeil interieur"; the various processes of seeing and

reading by which sense is made. But it is necessary to remark that Drucker isolates this type of reading from any oral rendering of the text, it is pure sight without pronunciation (1998, p. 103). However, this dissociation between sight and sound can, in many instances, become impossible to achieve. Even when the visual poem might contain elements that cannot be translated to a linguistic meaning, the experience often fuses all the senses. The separation is artificial but it responds to a cultural tradition of reading, the Western tradition, which has dissociated the moment of artistic contemplation from its social context, often constructing it as a moment of isolation between the reader/spectator and the work of art. There are, nevertheless, other traditions and ways of constructing the scenario for the visual poem's performative dimension that might shed some light into the specificity of our own way of relating to visual poetry.

- Navajo ceremonial sandpaintings:

The Navajo ceremonial sandpainting are an ancient type of ephemeral visual art. They are part of the complex Navajo chantway system, along with songs, masked dances and other rituals, such as body painting and offerings to the gods. They were not made to be "art objects" but rather as part of an elaborate healing ritual. The sandpaintings function as narratives, as legends that help restore a balance between negative and positive elements, drawing a sacred geography of magic places, animals, and spirits.

In the sandpainting we can see in Fig. 6, the underlying narrative centers around "One-who-goes-about-picking-up-discarded-things," also called Scavenger. Taken captive and enslaved by hostile Pueblo Indians, the boy is hoisted by them into a high eagle's nest, to throw down young eagles and to be left there to die. Forewarned by the gods he ascends but refuses to throw the birds down. Thereafter he is protected and nurtured by the parent eagles (REICHARD, 1977, n/p).

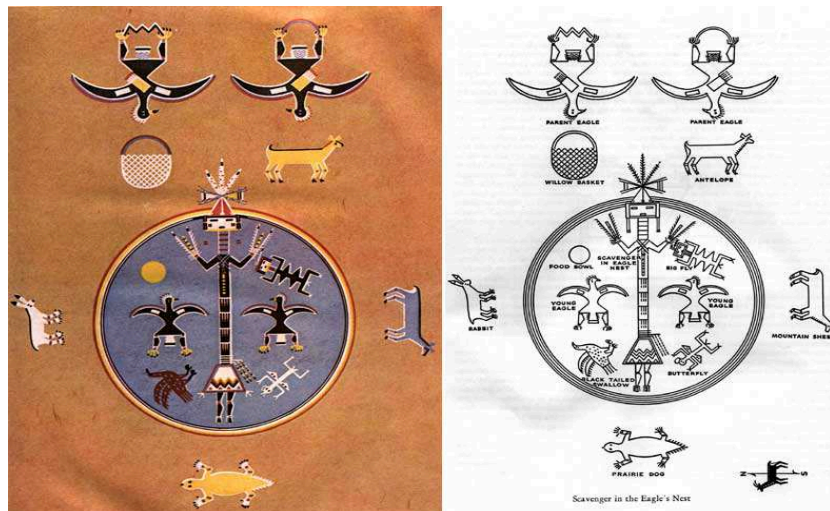


Fig.7. Bead Chant. Navajo Sandpainting (Ubuweb).

The Bead Chant sand paintings continue through nine installments, accompanied by songs and other appropriate actions. The medicine man and artist in question is identified as Miguelito, year of birth about 1865 . The artist is, therefore, also the healer, since the ceremonial sandpaintings often have a medical, as well as spiritual, purpose. After the elaborate construction of the painting, the person that needed healing was asked to sit on top of the sandpainting, which was supposed to act as a portal so that the healing spirits could come through the painting. Once the ceremony was over, the patient was considered healed from the illness afflicting him, this had been contained by the sandpainting, which was destroyed in a prescribed manner.

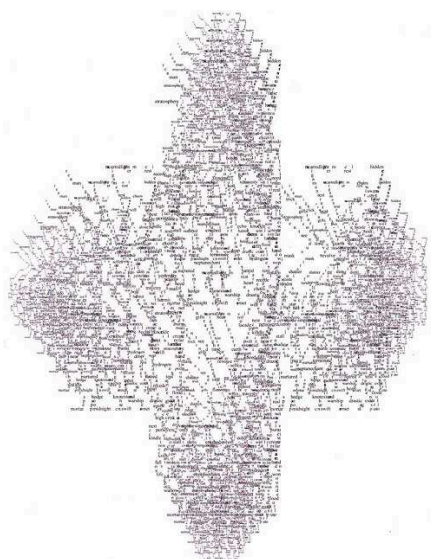


Fig.8. Portal 8. Andrew Topel.

A different type of portal is offered by Andrew Topel, who has created a cloud of names, a virtual topography of unreadable words, which, when we look at it closely, does take us to a mythological plane; the cold, complex world of computer graphics as the best representation of our contemporary life, loaded with information and yet so empty of physical human contact. Where are our medicine men, one wonders, are our visual poets telling us something that could heal us or

are we confronting a communication breakdown?

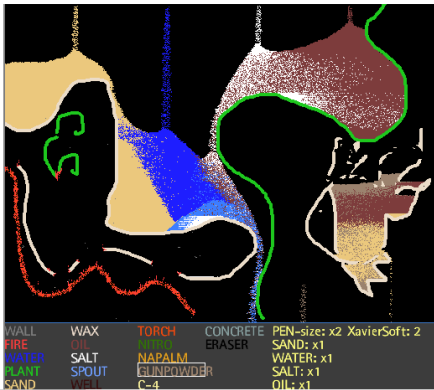


Fig. 9. Sandpainting to go by María. At [http://www.artsology.com/sand\\_paintin\\_g.php](http://www.artsology.com/sand_paintin_g.php)

Even when sandpainting is a form of ephemeral art, its function and form is communicated from one generation of medicine men to another, maintaining the tradition of this communal symbolic world. Curiously, the internet has facilitated the transmission of this cultural form to a much wider audience, through its web one can

now have access to numerous photographs and records of Navajo sandpaintings. Even a computer program has been created to playfully illustrate the type of materials and techniques used by sandpainting artists to elaborate their beautiful creations (oil, salt, sand, wax, fire, plants, etc.) (Fig.9).

Poetry's intrinsic performativity, its recitation, has acquired new creative possibilities in digital poetry, which has played extensively with poems' lyrical and musical qualities. An interesting example of the integration of image, sound and poetry can be seen in *Born Magazine*, in the short film created by Montreal artists Mathieu Doyon and Simon Rivest on Paul Gibbons' poem "Like wings abandoned from some future score". In it, the voice of the poet reciting his poem is synchronized, lipdubbed by a sequence of people in different locations that collectively share the poem. As *Born Magazine* editors comment in their retrospective book preview, from the moment broadband internet access became mainstream, video and audio began to infiltrate more profusely the collaborations between visual artists (film makers, graphic designers, etc.) and poets. This fusion is reconnecting poetry with its spoken-art roots and, as in Ancient Greek or Shakespearean poetry, is incorporating it into larger artistic productions. As it is common in the history of visual poetry, the genre question continuously emerges, is it a film or is it a poem?

- Shaker Visual Poetry (Gift Drawings and Gift Songs)

The Shaker visual poetry is another curious cultural product that fuses language and image in artistic forms, but, as the Navajo paintings and weaving, it is outside the domain of customarily accepted literature. However, the artistic manifestations of the Shakers, unknowingly predated some of the work of the most radical poetic experimenters.

The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing –called “Shakers”- was a religious group that originated in England. They practiced communal living and equality of the sexes, along with a reputedly complete abstention from sexual intercourse. After suffering persecution in England, the Shakers traveled to America in 1774, where for many years they increased the number of converts reaching 6,000 before they disappeared in the twentieth century.

Between 1837 and 1850 (known as the Era of Manifestations) the Shakers created some sort of visionary drawings that they called gifts. These were spiritual messages and visions experienced by one individual, which were later transcribed by another in the form of pictorial and symbolic messages, such as this anonymous *Spirit Message*, from 1843 (Fig.10).

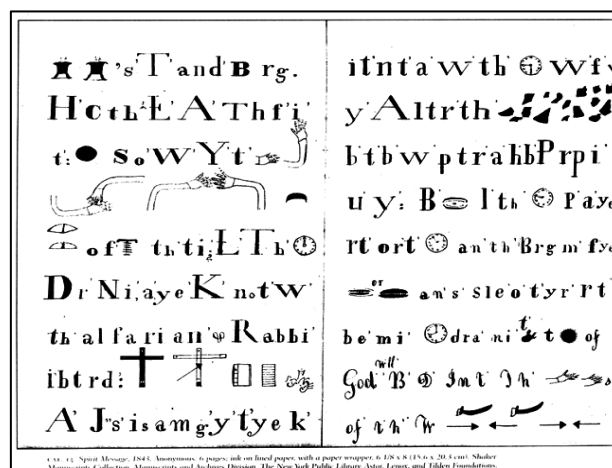


Fig. 10. Anonymous *Spirit Message*, from 1843. NYPL Digital Gallery.

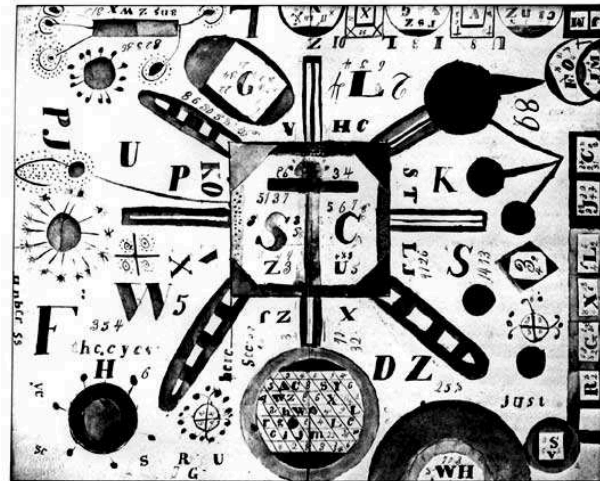
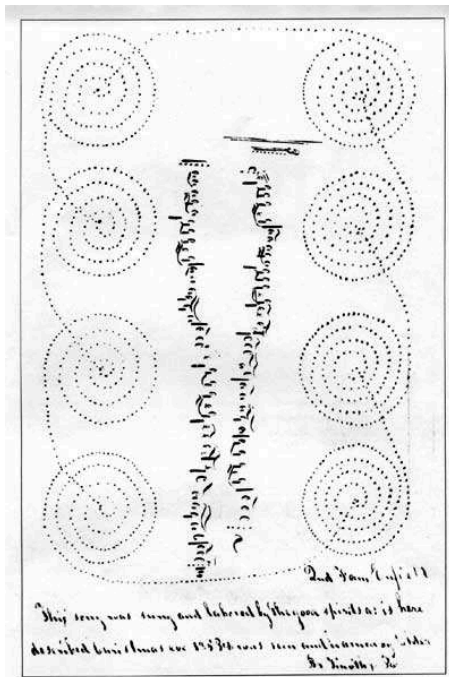
The content of the spirit message is lost forever, what is retained, however, is its aesthetic force, thus, like medieval cartography, it will not take us anywhere, but it is beautiful to contemplate and can tell us unexpected things about its maker. We see, for example, that the message is handwritten with ink in a lined paper, which, contrary to a white page, provides a sense of order and discipline. The lines in the paper are respected throughout the manuscript except at one moment in which chaos intrudes in the form of some broken black pieces. The work is mostly made of a combination of letters which are drawn following a variety of typographical styles (as if they represented different voices), capital and small case, but there is not a single number. Letters, like in a Lettrist poem, are isolated and do not form words, only a few syllables, except for the words “God”, which is the most clearly recognizable one, “not” and “will”, this last one added as an afterthought next to “God”. There are other graphic symbols, among them some little tables, hands and arms, crosses, swords, some strange notation, and most conspicuously, clock spheres marking different times, which point to a highly ordered lifestyle inside the community. The author has also used some punctuation symbols, specially the apostrophe, which seems to mark the rhythm in which the message has been delivered.

As you can see, the Shaker drawing is chaos in disguise, the document of a vision that is at once highly organized and indecipherable, child-like and profound. It shares an extraordinary family resemblance with the practice of later poets and artists. Like modernist experiments, the gift drawings seem to mix all sorts of linguistic and graphic symbols, trying to transcribe in the most precise way the messages perceived by visionaries, something similar to a home-made automatic language to represent complex sensations of the subconscious. Many of the reflections that Johanna Drucker exposed with respect to the art of Maurice Lemaître can be applied also to describe the art of the Shakers, and by extension a multiplicity of visual poetry digital works:

[T]hey question the process of conversion which is undergone in reading them: do they go from image to words, or to concepts already meaningful without linguistic translation? The potential of the visual sign to escape linguistic definitions and rules is



suggested (...), and in the process the nature of the system within which meaning might be fixed when signs lack syntactic or semantic stability is questioned. Outside such stable systems, the link between private act and public fact in language is threatened (1998, p. 85).



↑ Fig. 11. *Sacred roll* [untitled booklet], 1840-43. Anonymous. Ink and watercolor on paper.

← Fig. 12. Shaker Song recorded at Enfield, New Hampshire in 1853. Ubuweb.

This Shaker drawing (Fig. 12) represents visiting spirits dancing in circles. Identified as a song, the vertical writing in the center seems to be glossographia – wordless text and/or musical notation. As such it would match up with a range of Shaker spirit songs given "in tongues" by spiritual messengers that came from distant periods and locations. This Shaker song can be considered a sound-poem, preceding the experiments of Dadaists by nearly a century. The Shakers also developed their own musical notation as well as a kind of musical "free verse," anticipating Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Actually Walt Whitman, son of a Quaker, was probably familiarized with this type of manifestations, as he was also well acquainted with native American culture (curiously, he was the only major American poet to work in the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior). But what has been noted about the Shakers is that they contradicted many traditional

notions about art, specially the notion of authorship, by creating a collaborative artistic manifestation.

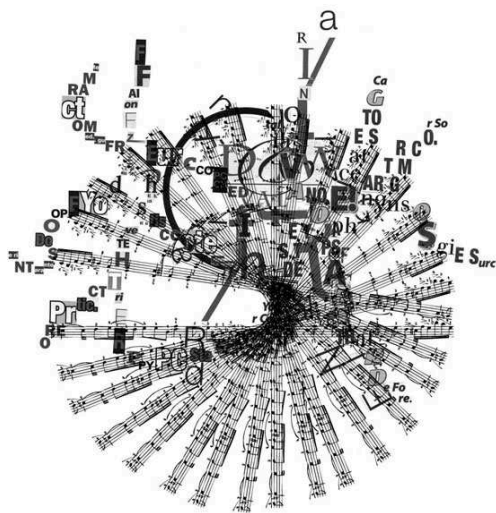


Fig. 13. A Topel-Soundless

The relationship between language and music has been also an essential field of exploration not only in visual poetry but also in sound poetry. Andrew Topel, for example, has a series of works dedicated to the interplay of letters and musical notation (“The sound becomes seen” at [http://antipodes.org.au/en.pure\\_concept\\_19.html](http://antipodes.org.au/en.pure_concept_19.html)), in which Fig. 5, a Topel song for Karl Kempton is also included. As in the Shaker song, it is impossible to read conventionally either the letters or the notes. There is no point of entry, no beginning or end, but there is a concentrated tension in the middle, a momentum which seems to gather speed, and it would not surprise us if next thing we know, the picture has spiraled off the page.

These bidimensional works contain their own choreography, the interior eye decodifies their elements in conjunction with their shape and spatial configuration. The spatial features of the page; center and margins, foreground and background, play their own particular role in the performance. Their “unpronounceability” does not turn them mute.

Jim Andrews also explores this relationship in his work *Nio*. In his introductory essay, Andrews reflects on the differences between his Lettrist experiments and his work with sound: “Written words and sentences do not have easy access to the primal or the harmonic/dissonant reveries of pure sound or the

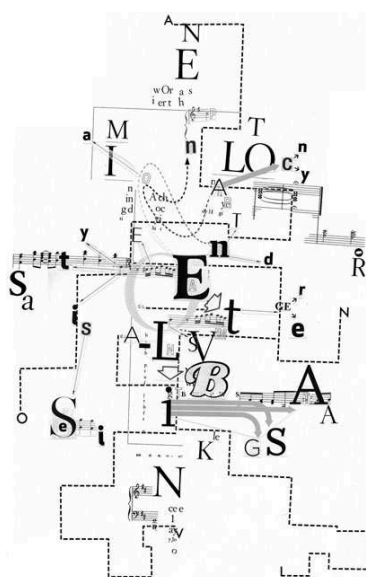


Fig. 14. A Topel-Soundless  
13

meaningful repetition, variance, trance, and pattern of the drum” (2001, n/p). As in the Shaker song, order and chaos can be juxtaposed in a very immediate, transparent way, using sound. Curiously, experimenting with sound has allowed him to realize that image and language have already found a sort of “dynamic fusion” in the digital domain, and that a similar fusion can take place between what is “written”, that is, recorded, and what is spoken.

### Relocating, Recycling and Remediating Letters:

There is another powerful drive that connects visual poetry of distant periods and locations, a compulsion that emerges from a special way of seeing, a shared attitude with respect to language and images, life and art. The long tradition of “found objects” accounts for this; it is the poet’s craft and peculiar perspective that allows him to discover poems all around him, it becomes a kind of visual dysfunction, a playful distortion and meddling with background and foreground, subverting hierarchies, dominant modes of distribution, breaking the constraints of the medium, going beyond the frame of the printed page or the screen. It is the poet’s synaesthetic sensibility the one that distils the input received from his senses into a single experience, just wondering in the streets, in the collage of



Fig. 12. Concrete series, No.7, Andrew Topel, in *Renegade*.

neon lights, graffitis, advertisements and traffic signs. The “anonymous poem” that Cortázar found in the juxtaposition of old and new posters in a Parisian street, for example, is another instance of visual poetry’s encounter.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes what is found is the right canvass, leaving aside preconceived notions of the specificity of a written medium for poetry, either print or digital, visual poetry overflows all

<sup>8</sup> Available in: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6-xkeuMLnk&feature=relmfu>>.

sorts of containers. The internet becomes the place to archive testimonies of their one-time existence, gather audiences' reactions and commentaries, expound manifestoes and theories in respect to them, but it just works as a megaphone medium, to create ripples in the ocean of disinformation. See, for example, the Concrete series by Andrew Topel. The author writes about the process of composing the poems in a fashion reminiscent of John Cage's famous opus 4'33"<sup>9</sup>:

On Concrete: the concrete photographs are a series of site-specific art works that exist now only as images. i call them poems; some may look at them and ask, 'where's the poem?' and i would respond - the poem was the sounds the birds made as i laid down each letter. the poem was the feel of the wind against my skin as i worked outdoors. the poem was the construction workers, the police officer, looking into whether or not i was vandalizing. the poem was the clouds moving overhead, the time slipping away, the shadows moving in as the afternoon became evening (TOPEL, 2012, n/p).

Reading between the lines of Topel's description, we can elucidate that the letters in the composition are not supposed to be read, that would be fruitless, the poem, as John Cage would confirm, has nothing to say, and that is poetry as he needs it.

Another way of interpreting his work would be his need to express that poetry is more a process, an experience, than an object that can be fixed for ever in a particular medium. Nothing will remain for ever and that is why the poet needs to be aware of the flux of life as it passes.

The art of recycling letters is closely connected with this awareness of the obsolescence of things around us. Actually, one of the experimental forms to come out of the modernist visual arts that had a major impact upon poetry was collage. The modern visual poem is generally composed with disassembled language material, including texts, words, phonic characters, types, ciphers, symbols,

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<sup>9</sup> 4'33" is one of John Cage's most famous pieces. "For any instrument or combination of instruments" its score only instructs the performer not to play his instrument, and to remain 4 minutes and 33 seconds in silence. The piece was not the silence itself but all the noises the audience could hear from their surroundings at that specific moment.

pictographs, accents, lines, etc. What the poet does is find new, unexpected places for those signs, relocating the sign. Taking the sign out of its context plays the double function of destroying its function and exposing the internal logic of the system in which it belongs.

Creating with discarded material, like newspaper and magazine clippings, for example, had the collateral effect of transforming the artistic field by subverting hierarchies, ideas of purity, perfectionism, skill. In this same line of thought, a defining characteristic of the Fluxus movement was the intention of democratizing art, an essential quality of the Fluxus artistic object was the inscription in its intended reception process of an impulse to create, borrow, recycle what the artist had proposed to the viewer; an active incitement to the spectator to become an artist himself.

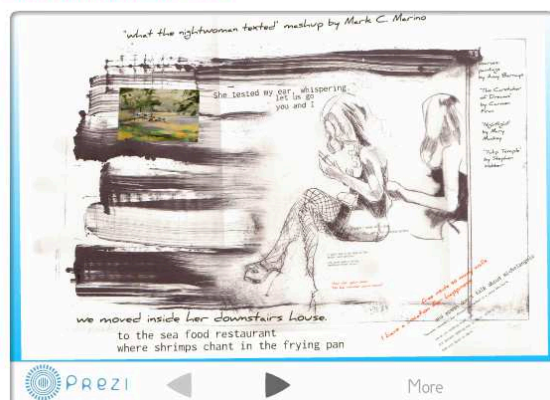
Digital literature abounds in these sort of experiments. Some works of visual and kinetic digital poetry propose to the reader a container, a sort of genre that can be filled with new content. These works are at the same time instances of poetry and genres in themselves, proposing a “do-it-yourself” mode of approximation to be able to thoroughly understanding the piece. The “E-Lit Cube” by Jeremy Douglass or the Mash-ups of Mark C. Marino and his colleagues at BunkMagazine, are good examples of this. You can pay homage to the forerunners of concrete poetry, creating your own Mesostic à la John Cage at <http://www.euph0r1a.net/mesostomatic/>, or participate in a more Web 2.0.-spirit using the Wordle tool for creating word clouds.

In these cases, the poet’s responsiveness has reused not just a text but a program to process text, an strategy that belongs to the new generation of digital poets and that has been extensively analyzed by Loss Pequeño Glazier in *Digital Poetics*. Many of these programs process input text and produce output, according to the modifiers specified by the user. The Mesostomatic game, for instance, uses a type of program that tries to find the letters in the vertical word you have written in its starting page on the web page of your choice to compose a mesostic. And Wordle is a “toy”, a little program for generating “word clouds” also from text that you

provide. The clouds give greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the source text. You can afterward transform the clouds with different fonts, layouts, and color schemes.

Very often these programs were created with a different purpose in mind. Mark C. Marino, for his Mash-up “What the Night Woman Textes”, has used Prezi, a tool for animating presentations using the zoom. In this piece, Marino has combined the collage fondness of modernists with the playful interactivity of the digital medium. Zooming in and out of the first frame, the reader will encounter fragments of texts and paintings that, by changing their size, will create a labyrinthine effect in which lines of text appear and disappear inside the paintings, penetrating different layers of text and visuals, making the reader lose spatial coordinates and points of reference.

what the nightwoman texted



([http://bunkmagazine.com/madbunkers/layout/demo\\_bunk\\_5.htm](http://bunkmagazine.com/madbunkers/layout/demo_bunk_5.htm))

## Reading moving letters

As we have seen, visual poets have always had an intense concern for the materiality of language, for its limits, and the possibility of play at the interstices between the fixidity of its medium, and the fluidity of its symbols. The most obvious transformation in digital visual poetry is the introduction of animation effects through programmable media such Flash. Alexandra Saemmer accounts for this qualitative change thus:

The word “dog” does not move its tale, notes Baruch Spinoza. On an electronic support, the word “dog” can run across the screen.



When the reader clicks on the letters, he can make the dog bark. Since words on screen are hyperlinked and animated, certain authors started to dream about a new semantic proximity between words and images. (...) Words rediscover their “materiality”, they become colored, are transformed into new graphic forms; being freely laid out in space, they suggest a simultaneity which was formerly characteristic of images; becoming animated, they acquire a new plastic dimension; being hyperlinked, they are now palpable, touchable.” (2007, p. 151)”

But what is really at stake is the very understanding of writing, either as the process of production of something fixed, a text, or a more fluid understanding of writing as process, open to continuous transformation, collaboration, interactivity. This second interpretation is what most visual/kinetic digital poets would defend.

Some seminal authors that have established and theorized the field of North American digital visual poetry are:

- Loss Pequeño Glazier (Electronic Poetry Center, University of Buffalo, Albany) (<<http://epc.buffalo.edu>>).
- Jim Andrews (*Vispo Langu(im)age* at [www.vispo.com](http://www.vispo.com))
- Robert Kendall (<<http://www.wordcircuits.com/kendall/>>)

As Glazier acknowledges in his introduction to *Digital Poetics*, the role of sites for archiving and disseminating poetry and related writing is central to the success of electronic poetry (3). Some sites of reference are:

- Kaldron Magazine (<[www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/kaldron.htm](http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/kaldron.htm)>)
- Ubuweb (<[www.ubu.com](http://www.ubu.com)>)
- Born Magazine: Art and Literature, Together (<[www.bornmagazine.org](http://www.bornmagazine.org)>)

## Conclusions

Kinetic/Visual poetry has aspirations to become a total art form integrating image, text, sound, animation, interactivity. It recuperates not only the visual dimension of

linguistic signs, but also their sonority, and other synaesthetic webs of connection. It involves a return to the integration of poetry inside wider artistic forms, such as computer art or film.

To be able to appreciate fully this type of poetry the reader needs to integrate some new reading strategies and become aware of the demands the genre and medium require of him:

- The Medium is the Message. When we privilege the material dimension of writing, the aesthetic properties of typography, we allow the reader to step back and return to the poem with a new perspective; all writing in general but the visual poem in particular has the capacity to be both looked at and read, and eventually also to function as the sign of an absent signified. The aesthetic quality of the sign is all there is, until the reader/spectator fills it with his own meaning.
- Poetry as Game
- Enhanced Synaesthesia
- The performative dimension of poetry acquires a greater importance, it is not the end product that is important but the process of composition.
- The shared interpretative conventions of a community of readers and writers become essential, as in primitive cultures. Without an initiation inside its modes of production and reception the reader might feel lost, without reference points to appreciate the piece.
- The act of describing, reporting, interpreting, archiving, acquires a new relevance inside the field of digital poetry, since many of its works are ephemeral experiences, depend on processes that leave no trace, thus recorded descriptions will be the only testimony of the existence of the poem.

What comes to the surface after this revision of some examples of digital poetry, on the light of their predecessors, is that their insertion on the World Wide Web has somehow facilitated the recuperation of the performative dimension of poetry, its inclusion into a wider frame or totalizing art form: everyday life. Internet



becomes a surrogate urban landscape where the poet can feel the power of beauty, the magic attraction of linguistic symbols, music, but also noise, silences; absences. The mechanic eye, moving at a pace in tune with its time, finds poems all around, composes them on every screen, interface, layout, out of any material, any program, any input text. The screen mediates but does not inhibit the fusion of the poet with his surroundings, a deformed reverie that magnetizes when meeting a potentially creative piece of software, an attractive typography, the right canvas or frame. We can conclude that Marshall McLuhan's recuperation law is fulfilled. Poetry has become again an ubiquitous genre, at least in the digital domain.

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