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Towards the Delight of Poetic Insight

Archive & Innovate as a Productive Paradox

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I.

In the past the future also used to be better.

Archive and innovate! Two imperatives concerning electronic literature: an archive of innovation? – There’s another paradox!

New can only come from what is old. Culturally speaking, innovation turns into a positive demand as soon as tradition can be identified, especially when it’s stored in technical archives and distributed and communicated by media. To work innovatively we need an archived tradition, which can be modified or from which we may radically separate. At the same time, and here the paradox turns productive, novelty is an organizational principle of the archive, because it helps to decide what has an original or authentic value, and what is worth including in the archive.

So far, I have only played a passive role in the work on the new ELO directory. At the very beginning, I asked the team what would be worth intergrating into the archive. A prompt answer came from Joe Tabbi and it was quite sympathetic. Apart from the definition of electronic literature to which the ELO is oriented, Joe didn’t present a catalogue of hard criteria but a quite pragmatic option.

In terms of Wittgenstein, the meaning would be developed during use: What could be accepted for the archive would become clear during the process, managed by those people willing to invest the time to read, write, and communicate and who would contribute their personal experience. This is a frank position and counts on the observer, on the subjective factor, which shouldn’t be neglected.

The productive paradox “innovate and archive” seems, to me, to be a major factor in the systemic organization of the genre. Obviously, electronic or digital language art

has already been in a phase of institutionalization for a long time. Can we still be innovating? Yes we can. And furthermore, don't we actually need innovation for poetic insight. So, what does this really mean?

II.

Let's have a look at some aspects of innovation, which the discourse offers.

The most obvious offer made in our field says: Innovation comes from artistically investigating the challenges of new media. We are dealing with an import of innovation from the development of information technologies, an adoption of what is both culturally and socially being traded as extremely current and is particularly valued for this reason. This position is most clearly followed in the anthology "New Media Poetry" which was edited by Eduardo Kac in 1996, and in which the title already connects "Poetic innovation" and "New technologies". Here the concept of novelty is clear and simple: it is distinctively separated from old and traditional print culture: „ (...) a radically new poetry, (...) that challenges even the innovations of recent and contemporary experimental poetics (...) The poems discussed in this anthology (...) state that a new poetry for the next century must be developed in new media, simply because the textual aspirations of the authors cannot be physically realized in print.“

In its polarization this position clearly has a touch of the avant-garde, it reanimates Modernism; we have also heard the term "remedialization" in this context. Meanwhile Kac deleted the "new" in the second, extended edition of his anthology – he felt that the new media couldn't be that new anymore and that the related arts would, by now, be part of the cultural archive. But Kac's personal artistic development from Holopoetry via Digital Poetry to Bio Art and, most recently, to the postulate of so-called Space Poetry under the extraterrestrial conditions of zero-gravity show how much innovation in the arts can be drawn from what is culturally important, particularly from innovative fields of scientific knowledge.

The second perspective is both broader and narrower. Broader because it is not limited to technological or scientific innovation; it actually includes any innovation of artistic methods. At the same time, this more or less restricts it to the inner dynamics, or we could say, the autopoiesis of art. In 1982 Richard Kostelanetz wrote about “Innovative Literature in America”. It was going to be crucial that this literature be “quite different from predominant styles”, and it was going to mean a “radically different scripting”. And so this means the innovation of the ways of writing compared to older ways, resulting in an enormous pluralism of methods. Franz Mon argues in a similar way in a retrospective of 20 years of the “Bielefeld Colloquium New Poetry” where until 2003 about 45 poets from Europe and North America met annually under the umbrella of so-called “New Poetry”. The members accepted the label “new” as neutral enough and as a sign of an open view on working techniques, as yet unknown or non-existent. They also shared the consensus to work with language in a highly flexible way, to react to contemporary conditions (including those in media or science) where these could be coined in language and to resist any linguistic form of ideologization.

The third aspect of innovation counts the quality of an individual artistic work, event or project. Then innovation is identified with fairly overt values such as “original”, “authentic”, “dense” or “deep”—values which have been used since the 18th century and are still in use today, though without the implication of an emphatic concept of author or genius. Their complex meaning becomes clear with use in language. But we can also observe the attempt to objectify innovation. In the 1960s a quite decisive attempt in this direction was made by Max Bense, who was born 100 years ago and who is associated with the first poetic experiments with computers. Bense developed a material text and information aesthetics, which investigates the analyses and poetics of artistic texts using mathematical methods. Here, innovation should be calculable far away from subjective speculation, it should be grasped as a high measure of information, not redundant, improbable, complex. This points to a high measure of decision and reflexivity. However, this rationalistic approach failed to achieve a broad impact.

III.

How are these aspects to be reflected? Artistically, the best approach is a satirical one. I want to briefly mention two intertwined examples: In 2005 philologist, media researcher and net activist Florian Cramer won a competition in net literature with his “pleintekst.nl”, an intelligently designed, highly conceptual text generator. “Pleintekst” works on text material with a set of algorithms for text transformation and typography. It mixes fragments of real time data from the operating computer system with passages from George Battaille’s “History of the Eye” (mind words like “pussy” and “milk”) and with an email dialogue between Cramer and Mary Anne Breeze. The machine is continuously started by interpassively clicking in any active field. Beyond, you may read, observe, associate and speculate over the profound reasoning behind the project, get frustrated or simply leave things to fend for themselves.

In both its typographic formatting and its three algorithmic modules “pleintekst.nl” is closely related to the concept and the typography of George Perec’s radio play “Die Maschine” (The Machine) from 1968. The radio play for four speakers/voices stages an imaginative computer with three memory units and a (female) control unit, which use dozens of OULIPO constraints to analyze and deconstruct one of the most famous poems of German literature: “Wandrer’s Nachtlid” (“Ein gleiches”) written by Goethe in 1780. The play ends as the computer falls silent after an excessive explosion of quotes from world literature or, to put it technically: it crashes by a stack overflow. Goethe’s poem has resisted any attempt of destruction and has proved its poetic power and the indestructibility of great poetry, as claimed by Perec’s German translator Eugen Helmlé who participated conceptually in this project.

Cramer’s “pleintekst” takes Perec’s machine concept from a sphere of representation into a sphere of execution, this means into a real computer. By doing so the concept is exaggerated. As opposed to many earnest experiments with automated text generation, we are dealing with comical pataphysics in both projects. The algorithmic generation of text out of texts thoughtlessly centres on itself in an onanistic fashion. Thus, plaintext explains itself and Perec’s machine as bachelor machines according to Duchamp’s concept: it interprets the machine as a substitute for the desire for

another, which fails in not being fulfilled, a short circuit on demand, as Duchamp states in the “Great Glass” or to put it shortly: as substitute for innovation.

This reflection about genre coming from genre leads to new questions: even if the poetic investigation of computer or new media, is inspiring, to what extent is this real innovation? We know from the history of electronic writing that a lot of it falls way behind what has already been achieved. How do interesting processes and results behave compared to those with more conventional procedures? Via the homage to Perec’s radio play (a conventional genre), Cramer’s artistic commentary points to the fact that even a print text, which has received highest estimation in the cultural archive, may be appreciated as potential for new experiences, while his own work in no way makes such a claim for itself. Is it possible that Goethe’s text, in spite of its lack of new procedures, presents such a high and improbable quality of information, along the lines of Bense, that it continues to be innovative for centuries? Which factors are responsible here? This needs to be discussed further. – By the way, Perec’s radio play was such a critical shock for the group associated with Bense that they completely gave up their rationalistic and academic experiments with computer poetry.

The question of innovation should be posed like this: Why innovate at all? Which qualities and functions apply and for whom? In my view answers can be found by looking at the character of poetic art, of poesis itself. Unfortunately we don’t have enough time to go into detail. But let me just say this much:

Beyond an elementary function to develop new procedures and aesthetically convincing work for the autopoiesis of art, innovation is actually the very nature of poetics itself. Within the medium of poesis, the generally individual processes of reading and writing the world can operate in a self-referential, flexible, fluid, and open way.

Innovation means the realization of the reflexive, performative and potential character of poesis. Poesis as innovation means the erotic energy of change from not-being to being. Innovation as poetic insight means the option for new experiences of what is not yet, or no longer conscious, the extension of the potentials in perception,

reasoning, and acting, the productive sensitivity for cultural, social, political and
aesthetical developments.