“The machinic author”

Artist’s Statement: The Reading Club

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Entanglements are not unities. They do not erase differences; on the contrary, entanglings entail differentiatings, differentiatings entail entanglings. One move – cutting together-apart. (Barad)

Disconnections, the alterations, the cut outs and paste - a live group discussion - a collective mind - an event not an object - moves, negotiations, retreats, attacks, situations - it includes spontaneity and vitality of thought - aware of our insides and outsides and our interactions all at the same time as the ludicrous limitations of our exchange - a multiple dialogue, a transformative process (Pop’lab)

Abstract

The Reading Club is an online venue for simultaneous, collaborative reading and writing, both of which occur within a precisely defined framework: «reariters» are invited to read a given text and to rewrite it within a set number of characters. The public also gets involved, reading and commenting in a chat field. Performances have been held in various languages (sometimes simultaneously), including the language of code.
ARTISTS’ STATEMENT

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Click this animated demonstration of The Reading Club to see it in action. Load time could be up to one minute after you click it. The Reading Club by Annie Abrahams and Emmanuel Guez, 3.9.11 _i_dentity_x_or[s][h]ism_ (2005-09-29 06:17) by Mary-Ann Breeze, Human Readable Messages (Traumawien, 2011), September 23, 2013. Readers : Alan Sondheim, Curt Cloninger, Helen Varley Jamieson, Lucille Calmel and Pascale Gustin.
We take the Reading Club as an example for how nowadays reading and writing is entangled with machines and software. A real-time language game with a humorously competitive character becomes, through a public act of constructing and deconstructing sense, a creative apparatus. This literary “machine” does not write itself, but makes authors write text in a conversational space full of meanings and emotions. It is a kind of human text generator that challenges the idea of creation and where the authors are, at best, co-creators. Appearing in the 1960s, the “death of the author,” who is not really one, is actually the awareness of the emergence of the machinic author.

**ONLINE AND EMBODIED SPACE**

The Reading Club, started in 2013 by Annie Abrahams and Emmanuel Guez, is an online event. Nevertheless an ongoing reariting can be projected in real space, as has for instance been done in the Centre Pompidou and the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris, and in the Mosteiro de São Bento da Vitória in Porto during the conference of the Electronic Literature Organization in 2017. However this projection in live, real space doesn’t directly influence the online reariting process. For more information see http://readingclub.fr.

The Reading Club was originally announced as, all at once

- an intertextual playground
- a laboratory
- an interpretive arena.

It was meant to be a device to explore reading on the web, to test, once more, the status of the author and to produce moving texts.

It is all that and more. Text in the Reading Club is performing and moving, literally pushed around and also emotionally touching. Participating in it is a very incarnate and corporeal activity full of affect. The bodies participating in a Reading Club do touch each other emotionally mediated by the information transformed into electricity. When a reader erases another reader they “feel.”

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**How It Works**

The interface, forked by Clément Charmet from the collective writing tool Etherpad, allows for only a limited number of characters. So the reariters need to erase text--their own, but also the text of the others--in order to be able to continue.

Thus the Reading Club is a complex apparatus where text is impermanent because reariters are constantly changing the flow of ideas, commenting on each others’ work, fast, in real-time. The reariters (the readers, who are also the writers) have no steady ground and are obliged to surf, slide, glide on this evolving text, continuously scanning their screen for interesting gaps, to be only very temporarily capable of introducing something, of making a mark in the stuttering story with no end. The limited time frame of each session interrupts the reariting process and brings it to an artificial end: a stop, that is not really one, because afterwards everyone can replay each session in an endless loop.

These and other settings of the interface function as what Massumi and Manning call “enabling constraints.” These are “sets of designed constraints that are meant to create specific conditions for creative interaction where something is set to happen, but there is no preconceived notion of exactly what the outcome will be or should be” (quoted in McKim). Through the settings the Reading Club becomes an active partner in the writing: it doesn’t write itself, but it “makes” the writing.

Looking at the Reading Club as a machine, from a formalistic, material point of view it can be seen as a human text generator, and also as a facilitator for a distributed intelligence on-the-fly. This intelligence creates text and relational patterns that do not depend on canons.

Participating reariters have to leave the self-centred reflective habits of the classical writer (Haraway) and accept the posture of a simple component who will never have an overview, but can share in a dialogically reariting through one another with the hard-and-software. This engenders creative and unexpected “outcomes,” and can be called in the words of feminist materialist philosopher Karen Barad a “cutting together-apart” (176) of new knowledge. The author becomes part of an apparatus, and is at the most a co-creator of text. She assists in an event that allows for diffractive moments (Braidotti et al.) – that is, “a mapping of interference,” which take her out of self-reflexivity, out of systemised subjectivity, out of a world that only reproduces what it knows already into an intra-active diffractive worlding (Palmer and Hunter). The author is this intra-action itself. The author is not “dead” as such (Guez and Vargoz). He has just changed his nature. The machinic author reveals herself as queer.

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1 Haraway: “Diffraction does not produce ‘the same’ displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction.”
2 Braidotti et al.: “The diffractive moment is when such interpellations or affections happen. The surprise of an interpellation or of affect is taken to be a moment of insight that is of importance for the production of knowledge.”
3 Palmer and Hunter: “What is a worlding? What is an –ing? Does the addition of a suffix –ing denoting the verbal noun phrase shift the world from a being to a doing; to a gerundive and generative process?”
WORKS CITED


BIOGRAPHIES

**Annie Abrahams** is an independent artist known worldwide for her netart (Being Human – online low tech mood mutators / not immersive. 1996 - 2007) and collective writing experiments. She is an internationally regarded pioneer of networked performance art. Abrahams has performed and shown work extensively in France, including at the Centre Pompidou and the Jeu de Paume, Paris, and in many international galleries as the Stadtgalerie Mannheim, Germany; the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center in Asheville, USA; the New Museum, New York; Furt- herfield Gallery, London; NIMk, Amsterdam and Aksioma in Ljubljana. She was lead-performer in ELO2017 Porto.