

Kiene Brillenburg Wurth

Multimediality, Intermediality, and Medially Complex Digital Poetry

DIGITAL POETRY COVERS AN IMMENSE TERRAIN of different poetic possibilities. It ranges from simple electronic mimics of printed text on the internet, poetic spaces on weblogs, and archives of 'old print' poetries, to experiments in lettrist shapes and moving images, surround-forms-and-sounds, gnoetry, networked and programmable media in general, and many other modalities. In this essay, I will restrict myself to one 'current' of digital poetry, which I would like to call medially complex digital poetry: poetry integrating diverse (simulated) medial layers modulating and transforming into each other. I will take this poetry as my point of departure to explore the relevance of the concepts of the 'multimedial' and the 'intermedial' to the poetic-digital domain. While 'multimediality' and 'intermediality' are often used interchangeably, there is a significant difference between them that is already announced in the prefixes 'multi' (many) and 'inter' (between). I will argue that intermediality is the more appropriate tool of the two to analyze the dynamic aspects of medially complex digital poetry.

The Multimedial and the Digital

Well before the peak of the internet bubble, media theorist Friedrich Kittler had announced the end of medial compartmentalization in a world of increasing digitalization:

But even now, before the end, something is coming to an end. The general digitalization of information and channels erases the difference between individual media... In computers everything becomes number:

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imageless, soundless, and wordless quantity. And if the optical fibre network reduces all formerly separate data flows to one standardized digital series of numbers, any medium can be translated into another. With numbers nothing is impossible. Modulation, transformation, synchronization; delay, memory, transposition; scrambling, scanning, mapping – a total connection of all media on a digital base erases the notion of the medium itself (Kittler 1997: p. 28-50, 31-32).

“But even now, before the end”: this is the end of medial identities as we have known them familiarly and perhaps most stringently since the eighteenth century. Since, I would hazard to suggest, the ‘emergence’ of authorship, modern genres, and the work-concept as a regulative concept. The privileged bond between author and creation as a relation between a point of origin and its demarcated dissemination; the rise of new genres in literature, painting, and music that delineated and isolated so-called medium-specific strategies; as well as the notion of an artistic work as a somehow fixed and stable entity – all these ‘symptoms of modernity’ helped to reinforce the myth of separate and sustainable media (here also: art forms) with their own inner and definable ‘essence’. In this context, it is certainly no accident that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s regulative distinction between the temporal and spatial arts should have survived as one of the defining moments of the eighteenth century (Lessing 1766).

According to a popular view, this notion of separate medial identities was at least partly undermined in the nineteenth century with the realization of Richard Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*: the ‘work’ of the future (and in that sense a work in progress) that would transcend the bounds of separate media. In this same view, Wagner’s composite work premeditates, so to speak, Kittler’s dream of a ‘total connection of all media’ that erases traditional distinctions between them¹. These media have become an amalgam without origin.

Is it, however, this amalgam that Wagner’s vision of ‘together-art’ imagines; that it projects into the future? According to Randall Packer and Ken Jordan it is, if we consider *Gesamtkunst* in the light of future multimedial technologies such as film, the experiments of the futurists, Morton Heilig’s sensorama of the 1960’s (a reality machine that engaged all the senses), and, as an extension of the latter, three-dimensional virtual reality spheres and games (Packer and Jordan

¹ For ‘premediation’ see: Richard Grusin, ‘Premediation’ in *Criticism* 46.1 (2004), p. 17-39.

2001)². Indeed, for Packer and Jordan the road from Wagner to digital multimedia is relatively straightforward. In their view, Wagnerian *Gesamtkunst* predates at least three of the five characteristics that can be attributed to digital multimedia (or ‘new media’) – integration, immersion, and narrativity:

Integration: the combining of art forms and technology into a hybrid form of expression.

Interactivity: the ability of the user to manipulate and affect her experience of media directly, and to communicate with others through media.

Hypermedia: the linking of separate media elements to one another to create a trail of personal associations.

Immersion: the experience of entering into the simulation or suggestion of a three-dimensional environment.

Narrativity: aesthetic and formal strategies that derive from above concepts, which result in nonlinear story forms and presentation (Packer and Jordan 2001: p. xxxv).

In Wagner’s music drama’s narrativity is, of course, still very much present in its traditional, linear form, yet it is also a narrativity that is multimedially derived – it depends not simply on a linear story, but also on musical themes and motifs that predict, comment on, and refer fore- or backwards to other story lines or characters. Thus, narrativity in Wagnerian music drama has multiple “links” and time zones, with different zones working into and against each other.

Integration and immersion are, to all appearances, more self-evidently present as Wagnerian traces in digital multimedia. Combining different media is, if not a Wagnerian invention, still a Wagnerian practice focused on a so called joint dramatic action that integrates the spatial and temporal arts (I will, however, get back to this aspect of integration below). Finally, immersion in contemporary digital multimedia is perhaps most distinctively “Wagnerian”. Just as present-day simulations (on screens or in head displays) usher a complete, absorption of the spectator/participant in a possible world, so

² The cover features a picture of Richard Wagner and one of a virtual reality device, suggesting a link between the two that is confirmed in the advertorial: ‘The essential reader in the history of digital multimedia’. In this reader, Wagner features as the beginning of this history. For more on Morton Heilig’s sensorama see his ‘Cinema of the Future’ in *Multimedia*, p. 239-251, and at <http://www.retrofuture.com/sensorama.html> or at <http://www.sensomatic.com/sensorama/> (both June 2006).

Wagner's ideal setting of the music drama facilitated an intense, willing suspension of disbelief. Wagner would have the orchestra completely tucked away so that nothing could distract the audience from the happenings on stage – and the music could tend to the dramatic action constantly yet unobtrusively. Thus, packed together in a dark amphitheatric space, the audience «forgets the confines of the auditorium, and lives and breathes now only in the artwork which seems to it as Life itself, and on the stage which seems the wide expanse of the whole World» (Wagner 1849, in Ashton Ellis 1895, 2006).

Reading *Multimedia*, it would seem as if nineteenth-century *Gesamtkunst* gradually adopted interactivity and hypermedia as the twentieth century progressed, evolving into the kind of aural-visual-verbal computer games and multi-sensory interactive art works that have now grown so familiar to us. Likewise, in medially complex digital poetry joint medial actions often appear to draw heavily (knowingly or unknowingly) on such Wagnerian principles³. At the same time, however, these poetics also resist (knowingly or unknowingly) some of the specifically Wagnerian aspects of medial integration. I will illustrate this on the basis of digital work by the Canadian poet and computer programmer Jim Andrews, and the American digital poet Jason Nelson.

Jim Andrews' *Nio* (2001) is a digital "lettrist" poem that not only combines different medial processes, but also merges art with technology and technological applications⁴. Here, as in much other digital poetry, the concept of play has pride of place as a bodily (re-)activity: *Nio* only materializes in a 'ludic' interaction with the reader/user⁵. Displayed as a circle of icons issuing images and sounds, *Nio*'s design and appearance is to a certain extent dependent on my actions and interferences as a reader/player: the icons I bring to live participate in a dance of letters that change their shape with every new addition or deletion, the music changing only minimally in its repetitive gestures. If Wallace Stevens once claimed that «poetry is the subject of the poem», *Nio* performs this quite literally as the constant (re-)creation of lettrist shapes acting as the protagonists of the poem

³ Packer and Jordan's definition of digital multimedia is predominantly geared at hypertext fiction – hence the emphasis on narrativity. Clearly, in digital poetry this aspect of narrativity need not be present at all.

⁴ *Nio* can be seen/heard/played at Jim Andrews' website:
<http://www.vispo.com/nio/index.htm> (June 2006)

⁵ "Ludic" derives from Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), in which he defines humans as playful creatures.

(Stevens, “The Man with the Blue Guitar, XXII”, in Kermode and Richardson 1997: p. 135-151: 144.)

Similarly, Jason Nelson’s *A Tracing* (2001) features a circle of coloured links, backgrounded by constant whisperings, yielding not letters but ‘proper’ stanza’s that can be ordered into appearance by the reader/user (Nelson, <http://www.heliozoa.com/resume/drag2.html> 2006). Thus, though rather more traditionally poetic with its fixed stanza’s, *A Tracing* exemplifies a “trait” of digital poetry that re-represents poems not as «inscriptions but transcriptions of the user’s movement and attention» (Baldwin 2003, 2006). Though the stanza’s can remain where they have appeared on screen, the possibility of their removal and shifting locates the possibility of their design in the hands of the reader/user: the poem becomes a history of a singular reading – just as, for instance, a choreography can be conceived as a history of a singular listening.

Nelson’s *Another Emotion* (2001) taps the multimedial potential of digital poetry more explicitly in an interactive way (Nelson, “Another Emotion” 2006). When I first entered the site, *Another Emotion*’s design reminded me of those magic lanterns that we used long ago to view Disney slides fixed in strips – moving the strips from left to right, the images appeared on screen. It was, in all probability, no accident that I thought of the past when viewing *Another Emotion*: this was one of the first times Nelson used ‘the organic crackle and film-like spreading lines’ that not just remediate old and fading filmic images in the digital mode, but in this way also render the interface a distinctly temporal dimension (Jason, “About Another Emotion” 2006). Or, differently put, *Another Emotion* evokes the sense of a time past by foregrounding and refurbishing in its interface the defects, withering qualities, and intrusive accidentals (the spreading lines) of an older medium. This is reinforced by the nostalgic piano music – it could be a romanticized fragment of a J.S. Bach Prelude, or just a Bach-like invention – that repeats itself without interruption.

Initially, all you get are two poems on two coloured blocks in red and terra cotta with a row of smaller blocks in different colours underneath. The music starts instantly, and you read about a world of patterns yielding ever more patterns and being nothing without or beyond these patterns. A postmodern world, in short, that is the effect or projection of designs and representations that are in turn always-already the effect of other matrixes and programmes. As such, *Another Emotion* suggests a dizzying abyss of artificial allusions which never (or only very rarely) allow one to hit rock bottom. Rocks: «I am standing on what looks/ like a rock, near the center/ of what appears to be an

ocean’ – though apparently solid and unmoving, the rock is merely a simulation, and as such far from being a solid anchor point. For there are ‘more rocks, with more patterns,/ concealing others who are also hiding’ – and so you see other patterns emerging from behind the text blocks. Inter-reactive, the blocks cannot be controlled that well. Nelson calls the poems that word them ‘snap shots’, slices of text that are briefly framed, and if the mouse accidentally moves over the lower, parallel blocks (in moving to the right or to the left) the strip starts to move – and the music shifts with it. In this way, the music obtains a distinctly spatial quality as it is heard from ‘left to right’ or ‘right to left’, or shuffling in-between, as if it were dragged along with the movements of the reader/user’s hand. It is always there, it cannot be erased, like an aural shadow echoing my reading trajectory. Thus, I become aware of the lower set of blocks as a digital control panel, the colours corresponding to different jumps in the music heard.

In this matter, *Another Emotion* recalls those artistic and technological experiments in colour music that can (at least) be traced to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – if not to the Pythagorean idea of the music of the spheres: the *clavecin oculaire* devised by Louis-Bertrand Castel in 1725 and 1735, with each note paralleling an associated colour, Bainbridge Bishop’s colour organ (1877) that could project colours as notes were played, Wallace Rimington’s colour organ (1899) that premeditated theatrical lighting techniques of the twentieth century, or composer Alexander Scriabin’s vision of a music-colour device that translated sounds into specific colours (1901)⁶. Seen in this light, digital poems like *Another Emotion*, or *Nino*, could be located in a multimedial tradition that is not merely projected by Wagner’s *Gesamtkunst*, but also by the more abstract experimentations in artistic synaesthesia centring on the material interactivity of colours and sounds. Here, it is not the dramatic action that determines the interactions between words, images, and sounds. It is, rather, a sonic timbre or ‘grain’ that would ignite a chromatic interplay. Digitally rehearsing this synaesthetic tradition, *Another Emotion* verily recollects it in the instant reactions between colours, sound-cuts and sound-jumps.

In the digital domain, ‘together-art’ is often an art of fusion: different media are not merely combined, but welded into a hybrid that rewrites older versions of the media involved. Thus, in *Nio* letters have been fused with sounds in such a way as to become something rather different from letters in a traditional, printed domain.

⁶ Simon Shaw-Miller, *Visible Deeds of Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). See also: <http://www.media.unisi.it/liberarte/musacven.html> (June 2006).

They are no longer part of words, but have become characters in a double sense of the term: in the Greek sense of an ‘engraved mark’ or symbol, which has in *Nino* (as in other lettrist poetry) acquired an independent status, and in the sense of ‘protagonist’ (in *Nino* the letters are the ‘players’ of the poem). Letters have here become spatial figures (one could even call them ‘movemental’), only faintly echoing their ‘proper’ role as word-constituents. In *Another Emotion* words are still used conventionally in lines and stanza’s. However, their interaction with the repetitive music makes, if not for a visual music, then for a visual-musical pattern that renders the music a spatial and the colours a temporal aspect: the music is heard in terms of spatial movement, while the colours engage in a ‘touch’ that is at once aurally informed – they have evolved into keys. In this way, as Kittler predicted, separately conceived medial functions start to collapse into each other.

Yet if ‘together-art’ is what the digitally multimedial has partly inherited from *Gesamtkunst*, this aspect of inter-medial collapsing is nevertheless not part of Wagner’s project of the future. For Wagner’s programme of ‘together-art’ feeds, precisely, on medial *limits*: in his outlook of the artwork of the future he starts from a hierarchy of the temporal (‘human’) over the spatial (‘plastic’) media and, moreover, situates each of these media within their conventionally assigned domain. Thus, painting and music or poetry are not so much fused as put together in the sense of combining while retaining their respective roles⁷.

Indeed, this combination depends on the distinctness of separate media: the combination only works in so far as each medium knows its ‘proper’ place. Thus, say, painting is not to mimic the (presumed) ‘ways’ or ‘methods’ of poetry or music, but must keep to its own (presumably) spatial ‘manner’.

Contamination is therefore not at issue here. It is not a transformative amalgam, a confusion of the arts and the senses, but a combination of separate parts that *Gesamtkunst* projects as a future possibility:

Purity of the art-variety is therefore the first requisite for its comprehensibility, whereas an *alloy* [*Mischung*] from other art-varieties can only foul this comprehensibility. In fact we can imagine nothing more bewildering, than if the Painter, for instance, should want to show his subject in motion such as can be depicted by the Poet alone. (*Arwotrk*, p. 182-195)

⁷ Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, p. 182-195.

Seen in this light, the idea of the multimedial grows less useful as a tool to analyse medially complex digital poetry⁸. Keeping in mind the experimental poetic ‘strands’ that predate the medially complex digital poetry I am concerned with here, I propose to use the concept of *intermediality* to analyze a dynamic ‘in-between’ that, so to speak, instates such poetry⁹.

The Intermedial and the Digital

In conventionally formatted print poetry (by which I mean words in lines and stanza’s printed from left to right and top to bottom on white paper) space is familiarly a mere blank against which words can appear in black. Such poetry is one-, possibly two-dimensional and fails or refuses to engage with the space it opens: it merely presumes this space to be ‘there’ (exceptions will be discussed below). By contrast, in the medially complex digital poetry of Aya Karpinska – who calls herself an ‘interaction designer’ – space acquires a pivotal role: it becomes a dynamic process, rather than a static given.

Thus, *the arrival of the beeBox* (2003) is a three-dimensional configuration of (reactively) moving words that makes possible a spatially layered reading experience which is at once interactive and immersive¹⁰. Though the reader/user is actively engaged, and is constantly aware of this active engagement, she can literally plunge herself into a geographical space of words, and see them as objects with different sides and aspects rather than as flat ‘front-only’ figures.

⁸ Peter Frank likewise argues that multimedia works like (Wagnerian) opera do not stage a contamination and hybridization of different art forms/works, but rather consists of different medial forms that continue to function as separate and ‘coherent artistic phenomena’. See for this Peter Frank, ‘Postwar Performance and Intermedia: The Technological Impetus and the Musical Paradigm’ in Leigh Landy, ed., *Technology* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1992), p. 35, note 1, quoted in Eric de Vos, ‘The Eternal Network: Mail Art, Intermedia Semiotics, Interart Studies’ in *Interart Poetics. Essays on the Interrelations of the Arts and Media* (ed.) Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, Hans Lund, and Erik Hedling (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), p. 325-336, 325.

⁹ For a philosophical approach to the intermedial and the in-between see Henk Oosterling, ‘Sens(a)ble Intermediality and Inter-esse’ at:

http://cri.histart.umontreal.ca/cri/fr/INTERMEDIALITES/p1/pdfs/p1_oosterling.pdf

¹⁰ Aya Natalia Karpinska’s *the arrival of the beeBox* can be read/played at <http://www.technikai.com/box/index.html>. On that same site, Karpinska also offers a theoretical outline of – what she calls – her spatial poem. For the simultaneous ‘presence’ of immersive and interactive responses to digital multimedia and literary media, see Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

An obvious remediation of Sylvia Plath's poem with the same title, *the arrival of the beeBox* is never a radically, but only a relatively unstable poem that becomes increasingly chaotic as the reader/user starts to interfere¹¹. In its stable version, this spatial poem consists of three vertical planes on a horizontal axis, with words clotted on the sides. In Plath's poem, the 'clean wood box' that the speaker has ordered appears to contain an uncontrollable life-force: the bees, 'Minute and shrunk for export,/ black on black, angrily chambering', could never be held in check¹². In Karpinska's spatial poem, the clustered bees have become clustered words and it is the reader/user who is to open the boxes as three-dimensional objects – allowing the words to stretch and flutter out and take their provisional in-line positions.

How to read? From front to back, left to right, or both in reverse? Interestingly, in the mere attempts to discover directions, the reader/user is already experiencing ways of reading that are more explicitly spatially informed. Karpinska herself already refers to old cube poems and word squares such as *The Enigma of Sator* (2nd century AD) that can be read horizontally, vertically, and backwards. The *beeBox* likewise ushers an explorative kind of reading that resists the sense of an ending¹³. There are hints of the evanescence of the momentary ('this is a collection of moments gone by'; 'each moment shows a different face'), scattered allusions to crowds and loneliness, to dancing, to speed and velocity – but then you discover that you can discard linear reading strategies and simply pick a phrase to go with an other: 'this is a collection of moments gone by/ to protect me from loneliness', or 'this is a collection of moments gone by/ when our blinking memories/ in the stuttered flow of uneven rhythm/ sharpen one mind against another'. I call this a random- creative reading (a readerly version of William Burroughs' cut-up and fold-in method) that can be classified under Katherine Hayles' *modus* of cyborg reading. Such reading is no longer attuned to the two-dimensional text, but is rather faced with a 'topographic area to explore, with layered strata, hidden openings, crosscutting pathways, links between different world levels, and other spatial and temporal unfoldings'¹⁴.

¹¹ Sylvia Plath, 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' in *The Penguin Book of American Verse* (ed.) Geoffrey Moore, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 534-535.

¹² Sylvia Plath, 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', l. 1, l. 14-15, p. 534.

¹³ Aya Karpinska, 'the arrival of the beeBox. An exploration of Spatial Text' at <http://www.technikai.com/box/beeBoxPaper.pdf>, p. 5.

¹⁴ N. Katherine Hayles, 'Print is Flat, Code is Deep. The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis' in *Poetics Today*, 25.1 (2004), p. 67-90, 86.

But this is not all. The *beeBox* can be toyed with, and when it is, the read/user can literally move into the space of words. The constellation can be turned, rotated, zoomed in and out. You can immerse yourself in the *beeBox*, see words from the inside out, see their backs and their momentary disappearance as the constellation turns round. You can, in fact, see words turning into things as the constellations starts to turn, the lines start to fold into each other, and the words appear more and more dominantly as objects in space instead of semantic vehicles: you see not a poem, but a spatial-temporal process of word-objects shaping, reshaping, appearing and disappearing. Language has now become a place to dwell and travel in. (Nelson's *this will be the end of you: play 4, within within* (2003) projects the same possibility)¹⁵.

Poetry as buildings; a geographical place to dwell in – this is, of course, not a digital invention (even though three-dimensional spatial texts, excluding video poetry, indeed tend to be digitally mastered)¹⁶. As we have seen above, the practice of spatial texts dates back almost two millennia, and indeed constitutes something of a tradition in Western culture. Looking back into the more recent past, the transformation of words into things that have a concrete function in a dynamical space was already part and parcel of concrete poetry as it was practiced in the twentieth century. Thus, in the 1950's the Brazilian *Noigrandes* group – consisting of Augusto and Haraldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari – launched the term 'concrete poetry' for a species of 'text' that is verbally, vocally, and/or visually informed, but cannot be reduced to any of these medial possibilities. The *Noigrandes* group borrowed the term from Wassily Kandinsky, who had used 'concrete' to label objects that can exist in themselves, rather than as a means alone. Concurrently, in concrete poetry of the *Noigrandes* group words were used as 'items', bricks or building blocks in a topographical space, not merely as vehicles for communication¹⁷.

¹⁵ Jason Nelson, *this will be the end of you: pla4, within within* at <http://www.heliozoa.com/ending4.html> (June 2006).

¹⁶ For more on video poetry, its relation to concrete, and its predating of digital poetry, see Christopher Funkhouser, 'A Vanguard Projected in Motion: Early Kinetic Poetry in Portuguese' in *Sirena: poesia, arte y critica* 2005.2 (2005), p. 152-164.

¹⁷ See for instance Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry. A World View* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967); Emmett Williams, *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1977); Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); the official website of Augusto de Campos at <http://www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/>; the entries for concrete poetry at <http://www.ubu.com/> or the index of concrete poetry on the internet at <http://www.gardendigest.com/concrete/cvpindex.htm>

In the 1960's and 1980's critics like Dick Higgins labelled such in-between-media-texts 'intermedia': texts, objects, performances that could not (yet) be classified within existing technologies, categories, conventions, and meaning schemes¹⁸. They constituted a third space, hovering in a domain that could or did not yet claim a medial field of its own. It fed, precisely, on medial confusion and contamination. Thus, Augusto de Campos' 'olho por olho' ['eye for an eye'] (1964) merged poetic form, images, and architectural space in a way as to remediate their respective medial 'genetics':



The shape of this poem-collage is at once 'poetic' and 'architectonic': the images of the eyes and mouths substitute words as they might appear in-line in a conventional poetic surrounding – there is, at least, the memory of a poetic configuration designed in a top-to-bottom line sequence. Yet this memory interferes, quite obviously, with the immediate impression of an architectonic shape: a cone-shaped building receding into the distance that consists of brick-shaped 'eye-openers'. If, in concrete poetry, words turn into things, here they in fact no longer appear as words but as image-things. This transformation of words into things also applies to the *beeBox*, except that the reader/user here *witnesses* a transition from words as signifiers to words as things; as ornamentals of a frame aiming at a *visual* effect – however simulative such a transition may be in the field of the digital²⁰.

¹⁸ Dick Higgins, 'Intermedia' in *Leonardo* 34.1 (2001), p. 49-54.

¹⁹ Augusto de Campos, 'olho por olho' ['eye for an eye'] (1964) at <http://www2.uol.com.br/augustodecampos/poemas.htm> (see under: 1964/65: *popcretos*) (June 2006).

²⁰ On the simulative status of medial interpellations in the digital sphere, see Yvonne Spielman, 'Aesthetic Features in Digital Imaging. Collage and Morph' in *Wide Angle*

In so far as the *beeBox* and De Campos' poem-collage fall 'conceptually between media that are already known', Higgins would call them 'intermedial'. In his view, there are existing media and there is the new, hesitating in-between what has already been given²¹. Thus, the intermedial is the *provisional*, the not-yet. It is what, Jean-François Lyotard has noted in a different context, is not yet presentable according to preestablished rules²². Resisting the known, intermedial art blends and rearranges familiar art forms in such a way as to make them indistinguishable and indivisible. In the collage-poem of De Campos, for instance, one can no longer isolate different artistic forms and strategies since these forms and strategies have mutually infused each other. The one (the verbal) has insinuated itself in the other (the visual) – and this is precisely why the intermedial is such a successful instrument of defamiliarization. The uncanny is, so to speak, its home-base.

Of course, intermediality can also be more broadly conceived as 'relations between media', whereby – in imitation of 'intertextuality' – all media are thought of as nodes in a network of other media. However, for critics like Higgins, Jacques Aumont and, more recently, Henk Oosterling the 'inter' has a more specific significance than 'interart relations' alone. This is a significance that not so much opposes as deepens the notion of intermediality in a more general sense. Thus, while Higgins locates the intermedial between existing media as a force of renewal, Aumont reads the intermedial as an in-between *within* a specific (multi)medial domain²³. This could mean that multimedially constituted 'works' can *become* intermedial once the different medial forms involved become inter-active and inter-transformative. Intermediality would then be a destabilizing *moment* in a multimedial setting. Such a view of intermediality could be illuminating with respect to relatively stable spatial poems like the *beeBox*: the intermedial could here be imagined as an *event* (rather than an inherent quality) that *occurs* when the verbal, spatial, and visual become dispersive processes.

21.1 (1999), pp. 131-148. Spielman argues that 'intermedial' is, strictly speaking, no longer relevant in the sphere of the digital because here all medial differences are reduced to numerical effects. However, and as I will show below, this is a somewhat naïve view: the same, of course, applies to the sphere of the analogue – yet Spielman never takes this into account.

²¹ Dick Higgins, 'Intermedia', p. 52.

²² Jean-François Lyotard, 'What is Postmodernism?' [1982] in: *Art in Theory 1900 – 1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (ed.) Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), p. 1008-1015.

²³ Jacques Aumont, *L'Oeil interminable: cinéma et peinture* (Paris: Séguier, 1989).

When, that is, the dynamic between them is such as to destabilize their conventionally assigned aspects²⁴. Seen in this light, the intermedial links to the ‘not- yet’ not only as a hybrid form that cannot yet be determined, but also as a temporal ex-tension that is always only provisionally realized in the happening of an instant.

In this way, intermediality more or less directs one to rethink medially complex digital poetics as *processes* instead of *works*: in terms of a transformative *dynamic*, however provisional that dynamic may be, instead of a static *identity*²⁵. This leads me to a third and more deconstructive reading of intermediality as advocated by Oosterling²⁶. For Oosterling, the intermedial has a differential aspect that is, as it were, covered up in Higgins’ theory: it is not just an in-between of the given, but a force of giving itself. Indeed, for Oosterling the ‘inter’ equals the force of *différance* in Derridean philosophy – a force that instates and defers at the same time; a force that instates presence as a mediated effect and defers it as a ‘pure’ occurrence²⁷. Thus, in this differential frame, mediation appears as an original force of contamination.

Oddly, however, (or perhaps not at all) in art and media theory ‘mediality’ has in turn been hypostasised as a fixed form – as presence: as, precisely, the presumed ‘essence’ or *movens* of a strictly demarcated medial identity. (Think, in this instance, of the ease with which we speak of ‘the’ visual, sonic, or literary media – as if they were stable givens with an inner self.) Clearly, mediality has here been fatally subjected to – what Judith Butler calls – the myth of

²⁴ This is, of course, at once a dynamic between these dispersive processes and the reader/user: the intermedial only comes to ‘exist’ in the interaction with the latter, because the reader/user opens or initiates the course of medial destabilization – s/he launches the project of the *beeBox* and clicks, so to speak, the ‘text’ into (further) disarray. Moreover, if the intermedial is an occurrence rather than an autonomous quality it would need the presence of a reader/user to *become* an occurrence.

²⁵ This, according to Katherine Hayles, is already presupposed by the electronic status of such poetics: ‘the [electronic] text exists in dispersed fashion even when it is confined to a single machine. There are data files, programs that call and process the files, hardware functionalities that interpret or compile the programs, and so on. It takes all of these together to produce the electronic text. Omit any of them, and the text literally cannot be produced. For this reason it would be more accurate to call an electronic text a *process* than an object’. See for this N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer. Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005) p. 101.

²⁶ Henk Oosterling, ‘Sens(a)ble Intermediality and Inter-esse’ (June 2006).

²⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967] (transl.) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

interiority²⁸. To counter this subjection, the ‘inter’ could be deconstructively imagined as a space that does not fall open between such presumed (historically developed) medial identities, but operates as their condition of possibility. More simply said: *a medium can be rethought as an intermedial effect*. Instead of a ‘without’ that inserts itself in-between existing medial identities, the intermedial can be reconsidered as a force that is always already at work *within* them – cuts through them as a differentiating drive.

There is enough ‘evidence’ in the history of art to suppose such an intermedial transaction. Though it would lead me too far to explore this in detail here, my contention is that such a transaction can, indeed, be most readily presupposed when medial identities foreground their own, supposedly ‘pure’, materiality most insistently²⁹. When, that is to say, they try to neutralize ‘alien’ incisions and appear to go ‘back to basic’ (as, for instance, happened in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé when it tried to realize *la notion pure* – when it reduced poetry (once more) to words, instead of ideas).

In the domain of the digital this neutralization is likewise at issue, albeit in the very opposite direction. As a facilitating field, the digital – we have seen at the beginning of this essay – neutralizes the alien by reducing heterogeneous media procedures to numbers. Medial integration is a numerical integration; the same goes for medial differentiation. But this will not be shown. The digital tends to hide its own numerical materiality and manipulate a medial diversity in the projection of medially complex configurations. This means that hybrids like medially complex digital poetry can in the end be nothing but a simulation of medial complexity. However, this very simulation may well bring home to us that media are in fact fluid processes with no essential point of origin *within* themselves. As visual, verbal, or aural streams, they are, instead, the effect of an ‘alien’ computation – of a programme that instates the differences between them as virtual differences after-the-fact. (And thus instates their identity as an after-effect.) In this way, medially complex digital poetics may teach us

²⁸ See for this Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Gender* [1990] (London: Routledge, 1999).

²⁹ Think, for instance, of the ‘musical’ methods that – as Clement Greenberg claimed in his ‘Towards a Newer Laocöon’ (1940) – the abstract currents of avant-garde painting would have absorbed to return to the so called ‘essence’ of painting. As doubtful as Greenberg’s text may be to modern eyes, it nevertheless (and perhaps despite itself) shows that a so called mono-medium, a medium consisting purely of its own matter, is in fact the result of an invisible intermedial contamination. See for this Clement Greenberg, ‘Towards a Newer Laocöon’ in *Art in Theory*, p. 554-560.

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something about medial identities ‘in general’: that they may likewise be the mere provisional and unstable outcome of an arche-writing or projective inter-mediality.

Coda

Medially complex digital poetry, half-descendent from concrete, lettrist, and process poetry, half-descendent from cut-up and fold-in techniques, does not comfortably fit in the notion of digital multimedia. Merely emphasizing the presence of *many* media, instead of the way in which such media interact with and instate each other, the multimedial is too much tied to traditional forms of ‘mixed media’ to be of any real significance to digital poetry. Instead, as I have tried to show, the kind of fusing and ‘third-space experimenting’ in much medially complex digital poetry requires the concept of the intermedial. Intermediality projects not simply a ‘together-art’ or any other continuation of nineteenth-century *Gesamtkunst*, but a criss-crossing between and mutual infusion of different medial modalities. Words become like colours, colours like words, texts like buildings and spaces, sounds are spatially heard – such contaminations date back not so much to Wagner’s utopian view of the arts united, but to those avant-garde experiments that questioned the respective identities and conditions of possibility of the different art forms. It is in the context of these experiments that much medially complex digital poetry can be situated and understood: they invent new languages of becoming.

Kiene Brillenburg Wurt*
(Utrecht University)

* Kiene Brillenburg Wurth works as an Assistant Professor with the Department of Comparative Literature at Utrecht University. In her research, she focuses on aesthetic theory, literary theory and intermediality, especially the relations between literature and music in the 18th-, 19th-, and 20th centuries. She has published on the sublime, music, British and German Romanticism, philosophy of art, and post-modern philosophy.

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