

Digital Latin American Poetry: Experimental Language in the Times of Bits

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The assertion that a great number of the inhabitants of our planet experience the world through interactions with digital environments is, at the close of the second decade of the twenty-first century, more than obvious. Digital cultures have become our atmosphere. This is not only because we have an ever-growing quantity of devices that operate on the basis of binary numeric code programming, not only because it is a quantitatively-evident phenomenon, but because that same quantity is paired with a way of being digital, an idea of computability that dwells within each of those devices, and this fact in some way becomes hegemonic in relation to the experience of the world, and life itself. This is also how it becomes natural and goes by unnoticed. The algorithmic culture that predicts and directs our mass consumption is nothing more than one of the most evident facets of the aforementioned naturalization.

But what has happened with literature in that context? Has literature also entered the flow of digital culture in this naturalized manner? Not so much, and not so little. On one hand, the digitalization of the written word is of course the order of the day. In fact, a lot of writing circulates on social networks, although there is also a lot of circulation of images and sounds; things are written with and read on digital devices, and enormous quantities of text, which were previously accessed in analog mode, have been digitalized. Nevertheless, digital literature, strictly speaking –and within what we could consider, as I will argue later, digital poetry—has at the moment and to a certain extent maintained its circulation in the not so usual channels. I suspect that this is due to the fact that from the moment it surfaced in the 1950s, when the first experiments were carried out with automatic text generators starting with computer programming, and up to the present, digital literature entails a great experimental impetus. This changes it into an uncomfortable, unstable object, difficult to define. And this presents at once an advantage and a disadvantage, a positive as well as a negative. Beginning with the negative, experimenting with this type of literature distances it from the general public, making it in some sense inaccessible. This seems to be currently changing, judging from developments in digital literature that are taking on platforms and social networks such as Twitter, although it is still not so widespread. On the positive side, we are dealing with a kind of literature that has great freedom to resist and to flow over

transversal and alternative paths, even from within the digitalization of daily contemporary life that drives more or less hegemonic and standardized social forms.

Even though digital literature is unstable and difficult to define, I will nonetheless attempt a definition so that what I am referring is somewhat clearer. Digital literature is a type of artistic practice that is in general multimodal, that is to say, one in which diverse languages intervene at the same time—verbal, visual, and aural, for example—but one which demonstrates the prominent presence of verbal language, emphasizing the way of saying something and not only on what is said. In addition, that emphasis is not subsidiary to other purposes of discourse (as can be the case in advertising, where the manner of saying something is very important, but is secondary to persuasion). It is a practice that, furthermore, dialogues with literary history. In the case of digital poetry, the dialogue specifically develops from the type of text that, because we have been doing so for centuries, we would without difficulty recognize as a poem due to its tendency to emphasize the experience of the event of the word, the capacity of the word to call attention to itself, and from there trigger meaning-making processes.

Unlike literature associated with the book medium, digital literature is: a) generated in/by/from electronic digital devices; b) programmed in binary numeric code through its creation and its use of various software and c) experienced in conjunction with digital interfaces. Texts that are transferred from print medium to a computer screen or similar devices are not digital literature, although in the transfer the digitized texts become, to a certain point, digital texts, computable as discrete units.

In such a framework, much digital literature is geared toward certain genres, or rather, toward certain modes of discourse, such as the narrative mode, on the one hand, or the lyric or poetic on the other, although these tendencies toward modes of discourse can be mixed among themselves and are not enough to characterize all the aspects of digital literature. Other questions that must be kept in mind are: a) constructive modalities such as connectivity (on/off line), automatism (algorithmic generativity/non-generativity), interactivity (yes/no), directionality (linearity/hyper textuality and hyper mediality); b) authorship (individual, collaborative production, collaborative reception); c) types of languages that take part (verbal, visual, aural, movement-image); d) types of supports or interfaces (computer, cell phone, tablet, screen in public space, etc.).

Against this backdrop, a considerable portion of digital literature, as I described above, specifically dialogue with poetry. And in Latin America this has occurred not only in a remarkable, but also in a pioneering way. First, the texts that were digitally-produced could only be visualized when printed, so they went from the digital to the analog, but that changed in the 1980s (or even before). As an example, here is a (non-exhaustive) chronology that covers the initial years (pre-2000) and to keep it brief, only looks at production from Argentina and Brazil, although digital poetry in various regions of Latin America has unfolded in a continuous and consistent manner up to the twenty-first century.¹ Later, I will focus on a couple of more recent examples and on other regions of Latin America in order to examine the reach of contemporary Latin American digital poetry.

Year	Title	Author	Description
1966	<i>IBM</i>	Omar Gancedo (Argentina)	Three punch cards, processed by an IBM Card Interpreter that printed in middle space of each card the text that was previously codified in the perforations.
1972	<i>Le tombeau de Mallarmé</i>	Erthos Albino de Souza (Brazil)	Ten visual poems in ASCII code printed by a computer after manipulation by a software meant for measuring the temperatures of liquids in pipes.
1982	“Não!”	Eduardo Kac (Brazil)	Visual kinetic poem projected on an LED screen at the Cândido Mendes Cultural Center in Rio de Janeiro in 1984.
1982	“Soneto só prá vê”	Daniel Santiago / Luciano Moreira (Brazil)	Visual poem generated by programming in TAL/II language.

¹ Other pioneering works are *Correcaminos* (aka *Caminante*), a Basic animation that includes letters and symbols (Eduardo Darino, Uruguay, 1965) and *El canto del gallo. Poeelectrones*, which includes visual poems designed through an computation (Jesús Arellano, Mexico, 1972).

1984	“Pulsar”	Augusto de Campos / Olhar Eletrônico (Brazil)	Computer-generated animation of the visual poem by Augusto de Campos, previously published in print in 1975.
1985	“Universo”	João Cohelo (Brazil)	Poem programmed through Advanced Basic Language.
1986	Fotomontaje/Poema madi	Ladislao Pablo Györi (Argentina)	Computerized visualization with 3D photomontage graphics by Grete Stern and synthesizer soundtracking of one madi poem by Gyula Kosice.
1992	“Poema bomba”	Augusto de Campos / Ricardo Araújo / Laboratório de Sistemas Integraveis (LSI) -Escola Politécnica USP (Brazil)	Digital animation in Flash of the visual poem of the same name published in print in 1986.
1993	“Dentro”	Arnaldo Antunes / LSI (Brazil)	Digital video-animation of the visual poem of the same name, published in print in 1990.
1994- 1998	“Rotaciones” “Abyssmo” “9MENEM9”	Fabio Doctorovich (Argentina)	Digital visual poems; the last two are interactive.
1997- 2003	<i>Anipoemas</i>	Ana María Uribe (Argentina)	A series of kinetic visual poems with sound, using animated GIFs.
1997- 1999	<i>Epithelia</i>	Mariela Yeregui (Argentina)	Interactive multi-media piece with images, sound, and fragmented texts (from the artist herself, Joyce, Pizarnik, Derrida,

			Plath among others); they form and disintegrate in real time.
1999-2000	<i>Postales</i>	Gabriela Golder (Argentina)	Hypermedia work that combines images and texts as verses and poetic prose that alternate between Spanish and French.

In Search of the Lost Poem

One of the questions that can be posed in relation to poetry in contemporary Western societies—perhaps since the 1960s—is the loss of a taste for reading it, with the exception of a rather restricted group. Thus, poetry inhabits the margins of typical cultural consumption, and if we return to what was said at the beginning of this essay, digital poetry occupies something like the margin of the margin. However, at the same time, digital poetry shares with digital culture, among other aspects, the same methods of navigation in the contemporary symbolic universe, methods of reading that are different from printed culture: hypertextual and hypermedial reading, multiple sensorial understandings not reserved just for the sense of vision, and the speed of interactions. And perhaps this could enable it to reengage its reading public. Such is the example of contemporary Twitter-poetry in which poets try out aphoristic writings under the restriction of a fixed quantity of characters, using bots that remix texts from the web—the case of *Poemita* (2010-pres.) by the Salvadoran-American Eduardo Navas, is significant.

But there are other cases that do not appeal to communication through social networks, but rather through the already-traditional web page, through which it is also possible to search for the lost poem. I will briefly present two examples to prove this hypothesis.

José Aburto is a Peruvian poet who has been producing digital poetry since the start of the year 2000. His web site <http://entalpia.pe/> until recently had as a significant subtitle the following sentence: “poetry has changed state.” Currently, the website’s title is “Unexpected Poetry”. His digital pieces—he also writes analog poetry—feed into the tradition of typographic, concrete poetry. In general, these pieces are made with Flash and the poet himself classifies them as interactive or combinatorial digital poems even though both categories can be produced at the same time. Such is the case with “Grandes esferas celestes,” in which a screen with a white background split horizontally in the middle contains in the upper portion light blue spheres or bubbles (controlled by the cursor of whoever interacts) that fall toward the lower half of the screen, from where (in a light blue grid) a verse

in two hemistiches rolls out: “chance grows until it disorders my needs and misplaces cadavers along with the silences.” When one of the bubbles from the upper part falls onto the poem and touches one of the words, it modifies the word through a combinatorial algorithm. Thus, “disorder” may transform into “humiliate,” but also into “moisten,” “encompass,” or “guide”; “my needs” transforms into “your intentions”; “misplace” transforms into “conceal,” or “forget”; “along with the silences” transforms into “under the silences” and so on. The reader-interactive activity resides precisely in the search for better, more suggestive, poetic options in dialog with the fulfillment of the combinatory algorithm whose code cannot predict who will interact unless the person spends a lot of time trying different interactive options.

Eugenio Tisselli, a Mexican poet, net.artist, activist, and programmer has been developing a prolific activity of digital poetry production for almost twenty years. Thus, *midipoet* (developed between 1999 and 2002) is a program of image, text, and sound manipulation in real time that according to the artist, is a tool for the distortion of current digital imagery and one with which pieces are produced even today. On Tisselli’s web site, <http://www.motorhueso.net/>, one can access the program itself as well as the poetic creations produced with this tool, linked to typographic and concrete poetry, for whose visualization it is necessary to download the program. In other cases, Tisselli’s digital pieces can be executed directly online and are not necessarily linked to the tradition of visual concrete poetry. This is the case in *PAC Poetry Assisted by Computer* (2006), a program developed in Spanish, Catalan, and English in which, starting with seed verses entered by interactors, lexical substitutions are generated by taking synonyms from remote dictionaries. In the Spanish and Catalan versions, the substitutions first pass through a process of automatic translation that sends the words of the entered verse to a remote translator, which introduces into the poems a high degree of uncertainty and opacity linked to the hegemonic modes of circulation of meaning in the Internet, something that Latin American digital poetry frequently discusses. The whole process gives rise to new verses that the interactors can correct as they search for better poetic solutions. Analogous with the last volume of that famous novel by Proust, *Time Regained*, which proposes going in search of lost time, I ask myself, “Are we in the presence now of the regained poem in the time of bits?”

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