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Reading, Seeing, Clicking: Kinetic Concrete Poetry

Concrete poetry in print media

In literary history the connection between reading and seeing has always been present, though not always very well known.[1] Such a connection already existed in antiquity, in text that possessed a semantic surplus through the arrangement of its letters. In *Labyrinthgedichten* (labyrinth poems), the line of text wiggles across the paper as if walking a labyrinth, thus keeping this metaphor visually present alongside the message of the text. In *Figurengedichten* (figure poems), the arrangement of the text forms a specific figure, at first often a cross, in the Baroque period also secular figures such as a goblet as on the occasion of the wedding of a Bremen burgher couple in 1637 (cf. Simanowski 2005, 165). This poem reveals an early form of interactive literature that prompts the reader to turn either the page or the head to read. The deeper meaning, i.e., joke of this formal gimmick is that after turning the paper, one feels as dizzy as if one had already emptied a goblet full of wine. The philosophy behind this play with form, behind this shift of attention to typography, is to liberate the word from its merely representational, signifying function. In literature the physicality of language, its graphic aspect, for instance, usually plays no role and is even rejected as undermining the authority of the text. In this case, however, the visual side of the word is used as an additional layer of meaning. The word not only represents an object but it *presents* it on the visual level. The goblet is visible even before one starts reading.

After 1910 attention to the visual materiality of language received a new impetus, when Futurists like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti or Dadaists like Tristan Tzara or Kurt Schwitters carried out their typographic experiments. These experiments on the physical level of language came to an end with Surrealism, which used language only on the linguistic level. The typographic experiment was renewed in the 50s and 60s of the twentieth century, now under the title of concrete poetry. The unifying element of this worldwide literary movement, the only worldwide literary movement after the Second World War, was that the texts could not be read aloud for their design would have been lost in orality. The texts

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1 This article is a slightly modified and updated English version of "Lesen, Sehen, Klicken: Die Kinetisierung konkreter Poesie" (Simanowski 2005, 161–177).

are visual texts or, as Franz Mon, one of the main representatives of concrete poetry, called them in an essay, "poetry of the surface" (cf. Mon 1994).[2]

A very famous example is Reinhard Döhl's "Apfel" ("Apple") from 1965 – here the repetition of the word "apple" forms an apple, with the punchline that the word "worm" is hidden in-between. An equally famous example is Eugen Gomringer's text "Schweigen" ("Silence") from 1954 – here several instances of the word "schweigen" are placed horizontally and vertically next to each other, with the word saliently missing in the centre of the text block. This blank space is the message of the arrangement for which all the words around it are only a preparation. It is the missing word "silence" that conveys that silence is not expressed in its naming but only in the absence of language. The statement lies not in the semantic sense between the lines but in the graphic sense between the words. However, the representative function of the word is by no means abandoned here in favour of a purely visual presentation. The irony of Gomringer's "Schweigen" lies in the fact that it utters the real value of silence rather through redundancy, for the gap around the missed word does not require the first and the last line to be understood or even read.

> silence silence silence
> silence silence silence
> silence   silence
> silence silence silence
> silence silence silence
> (Gomringer 1954; see Bann 1967)

The message is seen rather than read, but this presupposes a preceding reading of the surrounding words. This is precisely the meaning of the term concrete poetry: concrete is the descriptive or the graphic, in contrast to the abstraction of a word. Concrete poetry is about the relationship between the visible form and the signifying substance of the word; it is visual not because it uses images, but because it adds the visual gestures of the words to their phonetic and semantic ones as a complement, by extension or negation. Intermediality does not consist in the change of media but in the change of the media-typical act of reception, in this case from the semiotic system of reading, typical of literature, to the system of viewing, typical of the visual arts.

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2 For important collections of concrete poetry see Spoerri 1957; Bann 1967; Williams 1967; Solt and Barnstone 1968; Gomringer 1972. For a historical overview of experimental literature as a whole see Dencker 2002. Johanna Drucker refers to Ilia Zdanevichs *Poetry of Unknown Words* of 1949 as a "first exhaustive anthology of concrete and experimental typology" (Drucker 1994, 227).

Concrete poetry in digital media

In the realm of digital media, concrete poetry gains two further levels of expression. While in classical concrete poetry the graphic quality of the words becomes the constitutive element of the text alongside the linguistic one, in digital media time as well as interaction also generate additional meaning. The text can appear, move, disappear, and it can do so because of an action by the reader. In such a context, the worm can finally eat the apple as in Johannes Auer's digitised adaptation "worm applepie for doehl": The worm eats its way through the fruit, eradicating the linguistic signifier along with the visual one – and since digital technology has no concept of end or death, the worm can eat the apple over and over again.[3]

The works of the Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos and the Argentinean artist Ana María Uribe are examples of the personal continuity of experiments in concrete poetry in analogue and digital media. Campos' *poema bomba* (1983–1997) realises the explosion, which was first concretised by scattered letters on paper and in the digital medium finally by means of sound and movement;[4] Uribe, after her print works, which she calls "Typoem," developed digital works, which she calls "Anipoem" – animated poem – and which combine an elegant objectivity with refreshing humour such as the *Gimnasia* pieces of 1998. In them the circular substitution of the letters P and R, or of the letters I, T, Y, V, X with the respective following letter creates an association with gymnastic exercises.[5] An equally elegant – though more complicated – programmed example of the behaviour of text in time is "A Fine View" from David Knoebel's *Click Poetry*.[6] It is a short text about a roofer's fall, which gradually unwinds from a tangle of words – like the cigarette's smoke the roofer lights at the height of their workplace – and which comes towards the reader with increasing speed and size – like the abyss towards the falling.

While this form of kinetic concrete poetry is reminiscent of the text films or video and TV poetry of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the further development of concrete poetry to an interactive relationship with the reader exits the cinema situation again. An example of this is Urs Schreiber's "Das Epos der Maschine" ("The Epic of the Machine"),[7] winner of the Arte Liter@turwettbewerb in 2000, a competition of digital literature. In this elaborately programmed, technology-

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3 http://auer.netzliteratur.net/worm/applepie.htm.

4 https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/poema-bomba/vgHdr0QTZQrFbg?hl=de and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3gzuQ-3R94.

5 https://amuribe.tripod.com/gimnasia3.html and https://amuribe.tripod.com/gimnasia.html.

6 http://home.ptd.net/~clkpoet/fineview/fineview.html.

7 http://kunst.im.internett.de/epos-der-maschine.

critical work, the question of the meaning and function of technology builds up word by word in the form of a question mark, the dot of which is the word "truth." While the other words move slightly back and forth, "truth" stands as rigidly as described in the text. Clicking on it causes all the words to disappear behind it, as if they were seeking refuge there or as if truth was devouring that by which it is questioned. No matter how one reads this disappearance, it does not last long. If one now moves the mouse, "truth" follows the cursor, followed by those other words that emerge again in the pull of gravity and remain on the heels of "truth," wherever it escapes. If the mouse stops, all words disappear again behind "truth." Once questions have been raised – a possible interpretation – they can no longer simply be erased, provided there is movement in the discourse. That this lies in the hands of the users, is the realisation that literally results from the direct interaction of the users with the work.

The audiovisual rollover love poem "YATOO" (2001) by the Viennese net artists Ursula Hentschläger and Zelko Wiener also relies entirely on the action of the user. This piece initially appears as a pentagonal star, which, when the user moves the mouse over its parts, sounds the words of a love poem spoken by a woman and a man. As the parts of the star are activated by mouse contact, they simultaneously change their shape (Fig. 7). One soon notices that the exact following of the programmed sequence not only leads to a correct sentence – the first sentence of the man clarifies the initials of the title: *Y*ou *a*re *t*he *o*nly *o*ne – but also always to a new geometrical harmony. The verses seem simplistic and schematic and certainly do not belong to the finest moments of English-language poetry. This results in part from the poetics of constraint, to which each verse is subjected insofar as it must convey its message in exactly five words. However, the poetics of constraint – this is new and is what actually makes the work interesting – not only affects the process of creation but also the process of perception: If the recipients lack a certain dexterity in clicking on the corresponding parts, while at the same time avoiding touching the other parts, all one gets is a chaos of acoustic and visual signs.

The superimposition of the graphics and the sound files, which are activated by touch, results in an incalculable sequence on different verse levels instead of a dialogue between woman and man. It is precisely this confusion that is the point here. The superimposition of the sound files, the incalculability that has occurred, seems like a commentary on the title's declaration of unconditionality. It seems to signify scepticism or is at least an indication that in the long run, mutual understanding only works under certain conditions – though it is open to the recipient to perceive the very chaos as a refreshment and possibly also as a liberation from old communicative tracks. The condition to be observed and complied with in the present case is precise navigation; the constraint aspect thus itself becomes part of the message.
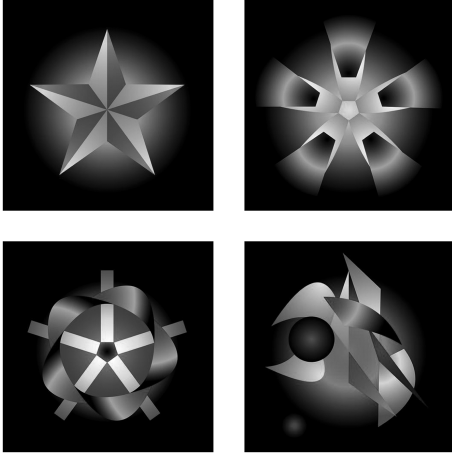
Fig. 7: Snapshots from "YATOO" by Zeitgenossen (Ursula Hentschläger and Zelko Wiener). 2001.

These examples may suffice to give a first impression of kinetic concrete poetry in the digital medium. This inventory is now replenished by some reflections on the poetology of concrete poetry in the print medium and in digital media.

Decoration and message

Experimental poetry – to which concrete poetry is assigned – has sometimes been reproached for its opaque language, which makes it a private matter and thus seems unsuitable to have an effect on the consciousness of the reader, and therefore unsuitable for political intervention. The counter-argument is that the focus on the material of the text also entails a critical reflection on language and its use, which leads to a sensitisation that works against any instrumentalisation of language (cf. Einhorn 1978, 1–4). "Through the isolation of words from the usual 'flow' of language," says Gisela Dischner, "the self-evident of the language habit suddenly appears new, questionable, incomprehensible; the intended language habits are broken. The aesthetic not taking for granted of the self-evident could be a model for the social not taking for granted of the usual, 'normal'." (Dischner 1978, 38; own translation) Johanna Drucker notes a similar intention for the typographic experiments of Dadaism: "[it] was concerned with opposing the established social order through subverting the dominant conventions of the rules of representation." (Drucker 1994, 65) In this respect, concrete poetry is enlightenment and some see its revolutionary content precisely in this dismantling play with the hierarchically alienated language system (cf. Bezzel 1978, 35). Can a similar pathos be found in kinetic concrete poetry?

One should first note that concrete poetry and its digital continuation are not only separated by media, but also by decades of social development. Since the thematisation of the postmodern condition, disillusionment set in with regard to such liberation projects. In addition, with the passing of the *grand narratives*, the emphatic message in literature was basically replaced by reflection on the pre-conditions of writing, i.e., the creation of messages, or by noncommittal everyday depiction. Regarding visual arts, too, observers have stated the farewell "to the holy seriousness of utopian designs, to ideologies of world improvement and claims of effect on society as a whole" (Wick 1999, 11; own translation) and de-clared a trend towards the sensual and playful. The aesthetic consequence of this cultural disposition is obvious: where no emphatic message seems to be possible anymore, the external comes to the fore. This was already the case with Manner-ism, which is a crisis phenomenon in a similar manner to postmodernism. For this reason, Umberto Eco, in his *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*, wonders "if postmodernism is not the modern name for mannerism as a metahistorical cate-gory" (Eco 1984, 66).

As far as current cultural trends are concerned, Andrew Darley, in his study *Visual Digital Culture*, notes a "shift away from prior modes of spectator experi-ence based on symbolic concerns (and 'interpretative models') towards recipients who are seeking intensities of direct sensual stimulation" (Darley 2000, 3). He also sees audiences "in pursuit of the ornamental and the decorative, modes of embel-lishment, the amazing and the breathtaking, the nuances of the staged effect and the virtuoso moment, the thrill of vertigo or the *agôn* of competition." (Darley 2000, 169) According to Darley, the domination of technology and image over con-tent and meaning – also manifested in computer-generated films such as *Star Wars* (1977), *Total Recall* (1990), and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) – leads to a "culture of the depthless image" (Darley 2000, 192). Darley speaks of films, MTV and computer games but the tendency towards the visual and sensual can also be observed in print media. One thinks of the designer David Carson, who uses let-ters only as ornaments which are difficult to decipher – they basically appear as images – and remodels information as an aesthetic event in design that has been called "post-alphabetic text" (Kirschenbaum 2000). As far as written texts in mul-timedia contexts are concerned, some speak of a replacement of the classical se-curity of the strict word. It is substituted by a restless dynamic, the endless abundance of images, and described as the replacement of "Protestant enlighten-ment" by "Catholic emotion" (cf. Schmitz 1997, 144; own translation).

Thrown into this context of shifting attention to surface effects, it is hardly surprising that the digital version of concrete poetry rarely shows its Enlighten-ment heritage with regard to the meaningful reflection of its materiality. Very often it remains at the level of an interesting effect or witty conceit, very often it

does not even presume to catch up semantically with the effect, but simply flexes its 'technical muscles.' In this case – as with Mannerism – language celebrates itself. In the digital realm language is, of course, no longer just the word or the image, but it is the digital code beneath the screen surface that is responsible for the appearance of word and image in space and time and in the interaction with the audience. And if code is the language, it is no wonder that the new type of artist is the "software artist," as Lev Manovich notes in his essay "Generation Flash." This software artist, according to Manovich, turns to the language of abstraction and modernist design, "to get away from figuration in general, and cinematographic language of commercial media in particular. Instead of photographs and clips of films and TV, we get lines and abstract compositions." (Manovich 2002a, 6) The announced retreat from the language of commercial media seems to take back the transformation of artists into designers that, in the 1920s, helped "[to change] the formal radicality of early modernism into the seamless instrument of corporate capitalist enterprise." (Drucker 1994, 238) However, that Generation Flash does not waste its energy on media critique, as Manovich further notes, weakens such an assumption:

> This is the new generation that emerged in the 1990s. In contrast to visual and media artists of the 1960s–1980s, whose main target was media – ads, cinema, television – the new generation does not waste its energy on media critique. Instead of bashing commercial media environment, it creates its own: Web sites, mixes, software tools, furniture, cloves, digital video, Flash / Shockwave animations and interactives. (Manovich 2002a, 7)

Another argument against such an assumption is the fact that the non-cinematic Flash aesthetic (which was ground-breaking in the 1990s and 2000s) was basically very well suited to serve as the language of a new, rapidly commercialised medium. It should be considered that most software artists also work as designers and create commercial products anyway, such as online games, web toys and multiuser environments.

One example is the group of designers, artists, and musicians Squid S o u p, whose piece "Untitled" – a navigable 3-D space made of transparent text walls – represents software art under the banner of the non-figurative and at the same time of "post-alphabetic texts" (see my review with screenshots in Simanowski 2001). Both, the visualised letters and the mumbled, barely comprehensible words randomly sampled from a book, represent the transformation of text into design and sound. A visitor of this project is visually and acoustically drawn into the project and feels the "feeling of being somewhere," that Squid S o u p states as the intention of their project. It is not about a deeper meaning, hidden between the lines, only recognisable after a long study and repeated reading, it is about fascination in itself (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8: Snapshot from "Untitled" by Squid S o u p. 2001.

An example, which almost paradigmatically embodies the development of concrete poetry, is "Enigma n" by the Canadian programmer and net artist Jim Andrews. "Enigma n" was first developed in 1998 as an anagrammatic play with the word "meaning," of which an updated version from 2022 is available (Fig. 9). In the print form of concrete poetry, the transformation of meaning through letter rotation could perhaps have been made clear in the form of horizontal and vertical rows, which would, of course, soon have revealed the anagrammatic excess of the letter n. In Andrews' digital form, the message is conveyed through the constant shifting of letters, with the title – "Enigma n" – and the source and target word – *meaning* – forming the lexemic bracket. The ongoing rearrangement of the letters simultaneously reintegrates the surplus letter n, for in this way meaning is not only enigma, but indeed n-enigmas. Andrews calls this work "a philosophical music & poetry toy for poets, musicians & philosophers from the age of 7 up." (Andrews 2022 [1998]) This self-description emphasises the play character of the piece, which, due to the necessary clicking actions of the audience, goes far beyond the play character of concrete poetry in the print medium.

In 2002, Andrews presented an audiovisual development of the piece, which perhaps does not necessarily increase the play character of the piece, but certainly its sensual effect. In "Enigma n^2," the initial word "meaning" is no longer shown in rearranged form but spoken, with the programme randomly selecting the starting point of the underlying sound line and determining the duration and number of repetitions of the activated section (cf. Andrews 2002). As Andrews explained in an email to me on November 12, 2002:

> The sound itself starts out with the word 'meaning' backwards and then there are two normal repetitions of the word 'meaning.' The program randomly selects a starting point in the sound and a random end point (after the start point). And it selects a random number of times between 1 and 6 to repeat the playing of that segment.

In another email from November 9, 2002 Andrews stated that he considers "Enigma n^2" "as a kind of continuation of "Enigma n" in that it is concerned with the enigma of meaning." However, whereas "Enigma n" required contemplating the deconstruction one sees on the screen, "Enigma n^2" is a work whose suggestive singsong, similar to "Untitled" by Squid S o u p, puts the listener in a hypnotic mood and pushes the original philosophical intent of the anagrammatic game into the background. Andrews described this further as "[a] kind of strange generative/interactive sound poetry/music. I have my stereo hooked up to my computer, so my computer speakers are my stereo's speakers. I play it sometimes (fairly loudly) for a few minutes to hear if I can figure out more about that sort of music." (Email from November 9, 2002) Concrete poetry has passed over into music, the purposeful play with form ends in sensation rather than beginning an intellectual process of material reflection.

Fig. 9: Screenshots from "Enigma n" and "Enigma n^{2022}" by Jim Andrews. 2022 [1998].

Erotics of art

Concrete poetry is apparently undergoing the same shift from "symbolic concerns" towards "intensities of direct sensual stimulation" (Darley 2000, 3) that Darley states for visual digital aesthetics. Behind this, on the side of production as well as reception, lies a condition of the technical that could be critically described as an expression of digital kitsch. It is based on Ludwig Giesz's definition of kitsch as the end of any distance between I and the object in favour of a feeling of fusion and surrender to the object (cf. Giesz 1954, 407). Such a take of course results from an academic perspective that is obsessed with meaning and dismisses phenomena such as ornament and spectacle as inferior. Darley rightly questions such an attitude: "Is ornamentation, style, spectacle, giddiness really

aesthetically inferior or, rather, just different (other) from established motions of literary, classical modern art? Is an aesthetic without depth necessarily an impoverished aesthetic, or is it rather, another kind of aesthetic – misunderstood and undervalued as such?" (Darley 2000, 6) Darley can draw on Susan Sontag, who noted as early as 1964 in her famous essay "Against Interpretation":

> In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings' (Sontag 1966, 7).

Sontag recommends an increased interest for the form in art and ends her essay with the famous line: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." (Sontag 1966, 14) Similarly, Darley also recommends approaching the "'poetics' of surface play and sensation" (Darley 2000, 193) openly and without any reservations based in cultural pessimism. With this call Darley can also draw on art history, for in a way the aesthetics of the sensual, the culture of the depthless image is reminiscent of the debate in formal aesthetics at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the time the visual sign was thought of in terms of its self-valence and called for to be freed from its meaning-bearing role to a pure visibility (for an international context of this debate see Drucker 1994; Wiesing 1997).

Does "Enigma n^2" – and especially those examples of software art that are consciously oriented towards "surface play and sensation" – signify a return to formal aesthetics? Is the autonomous technical effect that only refers to itself the contemporary equivalent of the principle of pure visibility? Does the aesthetic of "surface play" and "sensation" correspond exactly to the "event society" as the end of the twentieth century has been described (cf. Schulze 1993) and to its technological achievements? In this context, one may also ask whether one should not rather demand works that still invest and practice interpretative energy, against the sell-out of meaning. Reception theory and constructivism have taught us that the meaning of an artwork does not lie in the hand of the artist (alone) but (also) depends on the approach of the audience to the work. The production of meaning takes place in the specific media constellation of the present, which, not only with regard to digital media, is characterised by impatience and a lack of willingness to a deeper intellectual engagement with the work.

One example of the fact that even authors with more serious intentions have to reckon with this kind of reception is Urs Schreiber's "The Epic of the Machine." Schreiber quite aptly compares the reading of his hypertext in the introduction to diving, swimming, and rummaging. He also promises in an interview that those who "use the mouse pointer with interested patience [. . .] will not only encounter a spectacle of the surface but also one in the head" (Simanowski and Schreiber

2000, 4; own translation). However, as a reader attests, the encounter with kinetic concrete poetry can very well omit any closer reading: "ideal to plunge web designers into admiration and depression" stated an enthusiastic comment, and: "the handling of typeface and typography alone! I don't need to read any more! how words slide into each other and circle and appear and disappear and and and!"[8] It seems that the media constellation itself induces this attitude of surface. Digital media, characterised by the gesture of click activity and the ideal of instant access, favour curiosity about what is promised behind the link at the expense of curiosity about what is hidden between the signs.

This notion from almost twenty years ago has been confirmed by later digital artworks that employ text. One example is *bit.fall* by Julius Popp from 2006. In this roughly two-meter high and five-meter wide installation, hundreds of valves release drops of water so that they form letters which horizontally form words.[9] The words are taken from Internet announcements of world events and have a visual life of only two or three seconds. As Popp himself said, this "waterfall of letters" was supposed to express the fleeting nature of what we think is important (cf. Popp in Bit.Fall 2006). Of course, the irony is that the words disappear before they even have truly appeared. From the very beginning, they are not read as meaningful series of letters but are rather viewed as a fascinating phenomenon. We do not read words made of water. We touch them, we stick our arms into them, we wet our brows with them and we jump through them. Words of water can also be enjoyed from the rear. *bit.fall* invites people to encounter text on a visual actionist level. Meaning plays no role in this encounter. The text does not want to be decoded, just seen (for an extensive discussion of *bit.fall* see Simanowski 2012, 194–198).

Another, more recent example, is Refik Anadol's data sculpture *Archive Dreaming* (2017) that translates hundreds of thousands of cultural documents from an open source library in Istanbul into an immersive architectural space.[10] Thus, texts and images that usually require attention and understanding are turned into an immersive experience, if not into ambient art equipped to embellish airports, malls, or the entrance hall of an office building. When Anadol states: „Research in artificial intelligence is growing every day, leaving us with the feeling of being plugged into a system that is bigger and more knowledgeable than ourselves," (Anadol 2023) one suspects that the deeper meaning of this shift from "symbolic concerns" towards "intensities of direct sensual stimulation," to apply Darley's words

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8 This comment on the Internet Literatur *Webring* "bla" is no longer online.

9 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygQHj1W0PPM.

10 https://refikanadol.com/works/archive-dreaming.

again, is the beautification and sublimation of data. It is the transfer of "invisible and 'messy' phenomena [. . .] into ordered and harmonious geometric figures" (Manovich 2002b), as Lev Manovich described the visualisation of data as early as in 2002. It is beauty beyond meaning (for a discussion of digital art as sublimation with reference to Jean-François Lyotard and Immanuel Kant see Simanowski 2011, Ch. 5).

Examples such as "A Fine View," "YATOO" or "Der Epos der Maschine" have shown that kinetic concrete poetry can contain effects that are heavy with meaning. These effects are based on the semantic levels of time and interaction that concrete poetry gains through the underlying technology in the digital medium. In terms of both generating and perceiving the artwork, however, there is a clearly discernible tendency that technology as such will be placed at the centre of the action, as works like *bit.fall* and *Archive Dreaming* illustrate. The possible historical points of contact of this tendency towards "pure visibility" and sensation within formal aesthetics have been addressed, as have the obvious cultural-critical objections. The aesthetic and social consequences of this tendency are to be discussed elsewhere and beyond the digital media. One question of this discussion will be which side the producers of kinetic concrete poetry will take – and which side the audience will expect them to take. I discuss the aesthetic and social consequences as well as the background of this tendency with special regard to the "Farewell of Interpretation" and the shift from a culture of meaning towards a culture of presence proposed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in the "Introduction" and "Epilogue" of my study *Digital Art and Meaning* (Simanowski 2011, 1–26; 208–230).

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