

E-LITERATURE AND NEW MEDIA ART

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The key focus for the Slovenian investigator of the ELMCIP research project was directed toward conducting fundamental research focused on the following areas:

- E-literature and algorithmic culture;
- The reading of e-literary texts—introducing the concept of text as a ride, which directs one toward a more complex experience of texts, including corporeal arrangements;
- E-literature and new cultural turns—in the sense of a turn away from discourse and decontextualized information theory to the field of biopolitics, interface culture, and the body;
- E-literature and the social (including economic implications).

Through this work, as well as through the arguments of Domenico Quaranta (2011) on the new media art world, the term “e-literary world” is introduced to refer to the particular social context in which e-literature is placed. Following these arguments, it is an existential requirement that the e-literary world, like other artistic groupings, is seen to consist of appropriate institutions, festivals, journals, book series, creative platforms, critics, theoreticians, educational courses, and, perhaps most importantly, a readership. Only a small number of e-literary works have a chance of being noticed outside of this field.

The common denominator of this research was the focus on an expanded concept of e-literature, which includes the field’s interactions with new media art and digital, software, interface, DJ, VJ, and algorithmic cultures. An additional requirement was the analysis of e-literary text as an area that includes the play of verbal and nonverbal signifiers. Although it often seems that autopoiesis and self-reference have an important role in e-literature, this practice is distinctly contextualized and embedded in contemporary society, which is why the term “e-literary service” is introduced in order to define e-literature’s performative and algorithmic nature. This implies a link with the service economy of post-industrial society. In e-literature, but also in the fields of contemporary and new media

art, a number of fundamental things are happening at the intersection of different media, artistic practices, disciplines, genres, and forms (the importance of the “in-between” is also increasing). It is therefore no coincidence that the focus of the Slovenian ELMCIP seminar, in Ljubljana (September 22 and 23, 2011), was on *E-Literature and New Media Art*.

Both new media art and e-literature are linked to contemporary technologies and media: both employ algorithms, programmed media, interfaces, and connectivity. Along with e-literature, the existential criterion of a growing number of movements in new media art is to be “born digital.” Both fields are important for developing an understanding of new media literacy in the sense that they inform one’s ability to navigate and control new media content and the basic orientation of the individual in mixed and augmented realities. A number of e-literary works direct us to the question of what is happening to the letter and the word in the age of new media communications. The experimental approach associated with practice in this domain is analytical and “atomic,” focused on the medium’s constituent units.

The understanding of both fields is by no means exhausted through engagement with their technological and media foundations, i.e. with the fact that everything revolves around interfaces and software. They also deploy procedures that are directed towards inventing new algorithms and warning that high technology is not flawless. Noise, glitch, and the malfunctioning of the high-tech are things that are also of interest (e.g. Jodi’s projects in net.art). Like new media art, e-literature is also connective and contextualized. Its interfaces presuppose embodiment and encourage complex forms of reading. Social critique and feminist discourse also belong to the circle of a comprehensive understanding of e-literature, while a strong connection between e-literature and gameplay is also evident. It is precisely this movement towards gameplay, stimulated by the concepts of a number of theoreticians, from Espen Aarseth to Noah Wardrip-Fruin (*cybertext* and *textual instrument*, respectively), that is specific to e-literature, by contrast to new media art in which gameplay is not within its ontology.

The ELMCIP seminar was held in Slovenia in a context where new media art is well developed and present, particularly in the movements that presuppose

a critique of established science, connections with new technologies,¹² activism, and performance.¹³ On the other hand, this is a cultural context which coexists with highly conservative views on literature-as-we-know-it (e.g. the printed text), which national cultural policy considers as a constituent of the nation in the form of this simple syllogism:

Poets constitute Slovenian Nation
 She is a poet
She constitutes Slovenian Nation

There is probably no other country in the world where it would be easier to publish a book of poetry than in Slovenia. Authors who receive fees and annual grants for their slightly inventive pieces greatly exceed the number of readers. The state sponsors translations and printing costs for books of poetry by Slovenian poets at foreign publishing houses, arguing that this promotes the nation, even though the countries in which they are launching Slovenian authors have no greater interest in the poetry of their own local authors. A comprehensive apparatus of theory, media, and criticism is focused on printed literature. The curricula at different levels of education also include Slovenian poetry. The field of e-literature, on the other hand, is completely marginalized. Amongst these marginalized authors, two who deserve mention are Jaka Železnikar and Teo Spiller.

The only way that an interest in e-literature might be stimulated in Slovenia would be if the national, cultural, and educational policy could devote more attention to the field, which is highly unlikely since the field does not function well in terms of promoting national identity and national languages. English, as the *lingua franca* of the globalized world, is also the main language of e-literature. E-literature is not very appropriate for the glorifying of national identity, which is why only a few individuals in Slovenia are devoting themselves to its practice and theory. Likewise, it is of no interest to the media. If one inquires of editors why they are not reporting on events in this field, they would reply that they do not have any reporters who could cover such activity professionally—hence a report

12 Amongst them are aerospace technologies, presented and deployed in Cultural Centre of European Space Technologies (KSEVT) in Vitanje and postgravity art projects by Miha Turšič and Dragan Živadinov.

13 This includes the most extreme forms of body manipulation and augmentation involved in program of Gallery Kapelica, Ljubljana.

on the Ljubljana ELMCIP seminar was written for the national daily newspaper *Delo* by one of its participants.

For the Ljubljana event, which was prepared as a small conference, seventeen peer-reviewed papers by theoreticians and practitioners from eleven countries were presented. The concluding acts were the readings and performances by seven authors: John Cayley, Scott Rettberg, Philippe Bootz, Alexandra Saemmer, Simon Biggs, Talan Memmott, and Jaka Železnikar (while Maria Mencía, and Teo Spiller addressed their e-literary pieces in their papers).

The following paper presentations were given, listed in order below:

- Roberto Simanowski, “Code, Interpretation, Avant-garde”
- John Cayley, “Is there a Message in this Medium? The Materiality of Language in the [Sound and] Light of New Media”
- Alexandra Saemmer, “Reflections on the Iconicity of Digital Texts”
- Philippe Bootz, “Programmed Digital Poetry: a Poetry of the Apparatus; Media Art?”
- Beat Suter, “Big Brother Really is Watching You: Literature in Mobile Dataspace”
- Giovanna di Rosario, “Poetry Confronting Digital Media”
- Markku Eskelinen, “The Four Corners of the E-Lit world. Textual Instruments, Operational Logics, Wetware Studies and Cybertext Poetics”
- Saskia Korsten, “Reversed Remediation: A Critical Display of the Workings of Media in Art”
- Narvika Bovcon, “Literary Aspects of the New Media Art Works by Jaka Železnikar and Srečo Dragan”
- Aleš Vaupotič, “Do the Domains of Literature and New Media Art Intersect? The Cases of Sonnetoid Web Projects by Vuk Ćosić and Teo Spiller”
- Maja Murnik, “The Extensions of the Body in New Media Art”
- Bojan Anđelković, “[Techno]dispositives in Contemporary Art Practice: Fifty-year Theater Performance *Noordung* 1995-2045: by Dragan Živadinov”
- Dubravka Đurić, “Acoustic and Visual Imagination in Poetry from Neo-Avantgarde to New Media Poetry in Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Poetry”
- Janez Strehovec, “E-literature and the New Social Paradigms”
- Maria Mencía, “New Media Art Poetry: A Textural Surface”

- Patricia Gouveia, “Why Digital Games and Networks Can Help Us to Change Reality and Generate Concrete Changes in Social Environments”
- Teo Spiller, “New Media Textuality and Semiotics”

Even a fleeting glance at the papers presented reveals that they covered a very broad field which, in addition to e-literary theory, also included video games, the phenomenology of the body in performance art, historical examples of experimental writing in the former Yugoslavia, new social paradigms, and the theories of new media art. This was connected with the theme of the conference, which tried to reflect the expanded concept of textuality today in connection with new cultural turns. Four of the papers presented at the conference engaged new media art: those of Maja Murnik, Beat Suter, Saskia Korsten, and Bojan Anđelković. These papers were subsequently published in the Slovenian journals *Maska* and *Dialogi*.¹⁴ A selection of a further six papers was published in the special section of academic journal *Primerjalna književnost* 36.1 (2013), with Slovenian authors published in Slovenian and the texts by foreign theoreticians in English. As the section editor, the author of this report also prepared an introduction for that publication, which was published in both languages.

What were the main points amongst the seminar’s papers that stimulated the most intensive discussion and comments with the audience? Roberto Simanowski’s paper discussed the issue of text and narratives in transmedial installations with respect to the installation work *Listening Post* by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin (which transforms incoming streams of text data from chat room conversations into an audiovisual sculpture) as well as *Bit.Falls* by Julius Popp (which deploys water as a carrier of cultural information that is only perceptible for a split second and then disappears again). Simanowski addressed the projects’ perception and raised the following questions: to what extent do visitors of *Listening Post* and *Bit.Falls* become readers and coauthors of the text snippets? To what extent do these installations, by dissolving text into a sonic and visual event, change from reading to watching, from linguistic to visual art, and thus signify the “cannibalization” of language and the shift to voyeurism and sensation? To what extent are these presentations of Internet data reflections of contemporary society

14 Anđelković’s paper was published in *Maska* 26 (2011): 143-144. Murnik’s paper will be published in *Dialogi* 49 (2013): 3-4. Korsten’s and Suter’s papers will be published in *Maska*, 28 (2013): 155-156.

and culture and responses to the coexistence of conflicting concepts, discourses, and cultures as characteristic of (post)modern life?

John Cayley's basic argument was that language must be embodied, and thus its particular medium is—literally, ontologically—the matter, the flesh, the materiality of any message that it articulates. The media signify, meaning that the matter in which the message is embodied also traces differences that were already what we have come to call “writing” in a poststructuralist, Derridean sense: that of grammatological practices. Cayley has argued that the message of the medium literally consumes the materiality of language: its own body, flesh of its flesh. But this cannibalism would only be literal—and thus taboo and truly terrifying—if McLuhan's copula were ontological. The consequences of recognizing that messages are only ever media, that they cannot otherwise be—cannot matter or be—have therefore not been sufficiently addressed.

The materiality of language was also addressed by Alexandra Saemmer, who raised the question of the iconicity of the linguistic sign in digital texts. The starting point of her paper was that, in digital technology, a text is primarily characterized by its animation and “manipulability,” and it is therefore commonplace to observe that the digital text has become an *image*. She argued that we should take a closer look at the specificities of animated and “manipulable” texts and consider them instead as “pluricode couplings,” which involve two or more semiotic systems within the same stimulus. Her paper discussed such couplings between linguistic text and movement in the first part and between linguistic text and manipulation gestures in the second part.

This semiotic approach was distinctive in Philippe Bootz's paper, which questioned whether programmed digital poetry can be understood as media poetry in terms of Eduardo Kac's practice and theory, which broadens the digital textual poetry to video poetry, holo-poetry, bio-poetry, and programmed digital poetry. Bootz referred to the two communicational definitions of media: media as a vehicle for communication and media as a semiotic vector. He demonstrated that the former understanding of media is unable to account for the specificity of each poetic modality and that accounting for their techno-textual features is required. Bootz also drew upon his piece *Passage*, which requires both narrow reading and meta-reading in order to apprehend the full representation.

E-literature in mobile data space was discussed in Beat Suter's paper, which dealt with e-literary projects that are read by employing mobile devices.

Rather than drawing upon the trendy use of literature for mobile devices, such as e-books and cell phone novels, this paper referred to literary projects, such as *Wardive*, that experiment with urban locales, mobile data, and new technologies to produce locative and adaptive literature. Employing the Global Positioning System (GPS), along with mobile and WiFi networks, new interactive experiences of the urban environment can emerge. The environment can thus be perceived as a data space that provides new material for literary and artistic experiments. Through these means, real space is accurately measured and rendered tangible as data space, enabling artists to work with locative adaptive media.

Giovanna di Rosario argued that e-poetry encompasses a wide range of different works, proposing that e-poetry is far more than just one creative form. On the other hand, the interest of e-poetry seems to reside in the diversity that e-poetry can offer to its reader. This claim of diversity was at play in her paper, which dealt with close-reading works by three authors of e-poetry.

Markku Eskelinen considered e-literature as a field in question—even as a flat world infested with wild rumors, speculations, and warnings concerning the dangers of going too far in directions where e-literature as we know it may ultimately turn into something completely different, threatening the validity of our current conceptualizations. Using, and eventually abandoning, this metaphor, Eskelinen proposed a quick review of the four corners of this world as typified by the transformative powers of cybertext poetics, wetware studies, operational logics, and textual instruments. From this perspective, e-literature looks very much like any other literature threatened by new media and other arts, the social and physical sciences, gaming and play, and, last but not least, stagnation (geritextuality).

Saskia Korsten discussed reversed remediation as a counter-mechanism to Bolter's and Grusin's remediation (defined as a historical desire for immediacy). Following McLuhan's fear of the narcotic state, which the user of a medium can enter when becoming a closed system with the medium, reversed remediation offers a chance to wake up the viewer. It creates a state of critical awareness about how media shape one's perception of the world. Reversed remediation works counter to remediation mechanisms in the sense that it makes the media visible instead of transparent. It makes critical awareness possible because it lays bare the workings of media instead of obfuscating them. It goes beyond the reflectivity proposed by Bolter and Gromala by not reflecting on the medium from the outside but rather

reflecting from within the medium, in order to improve its formal workings without critically examining its effect on the way one perceives the world.

While Narvika Bovcon's and Aleš Vaupotič's papers analyzed the contributions of Slovenian authors to the field of e-literature and the textuality shaped by new media art projects, two other Slovenian theoreticians, Maja Murnik and Bojan Andjelković, discussed some examples of Slovenian new media art (such as projects by Janez Janša and Dragan Živadinov) that broaden the limits of recent media art toward techno-shaped performance and "postgravity art."¹⁵

Last but not least, the seminar enabled, for the first time, an intensive meeting and gathering of all the Slovenian participants in the field. As a result, knowledge of the field will be augmented through publications in the previously mentioned journals.

What was the common denominator of the papers presented at the Ljubljana seminar? This is by no means a simple question to answer. E-literature is an experimental field in the making, as is the case for new media art, and knowledge of its movements, tendencies, and paradigms is important in defining the horizons of the field. In new media art, e-literature's social (and political) implications are even more radicalized. It is hard to imagine e-literature questioning the ontological structure of its field as radically as certain movements in new media art, which demand the total abandonment of artistic function and value as we know it in favor of utility—even as an intervention in life itself. Such a direction is demonstrated by the practice of so-called device art and, in particular, by a project as radical as the "Transborder Immigrant Tool," created by the Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 (EDT; 2007-2008), which aims at re-appropriating widely available technologies to be used as a form of humanitarian aid. This "tool" consists of an inexpensive GPS cell phone and custom software. The software directs the user of the phone toward the nearest aid site, be that water, first aid, or law enforcement, along with other contextual navigational information. This is accomplished by a Java-based application, written by Brett Stalbaum, which accesses the phone's ability to receive GPS information without needing to send out data that might allow the user to be located or for network connectivity. The "Transbor-

15 In "Postgravity Art," Živadinov defined postgravity art as all art created in zero gravity conditions. These new living conditions will create systems that we are not yet aware of. Postgravity art is not a stylistic formation and does not intend to become that either. <<http://elmcip.net/sites/default/files/attachments/criticalwriting/31079708-50-topics.pdf>>.

der Immigrant Tool” can be seen as part of a larger shift from tactical media to tactical bio-politics. The EDT seeks to engage the political potential opened up by technologies which can serve to improve people’s lives directly, including medical technologies and systems such as GPS.

On the contrary, e-literature, in its extreme forms, primarily revolutionizes language itself, redefining narrative, establishing a laboratory for the experiencing of the letter and the word under new media conditions (e.g. the practice of e-poetry generators and John Cayley’s “writing to be found” with Google). E-literature also challenges reading by focusing on arrangements of words in a mode of illegibility (e.g. Jim Rosenberg’s *Diagrams* series). However, with regard to experiencing new forms of social engagement, it is less radical than new media art. An example of a piece that expands the area of e-literature to the field of mobile and locative media is René Bauer’s and Beat Suter’s “AndOrDada” (2008), which is based on an Android application for mobile phones, prepared with the intention of generating text depending on the user’s passing through locations. The application produces text-under-transformation, depending on the user’s path (walking, driving), when the input captured by wide local area network communications at a certain location influences the flow of the text and modifies it. In short, this project expands the area of e-literature by opening itself up to direct influences from the environment. However, it does not appear to question the field itself, in relation to the extra-textual and extra-artistic realities, as radically as the EDT project.

Nevertheless, what lay behind the discussions at the Ljubljana seminar was the finding that e-literary content is becoming increasingly contextualized, performative, and embodied. This suggests that matters of significant import are taking place in a field that is abandoning the classic cyberpunk and post-human perspective. This perspective is founded on the Cartesianism and Cyberplatonism that can be found (in the case of literary cyberpunk) in novels such as Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1986) and (in the case of several theories on the posthuman) in the viewpoint that the posthuman condition blurs the border between embodiment and the cybernetic, between the biological and simulation. Such notions that are beyond the findings of contemporary humanities and social sciences as well as the practice of today’s performance art are based on classical information theory, in that the specificity of information is determined by message length, complexity, and signal integrity. By contrast, issues

concerning the material and bodily contexts in which the information is embedded are pushed aside as unimportant.

New media art is most certainly a field that assists in the understanding of some novel directions in e-literature, particularly those that are expanding the area of hypertext to new areas of textuality, shaped by new media. A discussion of the fundamental paradigms of new media art suggests that we are functioning as contemporaries of tendencies and movements that are leading towards alternative politics, activism, hacktivism, and, potentially, the alternative organization of life in terms of current theoretical paradigm shifts. Rather than through events of the autopoietic systems of contemporary art, changes in this field are influenced by science, new technologies, new concepts of politics, and activism. In addition to the “Transborder Immigrant Tool,” two historical examples of new media art are of interest: the Slovenian artist Marko Peljhan’s “Makrolab” (first presented to the public at Documenta X [1997]) and the Critical Art Ensemble’s project “Free Range Grain” (2003-2004).

Marko Peljhan’s “Makrolab” (1997) is arranged as a laboratory, based on the model of the Russian MIR space-station, in order to tap communication data streams emanating from police radio and satellite telephones. This arouses in equal measure the suspicion of official bodies and the curiosity of professional surveillance institutions. Peljhan worked on the “Makrolab” as a project that focuses on telecommunications, migrations, and weather systems research at the intersection of art and science, from 1997 to 2007. “Makrolab” is also a creative artistic platform that enables other artists and activists to develop their projects with it, presupposing the role of the artist as the one who prepares only a creative platform, scheme, or instrument. Critical Art Ensemble’s (CAE) project “Free Range Grain” (2003-2004) was created as a live, performative action that used basic molecular biology techniques to test for genetically modified food available in the global food trade. CAE, in collaboration with Beatriz da Costa and Shyh-shiun Shyu, constructed a portable, public laboratory to test foods that others deemed suspicious of “contamination” due to genetic modification. Members of the audience were invited to bring to the gallery pieces of food that they found suspect, for whatever reason, and the artists tested them over a seventy-two hour period to see if their suspicions were justified. The point of this project was that science should not be left only to scientists, and that by using an artistic apparatus and artistic non-profit approach, it is possible to establish a framework for more

responsible research. This is similar to the intention of the “Transborder Immigrant Tool,” since both devices were developed in an artistic context and could perform a role that seeks to intervene in politics and national institutions that are protecting the integrity of the individual.

In the field of new media art, we are also contemporaries of a number of practices that are critical of broader social issues and of contemporary technological advances. An important direction here is the demonstration of the malfunctioning of the high-tech. Such a direction, in terms of broader social criticism, is much less noticeable in the case of e-literature. A more important role, in this context, is held only by feminist hypertext (e.g. Shelley Jackson) and a few rare pieces that deal with a critique of high-tech advances (especially of their promises) and with their malfunctioning (e.g. Eugenio Tisselli’s “Degenerative” [2005]).

In conclusion, let us establish a few findings that are essential for both fields:

- New media art and e-literature are connected by smart technologies, new media, and new areas of presentation (beyond the gallery’s white cube and the printed book—for example, in clubs and festivals) as well as new dissemination possibilities (the web, mobile media, etc.).
- Both place research value in the foreground (and not that of the cult, aesthetic, or exhibition); e-literature focuses on the fate of the letter, word, and narrative in the age of new media.
- Both new media and e-literature fields are closely associated with theory, where the participation between creators and theoreticians is essential; a good statement, which an author attaches to a project, is “*conditio sine qua non*” for successfully addressing an audience. Consequently, one of the conditions for the creators is that they are familiar with the theoretical paradigms that define their fields. In both fields, festivals and conferences alike are platforms at which theoreticians and creators (artists, e-writers) meet.
- Even in a quantitative sense, the surplus of theory over artistic and, especially, e-literary production is not a negative and disruptive affair. E-literature as practice is one thing, while the theory of it is another. Theory creates its own subject of knowledge, which is not identical to the “artistic/literary object.” Precisely due to this pioneering character, a reference to e-literary and new media works of art is ap-

appropriate in various theoretical discussions of new media and the individual's experience in an augmented reality.

- Both fields are focused on performances and services rather than on finished works. Their user is directed to a problem-solving and goal-oriented activity; he/she can also interfere with e-literary projects, defined as processes, in real time. Thus, both fields belong to the broader context of algorithmic culture.
- Essential for production in both fields are artistic and e-literary platforms and cooperation based on networking. The concept of the artist as genius has definitely been surpassed. Furthermore, in this field, the criterion of national literature functions only to a limited extent. Particularly, in the case of projects with collective authorship, one can come across coauthors from different countries. English as the *lingua franca* of the globalized world has a prevailing role in e-literature; only in countries with a rich e-literature tradition (e.g. Brazil and France) do national languages hold a significant role.
- Projects of new media art and e-literature are also useful for educating people about new media (digital) literacy as they expand the knowledge of the media and its behavior beyond the routine of everyday practices.
- A significant role in the reception, perception, and familiarization of these works is given to the hybrid viewer-reader-listener as the user, associated with the ontological structure of these projects and performances, which often have the nature of schematic structures (e.g. the textual instrument in e-literature) that invite users (or other artists) to their individualized concretizations. The most competent users (in the case of e-literature, also readers) are experts (including programmers) and authors who have a certain surplus of knowledge in comparison with traditional artistic and literary audiences.
- Characteristic of both fields is a great uncertainty, or instantaneousness, resulting from the difficulty of their definition and subsequent weak institutionalization. Each project blurs the boundaries of an individual field, and authors are required to invent new genres and redefine the boundaries of their fields.
- Neither field has developed critique in the form that we are familiar with in conventional literature and art. Critique, as in the case of

printed literature, is replaced by precise descriptions and presentations of individual works or by these projects appearing as the subject of a broader theoretical analysis that is focused on the conceptualization of certain paradigms. It seems as though less important and unsuccessful works are being ignored, while the important ones (those that invent their own genre) deserve wider attention. Particularly, in the e-literary field, greater critique should be given to works that burn out in a spectacle, exaggerate the use of special effects, and deploy a highly abstract and *McDonaldized* concept of language.

The Slovenian example of a highly conservative policy, founded on traditionalist views of the role of literature as a tool of national promotion, has already been mentioned. Let us now stress that we see a promising task for European cultural policy and the policy in the field of national education in facilitating a dialogue between the fields of new media art and e-literature and in promoting the institutionalization of theory and education in both fields. It is of special importance that literary studies be complemented with e-literary study and that e-literary criticism be included in education as new media literacy, since these projects demonstrate especially well the fate of language, text, and reading under contemporary new media conditions. Furthermore, it is important to educate and stimulate an emerging audience that is approaching this field as the geeks of digital, software, DJ, and VJ cultures, to make contact with contemporary creativity through e-literature projects.

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