

## Words and Characters in the Age of Electronic Performativity

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What are the influences digital technologies are about to exert on our concepts of written language? For some time now animated design has become state of the art in new media typography. Abundantly, language in TV news formats, advertisements, and video clips is being set footloose. Thereby it seems that the playful novelty of the choreographed formation wears off rather quickly. However, they are not symptoms of pure entertainment tendencies of commercial culture either. Used in a skillful way animated letters enact a new stylistics based on typographic rhetoric. They are beneficial as part of a rich multimodal texture together with sounds and images to generate information that appears semiotically and sensually gripping. All in all the various kinds of animated markup (dynamic changing of letters in size, color, position, or speed and direction of flow) serve traditional functions of communication (getting and keeping attention, highlighting hierarchies or relations within the information given, enhancing visual pleasure and affirming the memory effect).

The contemporary hype of moving letters within digital communication culture seems to find little response in the digital arts. First of all written language seems to be a prudish material for the fine arts. Nevertheless, there are renowned artists who care about visual language as part of their works albeit the linguistic turn has been superseded by the iconic and spatial turn. Despite formal similarities it is to be shown that language as artistic material differs profoundly from communication design. Scholarly expertise is required to analyze the aesthetic and conceptual characteristics of language art and its function within communicative culture.

A letter as part of the alphabet from a linguistic viewpoint does not carry any meaning. It is a distinct unit as part of a phonographic system that

evolved from a process of defiguralizing of former iconic symbols. Especially within the Gutenberg galaxy the letter got tied to the horizontal and vertical grid of linearization. This affirmed an aesthetic that was accurate to the scheme – sort of stripped bear of its aura of the unique calligraphic initial, and a flawless allographic reproduction solidly placed without tilting or bending off the reading line. Consequently the perceptible impact of letters was reduced to the abstract and cognitive features of written language as a carrier of meaning. This also consolidated the divide within the arts between literature and the fine arts.

Against this background the close analysis of a few examples of word art shall be discussed from a historic perspective as part of analog and digital moving images. It will be shown that contemporary word art can be traced back to art movements like DADA or Fluxus but still makes a paramount contribution to modern communication issues. While using new technology in their installations or video performances the word artists at the same time hold an eccentric position which allows them to comment critically on language, new media, and communication. In allusion to Julia Kristeva one can speak of a second revolution of poetic language to describe works by Paul Sharits, Jenny Holzer, Tony Oursler, Jeffrey Shaw, Julius Popp, or Camille Utterback. With this perspective critical concepts are translated into various aesthetics of language. Within these aesthetics a number of key terms come into play to describe on the one hand the break with traditional concepts of language: poeticization, pathologization, pictorialization, spatialization, corporality. On the other hand these terms open up the problem of interpretability. Assuming that the works of word artists do not end up in a gesture of pure negativity, the question has to be raised what kind of semiotic as well conceptual strategies are employed to create meaningful works of art. At first glance artists seem to deconstruct a number of certainties from the realm of communication: for example advertising and political phraseology (Holzer), digital flow of information (Popp), trivial mythology (Oursler), perception and neurology (Sharits), or meaning as pure intellectuality (Utterback). This approach implies that the academic interpreter as much as the experiencing visitor of the artwork is confronted with a true challenge, namely to decide whether a certain artistic expression goes beyond an identifiable critical stance and alludes to some kind of alterity.