

# EncASZters

*Fabio Doctorovich*

## **Progress, Science and Poetry**

According to Clemente Padín,<sup>1</sup> experimental poetry makes possible the development of cultural knowledge, preventing its stagnation thanks to conceptualization of the unknown, instead of the manipulation of established concepts. The concept of poetry as a means for the acquisition of knowledge and the term "experimental" intend to match poetry with science. There is currently a prevalent tendency in many authors and critics to incorporate scientific precepts in their literary research, additionally basing them completely on classical scientific methods. This is probably a partial vision: current science is based on a rational mode of thought, while poetry must encompass other research beyond the limitations imposed by reasoning. More than making art scientific, science should be reexamined from the point of view of art in the way Beuys did, in search of a communion and at the same time a reform in both fields of knowledge. That is why the term "posttypography" seems to be more adequate than "experimental" to describe the changes that are occurring in literature due to the invention of new media.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that there is a strong component of research in "experimental" poetry, not only for rational knowledge but also for a way of life, an extension of humanity beyond physical reality, a search for the undecipherable, undecipherable, and invisible. Perhaps in this sense we should examine the posture of Carlos Estevez ("Cuestiones Paralenguales"): "to convert poetry into a personal experience."<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, one might ask whether an indiscriminate accumulation of knowledge is connected to modern notions of progress and linearity of history. One might also inquire if this endless accumulation of knowledge ought to be a goal more important than the improvement of humanity, or if the first implies the accomplishment of the second. The latter statement does not seem to be true: those countries with the greatest degree of scientific and technological advance have performed most of the massacres and cruel wars of this century (and the majority of the wars of humanity). This would indicate that those societies that fabricate more powerful weapons are thoughtlessly destroying the planet, dropping their nuclear bombs over the Pacific Atoll, the Nevada desert, and Hiroshima like artificial fires (games of artifice). Thus, the first technological machinery specifically designed for mass-murder (the gas chamber at Auschwitz) was created during World War II by one of the most technologically advanced countries on Earth. This is a clear example of the inability of people to

manage a body of knowledge that has become too vast. Thus, man could be accurately represented as a self-destructive animal with too much intelligence compared to his soul.

Regarding the developed countries, the twentieth century has turned out to be a constant oscillation between consumption and destruction.

*For the rest of us, it has been just destruction.*

## **Posttypography**

The publishing industry has remained virtually unchanged since 1455 when Gutenberg first printed the Bible. Now, we are witnessing the most important technological transformation in literature since the invention of the printing press: the Gutenberg Galaxy is starting to disintegrate into a myriad of small posttypographical nebulae: the McLuhan Entropic Galaxy. The influence of new technologies on poetry is going to be as decisive as Gutenberg's invention, though in an inverse way: at the time printing started, oral and other non-typographic poeties were gradually abandoned as a consequence of the growing power of the printing press. In his book about the emergence of post-typographic culture, Eugene Provenzo says, "The changes that are beginning to emerge in our culture as a result of the large-scale introduction of computers parallel many of the changes that took place in Europe as a consequence of the information revolution that followed the invention of printing."<sup>3</sup> I would add that not only computers but also other electronic media, such as radio and TV, are contributing to the creation of new languages that attempt to adjust to the new technologies. In this sense, the early recordings of poetry readings are primitive ancestors of what sound poetry should be: not an oral translation of paper poetry but a new language designed exclusively for the oral media. The consequence of this is that the limits of literature are being gradually shifted to the point that the following question should be asked: is literature mainly the written word?

At this point, the printing press is being complemented—not yet substituted—by a number of other publishing technologies, such as audio recordings (in the form of sound poetry and audio books), computer media (CD-ROMs, electronic networks, and computer art), videotaping, and others. By contrast, old "literary" techniques like singing and acting are being revamped by performance and sound poetry (both of them frequently using technological refinements as well).

Not only is the publishing industry being altered, but also the act of reading, unchanged for several centuries. In the case of computer CD-ROMs, reading has become an active, participant-directed process rather than a passive, author-directed one: turning pages in a book has been transformed into following hypertext links. The rational-visual act of reading has become an experience of sight, sounds, and colors. In the case of performance poetry, reading (a solo act with a

slow, asynchronous response by the reader) mutates into a collective experience (a social action in which the answer of the public is received in an immediate and synchronized manner).

As it would seem obvious, writing techniques are also being profoundly altered. Most posttypographic poets blend their writing skills with oral (Carlos Estevez), visual abilities (Alonso Barros Peña), and even technological knowledge (Ladislao Pablo Györi). This, together with a literature that allows an active participatory reading and even the introduction of modifications made by the reader to the work of art, will perhaps help to rehumanize literature and achieve the avant-garde's unfulfilled fantasy of merging art and life.

### **Autocreation**

Duchamp's "Large Glass" is not only a pictorial work, but its literary constituents are important for its apprehension. Part of its "unfinished" character is due to fragments that were described in the project (the Green Box) but never realized in the glass. However, the existence of a description of the parts allows the pictorial work to be completed in the reader's imagination.

In the preparation of a book, the text constitutes a dynamic work until it has been printed. The author corrects, adds, or removes parts, reorders, assembles: it mutates constantly. Nevertheless, though every text is completed by the reader, almost nobody will read it until the moment of printing. Once printed, the work loses its dynamism: the book is a format devoid of possibilities of reordering, expansion, or implosion. As a result, the reader will perceive a fixed, permanent, finished work. The writer is seized by the dynamic impossibilities of the book; all permutations must be done before the printing process. Even more, in the case of a traditional artistic work the mechanism of material creation has been completed at the moment the spectator observes it, and from the viewer's side only the non-material creation can exist that can not modify the physical aspect of the work, unless the spectator destroys it (as in the case of the "Pietà") or writes annotations on the margins (as in the case of a book).

Is the existence of an infinite work feasible, in the sense of being unfinished and at the same time impossible to be concluded? Maybe through a temporal chain of authors who would carry out the construction of the work. This could be realized by means of mechanisms of interaction and co-participation with the spectators. The originator (designer) of the work could also act as spectator, and vice versa, meaning that the spectator-author differentiation loses significance. The work becomes a kind of auto-assembled machine, or even more, materially generated through space and time by an accumulation of authors (spectauthors).

Undoubtedly, cybernetic virtuality constitutes an ideal medium for the design of a work generated through space and time. The electronic ether provides of a great number of possibilities for the modification of (virtual) objects and the interaction between spectauthors. Nevertheless, it lacks material properties, an important component in people's enjoyment, as we are largely material creatures. The book, the printed page, is not only a compendium of immaterial codes, but it also possesses tactile and olfactory qualities, and overall it produces those feelings related to the possession of material objects, something very difficult to generate in the virtual world.

## **Interaction**

A good amount of poetry created during this century is "private:" it has been written to manifest emotions of the author or as a tool of personal search or knowledge but not to be read, which does not stop it from being published, commented on, and even read. For example, the surrealistic mechanism of automatic writing is a technique of textual creation and not necessarily a device designated to generate material to be read: the accent is on emission more than on perception; the center of the creation is the poet and not the reader.

Some post-avant-garde Latin American movements such as Process/Poem<sup>4</sup> and Poetry to and/or Realize revised the mechanisms of reading generation and intended to displace the center of creation (and thus of emission) toward the reader. This was a first step toward the disappearance of the notion of an author-artist placed on a superior plane of creation, a notion that has been with us for centuries and that has undoubtedly contributed to construct a barrier between reader and work.

Reading is an interactive method since mental elaboration of a text demands an effort which transforms the work in the mind of the reader depending on personal factors: the perception and re-elaboration varies from reader to reader. However, this is a materially passive interaction, for the printed words that compose the work remain unchanged. Since materials are not modified, the reader is converted into a participant who is materially external to the work. This restrains the reader-work communion and by doing so obstructs complete apprehension and enjoyment.

The conditions for the development of mechanisms for material interaction are not very propitious considering that spectators have been predisposed to a passive behavior for many centuries. Therefore, it is important to consider the interfaces (human, material, cybernetic, and so on) to be utilized in order to achieve the desired interaction. Furthermore, our culture is primordially visual-auditory, which disadvantages the other senses. We are conditioned to perceive art only through sight and hearing. Art could be a tastable, palpable, gaseous, smellable entity. The performer (human interface) can fulfill the purpose of enticing the spectauthors to interact with all senses (among them

and singly), and also provide the spectauthors with human physical contact. In contrast, the cybernetic interface (computer mouse, virtual reality helmet, and so on) principally fulfills functions related to visual-motor interactions (corporal movement as a response to visual and auditory stimuli, and vice versa). Material interfaces (sculptures, installations, objects) by themselves can only stimulate interaction by means of visual, auditory, and olfactory passive mechanisms or at the most those that need the spectauthor for their functioning (manual intercourse machine<sup>6</sup>). Thus, the most effective solution seems to be the communion of these three interfaces (or all other possible ones) in a sole work.

### **Multiconcept**

The push for renovation on the part of the artistic movements of this century has been such that most works produced by these proposals are generally "partial," emphasizing a sole aspect or poetic technique, slanting or overlooking the others. The failure attributed to the avant-garde could, among other factors, be due to the monoconceptualism of the works produced, which concentrated their strength on a single fundamental concept that at most included some related basic ideas. A certain ideological fanaticism—and the fight for legitimacy and consecration, according to the analysts of the sociology of culture<sup>7</sup>—compelled the authors to discard concepts from prior movements, thereby attempting to demonstrate the *novelty* of their proposals and to gain an advantageous position in the artistic community.

As a corollary, the realization of multiconceptual works opens new trends thanks to the application and exploration of ideas previously outlined. In light of former experiences, it becomes possible to work in such a manner that, without screening out new research, all techniques developed so far are utilized to produce comprehensive and interactive works: multiconceptual poems. For example, we could take the experiences of W. Dias-Pino (semiotic poem) and E. A. Vigo (poetry to and/or realize) to produce a performance of "oral, corporal, and semiotic poetry to make and/or realize." This would consist in assigning to every corporal gesture or sound a meaning as simple or complicated as one desires (for example, showing the tongue means "hunger," pronouncing the letter "a" means "influence of TV on organization of the family"). The poet would only enunciate the proposal. While some participants of the "public" would assign the codes and interpret the gestures, others would publicly realize different readings or interpretations of each poem (for example, "the familiar hunger is diminished by TV" or "hungry family televised"). This proposal, which I call Gestural Poetry,<sup>8</sup> is a multiconceptual poem, the same as "Auch-Bits."<sup>9</sup>

## **Fittings**

An application of the multiconcept could be constituted by the production of works with diverse components (textual, visual, sonorous, and so on) organized in interrelated though separate parts that would be assembled, forming a modular structure. Each module—different from multimedia or audiovisual—would not necessarily be represented simultaneously with the others. This would give to the modular project a character of "work to be assembled," for the reader could order the modules in different possible sequences or could even add his/her own modules, thus generating a multiplicity of readings. With the purpose of producing a work that is a whole (though divided in pieces) and not the mere sum of its parts, apart from sharing one or more topics in common, the modules should possess appendices that would function like fitting pieces. The most obvious example of this is the intertextual technique in which module B employs phrases that make reference to module A. This would not be applicable when no phrases or words are utilized (as in some visual poems that make use of signs), and in such cases intertext should be extended to "intersign" or "inter-icon" (reference to a sign or image instead of a phrase or word), an example being the construction of blueprint-poems of virtual places that would be described or referred to in the text.

We then have a construction of mono- or multiconceptual units (modules) that fit together, forming a three-dimensional semantic mesh. A hypertextual syntax, or, better yet, a hyper-posttypographic syntax, replaces the lineal syntax of written language. The fitting pieces would be given by:

*Intertext.* Repetition or allusion to textual elements in different units to be fitted together.

*Inter-icon.* Ditto, with mobile or static images.

*Inter/action.* Application of modes of similar action in different modules.

*Interweave.* Structure that continues in the following module like a splice of cinematographic sequences.

*Transitions.* "Border" works that mix aspects or techniques of each of the modules to be joined, similar to the transitions of computer-generated video.

The initial designer must sketch a map or diagram (linear, bi-, tri-, or n-dimensional) of the work that will serve as a guide to future authors and at the same time will indicate the spaces to be filled (modules or fragments to be realized). Thus, the work evolves into a dynamic entity, formed by

assembled parts that can be fitted or unfitted at will. The concept of "finished work" no longer exists, for the notion of "artwork" unfolds from being something material and fastened, like a book, to a metamorphic gelatinous structure, an entity forged of solid and virtual materials.

### **Timing**

Synchronization of all modules as in an opera or other multimedia spectacles is only possible when the author/spectator relation exists and the mechanisms of the work are adjusted for that purpose. Moreover, overloading the spectator with simultaneous visual and sonorous stimuli generally induces passivity. We suggest, then, a series of asynchronous auto-fitted modules: not only creation of the work but also its perception is realized at different temporal intervals. More than that, the different modules (sonorous, visual, and so on) may be fitted simultaneously in multiple combinations. The existence or not of these and the manner of combining them will be decided by the spectauthors. In this way, the work becomes an entity that can be only partially perceived in any temporal interval. Totalization is solely possible in the spectauthors' minds, and, of course, it will be different for each one of them. This would be in some way closer to the partiality of vision in real life. We thus define a polymorphic (or anamorphic) work that can not be represented twice in the same fashion.

By contrast, certain modules could be developed in real time, a notion principally utilized in cybernetics to denote that the realization of data-processing by the computer is proceeding simultaneously with its output. When this is applied to an animation program, a certain degree of participation (input) is added by the user for he interacts with the program through an interface in a manner similar to a videogame. This same concept applied to poetic performance is equivalent to adding up interaction with the public + their participation in the realization of poem + improvisation. The "readers" become makers of the poem (poets) at the same time that the work is being created and shown, a fact again related to Vigo's *Poetry to and/or Realize*. Examples of this are seen in the works "Auch-Bits" and "Gestural Poetry" mentioned above.

### **Improvement, Artistic Mood, *Cartes***

In this panorama, art would be a method of improvement and investigation of the (in)human more than an object to be observed. We thus rediscover, though in a different way, artistic occurrence as an immaterial reflection of an object in the spirituality of the observer, pursuing the attainment of an artistic mood, a personal experience apart from the materiality of the object, without aiming at an impossible Padinian non-objectuality<sup>10</sup> or the absolute virtuality proclaimed by Györi.<sup>11</sup>

In the current context, art seems to be the only vehicle possible for a true improvement of mankind, for science has become stagnated in the rationality of Cartesian thought and the materiality of

the modern era: the enhancement of man given by surgery, longevity, and the improvement of corporal appearance. Machinism.

Art-science recombination, according to Beuys, portrays a real hope for the true renovation of science. For that purpose, the solid compartmentalized structure established by the system, research centers, and artistic publications should be demolished.

*Clinical orgasm as an artistic moment.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>"Methodological Difficulties in the Examination of Experimental Poetry," Montevideo: Author's edition, **1995**.

<sup>2</sup>Buenos Aires, personal communication, **1996**.

<sup>3</sup>E. F. Provenzo, Jr., *Beyond the Gutenberg galaxy*. New York: Teachers College Press, **1986**.

<sup>4</sup>Clemente Padin, "Semiotic Poem: The Beginning of the End of the Word in Latin American Poetry." Montevideo: Speech given at the XI International Symposium of Literature, **1993**. English trans. H. Polkinhorn. Printed by the author.

<sup>5</sup>E. A. Vigo, "From Process/Poetry to Poetry to And/Or Realize," in *Corrosive Signs*, César Espinosa, ed., trans. H. Polkinhorn, Washington, D.C.: Mazonneuve Press, **1990**, pp. 72-76.

<sup>6</sup>*Manual intercourse machine*, a mechanical device assembled by the author, part of the work "Asz," presented in "Paralengua 11," Foro Gandhi, **1990**, and "Aeiuo," Centro Cultural Recoleta, **1996**, Buenos Aires.

<sup>7</sup>Beatriz Sarlo, "Escenas de la Vida Posmoderna: Intelectuales, Arte y Videocultura en la Argentina." Espasa Calpe/Buenos Aires, Ariel, **1994**; see subsection "Valores y Mercado," chapter 4, p. 152.

<sup>8</sup>"Paralengua VII," Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas, Buenos Aires, June, 1996; "Jornadas Rioplatenses de Poesía Experimental," Cabildo de Montevideo, October, **1996**.

<sup>9</sup>"Paralengua VI," Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas, Buenos Aires, December, **1995**.

<sup>10</sup>Clemente Padín, *De la Representation a l'Action*. Marseilles, France: Doc(k)s, **1975**; "Hacia un Lenguaje de la Acción," Montevideo: OVUM, **1975**.

<sup>11</sup>Ladislao Pablo Györi, "Criteria for a Virtual Poetry," **1996**, <http://www.postypographika.com/menu-en1/genres/vpoetry/concepts/criteria/criteria.htm>. No longer active.