Connect and immerse: a poetry of codes and signals

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Abstract

This article investigates how codes and signals were employed in avant-garde poetry and art in the 1960s, and how such attempts were performed in the wake of cybernetics and (partly) through the use of new media technologies, such as the tape recorder and the computer. This poetry—as exemplified here by works by Åke Hodell, Peter Weibel, and Henri Chopin—not only employed new materials, media, and methods for the production of poems; it also transformed the interface of literature and the act of reading through immersion in sound, through the activation of different cognitive modes, and through an intersensorial address. On the one hand, this literary and artistic output can be seen as a response to the increasing intermediation (in Katherine Hayles’s sense) in culture and society during the last century. On the other hand, we might, as contemporary readers, return to these poetic works in order to use them as media archaeological tools that might shed light on the aesthetic transformations taking place within new media today.

Keywords: poetry; code; signal; intermediation; sound; embodiment

“We are in open circuits”, Nam June Paik, 1966

In May 2011, a new film and literary work had its premiere at the small cinema Zita in downtown Stockholm. The title of the piece was Fjärrskrift (Distance Writing or Telewriting), and as was soon disclosed to the audience, the main content of the film was actually writing; literary writing composed by the Swedish novelist, poet, and essayist Lotta Lotass. On the screen, from right to left, ran a strip of paper with words and sentences printed on it—words and sentences addressing communication and desire, signals and noise, oceans and distant shores. It ran in a steady pace, forcing the viewer to adjust her bodily movements, her watching and reading (in a lateral zig-zag pattern) to the workings of the apparatus. The technology that engendered the strip, or part of it at least, was also disclosed to the viewers: to the right on the screen sat the exquisitely sculptural and shining chassis of a teleprinter by the German brand Siemens (model T68), produced in the 1940s (a war child), and now refurbished in the 1990s (a war child), and now refurbished to meet the demands of a work of poetry 2011—demands shaped by the ubiquitous presence of

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new media, whose machinery is ultimately dependent on code or even voltage differences, as Friedrich Kittler once, famously, declared. Or, as Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen outlines this crucial cultural transformation in the introduction to this volume: on “the shift from sign to signal”. In his chapter on telegraphy (or distance writing) in Understanding Media (1964), Marshall McLuhan expounded that it “is the artist’s job to try to dislocate older media into postures that permit attention to the new”, and that “to this end, the artist must ever play and experiment with new means of arranging experience, even though the majority of his audience may prefer to remain fixed in their old perceptual attitudes.” Certainly, the multiplication of new media during the last half century has made the artist and poet heed to this call for an experimentation “with new means of arranging experience”. We have learned to enter different spaces of reading and perception through elaborations in digital technology—complex spaces of text, image, and sound as well as more sober remediations of the book. And we have been acquainted with the possibility of pushing poetic practice towards unexpected horizons, for example the use of DNA-code and bacteria as storage and generative devices for literary production in works by artists and poets such as Eduardo Kac and Christian Bök. To put it briefly, the channels as well as the interfaces of literature have (at least here and there) changed in line with the ideas of McLuhan.

What makes Lotass’ piece of telewriting interesting in this context is that she does not only entice the reader/viewer to reconfigure the literary experience and reflect upon the medial and material conditions of reading—this is true for the film as well as for the other materialization of her work as an artist’s book consisting of the full text strip rolled together and placed in a box (reminiscent of a reel-to-reel tape). But her work is, moreover, a reminder of how the use of code and electric signals as a material base for production and dissemination of literature is not restricted, historically, to a contemporary condition of inexpensive computers, wieldy software, and accessible servers. The Siemens teleprinter converts the input of letters and words into a code called Baudot, a forerunner to ASCII, which makes possible the transduction of the writing into electric signals, and which, naturally, affects the output and the reception. This media archaeological insight, delivered by the poem, forces us to acknowledge a long tradition of encoded and electric writing, from Giuseppe Mazzolari in 1767 and onward—a tradition that is intimately connected to a history of literature.

Here I want, however, to be more modest in my media archaeological ambitions, and return to the electronic and cybernetic era outlined by McLuhan, Norbert Wiener, and others 50 years ago, in order to trace a poetics and poetic practice engaged in a displacement of literature’s alphabetic bias and a transformation of the interface as well as the reading of literature through the elaboration of codes and signals. The field of post-alphabetic writing that was mapped out during the postwar decades through the emergence of new technologies, disciplines, and tendencies in science—television, computers, tape recorders, cybernetics, informatics, molecular biology, and so on—was also a place that attracted artists and poets to imagine and construct alternative modes of production and reception. I will focus here, more specifically, on a handful of works by the poets and artists Åke Hodell, Peter Weibel, and Henri Chopin, who in different ways, conceptually and materially, with paper, electricity, and magnetic media, explore the signal, rather than, or just as much as, the sign, as a condition and vehicle for poetry and art.

POETRY OF CODES

The early 1960s witnessed, in the wake of cybernetics, the emergence of the first computer generated poems, by writers and artists such as Theo Lutz, Nanni Balestrini and Brion Gysin; and Lutz’s first algorithmic piece, based on material from Kafka’s The Castle, allegedly the first digital poem, actually dates back to 1959. But this interest in codes and algorithms would also infiltrate the more “humanly” based production of poetry. In genres or modes such as lettrism and concrete poetry, for example, images and other forms of writing (braille, musical notation, etc.), as well as a sophisticated play with typography, expanded the field of literary signification. Far more than ornamental, such para- or post-alphabetic elements invited a reflection on how new means of communication and expression emerged in an ever expanding media-ecology.
One is reminded of Katherine Hayles’ remark that, “Language alone is no longer the distinctive characteristic of technologically developed societies; rather, it is language plus code.”

A good example of this tendency can be found in a transmedial work from 1964–1966 called Lågsniff (Low Range Flying), by the Swedish poet and artist Åke Hodell. Materialized as a book, a sound poem, a performance, and a TV-film, the piece had its starting point in Hodell’s own past, and, more specifically, in his experiences as a pilot during World War II. In the book version (published in 1966), which I will focus on here, this comes forth in the straight appropriation and juxtaposing of images and forms that in one way or the other refer to the communicative situation of the pilot in the cockpit—tables, diagrams, grids, fragments of maps, strings of letters and numbers, and morse code cover the pages of the book (Figures 1 and 2). This is a communication that does not allow for semantic vagueness, but which relies on exact data. Otherwise an escalation of distorted feedback loops—of the kind described by Norbert Wiener in his introduction to Cybernetics—will entail, and catastrophe lurks around the corner.

Hodell would also crash his aircraft in the southern parts of Sweden in 1941, and after a long convalescence, he changed his path to become a writer. His first collection of poetry was published in 1953. It would, however, take more than a decade before the language of the cockpit (the “electronisms” as he called it) was allowed to enter the space of writing. In 1963 and 1964 he published two books based on a mix of sound poetic score, minimalist typewriting, and collage. Commenting on this transformation (which he had prepared since long, but been advised by others to refrain from) Hodell suggested that the “language of the dashboard could

Figure 1. Åke Hodell, Lågsniff (1966). Cover of book. © Ann Hodell Smith & Laila Hodell.
be used [...] and offer something more than just data [...] and in a new way convey something about a human”.12

What made Lågsniff stand out was, then, the insistent use of technical language and codes, and its connection to aeronautics (one of the first areas of application of Wiener’s cybernetics, of course). The language usually encountered in books of poetry is absent, except for a few scattered phrases, such as “enemy attacks”, “OUT-A-SPACE”, “we’re diving”. It is thus a poetry linked to complex technological networks, which remediates an interface for communication where not only verbal representation has been substituted with code, but also where a physically situated observation has been replaced by orientation and action through the processing of signals at a distance. In this regard, the interface of Lågsniff evokes, on an allegorical or conceptual level, a set of familiar, contemporary interfaces.

The best way to describe this poem is perhaps to use the concept of intermediation, as it has been employed by Hayles, as referring to “interactions between systems of representations, particularly language and code, as well as interactions between modes of representation, particularly analog and digital”. Such interaction is here explored through the technology of the book. And since the idea of the human in this and several others of Hodell’s works is linked to machines and media technologies, one might also include the addendum to Hayles’ definition: “Perhaps most importantly, ‘intermediation’ also denotes mediating interfaces connecting humans with intelligent machines that are our collaborators in making, storing, and transmitting informational processes and objects.”13

The poetry in Lågsniff is, consequently, a poetry that evokes new ways of communication theorized in cybernetics and informatics. Still, our approach, as readers, to the codes used in the book will be basically conceptual—some of the strings of letters and numbers are, perhaps, even to be processed by a machine rather than by human cognition. As in visual poetry in general, the reception process of this work is certainly complicated, as it invites an oscillation between two cognitive modes (reading and seeing). But we will not engage here in an act that differs much from the reading of most books. It is actually quite easy to find other paper based poetry from the period where the embodied reader is addressed in a more complex way—where, for example, one is forced to turn the book upside down or shift the distance to it in order to process its content.14

As mentioned above, Lågsniff would, however, also materialize as a performance. But the performance was to a large degree dependent on linguistic representation, narrative, and theatrical conventions, even though elements of code are still present—one of the roles is devoted to the telegraphist, whose acoustic signals perforates the performance space and enters the ears of the audience.

In order to find a poetry, which transforms the literary (or theatrical) interface through the operations of code and signals, and which engages an embodied reader in a more thorough way, one might turn instead to a couple of works by Austrian media artist Peter Weibel. In the second half of the 1960s Weibel developed an artistic activity influenced by the Vienna group and Vienna Actionism, and collaborated with artists such as VALIE EXPORT—an activity that combined elements from concrete and sound poetry, performance art, conceptual art, and early media art, using different technologies, materials, and environments to these ends.

Two years after the publication of Lågsniff, Weibel produced a piece that he designated as “electric poetry”, and as an “interactive text installation”—designations that manifest a certain
affinity with Hodell’s poetics. Der Lange Marsch (The Long March) (1968) uses a series of repetitive sentences organized into six groups or stanzas as its linguistic base, of which the first runs: “1. abschaffung der schaffner/abschaffung der verwaltungsvollstreckungsgesetze/abschaffung der verkehrssicherheit” (abolition of the conductors/abolition of the administrative-execution-law/abolition of road safety). These sentences were, however, not presented in written form, but as speech acts recorded on audiotape. The installation as such consisted of four parallel steel plates, laid on the ground within wooden frames, on which push buttons were installed and connected to three tape recorders (Figure 3).

The tape on each recorder contained two tracks (two word groups). The visitor of the installation (the reader or listener) could choose to push one button and hear one part of the text. But if the visitor touched or pressed two buttons from different plates simultaneously, he or she also activated an amount of electricity—and while advancing along the plates toward a light bulb at the end of the installation, the voltage that ran through the plates increased (eventually to a life-threatening level).

Thus, a reading of Weibel’s poem not only engaged the visitor as a viewer, listener, and reader of language (or decoder of code), but also as a “toucher”, and to such a degree that pain or injury might become part of the reception. Such a physiological aesthetics were integral to much neo-avant-garde activity at the time. But it is interesting to observe how Weibel uses new communication technology, and a poetics that moves from sign to signal, in order not only to entice the reader to interact with the poem and contribute to its (variable or open) formation or process, but also to establish a completely different interface for the genre; an interface that literally connects and embodies the reader in a way that a book based work such as Hodell’s could only hint at. Here intermediation as outlined by Hayles is materialized in a brutal and even sensorially piercing and hurting manner. The cybernetic coupling of human and machine dissolves the humanist subject as the talking animal, even to the point of literal extinction. There is, certainly, an ironic dimension in the final line of the final group of sentences used in Der lange Marsch: “abschaffung der sprache”—abolition of speech.

POETRY OF SIGNALS

A key component of Peter Weibel’s poetry installation—and the verbivocovisual, tactile, and kinaesthetic interface it produced—was the tape recorder, a crucial technology for innovative postwar poetics. The literary genre that would benefit most from the emergence of viable apparatuses for magnetic recording in the late 1940s was, without doubt, sound poetry. While the genre’s modern progenitors were to be found in the early avant-garde of Futurism and Dada, the genre would blossom and take off in a variety of directions during mid-century due to the possibilities offered by tape. In distinction to the phonograph and the gramophone, the tape recorder was a flexible and easily managed technology—it was actually, the first recording device for amateurs. With it sounds could be captured in a multitude

Figure 3. Peter Weibel, Der lange Marsch (1968). Photograph of “interactive text installation”. Permission to reprint from the artist.
of environments—it was a portable, a mobile medium—and a tape recording could run on continuously for a long time (much longer than gramophone records), but just as easily be erased and substituted with a new one.

Moreover, and most importantly, tape was susceptible to post-production. A wide array of manipulative techniques were offered to the operator: cut and paste, layering, echo and delay, loops and different speeds of playback and recording, and so on. All these operations would be employed in sound poetry. Usually they were directed against the voice, the basic material of the genre. But also other sound sources were used to expand and differentiate the acoustics of literature. The soundscapes of sound poetry, together with the development of the postwar radio play (or Hörspiel), and some early installations and happenings, must be considered as the most important precursors of the ubiquitous presence of sound in art today.

Important to underline here is that tape based poetry is an eminent example of how a poetics of the signal was installed in literature. A recording takes place as a soundwave hits the membrane in a microphone, which generates an electric signal run through a wire onto a tape head that produces a certain configuration or pattern in the magnetic particles on the tape; in playback, this process of transduction is reversed, and the electric signal sets another membrane—that of a loudspeaker—to vibrate, which reproduces a good, but not exact copy of the initial soundwave. Whatever enters our ears is then relayed through a technical system based on electricity and magnetic storage. The signal is key to the practice, and to the materiality of the poetry produced with these means.

One of the most prolific practitioners of sound poetry during the postwar decades was the French poet Henri Chopin. He ran the influential review OU, perhaps the first literary publication to include sound recordings (on disc), and he composed a large number of poèmes sonores, specializing in a kind of archaeology of the voice. By using microphones and contact microphones in an inventive way he was able to capture subvocal and bodily sounds as well as para-linguistic vocal expressions such as breath, coughs, cries, and smacking of the tongue and lips—the embodied microparticles of language in action—in combination with the articulated word. As these sounds were converted to signals and magnetic patterns they were manipulated through mechanical operations on the tape recorder. Especially, Chopin employed variation of recording speed and superimposition to construct a strange soundscape primarily based on a materialized and de-familiarized voice of clicks, hisssings, chirps, and blips, as can be heard in poems such as “Le corps” (1966) or “Le ventre de Bertini” (1967), in which an acoustic montage, verging on noise, is juxtaposed and contrasted with the classical lyrical tone of poetry and song that introduces the sound poem proper.

Even if the voice as a source of poetry, and the ear as its receiver, is a model of some reputation in history, the strange sounds that are emitted from the loudspeakers in the work of Chopin and others impinge on the acousmatic—or the seemingly sourceless—sound, as it was once defined by Pierre Schaeffer. The effect on the listener is quite disorienting, sometimes even dizzying, leaving him or her searching for a sign, a shard of language, in the subvocal terrains, or a visual correlate to define the sound source, which would render a more stable meaning to what is heard. Since experimental recording methods and manipulative post-production were often supplemented with inventive loudspeaker placements, which contributed further to the sonic invasion of the listener’s senses—that penetrated and embedded him—this effect of disorientation was easily heightened.

As Steven Connor has remarked, we are never passive in relation to sound: “we never merely hear sound, we are always also listening to it, which is to say selecting certain significant sounds and isolating them from the background noise which continuously rumbles and rattles, continually on the qui vive for patterns of resemblance or recurrence.” This implies, moreover, as Connor suggests, the construction of a space with “the ear commandeering the eye to make out the space it finds itself in”. But the acoustic environments that surround the listener in much sound poetry complicate such commandeering, and invite an indeterminate intersensorial or proprioceptive activity of body and mind. In listening to a multi-track piece such as Chopin’s “Hoppa bock” (1970), for example, we are immersed in a soundscape that necessitates an embodied
engagement, but which forces us to leave behind the hope of anchoring our listening in the identification and interpretation of signs.23 Such a sonic space is more akin to the smooth space of Deleuze and Guattari—characterized by closeness, the haptic, and linkages in “continuous variation”—than to an ordered Cartesian space that places a subject, at a certain distance, in front of a world of logical and ideological coordinates.24 The intermediation between different representational systems and between man and machine in this kind of sound poetry is based on a poetics of the signal (and the sign) that cannot go on without a body.

CONNECT AND IMMERSE

In her study on information aesthetics, Materializing New Media (2006), Anna Munster brings up the necessity today of taking the body into account in dealing with the production and reception of new media art, and she sets herself the task of constructing “a different genealogy for digital engagements with the machine, one that [gives] us room to take the body, sensation, movement and conditions such as place and duration into account”.25 A key concept in Munster’s investigation is the interface, or interfaciality. Whether the ears are to be considered as a part of the face is perhaps an open question, but when it comes to issues of space, embodiment, and immersion in relation to the specific qualities of new media art, there is a large amount of affinities and correspondences to be found in the recent history of acoustic arts, as Frances Dyson has shown in a recent work.26 And sound poetry is no exception to this. If one wishes to describe and analyze a signal aesthetics or poetics of new media, and the various modes of reception they invite, a media archaeological approach would certainly bring up this genre as a crucial finding.

Something similar can be said of the other poetic works from the 1960s that have been discussed above, and which address, on different levels, the increasing mix of language, codes, and signals in the “technologically developed societies” of the late twentieth century. Consequently, a book such as Åke Hodell’s Lågsniff, where code and language are juxtaposed on the pages, and where standard readerly habits are challenged, offers a perspective on the forms of production and reception of new media art and poetry today. And Peter Weibel’s inventive, and chilling, transformation of the interface of literature in his installation Der lange Marsch forces us to consider how the body, and a mix of the senses, were activated in the processing of poetry in the 1960s in a manner that if not anticipates then at least opens up channels between earlier artistic practice and new media art. Both of these works intensify the intermediation discussed by Hayles, and they connect poets and readers to networks of technologies for communication. Whether we talk of cyberpoetry or biomedia poetry of the kind encountered in the works of Eduardo Kac and Christian Bök (also DNA-code attracted the sound poets of the 1960s, as can be observed in Sten Hanson’s “La déstruction de votre code genetique par drogues, toxines et irradiation” from 1969), there are important analogies and isomorphies to be acknowledged.

Just as Lotta Lotass’ piece of telewriting in Fjärrskrift from last year functions as a kind of media archaeological-poetic probe, laying bare the material and embodied conditions for writing and reading in different media, the works by Hodell, Weibel, and Chopin can, consequently, be applied as “tools for excavating the present”, to quote Paul deMarinis in his analysis of new media art through telegraphy, phonography, and optophonetics.27 Not only literary artifacts of an avant-garde past, these poems might be revisited and used as passages to a contemporary aesthetic condition, “where the interfacing of signals is the message that affects us” (Thomsen).28 It is a condition that certainly has transformed the ways of writing and reading, creating and viewing (and listening to) poetry and art, although it did not come about in an instant.

Notes

1. Quoted from the reprint of Paik’s “Cybernated Art”, in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, eds., The New Media Reader (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 229.
2. For a presentation of the work in (Swedish) text and image, see http://www.drucksache.se/fjarrskrift/index.html (accessed March 20, 2012).
3. See Friedrich A. Kittler, “There Is No Software”, in John Johnston, ed., Literature, Media, Information Systems: Essays (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1997), 150.
4. See B.M.S. Thomsen, “The Signaletic, Haptic and Real-Time Material”, in this supplementary of Journal of Aesthetics and Culture, 2012.

5. Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man (London: Sphere Books, 1967 [1964]), 271.

6. For Kac’s and Bök’s uses of the DNA sequence as an alphabet and the bacterium as medium, see Eduardo Kac, ed. Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), and for Bök: http://www.law.ed.ac.uk/ahrc/script-ed/vol5-2/editorial.asp (accessed March 20, 2012).

7. Cf. Siegfried Zielinski, Deep Time of the Media. Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), trans. Gloria Custance, chap. 6.

8. For a history of the computer based poem, see C. T. Funkhouser, Prehistoric Digital Poetry. An Archaeology of Forms, 1959–1995 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

9. N. Katherine Hayles, My Mother Was a Computer. Digital Subjects and Literary Texts (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 16.

10. Åke Hodell, Lågsniff (Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1966).

11. See the introduction to Norbert Wiener, Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969 [1948, 1961]).

12. Åke Hodell, “Poesins position. Enkät II”, Rondo 2 (1963): 5 (my trans.).

13. Hayles, My Mother Was a Computer, 33.

14. A Swedish example would be the typewriter landscapes in Bengt Emil Johnson’s Essäer om Bror Barsk och andra dikter (Essays on Brother Harsh and Other Poems) (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1964). Cf. my essay “Kneaded Language: Concrete Poetry and New Media in the Swedish 1960s”, Modernism/Moderernity 18, no. 2 (2011): 273–88.

15. For a documentation and description of Weibel’s piece, see Woody Vasulka and Peter Weibel, eds., Buffalo Heads. Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers 1973–1990 (Karlsruhe: ZKM/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 714.

16. Such a physiological aesthetics would include pieces ranging from the extremely physical performances of the Vienna Actionists to early sound art and flicker film by Tony Conrad and others.

17. On postwar tape recorder poetics, see my article, “The Audiographic Impulse: Doing Literature with the Tape Recorder”, in Matthew Rubery, ed. Audio- books, Literature, and Sound Studies (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 61–75. The term “verbivocovisual” was coined by James Joyce in Finnegans Wake (1939), and re-activated by the Brazilian concrete poets in the 1950s; see, for example, the manifesto “Pilot plan for concrete poetry”, in Mary Ellen Solt, ed. Concrete Poetry: A World View (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970).

18. Of course it is in recorded music (a relative to sound poetry) that a poetics of the signal has been most present. For a recent discussion on this topic, and its theory and discourse, see Jonathan Sterne and Tara Rodgers, “The Poetics of Signal Processing”, in Differences 22, nos. 2–3 (2011): 31–53.

19. Phenomena such as remanence and hysteresis forbids that. For an interesting discussion of the former, see Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, Mechanisms. New Media and the Forensic Imagination (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

20. Both of these poems by Chopin are accessible at http://www.ubu.com.

21. See Pierre Schaeffer, Traité des objets musicaux (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966).

22. Steven Connor, “Ears Have Walls. On Hearing Art”, in Caleb Kelly, ed., Sound (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 135. At http://www.stevenconnor.com/earshavewalls/ (accessed March 20, 2012).

23. Chopin’s poem is available at the CD, Text-Sound Compositions—A Stockholm Festival (Stockholm: Fylkingen Records, 2005).

24. Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), trans. Brian Massumi, 493.

25. Anna Munster, Materializing New Media. Embodiment in Information Aesthetics (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 3.

26. Frances Dyson, Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

27. Paul deMarinis, “Erased Dots and Rotten Dashes, or How to Wire Your Head for a Preservation”, in Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds., Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, and Implications (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 214.

28. Thomsen, “The Signaletic.”