5 Concrete Digitalities

5.1.

Finding Concreteness in Digitality: Analog and Digital Concrete Poetry Meets *Text Rain*

> When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It moves. It feels. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving. Can we think of a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other?
>
> Brian Massumi, 2001.

To say that digital poetry recaptures some of the fundamental theoretical debates from concrete poetics is not to establish a teleological pattern of investigation. As transnational as I wish these interrogations to be, I draw on the advantages of the Brazilian context to briefly elaborate on this argument. Digital poetry per se is not the focus of this thesis and I believe the sub-genre would require one entirely devoted to its study. Nonetheless, in my attempt to offer a panorama of digital literature, I would certainly be remiss not to address kinetic poetry. The commonplace contention is that it would only be natural for digital poetry to be framed against critical and theoretical biases of Concrete rhetoric. As theorist Giselle Beiguelman writes in her "The Reader, The Player and the Executable Poetics: Towards a Literature Beyond the Book":

> Locating digital literature in general and more specifically cyberliterature, in relation to Concrete Poetry is particularly relevant in the Brazilian case because of the influence some of its main artists had – and still have – on first generation multimedia artists

(such as Leonora de Barros, Arnaldo Antunes, and Andre Vallias, among others), due to their pioneering in incorporating the beyond the page media such as videotext, video itself, and electronic billboards into their writing. (…) (BEIGUELMAN, 2010, p. 404)

A Concrete poem is, as Manuel Portella of *PO-EX: Poesia Experimental Portuguesa – Cadernos e Catálogos* puts it, a "self-referential poly-sign that, through fractal self-similarity between graphic and semantic form, seeks to enclose its field of reference in its own materiality" (PORTELLA, 2008, http://poex.net/). It stands to reason that digital poetry should also seek to enclose its field of reference into its significantly more complex material makeup. In the Brazilian scene, one could cite the kinetic poetry of the Campos brothers – two icons of Concretism who have adopted "click poetry" as an aesthetic medium. To say that one can detect tropes of Concrete rhetoric in electronic poetry is not to suggest a pattern of oversimplified remediation. To be sure, the Campos brothers' re-compositions of the poems *Bomba* and *Parafísica* as well as Kac's holopoems cannot be discussed in chronological terms alone (BEIGUELMAN, 2010) – i.e., Augusto de Campos's statement that "a prática tem demonstrado que as antecipações da poesia concreta encontram no computador o veículo adequado para suas novas proposições verbais" implies a notion of historicity and diachrony I do not wish to pursue (CAMPOS apud. BEIGUELMAN, 2010, p. 407). As my previous discussion on Eduardo Kac's holopoetry has shown, every instance of successful remediation promotes its own modality of syntactic/semantic disturbance. Instead of a causal model, I submit that the study of digital poetics adhere to the recursive logic of cooperative theorization (Cf. Chapter 1).

In her essay "From Concrete to Digital: The Reconceptualization of Poetic Space," theorist Anna Katharina Schaffner proposes to investigate "how two of the main concerns of concrete poets – the poetics of space and the exploration of the concrete materiality of the medium – translate into the digital domain" (SCHAFFNER, 2010, p. 179). While an analog poetics of space necessitates the analysis of strictly Concrete discursive strategies, a digital spatial poetics ought to encompass the direct effects of programmable language on ontological parameters ("material performances of the text") (HAYLES, 2006, p. 186). I would like to dwell

on the notion of space inasmuch as it permeates much of the theoretical discourse on digital literature. Bi-dimensional space is surface – I shall address three-dimensional complex surfaces in the manner of John Cayley, but suffice it for now to think of space as non-complex surface, as a page. In printed text, space is mostly fixed – cognitive implications stemming from reader-response criticism and reception theory, notwithstanding. Quite schematically, Concrete poetry's emphasis on design and spatial grammar triggers two distinct (albeit inextricably conjoined) reception strategies, namely, those of "reading" and those of "viewing". Incidentally, the trope of optical fluctuation in Concrete poetics is precisely what Brazilian Concrete poet Augusto de Campos and other co-members of the Noigandres group of São Paulo (Décio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos) have attempted to subsume under the heading of the "verbovocovisual" function[1] – semantic and visual (formal) constituents being synchronically deployed. It is significant to note that the term *verbovocovisual* is itself borrowed from James Joyce's "verbivocovisual presentment" (Book II, Episode 3 of *Finnegans Wake*). In his "Versatile Vanguard Vectors," literary critic Charles A. Perrone stresses the function of the triple feature contained in the hyphenated version of term *verbo-voco-visual* – i.e., "the triple feature [clarifies] the idea of the simul-tan-eous presence of semantic, sonorous and optical elements. By the end of 1955, in any case, their published elucidations would utilize the amalgamated term" (PERRONE, 2007, p. 1). By turning poetic space into an integral semantic layer, Concrete poets effectively transform spatial syntax. The poets of the Noigrandes group elaborate on the notion of "poetic nucleus" in their *Plano-Piloto para Poesia Concreta* (*Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry*) as follows:

> *O núcleo poético é posto em evidência não mais pelo encadeamento sucessivo e linear de versos, mas por um sistema de relações e equilíbrios entre quaisquer partes do poema.*
>
> - *funções-relações gráfico-fonéticas ("fatores de proximidade e semelhança") e o uso substantivo do espaço como elemento de composição entretêm uma dialética simultânea de olho e fôlego, que, aliada à síntese ideogrâmica do significado, cria*

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[1] Cf. FINIZOLA, F. Augusto de Campos: "The 'verbivocovisual' function of the concrete poem valorizes the word's every sense of communication, its semantic load, its sound and visual shape. All these elements now influence simultaneously the reading, which receives not only a verbal but also non-verbal character, outlining a phenomenon of meta-communication" (*Poesia Concreta Contemporânea - Novas Interferências do Meio Digital*, 2009).

*uma totalidade sensível "verbivocovisual", de modo a justapor palavras e
experiência num estreito colamento fenomenológico, antes impossível.*

(The poetic nucleus is no longer evidenced by the successive and linear chaining of
verses, but by a system of relationships and equilibriums between all parts of the poem.

- graphic-phonetic functions-relations ("factors of proximity and likeness") and the
substantial use of space as an element of composition maintain a simultaneous
dialectic of eye and voice, which, allied with the ideogrammic synthesis of
meaning, creates a tangible "verbivocovisual" totality. In this way words and
experience are juxtaposed in a tight phenomenological unit that before was
impossible.) (CAMPOS et Al., 1956).

ra terra ter
rat erra ter
rate rra ter
rater ra ter
raterr a ter
raterra terr
araterra ter
raraterra te
rraraterra t
erraraterra
terraraterra

Fig. 22. Décio Pinatari's *Terra* **(1956).**

A full critique of the Noigrandes poets' phenomenological agenda need not
concern us here. Given that "concrete poetry begins by being aware of graphic space
as structural agent," (CAMPOS et. al, 1970, p. 71) one can extrapolate, with regards
to a poetics of the screen, that the repercussions of "detached" signifiers in fluid
surfaces will be numerous. Surface itself, within this realm, can only be rationalized
metaphorically: there is no true stability to speak of; there are only gradual, ever-
minute, instantiations of permanence. The "media-constituted diegetic world," to
borrow from John Cayley's terminology, is if nothing else a place of flux and
constant change (CAYLEY, 2010). Digital poetry requires that the tension between

semantic value and what Schaffner has successfully termed "the graphic gestalt of letters" be placed in the fore alongside kinetic and interactive practices (SCHAFFNER, 2010). In the electronic poetry of Argentinean Ana Marie Uribe, for instance, it is the author's contention that visual associations activated by discrete morphological manipulation serve as "constituents of meaning" (Ibid, p. 181),[2] a point easily evidenced by the image (animation) below (Fig. 23).
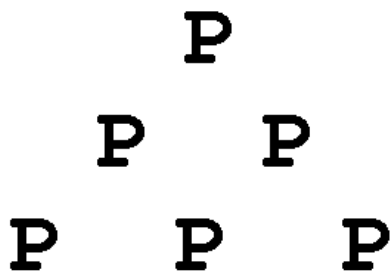
P

P   P

P   P   P

Fig. 23. Ana Maria Uribe's *Gymnasia* (1998). In the animated version the P's become R's, thus mimicking an elongation drill in gymnastics.

As my earlier discussion of Cayley's *Overboard* has indicated, digital encoding injects complexity into interface text – binary code instantiating multiple screenic planes. At the interface level, this logic translates in the interplay of text as both signifier and "post-alphabetic object".[3] If the requisites of Concrete poetics disrupted Western reading practices of linearity and hierarchy, in digital poetry the imbrications between what can provisionally be termed a signifier and fluid material arrangements become all the more malleable. At the outermost layer – interface text – words tend to tilt, dance, crack and generally thwart legibility. With Hayles, one might argue that digital-instantiated text presents a distinct type of materiality, one which invokes proprioception as well as kinesthetic engagement (HAYLES, 2006, p. 184). Strictly at the level of reception, it is safe to assume that processes of signification in programmable media arise from concurrent engagements of affects and percepts.

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[2] The concept of meaning here is to be taken with the proverbial grain of salt – let us, along with Hans Gumbrecht, attempt to detract notions of universality and depth from it. But the point is that the semantic structuring of the digital poem includes non-verbal elements.

[3] The latter is borrowed from Simanowski's terminology.

Additionally, insofar as they are *processes*, not to mention outcomes of *processing*, digital poems require a de-emphasis on spatiality in favor of temporality. In other words, these objects often demand careful, albeit fleeting, forms of perusal (FUNKHOUSER, 2006). This is not to undermine spatiality or form, but simply to suggest that the digital poem ceases to exist as a self-contained unit to operate as a time-instantiated entity, "an event brought into existence when the program runs on the appropriate software loaded onto the right hardware" (HAYLES, 2006, p. 181). The processualization of poetry has at least one further significant implication. If theories of aesthetic response have taught us that text emerges out of a series of cognitively activated interactive procedures, the distinctions brought about by digital literature are of an entirely different nature: "Although print readers perform sophisticated cognitive operations when they read a book, the printed lines exist as such before the book is opened, read, or understood. A digital text does not have this kind of prior existence" (HAYLES, 2006, p. 181). Digital text owes its material (ontic) inscription to an intricate network of human and machinic entities.[4]

It might appear counterintuitive to reconcile presence theory's emphasis on spatiality with Hayles' temporalizing take on the nature of digital poetry: "thinking about the digital poem, paraphrasing William Carlos Williams, as a machine to organize time" (HAYLES, 2006, p. 181). As tutor texts, Hayles examines John Cayley's *riverIsland* along with Stephanie Strickland's Web poem *V: Vniverse* with its companion print book, *V:Wave.Son.nets/Losing L'Una* (STRICKLAND, 2002). Inasmuch as space is to be associated with the tangible realm of existence (GUMBRECHT, 2004), one must discern materiality as such (apparent *stasis*, as Cayley would have it) from material gradations – the intervening stages between encoding and interface. As a provisional hypothesis I would argue, extrapolating on Cayley's deductions, that the screen as a surface of textual inscription is not a

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[4] The contention that digitality detracts from the poem's self-containment is hardly disputable. I should note that in light of all the discussions stemming from reader-response criticism and reception theory, the notion of self-contained stable texts is, in itself, highly debatable. In his 1980 book *The Act of Reading*, Wolfgang Iser underscores the importance of the asymmetry between text and reader as he speaks of interaction: "To sum up the asymmetry between text and reader stimulates a constructive activity on the part of the reader; this is given a specific structure by the blanks and the negations arising of the text, and this structure controls the process of interaction" (ISER, 1980, p. 170). See also his discussion of Roman Ingarden's concept of *Unbestimmtheitsstellen* (translated "spots of indeterminacy").

transparent medium of delivery, nor "should [it] be cast as a bearer of multiple (flat) successive 'states of text." Precisely because it is *space* that can act as a *temporal* repository, both monitoring and retaining traces of all recursive stages of programmable text, it should be treated as a complex surface (CAYLEY, 2005).

In my prefatory remarks on the distinction between digital literature from the broader umbrella of digital art, I commented on Hayles' suggestion that the "verbal mark" can operate as a provisional criterion – provisional being, of course, the operative term in this assertion since the complexity of individual works (their very readability as textual objects) will often vary, thereby rendering such clear cut demarcations almost impossible. Here I suggest to expand on notions of "genuine" digital literature and argue that textual installations such as *Text Rain* (1999) by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv or *text.curtain* (2005) by Daniel Howe, wherein legibility is algorithmically predicated, are nonetheless literary works insofar as the presence of the linguistic sign will draw a distinctive kind of attention (one may call it an impulse to "read") on the part of the spectator. Simply put, if there is an "A" falling on my shoulder instead of the image of a raindrop, it will make a difference. I will want to find out what sentences are formed by these strings of signs even if I am denied totality and ultimately walk out of the installation without a clear notion of what the full text was about. I shall resume the discussion on inter- and intrapersonal boundaries in my descriptive and systems-theoretical analysis of *Text Rain*. The contemporary tendency towards dematerialization – clearly evinced in the elusive poetics of *Text Rain* – does, however, echo Gumbrecht's caveat against the universality of metaphysics: "Rather than having to think, always and endlessly, what else could there be, we sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin" (GUMBRECHT, 2004, p. 106).

The fact that Hayles addresses an epistemic shift in information theory remnant of the years following World War II (from the present/absent binary distinction to a pattern/randomness paradigm) is precursory of the debates one can hope to attain at the intersection of digital aesthetics and post-hermeneutical theory. In contemporary society, information is defined as a "pattern of randomness." With Hayles, one might

argue that the confluence of "signal and materiality" endows bodies and texts with "a parallel doubleness" (http://www.english.ucla.edu/faculty/hayles/Flick.html).

> Just as the human body is understood in molecular biology as simultaneously a physical structure and an expression of genetic information, so the literary corpus is at once a physical object and a space of representation, a body and a message. Because they have bodies, books and people have something to lose if they are regarded solely as informational patterns, namely the resistant materiality that has traditionally marked the experience of reading no less than it has marked the experience of living as embodied creatures. (Ibid.)

Granted, while carbon-based bodies are relatively stable organic substrata genetically adhering to their material configurations, the same cannot be said of digital artifacts.[5] Changes in the body ("the material substrate") and "changes in the message" ("the codes of representation") led Hayles to adopt the term "flickering signifiers," which she describes as "characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations and dispersions" (Ibid.). Lacanian incursions through "floating signifiers" aside, I shall retain the notion of "flickering signifiers" in my discussion of the visual-textual installation *Text Rain*. Lastly, my meditation on *Text Rain* will also take into account Hayles' notion of "eventilization," or the fact that in digital media "the poem has distributed existence spread among data files and commands, software that executes the commands, and hardware on which the software runs" (HAYLES, 2006, p. 182). That said, some texts are more visibly stable than others and I think that is Hayles' point. Put differently, digital literature contains a strong element of performativity, which explains why it is safer to call a digital text a *process* instead of an *object* (HAYLES, 2006). While a portion of the performative potential inherent to digital texts can be traced to the prior execution of code (processing) – hence John Cayley's, Talan Memmot's and others' battle for the inclusion of code in the study of digital literature –, the other equally performative characteristic lies in ergodic (tangible) procedures unraveling at the level of interface. With these reflections in mind, I proceed to a close reading of *Text Rain*.

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[5] Hayles admits this is a point of usual dispute and writes that the material performance to which she refers – which is the one I understand to happen in digital literature – precedes "whatever cognitive processing the user performs to read and interpret the text" (HAYLES, 2006, p. 185).

5.2.

Exhibit A: *Text Rain*

> One evening in 1911, four members of the Parisian avant-garde attended a bizarre theatrical presentation: Marcel Duchamp, Guillaume Apollinaire, Francis Picabia and Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia went to see *Impressions of Africa*, a performance based on a novel by Raymond Roussel. "It was tremendous," Duchamp was later to say of that night. "On the stage there was a model and a snake—it was absolutely the madness of the unexpected. I don't remember much of the text. One didn't really listen.
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> <div align="right">Rosalind Krauss, 1971.[6]</div>

In his *Digital Art and Meaning: Reading Kinetic Poetry, Text Machines, Mapping Art, and Interactive Installations,* Roberto Simanowski vehemently presents his case for interpretation as follows -

> In postmodern times interpretation is no longer about control or truth. It is not about solving the puzzle of meaning a work of art represents. It is about suggestions, playing with ideas, reflecting and sharing the thoughts and feelings triggered in the interaction with the artwork. No single interpretation should be the end of this process. But there should also be no end to interpretation. (SIMANOWSKI, 2011, manuscript)

That meaning is plural seems to be a consensus amongst theorists. In his *On Grammatology*, Derrida speaks of the end of the age of the sign (which Gumbrecht reads as "the end of metaphysics") (GUMBRECHT, 2004, pp. 51-52). According to Derrida, it is not a matter of endings but simply one of closure (*clôture*): it is entirely possible that "the age of the sign will perhaps never end. Its historical closure, however, is outlined" (DERRIDA, 1967, p. 14). Post post-structuralist semiology, however educed, can no more retain the binary Saussurean distinction between signifier and signified than communication/information theory can afford to be

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[6] KRAUSS, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 69. (Pierre Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 71. Apud RICARDO, 2010, p. 58.) Ricardo notes that that both the event and a photograph of it appear in RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006 [1979]), 76.

reduced to a sender/receiver (message) transmission model.[7] To quote directly from Derrida's text:

> La « science » sémiologique ou, plus étroitement, linguistique, ne peut donc retenir la différence entre signifiant et signifié — l'idée même de signe — sans la différence entre le sensible et l'intelligible, certes, mais sans retenir aussi du même coup, plus profondément et plus implicitement, la référence à un signifié pouvant « avoir lieu », dans son intelligibilité, avant sa « chute », avant toute expulsion dans l'extériorité de l'ici-bas sensible. (…) Bien entendu, il ne s'agit pas de « rejeter » ces notions : elles sont nécessaires et, aujourd'hui du moins, pour nous, plus rien n'est pensable sans elles. Il s'agit d'abord ie mettre en évidence la solidarité systématique et historique de concepts et de gestes de pensée qu'on croit souvent pouvoir séparer innocemment. Le signe et la divinité ont le même lieu et le même temps de naissance. L'époque du signe est essentiellement théologique. Elle ne *finira* peut-être jamais. Sa *clôture* historique est pourtant dessinée. (DERRIDA, 1967, p. 25)

Whether the "age of the sign" will come to an end is not clear in Derrida's text. More importantly, the debate seems a matter of theoretical conjecture, which quite frankly ceases to make sense. Rather than partaking in fruitless futurology exercises – and ever subscribing to the systems theory adage that "future" is a matter of self-referential differentiation[8] – I opt to expand the limitations of the semiotic paradigm and delve into the unchartered waters of the here and now. In this sense, Gumbrecht posits a pertinent question: "at least from my point of view, then the most urgent question is: Who will be patient enough – infinitely patient enough – to agree with Derrida?" (GUMBRECHT, 2004, p. 52). As mentioned, the point is to *supplement* (in the Derridean sense) interpretation with the neglected sphere of the body. I bring this up to introduce the textual installation *Text Rain* precisely because, in many ways, the piece reenacts the "drama" of the end of metaphysics.

In his notable analysis of Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv's 1999 textual installation *Text Rain*, theorist Francisco J. Ricardo writes that *Text Rain* functions and presents "several discursive spaces or moments of being, revealing themselves in

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[7] See LUHMANN, N. *How Can The Mind Participate in Communication?* 1994, p. 371. Also see LUHMANN, 1998 on second order observations as the operative basis for structural differentiation between systems. According to Luhmann "society can conduct observations only in the form of communications, not in the form of conscious internal operations and above all not in the form of perceptions" (LUHMANN, 1998, pp. 56-57).

[8] Cf. LUHMANN, N. *Observations on Modernity* (*Beobachtungen der Moderne*. English translation: William Whobrey) Stanford U. Press, 1998. Specifically, chapter 3, "Describing the Future."

gradual fashion" (RICARDO, 2010, p. 58). In his introductory remarks, Ricardo references an oft-quoted passage from Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation*: "The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show what it means" (SONTAG, 1964, p. 14). The ontic axiom "how it is what it is" denotes an "implicit line" between interpretation and close reading (RICARDO, 2010, p. 55). This is a particularly pertinent distinction with regards to this thesis because I start out announcing a firm belief in close readings whilst rather subversively advocating Gumbrecht's theories of presence – versus interpretation. The truth, or least my truth, lies in the middle. This is why (albeit for distinct reasons than his own) I agree Roberto Simanowski that given the chance to rewrite her article today, Sontag would probably not repeat her vehement attack on interpretation (SIMANOWSKI, 2011). It is my hypothesis that she would veer towards the line of reasoning that Gumbrecht defends.

Particularly suited to my take on *Text Rain*'s immersive wordplay logics is Ricardo's distinction between interpretation and close reading. While interpretation lends itself to variation (a myriad of viewpoints will produce multiple interpretations), close readings in Ricardo's sense entail more rigorous scrutiny and analysis. Nevertheless, and this is key point, the author realizes that any reading, however rigorous, remains "a" reading (one out of an infinite range of possibilities). Furthermore, to speak of such differentiations implies a discussion of the non-interpretive, sensory aspects of the work, hence the self-posited questions:

> What then of the multimodality of imagery and text that new expressive forms and media have attained, all the re/ mediation to use another phrase, all the convergence? Why all of this if not to take the receiving audience to new landscapes of imagination, and therefore interpretation? Ought we reasonably disallow the greater contemporary need for new interpretive positions in light of media, products, and works that bring novel sensory impetus and user participation? (RICARDO, 2009, p. 56)

The short answer to these questions is no, one should not disavow interpretation but one should recognize that new media theory ought to develop an adequate repertoire with which to conjugate affect (one might safely call it presence) and hermeneutics. The *transmodality* of which Ricardo speaks is elucidative of the intricate and distinctly novel literary fabric of *Text Rain* – one which subsists on the

simultaneous deployment of imagery, performance and pure text. With Krauss, Ricardo regards Duchamp's reception of *Impressions of Africa*, characterized by the latter's inattentiveness to text, as indicative of "the sensory montage of multiple modalities, and [of] the dominance of action in the visual field," (RICARDO, 2010, p. 58). Admittedly, new media theory would largely benefit from thematizations derived from cognitive sciences and computational linguistics, i.e., studies on proprioception/semiosis/kinesthesia. Through a series of rhetorical questions, Ricardo comments on an epochal change reflective of the ubiquity of technology. A viable solution, he claims, would encompass a shift in critical attention from reception to production:

> (…) the change to consider revolves around how the voice of artistic effort emerging from the author, painter, poet, filmmaker, orator, or sculptor is to accommodate within the presence of expressive mechanisms that produce projective imagery, sensory activation, and selective immersion of their own as instrument of creation that complement, or perhaps compete with, received notions of artistic expression. The production, therefore, of imagery as extension to or evolution after the staunchest formalism, to include arguments for pure literature, can not be distanced either from the literary—as abstraction, as ontological characteristic however defined—because that quality cannot be defined as either image-free or imagery-free. (RICARDO, 2009, p. 57)

In a doctoral thesis slanted towards – albeit not entirely predicated on – productions of presence, I am inclined to underscore sensory activations. Per my self-imposed descriptive hypothesis, a closer look at Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv's textual installation *Text Rain* (1999) requires that I first *describe* it.

Text Rain is an interactive textual installation consisting of a camera which captures participants' images and projects their mirrored images in black and white onto a large screen, combining them with a color animation of falling virtual letters. Unbeknownst to the participants (the poem is not made available at the installation site), the letters form excerpts from the poem *Talk, You* by Evan Zimroth from the book *Dead, Dinner, or Naked* (1993). The algorithmic logic is simple: letters will fall and momentarily stabilize – "land" – at objects darker than a pre-determined and yet spatially adjustable threshold. Should participants lift their arms or bring with them a prop such as an umbrella, they can manipulate the rate at which the letters fall,

prompting them to float and undulate. A verse can be formed if a participant lingers to collect enough letters. In a voice-over description contained in the video of the installation, Camille Utterback states that the poem is purposefully selected because of its theme, "bodies and language": "The falling letters are not random but form lines of a poem about bodies and language. 'Reading' the phrases in the *Text Rain* installation becomes a physical as well as a cerebral endeavor" (UTTERBACK, http://camilleutterback.com/projects/text-rain/).

Fig. 24. Still Image from *Text Rain* by Romy Achituv and Camille Utterback (1999).

The poem is quoted below:

I like talking with you,
simply that: conversing,
a turning-with or –around,
as in your turning around
to face me suddenly . . .

At your turning, each part
of my body turns to verb.
We are the opposite of *tongue-tied*, if there
were such an antonym;
We are synonyms

for limbs' loosening of syntax,
and yet turn to nothing:
It's just talk.

To redeploy one of Hayles' favored terms from physiology, *Text Rain*'s proprioceptive appeal displaces and recontextualizes earlier Concrete distinctions between seeing and reading. In *Text Rain* the point seems to be less about the letter as lexical unit and more about what happens (or appears to happen) to the letter, or the "flickering signifier", as it responds to the interactor's bodily gestures. In his analysis of the installation, Ricardo has a brilliant take on the installation's visual strategy: not reliant on archival imagery *Text Rain* is "based on a kind of recombinant encoding that [he] has associated with the language of cyber literature" (RICARDO, 2009, p. 58). Put in different terms, *Text Rain* contains nothing in itself; it possesses no preexistent visual repertoire – apart from the letters. It *is*, in a sense, what *happens* to it.

On the issue of embodiment proper, one might argue that the verse: "at your turning, each part of my body turn to verb," is emblematic of the unstable materiality of programmable language. That text is algorithmically designed to fall on the participants' limbs – subsequently forming fragments of verses which will later amount to fractional legibility – is but one element of the piece. The fact that Zimroth's poem is not prominent or available *in situ* renders *Text Rain* particularly acquiescent to readings which fluctuate between meaning and presence effects. Clearly, the *you* and *I* are inherently immaterial: either disembodied (unavailable, no less) rhetorical tropes or black and white projections metonymically relating to available (albeit transient) material bodies circulating at the installation space. It will be up to the participant to decide whether these letters will simply captivate and fascinate in their own right or become part of what I consider – and here I agree with Roberto Simanowski's reading of *Text Rain* – a significantly richer experience. In his own reading of *Text Rain*, Roberto Simanowski writes that "after enjoying the interaction with the letters and other visitors one ought to contemplate for a moment what it means to engage with letters in such a 'post-alphabetic' way" (SIMANOWSKI, 2011, manuscript). Ricardo describes the installation as "both a

completely visual work and a completely sovereign text" (RICARDO, 2009, p. 58). This is a clever ploy for it accomplishes two objectives at once: not only does the author successfully elude the reductive interpretation/non-interpretation dichotomy, but by addressing issues of "framing" (rather than value), Ricardo sheds light on "the structural ontology" which he deems common to all new media art (Ibid.). These ontological clarifications are valuable if only because they render imperative a high level of fluency in several modes of perception and conceptualization. Here I intentionally do not confine the discussion to the semantic gamut developed by art history and honed by film theory devoted to the "reading" of images. Because *Text Rain* is a conciliatory space between textuality and imagination, as Ricardo puts it, my bet is that it certainly allows for the critical and theoretical affordances of a "sensory" reading. The challenge is to make sensation, more specifically, the critical apprehension of sensation, coalesce into a cohesive rendition of non-hermeneutical criticism. Ricardo argues that the "de-anchored text wants to refute the rational assumptions that frame reading" (RICARDO, 2009, p. 59). Though I understand the assertion, I maintain the hypothesis that text, be it post-alphabetic or not, is still referential code inasmuch as it triggers the lexical impulse to be *read*. In this sense I believe the most interesting question in *Text Rain*, or in *Overboard*, for that matter, is not one of legibility at all and much less whether the text means what it normally means when it appears upside down or blurred in the latter case (RICARDO, 2009). Meaning is both too reductive and too complex a concept to be applied in this instance. If I were to deploy it within the framework of hermeneutical tradition, then it would be reduced to sense beneath surface – i.e., on the basis of the meaning/meaningless binary distinction: "Meaninglessness can therefore never be achieved by the negation of meaningfulness" (LUHMANN, 1995, p. 62). On the other hand, if we understand meaning to be a momentary stabilization of multiple overlays, then the challenge of a theoretical description of *Text Rain* surely rests on the ability to look beyond the awe of lexical/deictic subversion.

To recast this discussion within the framework of systems theory: meaning is, Luhmann posits, "the continual actualization of potentialities" (LUHMANN, 1995, p. 65). The corollary is, of course, that because "meaning can be meaning only as a

difference of what is actual at any moment and a horizon of possibilities, every actualization always also leads to a virtualization of potentialities that could be connected up with it" (Ibid.).   A possible solution to this theoretical conundrum could be to approach the object of investigation from a descriptive stance. I have implied that *Text Rain* is ideally oscillatory in that it addresses human incommunicability on par with the complex autopoietic models found in the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann opens his "How Can the Mind Participate in Commmunication?" with an explosive claim:

> Within the communication system we call society, it is conventional to assume that humans can communicate. Even clever analysts have been fooled by this convention. It is relatively easy to see that this statement is false and that it only functions as a convention and only within communication. The convention is necessary because communication necessarily addresses its operations to those who are required to continue communication. Humans cannot communicate; not even their brains can communicate; not even their conscious minds can communicate. Only communication can communicate. (LUHMANN, 1994, p. 371)

Now what can we say about communication?   According to Luhmann, communication, as the structural basis of society, means autopoeitic reproduction, but not that of an external world.[9] Systems theory informs us that all we do have is a system's *internal* capacity to distinguish between self-reference and external reference. As Eva Knodt eloquently puts it in her preface to *Social Systems*: "systems theory solves the problem of understanding by turning it on its head and, in so doing, displaces the entire hermeneutic tradition together with its perpetual self-doubt" (KNODT, 1995, p. xxv). By shifting the focus from questions of *how* understanding can occur despite the fact "that the mind cannot consciously communicate" (LUHMANN, 1994, p. 372), systems theory recasts communication in a probabilistic framework wherein autopoietic closure generates openness. No longer grounded on a

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[9] In fact, Luhmann simply and elegantly addresses the problem of reference when he determines that observations and operations can only be accounted for from *within* the system. There are no *métrecits*, in Luhmann's opinion, because there are no outside observers. In their introduction to the Aldine Transaction Edition of N. Luhmann's *Risk: A Sociological Theory* (*Soziologie des Risikos*, 1993), Nico Stehr and Gotthard Bechmann explain "(…) communication is an operation in precisely the sense that a distinction is made. Communicative acts say nothing about the world, and communication reflects nothing about the world, which is not reflected by communication but rather classified by it. The purpose of communication is to create differences that can then be attached to further communication, forming and stabilizing system boundaries" (1995, p. xvii).

binary model of transmission (sender/receiver), communication is restructured in a tripartite selection process which distinguishes *information* (a selection from a known or unknown repertoire of possibilities) from *utterance* – thence defined as "a selection proposal," i.e., an actualized suggestion derived from an array of intentional acts: "what is uttered is not only selected, but also already a selection – that is why it is uttered" (LUHMANN, 1994, p. 140). *Understanding* ultimately emerges as the operative and highly contingent distinction between "information and its utterance" (Cf. KNODT, 1995, p. xxvii). Because not all systems process complexity in the same manner, the double negative "we are the opposite of tongue-tied" reinforces the possibility of interpersonal *interpenetration*,[10] whereas the dismissively casual "It's just talk" points to the inefficacy of language: limbs' loosing of syntax ultimately turn to nothing.

Interpenetration, Luhmann writes, "is not a general relation between system and environment but an intersystem relation between systems that are environments for each other" (LUHMANN, 1994, p. 213). Penetration, on the other hand, occurs "if a system makes its own complexity (and with it indeterminacy, contingency and the pressure to select) available for constructing another system" (Ibid.). For this reason, interpenetration presupposes a reciprocal exchange of complexities, which implies that to be "the opposite of tongue-tied," that is, to be pure, communication cannot occur at all, and if it could then it could not proceed without indeterminacy. As long as interpenetrating systems – in this case "alter" and "ego," to employ Luhmann's terminology, remain environments for each other – "the complexity each system makes available is an incomprehensible complexity – that is, disorder – for the receiving system" (Ibid.). Accordingly, one could say that the two entities speaking in the poem are psychic systems ("conscious re-productions of thoughts") mutually exchanging increasing amounts of noise. As it turns out, "simply that, conversing" is not so simple. Comprehension can only be rationalized as systemic distinction and

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[10] "In interpenetration, the receiving system also reacts to the structural formation of the penetrating system, and it does so in a twofold way, internally and externally. This means that greater degrees of freedom are possible in spite (better: because!) of increase dependencies. This also means that, in the course of evolution, interpenetration individualizes behavior more than penetration does. This is strikingly true in the relationship of human beings to social systems" (LUHMANN, 1995, pp. 213-214).

no longer as an unfiltered duct between subjects (Cf. GUMBRECHT, 1997). Arguably, the genius of *Text Rain* lies in its self-conscious recalcitrance to signification despite its blatant attempt at dialogue. Operating in the turbulent juncture of concrete space and screenic instantiation, the installation unfolds in intuitive, pre-semantic increments of legibility and nonsense. I particularly agree with Ricardo's assessment that "*Text Rain* is motivated by a reach for connection, not merely of what emanates in the epic flows of its movements, but also by the text it fragmentarily presents" (RICARDO, 2010, p. 58). All one can do is reach for connection but never fully attain it: "what we experience as our own mind operates as an isolated autopoietic system. There is no conscious link between one mind and another. There is no more operational unity of more than one mind as a system" (LUHMANN, 1994, 372). Thus even if the interactor is able to piece together an entire verse, the aesthetic experience occurs primarily in a pre-semantic space. The incommunicability between subjects is thematized in *Text Rain* – that is, it is implied but never spelled out – unless one insists on a reductive reading of the poem.

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