
Roberto Simanowski, Professor of Media Studies at the University of Basel, champions a semiotic approach to digital poetry and art, invoking close reading, as opposed to theories that prioritize “code, body, and presence.” The book, aimed at graduate students, is densely written and deploys a wide range of theoretical readings from Adorno to Zola.

It gets off to a slow start. There is some repetition in the preface, introduction, and first chapter, which was first published in The Aesthetics of Net Literature (2007), edited by Peter Gendolla and Jürgen Schäfer. Simanowski then examines kinetic concrete poetry by discussing the work of David Small, John Cayley, Hentschläger/Wiener, and Squid Soup. Text engines or “machinic authorship” are the subject of the next chapter in which the author traces their origins in Dada and OULIPO, although there is no reference to Dan Graham’s project “Schema for a Set of Pages” for Aspen (1967). Simanowski is at his best when he closely examines an individual work, and there is an interesting discussion of Simon Biggs’s The Great Wall of China (1996), which reprocesses the text of Kafka’s short story of 1917. This leads on to a discussion of interactive installations from David Rokeby’s Very Nervous System (1986-90) to Lozano-Hemmer’s acclaimed Vertical Elevation (1999), which used public participation over the Internet to alter robotic lighting in the Plaza el Zócalo, Mexico City. This is followed by a chapter on “mapping art”: by this Simanowski means visualization, such as Mark Napier’s Black and White (2002), which analyzes traffic on the CNN server. However, this starts to elide with the next chapter on “real-time web sculpture,” especially as one of the examples scrutinized here is Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin’s Listening Post (2000-1), analyzing Internet chat rooms and bulletin boards. The epilogue re-opens the discussion of code, interpretation, and the avant-garde.

There is a useful bibliography, which includes many European sources. A surprising omission is Marjorie Perloff’s Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century (2010). The book has twenty-six black and white photographs of the works discussed. It would have been useful to have a separate bibliography for these “primary sources” with links to any of their surviving traces on the Internet. No doubt there are hardly any remains, and the transient nature of their hardware, software, data, and interactions reinforces the question of where the work of art resides in such pieces, and indeed who is the artist.

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