

Intermedialities in Visual Poetry: Futurist “Polyexpressivity” and net.art

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to investigate the crucial role of Futurist visual poetry as starting point in the creation of an interconnected and expansive net of interdependencies between traditional artistic branches and new media in the Western world. At the beginning of the 20th-century, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and his colleagues launched their systematic program of action as a result of the impact of new technologies on their creative process. They coined neologisms as “polyexpressivity” or “multisensoriality” to define the essence of their cultural productions based on the equivalence and the mixing of media to stimulate and implicate the participant in the construction of a total artwork. Futurist contribution constitutes a milestone in the field of intermedial studies, and it can help determine the idiosyncrasy of net.art and other innovative cultural expressions in the digital age, a new period of transition.

Key words: digital poem, intermediality, Futurism, net.art, “polyexpressivity”, visual poetry.

The conceptualization of intermediality is closely related to early 20th-century avant-garde movements where media borders were continuously overlapped. Among all the cultural proposals at that period, Futurism still retains an important place in the integration of traditionally separate disciplines into a single work through the use of new media and the influence of technological development.

It is not a coincidence that the inaugural act of Futurism was the publication in 1909 of the foundational manifesto in *Le Figaro*, the most popular daily newspaper at that time in Paris. Its author, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, used mass media to spread Futurist postulates beyond Italian frontiers to reach the whole world through an unprecedented campaign that led up to the age of globalization. He launched his antitraditional and revolutionary program from the cultural epicentre of Europe to attack the heart of high culture in order to claim the beginning of a new era inspired by ‘the beauty of speed’. It was one of the first attempts to set a theoretical system to bring the

impact of technology, industrialization and new means of communication, transportation and information into the cultural field.

Marinetti started the Futurist reconstruction of the universe adopting the analogical foundation of life as the main principle to state a new socio-cultural scenario aligned with the effects of modernity in the way of living. Due to his literary roots, the analogy depicted the fulcrum of an intermedial condition where interdisciplinarity became an incomparable framework for creation. From visual poetry, the Futurist leader together with some of his colleagues as Ardengo Soffici, Fortunato Depero, Paolo Buzzi, Carlo Carrà or Francesco Cangiullo outlined a roadmap that could be applied in every artistic expression from painting to cinema, from literature to photography.

By doing so, the Futurists laid the foundations for achieving the same recognition both for old artistic fields and new technical media. They understood that new media was not just a simple consequence of industrial era but a decisive achievement that would change the whole cultural and social system. For this purpose, they tried to understand the fundamental conditions of every single medium to build a complex network of interdisciplinary intersections. It was also necessary to define the aims, challenges and boundaries of such an innovative project through a new vocabulary adapted to the current circumstances. Marinetti and his companions coined neologisms such as ‘polyexpressivity’, ‘modernolatry’ or ‘multisensoriality’ and adopted ‘dinamism’, ‘simultaneity’, ‘velocity’ and ‘totality’ as key words to express their faith in the potential synergies between art and media.

Futurist attempts to determine intermedial traits can be related to present efforts from Comparative Media Studies to define the impact of new technologies on the creation, dissemination and reception of knowledge in the digital age. Scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Werner Wolf, Lars Elleström, Marina Grishakova or Marie-Laure Ryan, among others, are exploring new options to refer to those intermedial processes resulting from media crossings. Therefore, as it happened at the beginning of last century, we are dealing with a broad variety of neologisms characterized by the use of prefixes like ‘trans-’, ‘cross-’, ‘inter-’, ‘multi-’, ‘pluri-’, ‘meta-’ and ‘post-’, and concepts like ‘hybridization’, ‘interactivity’, ‘transition’, ‘convergence’, ‘immersion’, etc.

Futurist practices on visual poetry and multisensoriality, influenced by collage paintings or film editing processes, became crucial to establish a complex system of “remediations”, as stated by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), between traditional arts and new media. As the experience of Marinetti and his revolutionary followers demonstrates, a systemic revision of artistic changes in line with technical development becomes essential to set new aesthetic and cultural principles, an intuition that nowadays makes more sense than ever before.

Italian avant-garde was not the first to look forward to an integration of the arts through a theoretical system. Starting with the German opera composer Richard Wagner, who in 1849 introduced the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, for many decades, artists, poets, musicians and theoreticians had been seeking a medium to create a total artwork and also to express their concern with individual and social consciousness.

In the early 18th-century, numerous treatises on the limits of the arts were published. They attempted the formulation of new strategies to reflect the transition of social and cultural sphere to modernity. Those proposals generated intense debates and controversies concerning the role of intellectuals and their position in an unrestrained ontological transition.

In contrast to Ricciotto Canudo's essay "La naissance d'un sixième art. Essai sur le cinématographe" (1911) or Futurist manifestos on the relation between different media, some theorists were against the interrelationship between artistic genres, such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who claimed that "these bad influences are manifested in poetry through descriptive obsession and in painting with the allegorical habit, wanting to turn the first a speaker box [...] and the last one a mute poem" (239).

After many frustrating attempts along the end of the 19th-century, in 1909 *Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo* was the first set of principles to push the limits of art to its breaking point. Marinetti's desire of provocation and rupture with traditions secured him a leading position among modernist cultural tendencies, *anticipating the experimental practices of the historical European avant-garde*:

We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! (...) It is from Italy that we launch through the world this violently upsetting incendiary manifesto of ours (...) The oldest of us is thirty: so we have at least a decade for finishing our work. When we are forty, other younger and stronger men will probably throw us in the wastebasket like useless manuscripts—we want it to happen! (...) Erect on the summit of the world, once again we hurl defiance to the stars! (Marinetti, 1909)

Futurism, as the avant-gardes that came after it, was grounded in the traumatic loss of faith in the traditional cognitive framework and in the experience of fragmentation and disintegration. In fact, the absence of coordinates became the starting point for their action program: "Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed." (Marinetti, 1909) As Asunción López-Varela pointed out:

At the centre of this crisis were the new technologies and methodologies of science, the epistemology of logical positivism and the relativism of functionalist thought [...] The artist as visionary would attempt to create what the culture could no longer produce: symbol and meaning in the dimension of art, brought into being through the agency of language. [...] (2011: 208-209).

Some of the most innovative Futurist contributions arose from the fundamental alterations in the perception of time and space caused by the introduction of railroads, photography and media communication. The depiction of speed and motion was meant to illustrate such technical developments through a rapid and vibrant style based on the principle of simultaneity. This term was introduced on February 1912 in the preface of the catalogue for the Futurist exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery in Paris (Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla, & Severini) and it represented the core idea of Futurist

imaginary. For this reason, Umberto Boccioni reacted angrily to Robert Delaunay's appropriation of this word.

The aim of Marinetti and his colleagues was to immerse the observer in the so-called "polyexpressive" experience, an all-embracing process that would appeal to all the feelings and senses simultaneously. Instead of representing one detail or another of the reality, Futurist art seeks to realize a "complete fusion in order to reconstruct the universe making it more joyful, in other words, recreating it entirely" (Balla and Depero, 1915). Hence, this creative procedure required both the fusion of all aesthetic experiences and a participative role of the viewer, only possible by virtue of an intermedial approach closely related to the cognitive concept of analogy.

In *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista* (1912), Marinetti proclaimed the destruction of syntax and the abolition of the punctuation. In this way, he stated that perception by analogy would settle the basis of an innovative methodology for both literature and the visual arts: "Analogy is nothing but the immense love that connects distant, seemingly different and hostile things. It is through very vast analogies that this orchestral style, at once polychromatic, polyphonic, and polymorphous, can embrace the life of matter." (Marinetti, 1912) In this text, he also mentioned the potentiality of "imagination without strings" and "words in freedom", two concepts that, one year later, he would develop in the manifesto of *Distruzione della sintassi - Immaginazione senza fili - Parole in libertà* (1913).

The imagination without strings, and words-in-freedom, will transport us to the essence of the matter. With the discovery of new analogies between things remote and apparently contradictory, we shall value them ever more intimately. Instead of humanizing animals, vegetables, and minerals (a bygone system) we will be able to animalize, vegetize, mineralize, electrify, or liquefy our style, making it live the very life of matter. For example, to render the life of a blade of grass, we might say; 'I will be greener tomorrow.' But with words-in-freedom we might have With: Condensed metaphors-Telegraphic images-Sums of vibrations-Knots of thought-Closed or open fans of movement- Foreshortened analogies-Color Balances-The dimensions, weights, sizes, and velocities of sensations-The plunge of the essential world into the water of sensibility, without the concentric eddies produced by words-Intuition's movements of repose-Movements in two, three, four, five different rhythms-Analytical exploratory telegraph poles that sustain the cable of intuitive strings. (Marinetti, 1913)

Marinetti also announced the introduction of 'onomatopoeic harmonies' to render the sounds and noise of modern life; the 'typographical revolution' to emphasize the expressive force of words; 'multilinear lyricism' to allow the poet to play with "several chains of colors, sounds, odors, noises, weights, densities, analogies. One line, for example, might be olfactory, another musical, another pictorial." (Marinetti, 1913) In "*Modernolatria*" et "*Simultaneità*", Pär Bergman explores the multiple connections between Futurist multilinear lyricism and Wagnerian postulates on total artwork (241).

Marinetti was convinced that the separate branches of art would attain new poetic heights when put to the service of the “polyexpressive” reconstruction of the universe. He “saw the artist as a revelatory being whose task was on the one hand to penetrate reality and on the other hand to create a new reality” (Ohana 2010: 46). Marinetti developed his strategy inspired by the method of the intuition and the concepts of vitality, dynamism, instinct and pure perception, present also in Henri Bergson’s theory of consciousness as flux:

We shall give flesh and blood to the invisible, the impalpable, the imponderable, the imperceptible. We shall find abstract equivalents for all the forms and elements of the universe, then combine them together according to the whims of our inspiration in order to create plastic complexes that we will put into motion. (Balla and Depero, 1915)

The influence of cinematic processes was also an essential contribution to Futurist literature, poetry, painting and theatre’s renewal. According to Mario Verdone, montage was the best gift that the 20th-century had given to the art world (1967: 39). One of the most representative examples of the decisive influence of cinema upon poetry and literature was *L’elisse e la Spirale. Film + Parole in Libertà*, a novel written in 1913 and published in 1915 where Paolo Buzzi tried to incorporate the logic of film editing (to obtain a better understanding of cinema’s role in Futurist intermedial project, see Strauven, 2006, Lista, 2009 and Fernández Castrillo, 2011).

Attracted by the illusion of an unmediated experience, Futurists proclaimed the death of the book and their preference toward the novelty of cinematic logic and sequence. They developed a particular approach announcing that all the artistic disciplines should be transformed by the new media. In all through Futurist manifestos, essays, speeches and artworks there is an effort to achieve the equivalence of the media as well as to mix them together in new combinations. As mentioned before, the method introduced by Italian modernist avant-garde turn out to be a pioneer contribution to Comparative Media Studies and, more specifically, to the theory of intermediality. Werner Wolf supports that, in a narrow sense, the term “intermediality” refers to the participation of more than one medium, or sensory channel, in a given work, whereas, in a broad sense, it is the media equivalent of intertextuality and it covers any kind of relation between different media (1999: 35-36).

The insistence of Futurists on work across media borders led them to explore the media-specific idiosyncrasy of each respective medium, and also to experiment with the mixing of old and new artistic disciplines. Not one single artistic branch remained untapped. Among all their proposals, visual poetry needs to be taken in consideration in order to explain the roots of Futurist hymn to the future based on the principle of intermediality. In *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry, 1914-1928*, Willard Bohn suggests that “Combining painting and poetry, it is neither a compromise nor an evasion but a synthesis of the principles underlying each medium.” (1986: 2). Unlike the so-called ‘figurative poetry’, ‘ideograms’ or ‘calligrams’ created at that time, Futurist poems are not just a bridge between image and text but also the conjunction of the rest of disciplines

in a unique artwork. In *Distruzione della sintassi - Immaginazione senza fili - Parole in libertà*, Marinetti rejected any relation to Symbolist legacy:

I oppose the decorative and precious aesthetic of Mallarmé and his search for the exotic word, the unique and irreplaceable, elegant, suggestive, exquisite adjective. I have no wish to suggest an idea of sensation by means of passéist graces and affectations. I want to seize them brutally and fling them in the reader’s face.

I also oppose Mallarmé’s static ideal. The typographic revolution that I’ve proposed will enable me to imprint words (words already free, dynamic, torpedoing forward) every velocity of the stars, clouds, airplanes, trains, waves, explosives, drops of seafoam, molecules, and atoms (Marinetti 1913)

A new awareness of the printed page led Futurists to examine the spatialization and visualization of the poetic message. As Achille Bonito Oliva points out, the contemplation of these poems is founded in “the spatiotemporal” perception, similar to that of painting, of a unitary dimension not as the presence of an absence (2007: 18). The revolutionary idea of “words in freedom” was a project in progress always open to new experimentations that Giovanni Lista (2009) summarizes in two main categories: 1. The interaction between codex based on synesthetic and synoptic principles that results in multi-sensory experiments; 2. The impact of typographic innovation together with the material components of the Futurist poetry: format of the page, ink colours, typefaces, texture of the paper, book-binding technique, etc. (Lista 2009: 293)

In addition to the different types of intermedialities, from the fusion of different arts and media into new genres or the representation of one medium into another, the words started to call attention to themselves. They were no longer perceived as transparent signs, but assumed an artistic value as a result of the creative typography.

My revolution is directed against the so-called typographical harmony of the page, which is contrary to the flux and reflux, the leaps and bursts of style that run through the page itself. For that reason we will use, in the very same page, *three or four different colors of ink*, and as many as twenty different typographical fonts if necessary, For example: *italics* for a series of swift or similar sensations, *boldface* for violent onomatopoeias, etc. The typographical revolutions and the multicoloured variety in the letters will mean that I can double the expressive force of words. [...] And so I shall realize the fourth principle contained in my *First Manifesto of Futurism* [...] “We affirm that the beauty of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty: the beauty of speed.” (Marinetti 1913)

Gabriella Belli (2007: 49) affirms that, until 1911, Futurist writings looked much more innovative than painting experiences. The icons and the letters of the alphabet became signs and shapes able to express any kind of feelings and emotions, appealing simultaneously to all the senses of the readers and the viewers. Another distinctive trait of Futurist contribution to the cultural renewal is the influence of mass media in visual poems and word-paintings, as we may observe in Carlo Carrà’s *Manifestazione*

interventista (Festa patriottica-Dipinto parolibero) (1914), a collage made of tempera and pasted newspapers clippings on cardboard inspired by Guillaume Apollinaire's first visual poem "Lettre-Océan", published in *Les Soirées de Paris* in the same year. Both authors glorify the *élan vital* and render the atmosphere of Modern life by the creation of a "polyespressive" symphony:

The snatches of music in the poem are matched by a fragment of sheet music pasted to the collage and by assorted references to an "orchestra" and 'canzoni' ('songs'). Similarly, the sounds made by Apollinaire's new shoes ('cré cré') the phonograph's scratchiness ('zzz'), and the bus's motor ('rro oo to ro ro ro') correspond to Carrà's onomatopoeic 'cruca cruca', 'bree bree', 'cric crac', 'zzzz', and the sounds of various vehicles ('Trrrrrrrrrrrr', 'traak tatateak') (Bohn, 1986: 13).

Focusing his analysis on the mutual admiration that existed between Apollinaire and Carrà Willard Bohn explains the similarities between the cited figurative poem and the word-painting:

Both have the same geometrical configuration. The lines of poetry in the poem, like the phrases and painted papers in the collage, form a series of concentric circles radiating outward from a circular center, from which extend a number of symmetrical 'spokes'. The same can be said of the principal techniques employed. Both works exploit the visual properties of written language to create ideogrammatic compositions in which the formal configuration reinforces the linguistic message and vice versa. If they are essentially pictures formed of words, they are also literary works the structure and spatial relations of which are determined by the [...] physical properties of the text, by the juxtaposition of the words on the page (or canvas). Perception and conception, image and metaphor tend to emerge into one indivisible whole. In this context the compositions represent extreme examples of concrete metaphor. (1986: 9, 13).

Apollinaire and Carrà comprehended that new media (as the radio or the cinema), the principles of advertising, magazine illustrations and the new means of transmission (as the telegraph or the telephone) were exerting a strong attraction on the population and, at the same time, they constituted innovative communicative models to emulate for their effectiveness and attractiveness.

Futurists did not hesitate to create their own newspapers and magazines as *Lacerba* (1913-1915), *La Balza futurista* (1915) or *L'Italia Futurista* (1916-1918), among others, to divulge both their visual analogies, multilinear lyrics and word-paintings. All of them, were inspired by the success of the pre-Futurist international magazine *Poesia* (1906-1909), founded by Marinetti. They also launched Edizioni futuriste di *Poesia* and Edizioni di *L'Italia Futurista* where they published their anthologies and volumes on the mentioned topic.

Marinetti incorporated Futurist literary and poetic revolution to his declamatory style and, on the other hand, he also applied the immediacy and the strength of verbal

communication to his writings. As noticed by Lista (2009: 294), the first period of Futurist experimentation in visual poetry was dominated by the principle of *dynamis*, turning visual poems into a multisensorial seismograph of Modern rhythm. Together with this polyphonic reflection of urban experience, the physical value of the page (*physis*) progressively started to have a main position as a result of the Futurist typographical revolution.



Zang Tumb Tumb (1914) by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, cover.

Marinetti tried to synthesize both perspectives in *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1912-1914), his first book of "words in freedom", that required considerable skill from the typesetter for its revolutionary typographic style. He depicted the *hinc et nunc* of a violent scene in the battlefield by an onomatopoeic recreation of the noises; using different sizes and styles of types; with the incorporation of lyric equations; through the destruction of the syntax and the presence of an agglomerate of "words in freedom" to affirm the "beauty of the speed"; and, finally, with the "multilinear lyricism" to achieve "the most complex lyric simultaneities".

In *Lo splendore geometrico e meccanico e la sensibilità numerica*, Marinetti explains the idiosyncrasy of his lyric equations:

I create true theorems or lyrical equations, introducing numbers which I've intuitively chosen and placed within the very center of a word; with a certain quantity of + - x +, I can give the thickness, the mass, the volume so things which words otherwise have to express. The arrangement + - + - + x, for example, serves to render the changes and accelerations in speed of an automobile. The arrangement + + + + + serves to render the clustering of equal sensations. (E.g.: *fecal odor of dysentery + the honeyed stench of plague sweats + smell of ammonia*, and so on in "Train Full of Sick Soldiers" in my *Zang tumb tumb*). (Marinetti 1914)



Montagne + Vallate + Strade x Joffre (1915) by Marinetti. Printed paper, 19,3 x 16 cm.
From <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Marinetti-Motagne.jpg>

Useful decoding instructions for some of the most popular Futurist visual poems are also found:

Everything must be banned which doesn't contribute to expressing the evanescent and mysterious Futurist sensibility with all its new geometrical-mechanical splendour. The free-wordist Cangiullo, in *Fumatori II^a* had the felicitous idea of conveying the long monotonous reveries and self-expansion of the smoke-boredom during a long train journal by means of this *painted analogy*.

TO SMOKE

Words-in-freedom, in their continuous effort to express things with maximum force and greatest depth, naturally transform themselves into self-illustrations.

By means of free, expressive orthography and typography, synoptic tables of lyrical values and designed analogies (Marinetti 1914)

It is worth emphasising the contribution of the free-wordist Ardengo Soffici who became the theorist of the “imagination without strings” and the “synoptic tables” in order to achieve the liberation of the word. It is also remarkable Angelo Rognoni's precognition of the typographic sculptures. Meanwhile, Fortunato Depero paid attention to the potentiality of abstract verbalization and as a result of his interdisciplinary research he created a new conceptual language called “onomalingua”, based on the onomatopoeic sonority to communicate feelings instead of concepts. His most famous book, *Depero*

Futurista (1927), also known as “Libro imbullonato”, anticipated the mechanical book, whereas in *Numero Unico Futurista Campari* (1931), in *Liriche Radiofoniche* (1934) and *Fortunato Depero nella vita e nelle opere* he gradually renounced to the graphical and linguistic experimentation characteristic of his unfinished volume *New York. Film Vissuto*.

In 1916, Edizioni futuriste di *Poesia* published Francesco Cangiullo's *Piedigrotta: parole in libertà*, a masterpiece of visual poetry in which he described the orgiastic celebration of Napolitan festival. Three years later he presented the first Futurist book-object: *Caffèconcerto. Alfabeto a sorpresa* in which he represented, show by show, a variety spectacle. In 1923 with *Poesia pentagrammata*, Cangiullo explored the relations between figurative poems and music. Among some of the most interesting projects of visual poetry we find also two unpublished collections: Paolo Buzzi's *Conflagrazione* (1914-1918), an experimental handwritten diary, and Marinetti's anthology *Paroliberi futuristi*, which was announced in 1915 in the flier *Parole, consonanti, vocali, numeri in libertà* but it was never published. In 1932 the founder of Futurism finally published *Parole in libertà futuriste tattili, termiche, olfattive* an essential reference work for the European avant-garde, the highest expression of multisensorial research in Futurist poetry. The book was printed in metal sheet to render the mechanical aesthetics and to realize Marinetti's old dream of creating a book made of nickel. It also implemented the main postulates of *Il Tattilismo* (1921), a Futurist manifesto on sensory stimulation, an early form of interactive art.

In fact, the audience's attitude toward the printed page played an important role in Futurist visual poetry which anticipates the characteristic involvement of the public in performance practices and the emancipation of the user in the digital age. The reader became a participant and his interaction with the text an adventure to live. Jean-Pierre Goldenstein points out that one of visual poetry's major functions is to force the reader to investigate an infinite number of paths, preventing him from deciphering a preexisting sense (160). Willard Bohn studies in depth the reader's role in visual poetry. He explains that:

[...] the poem cannot be reduced to a single meaning, since each reader brings something different to the text. The reading process is also complicated by the nonlinear format of much of the poetry [...] In carrying out the procedures connected with consistency building, readers are continually forced to modify their interpretations [...] The average reader doesn't have a chance of reproducing the author's thought patterns and associations. (Bohn 2001: 30).

As we have seen, in their rebellion against *passéist* cultural malaise, Futurists announced the unquestionable relevance of the media experience and its unavoidable influence in the search of a whole new set of linguistic and communicative techniques, more adapted to express the complexity of Modern condition through a “polyexpressive” approach. Their original response to the epistemological crisis caused by the impact of industrialization, mass media and new technologies in their society is nowadays a

grounded model extremely helpful in deciphering the intermedial idiosyncrasy of new cultural expressions in online communication.

Futurist postulates on intermedial practices could belong to our own era. Media archaeologists often compare the reception of reproductive and broadcast media in the early 20th-century to current strategies for integrating digital technology. Regarding the influence of the earlier moments of cultural and technological transition, Tom Gunning sustains that “the introduction of new technology in the modern era employs a number of rhetorical tropes and discursive practices that constitute our richest source for excavating what the newness of technology entailed.” (2003: 39). This self-conscious awareness of change and conceptual uncertainty is evident nowadays. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins claim that “there is an urgent need for a pragmatic, historically informed perspective that maps a sensible middle group between the euphoria and the panic surrounding new media” (2). In their book *Rethinking media change: the aesthetics of transition*, these authors suggest to approach media intersections as a process instead of a static completion.

On this view, convergence can be understood as a way to bridge or join old and new technologies, formats and audiences. Such cross-media joinings and borrowings may feel disruptive if we assume that each medium has a defined range of characteristics of predetermined mission [...] A less reductive, comparative approach would recognize the complex synergies that always prevail among media systems, particularly during periods shaped by the birth of a new medium of expression (Thorburn & Jenkins 2003: 3).

Such convergences occur regularly in the history of the “information society”, a term introduced by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media: the extensions of man* (1964) in reference to the effect of emerging technology in data creation, distribution and manipulation in the post-industrial era. In this regard, Marinetti and his avant-garde colleagues assumed a pioneer position since, more than one century ago, they focused their artworks, performing acts and manifestos on pursuing the ways in which media interact, replace and cooperate with one another in the cultural sphere. From their initial incursions in visual poetry to the following contributions in a myriad of uncategorized genres, there are three focal points that resume their intermedial paradigm’s: the principle of “simultaneity”, “instantaneity” and “totality”. These three main characteristics anticipate Randall Packer and Ken Jordan’s definition of new media in the digital age:

Integration: the combining of art forms and technology into a hybrid form of expression.

Interactivity: the ability of the user to manipulate and affect her experience of media directly, and to communicate with others through media.

Hypermedia: the linking of separate media elements to one another to create a trail of personal associations.

Immersion: the experience of entering into the simulation or suggestion of a three-dimensional environment.

Narrativity: aesthetic and formal strategies that derive from above concepts, which result in nonlinear story forms and presentation. (Packer & Jordan 2001: xxxv)

Although new applications for digital media emerge over the time, it can be stated that, at the present, the most distinctive feature of online creative procedures is the encouragement of interaction, that is, the sharing of collaboration within the artistic process itself. Digital code fulfils the old Futurist dream of achieving an interactive and ‘polyespressive’ artwork by the principles of ‘numerical representation’, ‘modularity’, ‘automation’, ‘variability’ and ‘transcoding’ (Manovich, 2001). The critic Friedrich W. Block (2007), claims that, in media poetry, movement transforms into animation and processuality whereas interaction becomes participation. Futurist strategies developed in visual poetry, as the “multilinear lyricism” or “words in freedom”, become embedded in the commands and interfaces of computer software as Marie-Laure Ryan sustains: “The digital revolution of the last decade has let words on the loose, not just by liberating their semantic potential, as most avant-garde movements of the past hundred years have done, but in a physical, quite literal sense as well.” (1999, 1) Along the same lines, Katalin Sándor argues that: “the artistic practices of visual print poetry, of pattern poems, calligrams, concrete poetry, lettrism, and colleagues have come to function as a continually recycled ‘resource’ for digital poetry.” (2012: 147)

As outlined above, net artworks continue the everlasting avant-garde aspiration of increasing the immersion and the aesthetic response of the observer. Loss Pequeño Glazier claims that:

The conditions that have characterized the making of innovative poetry in the twentieth century have a powerful relevance to such works in twenty-first century media. That is, poets are making with the same attention that they did through the movements of the previous century and they are doing so with new materials — and new materials alter what constitutes writing. Through recognizing the conditions of such making and by appreciating the material qualities of new computer media we can begin to identify the new poetries of the twenty-first century. Putting such a vision together is more than a simple concatenation of strings of practice; it involves recognizing the interwoven matrices through which e-writing makes its way. (Glazier 2001: n/p)

Lori Emerson defines these creative processes as performatic events “complete with their own set of viewer/viewed relation” (2003: 91). When we refer to the new expressions of digital culture, we should remember that the term “Internet art” or “net.art” englobes all artistic branches that use Internet as the main medium and that cannot be produced, manipulated, spread or experienced in any other way. Ryan centres the definition of net.art on the code’s key role: “By net.art, I mean any work available on the World Wide Web that takes advantage of the computer, not only as a mean of production and dissemination, but also as support necessary to the performance of the text. In other words, I restrict the category net.art to works that need to be executed by code.” (2012: 132).

From the beginnings of computer-based literature, at the end of the sixties, to the creation of interactive e-poems, there have been many artists and academics that have enriched avant-garde postulates on intermedial qualities of figurative texts. However, Marjorie Perloff mentions the risk of misunderstanding the role of visual poetry in the electronic age by fetishizing digital condition as something in itself remarkable, instead of appreciating the real sense of net-poetry:

[...] poetry is an especially vexed case because, however we choose to define it, poetry is the *language art*: it is, by all accounts, language that is somehow extraordinary, that can be processed only upon rereading. Consequently, the “new” techniques, whereby letters and words can move around the screen, break up, and reassemble, or whereby the reader/viewer can decide by a mere click to reformat the electronic text or which part of it to access, become merely tedious unless the poetry in question is, in Ezra Pound’s words, “charged with meaning.” (Perloff 2006: 143-144).

Many terms have been suggested to describe such poetry, from “cyberpoetry”, to “digital poetry”, “computer poetry”, “media-poetry”, “interactive poetry”, “net-poetry”, “electronic poetry”, “e-poetry”, etc. Friedrich W. Block (2007) enumerates the specific criteria to distinguish digital poetry from other literature: 1) the mechanical generation of texts (supporting or complete), 2) electronic linkage (in the computer, on Intranet or Internet) of fragments and files of the same or also different media types, derived from this the 3) multi- or non-linearity of both text structure and individual reading matter and if required 4) multimodality and animation of texts in the broadest sense 5) interactivity as a ‘dialog’ between machine (hard and software) and user as a -dependent on the programming- reversible or irreversible intervention into the display or data base text, as a telematic communication between different protagonists on the computer network; derived from this 6) the shift or even de-differentiation of traditional action roles such as author, reader, editor.

Among the numerous examples of digital poetry which follow Futurist premises, it should be pointed out *C•O•G•(I) An Interactive Kinetic Textual Composition* (2002) created by Loss Pequeño Glazier, professor of Media Studies at University of Buffalo, New York, and director of Electronic Poetry Center (EPC). Despite a certain grade on ingenuousness, the cited artwork incarnates the Futurist “words in freedom” in the digital age, including movement, colours and a dynamic typography.



C•O•G•(I) An Interactive Kinetic Textual Composition (2002) by Loss Pequeño Glazier

Another example of the digital accomplishment of “words-in-freedom in movement” and “animated writing” is Dan Waber’s *Strings* (1999), where the moment of words ‘yes/maybe’ recreates a ‘flirt’, or the growing ‘haha’ stands for contagious laughing, a reverberation of the “instinctive deformation of words” that “corresponds to our natural tendency to use onomatopoeia.” (Marinetti 1913)



Strings (1999) by Dan Waber

Yet one more example of the achievement of “the most complex lyric simultaneities” comes from Thomas Swiss’s web-based work in which he explores the relationships between sound, image and text through a collaborative strategy. Tim Berners-Lee defines “intercreativity” as “the process of making things or solving problems together” (1997). In this case, the poet establishes a network of relationships between his production and the linked images, texts and sounds others create, moving from individual to composite authorship.

These are just some examples of the first e-poems at the turn of the 20th-century. There are now many digital artists and poets who develop new strategies to accomplish avant-garde expectations by means of augmented reality, or user generated systems. María Mencía’s ongoing series of generative poetics texts or Airan Kand’s interactive installations, among many others; a valuable effort that would deserve more extensive study.



Generative poems (on going) by María Mencía. Presentation and exhibition: (PAN) Palazzo delle Arti, Naples, Italy, 2010.

To conclude this essay, I would like to point out that under the pressure of technological innovations and mass media society, Futurists made a special effort to renovate the traditional artistic expressions by exploring their intrinsic value. The rise of modern visual poetry reflects the end of the power of abstraction of the word in favour of its embodiment by the juxtaposition of divergent artistic elements in the creation of an interconnected and expansive net of interdependencies.

The multisensorial tables of “words in freedom” acted as a synthesizing crucible providing the perfect formula for the revitalization of the creative process; a method founded on the concept of intermediality which is, still nowadays, a valid reference model. In fact, the avant-garde aesthetic strategies live on in present-day hypertextualities, ibridations, collages or mash-ups in the “remix culture” (Manovich, 2007).

Nowadays, new cultural expressions as net.art, or more specifically digital poetry, demand standards of definition agreed by a global community as it happened at Futurist time, when a large number of artists congregated around programmatic texts to coin new terms to define the “polyexpressive” nature of the multimedia experience. Therefore, Futurist legacy is still nowadays an inspiring milestone to face the reception of digital technology since the inherent potential of intermediality is and will continue to be in development.

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