

# The Influence of New Technologies on Language

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## Abstract

*What is the impact of new (digital) technologies in the uses of language in visual arts? Different artists are researching in their work the implications of Internet and mobile technologies on language and communication. Widespread desires and longings for a global community are being questioned. Other questions arise including the way these changes influence our day-to-day life and our manners?*

## 1. Introduction

In his book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) Walter Ong explores 'orality'. Ong describes orality in terms of a primary and secondary orality as opposed to the written and printed word as the sole iteration of linguistic and narrative sophistication. Ong proposes that in the electronic era an emergence - through the use of telephone, radio and television - of secondary orality is taking place. In this paper I will argue that the work of a number of contemporary artists very clearly demonstrates this move towards a secondary orality.

## 2. A Short Overview of a Century of Language in Art

### 2.1 The first impetus for change

Since the introduction of language people have been occupied with the interpretation and organisation of language. It was not until the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th that language was uncoupled from grammar and meaning. The first impetus for presenting the word as a separate entity was given by Stéphane Mallarmé in 1897. In his poem "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard" (A throw of the dice will never abolish chance) words are separated from one another by white pages and depicted in various forms. Subsequently Filippo Marinetti, the leader of the Futurists in Italy, was the first to speak out against the structuring of language on a page. In his 1912 Manifesto he called for doing away with harmony, and he wanted to confront the reader directly with the word. Only by means of a 'typographical revolution' would the word get back the autonomy and dynamism that it deserved. At the same time, painting was making an approach to language. As early as 1911 words and sentences were being integrated into paintings. Together the expressionists, cubists and futurists liberated word and image from conventional rules. After World War I the Dadaists tried to bring to the surface the true nature of the word or letter. The thread linking all these experiments was to do away with the self-evidence of art, and casting doubt on its content and function.

### 2.2 Growing influence of mass media

The enormous growth of mass media meant that after World War II artists' interest in language shifted to the cultural impact and significance of language and the effects of language on com-

munication. In the 1960s and '70s language was seen in art as an extra means for confronting viewers with themselves and with their environment. In his book *The Pleasure of Text* (1973) Roland Barthes introduced the notion of two sorts of language use: the written, readable ('readerly') text, fulfilling the reader's pattern of expectations, and the 'writerly' text that, conversely, disturbed the expectations. The opacity of text assures that sentences and words must be analyzed piece by piece, breaking the existing conventions between object and viewer. The vertical structure of writerly text demands an active role from the reader, in which he or she becomes both reader and rewriter. The attention of the artist must increasingly be focused on the whole communication process rather than making language itself into an artwork. The active vernacular was subjected to investigation in which the emphasis lay on rhetoric and tautology; through slight shifts in the letters new meanings arose, with or without ironic undertones.

### 2.3 The rise of feminism

This trend continued in the years that followed, and was reinforced by the rise of 'story art', which set down short statements, thoughts or events, often accompanied by photography or video. Story art was particularly popular with feminists, who in the mid-'70s were acquiring an increasingly larger voice in art. The slogan "the personal is public and political" was introduced by Luce Irigaray in 1974, and was a protest against an unequivocal conception of truth in language. One of the consequences of story art were the 'sound bites' of the 1980s and 1990s. These too involved social and political slogans, which were placed over images and/or in public space. Sound bites were however much stronger and were permeated with black, cynical humour. Their power lay primarily in the choice of the right words, which would stick in the memory. Mass culture was an important source of inspiration for many of the sound bites. Although because of this the pronouncements often appeared very non-committal, they certainly sparked reflection without offering a solution. The outcome of this process might then lead to improvements. This existential view, in which life is seen as an absurd experience, which can lead to understanding, but not necessarily to improvements in life, is still to be found in art.

### 2.4 From literary culture to oral culture

Responses to the language experiments at the beginning of the last century were far from uniformly positive. Critics saw the investigations not as revolutionary, but as regressive. The artworks were seen as reflections of the time before the introduction of the alphabet, when people only had spoken language which was impenetrable and inflexible. This comparison is still made today, but now in a positive sense. According to Walter J. Ong, we find ourselves in a 'second orality', the second verbal era. In his book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Ong investigates the contemporary trend toward a new manner of communicating. According to him, the arrival of electronic media

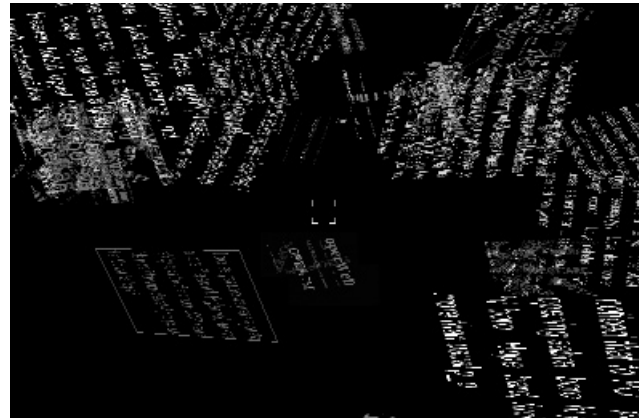
has led to a change in our thinking. Interest in the written word will diminish and the spoken word will get the upper hand. He bases this primarily on the non-linear structure of an oral culture, which is also to be found in the structure of the internet, for instance. He believes the possibilities of interactivity in 'hyper-narratives' in which various pieces of text, images and/or sound fragments are connected with one another by means of links, reflects the oral tradition. According to Ong, the 'second orality' will be a period in which the principles of both oral and literary culture will coalesce.

### 3. Current practices

Ong wrote his book in 1982. Although computers and the Internet existed there were only few people who made full use of them. Due to ongoing developments and cheaper tools today everybody is using computers, mobile phones and of course the Internet. The popularity of chatrooms on the Internet and the speed of electronic mail have led to an enormous growth in communication, and with it, changes in the uses of language. The changes caused for a series of new vernaculars to emerge, resulting from a range of activities that take place on the Internet; from e-commerce to technical specific programming. The Short Message Service (better known as SMS or texting) is the latest development that is said to change our conventional writing. With only a limited space to type the words messages are at times very cryptic. The use of abbreviations like 'rsvp' (please reply) or 'cul' (see you later), is not new. What makes it interesting is that this language is becoming more and more popular and not just with a younger generation. Already books are available that will explain and suggest abbreviations and how to use punctuations to produce a smiley that expresses your feelings :-)) (the so called emoticons). With the same kind of language is becoming quite standard in email and conversations in chat rooms it is of no surprise that the Oxford Dictionaries decided to include text message abbreviations and emoticons in their new edition. As Judy Pearsall, Publishing Manager states: "In Oxford Dictionaries we have been monitoring the phenomenal growth of text messaging with great attention: its influence is now such that we felt it was time to treat it as a legitimate part of English."

Looking back at the history of language uses in art we can see that there have always been attempts at changing the nature of language. When Ong talked about secondary orality he did not mean that written language will disappear or change in itself, but instead that language and the uses of language will be more and more structured in the lines of oral traditions. According to his view the secondary orality will be a phase in which people will use principles of both the literate and oral cultures. Thus creating a place where the spoken word adds to life and communication instead of being considered inferior. In secondary orality more and more texts will emerge that are associative, non-hierarchical organised, which are more difficult to analyse and will leave interpretation open. Ong also suggested that people in oral cultures live in close, intimate connection with their environment and with each other. Oral communities would group people together whereas reading a book or writing are individual activities. Secondary orality likewise will generate a strong group sense but will be much more global oriented. Another interesting change will be the way people interact with the spoken or written word. In print culture the newspaper would keep the news at distance, in an oral tradition people tell about happenings in person. Leading up to an experience which is subjective and communal, a site where "the listener contributes to the production of the work in performance. The listener is author, scarcely less than the performer is author" (Paul Zumthor, in Fowler 1994). Which is to say that people get a change to interact and to intervene in a discourse albeit written or spoken.

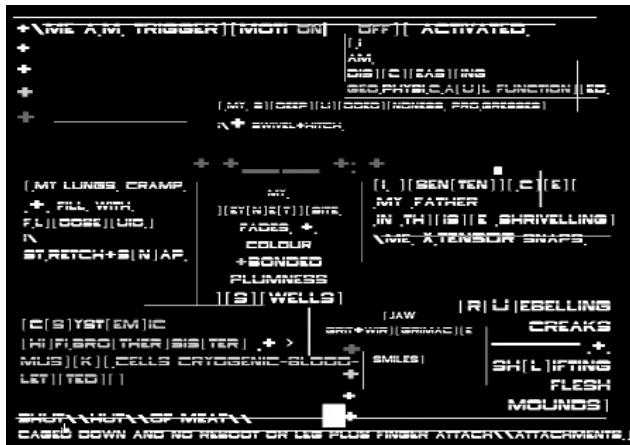
Seeing the world today it seems logical to say that indeed the changes that Ong mentioned are taking place and that we have entered a secondary orality. These observations are of course not new. As I have put forward Barthes and others before him already made the distinction between different texts and different uses of text. The same as many artists have been trying for 100 years to change language and the implications of language. By employing new technologies more and more artists reflect on the one hand the body of thought and ways of working of artists in the beginning of the last century, and on the other hand they are placing those ideas in a contemporary perspective. I like to introduce and discuss the work of three artists in more depth to show how different - and similar at the same time - these contemporary approaches can be.



Peter Frucht - iow...

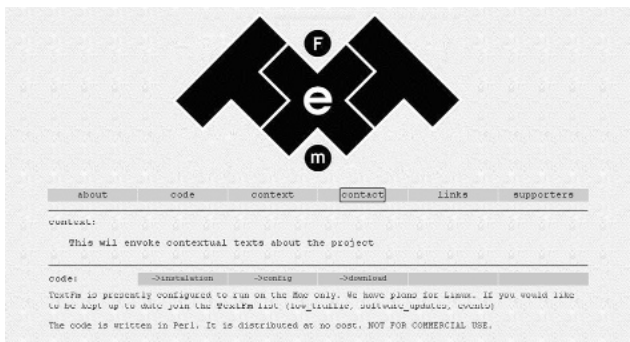
The Hungarian/German artist Péter Frucht, now living in Germany where he just finished the Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne is fascinated by the misunderstandings that arise in communication. Influenced by his long presence in chatrooms, in his installation *iow inanalbipootv mmif with mftw ibn and coltflgohaha isbt* Frucht captures the endless talks and conversations that take place all over the Internet. He brakes into conversations and extracts parts. When the texts enter in the virtual 3D world at first the viewer is able to read them. When someone starts mixing the texts however they become unreadable. The first selected text turns red and if the second text gets selected it merges with the previously chosen text. Immediately certain letters change and the leftovers are automatically rearranged. The result is a wave of live chat that can be mixed and linked together by the visitor. In mixing the various portions of text with each other the texts lose their original content. And by replacing certain letters Frucht alters the literal meaning of the words. But by the regrouping of the words and texts, new symmetries and new rhythms arise. The boundary between word and image can become very unclear through the various forms that are superimposed over one another. The typography functions here as an aesthetic element and as a connection among words, sentences and texts. This abstract typography and the abbreviations used are clear references to conversations in chatrooms on the Internet. What is interpreted as image and what as text depends on the visitor's capacity for abstraction. At the same time the sound is manipulated as well. By using a text-to-speech program different languages become audible. Through the interaction of the visitor the live chat can be mixed, interweaving the various languages ending up in an unintelligible flow of rhythms and melodies. With his installation Frucht shows that language is based on random rules and that it long ago lost its sense. Moreover according to Frucht communication through the Internet is bound to result in misunderstandings and miscommunications. This world of closure and confinement is also physically present in the installation

where the visitor can only peak through a small bar into the virtual 3D world and has to find its way using a cumbersome navigation tool.



mez (Mary-Anne Breeze) - m[ez]ang.elle

The Australian artist and writer mez produces e-poetry in the Internet which she herself terms *m[ez]ang.elle*. m[ez]ang.elle is a game with language, supported by sound, symbols and text, which arises from abbreviations that are current in e-mail and SMS communication. The words are altered in a manner that reflects the fundamental meaning of the word and calls up new associations. Her language is based on English and contains mathematical, programming and other language codes, in order to develop a language specific to Internet. By introducing punctuation marks reading becomes an active procedure that is more in the tradition of oral than literary culture. In addition to providing a new language inspired by new communications media, with her texts mez also wants to overturn other traditions. The primary message can often be found on the outside of the [] brackets while the insides 'hides' another meaning(s). For instance, altering the word 'postmaster' to "post[wo]ma[n]ster" not only shatters gender conventions, but at the same time places the word 'master' in an historical context and hints at words that sound similar like 'monster'. In this way a single word can receive multiple meanings, so that the text can no longer be read unambiguously. Alphabetic characters are replaced with numerals and even the punctuation marks loose their neutral value, they begin to speak an unuttered language. Like no other, mez employs the hyperstructures of the Internet and brings to the surface the underlying meanings in language. The readers are left to wonder; should they trust the inscription or the encryption?



Graham Harwood and Matthew Fuller - TextFM

Although not altering language Graham Harwood (member of Mongrel, an artists' group in the UK) and Matthew Fuller designed *TextFM* (2001) to orally intervene during radio broad-

casts, seminars, in clubs etc. Harwood and Fuller took advantage of the widespread availability of mobile phones to allow people to broadcast voice messages over the public radio airwaves. Instead of using the voice they made use of the popular texting methods. The user can send a normal text message to a central phone number, where a computer captures it. The computer converts the message to speech using text-to-speech software and the spoken text is then sent to a transmitter and broadcaster over a FM radio frequency. The user can also include several optional codes specifying the language the message must be in, which of the ten voices to use, the pitch of the voice, and the speed at which the text must be read. Their first interest in this project came from looking at hidden possibilities that exist in different media technologies, after mobilising these they mixed them with others. The project is also about finding out what potential cultures of communication exist in the public space. What will people do when they get the opportunity to interact or manipulate an existing system, like a radio transmission, a symposium or a club night. It is a system that is using language as data, and then allowing people to interrupt that. Because they use synthesised voices the sounds tend to be very mechanical. Instead of rejecting these sounds people started using the system's incapacity to produce simple beat structures or get the voices to sing by using certain mixes of characters.

#### 4. ITFA

Looking at the projects that I have addressed and others that are being presented at the moment on the Internet and outside of the Internet clearly show that a shift into a secondary orality has taken place. Maybe our language will not change as dramatically as mez puts forward in her constructed m[ez]ang.elle or as the Futurist would have wanted, but uses of languages like mez' or projects like TextFM are altering our perception of language and in the end will change communication patterns. Concluded can be said that new media once again reinforce old ones but at the same are transforming them. And while looking at the increasing number of computer and mobile phone users a definite change might be here to stay.

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