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e-Lit Jazz

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ARTISTS' STATEMENT

> Keith Richards: "Once we get behind our instruments there's something bigger. The sum is greater than the parts. There's just a feeling that we were meant to do this, we have to do this, and we're just following the trail."

Start from the case of Jazz and jazz improvisation. Think of the energy, think of the emergent form, think of the bodies in motion and communicating: eyes ablaze, fingers moving, breath through the instruments. What is like this in electronic writing? Can this provide a model for electronic writing? What if we look for the equivalent of Sun Ra or Billie Holiday in e-lit? There is much talk of embodiment in e-lit but this deceptive or at least fleeting, bodies seen in their traces, their haptic interfaces, their encodings; bodies as terminal points. Sure, e-lit authors read their work, typically still and stiff, incanting off the screen; and if they are dynamic and mobile, it seem to avoid the e in the lit, returning to older forms of performance poetry. Jazz improv is carried through bodies, through and in the instruments, bodies as producers and produced, not as terminals.

More generally, jazz is a life force. Its energy is palpable. How can we promote this in e-lit? Aristotle's *Poetics* or the Indian *Natyashastra* (with its concept of "rasa," that Alan Sondheim has invoked in relation to digital embodiment) think of the work as a bodily and communal artifact. Certainly concrete poetry attempted to describe something like this: the Noigandres pilot plan treats poetry as a feedback with a viewer or viewers. Certainly strands of e-lit such as the recent netprov explore improvisation and collaboration, but what if we start from this point?

Can the emergent features of this model account for "literariness" in electronic literature?

Do we need another account of literariness in electronic literature? Most accounts are based on the following:

1. literary mechanisms (literariness as an aesthetic use of the machine);
2. textual mechanisms (literariness as an aesthetic use of text);
3. authorial mechanisms (literariness as an expression of the author's style; machine used differently); and
4. thematic mechanisms (literariness as an expression of certain themes in culture).

We find all this useful and productive but directed from paradigms rooted in the single authored textual artifact. Yet art, and certainly the art of the last century, belies this. From conceptual art to modern theater, multi-performer and multi-artist works provide another and perhaps more useful approach to electronic literature.

How does jazz improv differ?

1. the instruments are significant but are clearly media for bodies, for breath, for movement;
2. the text is minimal or at least functions as a script/score, its role as an artifact secondary to its role as a provocation and means;
3. the authors are multiple and no one intention dominates, but they may take turns, and there may be exciting emergent authorial forms; and
4. certainly there are a variety of thematics in improvisation, and it may model complex ways of exploring a theme and its variations.

ABOUT

Sandy Baldwin is Associate Professor of English at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he teaches courses on electronic literature and digital humanities. He is the author or editor of 10 books, most recently *The Internet Unconscious*, Winner of the 2014 N. Katherine Hayles award for the top work of criticism in the field of electronic literature. He is editor of Computing Literature, the only academic book series focused on scholarship in electronic literature. He is also managing editor of *electronic book review*, one of the oldest all online peer reviewed journals. He is Vice President of the Electronic Literature Organization, where he directs the CELL initiative, a global consortium of research centers focused on electronic literature. His own artworks involve literary interventions in video games and are shown around the world.

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It is true that we speak of performance from the perspective of the reader – the reader performs the text. However, far too often this approach is subordinated to the single authored textual artifact. The text is performed by the reader but it remains singular and authored. The reader confirms the text, or if we focus on reader response, then such response is based on the text as artifact. From this, three immediate areas, explored in this presentation:

1. approaching all e-lit in this way
2. re-organizing definitions and canons of e-lit in this way
3. proposing alternative future directions for e-lit in this way

The following is an improvisation of e-lit theory. Firstly, what is theory today? We (whoever *we* is) are past the era where theory was something in itself. Today theory is absorbed into all we do. At the same time, the e part of e-lit, the flowing electrons, require any theory of e-lit to be improvised, on the fly, over the wires. In short, theory operates as a kind of "metadata," annotations for performing data.

More specifically, "e-Lit Jazz" is about re-situating e-lit in terms of jazz but also riffing on e-lit, approaching e-lit as jazz. This theory performance takes multiple forms, as is the case for an improvisation.

Firstly, an essay we wrote. The core of the writing is seventeen paragraphs on e-lit. Even here, this writing is fragmented, nodes of writing composed of at least two voices, sometimes one, sometimes more. You can enter at and leave at any point.

Second, a performance that took place in Victoria, Canada. At that moment, we performed the work within the institutional space of the conference held by the Electronic Literature Organization, that is, within the space that defines "electronic literature." In doing so, we recombined the terms for naming e-lit, we riffed on it. The order of the statements was randomized for reading and new terms were programmed and seeded into these texts. For the audience, the performance made a statement about e-lit as jazz, but in a form that was never to be repeated.

Finally, here, where you can read the latest performance of e-lit jazz. You can once again read the essay in its fragments, while at the same time a javascript grabs phrases and recombines the essay as you read it. This latest of the series of performances makes a statement for readers of *Hyperrhiz* but also keeps on playing e-lit jazz.

VIEW PROJECT: e-Lit Jazz

DOI PERMALINK

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e-Lit Jazz

Sandy Baldwin and Rui Torres

And

The rhizomatic "and... and... and." On the liner notes to Free Jazz, Ornette Coleman wrote: "It was when I found out I could make mistakes that I knew I was on to something." At first glance, notions of transcoding and assemblage fit particularly well with this notion of improv as emergent forms. Bop and electric, saxophone and violin. But: is e-lit truly an assemblage? Transcoding from where? Or can e-lit, or rather all lit, be re-defined as "and... and... and..."

Impossible

Pierre Boulez stated that it "is necessary to deny all invention that takes place in the framework of writing [...] improvisation is not possible." If I improvise according to rules, am I really improvising? Most examples of improvisation include some sort of rule, however loose. By this logic, a sonnet is improvisation with rules, the tightest and most planned form of writing is still improv, and improv - of any sort - is still rule-based. If I do anything at all, freely, am I doing anything? Is literature, as letters, impossible qua improvisation? Or is it precisely the opposite: there is only literature because of the possibility of improvisation, of radical invention, of something utterly unseen emerging out of the formal. In this case, should we perhaps talk about digital poetics and improvisation but not digital literature? Is there only digital improv, some of which happens to be "literary," that is: made of letters?

Thing

Theodor Adorno rants against jazz in discussing the thing-character of works of art in Aesthetic Theory. For Adorno, improvisational freedom in jazz is a kitschy bit of capitalist salesmanship. What's up with the thing? On the one hand, the artwork must appear, manifest and materialize, as a thing. The work of e-lit, however variable, distributed, and made of electrons, must be addressable, have a title, and so on. How far does improvisation undermine this? Reading and reading-writing engage in the not totally objective and thing-like aspect of the work. To read is to activate virtual potentials that are not thingy. There is something not yet in space or time that is actualized. At the same time, the work must be in space and time. Adorno writes of the "precariousness" of the artwork as thing, in space and time, using theater and music as examples, but argues that this does not "release the artwork from its participation in the world of things." Is all e-lit precarious in its non-thing-ness?

Score

The score or the program or the recipe. Three forms, three writings, three actions. How are these similar? How does electronic literature correspond to the score or the program or the recipe? The program seems obvious, but perhaps not: as Florian Cramer argues, we cannot tell what code does without executing it; that is, "the namespace of executable instruction code and non-executable code is flat." The output of a generative work itself a score, since it has an emergent time/space via generation. Or is the code of the generative work the score, since it is a generator of works? To record is freeze what was liquid, inscribe the indeterminate. Improvisation implies presence: it is procedural and fluid. Like many experimental forms of literature, these ergodic forms depend on performative materialities: we can say that they act as networks of relationships in constant metamorphosis and renegotiation. A database poem or orchestra of jazz improvisers: both are complex networks of multiple files.

Modes

Differences between three jazz modes:

1) "Classic" bebop, improvisation through heads, chord variations, and modal harmony.

2) Scored or game improvisation, as in John Zorn's Cobra.

3) Free blowing or free jazz improvisation, as in Ornette Coleman or Peter Brotzmann.

How do these map onto e-lit? Certainly: bop improv as literary variation and complexity; scored and game improv as any and all forms of e-lit generativity; but free blowing is less clear. Where do we find it? What if we add jazz fusion to the mix: affiliations as themselves improvisations; improv in the transcoding of language and cultural materials. Again: Jazz allowed for a redefinition of musical languages, genres, and it raised questions, challenged conventions. What can e-lit learn from this history and its debates? As with jazz in relation to music: is e-lit a new material environment to investigate different dimensions of literature itself?

Sorting

Sorting out: improvisation as a particular practice within jazz versus improvisation as a potential in any music, indeed any performative act. Where do we locate this potential in writing and e-lit? Is it in reading as a performative act? How might it relate to "ergodic," for example? Is improv something particular to certain art forms, including jazz and some types of theater? It would therefore simply not apply to e-lit, or to arts of inscription and writing in general, it would be a category error to discuss improv and e-lit and really there is nothing more to say. But what if I invent something to say? And what about when a work of e-lit does that, invents something new? Where do we put that, what sort of thing is that work?

Authors

Authorship, ownership. How does improvisation trouble these? Does it replace authorship with clusters of bodies in action? Is this like/different from the claims for subverting authorship in generative work, hypertext, and e-lit (the death of the author)? Let's recap: Is a generative text really created by its author? Is there a single author?There are: reader/(specta[C]tors) intervening in the process of text generation; collaborators that select, add and delete, change; readers acting like filters. In all cases, a displacement of the author. Readers becoming authors, using their software as their own, changing it. No authorship (no solo), but groupship (collective performance). Author-reader (autoreader). E-lit stages texts that do not exist; texts as latent possible texts; texts controlled by the genetic program that articulates them; cybertexts that are not concrete; texts who dream themselves, texts-ideas. Abraham Moles writes: "the computer is an enhancer of creativity, converting the finite into infinite." Improvisation and performance as mechanisms for the creation of continuously new unexpected works. AUTHORS as READERS dreaming the TEXTS. Text that are not except in the dream.

Why

Why improvisation now? How this might lead us to reconfigure community, collectivity, and action in e-lit. An issue of how we act/perform together. We ask you: what can we improvise together? How can we make something new?

History

What examples of e-lit, past or present, suggest improvisation? Purkinge is an early and significant project, working from about 1992 to 2001, with Sandy Baldwin, Eric Douglas, Chris Funkhouser, and Belle Gironda, a collective making not works but a continuous improvisations written down for the moment, for the event, starting from on-the-fly chat room and IRC writings and passing through music, dance, and other modes. We created with code, with instruments, live at rock concerts. There are other examples, of course, and they should be gathered: we should form a counter-history of e-lit, one based on improv, on the event, a history of e-lit as free blowing.

Futures

What might e-lit look like if it originated in improvisation? Consider the Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3: yes, monumental, amazing, but precisely "thing oriented." Individual works in the collection are not e-lit as free jazz, or are they? Twitter bots, a major contributions in the ELC3, could be understood in terms of jazzy improv interventions in the twittersphere. Jose Aburto's Grita requires that you vocalize, shout, in order to make the verses of the poem appear. Surely this is improv? Can we even predict how e-lit will be, what it will become? Could John Coltrane imagine John Zorn? Did Theo Lutz dream of Nick Montfort? Eschatological views of e-lit as the end times of literature, or

even the idea that e-lit begins or ends anything, imply too much teleology, and see e-lit purely as the unfolding of the possibilities of the apparatus. Can we move beyond this form of literalization? Can literary works be more than the sum of their technical features? Can e-lit avoid technocracy?

Code

Consider code, algorithms: are they ever improvisation? Does code improvise? How? What? Code is codification, codex, a book of laws, literally a "block of wood." Code is solid. Don't tell me otherwise: code doesn't do improv.

Feeling

"It bugs me when people try to analyze Jazz as an intellectual theorem," said Bill Evans, adding: "It's not - it's feeling." Can we think about e-lit as feeling, as practice only, as not intellectual or theoretical or analytical? Is fair to ask at a conference? Some forms of literature resist theorization, and could be defined by such resistance. Is this the case for e-lit? We continue to use the old, contested term "literature," and the throwback notion that there are poems and novels and so on in e-lit. Rather than these formalisms, e-lit is lit because it is never what it is, always only a practice. Let the stream of works just follow and be. Critics would then be left to reflect on process. Can critics be performers? If jazz is about feeling, is e-lit about feeling? What feeling? What is the feeling of e-lit? Not: e-lit makes me feel this or that, but rather its mood, its style as Merleau-Ponty put it, the way that it emerges into the world.

Institutions

How does e-lit affect other literary and scholarly practices? Can it be a provocation? DH, game studies, software studies ... Compare this institutional question to jazz: unwelcome intruder, later unavoidable, and now finally recognized for its impact on all other forms of music, from classical to rock. Jazz created new creative and reflexive forms, gave rise to schools, social programs etc. What forms and schools and programs are we creating? What community of mechanisms for future production and acquisition of knowledge? Is e-lit really a site for both theoretical and practical research? Are we using its performative and reconfigurable possibilities, its dynamic nature, not to make works but as a workflow, as an interface for new interpretive actions and horizons?

Collaboration

Jazz scholars use Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, polyphony, and heteroglossia to emphasize dismantling of stylistic elements. Jazz is defined by openness. In the same way, literary scholars address heteroglossia, polyphony, dialogism in historical experimental forms of writing. Should we

keep this jargon when addressing e-lit? Would this mean that e-lit as improvisation cannot be finalized, e-lit always indeterminate and incomplete, not a field but a line, side-slipping as Coltrane did over the scale. Imagine an e-lit that does not begin or end. Quote: snatch, borrow, dialogue.

Presence

"Jazz is there and gone. It happens. You have to be present for it. That simple," said Keith Jarrett. Presence and immersion are key features of a jazz performance. Improvisation further implies irreversibility. Readability rests only in its interpretation. Readings are riffs. There is only presence, production, momentum. The single moment, present: the un-simulated?

Words

Can we play with words just as jazz musicians play with notes? Does e-lit play in this way? Can we transpose the poem to a key other than the original? How, what? Is this still an Oulipo-like game? In Jackson Mac Low's poetry "any number of readers are encouraged to read aloud whichever words they wish, at whatever tempo they wish, for indefinite durations." Consider Or Pedro Barbosa, and his quantum cyberpoetics: from one word to another, there is "a leap of meaning, or a qualitative leap of informational energy." Linked in a complex network of interactions, words act out during the act of reading. Constellation, tension, flux of relations involving code, meaning, and culture, e-lit jazz.

Cobra

Can we conceive such thing for an e-lit work? Cobra: a game piece, conducted by cues on cards proposed by John Zorn, with guerilla units, sound memory, and cartoon tactics. Conduction(c), structured free improvisation for an improvising ensemble invented by Butch Morris, led by hand and baton gestures. Beyond mere randomness: constructing, arranging, modifying sonic compositions through collective improvisation, "a structure-content exchange between composer/conductor and instrumentalists." Why this? Can we reinvent poetry (mostly based on verbal language, but a sum of many different languages) with the alteration of aspects of "harmony, melody, rhythm, tempo, progression, articulation, phrasing or form through the manipulation of pitch, dynamics (volume/intensity/density), timbre, duration, silence, and organization in real-time."