

**Le(s) Mange Texte(s):
Creative Cannibalism and Digital Poetry**

I. Digital poetry always involves mathematical concepts. Fusing together textual elements is an additive process, at very least. Combining files and presenting them via computer screens multiplies possibilities for poetry, and the sum, or sums, of the artistic equation are often worthy of the effort involved. Thus, what we factor into the equation, and how it is factored in, is important. Considering some of the successful works of digital poetry that appeared in the hypermedia journal *Alire* in France, and in other historical and contemporary works, I see a trait that emerges despite overt aesthetic differences and variant approaches in works produced that I wish to associate with a liberating and useful poetical concept that emerged in South America nearly a century ago.

When Pero Afonso de Sardinha arrived on the shores of Brazil from Portugal in the mid-sixteenth century to be Bishop of Bahia, natives in the Aimorés tribe (pagans) ritualistically ate him. This historical event, a spontaneous response to colonial oppression, has been a source of identification for Brazilian artists since the modern era, and has been used as a foundation for the cultivation of heterogeneous expressive forms. Use of this transgressive context has expanded, and has significance and application in today's media environment. Anthropophagy (or cannibalism), the name assigned to this unusual and iconoclastic creative philosophy, was initially announced by, and exemplified in, Oswald de Andrade's "Anthropophagy Manifesto" (1928), which proclaims "I am only interested in that which is not my own" (65).¹ External texts and idioms become grist for the anthropophagist's mill, a trait reflected in Oswald's short poems "Biblioteca Nacional" (partially composed of juxtaposed document titles, e.g., "Brazilian Code of Civil Law/How to Win the Lottery/Public Speaking for Everyone/The Pole in Flames) and "Advertisement" (which adopts the language of advertising copy, e.g., "All women—deal with Mr. Fagundes/sole distributor/in the United States of Brazil") (Bishop 11, 13). In another historical example of anthropophagy in poetry, Raul Bopp's *Cobra Norato*, the brutal hierarchy of the elements in a rain forest is established in a

serial poem involving continuous encounters between these elements (e.g., a snake, trees, a river, and birds). Bopp, favoring process rather than destination, engages, emulates, and reprocesses natural, conversational sounds, stitching the language of the creatures of the forest in which the poem is set into the poem (e.g., “*Tiúg... Tiúg Tiúg.../Twi. Twi-twi?*” (16). More importantly, Bopp borrows the story of *Cobra Norato* from native mythology, and re-inscribes it in “very colloquial and popular language;” it is primarily anthropophagic in terms of its “*ethos* and thinking structures” (Salgado n. pag.).

Numerous poets and artists in Brazil were subsequently motivated by anthropophagy.² Today, useful connections can be made between anthropophagy and digital poetry that divulge significant operative characteristic and artistic opportunities in a genre known for its synthesis of fragments. The relationship between concrete poetry and digital poetry is often discussed, and exploring the ties between one of the concretist’s major influences and digital poetry is a worthy pursuit.³

Augusto de Campos explains in a 2005 interview, “Oswald made a distinction between anthropophagy and pure cannibalism—by hunger or by greed—from ritual anthropophagy. Ritual anthropophagy is a branch of anthropophagy in which the cannibal eats his enemy not for greed or for anger but to inherit the qualities of his enemy. The metaphorical, and also in certain aspects philosophical, idea of cultural anthropophagy Oswald promoted was the idea of cannibalizing the high culture from Europe, with the results that one could acquire, or could have from this devouration, and could then construct something really new out of this development” (Interview 2005). Transformative expression appropriates given data then warps or reconfigures it to new ends. Such a method certainly corresponds, or perhaps responds, to Dadaist techniques of appropriation, and also corresponds to the type of cannibalism seen in examples of digital poetry. An anthropophagic text, in which the author or authors engage with multiple languages or idioms,

devours other texts, icons, and is free to remix discrepant methods and philosophical approaches. Discovery and re-discovery of meaning is reached through the cannibalization of texts, which may then establish alternative perspectives on cultural or personal subjects taken up by authors in textual composition, re-composition, and composting. Through anthropophagy, artists are free to reshape external influences. This open acknowledgment of plurality is what makes the concept still relevant today, as an active principle for the creation of "difference."

II. Before reading computer-based works in this context, I want to pause to sketch a framework for poetry enabled by digital media, which has been called e-poetry, computer poetry, cyberpoetry, and digital poetry.⁴ Essentially these labels are used to describe the new genre of literary, visual, and sonic art launched by poets who began to experiment with computers in the late 1950s. Poets initially used computer programs by synthesizing a database and a series of instructions, in order to establish a work's content and shape. By the mid-1960s, graphical and kinetic components emerged, rendering shaped language as poems on screens and as printouts. Since then, videographic and other types of kinetic poems have been produced using digital tools and techniques. Beginning in the 1980s, hypertext (mechanically interconnected non-linear texts) developed in sync with the increasing availability of personal computers. A few other experimental forms, like audio poetry and holographic poems, emerged as media technology advanced.

The invention of the computer is certainly one of the definitive moments of the past fifty years. One of the foremost ways digital poetry is anthropophagic is because it mints a literary concept via the absorption of forms of expression and production that were foreign to digital technology. Digital poems have inherited the qualities of computer media: poets courageously embrace formidable machines, built for the progression of science and business, and these explorations have been fruitful. Assimilation of texts and language unrelated to computer operations, which results in the reinvention of both language (through programming) and computers

(through making poems with them), has, in any case, endowed digital poetry with a type of autonomy, and numerous sophisticated projects contain artistic qualities worthy of circulation and study. The anthropophagy of early computer poems generated by algorithmic equation reify modernism's inscription of tentative, nonlinear arrangements of text; use of randomized elements, as in Dada, is sometimes employed. Instead of computing equations and processing data, the computer is entrusted with creative expression, giving the machines and programs a role in the negotiation between author, reader, and language. For more than four decades, text-generating programs have been used to process and permute databases of words into poems. Mechanically consuming a text to project a new text is unquestionably anthropophagic on an aesthetic register. The analogy, in which perpetual digestion is a necessary function, corresponds to one of the profound observations on hypertext and hypermedia, upon which contemporary identities for digital poetry now operate. As Michael Joyce observes, electronic text almost always authoritatively "replaces itself" (rather than affix itself)—a defining characteristic of digital poetry (236). This dynamic invites the author to reconsider what an author is and does, enables poets to recycle composed texts within new contexts, and to alter the visual materiality of texts in inventive ways. Of course, however, a distinction can be made between a text that consumes, rather than replaces itself.

III. One way or another, many electronic poems are cannibalistic. What I want to do now is review a range of texts that portray the characteristic. In France, many works reflecting anthropophagic textual mechanics are found in the hypermedia journal *Alire*. One need not go any further than the first edition of the journal (1989) to find a piece by Jean-Marie Dutey called "Le Mange Texte" (The Text Eater). This piece is significant, like many other works in *Alire*, because in spite of its straightforward approach to design, aesthetic challenges are presented. A nine- by eight-block grid is used to present eight pairs of words at a time; the words are also built on micro-grids so as to appear to be made up of smaller blocks. The piece cycles through three different sets of texts,

which are identical each time the program is run, and ends with a bright aqua blue and pink image built using the same structure (pictographically, without language; each set of words appears in the same location on the screen). In between each set of words, the text dissolves then reforms.

Distorted pixilated effects combine with harshly contrasting colors making the words—in French and English—challenging to read. The relationship between each pair of words and between each of the lines is unclear, yet the work reasonably performs as a blunt and abstract minimalist poem; the first example seen in the piece, typical of this lot, reads: “robe what/silk type/too you/snob are/she what/drink sky/she you/see if you please” (n. pag.). In this bi-lingual, visually challenging presentation, rapid dissolution and resolution of text present the viewer with an unconventional puzzle. Dutey’s work is evidence of how authors exploited distinctly electronic characteristics to deform and reformulate language in projects that simultaneously explore and establish new modes of reading; in the last section of this piece the words are replaced by bright but indistinct symbols.

Kinetic poems in which texts consume other texts were prominent in *Alire*. Claude Maillard and Tibor Papp’s “Dressage no. 7” is glaring example of anthropophagic inflection in early digital poetry. The authors, continuing to use the same language and themes established in previous editions of *Alire*, cast familiar words and phrases amidst a wider span of new visual contexts. Alternating graphical pages, verbal pages, and pages that incorporate both propel the narrative. Works in Maillard and Papp’s “Dressage” series address the diminishing status of civil liberties in general, inscribing their views in a new media format that revives the aesthetics of an earlier era with new purpose. Contributors to *Alire* by Philippe Bootz, Patrick Burgaud, and Frédéric Develay similarly dissolve, reform, and use segments of words that have previously appeared in new constructions; text generators appearing in the journal were also overtly anthropophagic. *Alire 8* features a poetry generator by Jean-Pierre Balpe (whose work in this area extends back to 1980), “L’esprit humain;” Pedro Barbosa and Abilio Cavalheiro’s *SYNTEXT*, an anthology of programs

that appeared in that same issue, provides numerous examples of this dynamic and perspective on textuality.⁵ Poems and prose poems made by the programs include various rules, and process—through a type of virtual consumption—words from databases to create new texts.

The first experiments in computer poetry in the United States, Emmett Williams's "Music" and "The IBM Poem," as had Theo Lutz's earlier stochastic texts in Germany, clearly embody anthropophagic aesthetics. In "Music" (1965), Williams used an IBM 1070 to identify the 101 most common words from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and used them to create a series of computer poems. Williams borrows a condensed verbal framework from Dante, which is mechanically represented into lines that diminish, in relation to the number of times they appear in *Divine Comedy*, until a single word remains.⁶ In "The IBM Poem" (1966) twenty-six words are randomly chosen from a dictionary and each is associated in a list with a letter of the alphabet to form lines; the letters of words in one line are then permuted to make subsequent lines. Several other American artists, such as Jackson Mac Low, John Cage, and Charles Hartman subsequently cultivated similar electronic approaches to composition. A fascinating program that "read" and transformed a text provided by the user (who also sets various parameters), TRAVESTY, was developed in the early 1980s.⁷

Both Cage and Mac Low very ritualistically used appropriative, chance, and computational methods in their work before having access to computers. Cage experimented extensively with aleatoric process, often using the *I Ching*, a "discipline" that involved formulating a question then using coins to divine numbers that provide answers.⁸ Typically, Cage composes or identifies a source text that he uses as an "oracle," and asks it what words to use for each letter of the (vertical) structure. In lecture-poems that are collected in his volume *I-VI*, the source texts include his essay *Composition in Retrospect*, writings by Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, L.C. Beckett, Fred Hoyle, Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, Gene Youngblood, and articles that had appeared in daily newspapers.

Mac Low created *Virginia Woolf Poems* using a “diastic” method he developed in 1963, whereby a phrase (or even a word) from a text is chosen, then words in a source text that share the same verbal or letter patterns are extracted and used to create new poetic work. Later, Hartman transformed Mac Low’s arbitrary method, which itself was algorithmic and did not involve random elements, into a computer program named DIASTEXT. The program was capable of rapidly performing the artist’s deterministic tasks once an input text and “seed” phrase are chosen (Hartman 96); Mac Low was pleased with the program, and used it to compose many poems and books. Using a combination of the TRAVESTY and DIASTEXT programs, Hugh Kenner and Hartman assembled a book of poems called *Sentences* (1995) in which source text is a nineteenth-century grammar book that was run through TRAVESTY “a number of times” then underwent DIASTEXT’s “spelling through” process (96). Each piece begins with a two hundred and fifty-word text generated by TRAVESTY, followed by DIASTEXT’s manipulation of that text into poetry. Hartman’s own “Monologues of Soul and Body” feeds off of his own poems in a similar manner, creating a compelling dialog, between original and processed texts that is presented in his volume *Virtual Muse*.

It is important, although perhaps unsurprising, to note that overt clustering of anthropophagic works are found in somewhat communal environments. In France, the serious researchers whose animated works circulated in the same publication (*Alire*) shared common aesthetic ground in this regard. In the United States, several artists who were inclined to use the same (or similar) text-based computer programs also created profound cannibalistic works. I would not extend this observation by suggesting such methods are necessarily tribal, but such group formations, even if only loosely organized, have resulted in prolific output.

In recent, post-WWW years, several of the most exemplary works of digital poetry put forth by individuals not explicitly working with a particular group can be identified as anthropophagic.

Due to time and space limitations, my analysis will be limited to introducing briefly different types of anthropophagic techniques in works by three artists. The type of anthropophagy in Brian Kim Stefans's *the dreamlife of letters* is reminiscent of but not identical to permuted works introduced previously. The textual content of *the dreamlife of letters* is entirely appropriated from text by Rachel Blau DuPlessis that was part of a POETICS listserv roundtable discussion on sexuality, which are then alphabetized to make a series of "'concrete' poems based on the chance meeting of words" (n.pag.) Stefans's work, as a Flash animation, refines the aesthetic presented in earlier works: words twist upwards in spirals, spin like a propeller, stack into grids and rows, bounce, flowing in vertical columns, and blend into one another. As Janez Strehovec observes in "Text as Loop," the "meaning" of the poem is created by the "quick transitions to anti-words, derivative words, and even non-words" (n. pag.). The rearranged words become something else when put into motion, and certainly different from what they are on a page. The quick and rapid presentation of asyntactic fragments is visually interesting, and keeps a reader attentive to see how (or if) they are connected.

Rather than describe any single poem by John Cayley in detail, I will instead describe two of the explicit techniques that play significant roles in many of Cayley's titles. The first is collocation, a process which actively produces content through generative algorithms embedded within the program that shuffle language using a formula to determine word placement. Describing some of the details of the mechanics involved, Cayley writes that the, "transformation can proceed with any word in the given text, which we then may call 'the last word chosen.' Any other word—occurring at any point in the given text—which follows (collocates with) the last word chosen may then follow it and so become in turn the word last chosen" (*Moods & Conjunctions* n. pag.). In some examples of this work, one visual "level" of text appears, forming a stanza drawn word-by-word from the database. Another variation of the process, that has a startling effect, involves two levels of text being presented. These methodologies have obvious forbears in the mesostic and "diastic" work of

Cage, Mac Low, Hartman, and Williams. Cayley's approach differs from these examples, however, and are more like the animated works found in *Alire*. "Hologography," an concept invented by Cayley based on the model of holography, is metaphor Cayley uses to describe his mechanical output. According to Cayley, a hologogram is "a pattern of language produced when the words of a given text are glossed, paraphrased, etymologized, acrostically or otherwise transformed, and such transformations are allowed to interfere with the given text; a set of rule, a machine or a computer program which defines or displays such a pattern" (n. pag.). Like TRAVESTY, the work represents an ordered juxtaposition of words within a continuous string of verbal information. Instead of the angle of light impacting the projections of the work, it is the presence of another text that shapes what the viewer sees. Cayley's programs mutate before the viewer's eyes, using "given" texts and kinetic processing; his given texts sometimes incorporate his own writing, but often include borrowed material. In *Golden Lion* the base text is by Fazang, an eighth-century Chinese monk; *Moods & Conjunctions* includes a text by Ezra Pound, to give just two examples. The base texts provided become the work; they are processed but inseparable from the original. Over the past fifteen years Cayley has refined these techniques to create a plethora of work, including *Windsound*, in which letters drawn from base texts algorithmically unfurl into one another over the course of twenty minutes.

Returning to contemporary digital poetry in Brazil, Augusto de Campos's electronic *Não Poemas*, using a range of approaches, impart anthropophagic tendencies to some extent. "Cidade" synthesizes and compresses multiple languages into a single word without spaces as a way to try to capture the verbal and visual intensity of a cosmopolitan place. A multitrack soundscape of the author reading the poem presents a verbal din, and the scripting of the animation puts the poetry—as a representation of the chaotic city—into motion.⁹ Mechanical possibilities amplify the poem's original intent when Augusto feeds his poems into the computer. The poem display a type of

feedback, digesting the other in order to invent; it is composition as a regurgative, recyclical process in which subjects or other outside influences are transformed. Such works are not only poetic but critical—authors are selective and purposeful, sampling influential characters and cultures, combining sound bytes and animations to assert the relevance of work, and add their own material into the body of the poem. Different forms of influence are revealed in de Campos's poems, which tend to portray overt aesthetical appearances of cannibalistic effect even if they are not entirely anthropophagic. In "Sem-Saída" is laid out so that it presents itself then devours itself. The user drags the mouse to unveil the first line of text; in order to proceed through the piece, the viewer must visually dismantle (by erasure with the mouse) the text that has just appeared on the screen. This characteristic, text being replaced by other texts, inherent to many electronic works, is critically illustrated here. That the poem contains no more than modest ritualistic values could be easily argued, however, and thus it is necessary to recognize that varying degrees of anthropophagy emerge, dependent on content and processes involved.¹⁰

A major theme in Oswald's project of anthropophagy was to imagine changing taboo into totem. In examples shown above, and in many other titles not shown, we see that poets have rejected the idea that technology is forbidden; in fact, we have finite evidence that it is desired (and not to destructive ends). Such engagements by poets with computers are becoming legitimate avant-garde methods. As computer usage has become such a huge presence in many cultures, and its demographics have grown in general, we recognize that computer hardware and software are tools capable of presenting vibrant poetic works.

IV. Instead of embodying any sort of self-contained awareness, which Oswald denounces in the manifesto ("against all the importers of canned consciousness"), anthropophagy suggest a type of shifting, combined realization, which can be asserted, as we see above, in different ways. External material is consumed and restated as a new entity. Historically, this process of absorbing what is of

interest in foreign matter has been a technique used to combat and transcend colonialism. Beyond that objective it has pertinent cultural relevance by promoting the value of diversity and discrepancy on multiple registers. Digital works in the anthropophagic continuum reflect a range of orientations, including analog information, to make intriguing, vibrant expression.

Plenty of evidence suggests that artists are cultivating sustained, habitual methods of inquiry and composition involving the reconfiguration of original or appropriated base texts to creative ends. The anthropophagic possibility, permitting a blend of individual expression and structure along with the incorporation of outside elements, seems to contain boundless opportunity. What is important is intent. Certainly there are many poetic interpretations of the anthropophagic analogy, and other sorts of artistic engagement with the concept. Nevertheless, as did the concrete poets, digital poets approach anthropophagy in distinct and profound ways: (1) through *transcreation*, in which “original” writings are processed and re-linguaged; (2) through direct incorporation of external elements (including multiple languages, images, and symbols) in the generation of original expression; and (3), in the mechanical presentation of the work (and inventing new technological/navigational structures, appropriation of coding language). Each of these areas holds the potential to advance the poem into a realm of heterogeneity. While some of these traits are undoubtedly present in analog poetry, digital multimedia works are best able to represent anthropophagic mechanics, which, as Charles Bernstein writes, give us “a way to deal with that which is external...by eating that which is outside, ingesting it so that it becomes a part of you, it ceases to be external. By digesting, you absorb” (n. pag).

An evolving, transitory art, instigated across a century of possibility, has been sprung with intent, aesthetic polemic, and, plausibly, political depth. In the world of just globalization artists absorb, through consumption, to become another. To transform, one must be transformed. Incorporating anthropophagic conditions into progressive creative schemes is not compulsory.

Doing so, however, opens up new promise for the synthesis of discrepant cultures and expressive histories.

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NOTES

¹ Other associated essays from the same period are collected in the volume *The Anthropophagic Utopia*.

² Certainly a discussion about the manifestations of anthropophagic poems in Brazil would address works by de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and other concrete poets, as well as other historical figures in Brazil (e.g., Flavio de Carvalho) and younger artists who practice with intent today. Here I would like to thank both Lucio Agra and Marcus Salgado for bringing relevant works by historical and contemporary artists to my attention, and for our ongoing dialogues, which have substantively contributed to my discussion of this topic.

³ References to concrete poetry are far from uncommon in dialogues regarding the influence of literature on new media productions: concrete poetry has been cited as an influence on computer poems since the first two books on the subject appeared in the 1970s, Richard W. Bailey's anthology *Computer Poems* (1973) and Carole Spearin McCauley's monograph *Computers & Creativity* (1974). Bailey writes that in graphical computer poems, "concrete poetry is reflected with a computer mirror" (n. pag.). McCauley acknowledged in *Computers and Creativity* that computerized graphical poetry "resembles, or perhaps grew from... 'concrete poetry'" (115). More recent books on the subject, such as Loss Pequeño Glazier's *Digital Poetics* (2002) and Brian Kim Stefans's *Fashionable Noise* (2003), as well as essays by Friedrich Block and Roberto Simanowski, discuss the relevance of concrete poetry to the development of digital poems.

⁴ Digital poetry, as defined by the authors of a 2004 anthology titled *P0esIs: Aesthetics of Digital Poetry*, "applies to artistic projects that deal with the medial changes in language and language-based communication in computers and digital networks. Digital poetry thus refers to creative, experimental, playful and also critical language art involving programming, multimedia, animation, interactivity, and net communication" (13). The form is further identified as being derived from "installations of interactive media art," "computer- and net-based art," and "explicitly from literary traditions" (15-17). "Medial self-referencing" in digital poetry, wrote the authors of *p0esIs*, "refers to poetic interest in the 'concrete' (as defined, for instance, by concrete poetry) 'material' of the language itself" (25).

⁵ One of the programs included on *SYNTEXT* is a re-creation of one of the earliest generators, Nanni Balestrini's "TAPE MARK" (1961). Balestrini's work appropriates texts by Lao Tzu (*Tao Te Ching*), Paul Goldwin (*The Mystery of the Elevator*), and Michihito Hachiya (*Hiroshima Diary*). The program combines and constructs chains of words from these passages, but as a result of the inclusion of Hachiya's text ultimately and unavoidably portraying a scenario of nuclear disaster (albeit always through new perspectives rendered by the other two texts).

⁶ The ideogrammatic appearance that would take shape as a result of this design scheme (a downward pointing wedge) portrays more than a degree of concretist aesthetics, as represented in the shaping present in works such as Gerhard Rühm's "wan," and Williams's "do you remember?" (Williams n. pag.). Concrete poems also invert this type of shaping by placing one word in the first line and gradually layering words beneath it; also, concretists commonly atomized words themselves, so that instead of a presenting a single word on a line, a single letter or a fragment of a word is presented.

⁷ In brief, the program analyzes a text file and identifies successive patterns of letters and spaces (known as "character groups") and makes a "frequency table" for each character group in a document's source text (Hartman 55). The user is prompted to set the desired amount of output and to set the size of the pattern length up to nine characters in the original version of the program.

⁸ *I Ching*: "...the ancient Chinese oracle which uses chance operations to obtain the answer to a question" (Rettalack 153). Cage employed this method to structure poetic lectures and compose poems in the late 1960s, and later became known for his use of a unique form of poetry known as "mesostics," works he prepared for the celebration or memorializing of individuals or concepts, in which words drawn from other texts are spelled vertically by letters within the body of the poem (also derived by use of the *I Ching*).

⁹ This piece, described as an "anemogram," repurposes an earlier poem "Cidade" (1963), previously presented on an oversized, folded page in the author's collection *Vivavaia*.

¹⁰ In an email exchange regarding the ritualistic elements in concrete poetry, de Campos writes, "We viewed Anthropophagy as an anthropologic metaphor, nurtured in Freud, Nietzsche, Lévy-Burhl and Bachoffen (from whom he took the theory of ancient Matriarchy, that would have preceded Patriarchal society, associated with authoritarian monarchies and private propriety)... The brainstorming in which we three, Decio, Haroldo, were engaged, in a Poundian way ("paideuma", "the age demanded"), trying "to gather from the air a live tradition", reading in several languages as only barbarians do to arrive at the selective choice MALLARMÉ-JOYCE-POUND=CUMMINGS was surely linked to the Oswaldian cultural ANTHROPOPHAGY" (Email 2006).