

Giselle Beiguelman

Tracing the work of some leading Brazilian visual and concrete poets, this essay discusses links, crossovers and points of divergence with e-poetry.

It aims neither to define boundaries nor to make simple ontological proposals; these are dangerous since all cultural differences fade when poetry is reduced to its supporting medium (magnetic, printed, or digital).

The Brazilian Visual Poetry, an exhibition presented at the Mexic-Arte Museum (Austin, Texas, 2002) and curated by Regina Vater is a good example of how these fields are both different yet similar.¹

A conceptualization of such practices is urgent. Otherwise, the tendency is to follow a reductionist point of view that stresses the predominance of supporting medium over content.

Crossovers

The associations between Brazilian concrete poetry and e-poetry are many. Critics stress their importance for poets devoted to digital media.² It is important to explore these associations in order to discover what we learned from past traditions. Are e-poets doing something different or just updating what was already done in other media?

The particularities of the Brazilian position in the production of concrete poetry, especially in the 1950s and in the international milieu, can be understood in the postwar historical context. Haroldo de Campos, one of the pioneers in the field, states:

Concrete poetry wasn't born by spontaneous generation or mere idiosyncrasy. It wasn't something so isolated. On the contrary, it was an international movement, translinguistic, that had resonance

among poets of many countries, from East to West. The novelty was that the Brazilians were, from the first hour, involved in that experience as founders of the movement.

This movement was born from a historical necessity: the retaking, in the 1950s, of the first avant-garde movements. [...] After the Second World War there was a movement in all artistic fields towards the recuperation of those efforts that Nazism and Stalinism had marginalized as “degenerated art” and “decadent art.” (Pignatari & de Campos & de Campos 1996)

If this explains the Brazilian prominence in the “concrete arena,” it does not make clear why the movement is still considered a point of reference for digital media. Another comment made by de Campos is a good point of departure for such a consideration.

In poetry it was imperative to recuperate the revolution started by Mallarmé (“*Un Coup des Dés*”) and amplified by Pound, Joyce, Stein, Cummings, Apollinaire and other vanguard movements of the first decades. The concern was to continue to knock down the verbal structures of contractual discourse, a discourse insufficient to embrace the universe of imagination and sensibility. (Pignatari & de Campos & de Campos 1996)

As a matter of fact, this is what e-poetry, especially in works conceived for the Web, could have as its mission statement: knocking down the verbal structures of contractual discourse and melting different poetics into a hybrid tradition.

Beside those objectives, e-poetry shares important characteristics with visual and concrete aesthetics. Both resist verse conventions, appeal to multiple senses, and use multiple media to expand the poetic object, working beyond *and sometimes without* words.

In short, concrete poetry can be defined as poetic practice that, following Joyce’s “verbivocovisual” strategies, organize the text according to its graphic and phonic values. It suppresses syntactical links between its elements to stress the work’s paramorphisms (as Pignatari described, or paronomasias, by the way of Jakobson).³

From a lyric point of view, technical innovations pioneered in the 1950s are important because they are at the core of e-poetry. Concrete poets made poetry more consonant with the materiality of language, breaking the linear structure of the traditional print format. They allowed multiple

readings and viewpoints through the exploration of the graphic possibilities of the text.

This non-linear approach, which necessitates that readers use their imaginations to organize meaning and content, laid the groundwork for the introduction of space into the temporality of language, an issue intrinsic to any cyberpoetic work.

Moreover, both poetic systems depend on the reader's participation in the meaning-building process and on the fusion of media content. For these reasons, these systems demand and produce new paradigms of reading, opening new reading horizons.

It is true, as pointed by Pignatari (paraphrasing Borges), that "any innovating poetic movement creates its own precursors" (Pignatari & de Campos & de Campos 1996). In this sense we can say that one of the most important contributions of concretism to e-poetry was the absorption, in the 1960s, of non-verbal elements into the poetic composition.

Concretism opened space for new genres of visual poetry like the boxes and posters produced in the 1970s by Edgard Braga (1897–1985),⁴ who not only expanded literary supports but worked, like no other Brazilian poet, to produce poetry beyond phonetics, playing with the "rise of language" in order to subvert its borders. (Santaella 2001).

Most of the international anthologies that mention Braga show poems that highlight how he explored the movement of words, the balance between form and content, transforming semantics into content in ways that resemble the work of Eugene Gomringer.⁵

In spite of this, it is in his calligraphic works, made of different materials and supports like stones, walls, and charcoal, that Braga's poetry points to a subversion of limits of what is visual art and what is poetry.

His "The Mask of the World," for instance, restores the ideogram symbology releasing poetry from idiomatic language. The same gesture appears in many poems of "Tatuagens" (1976) and "Murograma" (1982), revealing its differences with the visual poetry of the 1970s, more committed to the resignification of mass media and the invention of new dimensions of pop art (as it is patent in the work of Omar Khouri, for instance).⁶

This kind of subversion explains why can we credit Braga with being a paradigmatic creator for those working today with new dimensions of language and its intersections with non-verbal arts.

Intersections that mean implosion, visual guerrilla action and electronic intervention can be found in the work of Waldemar Cordeiro (1927–1971),

who, in the 1970s, coined the concept of *arteônica* (art + *electronica*) and made pioneering efforts with computers and the arts in 1968, working with Giorgio Moscati, from the Physics Department of the University of São Paulo at that time.

“A Mulher que Não é B.B.” (“The Woman who is not B.B.” 1971) is an expressive example of his challenging approach. It follows his series *Derivadas* (*Derivates* 1968), a series focused on processes of translation and recreation of photographic materials through digitalization.⁷

In that piece, a portrait of a Vietnamese girl was processed in perforated cards, resulting in a disturbing image of that period. This work relates to politics, anthropology, art, science, and mass media, stressing all those tensions by submitting them to a new language system: computer binary code.

Cordeiro advanced notions of appropriation and reinscription processes in creative practices mediated by electronic media. He eroded the borders between visual art, technology, and information.

We know that modernist avant-garde practitioners used such points of reference extensively, but we also know that they never have been so important as they are now. What makes us still think about Cordeiro’s work is his mastery in bridging conceptual differences between hybridism and media agglutination.

Links

Digital environments are practical and functional for multimedia works. They make production that demands simultaneous resources (audio, video, animation, etc.) easier and cheaper.

But the use of digital tools or digital support does not introduce *per se* any different epistemological attribute in the building of the meaning process, a condition of any form of digital poetics.

Not by chance one of the first critical works devoted to computer arts (*Art et Ordinateur*, 1971, by Abraham Moles) used Cordeiro’s works (*Derivates*) to introduce the fourth chapter “Poetics, Literature and Information.”

If contemporary literature is the art of the spacialization of language temporality, no matter if is verbal or not, his work is representative of this mobilization. It pushed poetics towards a hybrid practice that makes itself through the interpenetration of media and by its interstices.

Nevertheless, the first attempts directly committed to the exploration of new media for literary purposes were made only in the 1980s by Julio Plaza and Eduardo Kac, in pieces that used videotext and holography.⁸

By the same time contemporary Brazilian multimedia poets like Arnaldo Antunes, Walter Silveira, and Lenora de Barros were able to reinvent concrete procedures in their works, introducing photography, video, audio, and computer graphic arts. But they did not demonstrate any interest in applying this background to digital environments.

The question here is not whether or not they used computers and software in order to produce their works. Of course they used digital technology, but nothing that has the same poetic strength and degree of invention they reveal in their other works, which are outstanding.

As to work in digital media, for many years the important explorations made by Julio Plaza in electronic panels and with videotext in the 1980s, though appreciated at the time for their novelty, seemed to be isolated exercises. This did not change until they influenced the work of other artists in the 1990s.

A decisive moment in this movement happened in 1985, when Plaza, with Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, Moisés Baumstein, and José Wagner Garcia began a collective research project called *Triluz* (*Trilight*), realized and coordinated by Plaza, that aimed to “marry words and images to light.”

Presented at the Museum of Image and Sound, in São Paulo, the exhibition showed poetic projects made with holography⁹. One year later, it was expanded and presented at the same place in another exhibition “Ideologia” (“Idehologie”).

Important holographic works were launched there, including “Space-time/Espazotempo” by Décio Pignatari, a poem that reproduced the DNA model; “Arco-Íris no Ar Curvo” (“Rainbow in Curved Air”) by Plaza, a work in the form of the Moebius Ring; and the internationally known “Poema-bomba” (Bomb-poem, 1983–1997) by Augusto de Campos.

By that time Kac was also working with holography for literary purposes and trying to conceptualize what he called “textual instability” and the “fluid sign”, working simultaneously with the “Olho/Holo” (1983) anagram and its theoretical implications.¹⁰

Plaza’s work can be considered the precursor of a new poetic tradition that incorporates new media in composition, reinventing new uses for its material attributes, and reconfiguring its functionalities. In this sense, we

could say that in his work *Plaza* anticipated one of the crucial demands of poetry conceived for online spaces.

Kac's research on holography and videotext expanded the possibilities of electronic media for poetic creation. He incorporated specifics of concrete art from Rio de Janeiro, usually called "neo-concretism," revealing more about the idiosyncrasies of Brazilian culture in the 1960s than about its conceptual strategies.

Those differences are defined in opposition to the bidimensionality of the works produced by the Campos brothers and Pignatari from their beginnings to the interactive three-dimensional poems that had to be manipulated by the viewer in order to be read (produced by Ferreira Goulart, among others, in Rio de Janeiro by the end of the 1950s).¹¹

These experiences were decisive for the development of a new media poetry capable of challenging the limits of the book interface, transforming the reader's role by giving her a role in the process of the text creation and not only in meaning elaboration.¹²

Nonetheless, it was only in the 1990s, with the work of Philadelpho Menezes, Alckmar dos Santos, and André Vallias, that a systematic investigation of e-poetics began, an investigation of what could be an e-poetics and how it could be related to concrete and visual poetry.

Menezes explored new sensibilities with a focus on the investigation of the processes of the reconstruction of meaning from one medium to another, not by linear translations, but by the traversal of different symbolic protocols towards an intersigned practice. He devoted his attention to the problem not only theoretically, but also in practice. This practice resulted in his CD-ROM *Interpoesia*, made with Wilton Azevedo.

About this he wrote:

The intersigned fusion conducts, after all, the creative exercise towards the fusion between the text genres, where the poetry penetrates the field of theory, tale and encyclopedic information. Everything proceeds to the creation of big systems of communicating chambers where the narrative fiction, the game, the poetry, the scientific research, the daily information and the interpersonal contact can be moments of the same productive exercise. The fusion of genres is, furthermore, natural to interpoetry: visual poetry, sound poetry, theoretical text, encyclopedic information, fiction, lies, games, all are possible paths within the interpoem.¹³

dos Santos, a poet and a scholar devoted to research on digital literature, introduces other important nuances in this process of transference and fusion, moving our attention from the environment to the interface. He explored the complicity and fugacity that are embedded in the relation between reader, author, and work, relations involved in the reading experience on the computer screen.¹⁴

Vallias, a well known web designer and digital artist, is very close to Lenora de Barros and Walter Silveira. With strong links to Augusto de Campos, he has been completely devoted to the specifics of digital poetics.

He defines himself as a language designer who aims for a non-logic-centric poetics. Devoted to mathematical compositions since the early 1980s, his “Nous n’avons pas compris Descartes” (1990) is an incredibly concise and deep reflection on the tensions between the poem and its support, through the conversion of the page into a Cartesian grid.¹⁵

The title excerpts a poem by Mallarmé and figures a new reading experience – three dimensional space and its potential to configure a reading environment.

Vallias says that in “A Leer” (1997¹⁶) he pursues a poem as an “open diagram,” something that orients “a leer,” for our telematic society. His “laborinthic anthology” (“antologia.laboríntica”) is a long work-in-progress that mixes languages (Spanish, Portuguese, German), other authors’ texts, sounds, and signs to explore directions, durations, and limits in poetic practice and reading.

Divided into multiple windows “A Leer” is almost a tribute to the concrete tradition and its debt to the thoughts and poetics of Mallarmé and Cummings: the mixing of media into the message.

Distances

The publication history of “Un coup de dés” is well known, particularly the importance to Mallarmé of how the poem appears on the printed page.¹⁷ He was one of the first artists to deal with typography and layout as constitutive elements of the poem, paying attention to their importance in the reading process.

Conscious of the technology available at the time and of its relevance to a poetics tuned to the sensibility of his historical moment, Mallarmé revolutionized poetic creation by establishing the complicit agreement be-

tween art and information sciences that are so important for digital poets of nowadays.

Cummings, another important reference point for the Brazilian concrete poets, was indifferent to the vast population of gadgets and machines that, since the beginning of the twentieth century, are part of American culture. Well known was his resistance to technological progress.

Paradoxically, writing on Cummings, the Brazilian semiotician Lucia Santaella argues:

It is not possible to understand his [Cummings'] expertise in building his poems without considering the *sui generis* resources made available by the typewriter as a machine. There is, in his poetics, a peculiar sensibility with the written language that is specially mediated by the typewriter. It stresses the visual and sensitive values of the blank spaces, lines and digits (the letter as the finger touch on the machine) that would be unconceivable in a calligraphic work. (1987)

This engagement between material poetic resources and poetic meaning construction is intrinsic to any serious digital work; it is enough to quote here the work of Silvia Laurentiz and Arthur Matuck to stress its importance.

Few artists could face the difficulties implicit in Haroldo de Campos's statements on translations as transcreations as Laurentiz does in her work "Econ" (1998), concerning the poem "O Eco e o Icon" (The Echo and the Icon) by the Portuguese poet Ernesto Manuel Galdes de Melo e Castro¹⁸.

Laurentiz in fact recoded the poem by creating a special architecture for it in a VRML environment. The artist says "Econ is an interactive space poetry, a new reading form, evoked by the plasticity of the words – position, shape and color – and by spreading sound in distinct zones."

The poem is not just revisited but is in fact recreated, opening it for new senses, while stressing its original meanings. It announces the necessity of thinking about the new forms of transcreation that challenge the limits of language, expanding its meaning to relational information.

A completely different approach to transcreation is that of Arthur Matuck who brings French Oulipo principles to the e-poetry scene. In his "Literaterra" ("Landscape", 2002¹⁹) he explores the input movement determined by the Web reader and configured by the Web developer.

The algorithmic “Landscape” deals with automated generative processes and with new partnerships between creator, reader, and machine, in a phrase: with new reading and writing contexts.

The work is not concerned with grammar manuals, sequential arrangements, or originality. It operates through appropriation of submitted text, discovery of meanings, the use of random patterns, and combinatorial reasoning. Made of fragmented texts and databases of words that must be arranged by the reader, every word typed in “Literaterra” is reset by the program and linked to a group of ideas.

It is possible to deconstruct words, to define their classes, and also to explore the series and collections already stored by other “Literaterra” inhabitants (the landscapers). A useful “set up” allows the customization of the interface according to reader preferences.

Nevertheless, one should be conscious that everything submitted to “Landscape” becomes collective property and might be used freely by other landscapers. By doing so, more than transferring and recycling Oulipian ideas to the Web, Matuck celebrates the instability of the electronic word and its deep connections to the materiality of the digital media.

Matuck’s work celebrates the kind of materiality that it is not determined by the objects that allocate content but by what is intrinsic to the reading experience: the materiality that, as states N. Katherine Hayles, “emerges from the interplay between the apparatus, the work, the writer and the reader/user” (Hayles & Gitelman 2002). Such a materiality allows contemporary literature to mix the interface into the message.

In this sense we can say that the particularities of the digital poetics of such a work are not defined by mixing the interface into the message, but in the productive means that result in the work.

In digital environments, what is seen, perceived, and experimented with is a result of monitor pattern and quality, connection speed, browser versions and models, plug-ins and boards, and operating systems, among many other computer and networked conditions that are configured and established by the reader.

Since it is hypertextual, digital writing is relational writing, and the online reading experience is a browsing experience. It occurs in simultaneous windows and, with the proliferation of handhelds, mobile phones and electronic panels, in increasingly fragmented reading spaces; it occurs not as an activity in itself, but in between, while doing other things.

Recontextualization of meaning, assemblage, and discontinuity are the key words of such a phenomena; here can be seen the link between the digital poetics of Vallias, Laurentiz and Matuck and concrete practices, as well as the connection to a post-national literature.

If concrete poets, following Cummings, and above all Mallarmé, could redefine poetic practices by trusting the unity of the page (Mallarmé 1974), e-poets are teaching us, as well as learning themselves, to deal with the transitory and fluid liquid field of digital media and Net reading conditions.

E-poetry in this context expands and redirects not only the reading support, but rather the reading interface itself. Ubiquitous, those interfaces are more and more disconnected from the conventions that attach representations to supports (Lichty 2001; Derrida 1973).

Disembodied by the multiplication of meaning across different platforms, e-poetry in this sense creates its own poetics by the interpenetration of interfaces into simultaneous and discontinuous messages – messages that, from now on, are made of a liquid textuality that challenges us to understand the hybridism of our times.

NOTES

1. For the electronic catalog of *The Brazilian Visual Poetry* (see <http://www.imediata.com/BVP/>). For different concrete practices, see Solt (1968, also available on line at UbuWeb: <http://www.ubu.com/papers/solt/index.html>).
2. See, for example, Glazier (2002).
3. Pignatari & de Campos & de Campos (1996) and Greene (1992, reproduced at <http://www.ubu.com/papers/decampos.html>)
4. A physician, born in the north-east of Brazil, Edgard Braga is not well known and there are only a few articles about his impressive work, most of them written by other prominent contemporary poets, like Haroldo de Campos and Régis Bonvicino, who was the editor of *Desbragada*, a collection of Braga's work.
5. A few examples available in English are the translations of Braga's poems made by Edwin Morgan in *Concrete Poetry* (Chapbook 9), Fall 1996, pp. 29–33. An exploration of Braga's and Gomringer works can be found in an essay by Paul Kloppeborg ("Concrete to Computer: The future of visual poetry") published in the electronic magazine *Periphelion*. Available: <http://www.webdelsol.com/Perihelion/p-theory.htm>.
6. Some of Khouri's works were published by "Arteria" magazine, which was distributed in plastic bags with white envelopes inside. Examples of his works are available at *Antologia Virtual: Anos 70 – Poesia (Virtual Anthology – The 1970s Poetry)*. Available: http://www.itaucultural.org.br/index.cfm?cd_pagina=572.
7. For a detailed explanation of the technology used by Cordeiro and Moscati, see *Arteônica*, catalog of the exhibition presented at the sixth Sibigrapi (Brazilian Symposium on Computer Graphics and Image Processing) in Recife, September 1993, pp. 10–15. Available: <http://www.visgraf.impa.br/Gallery/waldemar/catalogo/catalogo.pdf>.

8. One of the videotext works by Julio Plaza made in 1983 is on line. It is an exercise in intersemiotic translation of a poem by Paulo Leminski “Lua na Água” (Moon on Water). Available: <http://www.leminski.curitiba.pr.gov.br/arquivos.htm>.
9. By this time, Wagner Garcia (1983) and Moisés Baumstein had already worked with that technology in their works of art but their works were not devoted to poetry.
10. The piece was presented at the Museum of Modern Art, in Rio de Janeiro, in 1985, and developed with Fernando Catta-Preta. Many samples of Kac’s holopoems, along with his texts and essays on the subject, are available at the artist’s web site at <http://www.ekac.org/holopoetry.html>.
11. For a critical analysis of the intellectual conflict, see Reis (2002).
12. It is difficult not to remember here Barthes premonitory words: “L’enjeu du travail littéraire (de la littérature comme travail), c’est de faire du lecteur, non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte” (Barthes 1990).
13. Philadelpho Menezes, «Interactive poems: intersign perspective for experimental poetry». Available: <http://geocities.com/Paris/Lights/7323/philadelpho.html>. See also his *Interpoesia*, CD-ROM (with Wilton Azevedo), Educ/Mackenzie, 2000.
14. For some of Alckmar dos Santos digital creations, see. *alire* 11, CD-ROM, Mots-Voir, Villeneuve d’Ascq, 2000.
15. Conceived for printed surface, the poem was updated for the web. One of its versions is at <http://www.refazenda.com.br/aleer/page/nous.htm>.
16. [Http://www.refazenda.com.br/aleer/](http://www.refazenda.com.br/aleer/).
17. See, for instance, “Page-proofs for page 5 of *Un Coup de Dés*.” Available: <http://www.uia.ac.be/webger/ger/joyce/ucdd.html>.
18. [Http://www.pucsp.br/~cos-puc/interlab/in4/entradai.htm](http://www.pucsp.br/~cos-puc/interlab/in4/entradai.htm).
19. [Http://www.teksto.com.br/](http://www.teksto.com.br/).