# "LPDT2": LA PLISSURE DU TEXTE 2


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This paper will discuss the artistic processes involved in the creation of the three dimensional, virtual art installation *La Plissure du Texte 2*, which is the sequel to Roy Ascott's ground breaking telematically networked art work *La Plissure du Texte*, created in 1983 and shown in Paris at the Musée de l'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris during that same year. While the underlying concepts of the original art work, as well as its capability of regenerating itself as an entirely novel manifestation based upon the concepts of distributed authorship, textual mobility, emergent semiosis, multiple identity, and participatory poesis will be underlined, the main focus of the text will be upon the creative strategies as well as the technological means through which the architecture was brought about in the contemporary creative environment of the metaverse.

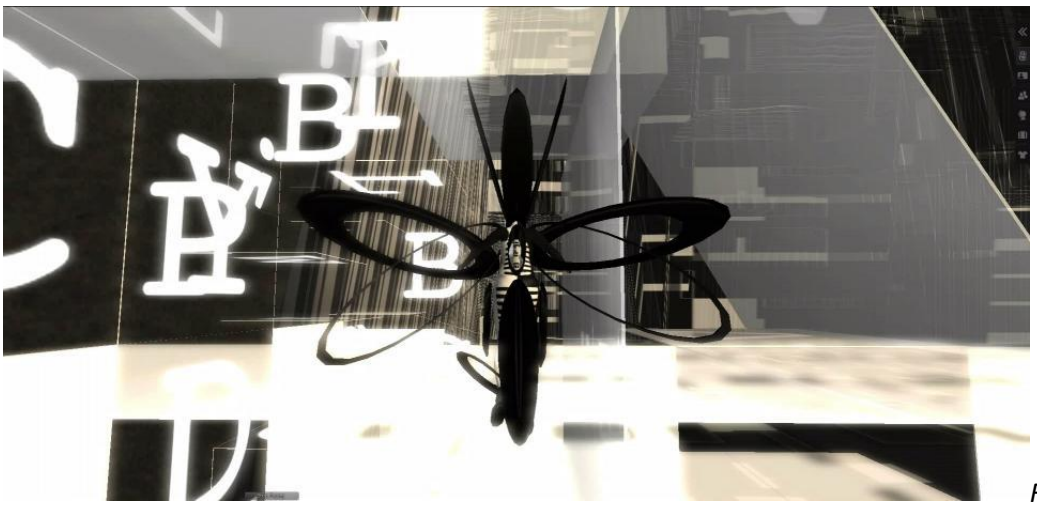

*Fig 1. LPDT2, Avatars playing in text ecology, Second Life, 2010. Architecture showing three dimensional textual deconstruction. Virtual photograph by Elif Ayiter.*

*Figure 2: LPDT2, The Letter Cube, Second Life, 2010.*

**Text Transformed**

The title of the project, *La Plissure du Texte: A Planetary Fairy Tale*, alludes to Roland Barthes's book *Le Plaisir du Texte*, a famous discourse on authorship, semantic layering, and the creative role of the reader as the writer of the text. As was also the case in its first incarnation 'distributed authorship,' a term coined by Ascott [1] has been the primary subject of investigation of *La Plissure du Texte 2 (LPDT2)*.

*LPDT2* consists of a geography/architecture constructed entirely out of dynamic input text, which is built in a three dimensional, online, participatory virtual world, i.e., a metaverse. While an earlier version of the work was created in the proprietary metaverse of Second Life, the current location is an independent artist's grid called the New Genres Grid which is a part of the newly emerging independent online hypergrid system.

Whereas in 1983 the text was pleated by a number of human storytellers positioned around the globe; in the three dimensionally embodied metaverse the storytellers show novel and unexpected attributes: An emergent textual architecture/geography, as well as a population of autonomous 'robot' avatars which dwell inside this bizarre, literary landscape are pleating the text by acting as communication nodes between the narrators of this new version of the tale: The primary persistent distributed authorship is now accomplished by many writers throughout the ages:

A text generator telling a non-linear, multi-faceted, often times poetic, story harvested from the online *Project Gutenberg* is now distributing its output amongst an architecture and its inhabitants, generating dialogues and iterations taking their trajectories from masterworks of classical literature. The pleating resembles musical sampling, the connection between the sentences fades, text becomes noise, from which the audience generates meaning.

While the virtual structure on the simulator provides the primary layer of pleating by visually mixing the different sources of text, yet another layer of textual input has been provided through which Real Life visitors can contact *LPDT2* by sending SMS messages as well establishing contact via Twitter. All pleated text - the generated, the contributed, and the stored - is simultaneously visible as a massive, ever evolving literary conglomeration. Consequently, the participatory pleating involves not only a meeting of individuals from the same timeframe but extends into a meeting between the past and the present, the bringing together of voices of many ages, then and now.

Although *LPDT2* has been planned as a virtual installation which will nonetheless be predominantly visited in a physical gallery space, the interaction with *LPDT2* is by no means limited to the physical realm alone: Since the project unfolds in a freely accessible, participatory online virtual world visitors throughout the globe can visit the installation with their avatars at any time of their choosing. Thus, an added layer of participation is provided through the three dimensionally embodied interactions of geographically dispersed individuals amongst each other, with the 'resident' robotic avatars, as well as the avatars of the artists themselves.

## Creating a System: Generating the Text

Various means of gathering the input text, which would get the entire system operational, were discussed during the early phases of the project; however even from the onset a wish to create a system whereby the text would be generated rather than be contributed by discrete individuals was seen as an

exciting option. That this was a distinct possibly was evident from the existence of various online text generators and particularly the *Dada Engine.* [2]

Although text can be harvested from many different sources such as search engines and even text determined upon by the artists themselves, *Project Gutenberg* [3] proved to be an inspired choice, since not only does the vast repository provide a huge resource, but also the text thus harvested reinterprets Roy Ascott's key phrase of 'distributed authorship' by adding to it a dimension of temporality, if not indeed a transcendence of the here and now: The repository holds over 30,000 texts which have been authored by countless individuals throughout history. However, beyond this aspect of temporality, the startlingly poetic nature of the harvested text has proven itself to be an additional blessing which came out of utilizing *Project Gutenberg* as a means for achieving 'participatory poesis.'

The Dada engine has been reprogrammed to select a sentence (S1) as the starting point and to search for another sentence (S2) in text (T) which is randomly chosen from *Project Gutenberg*. This search procedure is done by first searching the text for the longest word of S1. Once the related word is found the next sentence in the text becomes S2, the assumption being that S2 has a logical relation to S1 through the shared longest word. These consecutive sentences are then sent to an HTML server from where they are mapped onto the architecture. However, the same text generator also sends aggregated text via email directly into the metaverse where it is used as the conversational material for the robotic avatars who are the indigenous residents of the architecture.

Although the text generator does provide the bulk of the text, additional input is provided through an AI system contributed by *i-DAT* from Plymouth University through which visitors to the physical gallery space can send SMS messages which are then displayed as an additional text layer by means of a screen based heads-up-display. Finally, visitors to the virtual installation can send Twitter messages by clicking on a message board which displays a short sentence obtained from the text generator.

## The Aesthetics of *LPDT2*: Typographic Deconstruction

In both versions of the build, the architecture stretches itself over an entire metaverse simulator and reaches thousands of virtual meters into the sky, materializing on several platforms which show differences both in terms of visual appearance as well as content. Beyond this, the second incarnation of the project does not copy or mimic what was created in the first version, but strikes out into different visual investigations, searching for novel means of utilizing the generated text in a significantly more restrictive environment: While at a cursory glance the open metaverse operates in a similar fashion to the enclosed world of *Second Life*, nonetheless there are considerable differences when it comes to scripted objects and especially those involving virtual physics. This inevitably necessitated omissions of architectural components upon which the success of the *Second Life* structure had much relied. However, as is all too often the case, necessity gave rise to invention and the second version of *LPDT2* shows marked differences as well as improvements. As an example, the ground level of the second build puts us into a space of letter columns which form sentences from the harvested text. These columns surround a space filled with one hundred tables. Tablets of a single sentence each have then been placed upon these tables and through them the entire table hall bears testimony to the anonymously distributed authorship of the authors coming to us via *Project Gutenberg*, whilst at the same time reflecting upon the symbolic attributes of the 'tabletop,' a recurring conceptual element of Ascott's throughout his artistic career.

What remains consistent throughout both the first as well as the second formation of*LPDT2* is an adherence to the basic key phrases formulated by Ascott: Textual mobility, distributed authorship, emergent semiosis, multiple identity, and participatory poesis.

This brings about the installation in which the generated text is mapped onto architectural components such as floors, walls, as well as spaces which are more difficult to make sense of, such as a strangely configured cube upon which an ever changing text flow is mapped, or an ever changing labyrinth of sentences and letters of the alphabet. While the text can be read as full stand-alone sentences on the individual planes onto which it has been mapped, oftentimes the layering of the planes as well as the juxtaposition of typographic elements results in typographic deconstruction.

In the early 1990's the potential unleashed by desktop publishing and graphics software, allied with the methodological potential offered by deconstructionist philosophy, produced a style of graphic design and typography known sometimes as deconstructionist graphic design, and sometimes as 'The New Typography.' Although the later influx of deconstructionist philosophy cannot be denied, nonetheless deconstructivist typography has its origins in the early 20th Century. Thus, Marinetti writes in 1913:

"My revolution is aimed at the so-called typographical harmony of the page, which is contrary to the flux and reflux, the leaps and bursts of style that run through the page... With this typographical revolution and this multicolored variety in the letters I mean to redouble the expressive force of words." [4]

Modernist typography had engaged in such structural games, even before Marinetti. The printed word was liberated from printing's traditional constraints by Stéphane Mallarmé with *Un Coup de dés* in 1987, pioneering an expressive form of visual presentation for poetic language. One might have expected Marinetti to enthuse over *Un Coup de dés*, however he had other views:

"Moreover, I combat Mallarmé's static ideal with this typographical revolution that allows me to impress on the words (already free, dynamic, and torpedo-like) every velocity of the stars, the clouds, aeroplanes, trains, waves, explosives, globules of sea foam, molecules, and atoms." [4]

One of Marinetti's basic Futuristic tenets, the relegation of human experience to a continuum of sensations, underlay the techniques he proposed to use in achieving a Futurist literary expression. Marinetti described these procedures by declaring that "nouns will be scattered at random, infinitives with their greater elasticity will replace the pedantic indicative." [5]

Marinetti's attack on typographic convention, taking Mallarmé's work several stages further, had considerable prescience. His directness, vigor and visual augmentation of the power of words, the entire Futurist ethos of treating words as ammunition, helped formulate the solutions which the new needs of the 20th century demanded. [6]

Although separated in time though a period of 80 years, Ellen Lupton seems to pick up on certain aspects of Marinetti's outcry when she sees deconstruction in graphic design as a process – an act of questioning typographic practice. In Derrida's original theory deconstruction asks several questions which are crucial to typographic design as well: How does representation inhabit reality? How does the external appearance of a thing get inside its internal essence? How does the surface get under the skin?

A crucial opposition in Derrida's theory of deconstruction, and one which is also highly pertinent in terms of typographic design, is speech versus writing. The Western philosophical tradition has denigrated writing as an inferior, dead copy of the living, spoken word. When we speak, we draw on our inner consciousness, but when we write, our words are inert and abstract. The written word loses its connection to our inner selves. Language is set adrift.

Parallel questions for graphic design which preoccupy Lupton are how visual form may get inside the 'content' of writing and through what means has typography refused to be a passive, transparent vessel for written texts, instead developing as a system with its own structures and devices throughout the ages? A typographic work can be called 'deconstruction' when it exposes and transforms the established rules of writing, interrupting the sacred 'inside' of content with the profane 'outside' of form. [7]

Added should also be that, more often than not, deconstructionist typography exhibits a fascination with contemporary technology, in both its utopian and dystopian possibilities, as well as its glamour, adopting tropes and strategies of appropriation, juxtaposition, détournement, montage, collage, repetition, facilitated by or reflecting upon the extraordinary capabilities of digital technologies. It is thus of no surprise that the outcome often resonates upon a world of diffused and distributed communication mediated through networks of powerful information technologies. Even when the artifact itself is presented as a static printed page the reference to a cyberspace driven by hypertext is very often implicit, underscoring that "communication for the deconstructivist is no longer linear, but involves instead the provision of many entry and exit points for the increasingly over-stimulated reader." [8] Thus the page is no longer to be just 'read' but also to be 'perceived,' beyond the pure textual content, into all of its associative conjunctions: We are also meant to 'feel' rather than just to 'read' a page.

In *LPDT2* typographic deconstruction is mostly achieved through space; that is the Z axis of virtual three dimensionality. As one wanders through the conglomeration the text planes containing their individually coherent sentences will inevitably fall upon one another, creating overlapping layers and presenting the visitor with configurations which will juxtapose as well as superimpose different sizes and angles comprised of many different sentences, enabling readings which may present many entry and exit points. Since the input text not only manifests upon two dimensional planes but also materializes as three dimensional objects, another juxtaposition which deconstructs the typography is the perception of two dimensional and three dimensional text simultaneously, often one blending into the other, falling upon each other, creating waterfalls and cascades of words, which are indeed meant to be 'felt,' as well as be 'read.' The conversations held by the robotic avatars, as well as the SMS text sent from the physical realm add further layers to this deconstructive process. Furthermore, the entire typographic system is in an ever changing state of flux depending upon the motion and view point of the avatar who traverses it.

This visual deconstruction would appear to enhance the transmission of Ascott's fundamental key phrases: Textual mobility, distributed authorship, emergent semiosis, multiple identity, and participatory poesis are augmented not only through the contributions of the countless historic authors whose words reside inside *Project Gutenberg*, but additionally through the layers of deconstruction which brings these words and sentences together in ever changing novel visual expositions.

## Future Work

*La Plissure du Texte 2* is expected to be an evolving work which will continue its residency in the metaverse. As online, three dimensional technologies continue to develop many new interventions to the existent structure, as well as entirely new structures which may or may not emerge from the already existent one can be contemplated: An increasing availability of kinesthetic-somatic interfaces which can be expected to vastly augment avatar agency into states of online hyperpresence, [9] as well as research such as the AMBX system [10] and magnetic levitation haptic interfaces (Berkelmann et al, 1999), are only two of many projects aimed at an enhanced integration of physical and virtual sensory experiences which may vastly enhance, if not indeed fully alter, the adventure of yet to materialize future generations of *LPDT2*.

## ***References and Notes:***


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