

## INTERVIEW WITH DANIELA CALISI

Daniele Giampà\*

**ELR<sup>1</sup>:** Between 1997 and 1999 you composed dynamic poetry <http://www.contentodesign.it/> and thus you are one of its earliest Italian composers. Where did your project and your interest in electronic literature come from? Where did you get your inspiration?

**Calisi:** In fact my first attempts were in 93/94. I was looking for a poetic form that would allow me to express a multiplicity of voices and points of view that for me are continually changing and evolving. I was trying to figure out what shape literature might have in the age of new media, in the age of television and electronic music, recombinant DNA, quantum physics. Within this context, what form would the text take?

**ELR:** At the 2013 show you exhibited your poetry machines. Can you explain the relationship between art and your poetry? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2tIQ4u2QPQ>

**Calisi:** The first poetry machine was in 2006. I wanted to build something "warm", portable, tangible and physical. An object which was not electronic in itself but was the consequence of a way of thinking, an experience and of a process which to a great extent were digital.

The poetry machines are hybrid objects that pass several times from the material status to the digital and backwards, becoming reinterpreted and enriched with every step. I keep track of these steps and make them explicit by producing a different evolution of the same text each time.

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After having finished writing a text, I leave it to settle, sometimes for years. Re-reading it later I always feel that I would have liked to have been more precise or deeper, or I contradict myself and just play with the words. I have developed a method for annotating these corrections with slashes, parentheses, and divisions. It's something I do in pencil on paper. I do this several times, looking for points of articulation between the letters from which to develop alternatives. At a certain point, reading the text starts to get a bit complex: instructions are needed.

When I transcribe the text to the computer I do it directly in HTML. I start trying to figure out how to move the changeable parts, which script to use, which form of interaction with the reader. I make two or three different versions, each takes me a few weeks or a few months. Then I make a Flash version. If it is a recombinant text I use a textual comb structure, which I designed years ago. In the final version the code looks for an external file that lists the options for each verse. Each verse is an object that loads its contents from the external array and then runs an animation. If instead the text is mutant I animate everything by hand, letter by letter.

However, in 2009 I wrote a piece of code that "sifts" every letter, word and verse and assigns to each element a unique name. In that way I can recall every single letter, word or verse and trigger their behaviours directly from the code.

Then I have to consider the problem of graphics, fonts, images. Usually I only do it for the version that I post on [contentodesign.it](http://contentodesign.it). Sometimes I also make versions in English or French. When I start thinking about how to make the poetry machine, first I do drawings by hand. Then various prototypes in paper, using sliding parts and windows that close to reproduce the movements of the text. Sometimes I photograph the mechanism and reconstruct the interactions and movements, adding more elements to the text in a digital version for publication on the web.

For the construction of the machine itself, I always need technical and creative support: the first time I worked with Enrico Saletti for wooden parts, inner workings and wax finish, and with Raffaella Brusaglino to learn how to create the background and the writing of the text. In recent years I have collaborated with Christiana Daneo, a puppeteer who invents and builds control mechanisms for puppet theatre.

When Fab Lab came to Torino I thought it was an opportunity to re-build one of the poetry machines. I made a font with my own calligraphy and vectored the outlines of

one of the paper versions, faithfully preserving all the typical defects of something handmade. I sent the vector file to the laser cutter and made several copies, both in paper and in wood. At this point, Christiana and I designed and made the templates, mounting them directly on the wooden plank.

I then hand-coloured the engraved text and the background.

From the same text, also in the English version, we made four functioning poetry micro-machines, in brass and wood, wearable like jewelled brooches.

For me, the work is procedural because is formed by the entire set of these translations from real to digital and vice versa, and it is potentially never finished because a new translation is always possible.

On the other hand each single variant is, if you will, a work of art in itself, to be enjoyed as such but which also invites you to think about the implications of its digital or physical status: Is it a product? Is it a work to be preserved (or not) in time and - if so - in which manner? If it is a message to be broadcast to the public, upon which assumptions?

**ELR:** On your website you explain your concept of text; could you reiterate the most important concepts?

"the behaviour and the change of the text within time: a language that is not linear, but that which expresses a complexity of voices.

The ability of the text to change its form: changes of visibility, location, shape, size and colour.

the ability of the text to change its meaning: the word combined with other words creates relationships of transformation, mutation, permutation, anagrams.

the ability of the text to react to the actions of the reader, but also, more broadly, the ways in which the text shapes and facilitates the relationship between action and reaction; "

**Calisi:** I wrote this in 2001 on [contentodesign.it](http://contentodesign.it) and I think is still true.

The 2 necessary concepts are: the trigger and the time.

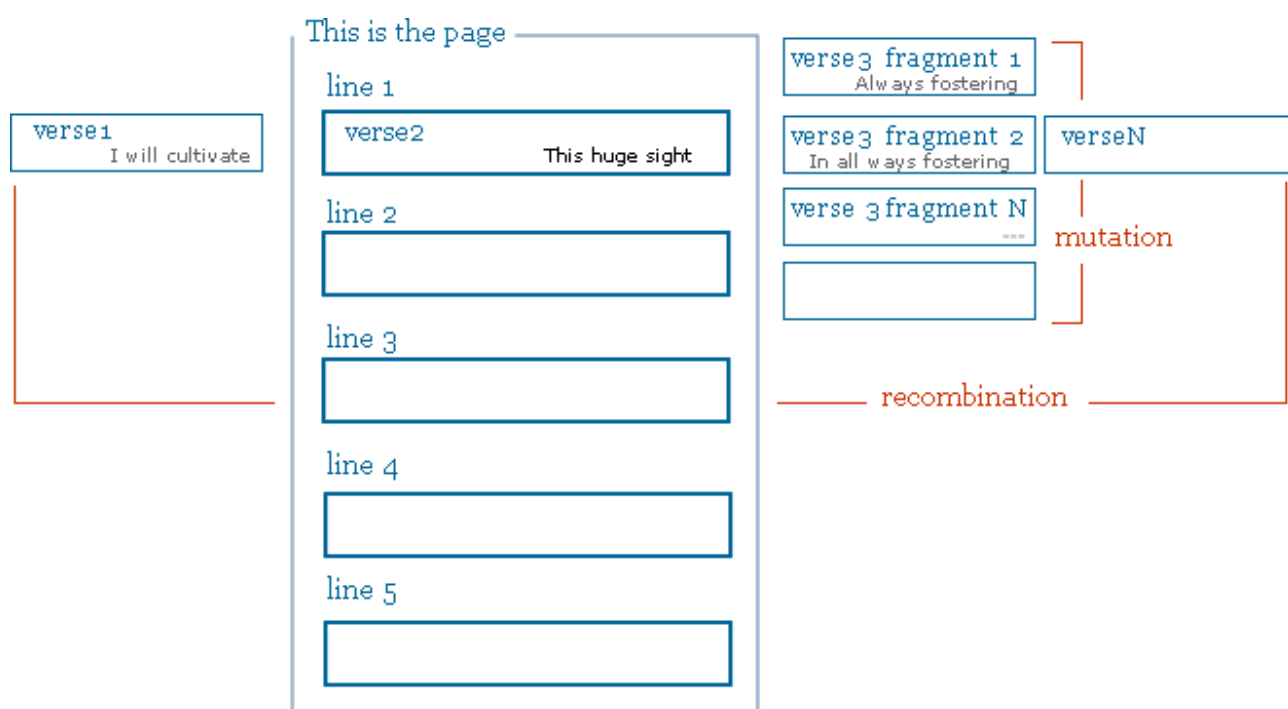
The trigger is the external reality that instigates behaviours in the text: it is that which starts the clock.

The time is defined as time outside the text: that which happens in the world of the reader; that within the text: all the different timelines that the text performs; and that

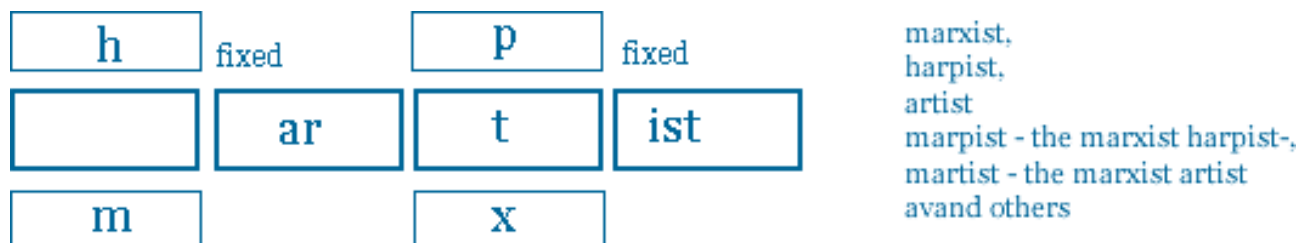
which is constructed by the text, which is the time of the meaning both as recounted and understood.

Without these two elements, the text cannot unfold.

The texts that I call “mutants” have a protein-like form; they are like a ball of string. They can be asymmetrical in their development but do not have a random structure. Whether the mutation occurs at the level of the verse or the word I always treat them as variations that “flow” within an ideal structure.



Within each line run variants of the verse, within each verse run variations of the word, within the word run fragments, fixed and changeable, which generate variants.



**ELR:** In your opinion can the works created and used on electrical devices be defined as literature? Where do you see the differences and similarities between digital and paper publishing?

**Calisi:** To the first question I answer yes, I personally consider these as considerations within the scope of literature.

With regard to print and digital publishing one point should first be clarified: the whole process of creation and production of a book, from writing to the printing press, is a digital process. The final product that we find in the bookshop is the physical result of a digital process.

The issues relating to the alleged rivalry between digital books and paper books are largely due to issues that affect sales. In Europe, for example, there is a directive that imposes a tax of 22% upon digital books, equating them with electronic products, while paper books are taxed at a reduced rate of 4% as cultural products. It seems absurd that the same book is or is not a cultural product depending on the support on which it is read. It's obvious that there is protectionism for the printed book, and it is understandable that there are concerns regarding the disappearance of a product of high cultural value.

But as Joe Clark said in an old article on [alistapart.com](http://alistapart.com): "The Internet has not replaced television, which in turn has not replaced the cinema, which has not replaced books. Nor will e-books replace books. E-books **are** books, only in a different format. "

If we take the U.S. market as an example, we see that, in the face of the spread of ebooks, which at the end of the fourth quarter of 2010 accounted for 13.6% of the market for fiction and 6% of the total market, the segments that suffered the most are the commercial types (romance novels, thrillers and science fiction) with a decrease of 26.6% in paperback sales across the mass market. Widening the picture it turns out, however, that non-fiction and hardcover fiction have not experienced particularly significant declines and the overall market has grown by 2%, so publishing *in toto* is not suffering.

It would seem obvious that the future of the book will see a product differentiation, in which the physical object takes on the characteristics of a luxury product that differs

from the digital object because there is a work on paper, which gives an added value to the content.

From the creative point of view then other issues arise: the majority of digital eBooks are conversions of paper books. Beyond technical support there is no innovation. The reasons are many but I mention only a few:

First of all, the simple conversion of a book from paper to digital costs very little.

Amazon, the largest player in the market, sells only one format, .mobi, which does not support interactive animations and only allows you to enlarge a pop-up in some parts of the book.

A few 'Digital First' authors still exist who are able to conceive a work designed for the digital age. Those who carry out research and experiments in electronic literature do not have close relationships with publishing, they lie rather in the artistic or academic sphere, and never have to deal with the problems of the public and the market.

**ELR:** You have been a collaborator in the start-up PubCoder since 2013. <http://www.pubcoder.com/>. Unlike the conventional ebook reader PubCoder offers many innovative options. Could you explain some of them?

**Calisi:** PubCoder is software for creating interactive books. It was designed to allow next-generation authors to develop their digital works without having to deal with coding, concentrating their efforts on the text, interactions, animations, navigation, sounds, videos. Obviously, the code is always available and one can intervene and modify it at any point.

For each item you put on the page it is possible to detect the interactions of the reader, for example when he or she touches, caresses, tilts or shakes the screen.

For each of these events it is also possible to apply complex behaviours by simply listing the sequence of actions that you wish to be performed.

Starting from one interactive text it is possible to derive different versions, for example to create a different navigation or translation, whilst maintaining all the functions within the same project.

Once you have finished processing it is possible to create an app or an eBook, or to upload to the web.

This technology is easy to use, you can download it from the internet – from [www.pubcoder.com](http://www.pubcoder.com) - and you don't need a big budget to use it.

Once the elaboration of the ebook is finished it is possible to create either an IOS or an Android app, or an ebook in standard EPUB3 format, or even .mobi a sell your work through the main on line stores.