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'Grasp All, Lose All': Raising Awareness Through Loss of Grasp in Seemingly Functional Interfaces

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From baroque proto-cybertexts to countercultural gestures by historical avant-gardes, there is a longstanding tradition of disruptive strategies used by artists at the interstices of societies' demands for order, control, and functionalism. For the avant-gardes and their multiple artistic inf(lection)s, radical changes to the way sensory perception had come to be depicted since Modernism became a central part of their strategy. By placing an emphasis on the confluence between various arts and media, the innovative character of their proposals had much to do with the ways in which they were able to embrace notions that represented modernity, including concepts such as simultaneity, dynamics, motion, and the symbiosis between human and machine. In this manner, they sought to induce estrangement and defamiliarization by using seemingly functional mechanisms to raise awareness through the loss of grasp.

Drawing on this idea of raising awareness through what appear to be functional mechanisms, I argue that non-functional/dysfunctional digital interfaces that are part of contemporary artworks that deal with digitally based haptic reading processes (expressly, digital literature) are largely influenced by early avant-garde artistic proposals. Thus, through its metamedial aesthetic and poetic critique of digital media, digital literature reinvents inherited strategies of subversion and disruption previously explored by Modernism, drawing attention to artworks' processes of signification and affect. As a variation of a rich heritage of experimentation with seemingly functional mechanisms in the arts, such strategies reenact age-old tensions between tradition and innovation while laying the foundation for (re)new(ed) ways of reading and writing in digital multimodal environments.



Naturally, functionalism not only denies human consciousness its right to emancipation; it also denies the meaning of such emancipation from norms and compulsions, for emancipation leads, according to functionalism, directly into nothingness, into an empty individualism, an amorphous chaos, and the loss of structure in society.

Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*

Modernism is a history of infections: by political movements; by mass culture and consumerism; and now by the Internet, information technology, and interactivity. The openness to exteriority and its infections is an essential characteristic of the modernist inheritance, and that inheritance is the will to reveal the Other within oneself, to become Other, to become infected by Otherness.

Boris Groys, *In the Flow*

Grasp – A practice of the hand associated with knowledge in gathering, tool use and the communication of emotion. Also the successful psychological effort to understand.

Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*

Infections/Inflections

In his 2016 book, *In the Flow*, Boris Groys expands on Kazimir Malevich's idea of the presence of infection amongst several art styles such as Cubism and Suprematism. By comparing Suprematism's characteristic straight lines to the rectilinear organic form of the bacillus responsible for tuberculosis, the latter being capable of modifying its own structure, Groys informs us how Malevich was able to describe the ways in which 'novel visual elements introduced into the world by new technical and social developments modify the sensibility and nervous system of the artist' (Groys, 2016). However, by applying the trope of biological evolution to artists and the teaching of the arts, Malevich subverts the logic of immunization inherent to the metaphor. In this manner, instead of incorporating 'new aesthetic bacilli, to survive them and find a new inner balance, a new definition of health', artists 'should not immunize themselves against these bacilli, but on the contrary accept them and let them to destroy the old, traditional art patterns' (2016). Consequently, according to Groys' reading of Malevich:

The body of the artist may die, but the bacilli survive that death—and begin to infect the bodies of other artists. That is why Malevich actually believes in the transhistorical character of art. Art is material and materialist. And that means that art can always survive the end of all the purely idealist, metaphysical projects—whether Kingdom of God or Communism. (2016)

Kazimir Malevich's avant-garde idea of hijacking the whole logic of the immune system and applying it to the arts (and artists) is not so distinct from the ways in which computer viruses and digital virality would come to be understood several decades later, as attested by the following excerpt from Mark Amerika's Avant-Pop Manifesto:

The single most important creative directive of the new wave of Avant-Pop artists is *to enter the mainstream culture as a parasite would sucking out all the bad blood that lies between the mainstream and the margin*. By sucking on the contaminated bosom of mainstream culture, Avant-Pop artists are turning into Mutant Fictioneers, it's true, but our goal is and always has been to face up to our monster deformation and to find wild and adventurous ways to love it for what it is. The latter strains of Postmodernism attempted to do this too but were *unable to find the secret key that led right into the mainstream cell so as to facilitate and accelerate the rapid decomposition of the host's body*. ... Avant-Pop artists themselves *have acquired immunity from the Terminal Death dysfunctionality of a Pop Culture gone awry and are now ready to offer their own weirdly concocted elixirs to cure us from this dreadful disease ('information sickness') that infects the core of our collective life*. (Amerika, 1993; emphasis added)

In a similar way to Malevich, Amerika makes use of terminology associated with microorganisms, biochemistry and virulence, manifestly opposing the stable symbiotic relationship between a parasite and its host, specifically between mainstream culture and its 'dreadful disease ("information sickness")'. Interestingly, a decade and a half later, in *Digital Contagion* (2007), Jussi Parikka would highlight that the notion of virality is infectious to the point of expanding 'into various contexts from cybernetics and computing to biology, literature, television, cinema, and media art', including 'philosophical theory and cyber theory in the 1990s' (Parikka, 2007: 165). Possessing an understanding of the materialities of art that resembles Malevich's, Parikka—here paraphrased by Kim Knight—posits that 'the digital virus is becoming-biological and ... [that] ultimately the biological deterritorializes and reterritorializes across different texts and contexts' (Knight, 2015).

While the notion of virus is a trope for contagion (From the Latin *contagionem*, 'a touching, contact'; also infecting, contaminating, and mutating) from the moment it became associated, by affinity, with digital media, it underwent a transformation from a state of 'becoming-biological' (to use Parikka's expression), to its current condition of in-betweenness.¹ As a permeable trope, due to that very liminal status, the

¹ In biology, 'a measure of the attraction of one biological molecule toward another molecule, either to modify it, destroy it, or form a compound with it'. Examples of this being 'enzymes and their substrates, or antibodies and their antigens'. <https://www.genscript.com/molecular-biology-glossary/8371/affinity>. Accessed 7 May 2021.

word virus acts as an interface, ‘infecting’ diverse fields of knowledge. Ultimately, as a space suitable to the spread of contagion and transversal propagation of movement (from computer viruses to ideas and affects)’ (Terranova, as quoted in Parikka, 2010: XXIV), the Internet is the perfect ecosystem for the propagation of these viral replications. Working in dialectic tension, the idea of new media art being infected by avant-garde artistic practices has been a common topos of analysis in several major studies evident, for example, in Lev Manovich’s recognition of avant-garde visions within computational software (Manovich, 2002), and Teemu Ikonen’s statement that the ‘bipolar distinction between digital and print media hides ... a complex historical background’, hence the need for a ‘clarification of the historical development from the “analogies of movement” in printed literature to the innovations in video art, experimental film and multimedia poetry’ (Ikonen, 2003).² In addition to these and other researchers who point towards evidence of an inheritance passed down by avant-garde artistic practices to today’s experimentalisms, Gianni Eugenio Viola notes the possibility of recognizing today some of the proposals anticipated by Italian Futurism:

[i]t is difficult not to see in the composition for *intonarumori* a clear anticipation of concrete music, the *tavole parolibere* are certainly—in their synthesis of word and image—an anticipation of the visual poetry experiments that will be so dear to the neo-avant-gardes. The *serate* and the futurist theatrical syntheses cannot, yet, not be seen as an anticipation of the happenings and experimental theatre of the second postwar period of the twentieth century. Finally, how can we fail to see in the linguistic aspects of Marinettian syntheses and analogies the premise to the synaesthetic expressions that have become the very basis of advertising communication (but also of many necessarily fast aspects of social communication in the years of the most accentuated development of mass communications)? (Viola, 2004: 172; my translation)³

In addition to Viola’s observations, and considering the emphasis of these movements on the confluence between several arts and media, it may be observed that their performative nature often sought to engage an audience by means of deliberate provocation, as a means to fuse art and life. This pervasiveness of subversion in avant-garde practices is evinced, for example, in the ways the Italian Futurists came to

² I am following Oliver Grau’s definition of new media art, ‘a comprehensive term that encompasses art forms that are either produced, modified, and transmitted by means of new media/digital technologies or, in a broader sense, make use of ‘new’ and emerging technologies that originate from a scientific, military, or industrial context’, as described in: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920105/obo-9780199920105-0082.xml>.

³ See also Aarseth (1997); Block et al. (2004); Simanowski et al. (2011) and Pressman (2014).

consider the public as an active and creative element, not only through the performative reconfiguration of reading conventions, including the manifestos, but also at the level of public performance, of which the famous Futurist *serate* are an example.⁴ By inciting whistling, whooping and other violent reactions from the public, Marinetti gave the audience a more active role during these *serate*, a practice that would later be appropriated by the Dadaists.⁵ In proclaiming an embodied experience evidenced by the performative nature of the *serate*, manifestos and other Futurist creations, Italian Futurism sought to change aesthetic paradigms through the mechanism of disruption, specifically via the reconfiguration of the relationship between human and machine. Through these innovations, which contrary to some erroneous beliefs and self-proclaimed principles did not fully ignore tradition (Marques, 2018: 169–178), there was also the need for radical changes to the way sensory perception was understood within the context of the reception of art. As a result, notions that represented modernity, such as simultaneity, dynamics, and motion, were incorporated, often by means of a genuine attempt at ‘polyexpressiveness’ (in Italian, *poliespressività*; De Maria, 2014: xxxvi), which already assumed a symbiosis between human and machine.⁶

Effect/Affect

Generally described as the ‘quality or state of being functional’, ‘the quality of being suited to serve a purpose well’, or the ‘purpose that something is designed or expected to fulfil’, within the technological field, the term ‘functionality’ is also used as a way of referring to ‘the range of operations that can be run on a computer or other electronic system’, as well as ‘the set of functions or capabilities associated with computer software or hardware or an electronic device’, as in ‘new software with additional functionality’.⁷ Often connoted with the concept of transparency, this association of the term with digital/electronic capabilities is usually intended to express the idea that

⁴ On the performative dimension of the manifestos, Lawrence Rainey states that: ‘Many of the manifestos are also recognizably imbued with a performative dimension. That is not surprising, especially as some of the earliest ones (e.g., the ‘Manifesto of the Futurist Painters’) were routinely read aloud at the Futurist ‘evenings’ or *serate*, performed onstage in halls and theaters’ (Rainey, 2009: 46).

⁵ See Marinetti, F. T., ‘La voluttà d’esser fischiati’ (De Maria, 2014: 30–33).

⁶ Luciano De Maria is one of the few researchers who points out the complexities of the aforementioned connection between human and machine in Italian Futurism. Considering the confluence between tradition and innovation in the manifestos and other artworks by Marinetti and several generations of Italian futurists, De Maria claims that this duality should not be understood so much as robotic triviality, but rather seen as representative of the more emblematic idea of the ‘metallization of corruptible human flesh as the overcoming of death and glorification of the body’ (De Maria, 1983: xli; my translation).

⁷ All previous possible definitions can be found on Merriam Webster online as well as on LEXICO, Oxford Dictionary online.

the machine works for us, serving as a prosthesis to which we delegate a specific task in order to meet a specific goal or target. But as with many of the appropriations of terms borrowed from other fields of knowledge during the digital era, functionality is a term that has been considerably instrumentalized. Whether through the representation of touch and gesture as forms of superficial contact, or through the promises of presence, transparency, and intimacy, instrumentalizations perpetuated by digital technology industries (expressly those pertaining to tactile/haptic sensory perception) paradoxically reveal the gap between human and machine, even if their main purpose is to efface the barriers between the two: the crux of the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) paradigm. Adapted from a field of knowledge known for its continuous search for exactness, the HCI paradigm has been sold as the eternal attempt towards the attainment of smooth and intuitive communication. By amplifying human nature through artificial prostheses intended to enhance human capabilities, the HCI paradigm ends up omitting one side of the equation, namely, its focus on the elimination of potential failures and consequent dependence on a strictly functional interaction model.

As a strategic interface that predominates contemporary technological culture, the HCI paradigm is as pervasive and automatized as technology itself. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's distinction between the concepts of strategy and tactics, in *Tactics of Interfacing: Encoding Affect in Art and Technology* (2020), Ksenia Fedorova presents a series of transdisciplinary artworks in which computerized operations affecting and transforming human experience are tactically disrupted to question technological interfaces that mediate HCI. By exposing crossdisciplinary experiments in which affects and defects are part of the algorithm, Fedorova reveals the extent to which art and technology bring into question natural and artificial glitches inherent to both human nature and machinic code. For that purpose, she analyses artworks that are able to disruptively explore the process of raising awareness by turning the strategic effects of these technologies into tactical affects (see, for instance, her critique of 2015's *Karen* by interactive media art group Blast Theory: 145–153), and consequently 'bring to light the various "gray" zones of technological culture' (Fedorova, 2020: 8).

Through its metamediality, new media art often brings to light the engineered functionality of digital media in addition to questioning other prevalent concepts in the digital age, including HCI, immersion, interactivity, virtuality and digitality. Through its aesthetic critique of digital media, new media art reinvents inherited tactics of disruption, raising awareness regarding the artwork's processes of signification and affect. As previously referenced, one of these tactics involves the creation of mechanisms that lead to an eventual loss of grasp, often using seemingly functional,

dysfunctional, or even completely non-functional interfaces. In a similar way to the most recurrent words now associated with the digital (such as screen, interactivity, code, computer, and interface), the loss of grasp potentiated through new media art is not something born out of the digital realm. As such, despite a possible dialectic continuity of disruptive operations of estrangement, the differences between previous explorations of loss of grasp and the ones enabled by contemporary artistic practices (through (re)new(ed) rhetorics of bodies, surfaces, and interfaces) must be brought into question (Marques, 2018: 20).

Within historical avant-garde movements of the early 20th century, specifically in the various inf(1)ections of Futurism and Dadaism, loss of grasp was often associated with apparently functional mechanisms. With this in mind, in his PhD thesis titled 'Affect Transmission through Seemingly Functional Mechanical Sculptures', Stelios Manganis sought to understand 'how seemingly functional mechanical sculptures can generate and transmit notions of affect and how preventing their activation by gallery visitors might enhance the effect of affect transmission and their overall understanding of the work' (Manganis, 2010: 2).⁸ By means of a series of observations and analyses of visitors' varying behaviours in several art galleries across the United Kingdom, Manganis comes to detect an 'affective dynamic between the artist, the artwork and the spectator' (2).

Mainly informed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's writings on theories of affect, Manganis, through the use of several mechanical sculptures with apparent functionality that he designed and built himself, concludes that a 'sense of functionality combined with a lack of physical interactivity is sufficient to enhance the intended purpose of an artwork' (3). Using Francis Picabia's mechanomorphic drawings as a reference, in making these sculptures 'seemingly functional', Manganis allows space for the subjective judgement of the viewer, who in turn affects that which they are viewing. For instance, 'a given stationary mechanical system, in this case an artwork' contains 'all the necessary elements which will enable it to be potentially activated' (2010: 17–18).

Henri Bergson's ideas regarding recognition and attention are of particular interest to Manganis' argument of affective transfer. According to Manganis, and drawing on the aforementioned French philosopher's work, during a subject's encounter with an object, his subconscious will automatically scan through personal memories and experiences in order to find a similar pattern,

⁸ See, for instance, Manganis' sculptures 'Look at Me Now Dad' and 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings': <http://www.steliosmanganis.com/gallery/>.

[w]here he will either connect with the artwork in an affective manner or enter into affective indifference and aim towards a search for the ‘meaning’ of the work. Thus, the work in terms of its affective function exists, or is created by the artist, in a state of affective potential, the activation of which depends upon the presence of the ‘right’ individual viewer. (52–53)

Following on from Bergson’s theories, although vision is often cited as a main channel for sensory perception, such actions should be understood in light of a multisensory perspective. For instance, when faced with a particular gesture of the body in a painting, we will have the tendency to search for a similar representation of a tactile/haptic experience kept in our memories, not limited to merely visual cues.⁹ This might explain our first impulse to touch a handle or a button in an artwork (or their rendering), a direct result of our memory informing us that that is the function of that particular object. In this manner, according to Manganis, the handle, as a ‘familiar form with a familiar function, works as a bridge connecting the human with the machine’ (60–61). In much the same way that the human hand works as a trope for the representation of touch and corporeality (Marques, 2018: 107–156), the handle works as a signifier for the presence of the human hand and touch in the machine. Which brings us to the question: how can a handle work without working?

Man Ray’s installation *Self Portrait* (1916) is a prime example of an artwork in which this paradoxical realization is put into question. In his autobiography of the same name, Man Ray affirms:

After Christmas I had my second show at Daniel’s. There were only nine or ten items, pure inventions. One panel particularly, called ‘Self Portrait’, was the butt of much joking. On a background of black and aluminum paint I had attached two electric bells and a real push button. In the middle, I had simply put my hand on the palette and transferred the paint imprint as a signature. Everyone who pushed the button was disappointed that the bell did not ring. Another panel was hung by one corner which, inevitably, visitors attempted to redress only to have it swing back at an angle. I was

⁹ It may be of relevance to recover Martin Jay’s observations regarding Cézanne’s paintings, according to whom the painter ‘tried to present objects that were present to all the senses at once’, including the notions of depth, smoothness, softness, and hardness. According to Jay: ‘In so doing, Cézanne wanted to overcome the very distance between viewer and viewed, thus shattering the window’s glass separating beholder from the scene on the other side. His task, therefore, was the recapturing of the very moment when the world was new, before it was fractured into dualisms of subject and object or the modalities of separate senses’. Jay also adds: ‘Not surprisingly, so ambitious a project could never be successfully accomplished. To render reality in all its sensual manifestations in a medium that remained stubbornly visual proved an intractable problem’ (Jay, 1994: 159).

called a humorist, but it was far from my intention to be funny. I simply wished the spectator to take an active part in the creation. (Ray, 1967: 71)

Despite Man Ray's apparent naivety in describing his (and others') artworks, *Self-Portrait* is anything but naive. The illusion of an erotic environment suggested by the shape of the installation (its push-button and electric bells strategically placed on a structure resembling a cyborgian body) also functioning as a mechanism that elicits our touch. In this case, though, its non-functionality appears to be the only key to grasping a potential message.

When it comes to the use of non-functional mechanisms/interfaces in early avant-garde proposals, Marcel Duchamp's *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, also known as *The Large Glass* (1915–1923), overshadows virtually everything else. Despite the multiple readings on the hermeneutics of *The Large Glass*, the approaches directly concerned with its materialities are scarce. According to Calvin Tomkins, Duchamp's election of glass as the primary material used in *The Large Glass* is both pragmatic and idealistic. Apart from the fact that 'a painting on glass could be sealed hermetically, which would prevent or at least delay the gradual oxidation that causes pigments to fade and change color', this new medium also served to break away from that which Duchamp referred to as 'retinal art'. Furthermore, Tomkins observes that as Duchamp became progressively less interested in 'art for the eye alone', seeking to erase all traces of 'the artist's personal touch', he opted for glass instead of the traditional canvas (Tomkins, 1966: 34).¹⁰

Presenting itself as more translucent rather than transparent, *The Large Glass* contains a plurality of dimensions. Duchamp's descriptions of the work's four-dimensionality open a window into a game of surfaces made possible by the material in question. Through the glass, not only is one able to perceive the series of cogs set up by Duchamp in order to set the gear into motion, but is also made aware of one's reflection, blending into the space before and behind the glass panels. In consonance

¹⁰ Regarding Duchamp's choice of glass as an alternative surface to canvas, in her biography of Duchamp, *The Bachelor Stripped Bare*, Alice Goldfarb Marquis tells a slightly different story from the one told by Tomkins. Establishing a connection between Duchamp and the Czech painter Frank Kupka, Marquis states that, in addition to being neighbours with two of Duchamp's brothers, Kupka also saw glass (particularly stained glass) as 'the best solution for what he was seeking'. (See Marquis 2002: 39–60). Regardless of the real reason behind Duchamp's choice (if there was in fact one), what we do know is that the early industrial reputation of glass was closely associated with its use among early 20th-century artists. One only needs to search for any avant-garde exhibition catalogue or manifesto and glass will be found among the most cherished materials, taking various shapes and forms. Take, for example, Boccioni's Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture (1912), in which the Italian Futurist painter and sculptor elects glass and other less noble materials as the proper tools to translate 'those atmospheric planes which bind and intersect things' into a new plastic art that refuses 'the literary and traditional dignity of marble and bronze' (Boccioni, as cited in Rainey et al., 2009: 114–118).

with what Roy Ascott refers to as ‘screens of operations’ (as opposed to ‘screens of representation’) (Ascott, 2003: 235), *The Large Glass* ‘resists a consistently transparent view because it includes the reflection of the observer and his or her environment in its image’ (Shanken, 2003: 78), which is to say that everything is destined to happen on the screen, ‘the site of interaction and negotiation for meaning’ (Ascott, 2003: 235). Nonetheless, apart from a few exceptions, screens have been predominantly places of representation rather than fields of operation, ‘retinal’ rather than ‘procedural’, wherein the transparency provided by their glassy surfaces frequently has its corollary in the retinal display of images that attempt to substitute our optical perception of the world. In other words, wherein lies a promise of transparency, there is also a promise of convergence between actual and perceived images. In essence, this is the holy grail of the perfect cyborg human-machine interface, where the surfaces of the interface are coupled into a single perceptual system, and the externalized body internalized as a natural interface.

Control/Grasp

Artist, performer and researcher, Serge Bouchardon has been working for years on the idea of a ‘rhetoric of manipulation’ in interactive digital art and literature (Bouchardon, 2008: 2), a specific grammar for distinct and meaningful units of gesture in contact with digital interfaces (Bouchardon, 2014: 160). According to him, within the context of interactive fiction, ‘figures of manipulation’ (166), ‘a category on its own, along with figures of diction, construction, meaning and thought’, are often used by artists in order to ‘introduce a loss of grasp’ (Bouchardon, 2008: 1). For Maria Angel and Anna Gibbs, Bouchardon’s understanding of loss of grasp seems to focus more on the ways digital creations question embodiment in reading that directly involves gestures than on ‘outdated debates about interactivity and its limits in artworks, or in discourses of the power, control or freedom of the reader’ (Angel and Gibbs, 2013: 131). As such, they consider that ‘the experience of manipulation is characterized not only by grasp, but also, and crucially, by its loss’ (131). Moreover, the fact that this experience is characterized by a loss makes it impossible not to think of a macrostructure of gestures that goes beyond its individual microstructures, especially considering the several possible meanings of the word ‘manipulation’. In this sense, if manipulation can mean a ‘hand filled with something’, a ‘skillful handling of objects’—another way of saying that it ‘is the gesture of the reader which reveals the materiality of the text’ (Bouchardon, 2008: 5)—its loss can also mean manipulating a person in the sense of deceiving them. In Bouchardon’s observations,

a significant distinction is made between the ergonomic idea of control engineered by digital industries and the ‘traditional anthropological meaning’ of grasp. While the user may have control, for instance, over a control panel, this does not mean that they have a grasp on what they are supposed to control (11). The opposite is also valid, since a user can have ‘less control and paradoxically more grasp’ (8) by questioning a mechanism’s inoperability or dysfunctionality, for example. Thus, while figures of manipulation may or may not give control to the user, they are often used to invite ‘the user to have a reflexive attitude towards his/her interactive practice’ by means of an intended loss of grasp (11).

This aspect of intentionality allows for a better grasp of Bouchardon’s artworks, as evidenced by the title of one of his most well-known interactive fictions, *Loss of Grasp*. Created by Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert (2010) as part of a series of interactive fictions titled *Hyper-Tensions*, and briefly described by its authors as ‘an online digital creation about the notions of grasp and control’ (Bouchardon, 2010: project statement), *Loss of Grasp* is an interactive narrative divided into six scenes that gradually interconnect with each other, featuring a character who paradoxically loses grasp as he tries to get a grip on his life.

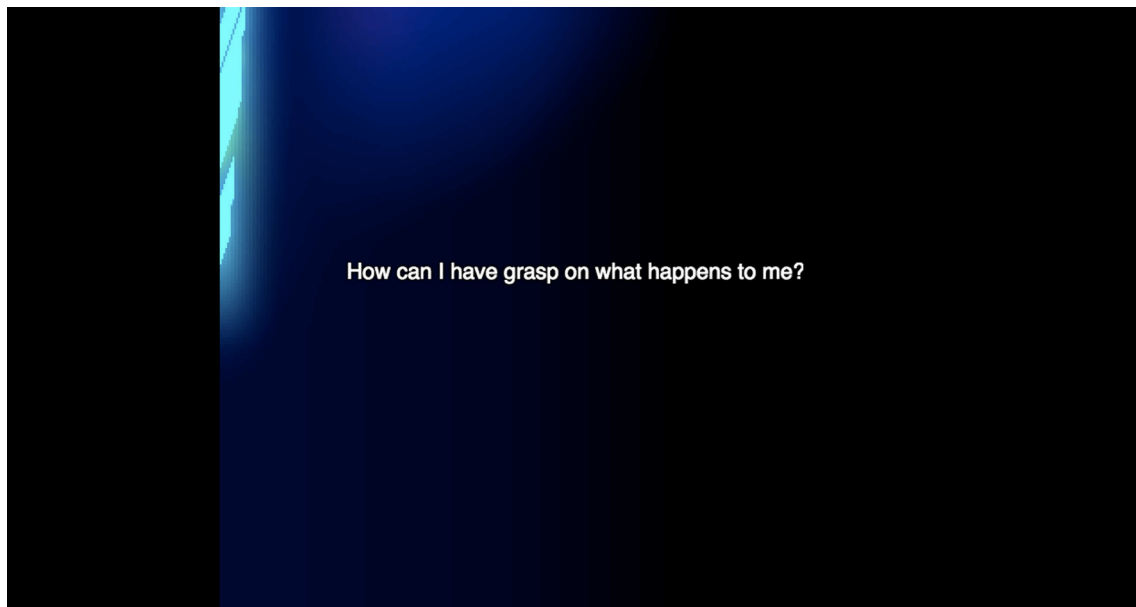


Figure 1: *Loss of Grasp*. Scene 1. As the story’s subject meshes with the reader’s perspective, the latter may begin to wonder who this ‘I’ may be—subject, reader, user, author, or all of these? Reproduced with permission, courtesy of Serge Bouchardon.

Serving as an allegory for tropes of functionality and transparency (in digital multimodal environments), this piece also allows both reading subject and character to attain a gradual state of awareness, only made possible through a progressive and unavoidable loss of grasp (Figure 1).

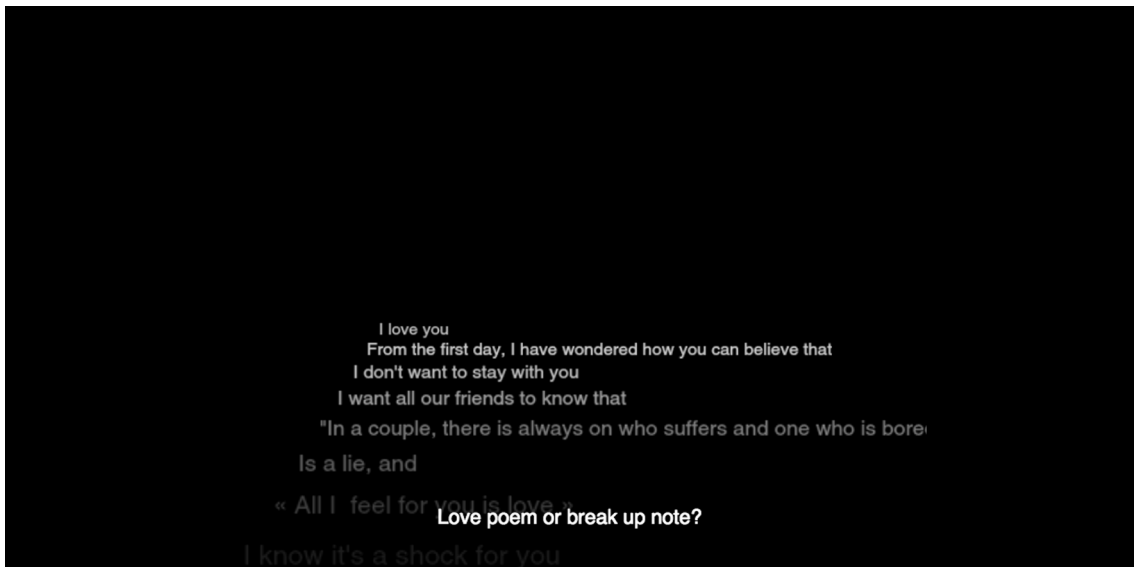


Figure 2: *Loss of Grasp*. Scene 3. By means of a gradual loss of grasp, the action in this scene consists in playing with the sentences of a love poem/break-up note left behind by the subject's wife. The accompanying sound of Bizet's famous "Habanera" (from the opera *Carmen*), also becomes more or less distorted according to the reader's movements. Reproduced with permission, courtesy of Serge Bouchardon.

Moreover, Bouchardon questions the ways in which interaction is engineered as the production of an instrumentalized relationship between users and devices/interfaces. By means of an interactive reflexiveness, *Loss of Grasp* is able to show how readers, through a rhetoric of manipulation, become subjects themselves. In turn, this same process triggers an embodied subjectivity built upon the actions the device requires from users, questioning their autonomy by revealing how the interface already includes them in its particular mode of control (Figure 2).¹¹

¹¹ See also Maria Mencia's 'Transient Self-Portrait', a metapoetic and self-reflexive digital poem, in which the reader is told that they are literally part of the poem, the latter needing to be caressed in order to speak, needing light so that the reader can become 'its ink, its colour, its surface'. By playing with the poem, a transient portrait of the reader (via means of the reader's webcam) is created, a direct result of the process of interacting with the textual layer which may be described as follows: in reading others, through time, I read myself. http://www.mariamencia.com/pages/transient-self_portrait.html.

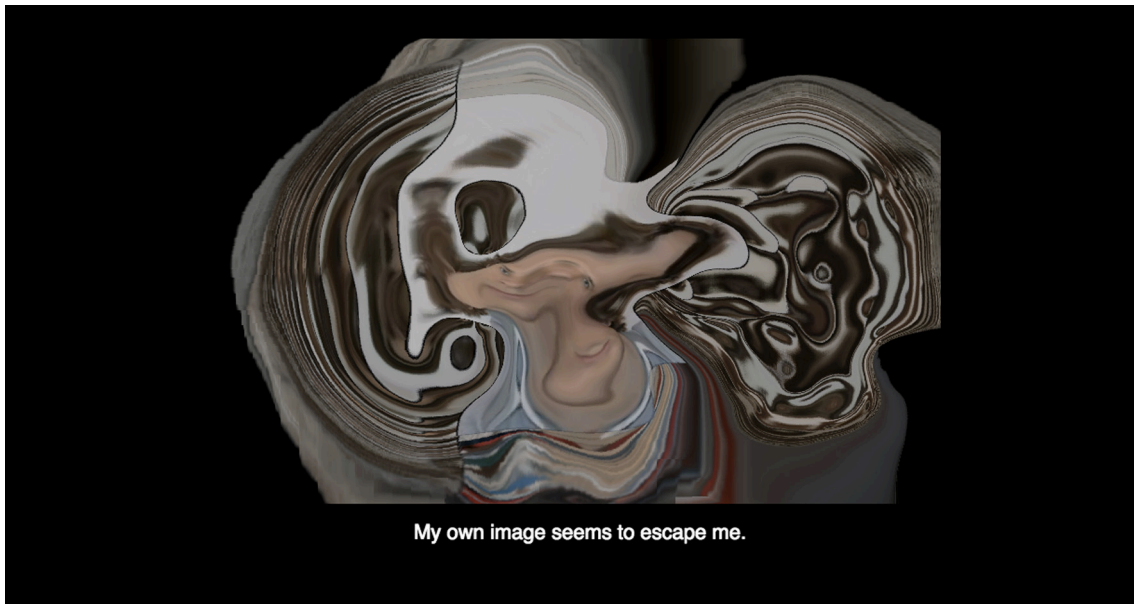


Figure 3: *Loss of Grasp*. Scene 5. As the gradual process of losing grasp falls upon both character and reading subject, a self-distorted and melting image of the reader, captured via webcam, is accompanied by various lexias. Reproduced with permission, courtesy of Serge Bouchardon.

Regardless of its ‘dysfunctionality’, in terms of its mechanisms, the main digital interface of *Loss of Grasp* (the screen) may be regarded as entirely functional, maintaining a series of characteristics that give it the illusion of functionality in what concerns the standard design of interfaces. Considering that the work’s main priority is to give the illusion of control (that will eventually be taken away) the reader needs to be gradually led on a journey towards a literal and metaphoric loss of control, so as to grasp some sort of meaning (Figure 3). However, as would be expected, Bouchardon does not leave out of consideration the significance of other (gestural) manipulations in literary artifacts external to the digital realm. Nonetheless, while he is aware of the implications of notions such as ergodic literature and cybertext, in what concerns the need for a non-trivial effort by readers in order ‘to traverse the text’ (Aarseth, 1997: 1), Bouchardon argues that ‘what is somewhat new in interactive digital works is the fact that it is the text itself, and not only the physical medium, which acquires a dimension of manipulation’ (Bouchardon, 2014: 159) (Figure 4).

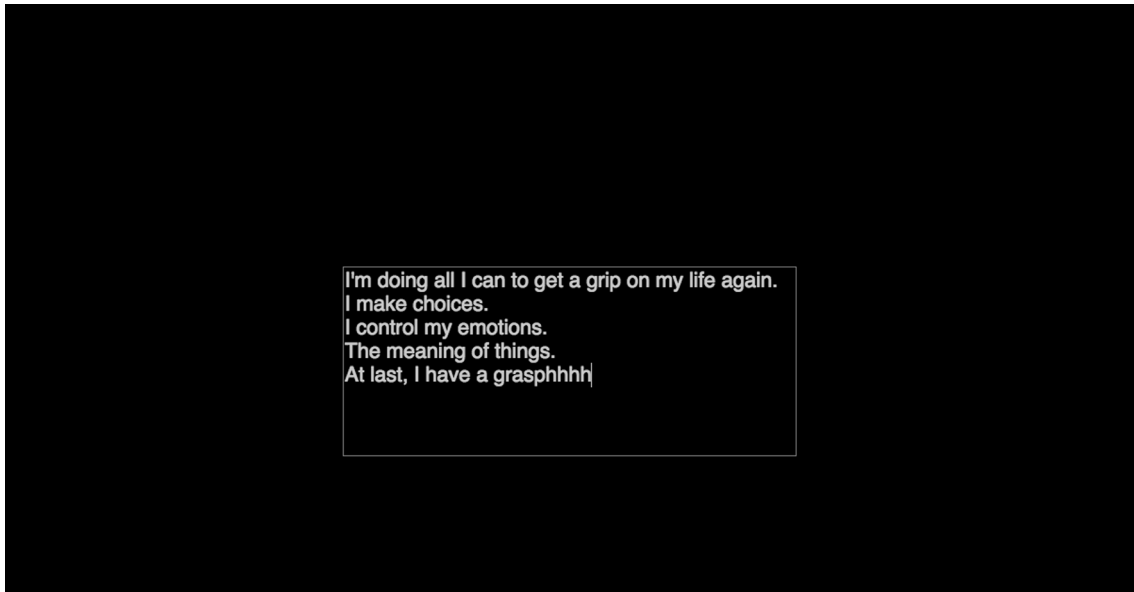


Figure 4: *Loss of Grasp*. Scene 6. In their last interaction with *Loss of Grasp*, the reader is invited to type words of their choice inside a textbox, such illusion serving only to unveil the final deceit, since regardless of what is typed, the program does not obey any of the reader's actions. Reproduced with permission, courtesy of Serge Bouchardon.

Motion/Commotion

According to Teemu Ikonen, as aforementioned, 'the possibility to manipulate the literal movement of the text could be one of the essential variables separating digital literature from printed literature' (Ikonen, 2003). But what happens if a digital artwork disrupts this very idea of movement by making non-movement its main condition to be experienced? Such is the premise of *Still Standing* (2005a), by Jason Edward Lewis and Bruno Nadeau, an 'inter-inactive' installation that requires the reader's body to be motionless in order to enable a potential transmission of signification and affect.¹² Facing a white screen and some scattered letters on the ground, any movement by the reader causes the letters to disperse in all directions. However, should the reader/performer stand still for even a brief period of time, the letters promptly rearrange themselves to match their silhouette, assembling as a self-reflexive poem previously created by the authors for this specific purpose. In addition, if the reader moves again, the poem disappears and the letters go back to their fragmented state.

Despite nearly two decades since its first interaction, one of the singularities that makes *Still Standing* an ever-present reference in the field of digital literature is the way in which it conveys a tension between movement and rest/stillness of both body

¹² See: http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/nadeau_stillstanding.html, last accessed August 31, 2021.

and text in order to present a reversed idea of playability. It does this by making use of a mechanism of dysfunctionality, via means of an interface that does not perform or function as one would expect, so that in order to have a full literary/artistic experience the reader needs to lose grasp and control of what they are experiencing. By effectively demonstrating that movement is a fundamental characteristic of digital literature through the very disruption of the idea of movement, this installation elicits a reflection on readability and its relation to motion or lack of it. This inclusion of stillness, or rest, as a significant part of the interaction process, led the authors to apply the term inter-inactivity, described by Nadeau and Lewis as follows:

Inter-inactivity is formulated as an expansion on approaches to interactivity which typically requires the user to constantly and actively engage the work in order to experience it. Inter-inactive works incorporate both motion and stillness into their design, often using periods of action to lead users into moments of rest. (Lewis and Nadeau, 2005b: 1)¹³

Features of stillness, in this case, require the reader's previous experience with the disperse moving letters during their initial interaction with the work, when they are able to kick the letters lying on the 'ground' (i.e. that are displayed at the bottom of the screen). Both rest and movement contain within them a gestural dimension, which includes the gesture of not moving. Nonetheless, the range of possible gestures elicited by the installation, assumes attention as a major variable for a holistic understanding of the artwork's potential meanings.¹⁴ Concerning tactile attention specifically, Alberto Gallace and Charles Spence define it as being related to a series of 'neurocognitive processes that allow for the selective processing of incoming sensory stimuli', sorted according to relevance through various mechanisms in order to perform a task or achieve a goal (Gallace and Spence, 2014: 147). However, they also affirm that due to these same mechanisms, shifting our attention away from tactile stimuli is harder than

¹³ While it is not my intention to disavow this alternative definition of inactive participation, I believe that when speaking of motion and interactivity, such moments of rest are already implicit. This may be loosely associated with Spinoza's understanding of a body as 'one with its transitions' (Massumi, 2002: 15), a transition being, for Massumi, a way of 'saying relation between movement and rest', a capacity that gives the body power to affect and be affected. In addition, according to Rita Raley, 'Still Standing seems to require cognitive rather than physical engagement, thus rendering stillness as an integral feature of reading. But there is an important paradox here: standing still asks for physical movement that we might even call rigorous; after all, it takes a certain strength and muscular control to remain motionless' (Raley, 2009: 29).

¹⁴ This analysis should not discard, however, the fact of *Still Standing* being part of a series of digital literary installations assuming bodies and code as part of their reading and consequent behavior as living organisms. Examples may include *Text Rain* (1999) by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv as well as *Screen* (2003), a cave installment at Brown University.

drawing it away from visual or auditory stimuli (148). This observation may explain the seeming need to temporarily abstain from physically engaging with the artwork, in order to focus on the textual poem that gradually begins to reveal itself.

Both the poem in its entirety and its respective title, 'Seeking Sedation', imply that the textual poem is to be understood as a fundamental part of the creative process, given that the words used allude to the aforementioned tension between movement and rest.¹⁵ Moreover, this piece also suggests that, regardless of our corporal experience, there will always be a need for a certain hermeneutic effort. This observation seems to align with the authors' description of the poem as having been 'composed explicitly for use in the installation [where it] plays with the semantic and etymologic intersection between motion and commotion to advance a theme of longing for a perfect motionless moment. ... In this way, playful interaction leads into meaningful poetic content' (Lewis and Nadeau, 2005b: 2). Insofar as the text describes the process of reading the text, it also adds a cognitive layer to that playful interaction. Reading is subject to bodily movements that enable letters and words to affect the reading self, thus, relations between motion and stasis become embodied correlates of the interpretive process required to create meaningful associations. This unique relationship between body and language, established through the installation in order to present a reversed idea of playability (where the reader/user refrains from physically moving and touching the artwork), also brings to the fore implicit tensions in the metaphors and analogies of (e)motionless bodies and motionless texts, often through a combination of literal and metaphorical loss of grasp, raising awareness with regard to its signifying and affective strategies.

Endings/Beginnings

Artistic experimentation with apparently functional interfaces (and mechanisms) is a common trait in new media art. Whether through semi-functional, dysfunctional or non-functional interfaces, these experiments behave as living microorganisms in the sense that, due to their strong performative nature (and similarly to a virus), their metamediality confers them the ability to disruptively reproduce themselves, questioning the very same devices, media and concepts that are necessary to their existence. This, in turn, serves the goal of generating a purposeful loss of grasp in order

¹⁵ The poem reads as follows: 'five chapters of addiction / for my perpetual commotion / bring my brain to a stop / the inception of sedation is needed / for the waves to break and the spin to reduce / letters to literal the motionless moment / hides for my sight to seduce.'

to raise awareness through an experiential process of incremental dysfunctionality intrinsic to these mechanisms. However, one must keep in mind that despite their apparent passivity, it is the reader/user who activates these operations, even when the experience resembles mere voyeurism, seemingly rendering them powerless against viral algorithms and digits.

Curiously enough, the very notion of viruses has become increasingly seen as part of the solution for several problems, as evidenced by the way in which virology and virotherapy have been making use of particular viruses for the treatment of various diseases, namely, in the field of oncology (Mietzsch and Agbandje-McKenna, 2017: 1). Similarly, just as the complex understanding of a virus may prove to be beneficial in its multitudinous applications, in what concerns digital technologies, the complexity of its nature alludes to Bernard Stiegler's use, through Derrida, of the concept of *pharmakon*. As stated by Rui Torres and Eugenio Tisselli, two other media artists who resort to poetic disruption and difficultness in order to raise awareness:

Technology is a *pharmakon*: it allows us to take care of ourselves and our world, but it is also something we should be careful of. Technological pharmacology is a question of dosage, a question of thresholds. Under a certain threshold, technology cures the wound of human vulnerability. Above that threshold, it becomes an uncontrollable fractal, capable of destroying our bodies and our ecosystems, like a cancer out of control. (Torres and Tisselli, 2020).

Despite the ways in which new media art gains new possible readings by means of its disruptive interconnections with different fields of knowledge, namely, through the use of digital technology, these disruptions are nonetheless far from being exclusively digital. Regardless of new media art's own specificities, the influence of avant-garde artistic proposals is clearly undeniable both in its pre-posthumanist fusion of human and machine as well as in the enhancement of multisensory perception through the dynamics of movement. By focusing on the haptic information processing involved in the reader's/user's experience as a way of questioning digital interfaces, new media art ends up contributing to a countercultural and essentially intermedial aesthetics as a continuum of a particular lineage of disruption, raising awareness through the use of avant-garde artistic techniques such as difficultness, glitch and defamiliarization, all of which may be encapsulated in the idea of losing grasp.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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