

From: Johannah Rodgers

To: Joseph Tabbi

Re: ELO Conference, Porto, Portugal July 19 - July 22, 2017

Dear Joe,

It was colder in Porto than I expected, and the city was much more hilly than I had imagined it to be. Having packed North American summer-wear and mostly sandals, I was unprepared for the 60 degree nights, some light rain, and the city's many steep cobbled streets. Overall, it was actually somewhat shocking to get to Portugal and realize how little I knew about the country, which was all the more reason that it was so delightful to have the ELO conference there and to have the chance to learn more about the place. While my travel-related wardrobe issues may seem far removed from the concerns of the ELO17 conference, the fact that even with the abundance of information at my fingertips regarding the geographical location, climate, and urban topography of Porto, I could be so woefully (or, perhaps, more accurately, willfully) ignorant of the actual conditions very much relates to one consistent thread of the conference, namely the exploration of the relationships amongst humans and human-made devices and systems, the unique affordances and capabilities of both, and the space(s), at times figured as distances and, at others, as, simply, differences, existing between the two.

To get a sense of what happened at the conference, one can, of course, [look at the program](#), [read the abstracts and catalog from the conference](#), and [possibly watch some of the performances via digital recordings](#). But that is not to have had an experience of being there for and as yourself. Likewise, I cannot offer that. But, I can offer some observations from my experience of being there. These are paltry but hopefully pithy enough to invite some responses and analyses from others who were also there. At what increasingly feels like a very "late date" in the history of just about everything, the limits of human verbal communication, or that which is most often referred to as writing, may be becoming all too clear. If Southey had owned a digital "camera," would he have needed to write his ["Letters Written During a Short Residence in Spain and Portugal"](#)? But all cheap jokes at Mr. Southey's expense aside (and please note that while I am all too aware of their low cost, they still, always, make me laugh), thanks for taking the time to look at what follows.

Some Reports from the Keynotes

Day 1

The first day's keynote was presented by Friedrich Block and was entitled "Electronic Literature as Paratextual Construction." While hardly a new topic in discussions of electronic literature--Patricia Tomaszek has been [exploring the roles and functions of paratexts in electronic literature](#) for years--Block's take on the topic was novel because of the scope of his discussion. Thinking about the roles and functions of paratexts in relation to elit in a broader

institutional and cultural context, Block presented a finding that I would hear echoed throughout the days ahead: elit is now part of mainstream academic discourse. Block illustrated this by pointing to the increasingly canonized 20th century precedents for what is now referred to as elit, thereby laying out a history for elit works, and by highlighting various published statements made about elit, particularly those by N. Katherine Hayles in her 2007 [“Electronic Literature: What Is It?”](#) essay and Joseph Tabbi in his [“Manifesto”](#) for the Consortium on Electronic Literature (CELL) project. Reminding us that “the meaning of the object depends on the object of its meaning” and that “complex communication requires institutionalization, flexibility, and destabilization,” Block, drawing on the systems and communications theories of Niklas Luhmann and many other theorists, stressed the importance of naming to ecologies and economies of understanding and the many factors contributing to the construction of definitions.

Day 2

Eugenio Tisselli, “The Heaviness of Light” “Electronic Literature feeds intensively on last century’s avant-garde, which claimed art’s autonomy from other realms of human activity. However, in this talk, I will argue that it is no longer feasible nor desirable to understand art and literature as self-sufficient spheres of praxis, as ends in themselves. It is rather necessary to think about electronic literature differently, in composition with the world, and to do so I will propose a map of potentialities in which I will identify two of the many possible paths: containment and pharmacological thought.”

Day 3

Rita Raley, “Machine Writing: Translation, Generation, Automation” “Algorithmically generated content is now pervasive in our media environments: how do we know who or what is writing, and does it matter? What new aesthetic, philosophical, and political questions are raised by the many emergent forms of machine writing? How are writers and artists exploiting machine writing, and for what purposes? This presentation will highlight some of the generative works in the third volume of the Electronic Literature Collection, along with some of the works produced for the National Novel Generation Month (NaNoGenMo). It will then open up into questions of authorship and property, labor, the status and function of the “human,” and the contemporary techno-linguistic condition.”

Day 4

Matthew Kirschenbaum, “ELO and the Electric Light Orchestra: Lessons for Electronic Literature from Prog Rock” “Presupposing a more than casual affinity between the Electronic Literature Organization and its seventies supergroup namesake...the talk will mainly seek to draw out the “everyday” of electronic literature in the sense of the rich variety of writing on screens not typically acknowledged as literary - unsurprising applications including word processing, blogging, and texting. At stake is not only the work of the elit label in the academy - where we

knowingly leverage certain avant garde, progressive associations to claim legitimacy - but also the elusive popular reception and recognition of the literature this community creates.”

What I Remember:

Johanna Drucker’s discussion of “textual operations”; Manuel Portela’s comment that written messages can be defined as “external cognizers”; Rayley’s response to the question, “what is to be done” in the face of the increasing automation of reading and writing practices, as an urging to make visible the “entanglement of the human and the machine”; Bruno Mnistro’s talk about photocopiers and photocopy art, particularly his reference to the “The Copy Gallery” in NYC in 1987 and the image he projected of the “Dancing on the Photocopier” work by an artist whose name I do not have in my notes. The way in which Elizabeth Losh began her talk with [“Recursion”](#) (NOTE 1); The concept of “second-hand machine learning,” which I heard about during the Brown/Losh/Douglass panel on machine learning; wanting to learn more about Cayley and Howe’s re-designed [Reader’s Project](#); several interesting conversations that I participated in about how to define the term “reading”; my friend Robert Kalman’s comments related to his work (not presented at the conference) on interfaces; an impromptu reading during the lunch-hour from various participants involved in Rob Wittig and Mark Marino’s ongoing [“Monstrous Weather” project](#); talking to and joking around with Andrew Klobucar about possibilities for curating future academic conferences and how at “our” conference participants would all be forced to stay in the same room together for the entire duration of the conference and possibly be forced to come to some kind of agreement about something by the end of the conference. Deciding after I left the conference that the only art work I would make moving forward would be 100% degradable since there is clearly already too much stuff in the world already.

Note 1: [“Recursion”](#) is a 2016 performance work created by Sascha Pohflepp and performed by Erika Ostrander. In this work Ostrander reads “A text created by a custom built artificial intelligence system given a wide variety of texts” to learn from. The generated text must begin with the word “human,” but then mashes up lines from the other texts it has “ingested,” including those by [various philosophers, psychologists, pop-culture icons, and scientists](#). Not knowing what text Ostrander was reading from or anything about the project, I guessed, based on the content, that she must be reading a page from Lacan!

Appendix

Some Reports From Day 1 Panels

A panel on the topic of “textual machines” and dedicated to an exploration of relationships between digital and print texts followed Block’s talk. Joanna Drucker presented a talk centered

around a book [Amusements Philologiques](#) by G. P. Philomneste (second edition, 1842) in which she introduced the concept of textual operations. Oscar Schwartz presented on the topic of Romantic computational poetics, discussing “the Aeolian harp, a computational wind instrument that translates natural forces (wind) into aesthetic output (music)” as “a central metaphor in the poetics Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley.” Johannah Rodgers presented a talk on a 1677 publication entitled [Artificial Versifying](#) by John Peter, arguing that relationships between verbal language production and machine processing can be traced to the early 17th c. Andy Simionato and Karen Ann Donnachie presented on their project www.athrowofthedicewillneverabolishchance.com and its relationships to other remediations of Stephen Mallarme’s [original work](#). Agnieszka Przybyszewska presented on Milorad Pavic’s print publications and “paper book as a device for non-linear writing.”

I next caught the tail end of the panel dedicated to the topic of interdisciplinarity, but which I understood to be about performance art and/as elit with a focus on water as “elemental media.” This was followed by a panel dedicated to the topic of machine learning, machine writing, and machine reading. James Brown presented on the the importance of performativity in code studies and the opacity of computational processes,” arguing that “we should treat machine learning systems as black boxes and that we are best served not by examining code but rather by providing training data, examining the results, and keeping in mind that the relationship between input and output may not be entirely understandable.” Elizabeth Losh began her talk with “[Recursion.](#)” a 2016 performance work created by Sascha Pohflepp and performed by Erika Ostrander. In this work Ostrander reads “A text created by a custom artificial intelligence system given a wide variety of texts” to learn from. The generated text must begin with the word “human,” but then mashes up lines from the other texts is has “ingested,” including those by [various philosophers, psychologists, pop-culture icons, and scientists](#). Not knowing what text Ostrander was reading from or anything about the project, I guessed, based on the content, that she must be reading a page from Lacan! Needless to say, I was quite surprised to find out that a machine had authored the text being read and I left thinking that this two minute performance piece would be a very appropriate way to start every academic conference. Jeremy Douglass, who was unable to attend the conference for health reasons, presented his paper on “Art in the Age of Mechanical Recommendation” remotely, asking “what aesthetic effects are possible with machine learning that were not possible before it?” Probing the question, “what is the system learning about you as you are educating the system,” Douglass suggested that John Cayley’s project [The Listeners](#) can be read as an allegory of machine learning systems.