

konkret digital

Interview with Johannes Auer about Concrete Poetry and Net Literature (2011)

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The interview was held by Dr. **Martina Pfeiler**, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, TU Dortmund

Martina Pfeiler: *When did you first get in touch with concrete poetry? I am thinking of your ties to the Stuttgart School as well as your kinetic computer piece "worm applepie for doehl".*

Johannes Auer: With regard to my own work as an artist, I only began to get involved in concrete poetry while collaborating with Reinhard Döhl. I got to know Reinhard Döhl in 1995 at the Stuttgart Symposium for Max Bense and I began to experiment with him in the realm of net literature. In 1997 I created a tribute to his famous *apfel* in the form of a computer animation. You might be interested to know that in retrospect I view *worm applepie for doehl* rather critically in this connection. Whereas Döhl's *apfel* from 1965 reflects the producing code, my animation avoids this by hiding the producing code. That is why in 2004 I continued the apple game with the codeline $\$wurm = (\$apfel > 0) ? 1 : 0$. Articulated in words, this code expresses exactly what the apple animation does: *If the Apple is greater than zero, then the worm eats (i.e. is). If not, it is not (eating)*. This literary codeline represents a codework, an executable code.

Moreover, in the piece *G-Linie HTML*¹, which I was commissioned to work on as a digital engagement with Eugen Gomringer by the *Poesiewerkstatt Berlin* in 2008, I primarily treat the program code as the producing material. Not to be misunderstood, I do not hold a puristic view that true net literature should only create poetry by means of code. However, I do believe that the surface text should make the producing source text (i.e. the algorithm) concrete. I am sure that we will talk about this in more detail.

Through my involvement with the Stuttgart School I am particularly interested in the distinction that Max Bense made between artificial and natural poetry in 1962, influenced by Theo Lutz's "Stochastische Texte"². I reprogrammed Theo Lutz's work

in 2004 and further developed it in 2005 for the performance programs *Free Lutz!*³ and *searchLutz!*⁴. Here one of the main questions is how to make natural poetry out of artificial poetry especially in the light of the medial conditions.

MP: *In your introduction to the discussion round “Konkret Digital Döhl”, which you conducted with Peter Weibel and Michael Lentz in the Stuttgarter Literaturhaus in 2009, you are emphasizing that it was not surprising for a concrete author like Reinhard Döhl to get involved with net literature. Can it equally be expected that net artists have engaged themselves with concrete poetry that was published in books, or to have read it earlier in their lives? Also, do you consider yourself as part of a group of artists?*

JA: The early literary computer experiments with the *Stuttgarter School* and their theoretical reflections were indeed an important nexus for Reinhard Döhl's engagement with net literature. His works from the 1960s--such as *Buch Gertrud*⁵ and his permutative texts *Der Tod eines Fauns*⁶--were easy to update for the Internet. However, a permutation is a text with hardly any authorial presence. It depends on the execution of a rule and thus seems highly predestined for a digital realization.

Additionally, Reinhard Döhl was able to activate an international network of authors for our first literary net experiments in 1996. Ernst Jandl and Friedericke Mayröcker, Haroldo de Campos, Pierre und Ilse Garnier, Bohumila Grögerova and Josef Hisal took part in dialogic collective works such as *HHH - Hommage à Helmut Heißenbüttel*⁷.

A piece of art such as Eugen Gomringer's *3 variationen zu 'kein fehler im system'* from 1969 is, as it were, based on an executed algorithm, according to which the letter f always moves one position to the right.

I am not able to answer the question if and with what intensity net artists have generally occupied themselves with concrete poetry in print publishing. What can be noticed, however, is that, especially in ASCII-art, a kind of reinvention of concrete poetry in the digital medium takes place. For some time the command line in

operating systems was the only input-interface. The computer was directed there via text commands. Yet, from the beginning, the command line was also used to do something entirely different. Very soon one tried to produce images by means of ASCII-codes⁸. We can still recognize this in text emoticons in e-mails. What one could actually call a subversion of the command line initially had a very practical reason. In computer print-offs initially only ASCII-signs were allowed. If one wanted to print an image, one had to make them out of letters. The genre of ASCII-art is a decisive basis for the often asserted analogy of concrete poetry and digital poetry. The extent to which net artists like Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesmans von JODI, or Walter van der Crujisen, Luka Frelj and Vuk Cosic of the ASCII Art Ensemble have explicitly dealt with concrete poetry is beyond my scope of knowledge. Let's move on to the last part of your question: indeed, I do consider myself part of a group of artists, to which I would count everyone who is engaged with net literature's and net art's own medial conditions: textual basis on digital technology, algorithmic operations and interactive architecture.

MP: *Earlier on you talked about the self-referential function of the producing code. Which differentiations do you make with regard to the visual and acoustic dimension of your works as well as the program code?*

JA: In codeworks, phenotext and genotext become one, as Inke Arns has put it.⁹ "Saying" (genotext) und "doing" (phenotext) become one. When one puts "kill" into the command line of the computer, then this is exactly what happens. At first codeworks (i.e. a poetry based on program codes) appear poetically intriguing, yet – to me – they turn out quite unsatisfactory. Either they remain stuck in the artistic realm of hacker-games (e.g. most Perl-poems) or, in the case of successful examples, they have to be metaphorically blown up, such as in Jaromil's *ASCII Forkbomb*. Jaromil speaks of a viral, condemned poetry, "which (revolts) against those who attempt to sell the net as a burgeoning and safe place"¹⁰.

On second thought, code-works become "broken code" and thus cannot be executed by the computer. They become decoded code as private language, as in, for example, the work of the Australian net artist MEZ. Extremely put, they develop into ingenious poetry. One could perhaps rewrite the famous programmatic lines of

Goethe's Prometheus for this and say: "Here I sit, form a code-man language amalgam according to my will".

Regarding your question, in my more recent works (*searchLutz*, *searchSongs*¹¹, *searchSonata 181*¹²) the code, the algorithm, can easily be understood and thus followed by the viewer in the performance piece. In *searchLutz* this refers to the *Stochastische Texte* from Theo Lutz, which works with an algorithm that generates sentences according to a simple set of rules. The *searchSongs* use a simple code that Johann Sebastian Bach used to work with: the rule that letters correspond to notes on the musical scale (in the case of Bach B-A-C-H). *searchSonata 181* contains a password algorithm, which follows the simple rule to create random letters out of given words.

The visitor of the performance can, by inserting words, interactively co-create/think the algorithm and co-plan the result of the generated text. He or she can follow the genotext from the phenotext. Thus the code is not invisible, not "transparent", as in most computer applications.

Now, it's important that the considerations of the participant does not get stuck in the algorithm, but is passed on to a human interface—a speaker or a musician, who acts as an autonomous and interpretive conversation partner and not as an executing number cruncher. The algorithmically generated text is acoustically and dramatically performed. It becomes a score for a visual-acoustic live-performance.

MP: *In the U.S.A. up to the 1970s authors who experimented with the book as well as the computer as intermedial realms had to experience significant resistance from traditional cultural institutions such as literature departments at universities. How would you compare this situation to what was going on in Germany?*

JA: As of 1996 the situation for net literature in Germany was entirely different. Especially university researchers - equipped with a postmodern view of the world - were enthused about hypertext and hyperfiction as they recognized in it a visualized form of intertextuality as well as a reader, who became an author in the process of reading. For a while one was under the impression that there were more research

papers about hypertextual writing than works themselves. Who writes hypertext: the author or the reader? This was the rhetorical question that was asked. The argument was the following: in the internet, each reader becomes an author, as he or she co-creates the form of the text. In other words, the reader would contribute to creating a text collage, would produce the text in the process of reading. „In cyberspace“, according to Benjamin Whooley, "everyone is an author, which means no one is an author: the distinction from the reader disappears. Exit author..."¹³.

The Wreader¹⁴ as a death-button for the author? This question was early on demystified by Uwe Wirth among others: „To the extent that hypertext refuses structure, or rather, an internal coherence, it can completely open up to the decisions of the reader, blurring the line between usage and interpretation. A completely open hypertext is therefore entirely uninterpretable.“¹⁵ Put differently: an open hypertext is meaningless. In order for a hypertext to actually make sense while reading it, it needs an author, at least as a director, who limits the reading and thus controls the reading process to a certain extent.

Parallel to the enthusiasm about hypertext at universities, a kind of media hype around the internet developed which also included net art and net literature.

This intoxication in the second half of the 1990s, this initial euphoric overestimation of the internet onto which incredible social, political, artificial and particularly economic fantasies were projected, this intoxication, ended with the bursting of the big Dotcom-Bubble in the year 2000 and produced a major headache. Yet, the Olympic logic of „higher, faster, further“ continued to be pursued and immediately the internet was again uncritically inflated.

One of the most current examples is the social media hype, which is only slowly ebbing away. The logic of this hype could justify neither net art nor net literature in the long run. Thus some interpreters and curators have been sobering up, and the initial acclaimed death of the author in hypertext became a lament of net art and net literature and an escape into "Game Studies". An escape into the more popular world of game studies, which, so the argument goes, has inherited net literature in an

evolutionary way¹⁶. Net art and net literature have survived the hype, and will also survive playful misconceptions in good shape.

A computer is not a multimedia machine but a text machine. Multimedia is only surface – the interface such as the screen or the loud speakers. Whenever a computer turns multimedia, it is analogue. On the symbolic level digital technology consists of layers of texts: computer programs, protocols, even the 01 code is a text, just like Morse code. As early as 1979 the author William Gibson invented the word cyberspace in a narrative. In a recent interview William Gibson said "Cyberspace is here, now, today, there, where we presently are."¹⁷ He refers to the textual communication of our digital tools, which works for us in a "transparent" way – in other words unnoticed. Thus, if digital technology creates an invisible text space, a textual cyberspace around us, and one acknowledges that art has the function to shape reality, then net art and net literature has a wide field to work on.

MP: *In your piece of net art "G-Linie HTML" , how do you view the interactive semantisation with regard to Gomringer? What is the status of Gomringer's textual basis in this work?*

JA: Each browser has a function that can show the source text of every retrieved website. Thus, the internet user can always see how a specific website has been programmed.

That's what *G-Linie HTML* plays with. Websites are layed out with HTML-Tags. This includes for example the tag-pair `<p></p>` in each paragraph. A website can be created with any ASCII-editor. In these editors (and the browser's view of the source text is nothing else) line breaks and the distance between words can be carried out. However, they only become visible in the browser window when they are accordingly tagged. In other words, if an ASCII-Text is reformatted without HTML-Tags in the source text, one sees it as a sequence of words and signs without a break or gap.

JODI worked with this in the piece *%location*¹⁸ in a virtuous way. If one accesses the website in the browser, one only sees an unstructured, disconnected, blinking

sequence of signs. If one switches to the source text, then one can see ASCII-graphics.¹⁹

This is exactly what *G-Linie HTML* refers to, whose subtitle is *quelltext-hommage aah gomringer/jodi/la monte young*. In the browser, the viewer only gets to see a horizontal line of words. If one switches to the source text, these words are displayed as ASCII-Art, as poems by Eugen Gomringer.

Moreover, the viewer can replace words and signs in the browser-window with an immediate impact on the source text. As a co-writer, he or she has to employ a mental strategy to change the subtext that is hidden in the source text of the hidden poem by Gomringer.

In this process, he or she can extend the structure of Gomringer's poems – line breaks, blanks, the number of words can be expanded or reduced with some skills. Yet, they always remain the basis for the considerations. This demands a lot from the collaborative author and occasionally evokes destructive forces. The *G-Line HTML* is then rather turned into an interactive reload of my work *Kill the Poem*²⁰ from 1997. It is entirely up to my co-writer and how he or she deals with my offerings to act them out. "It is really not an issue whether the viewer understands the concept of the artist. (...) Once the piece of art is out of his hands, he no longer has any control over how a viewer processes it" [transl. MP], writes Sol LeWitt in his "Paragrafen über konzeptuelle Kunst" in 1967. Conceptual art is the third point of reference of *G-Linie HTML*. La Monte Young made the great call to action: *Draw a straight line and follow it* (Composition 1960 No. 10). In *G-Linie HTML* the co-writer can potentially construct an endless line of letter. This line can, however, just like La Monte Young's direction only be executed in one's mind.

MP: *Let's get back to "Free Lutz!" and "searchLutz" as well as to your latest project with Beat Suter and René Bauer: "searchSonata 181". Based on your experience with these projects, what is the fascination for both the programmers as well as the performers regarding a transformation of "artificial" poetry into a "natural" poetry? What exactly is made "natural" in this cross-over?*

JA: "Poetry, today, is no longer a channel for rather questionable ethical concerns, it is no means of justification for a mischievous world view"²¹, write Max Bense and Reinhard Döhl in the manifesto of the Stuttgart School titled "Zur Lage". They propose a poetry with a tendency towards artificial perfectionism. Conversely, one can conclude that in particularly artificial poetry, i.e. machine-generated poetry—which according to Bense's definition "cannot have a personal, poetic consciousness with lived experiences, emotions, memories, thoughts, or visions about an imagination"²² – defies being misused by humans as a mischievous world view ["*weltanschaulicher Unfug*"] and is rather capable as "an aesthetic negation of social conditions and deficiencies of civilization."²³

I believe that today these problems have been reversed. Computer technology is, extremely put, often no longer used for emancipatory purposes, but rather to use the human being for economic purposes. Take Google: it is not the genius algorithm of Larry Page and Sergei Brin that is responsible for its good search results, but rather the fact that it processes human worth and values, which are expressed by posting a link.

In 1769 Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen entertained his society companions with a chess robot. This so-called „chess Turk“ baffled its human opponents with its outstanding chess talent. This circumstance, however, was not attributable to its mechanics, but rather to the fact that the machine actually contained a tiny, living human being. This is just about the position that human beings take on within Google's algorithm.²⁴

I am not interested in programming clever poetry generators. I am much more interested in the question: how can I put the human being back into a setting with artificial poetry in an authentic way?

My current answer is that this can be achieved by a humanized output interface, such as a speaker, who would, as I have already explained, perform the algorithmically generated texts in an interpretive way. Thus, the performer transforms artificial poetry with his or her "pre-existing world".

MP: How would you locate "Free Lutz!" and "searchLutz!" within the wider spectrum of the international e-poetry scene, in which - just like you have said - the performative live-presence of the author has been increasingly returned to center stage? I am thinking for example about the E-Poetry Festival 2007 in Paris (<http://epc.buffalo.edu/e-poetry/archive/>).

JA: In Jörg Pieringer's performance and Aya Karpinska's Performance *Lala*²⁵, which one could experience at the E-Poetry Festival in 2007, I can see parallels to my work: the performance adds a crucial dimension to the electronic text. The difference lies in what gets accentuated. In Aya's case, the staging of a prop is in the foreground, whereas Jörg thinks, develops and programs much from the direction of code work. In my case, I accentuate interaction by integrated net communication in real time – words that are being put into search machines – and I let the writing audience interact.

On a concluding note, since we are talking about events, I would like to point out Peter Weibel's exhibition "Die algorithmische Revolution" at the ZKM from 2004 and international language-art-series "3durch3"²⁶ by Friedrich W. Block.

In the exhibition text for "Algorithmische Revolution"²⁷ Weibel makes a connection between instructions for viewers in conceptual art and the arithmetic statements of the algorithm. He calls the first one an intuitive algorithm. He recognizes this one in Fluxus, as for example in the *Event-Cards* by George Brecht from 1961, which ask for action from the reader. By contrast, for Weibel, the exact algorithm is the arithmetic statement to the computer; it is the computer program. He views the exact algorithm as a precise continuation of the intuitive algorithm. Developing this line of thought into a mix of intuitive and exact algorithm was a further source of inspiration for my net performances.

In his performance series "3durch3" Friedrich W. Block engages three positions within international language art. Visual Poetry, sound poetry and digital poetry can easily encounter each other in one evening. I view this positioning of digital poetry

that one can experience within larger language art environments as important and continuative.

Johannes Auer (aka Frieder Rusmann), is a net artist based in Stuttgart, Germany. He has been involved in collaborative, interactive and performative net art since 1996. His critically acclaimed projects have been exhibited internationally, such as, for example, at the Blue Metropolis Festival, Montréal, at Museum Strauhof, Zürich, as well as at several exhibition venues in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Berlin.

In the 1990s and early 2000s Auer collaborated intensively with Reinhard Döhl (a member of the Stuttgart School) in a number of projects including *Epitaph Gertrude Stein* (1996), *Kill the Poem* (1997) and *Worm Applepie for Döhl* (1997). His artwork is driven by explorations of the relationship between computers and human beings who are encouraged to co-create net art and net literature in performative and interactive ways.

In his most recent art project *Search Triologie* (search lutz! 2006 - searchSongs 2008 - searchSonata 181, 2011), which he co-produced with Beat Suter and René Bauer, the unifying concept is the usage of words that are typed in real time into search-engines like Google & Co. These search terms are processed by algorithm into texts as well as transformed into melodies/ sounds and phonetic sounds by live performance artists. (<http://auer.netzliteratur.net>)

- 1 <http://auer.netzliteratur.net/g-linie/>
- 2 Max Bense: "Über natürliche und künstliche Poesie". In: *Theorie der Texte. Eine Einführung in neuere Auffassungen und Methoden*, Köln 1962
Online: http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/naturliche_und_kuenstliche_poesie.html
- 3 <http://freelutz.netzliteratur.net/>
- 4 <http://searchlutz.netzliteratur.net/>
- 5 <http://doehl.netzliteratur.net/gertrud/gertrud.htm>
- 6 <http://doehl.netzliteratur.net/faun/faun.htm>
- 7 http://auer.netzliteratur.net/hhh/h_h_h.htm
- 8 The ASCII-Code includes the signs of the Latin alphabet capital and small letters, the ten Arabic numbers as well as some sentence and control characters.
- 9 Inke Arns: "Read_me, run_me, execute_me. Code als ausführbarer Text: Softwarekunst und ihr Fokus auf Programmcodes als performative Texte"
http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themen/generative_tools/software_art/8/
- 10 <http://www.p0es1s.net/de/projects/jaromil.html> [translation: MP]
- 11 <http://searchsongs.cyberfiction.ch/>
- 12 <http://searchsonata.netzliteratur.net/>
- 13 Benjamin Whooley, *New Media-Worlds*. London 1992, S.165. [Translation MP]
- 14 Wreader = der Leser „Reader“, der auch Autor „Writer“ ist.
- 15 Uwe Wirth: *Literatur im Internet. Oder. Wen kümmert's wer liest?*, 1996
<http://www.netzliteratur.net/wirth/litim.htm>
- 16 See the instructive explanations by Florian Hartling: *Der digitale Autor. Autorschaft im Zeitalter des Internets*, Bielefeld 2009, S. 321ff.
However, that there can be a fruitful overlap between computer games and net literature can be seen in the works of JODI and the Swiss artist duo AND-OR (Beat Suter, René Bauer).
- 17 "Leben im Cyberspace. William Gibson, der Erfinder des "Cyberspace" im Gespräch". In: *c't - Magazin für Computertechnik*, 15/2008, S. 204
- 18 <http://www.jodi.org/>
- 19 Interpreters keep emphasizing that JODI makes it so explicit that behind every surface text of a computer there is a program text, a code. What gets overlooked is that JODI except for the proprietary <blink> tag, the source text does not thematize the subtext. The piece only works if the HTML-Tags in the source text is left out.
- 20 <http://auer.netzliteratur.net/kill/killpoem.htm>
- 21 Max Bense, Reinhard Döhl: *Zur Lage*, 1964
http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/zur_lage.htm
- 22 Max Bense: *Über natürliche und künstliche Poesie*. A.a.O, S. 143ff. Transl. MP
Online: http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/naturliche_und_kuenstliche_poesie.html
- 23 *Zur Lage*, a.a.O.; Transl. MP

- ²⁴ This great comparison is taken from Nicholas Carr: "The Big Switch: Der große Wandel. Cloud Computing und die Vernetzung der Welt von Edison bis Google", Heidelberg 2009, S.254f.
- ²⁵ Aya Karpinska's Performance *Lala* is unfortunately not documented on the E-Poetry Website. A recording can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?hl=de&v=q4p6Y0G4TkA>
- ²⁶ <http://www.3durch3.de/>
- ²⁷ Peter Weibel: "Die Algorithmische Revolution. Zur Geschichte der interaktiven Kunst, 2004".
<http://www01.zkm.de/algorithmische-revolution/>