

# Letters Moving in Space, at Play

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A recently opened exhibition at the Hordaland Kunstsenter in Bergen features a series of short films produced by the artist Len Lye between 1935 and 1979. Curated by HC Gilje and Anne Szefer Karlse, the exhibit presents the films in a random order, shown on three different-sized screens in different parts of the room. The films are experimental, each featuring a different interaction of motion, color, letters, words, music, filtering effects, collaged imagery, and effects particular to the physical media Lye was working with, such as scratches made directly onto the celluloid film. What is remarkable about such films as *Trade Tattoo* (1937) is not that their effects seem strange or dissimilar to contemporary audiences, but rather that they seem so familiar. I had to check the exhibition program twice as I was watching the films, sure that I must be watching a contemporary video, extensively processed on the computer. A number of Lye's films looked as if they might have been produced last year. But the layering, filters, and kinetic text effects were all produced by Lye in 1930s, using analogue processes.

The Lye exhibition was a reminder to me that one of the recent trends in electronic literature, towards the production of works that feature letters moving in space, often synchronized to a musical soundtrack, is not precisely a novel phenomena, but something that writers and artists have been experimenting with to some degree since the dawn of moving image technology.

Poets have never been particularly locked into a paradigm of typographic uniformity. Although William Blake's poetry is often reproduced in contemporary anthologies without illustrations, the poems themselves were originally published by poet in lush illuminated editions, in which the typography on the page interacts visually and thematically with the illustrations and decorations. It could be argued that reading the words outside of that visual context is a disservice to the work -- the poems as Blake produced them were visual and textual. The images and typography were part of the poem, not separate from it.

In his *Un coup de dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance) (1897) Stéphane Mallarmé used varied typography, white space, and even the folds of the book itself to enable the reader to associate and recombine different associations among the fragments of the text. The work is often cited as an antecedent to hypertext, as the relation between the fragments is not clearly dictated by the author but primarily constructed by the reader.

The early 20th Century Futurist poet F.T. Marienetti used the space of the printed page to create a sense of speed and motion, and to foreground "parole in libertà" (word autonomy):

abandoning meter and line to focus on juxtapositions of single words or letters with each other in the typographic space of the page. This movement toward a focus on the impact of singular words and letters is a recurring motif in contemporary digital poetry.

The various twentieth century avant-gardes built upon the work of the symbolists and futurists and developed traditions in visual poetry, sound poetry, and video poetry, engaging in process of continual re-conceptualization of the relationship between lines, words, letters, space, motion, and semantics. The addition of the personal computer and global network to the toolbox of poets interested in this form of textual materiality is not essentially new, but rather the continuation of a process rooted in the earlier avant-garde. It might in fact mark the point at which these forms have ceased to be avant-garde, as moving letters, inventive typography, integrated imagery, and even nonlinearity are common aspects of everyday textuality in contemporary media ranging from television to the Web. The same motion graphic techniques used to create a digital poem might be used for instance to sell an automobile or advertise a restaurant's menu. While Mallarmé or Marinetti's approaches to poetry may have shocked the audiences of their day, contemporary digital poets are largely simply accessing a contemporary vernacular. Given the comparative ease of achieving multimedia effects on contemporary computers, it is no surprise that many poets are integrating visual imagery, motion graphics, sound, and computation-driven effects to their quivers.

A very active thread of practice among poets producing work for the digital media, kinetic poetry is particularly well represented in the Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 2, which presents readers with a wide variety of approaches to moving letters.

Peter Cho's "Wordscapes" and "Letterscapes" are two sets of 26 pieces each, which the author describes as "typographic landscapes." In "Wordscapes," we select a letter of the alphabet circled in the space of the screen before us. Each letter connects to a short sketch based on a word beginning with the letter we select. The sketches are interactive in that as we move the cursor, the word forms react to our touch. The interaction of each piece is based on a playful interpretation of the word selected: As we move the cursor we sail through the sky with "Aloft", as we navigate "Vanish" the letters hide and fade before our eyes, "Worry" presents us with pulsing lines reminiscent of *Vertigo*, and "Xenophobia" tries to avoid our icon at all costs. The companion work "Letterscapes" is similar but even more granular. Letters here are encountered as entities in their own right, but our interactions with the letterforms break them out of their usual composition -- they fracture into three-dimensional objects of diverse geometries. Both pieces are gems of clever design and typographic wit, produced in the open source platform Processing.

Elegant in its simplicity, "Ah" by K Michel and Dirk Vis that ambles through time, Einstein, and the way that idle moments of wandering thought might bring about certain types of epiphany. For the most part, we encounter the text as a single line, scrolling rapidly to the left off our screen and out of our field of vision. As the words move across the screen, they cross over and occlude one another. Periodically however the line will break and "ahs" "ohs

"lalas" and other ambiguous expressions of the thought process will break out of the line and float in arcs across a wider visual field. While the line strings together lucid pondering on physics and the psychology of closure, what it does most effectively is demonstrate how words moving silently through space can non-verbally effectuate the rhythms, flow, and stuttering of the human thought process. Subtitled "shower song" the poem is a visual representation of thoughts wending their way through the reader's brain.

Oni Buchanan's "The Mandrake Vehicles" could be described both as visual poetry and as an example of recombinant poetics. Each of the three installations begins with page of text about the mandrake plant, a botanical species rich in mythical, magical, and homeopathic associations. Portions of the text for instance describe the shriek of the mandrake plant as it is pulled from the ground. Moving through the seven stages of each installation, the poet first destroys the original text, as letters zoom off into oblivion or fall off to the bottom of the screen, forming new words there. The remaining letters then pull together, forming the lines of a new poem, before the process repeats itself, eventually forming a third text, a poem composed of very short lines. The poet describes each of the three pieces in the series as "vehicles" —an apt summation not only of the movement of the text on the screen but also the fact that as we move through the successive stages of each piece, we move through different poems, each composed from subsets of the words from the same original page. In a way the whole process seems to emulate the process of composing poetry itself. The poems begin with a large space of prose, and winnow themselves down to minimalist expressions.

"The Sweet Old Etcetera," designed by Allison Clifford is a beautiful piece based on the poetry of e.e. cummings, a poet known for his sense of play and formal invention. Clifford pulls the text of a numbers of cummings's poems into the work. As the reader selects different links within the work, the sound of a guitar strum is heard, and new lines are added to the visual landscape of the work. As we progress through the poem, some of these lines build themselves into a tree; others (from a poem about a grasshopper) literally hop across the screen. The work both immerses the reader in the playful genius of cummings's poems at the same time as it builds a visual and verbal instrument for its reader to play with as a hilly horizon of words and musical asterisks presents itself for our enjoyment. This is a toy both to think and play with.

When poetry, interaction, typography, design, and computation meet, amazing and delightful things can happen. The examples I've cited here are just a few among a significant group of kinetic poems in the Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 2. Each takes a different angle of approach to the possibilities and limitations of letters moving through the space of the interactive screen. And still I sense that we are just scratching the surface(s) of new poetics that are emerging in tandem with new technologies.

## Works Mentioned

“Wordscapes and Letterscapes” by Peter Cho

[http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/cho\\_letterscapes\\_and\\_wordscapes.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/cho_letterscapes_and_wordscapes.html)

“Ah” by K Michel and Dirk Vis

[http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/michel\\_ah.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/michel_ah.html)

“The Mandrake Vehicles” by Oni Buchanan

[http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/buchanan\\_mandrake\\_vehicles.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/buchanan_mandrake_vehicles.html)

“The Sweet Old Etcetera” by Allison Cliffords

[http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/clifford\\_the\\_sweet\\_old\\_etcetera.html](http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/clifford_the_sweet_old_etcetera.html)