Rewiring the Avant-Gardes:  
Brian Kim Stefans’s Digital Poetics

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Abstract

In the age of digital information, poetry and praxis are integrated with wireless technologies and hardware circuitry. These technologies not only permit unprecedented access to a variety of material, but they also enable preexistent texts to be easily sourced, reproduced, recycled, and repurposed into surprising new forms. In the case of Korean-American poet Brian Kim Stefans, this repurposing extends even to avant-garde strategies of appropriation. Stefans’s works use twenty-first-century digital technology to rearticulate both historical and contemporary avant-garde practices and texts. In this thesis, I interrogate five of Stefans’s digital projects from 2000 to 2010 in chronological order: “One or Two Things I Don’t Know About Her, or, ‘Dick’s Sister’ (Bellamy)” (2000), “the dreamlife of letters” (2001), The Vaneigem Series (2002), Circulars (2003a), and “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” (2010). These projects selectively remediate historical and contemporary avant-garde texts in the digital environment. Through close readings of these projects, I investigate the use of algorithm, blogging platforms, and the World Wide Web as poetic devices. In addition, I address the relation of digital media to the avant-garde strategies and appropriated texts on which Stefans draws in his works. I demonstrate that Stefans’s digital poetics continues the struggle of the avant-garde to enunciate acts of resistance to linguistic, social, and political structures and conventions. Through Stefans’s work, I also identify ways that this struggle has been reframed, recontextualized, and complicated by the media-specific characteristics of digital programs and online spaces. Stefans illustrates the question about how to find oppositional positions without reusing normative structures in language and text. Yet his works highlight that digital media are not staged in utopian spaces. Rather, the use of convention-based electronic systems is necessary for linguistic disruption. Stefans’s texts demonstrate the need to revise our understanding of the relationship between conventions and disruption, as well as the impossibility of finding a place outside language and convention-based systems.
I was undertaking a Master of Creative Writing program at the University of Auckland in 2009 when a random Google search for experimental North American poetry brought me to Brian Kim Stefans’s website www.arras.net. This chance online encounter with a major digital writer, together with the strong cohort of poets in the 2009 creative writing class, seeded a shy spark in poetics that would subsequently generate this thesis.

I want to thank my supervisor Jacob Edmond for his guidance and unwavering encouragement. Without his personal commitment and intellectual support, this thesis would not have to come to fruition. His challenging conversations have not only inspired my intellectual curiosity but have also generated exciting new trajectories for my creative writing. In addition, I am extremely grateful for a scholarship that Jacob Edmond awarded through his Marsden Fund grant. This financial aid has enabled me to undertake this research and to pursue my modest academic ambitions.

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Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini.
Success is not the work of one, but the work of many.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. i  
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... ii  
List of Illustrations .......................................................................................................................... v  
Introduction: Politics, Poetics, and Praxis in the Digital Age ....................................................... 1  
Chapter 1: Feminist Avant-Gardes and the Digital Text ............................................................... 12  
Chapter 2: *Circulars* Refreshed: The Situationist International Online ................................. 53  
Chapter 3: Futurism in the Digital Age: “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” .............................. 89  
Conclusion: The Avant-Garde in the Age of Digital Information ............................................. 120  
Appendix A: “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” Source Text ....................................................... 126  
Appendix B: Contents of Enclosed CD-ROM ............................................................................. 129  
Works Cited ...................................................................................................................................... 131
List of Illustrations

Figure 1. “A” and “B–C” sequences from “Dick’s Sister” ...............................................34
Figure 2. “L” and M–N” sequences from “Dick’s Sister” ...................................................36
Figure 3. First sequence from “Dick’s Sister” ..................................................................39
Figure 4. “D” sequence from “Dick’s Sister” .................................................................42
Figure 5. Prologue from “the dreamlife of letters” ..........................................................44
Figure 6. Text version of “the dreamlife of letters” ......................................................44
Figure 7. “O” sequence from “the dreamlife of letters” ................................................46
Figure 8. Index page from “the dreamlife of letters” .....................................................46
Figure 9. “S” sequence from “the dreamlife of letters” ..................................................48
Figure 10. “S” sequence from “the dreamlife of letters” ...............................................48
Figure 11. “S” sequence from “the dreamlife of letters” .............................................49
Figure 12. “C” sequence from “the dreamlife of letters” ................................................49
Figure 13. Guy Debord. ca. 1957. The Naked City: Illustration de Hypothèse des Plagues Tournantes en Psychogéographique. Copenhagen: Permild & Rosengren............................57
Figure 14. Logo from Circulars .........................................................................................57
Figure 15. “Daschle Denounces Bush Remarks on Iraq as Partisan,” The Vaneigem Series ......................................................................................................................................66
Figure 16. “PERSUSRE,” first recording, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” .............106
Figure 17. “STATES AIRSTRIKES,” first recording, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” .................................................................................................................................106
Figure 18. “ALPHABET,” first recording, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” ...............107
Figure 19. “ALPHABET,” first recording, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” ...............107
Figure 20. “SAI,” second recording, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” .......................112
Figure 21. “ISTENCERTEMX,” second recording, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” ........................................................................................................................................116
Introduction
Politics, Poetics, and Praxis in the Digital Age

The new media are orientated towards action, not contemplation; towards the present, not tradition. (Enzensberger [1970] 2003, 265)

If you don’t want something copied, don’t put it online. (Goldsmith 2011, 10)

In the age of information, the intersections of digital technology with language, text, and form are important issues for avant-garde poetics. The ubiquity of blogs, multimedia, e-mail, and instant messaging illustrate the interconnectivity of network ecologies in the twenty-first century. Digital networks become staging grounds for the immense proliferation and expansion of information as writers redistribute online conventions and structures of language, text, and form with remarkable ease. Coupled with these online patterns of distribution are programmatic strategies of duplication. (The cut-and-paste method of copying a text is the most obvious example.) Such strategies generate variant expressions of a work that can also exist in myriad of spaces online and in the so-called real world. As a result, the status of “the one authoritative version” is impossible to attain (Goldsmith 2006, 59; italics in original). In the digital age, one might question not only the originality of the text but also its structures of textual and linguistic authority that cut-and-paste methods replicate and disseminate on the World Wide Web, as well as in the real world.

From Tristan Tzara to Guy Debord, strategies of textual appropriation and technological détournement have long been part of the avant-garde’s response to new technologies of reproduction and the rise of the information industry. Yet these earlier avant-gardes’ use of appropriated language must today be rethought in the context of proliferating digital technologies. Digital reproduction and new distribution channels change the way writers create avant-garde poetry. What
happens to an avant-garde poetics in the digital age? How are the strategies of the avant-garde perpetuated or deformed in the digital medium? This thesis addresses these questions through the work of Korean-American poet Brian Kim Stefans who reiterates avant-garde poetics in multiple digital forms. My tutor texts—“One or Two Things I Don’t Know About Her, or, ‘Dick’s Sister’ (Bellamy)” (2000), “the dreamlife of letters” (2001), The Vaneigem Series (2002), Circulars (2003a), and “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” (2010)—interrogate and recontextualize avant-garde feminist, concrete, Situationist International, and futurist ideological and aesthetic approaches to language, text, and form. Stefans’s works illuminate the similarities and differences between digital poetics and pre-digital avant-garde practices. Put another way, Stefans redirects pre-digital and primarily print-based aesthetics in ways that highlight the continuities and contradictions in avant-garde practices that are engendered by twenty-first-century digital technologies.

Stefans’s digital works also illustrate the fusion of poetic language with high-level computer programming. As John Cayley suggests, Stefans is “one of the few true poet programmers who makes some portion of his work in new media” (Cayley 2006). His electronic texts have been variously described as “beautiful” and “spare” (Perloff 2006, 151), “minimalistic” (Strehovec 2003, 6), and “self-reflexive” (Morris 2006, 24). As Alan Golding remarks, Stefans “honors Language writers’ investigations of ideas of ‘presence’ and extends them into another medium” (2006, 258). That is to say, his texts investigate the politics of language in digital media. Where Language writers denaturalized linguistic structures and conventions in order to question the political status quo, Stefans extends this task into digital media, including into conventions of digital form. In the digital terrain, Stefans’s study of the politics of language includes the formal logic of programming, such as object-orientated languages. The interplay between human language and computer logic brings to the fore the tensions between the conventions of the machine and the structures of natural language.
In very different ways, the tutor texts in this thesis explore the poetical workings of appropriated language to resist the structures and conventions of language, text, and form. Stefans is not the only poet working in digital media who sources unoriginal material for his works. His contemporaries include mIEKAL aND (Mesotics for Dick Higgins, 1998), Ben Fry (Tendril, 2000), Darren Wershler and Bill Kennedy (The Apostrophe Engine, 2001), John Cayley (Translation, 2004), Jim Andrews (On Lionel Kearns, 2004; dbCinema, 2007), Alison Clifford (The Sweet Old Etcetera, 2006), Talan Memmott (The Hugo Ball, 2006), Jason Nelson (i made this. you play this. we are enemies, 2008), Illya Szilak (Reconstructing Mayakovsky, 2008), Jody Zellen (Without a Trace, 2008), Angela Ferraiolo (The End of Capitalism, 2009), Stephanie Strickland and Nick Montfort (Sea and Spar Between, 2010), and Stuart Moulthrop (Creature and Creators, in development). Stefans’s contribution to a model of appropriative digital poetics lies in his use of digital technologies and contemporary texts to explore historical and contemporary print-based avant-garde strategies, such as the Situationist International traditions of détournement and dérive, as well as the futurist use of handwritten script. As Christopher Funkhouser has noted, modernist approaches often “resonate closely with digital projects” (2007, 18). Exploiting these resonances, Stefans self-consciously draws on modernist and avant-garde aesthetics while also replicating and redirecting them in the digital context.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse this restaging and redirection of pre-digital and print-based avant-garde in digital media. By using avant-garde strategies and borrowings of text, Stefans’s works highlight how a digital poetics extends avant-garde investigations of language and form. Moreover, the media-specific properties of Stefans’s work reveal the tensions between earlier avant-gardes and the digital context in ways that evince the ongoing problem of questioning and overcoming normative structures and conventions of language, text, and form. Stefans’s works complicate the avant-garde struggle to challenge structures and conventions through modes of appropriation by asking what happens when the avant-garde impulses towards disruption are themselves
restaged. For the pre-digital and print-based avant-garde strategies and texts examined in this thesis, language constitutes the normative social, political, and cultural ideas that shape the world in which we live. Challenging such normative ideas demands strategies to upset the common structures of grammar and linguistic codes. Stefans’s restaging of these avant-garde disruptions in a digital context does not offer a utopian space outside of conventional text. Instead, Stefans’s use of the strict conventions of programming serves to analyse the utopian hopes of escaping convention found in earlier avant-garde approaches. Yet simultaneously, Stefans also draws on this avant-garde disruptiveness to unsettle the fixed programming structures of the digital environment.

Admittedly, avant-garde movements are highly diverse. Yet the specific avant-garde positions to which Stefans responds tend to stress linguistic and textual disruption—a disregard for normal rules of grammar, for example. Such disregard for these conventions finds easy parallels in digital media where the combinatory nature of programming can recreate multiple permutations of digital forms. As Florian Cramer notes, procedure-based digital literature “shows [that] the poetic potential of computing machines is not limited to transmitting ready-made signs” (2000, 3). Likewise, Bill Seaman suggests that the fleeting relations between media elements intersect to generate signification: the reader, viewer, and computer user can act on the “varying juxtapositions of computer-based media-elements to examine environmental meaning within a mutable generative electronic environment” (2007, 164). Stefans’s works raise the question of whether and, if so, how the avant-garde impulse to explode received ideas of language, text, and form might find analogues in the recombinatory nature of digital media and the machinic processes of the computer. Do digital media expand the potential for the avant-garde—and so underline Loss Pequeño Glazier’s assertion that the medium adds “potential for ‘making’” (2002, 34)? Can words be “freed from the tyranny of horizontality, or sequence” (Bernstein 1991, 3)? Or, on the contrary, does the digital context fix words to systems of convention even more tyrannically?
The diversity of digital forms might at first glance seem to offer the kind of freedom from fixed forms for which avant-garde writers have long yearned. The digital texts that I examine in this thesis include e-mails, a cinematic animation that plays on a fixed time line, web pages based on reproducible templates, a blog, and a random text generated animation. Such variety among born-digital texts has led them to be described with terms such as “fundamentally unstable” (Bolter 1991, 31), “carnivalesque” (Ryan 1991, 102), and “fractal” (Manovich 2001, 30). When George Landow observes that “one changes code, one changes the text” (2006, 35) and Michael Joyce proposes that “[p]rint stays itself, electronic text replaces itself” (1995, 232), they reiterate the idea that change is an integral property of the digital text. Yet as Matthew Kirschenbaum has noted, “exquisitely precise, calculated, and controlled processes” lie underneath the screen surface (2002, 25). Here, amid the computer hardware, the languages of programming make “exterior the interior workings of the computer” (Raley 2002). Algorithms methodically execute the transient and volatile relations between language and form that manifest at the level of the screen. While Jerome McGann argues that hypermedia structures like the World Wide Web present decentred texts, these structures are nevertheless systematically organized through “directed searches and analytic operations” (2001, 70). To suppose that a digital text is somehow more volatile than the text in a printed book is to ignore the hidden fields of programming languages that substantially shape the mutable properties of digital textuality.

Stefans’s work connects the tension between mutability and fixed structures in the digital media to questions of social engagement and politics. Stefans draws on a similar tension in the pre-digital avant-garde’s struggle to find ways out of linguistic and formal convention and to tie their formal disruptiveness to oppositional politics. As Funkhouser notes, poetry “is a socially constructed art form, always situated within other texts (not limited only to poems) and extended by readers” (2007, 18). In the case of Stefans’s fusing of politics and aesthetics, the use of code becomes both a poetic and a political device. The poetics and politics
of the digital text inform a broader critique of the cultural and political economy and the social world. While net neutrality typically conceives of online data as fundamentally neutral in value regardless of its origin, destination, and intent (cf. Marsden 2010; “Net Neutrality” 2011), a digital and appropriative poetics reinvents ready-made information into novel forms to shed light on hegemonic structures that are contained in language and convention-based systems, such as web template engines. As Lev Manovich suggests, computers “allow us to interact with cultural data” (2001, 70). Digital reproduction is hardly a disembodied practice that draws on valueless, meaningless data and processes but can itself be redirected with political intent into new cultural artefacts.

Stefans in particular investigates the conventions and normative structures of language, text, and form that readers take for granted because familiar use normalizes them. At times, the texts in this thesis challenge the structures that enforce ideological positions as universal truths. For example, Stefans interrogates the supposed authoritative structures of rhetoric in the New York Times in his series of appropriated articles The Vaneigem Series and in the animation “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).” Here, Stefans taps into the historical, cultural, and literary registers of Language writing that represent “a struggle . . . to unmake final sense” (Perelman 1996, 36). Although Stefans participates in a form of cultural thievery—the deliberate uplifting of language from other textual sources—theft as a political act also becomes increasingly difficult in the digital terrain. Legal structures, such as copyleft licensing and fair use, institutionalize the logic of shareware and freeware of programs, images, and texts. Such challenges also collide with other convention-based systems, such as the electronic page, algorithm, and code. Stefans’s works highlight that finding a position outside linguistic and programming conventions is equally, if not more, difficult in digital media than in the pre-digital context.

In order to understand Stefans’s politics of digital form, one must address the interrelationship between textuality and digital technology. In other words, one must treat Stefans’s texts as “technotexts,” a descriptive term that “connects
the technology that produces texts to the texts’ verbal constructions” (Hayles 2002, 25–26). Many designations can potentially describe the texts in this thesis. For example, Stefans uses the term “cyberpoetry” (2003b, 43). Yet technotext is particularly useful because it highlights the richness of its material inscriptive properties whether they are printing presses, software, and hardware platforms—right down to the circuitry of the machine that enables its visual and textual presentation. In many respects, technotext is similar to the perspective of “cybertext,” a term that underlines “the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange” (Aarseth 1997, 1). The term “cybertext” not only emphasizes the computational qualities of the text, but also responds to the “physical construction” of the work by the reader’s “non-trivial effort . . . to traverse the text” (Aarseth 1997, 1).

Neither “cybertext” nor “technotext” force an ideological perspective on the nature of the electronic text. Yet approaching Stefans’s work as a technotext recognizes the vital interplay between technologies that create the text (including use of the programming languages) and natural human languages to engineer signification.

To examine Stefans’s fusion of poetics and programming, one must, therefore, analyse the tense relation between natural language and the media-specific qualities—such as C++ or object-orientated programming languages—of the technologies he uses. By applying a media-specific analysis on his technotexts, one can shed light on the effects of avant-garde linguistic disruptions in the convention-based digital context. Media-specific analysis, also known as MSA, is the investigation of the “material apparatus producing the literary work as a physical artifact” (Hayles 2002, 29). Media-specificity also stresses the effects of the material properties that inform literary production and the dialogue between the text and its media. Such analysis also attends to the moments of recursivity that a digital text also undertakes. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue, media are “continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other” (1999, 55–56). This tendency of digital media to refer back to other properties and texts is
particularly evident in Stefans’s works that appropriate the aesthetics of mainstream news media. As a result, Stefans’s works often make visible the types of textual authority that operate in the information industry.

The appropriation and reconfiguration of preexistent works are integral to Stefans’s overall aesthetic practice and are inseparable from the wider context of digital media. The infrastructure of the World Wide Web is not only predisposed to sharing information, but it also makes such information a common currency. As Goldsmith’s epigraph at the beginning of this introduction suggests, digital spaces undermine traditional hierarchies of ownership and authorship. Cultural artefacts—the products and processes, such as poetry or music, that instantiate the structures and conventions of language, text, and form—become available for use and misuse. Various scholars have suggested a range of terms to describe the late-twentieth and twenty-first-century trend towards borrowed text, including “moving information” (Perloff 2005), “uncreative writing” (Goldsmith 2011), “redirected language” (Reed 2011), and “iterative poetics” (Edmond 2011). Likewise, an “open-source poetics” alludes to the contemporary impulse favouring “shared cultural codes, networks of dissemination, and collaborative authorship” that enable and sustain practices of strategic appropriation and replication (Voyce 2011, 407). Such a range of practices in digital media include data mining, collaging, plagiarism, music sampling, and web template engines, all of which present preexisting information in new contexts. For Stefans, these digital practices teem with meaning: the turn to appropriative, redirected, and iterative writing becomes part of an exploration of digital tools as poetic and political devices.

To illuminate Stefans’s fusion of iterative strategies, digital media, and responses to other avant-garde practices, I examine three sets of texts or clusters of related texts in chronological order that span the period from 2000 to 2010. As of June 2013, all texts remain freely available on the World Wide Web. In chapter 1, I examine a set of responses to a colloquium on sexuality and writing that was delivered through an e-mail exchange on September 30, 2000. I focus on three e-
mail essays and poems—Dodie Bellamy’s “Sex/Body/Writing,” Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s homophonic essay “Untitled Response,” and Stefans’s “One or Two Things I Don’t Know About Her, or, ‘Dick’s Sister’ (Bellamy).” I also interrogate Stefans’s subsequent adaptation of his e-mail response into the Flash animation “the dreamlife of letters.” While contemporary scholarship has focused on the kinetic drama of “the dreamlife of letters” (cf. Funkhouser 2007, 229; Saemmer 2009, 481–82), I analyse Stefans’s e-mail and “the dreamlife of letters” as examples of “differential” texts, a term that Marjorie Perloff uses to describe a work that exists in multiple forms (2002, 34). This chapter probes how feminist texts challenge the structures and conventions of gender, sexuality, text, and writing. In addition, I consider the problems of finding places outside of normative language structures and conventions in the digital context. Both Bellamy’s and DuPlessis’s texts demonstrate very different responses within feminist avant-garde writing to a shared issue about how to articulate critique against structures that essentialize identities and positions of gender, sexuality, and writing. Stefans’s use of procedure and code in his response “One or Two Things I Don’t Know About Her, or, ‘Dick’s Sister’ (Bellamy)” and “the dreamlife of letters” further complicate this struggle while exploring the inescapability of conventions in digital media.

Chapter 1 assesses the models of sexual politics and feminist avant-gardes that explore the structural relations between sexuality and text. In chapter 2, I undertake a different examination of the Situationist International and Stefans’s responses to the second Iraq War. In this chapter, I interrogate The Vaneigem Series (2002) and three works posted on the blogsite Circulars (2003a): “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword, “W’s Victory Speech: Gangsta Version,” and “War=Language.” These web texts demonstrate the tension between the Situationist International traditions of détournement (a form of plagiarism or collage) and dérive (a type of limitless wandering) with the machinic processes of the World Wide Web, such as web templates, the set pathways of hyperlinks, and translation programs. Circulars illustrates that digital media can continue and contradict avant-garde approaches that unsettle conventions. On the one hand, the World Wide Web seems to reflect
the chance processes of link rot—the process by which web pages become unavailable to a user—and prolific digital collaging such as MashUps, a term that describes functional hybrid web applications that are built from the data of various media sources (Wun 2009, 1696). On the other hand, the set pathways of hyperlinks may undo the disruption and displacement that Situationist International traditions create. The resultant texts in The Vaneigem Series and Circulars highlight an ambiguous relationship between pre-digital and contemporary digital avant-garde: alternative positions that can criticize poetics and politics are difficult to establish on the World Wide Web.

In The Vaneigem Series and in Circulars, Stefans examines the relation between the rewritten text to the source by exploring the role of language to destabilize the pro-war rhetoric of the Bush administration. In these texts, Stefans’s activism involves a collaborative poetics that links strategies of the Situationist International with the cut-and-paste techniques and Web 2.0 tools so apposite in the digital age. Web activism has been criticized as ineffectual for leading to the “deterioration in the quality of participation,” an assumption that, according to Henrik Christensen, is unfounded in research (2011). Yet the key focus in Circulars is not real world participation but the experimentation of digital text with the structures of the World Wide Web. Circulars is an experiment in writing as a political form. Here, Stefans undertakes a model of civic engagement that concentrates on exposing the overuse of political rhetoric.

In chapter 3, I continue my assessment of the intersections of early twentieth-century avant-garde movements and the digital aesthetics of the twenty-first century. In this chapter, I analyse the 2010 Flash poem “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” that draws on and restages the poetic and political impulses of Russian and Italian futurism. This poem expands Stefans’s experimentations with new media forms. Here, he uses object-orientated programming and futurist avant-garde practices while continuing to engage in the poetic-political critique of American global policy. In “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” Stefans appropriates an article from the New York Times, and his focus centres on the news media
conventions of rhetoric. In particular, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” illustrates that the language of programming is not neutral but can be utilized as political and poetic devices. Stefans’s use of futurism and news media continues the avant-garde strategies to upset the structures of text and language, while the futurist glorification of the machine and war leads to an uncomfortable connection between the text and the digital avant-garde. At the same time, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” shows that digital media can highlight the way that digital texts remain bound within the algorithms, stressing the inescapability of the language and the war machine.

As Stefans reiterates preexistent texts and transforms various avant-garde approaches and positions in digital media, he highlights an ongoing question about how to articulate oppositional positions without resorting to normative structures and conventions. The resulting texts illustrate that digital media do not take place in utopian, democratic spaces. Rather, the use of convention-based, fixed systems is vital to the linguistic disruption of natural languages. Stefans’s texts demonstrate the need to comprehend the important relationship between conventions and disruption, thereby pointing to the unavoidability—as well as the necessity—of both language and the machine.
Chapter 1
Feminist Avant-Gardes and the Digital Text

I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man. (Cixous 1976, 877)

If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story. (Irigaray 1980, 69)

Brian Kim Stefans’s “the dreamlife of letters” (2001) is a Flash animation that visually interrogates the semantic slippages in language. Running at approximately eleven minutes, the work yokes together the syntax of cinematic display and text. Arranged in alphabetical order, the programming animates words against an orange backdrop. At times, morphemes (the smallest indivisible morphological units, such as “un,” “break,” or “ing”), split off and recouple to produce astonishing new word combinations. As a result, “the dreamlife of letters” engenders fleeting relationships between minimal functional components in language as they migrate around the screen. In this way, the poem supports Jay David Bolter’s conceptualization of the “potential text,” where the possibilities for meaning are constructed from continuously shifting units rather than from an inclusive whole (1991, 9). Joining bold video effects with a text that refuses to stay still, “the dreamlife of letters” has become a much-celebrated model for the twenty-first-century technoteext that fuses a body of data and algorithms with text. Craig Douglas Dworkin calls attention to the poem’s cinematic choreography: “promiscuous letters” are animated in a “carnival rhythm of cuts and fades” (2007, 53). The combination of filmic effects and typographical design, in effect, foregrounds interconnectivity between words and movement. The text is no

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1 A recording of “the dreamlife of letters” is available in Appendix B on the CD-Rom.
longer anchored on the page. Rather, “the dreamlife of letters” incorporates motion as a vital property of its message. As Janez Strehovec suggests, the animation’s “quick transitions to anti-words, derivative words, and even non-words” engineer poetic meaning (2003, 7). The dramatic visual display invites the reader to engage with the instable relationships between “between sign and signified” (Funkhouser 2007, 229). The union of elegant rhythm and text makes this poem a particularly compelling example of the way that new media activate language on the screen.

Yet “the dreamlife of letters” canonization as a prototype for twenty-first-century digital poetics has largely obscured the context and specific conversations about avant-garde poetics in which it engages. Stefans’s “the dreamlife of letters” is not a self-contained, non-referential poem. Rather, it is the product of a generative discussion that was initially staged in a moderated group e-mail list, largely known to the North American poetic community as the Poetics List. Charles Bernstein and Loss Pequeño Glazier established the list in late 1993 (Bernstein [1999] 2012), maintaining it on the servers at the State University of New York-Buffalo. In 2000, Stefans was invited to participate in an e-mail-based colloquium that was organized and distributed by the Poetics List. The colloquium centred on the sexually charged essay “Sex/Body/Writing” by San Francisco writer Dodie Bellamy. Twenty invitees were divided into four discrete groups of five.

Note that the subject headings of Bellamy’s and Stefans’s e-mails differ from the titles of their works. In the bibliography, I have listed Bellamy’s e-mail as “Colloquium 0.1: Sex/Body/Writing—Dodie Bellamy.” I have abbreviated Bellamy’s e-mail as “Sex/Body/Writing.” Likewise, I have referenced Stefans’s e-mail as “Colloquium 4.3: Untitled Response—Brian Stefans.” Stefans’s e-mail included a short essay response as well as the poems. Hereafter, I refer to Stefans’s colloquium poems as “Dick’s Sister.” Lastly, I have referenced DuPlessis’s e-mail as “Colloquium 4.2: Untitled Response—Rachel Blau DuPlessis.” Throughout this chapter, I refer to her essay as “Untitled Response.”
members. Each member responded critically and creatively in sequential order to Bellamy’s essay and to the responses of previous participants within the assigned groups. Stefans joined the fourth group in the colloquium and followed poet and feminist literary critic Rachel Blau DuPlessis. He reorganized alphabetically DuPlessis’s response to Bellamy, constructing some thirty-six shorter poems from his new arrangement. Stefans collectively titled these e-mail poems “One or Two Things I Don’t Know About Her, or, ‘Dick’s Sister’ (Bellamy).” Following the conclusion of the colloquium, Stefans reedited, animated, and published this text on the World Wide Web as “the dreamlife of letters.” As of June 2013, “Dick’s Sister,” along with the variegated responses to the colloquium, remains online at the Poetics List archive.³

While “the dreamlife of letters” has gained a considerable amount of critical attention, scholars have mostly overlooked the responses, the chain of debate, and rewritings of which Stefans was a part. Stephanie Strickland, for example, calls the animation “more satisfying and provocative than any of its precursor texts” (2006). Funkhouser and Dworkin have briefly acknowledged Stefans’s appropriation of DuPlessis’s essay (Funkhouser 2007, 228; Dworkin 2007, 53). Likewise, Marjorie Perloff examines “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters” as examples of “differential” texts, a term that she uses to denote a work that is “neither single nor autonomous but a set of variants” (2002, 34). That is to say, differential texts exist in a variety of media, taking multiple forms with “no single version being the definitive one” (Perloff 2006, 146). Perloff has primarily analysed the two works in relation to each other, largely overlooking their similarly differential relation to DuPlessis’s and Bellamy’s texts and poetics. To my knowledge, there appears to be little discussion about the animation’s relationship to Bellamy’s essay. Such an

³ The colloquium took place on September 30, 2000. All e-mails relating to the colloquium can be accessed at http://listserv.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A1=ind0009&L=POETICS.
oversight ignores the relation of “the dreamlife of letters” to the works that provide its source text and to which it responds.

This chapter interrogates how Bellamy’s and DuPlessis’s essays have grappled with strategies of unsettling structures of gender, sexuality, text, and language, and how Stefans’s texts respond to these competing visions of feminist avant-garde poetics. I explore how Flash and e-mail bodies recontextualize and reframe these normative structures and conventions. More specifically, this chapter addresses a question that arises in Bellamy’s, DuPlessis’s, and Stefans’s contributions to the colloquium: how can poets and writers analyse normative structures and conventions without resorting to hegemonic or essentialist views of gender, sexuality, and language? All these texts demonstrate the difficulty of finding a position outside these normative frameworks, a problem that Stefans further complicates by using digital procedures and code in “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters.” One can understand “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters” as works with vital interrelationships—not only to the feminist texts that preceded them, but also to the media-specific qualities of online discussion groups and multimedia software. As such, one can read Stefans’s texts as negotiating the tension between the individual and community. If, as Hayles points out, “change anywhere in the system stimulates change everywhere in the system” (2002, 33), then we must explore what happens to a model of collaborative avant-garde when the text moves from a poetic exchange to the control of a single programmer. This chapter addresses the issue of who speaks for whom and who controls the text—a question common to Bellamy’s “Sex/Body/Writing,” DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response,” and Stefans’s “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters,” but which becomes even more pressing when we attend to the relationships between these intertwined texts.
“Sex/Body/Writing”

Dodie Bellamy’s and Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s contributions to the colloquium examine a common argument about how one can disrupt existing structures and conventions of gender, sexuality, and language without resorting to aesthetic strategies that essentialize the text or the physical body. Bellamy’s works address the issue by exploring the dialogue between narrative form, gender, and sexuality. Her texts are characteristically nonlinear. They use interruptive and multiple mini-narratives that describe sundry sexual experiences, often in a highly erotic language. In her essay “Sex/Body/Writing,” Bellamy’s narrative is composed of fragmentary personal stories and snippets of conversations that detail sexual desire between herself and her students, friends, colleagues, and would-be-lovers. Yet Bellamy’s narrative occupies a paradoxical position: “Sex/Body/Writing” manifests a friction between the act of sexualized writing and the difficulty of finding linguistic representation that can adequately illustrate embodied experiences. As Christopher Breu notes, this tension swings between the “ethical and political imperative of attempting to write the body” and Bellamy’s admission that “[l]anguage and the body are never going to meet” (2012, 270). Bellamy juxtaposes theoretical language with the “sexually charged language of embodiment” as a way to understand this complex relation between “language and the body” (Breu 2012, 270). The insertion of “body” between “sex” and “writing” in the essay’s title suggests that the lived experience of the physical body mediates theory-driven sexual politics and the act of writing. At the same time, the title refers to the engagements of the sexual body with a body of writing. Reflecting its title, “Sex/Body/Writing” negotiates between theory-based writing that is highly sceptical of self-expression and a literary approach that foregrounds intimate sexual experiences.

The blending of erotic language with multiple short narratives suggests the influence of New Narrative writing on “Sex/Body/Writing.” Emerging out of the highly divided San Francisco poetry scene in the 1970s and 1980s, New Narrative became associated with gay, lesbian, and feminist writers, including Bruce Boone,
Robert Glück, Camille Roy, and Kevin Killian, as well as Bellamy. Frank O’Hara and the Beats heavily influenced New Narrative writers. They also developed significant friendships and professional affinities with other radicals like Dennis Cooper and Kathy Acker. New Narrative aesthetics stressed gay and feminist literary practices that challenged the “materials of representation,” and their targets included those who were seen as advocating textual form and content in ways that marginalized the lived experiences of gay, lesbian, and feminist writers (Burger 2004). In this respect, the movement was in part a reaction against Language writing, which was prominent in the Bay Area at the time. New Narrative writers criticized Language writing for its predominately straight, male institutionalism that resisted self-expression in favour of a progressive formalism. By contrast, some Language writers viewed New Narrative as “reactionary” and “highly suspect” since it valorized sexual experience as a political tool to transgress normative acts of writing and binaries of gender and sexuality (Bellamy 2006, 50). In spite of these differences, New Narrative and Language writing were also “fellow travellers” since both movements shared a politicized focus on the way that language and writing could construct meaning (Glück 2004). Boone notes, for example, that New Narrative was “language conscious,” arising “out of the specific social and political concerns” of gay and feminist communities (1981, 1). New Narrative therefore emphasized that language and acts of writing constituted wider political and cultural hegemonies. For gay and feminist writers, explorations of gender and sexual performances, physical bodies, textual forms, and erotic language were strategies to shock the perceived straight, male social world. Performative text also enabled these writers to reclaim self-expression in avant-garde writing as a valuable political tactic.

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In order to assess the strategies that Bellamy uses to critique structures and conventions of gender, sexuality, text, and language, I want to give a brief overview of two specific New Narrative tactics. First, New Narrative utilized techniques that underscored breakage and disintegration of form and subjectivity. As Robert Glück states, narratives wove together appropriated piecemeal forms—such as anecdotes, gossip, pornography, and scandalous stories—the content of which writers excavated from their immediate lives (2004). While this content could be of a sexual or erotic nature, New Narrative held that writing was “more than a description of sexual acts” (Bellamy 2000b, 55). Sexual and textual boundaries could collapse by juxtaposing sexual experiences in multifarious textual fragments. In other words, New Narrative writers went beyond detailing their sexual exploits: they investigated the relationships between textual forms and content in order to confound sexual boundaries. Second, alongside fragmentary form, New Narrative writing frequently used a “text-metatext,” a type of “running commentary” that probed the erotic content (Boone 1979, 30). This framework of commentary invited a critical exchange between the writer and her text and, by extension, the writer and her audience. As Rob Halpern notes, the ongoing analysis between erotic text and authorial voice allowed the “narrative to interrogate itself” (2011, 90). The result constructed the subject-author who, with very real “faults and fissures,” was the product of her environment (Halpern 2011, 90). This model of gay and feminist writing, then, brought together a set of sexual vocabularies and tactics that explored how the social pressures of a straight, male world shaped the subject and her experiences.

New Narrative may be associated with the avant-garde of the 1970s and 1980s, but Bellamy’s essay “Sex/Body/Writing” still manifests some of its devices in 2000. Bellamy’s text joins together multiple anecdotes to create a sequence of various erotic moments that bridge sexual arousal with illegitimate, unrealized fantasies. In one passage, for example, Bellamy writes:
I don’t let on how drawn I am to [his] writing, but H. seems to know anyway. Over the semester his manner softens to sweetness, eagerness, affection even. Then one day he’s not in class I miss him. Unanswered questions, I suppose, are a form of intimacy. He writes, “you, standing middle of my target, i can admire you more than physics allows me.” I know this isn’t about me, but I pretend.

I do a little makeover: lose some weight, streak my hair, spend teaching money on new clothes. T., whom I haven’t seen in months, walks up to me at a party and says, “You look really good.” In the past he hasn’t given me the time of day - even though I’ve made overtures. I think, “I hate you,” get out of the conversation as quick as I can.

Here, the passage describes two separate encounters. The first paragraph details the heterosexual power dynamics between student and teacher: the narrator, Bellamy, is drawn to the aura of the student’s writing and to his projection that she constructs in his absence. In addition, she fantasizes about her own objectification as a physical “target” of the male gaze (“I know this isn’t about me, but I pretend”). In the second paragraph, the narrator once again objectifies herself: she manipulates her appearance—loses weight, alters her hairstyle, and acquires new clothes—to fit into a conventional model of heterosexual attractiveness. While T.’s past indifference morphs into interest, the narrator registers her disgust—not only at T., but also at herself for being complicit in a sexualized power dynamic. This passage sutures together a conflicted female subject that stresses a desire (“I miss him”) and a condemnatory passive aggression (“I hate you”). The narrator does not break the heterosexual norms she despises but, strangely, adheres to them.

The passage also calls into question the appropriation of writing and the relations of power involved in reconceptualizing material. In one possible reading, the narrator reimagines and recontextualizes H.’s story as her own. However, acts
of textual appropriation cast doubt as to who owns this story: whose voice is really speaking in the text? The act of rewriting content examines the autobiographical form by challenging authenticity and textual veracity. In one passage, for example, Bellamy details one of H.’s writing assignments where he describes a cannibalistic encounter:

In one piece a woman gets too close to him so he eats her. It’s his “Archiving” assignment. “Choose an object that you can easily bring to class. Write a real or imagined narrative explaining this object’s significance - its importance in ‘your’ life, how it came to be a part of ‘your’ life. Type and make copies for the class. Bring your object with you.” He brings in a plastic fork and knife.

For an essay that is composed of multiple narratives, a reader might ask where Bellamy’s authenticity lies in this text. H. may be the author’s invention, his story of cannibalism may be fictional (alternatively, it could be real). Yet “Sex/Body/Writing” sets up autobiographical encounters: Bellamy initializes names, conferring the appearance of anonymity as if to protect identities. Moreover, some accounts seem deeply exposing of her embarrassment. In “Sex/Body/Writing,” Bellamy expresses her desire for a writing that “champions the vulnerable, the fractured, the disenfranchised, the sexually fucked-up.” In this case, the vulnerable subject appears to be the writer herself. Bellamy acknowledges, for example, an anxiety of an audience’s “x-ray vision” that penetrates her body down the “frayed elastic of [her] panties.” Here, she suggests that the relationship between the body of writing and the sexual, physical body is tense when sexualized language and content is explicit in the text. Bellamy further reinforces her awkwardness: “no way can I stand in front of an audience reading this stuff,” she declares, “and maintain the abstraction [of] the ‘author.’” Underlying this statement is a suggestion that the sexually charged narrative breaks down the distance between reader and the subject. This vulnerability is
also problematic as Bellamy is responsible for her own objectification. “I feel miserable and invaded,” she admits, “[b]ut, really, it is I who have invaded my own privacy.” Bellamy balances these moments of seemingly authentic discomfort with the “real or imagined narrative” of her students and acquaintances. As a result, Bellamy collapses the boundaries between fiction and autobiographical genres, drawing the fantasy or authenticity of each into question.

“Sex/Body/Writing” does not achieve a transparency or an absolute truth because the authority and realism of subject, character, and the author are impossible to ascertain.

By rewriting and collaging stories, Bellamy unsettles the idea that the normative structures and conventions of text and writing can convey absolutes. This strategy is part of a broader program to disrupt the normative politics of narrative—the narrative structures, devices, and relations that represent and sustain dichotomies and social mores. In “Sex/Body/Writing,” Bellamy delights in moments that transgress binaries, with particular emphasis on the divisions between order and disorder, cleanliness and pollution. For example, she writes:

Stanley, my cat, has peed in the bed while I was sleeping in it. “I’ll deal with this later.” I get up, make coffee, sit down at the computer and take some Delany notes—“hebephilia, the love of filth”—I’m reading and typing and thinking about Delany for an hour or so when the scent of cat urine impinges upon me—the gray jersey nightgown I’m wearing reeks with Stanley’s urine. How marvelous, I think, Delany has imbedded my woof and warp

Samuel R. Delany is the author of *Hogg* (1995), a pornographic novel that he wrote initially in 1969. The novel details at length violent rape, incest, gay sex, child molestation, urophilia, and coprophiliac acts. Bellamy begins “Sex/Body/Writing” with an epigraph from Delany (“a fairy tale assumption in which an all but non-existent condition is assumed to be rampant”). She also directly quotes his
explanation of Hogg, which Delany describes as a critique to “every dichotomy on which our culture is based.” In the passage above, Bellamy enjoys the accidentalness of discovering her foul condition, and her delight blurs boundaries between filth and cleanliness as she compounds cat excretions with her acts of typing. For Bellamy, writing is a pleasurable and polluting performance rather than a transparent act that exposes any universal cultural mores.

While “Sex/Body/Writing” proposes a “[w]riting that shifts the matrix” of cultural assumptions, Bellamy also seems suspicious of transgression for its own sake. For example, she writes:

“I’m having some problems with transgressive writing,” he says. “Why is A.M. Homes so popular? Because she’s transgressive without being challenging.” Transgressive but not challenging YES these words circle through my head like a mantra for days - a formula for just about everything that pisses me off. Any sentence containing the word “gender” is at the top of my list.

Like Delany, A.M. Homes is a controversial author, most notably of The End of Alice (1996), which details accounts of child sexual abuse, prison rape, and murder. In this passage, Bellamy queries how to articulate a subversive writing that retains its transgressive power without normalizing notions of gender and sexuality. For Bellamy, transgressive writing cannot be solely enunciated in descriptive expressions of violent hostility towards hegemonic, heterosexual society. “Sex/Body/Writing” negotiates between working with, and finding places of literary resistance to, pervasive social pressures. In this sense, “Sex/Body/Writing” is an essay about the politics of writing and the difficulty of creating positions of resistance to literary and social conventions. As Gregory Bredbeck states, “power is rehearsed and constructed with the very apparatus of representation” (1995, 480). Bellamy does not overcome the literary practices that reinforce assumptions
of gender, sexuality, and language in her essay. Rather, she performs and interrogates them. For instance, she writes:

The last day of class. S. has changed her hair from white blonde to yellow blonde. “I was looking too 80s.” S. projects desperation for attention that she doesn’t have a clue how to get. (My softspot for her.) Finally, after hinting about it all semester, she’s writing directly about being raped. “in the back of my head lingo had long since departed and I wasn’t prepared to go down” This form is really working for you, I tell her, the straightforward narrative interspersed with poetic intensities. I think to myself, “This woman, this BODY has been raped for Christ’s sake.” While Creative Writing teaches us thus to hermetically seal content in aesthetics, I’m thinking, “Dodie, you are so full of shit.”

Here, Bellamy highlights the struggle to communicate specific—and sometimes brutal—social realities. She suggests that “to hermetically seal content in aesthetics” is a fundamentally problematic response to the violence of rape exerted against the female body. As Kevin Killian argues, “[n]arrative is a faulty analogue” for experience in the sense that it “attempts to ape the realities” of life (1990, 13). In this passage, Bellamy suggests that narrative-orientated aesthetics cannot authentically convey the experience of gender-based sexual violence. As a result, she expresses self-disgust towards the inadequacies of representation: “Dodie, you are so full of shit.” If, as Bredbeck proposes, narrative becomes “an inescapable quest” without “the promise” of resolving the lacuna between aesthetics and experience (1995, 489), Bellamy also posits that institutional practices of creative writing cannot bridge the gap between the text and violence done to the female body.

In my reading of “Sex/Body/Writing,” Bellamy investigates the conventions of writing as much as she stresses structures of gender and sexuality. For Bellamy, while writing can never fully coincide with expression, her commentary and the
juxtapositions of anecdotes permit her to cross-examine narrative and critique the modes of gender, sexuality, and writing. In this way, “Sex/Body/Writing” reflects a performative text where subversion is more nuanced. Bellamy locates the transgressive potential of writing in the investigation of the relations between form, content, and experience. Thus, she stresses that readers have no access to universal truths in language, text, and writing.

“Untitled Response”

Rachel Blau DuPlessis presents a different mode of the feminist avant-garde poetics, one that locates resistance in the disruption of normative language and syntax. DuPlessis is a feminist literary critic and poet. Her projects include the ongoing long poem Drafts as well as scholarship that recovers the narratives of historical women writers, such as H.D., Emily Dickinson, and Mina Loy. She was also a contributing editor of the feminist journal HOW(ever), which operated between 1983 and 1992. HOW(ever) was an important publication for experimental women writers who were interested in “women’s language issues” and “the making of poetry” (Fraser 1983). For DuPlessis, these “language issues” included language-orientated responses to the male-centred avant-garde poetry as well as poetic responses that sought to explode restrictions on women’s experimental aesthetics. Entrenched in language, DuPlessis contends, are the “paralyzing set of cultural allusions and discourses of race and gender” that function as “nets of hegemonies” (1988, 190; italics in original). Her works have often privileged linguistic disturbances that upset normative syntactical structures. As Hank Lazer argues, DuPlessis illustrates the overlap of “[p]olitics and aesthetics” in her “acts of resistance” to literary conventions (1996, 38). Her “Untitled Response” to Bellamy in the Poetics List colloquium is simultaneously a creative and critical response to positions of gender, sexuality, and writing. DuPlessis’s essay highlights her strong linguistic interventions in poetry that subvert political and cultural paradigms.
DuPlessis was the first member of the fourth group in the online colloquium to respond to Bellamy’s “Sex/Body/Writing.” Her essay alternates between short statements that employ homophonic spellings, and the translation of these statements into standard English. The resultant text performs the dream of free and multiple sexualities for which the essay argues. DuPlessis begins her essay in the following manner:

“gin dear hiss delight” sad dough tea bellum me wansin moo van bo drip age tic tock 2 cum “gender is the night” said Dodie Bellamy once in *Moving Borders*, page TKTK (to come (to come to 2 cum. zzz gindra delite ides aye - ginestra scissors delays, hex you all in ties his duh nigh, to come).

“Moving Borders” refers to the 1998 anthology *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Woman*, edited by Mary Margaret Sloan. In this passage, DuPlessis directly quotes the line “gender is the night” from an essay in the collection by Bellamy. At the outset, DuPlessis consciously anchors her “Untitled Response” in a feminist literary tradition that attempts to oppose the exclusion of innovative women writers from the literary avant-garde. In “Sex/Body/Writing,” Bellamy cites Samuel R. Delany and the stories of her students. Her citations and appropriations blur the binaries of fiction and autobiography, and thus she obliterates a reader’s access to absolutes of truth in writing. In her “Untitled Response,” DuPlessis’s citation defines her text in relation to Bellamy’s feminist voice. In addition, the dichotomy of homophonic and standard English also obscures transparency in the work: the sound translation renders the text difficult to read. DuPlessis’s writing thus resists claims to an authoritative voice. As a result, “Untitled Response” invites open and multiple interpretations. DuPlessis presents one strategy among many possibilities in what she has previously called a “struggle with cultural hegemony” (1990, 13). She stresses not “‘otherness’ in a binary system” but rather “an ‘otherhow’ as the multiple possibilities of a praxis.”
(1990, 154). That is to say, DuPlessis’s text does not demonstrate a universal strategy for female aesthetics. Instead, she presents her linguistic response as one amongst many possible interventions in poetry.

One can, therefore, read her contribution to the colloquium as not only offering a different perspective on gender, sexuality, language, and writing but also a different aesthetic tactic to foreground disruptions of linguistic structures and conventions. In particular, DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response” addresses some of the theoretical difficulties in challenging these norms while negotiating essentialist views of gender and sexuality. DuPlessis shares with Bellamy a suspicion of approaches that propose rigid views on sexuality and form. “Sex/Body/Writing,” for example, strongly emphasizes the multiplicity of lived experiences through an array of anecdotes exploring “a body [that] writes about sex” (Bellamy 2000a). Bellamy endeavours to decentre her narrative by refusing to weigh any one anecdote over another. Overall, “Sex/Body/Writing” lays bare a set of diverse experiences for the critical reader to assimilate, question, or reject. DuPlessis’s response to Bellamy argues for multiple sexualities that she locates, instead, within the fluid dream state of language. In one passage, for example, DuPlessis argues:

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zzz gindra delite ides aye - ginestra scissors delays, hex you all in ties his duh nigh, to come). Is gender the night? I’d say - gender is the day, sexuality is the night. Tis un gin dread gin fizz herd non owed ream? Tide sane oh. Butt on sss exude all eyes. Is one gendered (fixed-gendered) in one’s own dream? I’d say no. But one is sexualized. Hi. juice rote sun ding bike tis: “en um dean hair snow ow organ snope intel 2 one I just wrote something like this: “in the dream there is no now or then/ no pointing to an arthur spice on his mule end femur © wiper saturn 8 did ad ream, knowy hershey loll other space from this/ male and female are hypersaturated/ in the dream, no he or she all bart oeuf mends/ taj hey sew yam mahal/ vitamin A pennies end utterby nary/wills part of me and/
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Here, DuPlessis suggests “there is no fixed gender” in “the night” (“Is gender the night? I’d say - gender is the day, sexuality is the night”). However, the dream space augments and hypersaturates sexuality: sexual, physical bodies collapse into “many/vaginies, penies and other binaries.” In this passage, DuPlessis navigates between a writing informed by theoretical discourse and a homophonic language that retains its sexual suggestiveness when the reader vocalizes homophones like “six you alley tea” (“sexuality”). While DuPlessis disrupts grammatical norms, she suggests that sexuality remains acutely present in language.

The alternating homophonic fragments create what DuPlessis has called a “chora,” a “babble” that acts as a double to her analytic, standard English statements (2007, 137). The “chora” is a Platonic description that refers to a womb-like “space” or “receptacle,” containing neither being nor nonbeing (Plato 2008). It is also the term that Julia Kristeva uses to describe a presignifying, pre-Oedipal state that “precedes and underlies figuration” and is “analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm” (1984, 26). The “semiotic ordering” is orientated around the maternal body and is differentiated from the paternal and post-Oedipal symbolic law. Whereas the symbolic involves logic and the development of sign systems, the semiotic implies the instinctual, tonal, and gestural signifying practices that are regulated by the mother’s body (Kristeva 1984, 27). In DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response,” the homophonic statements allude to a writing that conforms to the cultural expectations of a feminine, emotional, and vocal language.
To understand how DuPlessis responds to the idea of a feminine language, I want to clarify the criticisms of gendered inscription in writing. Post-Lacanian French feminists, such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, expanded the notion of *l’écriture féminine* or feminine writing, a term that denotes “the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text” (Showalter 1981, 185). A feminine language proposes a vocabulary with which women and men can evade the theoretical logic of masculine language. However, scholars have criticized post-Lacanian feminism for surrendering language and writing to homogenizing positions that undo the potential for subversion of the paternal symbolic order. Nancy Fraser has argued, for example, that Kristeva’s semiotic theory fails to acknowledge “complex identities” of gender and sex by binarizing practices “along the sole axis of proportion of semiotic to symbolic, feminine to masculine” (Fraser 1990, 97–98). Judith Butler also contends that Kristeva’s theory depends “upon the stability and reproduction of precisely the paternal law” that must always reassert itself (1989, 105). In these critiques, the Kristevan chora belongs to a hierarchy that subordinately defines the feminine language in relation to an impervious, paternal sign system. Note also that feminine writing is not synchronous with female sex. Johanna Drucker notes that practitioners of *l’écriture féminine* include male writers who have rejected language as a foundation of universal values. For women writers, however, feminine writing becomes their “*only* recourse” (Drucker 1984, 61; italics in original). As Sianne Ngai also suggests, approaching feminine language as an emancipating platform to challenge convention limits women to “certain kinds” of writing and reinforces linguistic “gender divisions and hierarchies” (2001, 19). In other words, such linguistic essentialism, structured around a feminine/masculine binary, runs the risk of producing totalitarian identities and thus restricting the types of writing practices and genres available to women.

DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response” balances her claims for multiple sexualities with a formal division between homophonic and standard English. By foregrounding this linguistic divide, DuPlessis parodies the Kristevan binary of an
essentialized masculine and feminine writing. In the final sentences of “Untitled Response,” DuPlessis writes:

I mean that we experience (as of curse wed nipple lice hut chimneysweeper pole, hose room delicious ask ben setter ploy course oedipalized but sleeping people, those whom the unconscious has been set in play older glow danger groan pip) duh prejudgment pride of place evenup simple fight. although they are grownup) the pre-gender pre-oedipal every single night. Weiner hearing sense lay dunkel troubled nixed sensual heft leveling ring uglies. We experience a doubled, tripled, mixed sexuality of everything all ways.

DuPlessis argues that while Oedipality constructs gender, we as “odipalized but sleeping people” experience the “pre-gender pre-oedipal every single night.” Although “Untitled Response” presents a dichotomy of normative and nonstandard, waking and dream language, DuPlessis also disrupts her methodology and temporarily unravels these binaries. Note, for example, her use of “sensual heft” for “sexuality” in the quoted passage. The doubleness of DuPlessis’s analysis and the slippages between normative and nonstandard language set up what DuPlessis has previously described as a “both/and vision born of shifts, contraries, negations, contradictions” (1990, 6). “Untitled Response” elucidates the shifts between the semiotic and the symbolic that blend the divisions of gender and sexuality, rather than reinforce them.

In this essay, DuPlessis’s strategy investigates how to speak against cultural conventions that assume predetermined gender identity in language. The fusion of nongrammatical, vocalized language with conventional writing allows DuPlessis to negotiate the tension between the so-called marginalized feminine and dominant masculine positions in the text. By employing this mix of normative and nonstandard English, DuPlessis resists a transparent, readable text and so unsettles claims for universal truth. In the case of “Untitled Response,” computer
logic partly aids the sense deformation since the plain text formatting imposes its own laws and rules onto the text. On October 2, 2000, DuPlessis e-mailed the Poetics List, alerting subscribers that the “notorious WRAP of computers” did not transmit her “Untitled Response” in “the way that ‘I’ originally ‘intended’ it to—that is, a line of sound translation and a line of normative text just below.” E-mail is notoriously dependent on a range of factors. Different e-mail systems often use disparate text formats. Additionally, the use of rich text or HTML (HyperText Markup Language)\textsuperscript{5} e-mail editors can lead to incompatibility problems with a recipient’s e-mail client (such as Hotmail or Microsoft Outlook). As DuPlessis notes, “the computer body of sex/writing” enacts its own structures and conventions on the text (2000b). “Untitled Response” thus demonstrates not only a complicated overlap of a visual aesthetic with the logic of e-mail systems, but also the affect and physicality of writing as digital spaces recontextualize text and language according to programmatic rules and processes.

In “Sex/Body/Writing,” Bellamy posits a similar eroticism of the computer and modem. She writes:

Sitting at the computer, a body writes about sex. The keyboard and monitor are enormously erotic THE BEEPING MODEM, THE WORD MACHINE TALKING BACK more than once e-mail has gotten me in trouble.

On the one hand, a computer, keyboard, or modem are not disembodied but are implicated in an eroticism of writing. On the other hand, “Untitled Response” reveals that computers can heighten the confusion between natural (and sometimes illogical) human text and the formal, automated structures of e-mail

\textsuperscript{5} HyperText Markup Language (HTML) is a “publishing mother tongue” that is potentially readable by all computers. It is used for creating web pages, sending information over the World Wide Web, or presenting information in a Web browser (Ragett, Le Hors, and Jacobs 1999).
that are indifferent to natural language. Thus, the media-specific characteristics of e-mail add a further complexity to DuPlessis’s essay, which already destabilizes hierarchies of gender, sexuality, and text. While e-mail is a tool to distribute information, it also alters the textual properties of discursive exchange in “Untitled Response.”

“Sex/Body/Writing” utilizes normative language to imply that men and women are engaged in performances of gender. Bellamy does not write from a position outside of conventional structures of gender, sexuality, and language but from a critical exploration of relations between narrative forms and experience. In contrast, DuPlessis’s essay locates subversive linguistic strategies in an outside space of dreams and nonstandard, homophonic language. For DuPlessis, the dream space enables a free arena where language and sexuality can multiply, thereby permitting an array of identities with no one subject position being the definitive authority.

“Dick’s Sister”

In this section, I consider how Stefans uses digital media to recontextualize Bellamy’s and DuPlessis’s responses to positions of gender, sexuality, and language, while continuing to struggle with finding a place outside of conventional text and writing. Bellamy and DuPlessis highlight two possible writing strategies for a feminist oppositional poetics. At the same time, they introduce an erotic relation between the avant-garde and computer, a relation that Stefans’s contribution to the colloquium further complicates.

Stefans was the second poet of the fourth group to respond to Bellamy’s “Sex/Body/Writing.” He divides his e-mail into a critical response and a sequence of alphabetically ordered poems. In the first part of his e-mail, Stefans describes how he “ran some computer processes” on DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response” in order to rearrange her text alphabetically (2000). Stefans’s response to DuPlessis, and by extension Bellamy, highlights the fusion of the strategies of appropriation
with a concrete aesthetic, which Stefans uses to interrogate their feminist investigations of gender, sexuality, and the text. In “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters,” Stefans’s reframing of these feminist critiques demonstrates that challenging normative structures remains problematic in his model of a digital avant-garde. In particular, Stefans’s two works might seem to impose a restrictive framework on Bellamy’s and DuPlessis’s explicit and multivalent commentaries on gender, sexuality, and textuality. Harriet Tarlo has argued, for example, that “the dreamlife of letters” deflects “the difficulty” of DuPlessis’s colloquium essay, which is, unarguably, challenging to read (2011). Tarlo’s criticism implies a question that Darren Wershler posed to Stefans in Fashionable Noise: what happens to DuPlessis’s feminist politics when her text is “chopped up” by digital media (Stefans and Wershler 2003, 18)? One can view “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters” as an exploration of the political ramifications when sole authorship and theory expand to include combinatory new media systems.

Underneath the title of Stefans’s colloquium poems is the line “probably after Stacy Doris and Eugen Gomringer.” While brief, this inscription offers one context through which Stefans suggests we might read his response to Bellamy and DuPlessis. Doris and Gomringer represent two distinctive models of twentieth-century poetics that share similar considerations of structures of experience and consciousness in language and textual form. Stacy Doris was a poet and a translator of French and Spanish literature. Her aesthetic practice blends a procedural poetics with appropriative strategies. In addition, her erotic poetry collection, Paramour (2000), explores the relations between sexual impulses and the lyric form. Eugen Gomringer is widely known as a key figure in the concrete poetry moment. His works manifest simple structural and spatial arrangements of a few words, as his poem “Silencio” (1954a) demonstrates. This short visual work is composed of five lines: in each line, the word “silencio” (silence) is repeated three times. The exception is the centre position on the third line where the word is intentionally absent. The poem thus instantiates interplay between white space and text. These references to Doris and Gomringer frame
Stefans’s e-mail response in relation to a historical avant-garde and to strategies that use appropriative, procedural aesthetics. If, as Johanna Drucker proposes, concrete poetry (in its broadest sense) is defined by a self-conscious “visual appearance of text on the page” (1996, 39), one can read “Dick’s Sister” as displaying a conspicuous—and even erotic—attention to formatting and placement of recycled text on the screen.

This attention to the relationship between textual form and the spatial dimensions of the page is immediately evident in the first sequences, as the screenshot of “A” and “B” sequences indicates (figure 1). Here, the textual arrangement seems methodical, anchored in the simple but rigid plane of the e-mail body. The result appears to investigate what Gomringer describes as the “play area of fixed dimensions” where normative grammatical relationships between words are displaced (1954b). In these poems, the play area includes Stefans’s decisions over where to insert line breaks. For example, a single “a” is repeated on each line whereas “all” is successively restated across the page.

Mirona Magearu points to the colloquium poems’ concrete interplay between the semantics of space and words, an interrelationship that structures and reinforces the visual components of each letter (2012, 350). The fusion of space and text is integral to poetic meaning: the information extracted from a word depends upon its placement on the page. For instance, “am” on line 10 allows the reader to attend to the copula without the expected first person subject “I” or a predicative expression following it. Stefans’s rearrangement of DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response” has interrupted the identities and subject positions that she had staged in her text. At the same time, the spare, simple structure of “Dick’s Sister” addresses the poems and their contents as objects of art that one can view as well as read.

By rewriting DuPlessis’s text in a systematic order, Stefans has employed a technique of poetic alienation similar to Verfremdungseffekt (alienation effect), a device of theatrical distancing. According to Bertolt Brecht, Verfremdungseffekt prevents the audience from establishing empathetic responses to a play and so
Figure 1: Screenshot detail of “A” and “B–C” sequences from “Dick’s Sister.”
permits a critical, observational engagement with the characters. To this end, *Verfremdungseffekt* defamiliarizes the normative social and political conventions of art form and language by means of the performer’s acknowledging the presence of the audience or appearing “alien to the spectator . . . to the point of arousing surprise” (1961, 131). In “Dick’s Sister,” this alienation has a poetic function. Stefans’s conscious rearrangement of DuPlessis’s essay defamiliarizes the reader’s earlier relationship to her text. The alphabetical reordering frees DuPlessis’s word choices and punctuation from their initial context, thus permitting the reader to observe critically her use of language as well as the normal registers and logic of syntax. In figure 1, the virgules on the line 17 (“binaries/ bo/ Borders, but”) not only function as a separator of different objects but also seem to draw attention to themselves as ambiguous signifying markers. Such structures and conventions of language acquire uncertain significance as the alphabetical ordering dislodges word units from their anticipated context. The new arrangement thus creates strange relations between word units (such as “(ally) although am”). At the same time, the textual juxtapositions illustrate that even simple spelling changes can dramatically alter the meaning of words (“about abut”). *Verfremdungseffekt* interrupts the relations between expected cultural structures in language that enable a reader to understand a text. In “Dick’s Sister,” the alphabetical reordering upsets familiar reading strategies that one uses to decode a text, further alienating the reader’s response to the poems as well as to DuPlessis’s original essay.

Concrete poetry is a political form, insisting that the standard conventions of language are inadequate to express “advanced processes of thought and communication” (Solt 1970). *Verfremdungseffekt* enables a reader to respond critically and unemotionally to how the conventions and structures of language limit and restrict expression. In “Dick’s Sister,” the effect also stresses the gender and sexual inflections in language, as figure 2 illustrates. Stefans channels DuPlessis’s binary of a homophonic language and normative syntax (with its associations of masculine and feminine conventions) into the alphabet, which he uses to reimagine the fluid dream of words. For instance, the poem in figure 2
Figure 2: Screenshot detail of “L” and “M–N” from “Dick’s Sister”
juxtaposes the “male” and “mammary,” or male and female. Just as DuPlessis’s “chora” of homophonic spellings creates a space of multiple sexualities, the impact of Stefans’s alphabetical reordering also disturbs the binaries of gender and sex. In fact, the “male mammary” explores the “play-activity” of word forms as the alphabetization presents to the reader surprising interactions of linguistic expressions in the controlled space of the e-mail body.

As DuPlessis argues, words are “teeming with . . . gender ideas” in light of their social, cultural, and political history (1990, 143). Stefans’s disruption of DuPlessis’s binary also highlights that, as readers, we still approach the text and language with our cultural and social biases. The sexual suggestiveness and gendered references in “Dick’s Sister” (“male mammary . . . maternal . . . men”) are not allayed by the categorical reordering that Stefans has performed on DuPlessis’s text. While words like “cunt” or “phallic” are arranged alphabetically, they retain their sexual cues because the reader approaches language with their own gender and sexual histories. The result is that “Dick’s Sister” implies that the reader has no access to a gender-neutral language. Just as Bellamy and DuPlessis explore language and form as inflected by cultural and political constraints, “Dick’s Sister” posits that neutrality in text and language is, likewise, illusory. The so-called disembodied processes of computers (such as those procedures that Stefans uses to reorder DuPlessis’s text) inflect communications, highlighting that allusions to gender and sexuality remain present in “Dick’s Sister.”

“Dick’s Sister” also draws attention to a key problem for Bellamy and DuPlessis: can one find a critical position outside of cultural constructs of gender, sexuality, text, and language? One can read “Dick’s Sister” as simply replacing DuPlessis’s binaries of language and gender with another conventional form represented by the alphabet. The alphabet framework reduces “Dick’s Sister” to a field of categories and indexes, thus recalling the universal ordering systems of dictionaries and encyclopaedias. The alphabet may, in fact, impose a totalitarian structure on the complex subject positions and sexual identities that Bellamy and DuPlessis investigate in their responses to the colloquium. Moreover, the
alphabetical system brings order to DuPlessis’s double vision of tumultuous and clear prose. Combined with a program of appropriation, one can consider the alphabetization as an exercise of control over DuPlessis’s opaque text. Stefans manipulates “Untitled Response” into a recognizable universal system, the alphabet, for the reader to either assimilate or reject. In this respect, “Dick’s Sister” enacts a restrictive structure on DuPlessis’s essay, regulating her text that had resisted homogenizing positions of gender and sexual identity.

At the same time, “Dick’s Sister” does not always follow a predictable pattern. Stefans also breaks his own procedures. In the K and J poems, for example, lines “know - the knowy” and “Jewel Djinn/journal” deviate from the alphabet order that Stefans has set up. Such slippages undermine the totalitarianism of alphabetization as much as Stefans inscribes it into DuPlessis’s text. In fact, Stefans’s attitude towards his own ordering system seems ambivalent. At the beginning of “Dick’s Sister” is a shorter poem, which appears separate from the rest of the text (figure 3). The words in this poem are alphabetically ordered, but Stefans has chosen not to absorb them into the overall framework of “Dick’s Sister.” This passage, Stefans suggests, highlights the limitations of his method. He claims that this separate poem is the result of the failure of his “computer processes” to reorder some words that follow “m-dashes and slashes” in DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response.” The disruption to the ordering system provokes the question: who is writing (and speaking for) the textual body—the computer or Stefans? Just as the logic of computers mediates DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response,” the poem in figure 3 highlights the tension between the constraints of computers, natural human languages, and the intentions of the author.

While Stefans suggests that he has applied various “computer processes” to reorganize the “Untitled Response,” figure 3 also illustrates that rewriting involves human interventions in poetic form. In particular, Stefans has chosen to retain this unusual poem at the beginning of “Dick’s Sister” rather than insert the text at the end or redistribute the leftover words into the framework of the entire work. In addition, by crosschecking “Untitled Response” with “Dick’s Sister,” it
Figure 3: Screenshot detail of the first sequence from Dick’s Sister.”
emerges that Stefans has erased 251 words from DuPlessis’s text. Together, this list reads:

dough wansin 2 cum gindra ginestra ties to Is is day is tis gin gin fizz sss eyes Is one on is tis dean snopes 2 one there is then on his end ® 8 did other space from this or bart taj mahal end nary and other end fur end fact jinn drain Let of that there is fixed D-D drat Butt six None to it that way But there is dare greens think yurt nanny war there space something is Just few rote trounce head on wrote it down Wrote it done think and done and did will do and rogue Tis drecks and of this remember some this fort da ginger bee fore fuss daff’s from before do Diddles forage for it that thoth rem san din et thought that there and an of cum bin story puss and some are natch taking ell on on Screen There fore Do and of One sine it Disk or of This fit lease it now if There is fixed only sexualities There is no storm din tee lisp inner is formed so live dream our lives marmoset shovel thru are here whole other set of sexualities their send dare hutch and their not coracle marge and are and this by a thena with Phallus or Eye dot weenie these love with that as of hut pole room ask setter course but sleeping those whom been set play glow danger groan of fight they every lay dunkel experience a doubled of.

On the surface, some of these eliminations seem inconsequential. Prepositions like “on,” “by,” and “of,” conjunctions such as “or,” and odd homophones like “wansin,” “thoth,” or “dunkel” have not been included in “Dick’s Sister.” Additionally, Stefans’s processes have removed numbers and symbols like “® 8.” Some eliminations may indicate the limitations of a computer program to recognize a range of meaningful human signs. Yet other omissions seem purposeful. Stefans has excluded words like “phallus” and “sexualities,” while he has only partially counted words like “love.” In fact, “Dick’s Sister” may not only
be the result of computer processes (as Stefans implies in the e-mail) but also of his own deliberate interpretation of what his procedures have produced.

Stefans foregrounds these interventions in the “D” sequence (figure 4). Here, he has enclosed “ding ding” with scare quotes and “diplomatic Dodie” with parentheses. Stefans’s use of quotation marks suggests his interruptions in a work that he is constructing—or quoting—entirely from DuPlessis’s text. For Bellamy, citation obscures the veracity of her essay, enunciating the synthesis of autobiography and fiction. Stefans also challenges where the ownership of language lies: the person who arranges the text is not always the person who compose it. Like Bellamy’s “Sex/Body/Writing” and DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response,” Stefans obscures the authority of his poems. His additions to the text underline the information-giving properties of punctuation marks. Note for example that “delight” has only a closing quotation mark in the D poem. “Dick’s Sister” implies that linguistic signs become ambiguous without the logic of punctuation. The effect stresses that punctuation is not an indifferent construct but a powerful marker that can either regulate or change the meaning of a text. Stefans’s play with punctuation in “Dick’s Sister” leaves interpretation of the poems open, further obscuring its transparency.

“Dick’s Sister” presents a model for a digital avant-garde that builds on the strategies of appropriation found in Bellamy’s and DuPlessis’s avant-garde feminist texts. Stefans’s alphabetization reinforces the notion that traces of gender and sexuality remain embedded in language even when the conventions of text are disrupted. Instead of agreeing with Tarlo that the alphabetization deflects the “difficulty” of DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response” (2011), we see Stefans as using the alphabet to illustrate the difficulty of finding critical positions outside of standard structures in a digital world. Stefans’s use of the alphabet binds language to a procedure, thus emphasizing the impossibility of escaping convention-based systems. In “Dick’s Sister,” the gendered and sexual positions in language, text, and writing can only be recycled and rearranged.
Figure 4: Screenshot detail of “D” sequence from “Dick’s Sister.”
Following the conclusion of the colloquium, Stefans reedited and animated “Dick’s Sister” into the Flash poem “the dreamlife of letters.” In the prologue (figure 5) that precedes the animation, Stefans details the events of the colloquium and links to DuPlessis’s original e-mail (this link is broken) and to a copy of his original response (figure 6). Interestingly, Stefans has not provided a link to Bellamy’s essay. Here, it seems that Bellamy’s “Sex/Body/Writing”—the text upon which the colloquium was centred—recedes into the background. Stefans’s copy of his response to DuPlessis is not an exact replica of “Dick’s Sister.” Against a solid orange background, Stefans has numbered each poem, reformatted lines, added punctuation, and retitled the poem “the dreamlife of letters.” On the whole, this text looks visually polished, in stark contrast to the plain text typography and tabulated formatting of the colloquium poems. These changes distance the new expression from the body of erotic e-mail writing in the original Poetics List exchange. Stefans invites the reader to attend to the text without the standard paratextual conventions of e-mail, such as subject headings, addresses, or even the personal introductory essay that framed his colloquium poems. By making these changes, Stefans makes his position as a rewriter less transparent while simultaneously weakening his poems’ relationship to the community of the Poetics List. At the same time, the new title sustains the link between the dream space of a fluid language and the dream of multiple sexualities that DuPlessis proposes in her “Untitled Response.” These changes manifest a shift from the Poetics List community to the individual, while the eroticism of e-mail exchange is elided with the new text.

The animation also expands the relations between a concrete aesthetic and Stefans’s interpretation of the feminist avant-gardes into the field of video. John Cayley remarks that the kinetic drama of “dreamlife of letters” reflects a “[c]oncrete excess” that manifests a “masked festival of surface display” (2006). The energetic play of words in “the dreamlife of letters” amplifies the interactions between text and structure, thereby imbuing space with symbolic content. The
Figure 5: Screenshot detail of the prologue from “the dreamlife of letters.”

Figure 6: Screenshot detail of the text version, “the dreamlife of letters.”
electronic version illustrates, Cayley claims, the “dehistoricized Flash-Concrete that proliferates on the Web” (2006; italics in original). Certainly, “the dreamlife of letters” elaborates the synthesis of textual arrangement and spatial dimensions upon the electronic page. Running for approximately eleven minutes, sequences of black and white words are animated against the orange backdrop. These words break up into morphemes that rejoin into surprising new word combinations. In contrast to the fixed arrangement of “Dick’s Sister,” “the dreamlife of letters” is a dynamic visual display that explores the potential for making meaning: morphemes not only develop brief bonds with each other, but Stefans also examines space and perspective on the screen, as figure 7 illustrates. This addition of depth perception as a signifier for poetic meaning further highlights the shift from the body of e-mail writing with its two-dimensional planes to an illusion of three-dimensions in the video syntax. “The dreamlife of letters” self-consciously stresses the filmic properties of its performance. At the conclusion of the poem, for example, is a brief line, “thanks for watching.” Here, Stefans stresses a viewership over a readership. In addition, the poem includes an index of chapters that mimics a DVD directory where the viewer can select and initiate individual poems (figure 8). At the bottom of this page is the option to “run the whole damn thing.” A new media poem becomes, as Hayles notes, “eventualized” in the context of a specific time and place (2006, 182). In this way, time, space, and the frame compose the framework of the animation. In “the dreamlife of letters,” the video syntax also complicates the concrete and feminist impulse to disrupt the norms of language by using the convention-based systems of Flash. On the surface, “the dreamlife of letters” mimics the free flow of the semiotic field, which DuPlessis interrogated in her original essay by alternating standard English with a homophonic language. Yet the formal conventions of vector graphics and program code restrict the textual expression to a noninteractive, preprogrammed performance. The digital procedures thus enact a totalitarian structure on the text as much as they free it from the fixity of standard text displays.
Figure 7: Screenshot detail of the perspective in the “O” sequence from “the dreamlife of letters.”

Figure 8: Screenshot detail of the index page from “the dreamlife of letters.”
In this way, “the dreamlife of letters” demonstrates an ongoing dialogue between the so-called disembodied logic of programming languages and natural human languages, which are marked by gender and sexuality. In fact, Stefans has redirected the eroticism of the e-mail writing and the “WORD MACHINE” (Bellamy 2000a) into a multimedia context. The animation’s title suggests that the residue of meanings is enshrined in letterforms. The poem proposes a dream space where the traces of sexuality are sustained, however fragmented, in language. In particular, this erotic suggestiveness is demonstrated in the “S” sequences (figures 9, 10, and 11). In the first sequence, Stefans adds quotation marks that were absent in the colloquium version (figure 9). The additions further illustrate the power of punctuation. Here, the viewer can attend to the available subject positions, asking who—Stefans or the computer—speaks in the animation. In fact, the letters appear on the screen as if invisible hands type them. The effect not only alludes to the presence of the unseen poet but also to the erotic act of his typing. Like Bellamy’s erotic “WORD MACHINE” in “Sex/Body/Writing,” Stefans interrogates the junctions between the body of writing and sexual, physical body.

This relationship between the act of writing and the physical body is explicit in a sequence of text that follows the quotation (figure 10). The viewer’s eyes are drawn to a column on the left-hand side of the frame where the word “sexuality” is repeated down the page. The text rhythmically vibrates, gesturing towards the sexual act that the word represents. From this column emerges the word “sexualized,” which transforms into a burgeoning circle, followed by the text “sez shape” (figure 11). Stefans stresses that the digital text and the arrangement of words like “sexuality” are not empty vessels. Rather, the viewer activates language as they apply their acquired knowledge and experiences to the animation. The combination of movement, space, and text allows the viewer to recognize the signified sexual traces of the signifiers in this sequence. The circle is a frequent motif in the poem, materializing first as a cyclical “C” that rotates to complete the words “unt,” “onventional” (figure 12), and “urse.” Here, Stefans invites the viewer to explore not only to the linguistic relations between the words.
“Semaphor, send sensations...
sense sensual set
sew Sex-sexual--to sexual.”

Figure 9: Screenshot detail of “S” sequence from “the dreamlife of letters”

Figure 10: Screenshot detail of “S” sequence from “the dreamlife of letters.”
Figure 11: Screenshot detail of “S” sequence from “the dreamlife of letters.”

Figure 12: Screenshot detail of “C” sequence from “the dreamlife of letters.”
but also to the erotic and feminine associations of the unclosed circle as a symbol of discontinuity, or—like the Kristeva chora—as a womb-like structure. Stefans reimagines the complexity of language’s relation to sexuality and gender in the field of new media. He creates a position that closely resembles the fluid, kinetic sexualities that DuPlessis proposed in her initial response to Bellamy. As a result, we see in “the dreamlife of letters” the ongoing critique of a gender-neutral language. Notions of gender and sexuality that conform to expected conventions also manifest in the digital realm. The so-called disembodied programming languages perpetuate these conventions of gender and sexuality as they construct a human language on the electronic page. The implication is that digital poetics do not construct positions that are outside conventions of gender, sexuality, and language. On the contrary, “the dreamlife of letters” continues these hegemonic constructs as it explores them.

“The dreamlife of letters” also provoked an additional poetic response from DuPlessis with her poem “Draft 59: Flash Back,” which appeared in her collection Torques: Drafts 58–76 (2007). “Flash Back” refers to the software platform that Stefans used to create and play back “the dreamlife of letters.” In addition, her title suggests a flashback, a cinematic and literary device that inserts an early scene into the current narrative point. In her flashback to “the dreamlife of letters,” DuPlessis questions Stefans’s use of alphabetization as an ordering principle. She writes:

Question:

Why use the alphabet to organize,

and why not? Discuss.

Suggest another mechanism of order.

One form and then another.

Something that sort of ends, but sort of not (2007, 8).
In this sequence, DuPlessis asks what makes one ordering of meaning more desirable than another. Her response stresses the short command, “discuss.” This command suggests Stefans’s animation has weakened or obscured completely the generative discussion that the Poetics List colloquium produced. In composing “the dreamlife of letters,” Stefans transformed his position from an e-mail writer to that of a director who exerts his programming authority over a borrowed text. Yet DuPlessis’s response to his work also instigates a new conversation across media, between a born-digital text and her print-based poem. In this sense, poetic exchange expands from a body of e-mail writing to an intermedia form of communication where DuPlessis stages her challenge to the universal system that Stefans imposes on her text. We find in her response and in “the dreamlife of letters” the tension between the writer and rewriter that underscores the issue of who manages the body of writing. Bellamy and DuPlessis create multiple positions from which to speak and write the physical body and the body of text. However, Stefans has fixed and indexed DuPlessis’s subject positions in a universal ordering system. “The dreamlife of letters” augments a difficult tension between a model of digital aesthetics, which stresses individual virtuosity and conventional programming languages, and a feminist community, which emphasizes multiple strategies of literary disruption.

DuPlessis’s “Flash Back” has crucial implications for how we read both “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters.” Her response underscores that the task of finding dissenting positions from which to challenge structures and conventions of gender, sexuality, and textuality remains problematic in the digital realm. One must reconsider the utopian vision of disembodied and free digital spaces. While these spaces permit exchanges that challenge the hegemonic politics of writing, they do not replace the social world with a freer, apolitical, and noncultural space. Stefans’s two works suggest that the digital space can enable fresh explorations of such conventions, but also that digital media can equally entrap us within existing normative structures. “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters” use digital form to extend Bellamy’s and DuPlessis’s feminist strategies
of resistance at the level of narrative form and language. Yet both texts also rely on the feminist avant-gardes and concrete poetics in order to develop a politics of form in digital media. In the next chapter, I explore Stefans’s 2003 website Circulars, in which the complicated junctions of digital media with the politics of avant-garde texts and poetic communities are further accentuated at a time of war.
Chapter 2:  
*Circulars Refreshed: The Situationist International Online*

It is a matter not of putting poetry at the service of revolution, but putting revolution at the service of poetry. (Guy Debord 1981, 116)

The hardest thing is to create spaces that not only provide information but also allow for exchange. (Charles Bernstein 2011, 186)

Much has been made of the turn in avant-garde poetics from the “revolution of the word” to the “revolution of information” (Davidson 2011, 611), and yet this easy sound bite belies the complex history of the interactions between politics, avant-garde poetics, and digital media in the new millennium. Together, Dodie Bellamy’s, Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s, and Stefans’s contributions to the 2000 Poetics List colloquium illustrate the negotiation between a feminist avant-garde impulse towards textual disruptions and the normalizing conventions of e-mail and Flash. Stefans’s digital poetics continues an avant-garde tradition that grapples with the ongoing dilemma over how to challenge cultural norms of language, text, and writing. At the same time, the media-specific properties of e-mail and Flash

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6 Various scholars have addressed the influence of digital technologies on late twentieth and early twenty-first-century poetry. For example, Kenneth Goldsmith points to the ubiquity of wireless Internet connections that has made “the harvesting of masses of language easy and tempting” (2011, xviii). Craig Douglas Dworkin has also noted that the astronomical proliferation of material on the World Wide Web has created “new distributive paradigms” (2009, 78). Both Goldsmith and Dworkin point to the innovative possibilities of the World Wide Web to redefine readership and poetic language. The Web not only fosters new models of expressivity by appropriating and recycling preexistent materials but also links innovative channels of public access to experimental poetry.
further complicate the oft-tense relations between digital information and natural language. In fact, Stefans’s projects illustrate that finding alternative positions outside conventions of language and text remain highly problematic in the digital world. As a result, his projects unsettle notions of a utopian digital poetics.

The problem of reframing avant-garde positions in digital media arises also in Stefans’s blog Circulars (2003a), a website that scrutinized the frameworks of news media, digital media, and government rhetoric in the context of the politically charged climate during the Iraq War. Launched on January 30, 2003, Circulars documented the creative and critical responses of numerous artists and writers to the second invasion of Iraq. The website embraced a substantial variety of media sources. Stefans yoked together an eclectic mix of global news articles, interviews, critical essays, poster art, retouched photography, audio recordings, manifestos, and poetry from variegated sources found on the World Wide Web and offline. By the time Stefans posted the website’s final announcement on September 15, 2003, Circulars had accumulated 460 individual posts and over one thousand unique hyperlinks. Circulars also combined content with vigorous and, at times, unruly reader commentary that debated how poets might articulate a poetics of dissent.

The focus on language and the range of eclectic material differentiated Circulars from other oppositional poetry organizations like Sam Hamill’s Poets Against the War. Hamill’s group would subsequently present some thirteen

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7 By the end of January 2004, Circulars had registered 2826 hyperlinks. Spambots—remote automated computer programs—continued to paste and link website addresses underneath each unique post. I arrived at these figures by running a link-checking program on Circulars that recorded every link on the website and determined whether these nodes were either active or broken. Where possible, I have removed URL redirections and mailto URI schemes, which open a web user’s e-mail client. These web features inflate the number of discrete hyperlinks on the site, and I have not included them in my final count.
thousand poems by eleven thousand poets to Democrat Ohio Congresswoman, Marcy Kaptur (Hamill 2003, xix), thus producing a so-called real world activism that focused primarily on antiwar poetry. In contrast, Stefans concentrated exclusively on developing online literary resistance that used the blog medium to work out aesthetic strategies of protest and to investigate the relation of poetic language to structures of rhetoric and politics. To this end, the blog addressed the practices of copying and adapting material from external websites. The combination of Web 2.0 tools, such as MAB (Multi-Author Blog) and hyperlinks, with audio recordings and Flash design elements examine and problematicize the avant-garde fusion of politics and poetics in the context of the World Wide Web.

In order to elaborate the relation of the pre-digital avant-garde to Circulars, I want to explore Stefans’s reframing of the Situationist International on the website. This chapter demonstrates that Circulars and the works posted on the site foreground a tension between the strategies of the Situationist International—and specifically, its practices of dérive (or drift) and détournement (or defamiliarization)—and their digital manifestations in the preconfigured processes of hyperlink and link rot, translation programs, user-generated comments, and spam. In the first part of this chapter, I map out the possibilities and problems of dérive and détournement on the blog by focusing on Stefans’s recontextualization of Guy Debord’s artwork The Naked City as the Circulars logo. In the second part of the chapter, I examine the instantiation of dérive and détournement in three works on Circulars: “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword,” “W’s Victory Speech: Gangsta Version,” and “War=Language.” In these texts, Stefans’s digital poetics demonstrates continuities with a pre-digital avant-garde in a shared grappling with normative politics of language and textuality.
The Naked City on the World Wide Web

The Circulars logo, placed at the top right hand corner of the index page, is a composite image that remixes the political signs of the Situationist International with algorithmic processes. A Flash cylinder of rotating cogs overlays a black and white inverse of Debord’s The Naked City (figures 13 and 14). The Situationist International grew from a union of various European avant-garde groups, most notably MIBI (International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus), Lettrist International, COBRA, and the London Psychogeographical Committee (Elias 2010, 821). Debord—along with other prominent players, such as Jorn Asger and Raoul Vaneigem—wielded considerable control over the group’s ideological identity from its inception in 1957 until it finally dissolved in 1972 (Ball 1987, 21). The Situationist International conceived a revolutionary cultural program that could respond to, and overthrow, the oppressive framework of capitalist urban life. This program entailed the development of literary and artistic practices to create an urban renewal that would reverse the commodification—or the spectacle—of “human realization” (Debord 1967, sec. 17). Their revolutionary praxis centred on the “construction of situations,” that is, the temporary interventions staged in everyday life (Debord 2002, 44). Such political interruptions of everyday experiences point to the formation of a micropolitical ideology that denied the “separation between artistic and political activity” (Wollen 1991, 55). For Debord and his colleagues, the aesthetic spheres yielded

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8 While Debord collaborated with Jorn Asgers on The Naked City, only Debord is specifically credited on the work. For simplicity, I have followed the credit line provided by the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University and whose copy of the work I will analyse.

Figure 13: Artwork by Guy Debord. ca. 1957. *The Naked City: Illustration de Hypothèse des Plagues Tournantes en Psychogéographique*. Copenhagen: Permild & Rosengren. Image courtesy of the General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Figure 14: Screenshot detail of the logo from *Circulars*.
enormous political currency. “The literary and artistic heritage of humanity,” Debord argued, “should be used for partisan propaganda purposes” (Debord and Wolman 1981, 9). In short, the Situationist International would not legitimize art ‘for art’s sake’ but link artistic activities to a wider revolutionary praxis.

*The Naked City* reflects this blend of aesthetic and political action with a strategy of appropriation called détournement. From the French, *détourner* means “to divert,” “to embezzle,” “to misappropriate,” and “to hijack.” Thus, the word’s etymology conveys the dark and hidden elements of criminality and diversion. Like *Verfremdungseffek*, which I discussed in chapter 1, détournement is a device of alienation. At its most basic level, it names the act of commandeering cultural artefacts, such as texts, urban spaces, or architecture. These artefacts are then rerouted into new surprising combinations—such as graffiti, parody, or poetry with plagiarized text—that interrupt the anticipated cultural codes of the object. As a result, the new work casts doubt on the validity of the previous expression. Détournement is, as Debord claimed, a way “to go beyond” the familiar logic of cultural signs (Debord and Wolman 1981, 9). More specifically, détournement is a political activity that makes visible the structures and conventions of a hegemonic culture that have grown invisible because the public has taken them for granted. As Dworkin notes, détournement is less an artistic act than a critique that frustrates the “seemingly natural conclusions” of cultural signs. It “re-engineers objects and events,” he argues, for very different ends (2003, 14). Ultimately, détournement becomes a significant mouthpiece for oppositional political commentary. With a hint of illegitimacy, one can view a détourned work as an outsider’s statement on government infrastructures, economic orthodoxies, or monolithic cultural rituals that are expressed through language, text, or acts of writing.

Debord’s *The Naked City* illustrates this defiant and highly politicized diversion of a preexistent work (figure 13). Debord has cut a Parisian map into nineteen fragments, thereby abscising a rational city planning model into disjointed islands. While the red arrows link each cellular fragment of streets, their
relatively equal sizing refuses to imbue any one discrete portion with greater significance than another. The result is a representation of Paris that Debord has torn from its canonical abstraction. The city is reconstructed as an illustration of distinct fields. In addition, the unidirectional arrows suggest no natural starting place. Without recognizable instructions, Debord’s *The Naked City* rejects a single linear pathway for reading the reconfigured map. Instead, the audience can follow the arrows aimlessly and so create alternative reading itineraries for themselves.

*The Naked City* also documents a partial erasure of Paris, highlighting a vulnerable urban space that Debord has stripped down to the bare details, as the map’s appellation implies. Simon Sandler asserts that the eliminations evidence Debord’s drifting trajectory—or dérive—through the urban environment (1998, 61). While dérive might seem like a passive activity, it is nevertheless a highly focused and politicized movement that embraces radical shifts in perspective. As Amy Elias proposes, dérive is a pleasurable migration, “dictated by simple algorithms—‘Go Left, Go Left, Go Right’”—that restrict “randomness without prescribing exact or motivated direction” (2010, 824). The movement through the spectacle of the city studies the emotional effects of the fragile, yet manufactured, urban space on a subject during a transient passage.

In Debord’s *The Naked City*, the audience has a limited experience of dérive as their wandering gaze aimlessly traces the set directions of the arrows. Yet for Debord, the map exposes the symbolic architecture of capitalism. Sandler suggests that the map represents Debord’s forcible excavations of derelict areas that he felt had become riddled with the structures of capitalist bureaucracy (1998, 61). While some notable placenames are missing—such as Notre Dame Cathedral and La Palais Bourbon (the seat for the National Assembly)—others like La Palais Du Luxembourg (the seat of the French Senate) and La Banque de France (the Bank of France) remain on Debord’s map. The détournement encourages a double reading where the new composition sustains references to both the original presentation of the map as well as to its reformulated context. In this way, *The Naked City* suggests the friction in Debord’s excisions, between what spaces remain and what districts
he has chosen to eliminate. On the one hand, *The Naked City* represents an environment divested of this bureaucratic authority. Debord has cauterized parts of the map’s capitalist symbols so that the city might regenerate. Paris is partially refreshed. On the other hand, it is in these deleted spaces that a double reading is the strongest. A viewer familiar with the streets of Paris cannot easily forget the deletions. The absent districts still resonate in the unidirectional arrows as the map marks Debord’s journey from one set of streets to another. As a result, Debord’s map carries two representations of Paris: the Parisian map recalled from the memory of the viewer and Debord’s hopeful roadmap of a city transformed. Ultimately, this détourned work relies on such tension to execute its critique of the bureaucratic blueprint that the original official map entailed.

Stefans uses the *Circulars* logo to both disrupt and extend the possibilities of Debord’s work (figure 14). If by hijacking an official map in *The Naked City* Debord attempted to rewrite the codes that were inherent in a bureaucratic model, Stefans’s disruption of Debord’s map takes an additional step: he détournes the détournement. The logo is now inverted black and white and digitally reduced in resolution. This online *The Naked City* is a further negation of Paris. Pixilation has rendered the details of the streets unrecognizable. Stefans has thus eliminated the individual identity of the fragments that Debord’s work had upheld. In this respect, Debord’s *The Naked City* is less identifiable. The logo unsettles the authority of the earlier expression, which itself had become a canonized challenge to the bureaucratic canonized map. While Debord’s work looks towards a new approach to city planning, Stefans’s version degrades the representation of a modern urban space. Through digital reduction, he pushes it to the edge of obliteration. In this sense, the logo brings into conflict two very different twentieth and twenty-first-century models of space: a representation of a desirable modern city and the World Wide Web.

The conflict between the original context and the rewriting is integral to the study of détournement since it makes explicit overfamiliarized conventions of cultural signs. While striving to reconstruct an ideal model of Paris, Debord upsets
the bureaucratic blueprint. His cut-up strategy remains acutely evident and thus *The Naked City* congeals the two visions of Paris. Arguably, Stefans taps into the work’s political registers. By restaging *The Naked City* in cyberspace, he diverts the artwork’s energies of dissent into a new message that the website’s banner neatly summarizes: “poets, writers, and critics responding to American global policy.” Whereas *The Naked City* protests a Parisian urban policy, what arises from the *Circulars* logo is now a reshaped criticism of the structures of American government rhetoric, which are staged online and offline on a global scale. On the World Wide Web, this remapping, or dérive, takes place in the global realm. The *Circulars* logo links the revolutionary drives of the pre-digital Situationist International—namely, its countercultural impulse to overturn capitalist ideology—to a contemporary global conflict, staged in Iraq.

A key issue, then, is how the structures of the World Wide Web, as well as digital media, continue and complicate the operations of dérive and détournement in *Circulars*. By updating *The Naked City* into an everyday electronic space, Stefans has produced a critique of the Situationist International by using their model of détournement against themselves. In this way, Stefans illustrates the limits and possibilities of their philosophy in the age of digital information. As Edward Ball has asserted, the contemporary excess of appropriation and détournement has lead to a “society of the détourniste” (1987, 36; italics in original). Ball suggests that détournement has become a commodity rather than a specialized tool for oppositional politics. Digital network infrastructures emphasize his point: online community-orientated spaces like Facebook and Reddit allow for prolific and unrestrained sharing, reframing, recontextualization, and alteration of cultural material. To take the case of *Circulars*, Stefans’s usage of *The Naked City* illustrates how easy it is to source, alter, and reproduce images and texts found online. Additionally, the World Wide Web has become a representation of the real world with commercial, sexual, work, political, familial, terrorist, and day-to-day conversational activities. As Elias states, the World Wide Web has become incorporated into “the spectacle rather than as a challenge to it” (2010, 822).
reproducing Debord’s work online, Stefans is repeating a common web-based behaviour rather than constructing a situation that questions this practice. All the same, Stefans elaborates Debord’s work by interlacing it with the structures of World Wide Web and Flash design elements. The Circulars logo continues a dialogue with the Situationist International pursuit to misuse cultural signs, while the structures of the blog and Flash require a rethink of its theory and praxis in the new millennium.

The ongoing struggle to continue Situationist International practices of dérive and détournement on the World Wide Web heightens this tension between Stefans’ digital poetics and the pre-digital avant-garde. Overlaying the Circulars logo is a Flash module of rotating cogs. Clicking on these cogs will randomly alter the angles of the spinning objects. Here, Stefans invites the web user to interact with the mechanisms of the website. Although the algorithm executes a mechanical and predetermined performance, it also allows the user to interact with the logo with mouse clicks. The logo is an updated version of playful interaction with space that was so vital to the Situationist International concept of dérive. In addition, the rotation of the cogs suggests a preprogrammed motion that Debord’s The Naked City represents with arrows. Yet while Debord described the drift as the “passionate uprooting through the hurried change of environments” (2002, 46), the Circulars logo seems to define it as a process of calculation within set parameters. The rotating flash cylinder illustrates a type of flow that operates in Circulars, through which one might drift in the same way one surfs other parts of the World Wide Web. This flow differs, however, from the Situationist International’s experiential non-prescriptive movement. The hyperlink exemplifies a more constrained, exact model of drifting since it does not allow the web user to stray from a preconfigured pathway. The web-based drift is a preset course with a start point (or anchor) and an end point (or target). Web surfing is, therefore, removed from dérive-style wandering even if the web user clicks without motivation on a hyperlink. To move through the World Wide Web is to travel through constructed databases and bits of data. As Elias suggests, online
spaces lack the fluidity that is critical to “the political efficacy” associated with the concept of dérive (2010, 822). *Circulars* posits a notion of drifting that is integrated with the preexisting pathways and algorithms of search engines as well as Flash modules.

Web surfing and the hyperlink demonstrate one key difference between *Circulars* and a pre-digital avant-garde: here, the structures of World Wide Web do not permit the kind of disorientation that the Situationist International found so desirable. Nevertheless, in *Circulars* the hyperlink maintains a political function. On January 30, Stefans wrote in the website mission statement that “the link can be as powerful as word of mouth, and is itself the prize of an effective rhetorical strategy. These are ‘circulars’ because they are circulated” (2003c). For Stefans, the link not only transports the user along the information highways of the World Wide Web, but it can also operate as a grassroots channel for progressive messages of dissent. For example, the *Circulars* index page lists links to a number of left-wing, independent, and investigative news organizations such as *CounterPunch, Commondreams,* and *The Independent*. One can understand the hyperlink as a way to sidestep a dominant corporate media that may underreport or misrepresent unpopular opinion. In this case, the hyperlink has an ideological function that disrupts the information of corporate new media. At the same time, the idea of links as “circulars” suggests that they are throwaway advertising commodities like junk mail. The use of the word “circulars” thus leads to ambiguity. In one way, *Circulars* counters the Situationist International’s disruptive, countercultural ideology by submitting to an overt symbol of modern capitalism: the relentless deluge of commercial junk mail. In another way, Stefans defamiliarizes and redirects the usual apolitical print context of junk mail into the politicized structures of hyperlinks.

The ambiguity of hyperlinks as circulars also applies to the website’s logo. Stefans has previously acknowledged how easy it is “to steal anything from the web and integrate it into some other project” (Stefans and Beiguelman 2006, 250). While détournement embraces plagiarism, the logo does not suggest a theft. The
Flash cylinder is an open source module that its creator levitated.net distributes under a GNU General Public license. In brief, GNU licensing permits—and even encourages—this type of appropriation, modification, and redistribution on the basis that the modified work remains accessible to the online community (Free Software Foundation 2012a). Public licenses are an effective strategy to manage creative borrowing. Yet they also negate the disruptive collision with normative structures of cultural material that the Situationist International had proposed. In this instance, the GNU licensing of the Flash module further attenuates détournement as an online political practice since it confers the element of management and permissiveness onto the logo. Instead, here, the framework of a widely acknowledged copyleft management system restricts the détournement. By attributing the Flash module to the website levitated.net, Stefans is in fact pursuing a logic of shareware over a program of plagiarism. At the same time, Stefans has not attributed his use of The Naked City to Debord. However, it is possible that the Circulars logo constitutes “fair use” of a work. In other words, Stefans is legally permitted to appropriate texts and images for the purpose of “criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching . . . scholarship, or research” (“Copyright Law of the United States” 2011, 19). If Stefans intended to break copyright, the code of “fair use” has, nevertheless, prevented him from engaging the plagiarist spirit of the

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10 Of course, GNU licenses are far more complex than my explanation would suggest. The Free Software Foundation’s philosophy is user-orientated. Free software must satisfy “four essential freedoms.” The last of these freedoms neatly sums up the Foundation’s guiding philosophy: it permits “[t]he freedom to distribute copies of your modified versions to others (freedom 3). By doing this, you can give the whole community a chance to benefit from your changes. Access to the source code is a precondition for this” (2012b). For a fuller discussion on appropriative poetics and copyright see Stephen Voyce. 2011. “Toward an Open Source Poetics: Appropriation, Collaboration, and the Commons.” Criticism 53 (3): 407–38.
Situationist International. The logo thus highlights Stefans’s regard for programming conventions and the difficulty of achieving a pre-digital avant-garde criticism in the highly regulated structures of copyright management.

The Vaneigem Series

Stefans’s redirection of the Situationist International’s strategies of appropriation in Circulars is a continuation of an online series of détourned articles—The Vaneigem Series (2002)—that challenges the militarized global policy of the United States. Stefans copied the entire web page template of the New York Times and replaced sections of selected articles with portions of Raoul Vaneigem’s The Revolution of Everyday Life (1967) and Contributions to the Revolutionary Struggle ([1974] 1990). While Stefans’s usage of the New York Times might again illustrate “fair use,” the newspaper’s owner, the New York Times Company, issued Stefans with a cease-and-desist letter in October 2002. Despite the letter, the rewritten articles are still available on his website (Stefans and Beiguelman 2006, 248). One of these texts, “Daschle Denounces Bush Remarks on Iraq as Partisan,” is worth examining since it reveals the explicit program of détournement that Stefans repeats with the Circulars logo. This article foregrounds the interrelationship between source texts and rewriting in ways that uncover the normative language and layout conventions of corporate news media. The use of détournement in The Vaneigem Series also highlights some of the difficulties of recontextualizing pre-digital avant-garde practices on the World Wide Web.

In the article “Daschle Denounces Bush Remarks on Iraq as Partisan,” Stefans has replaced portions of a debate between President George W. Bush and Democrat senator Tom Daschle with text from the short treatise, Contributions to the Revolutionary Struggle (figure 15). Vaneigem’s text is a robust defence of a free society purged of capitalist economic infrastructures. The specific passage that Stefans uplifts from the tract repudiates a model of middle-class sexual mores. Vaneigem describes human sexuality as a revolutionary condition that is
Figure 15: Screenshot detail from “Daschle Denounces Bush Remarks on Iraq as Partisan,” The Vaneigem Series.
inseparable from the struggle for a free society. In Stefans’s rewritten article, a typical passage reads:

“The House responded,” Mr. Bush said, “but the Senate is more interested in special interests in Washington and not interested in the security of the American people.

“Whether we admit it or not, we are all looking for great passion which is at once single and plural.

“Socially we want to create the historical conditions for a lasting passionate relationship, for a pleasure the only boundary on which is the exhaustion of possibilities, for a game where pleasure and displeasure rediscover their positive side (for instance in the inception and in the ending of a free amorous liaison).”

In this section, Stefans combines Bush’s actual speech in paragraph 1 (“The House responded”) with Vaneigem’s rhetoric in paragraphs 2 and 3 (“Whether we admit it or not” and “Socially we want to create”). The shift in the style and tone clearly marks where Bush’s speech begins and ends. In chapter 1, Bellamy’s, DuPlessis’s, and Stefans’s contributions to the Poetics List challenged the concept of textual veracity: they all stressed that language, text, and writing cannot stage universal values. *The Vaneigem Series* undertakes a similar critique. By congealing together two different texts, Stefans’s new configuration raises some awkward questions over the extent that broadcast media skew the truth. While Stefans provides no clear answers, *The Vaneigem Series* casts significant doubt on the reliability of news media and their structures of language and text. In particular, the elision of Vaneigem’s tract with the *New York Times* article unsettles the authority of official news sources as well commenting on the tension between content and form on the World Wide Web. In fact, *The Vaneigem Series* facilitates a more critical
examination of the reportage and rhetorical structures of the *New York Times* that the paper uses to construct ideological positions as unquestionable truths. Such structures also include web page templates. Preconfigured web page layouts permit rapid replications while they sustain a reassuring stylistic consistency across multiple pages. However, they can also potentially flatten aesthetics into a corporate brand. Alan Liu has noted, for example, Web 2.0 content management structures separate user-generated content from the powerful HTML, XML, or non-HTML software. User content “flows in and out of back-end databases through ‘template’ Web pages” (2008, 320). The result is that “parameterization” assumes the “act of writing” (216–17). Content management systems thus enforce a binary of writing and form and so construct a new model of authorship that is “predicated by technologies” (220). By copying the web template and adding unexpected information, Stefans has interrupted the *New York Times* content management system—its preconfigured framework—that permits dialogue between set databases and code. As a result, he confronts not only the binary of content and presentation but makes the combination of text and form integral to the aesthetics of *The Vaneigem Series*.

The synthesis of form and text is evident in the semblance of legitimacy and authenticity in *The Vaneigem Series*. For example, Stefans retains certain stylistic features of the *New York Times* such as its header, the page column layout, and the placement of advertisements. Yet there is no mistaking that the articles in *The Vaneigem Series* are not authentic editions of the *New York Times*. Specifically, the reworked article “Daschle Denounces Bush Remarks on Iraq as Partisan” signals strange contrasts of language like “Iraq issue,” “political fodder,” and “Saddam Hussein” with “free amorous liaison” and “lasting passionate relationship.” The result is strangely disconcerting. One can construe *The Vaneigem Series* as a challenge to the standardization of web templates where fixed properties of

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11 XML or Extensible Markup Language describes computer and human readable data structures (Bray, Paoli, Sperberg-McQueen, Maler, and Yergeau 2008).
databases codify the act of writing and language of the news media. Set
parameters of templates, in effect, enforce ideological positions as universal truths.

To put words into someone's mouth is to exert control over an individual. Stefans's article disempowers Bush's and Daschle's speeches by juxtaposing the language of sex with war and politics. While the two original texts are stridently serious, the new article is absurd, echoing what Debord had called a "parodic-serious stage" in which satire conveys astute political criticism (Debord and Wolman 1981, 9). One could argue that Stefans's article is a cynical portrayal of American politics where Republicans and Democrats fluidly and incestuously negotiate their relationships according to partisan agendas. Stefans makes this point by inserting thesis 17 from Contributions to the Revolutionary Struggle into Senator Daschle's mouth:

"Have you ever felt the urge to make love (not as a matter of routine but with great passion) to your partner or to the first man or woman to come along, or to your daughter, or your parents, or your men and women friends, or your brothers and sisters?"

Mr. Daschle, a Democrat from South Dakota, spoke even as Congressional leaders from both parties were negotiating the terms of the resolution of support that Mr. Bush has requested for dealing with Saddam Hussein.

The first paragraph directly borrows Vaneigem's rhetoric while the second paragraph is the original text from the New York Times. As in "the dreamlife of letters," Stefans engages with the societal conventions of sexuality. However, the key difference between this détourned work and "the dreamlife of letters" is that Stefans uses sexual expressivity to unsettle satirically the representation of a hegemonic American government. Vaneigem uses examples of taboos to analyse the restrictions placed on sexuality that suppress human desire and play. By drawing on Vaneigem's tract, Stefans's act of satirical sabotage of the New York
Times recuperates a sense of recreation and amusement that high-level American politics suppresses. Through a humorous collision of political worldviews, Stefans upsets Democrat, Republican, and Situationist International peculiar brands of ideology through a digital mash up of erotic text.

In a broader sense, Stefans’s aesthetic strategy of appropriation is one among many possible tactics that are available to users of the World Wide Web to disrupt the ideological positions in programming and language. The Vaneigem Series and Circulars demonstrate the limits of détournement in the digital world where appropriation is not only a normalized activity but is also redirected into digital forms that are themselves constructed around standardized databases and templates. Circulars is, of course, a prime example of a Web 2.0 tool that employs a web template to manage its content. In this case, Stefans reinforces the structures of content management while he appears also to unsettle them. The détournement of The Vaneigem Series—and by extension Circulars—illustrates how a 1950s and 1960s pre-digital avant-garde’s strategies of resistance might be articulated in a twenty-first-century aesthetic to expose the theatre and spectacle of standardized blog content and templates on the World Wide Web. The Vaneigem Series draws on the problematic vocabularies of détournement that are later employed in Circulars. The series also documents the accessibility of cultural material on a global scale and the ease with which users can incorporate this material into a limited form of popular political protest. In the rest of this chapter, I return to Circulars to assess particular examples where the role of copying and adaptation—and the possibilities and limits of détournement and dérive—come to the fore in the politics and poetics of avant-garde opposition.

“W’s Victory Speech: Gangsta Version”
Calvin Cordozar Broadus, Jr.—known by his stage names Snoop Doggy Dogg, Snoop Dogg, and more recently as Snoop Lion—is an American rap, hip-hop, and reggae singer. Kathleen E. Miller credits Snoop Dogg for mainstreaming a distinctive cant known as izzle-speak (2004). As a linguistic marker of identity,
izzle-speak has a longer history than is generally realized. Miller traces the “izz”
infixed to a 1985 song “Roxanne Roxanne,” performed by Brooklyn rap group UTFO,
while variants of the izzle suffix first appear in mid-1990s among San Francisco
détourned version of Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” victory speech, which had
been televised on May 1. The original speech had been inputted into the online
translation program, Snoop Dogg’s Shizzolator. The program transformed Bush’s
oration (in the left column) into a recognizable, although heavily stereotyped,
African-American izzle-speak ‘gangster’ dialect (in the right column). It reads:

| “Bush Makes Historic Speech
Aboard Warship.” | “W’s Victory Speech: Gangsta
Version” |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thank you. Thank you all very much.</td>
<td>Thank yo’ ass, know what I’m sayin’?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admiral Kelly, Captain Card, officers and sailors of the USS Abraham Lincoln, my fellow Americans, major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed.</td>
<td>Admiral Kelly, Captain Card, officers ‘n sailors of da USS Abraham Lincoln, my fellow Americans, major combat operations in Iraq has ended, know what I’m sayin’? In da battle of Iraq, da United States ‘n izzle allies has prevailed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And now our coalition is engaged in securing and reconstructing that country.</td>
<td>And now izzle coalition is engaged in securing ‘n reconstructing that country, know what I’m sayin’?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In this battle, we have fought for the cause of liberty and for the peace of</td>
<td>In this battle, we has fought fo’ da cause of liberty ‘n fo’ da peace of da</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the world. Our nation and our coalition are proud of this accomplishment, yet it is you, the members of the United States military, who achieved it. Your courage, your willingness to face danger for your country and for each other made this day possible.

Because of you our nation is more secure. Because of you the tyrant has fallen and Iraq is free ("Bush Makes Historic Speech Aboard Warship" 2003).

The translation relies on the reader to recognize the racialized coding of an African-American subculture. The repetition of stylized slang—"yo’ ass," "izzle/izzall," and "know what I’m sayin’"—flattens any markers of individuality by appealing to a received idea of the gangster rapper, most notably Snoop Dogg. The program’s code miscreates convincing syntax. While "izzle" is actually a suffix, here it remains unattached to any root word, replacing in most instances the word “our.” In addition, the slang further homogenizes and reduces Bush’s speech into sounds: “n’,” “da,” “fo’,” and “mo’.” The result tempers Bush’s rhetoric by undercutting its emotive currency, and the speech loses its authority. This play with language is particularly highlighted in the line “We has fought fo’ da cause of liberty ‘n fo’ da peace of da world,” which replaces the correct auxiliary of the subject’s past tense (“have” to “has”) and alters the definite articles (“the” to “da”). Like the sound translations in DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response” (chapter 1), the homophones in this translation work to obscure the text. The result severs Bush’s speech from its sobriety and its victorious rhetoric. Furthermore,
Snoop Dogg’s Shizzolator strips his oration of its orchestrated, formalized, and tightly controlled script. Instead, the translation program reinvests it with the representation of spoken word, delivered with the semblance of spontaneity.

However, there is nothing spontaneous about this speech. Text generators exercise calculated algorithmic control over their inputs. The repetition of placeholder units such as “izzle” and “know what I’m sayin’” illustrates the complex and hidden codes that are brought to the screen surface. Snoop Dogg’s Shizzolator echoes Debord’s admonishment that “[a]n embryonic cybernetic power is vainly trying to put language under the control of the machines” (1981, 114). The text generator has accomplished the same effect as a political speechwriter by smoothing over differences and by creating a palatable dialogue that is immediately recognizable to a public. At the same time, the translation retains the elements of Bush’s original message even with the insertion of new textual units and the erasure of others through technology.

To call the translation a representative text on Circulars would be misleading, but it does illustrate some of the divisive undercurrents on the site. First, while the Shizzolator program invokes satirical humour, it reduces an ethnic group to slang units (or alternatively, slang units to an ethnic group). It thus engineers an awkward comic relief. One could argue that it points to a political statement on the alleged thuggery of the Bush Administration, but it does so by racially and linguistically objectifying African-Americans as thugs. The question is why Stefans, a Korean-American, would upload an invidious text that relies on a racist reading. On May 6, 2003, he posted a telling response on Circulars to Steve Perry who had initially uploaded the speech to his progressive website, Bush Wars Blog. Under the headline, “Question of the Day: Is Shizzolatin’ Racist?” Stefans justifies the “creative, non-discursive ‘surprise attack’ aspects of political art—excess, even if it moves beyond the positive formulations of what we should do” (2003e). Stefans’s position lists toward the hijacking of rhetoric, catching a glimpse of what Debord suggested is the “poetic adventure,” which is “difficult, dangerous, and never guaranteed” (1981, 115; italics in original). It is the possibility
of offence upon which the translation relies. By transmitting a signal of a stereotype, this new speech highlights the social and cultural divisions in American society. As Stefans argues, “creating obnoxious cartoons about ‘difference’ at least suggests the contradictions and potential conflicts in American culture that the Bush cabinet seems to want to gloss over” (2003e). Stefans suggests that offence defamiliarizes cultural conventions that otherwise inhibit difference. The original victory speech paints an ordered picture of a monolithic and culturally united America. References to “our nation,” “our allies,” and “our coalition” (“Bush Makes Historic Speech Aboard Warship” 2003) leave no room for difference. Placed alongside the translation, this unity unravels: an African-American dialect expresses a cultural otherness.

The questionable content of the translation highlights a particular danger of the Situationist International strategies on the World Wide Web where détournement is not only a normative tactic, but it also can be used to express derogative attitudes towards minority groups. Izzle-speak is a unique, but recognizable, social identity that is staged in language. It is possible that it reflects a disturbing viral trend where this linguistic mark signifies an unconscious mockery and contempt of the “hilarious black man” caricature. In this case, we must ask whether the translation invites us to laugh at George W. Bush, at an African American stereotype, or with the noncognizant translation program. This détourned speech underscores that issues of race and identity are as present in digital spaces as they are in the so-called real world. The World Wide Web is hardly a disembodied, utopian system that we might imagine it to be. In other words, the détourned work demonstrates a difficult relationship between conventions of language, including those which enforce racist positions of identities (such as izzle-speak), and the Situationist International strategies of détournement that posit an ideological position to overturn oppressive semantic conventions.

The use of machine-produced language also explores where authorship, ownership, and responsibility of language, text, and writing might lie on the
World Wide Web. In chapter 1, the feminist contributions to the Poetics List colloquium demonstrate that textual veracity is a suspect concept, and similar questions are raised in Stefans’s appropriations in “the dreamlife of letters” and The Vaneigem Series. In “W’s Victory Speech: Gangsta Version,” the relationship between the appropriated and rewritten text interrogates the kinds of language that enact dominant positions in the original source. Algorithms undermine the supposed authenticity of the source text because the new expression draws on racist comedic codes. While digital détournings continue an avant-garde tradition of negating language associated with mass media and government, here the combination of algorithm and text implies that we can never really escape the oppressive racialized linguistic codes on the World Wide Web.

Yet racist or not, the translation exemplifies the type of appropriative, collaborative, political, and poetic activism that colludes with programming. The translation recalls the way that universal translators standardize languages through repetition. It is a point that Debord argued: a translation program homogenizes culture and “inevitably misses any new meaning taken on by a word, as well as its past dialectical ambivalences” (1981, 117). Yet as Snoop Dogg’s Shizzolator demonstrates, the algorithms can also amplify distorted translations by inserting slang, such as “Thank yo’ ass izzall hella much n’ shit.” The result stresses the troubling politics of violence and oppression hidden beneath the smooth rhetoric of a political speech or the clean form of a programming algorithm.

“W’s Victory Speech: Gangsta Version” shows how digital détournings can be reformulated on the World Wide Web. Far from irritating norms of language and text, they can be complicit in reinforcing them. “W’s Victory Speech: Gangsta Version” pursues a logic of political revolt against the Iraq War, one which is staged in language identity. Yet the convergence of Bush’s speech with a racialized dialect leads not to an intervention in everyday life but the problematic maintenance of caricatures. In this case, algorithms and code are redirected to reflect hegemonic attitudes of the social world. Both the pre-digital avant-garde
and the online avant-garde engage the ongoing problem of questioning structures of language, text, and writing that will never fully give way to their projections of alternative utopian spaces, free from normative conventions.

“Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword”

One might argue that a web-based dérive differs from the model of transience that Debord undertook through the streets of Paris. While a user might randomly surf the World Wide Web, she also follows preset pathways through databases and, in the case of web searches, through algorithmic parameters. Hyperlinks are marks that signal an anchor or a starting point that references another set of data located on another web page or website. Hyperlink nodes are, therefore, more analogous to the symbolic red arrows in *The Naked City* that fix a representation of Debord’s trajectory. However, unlike the arrows on the map where the viewer can holistically witness their directions, a web user may not immediately know the destination of a hyperlink. It is within this uncertainty that a limited experience of dérive might operate.

The uncertainty of the link is particularly relevant in *Circulars*. Now, ten years after its inception, the website suffers from a common problem known as link rot, a process by which hyperlinks become unavailable to web users. Also known as broken link, dangling link, or—more ominously—link death, link rot is not unusual. Daniel Gomes and Marío J. Silva have estimated the half-life of a website to be 556 days (2006, 195). *Circulars’s* longevity is thus unusual. Clicking on a broken link will bring a user to any of a number of default error messages. A typical response is one called HTTP 404 Not Found, which signals that a server cannot retrieve the requested page.

The issue of link rot appears in the hypertext poem “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword” by Eddan Katz, which Darren Wershler posted to *Circulars* on April 21, 2003. The poem is also available on numerous websites including the Berkeley Intellectual Property Blog whence the *Circulars’s* version comes. The poem itself upgrades into the digital age Gil Scott-Heron’s 1970s spoken word
poem “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” Katz’s version indexes copyright and e-commerce sites as well as contemporary political and popular cultural references. I have placed it below on the right, next to Scott-Heron’s poem on the right. The underlined words indicate the syntax of a hyperlink. Together the first two stanzas of both poems read:

“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”  “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword”

You will not be able to stay home, You will not be able to stay home, dear
brother.
You will not be able to plug in, turn on You will not be able to plug in, log on
and cop out.
You will not be able to lose yourself on You will not be able to lose yourself in
skag and skip,
Skip out for beer during commercials, Final Fantasy,
Because the revolution will not be Or hold your Kazaa download queues,
television.

The revolution will not be televised.
The revolution will not be brought to Revolution is not an AOL Keyword.
you by Xerox Revolution will not be brought to you

In 4 parts without commercial brought to you on Hi-Def TV
interruptions.

The revolution will not show you Encrypted with a warning from the
pictures of Nixon FBI,
blowing a bugle and leading a charge Revolution will not have a jpeg
by John slideshow of Dubya
Mitchell, General Abrams and Spiro Calling the cattle and leading the
Agnew to eat incursion by
Secretary Rumsfeld, General Ashcroft
and Dick Cheney
AOL (America Online) keywords are shortcut help functions. The keywords direct the user to the relevant online content when she types a shortcut word, such as “billing,” into the AOL toolbar search engine on her web browser. Offline, “AOL Keyword” is a slang modifier: when placed in a sentence, it accentuates a point or an argument. Its usage in this poem exemplifies the infiltration of the structures of digital search engines into everyday language. In this hypertext poem, the term “AOL Keyword” suggests that one can neither logically search for revolution, nor can one organize cultural change into indexes and categories. Instead, the revolution must take place in the disordered offline world. The poem remains largely faithful to Scott-Heron’s defiant, anti-Establishment tone that decried the Vietnam War and the omnipresence of television. “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” uses spoken word over a funk beat as an alternative means of communication. Scott-Heron’s voice stands with the bass, drums, and flute against the spectacle of advertising (“Skip out for beer during commercials” [line 4]) and mass reproduction (“The revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox” [line 7]). Scott-Heron fuses advertising slogans, clichés, and media references that are plucked from television and popular culture. The work thus attacks the information management of technology while it locates resistance in spoken language that is itself inflected by mass media. Katz repeats this format in “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword” by using online cultural references—such as the term “AOL Keyword”—and web structures like hyperlinks to challenge the algorithmic processes of the World Wide Web. The resulting text suggests the Web’s inescapability and the impossibility of articulating a protest position from outside its infrastructures.
Overall, there are 89 individual links in 66 lines of the poem. In the first stanza, the hyperlinks fulfil their function: they take me to three different posts on the Berkeley Intellectual Property Blog, a jocular diagram that illustrates a hierarchy of geeks, and a peer-to-peer sharing site. The hyperlink nodes acquire meaning beyond its syntax: clicking on “to plug in,” for example, delivers me to an article about neighbourhood Wi-Fi sharing. The hypertext poem incorporates the information of this new web page. In the second stanza, I arrive at a series of 404 web pages when I click on the links “brought to you on Hi-Def TV,” “Encrypted,” “warning from the FBI,” “jpeg slideshow,” “Calling the cattle,” “leading the incursion,” “General Ashcroft,” and “Dick Cheney.” The pages are not completely lost. The Internet Archive, which crawls and captures thousands of web pages for its online depository, holds fourteen separate snapshots of this poem. These snapshots reveal that the missing links lead to websites of the National Association of Broadcasters, an electronic rights organization, an FBI index of facts and figures for 2003, an image gallery of President George W. Bush, the website of The Centre for Public Integrity, and a White House biographical note on Dick Cheney. In some respects, the broken link reinforces the metaphor for cultural amnesia that this poem urges the user to resist. Yet while we might popularly understand the HTTP 404 as an absence of content, it refers technically to a blockage. The requested data may still exist on a remote server but the pathway to it is unavailable. Just as links radiate the reader outwards, link rot puts blockages on display, allowing the reader to return to her starting point. A 404 thus manages the reader through technology. As Terence Harpold explains, hyperlinks are “detours,” that turn the user away from the destination. Yet “[e]ven as they bind the body of the text,” he claims, “they reveal its erasures and wounds” (1991, 178). In other words, 404 web pages have as much signifying value as the unbroken links in the hypertext poem “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword.”

While Scott-Heron’s poem uses phrases that have slipped from popular culture, the broken links in Katz’s poem are tangible evidence of how online
information is never entirely stagnant. Likewise, the Internet Archive demonstrates that information is never lost. Rather, it is copied and moved around to new online spaces. Yet in a broader sense, the link failure reflects the attenuation of cultural material on the World Wide Web. Now archived, the web processes, usually hidden, become visible on Circulars by way of the broken link. Time is a totalitarian phenomenon that reduces Stefans’s prized rhetorical strategy—the hyperlink—into banal 404 web pages. Yet link rot also highlights two key observations. Firstly, the fixed structures of data management and the preset pathways of the hypertext are vital to a model of oppositional rhetoric on Circulars. “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword” illustrates that pre-digital wandering is reformulated on the World Wide Web within systems of control and regulation. In other words, a digital dérive is a manufactured movement towards databases that the author wants the reader to access. The hyperlink nodes thus produce a very different outcome than the arrows in Debord’s The Naked City, where the viewer can start, end, and direct their gaze on almost any point. The hyperlinks in “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword” thus explore the problem of how a digital poetics might assert an oppositional position while standardized and preprogrammed technologies entrap such oppositionality within its fixed structures. Secondly, while “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword” demonstrates the convergence of management systems with text and writing, link rot resists and destabilizes such regulation and control. The poem in 2013 is clearly different from the one in 2003. Link rot demonstrates a form of resistance within the World Wide Web that was not evident in the early presentation of the poem. The infrastructure of the World Wide Web continues to shape a poem outside of human intervention. Like “W’s Victory Speech: Gangsta Version,” “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword” implies that Situationist International strategies become mechanical processes on the World Wide Web that counter the revolutionary, anti-system aesthetic of the pre-digital avant-garde. The digital context requires a revision of the way that we might approach détournement and dérive online to take account
of the coding and algorithmic instructions that now influence and shape digital works, even after the author has ceased to engage with the text.

“War=Language”

Stefans repeatedly reminds his readers of avant-garde politics—not only through his use of Debord and Vaneigem, but also through his reiterations of other historical avant-gardes, as I explore in chapter 3, where I trace Stefans’s engagement with futurism in his animation “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).” One can place *Circulars* among a number of roughly contemporaneous print works between the 1990s and the early 2000s that foreground an activist but also experimental poetics. Representative works include cris cheek’s *Cloud Eyes* (1991) and *The Enduring Freedoms*—mystik writing pad (2001), Bruce Andrews’ *s I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)* (1992), Barrett Watten’s *Bad History* (1998), Andrea Brady’s *Vacation of a Lifetime* (2001), Alice Notley’s *Disobedience* (2001), Keston Sutherland’s *Anti-Freeze* (2002), Michael Gottlieb’s *Lost and Found* (2003), Mark Nowak’s *Shut Down Shut Up* (2004), and Juliana Spahr’s *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005). Some of these works have also used preexistent texts, such as Hart Seely’s *Pieces of Intelligence: The Existential Poetry of Donald H. Rumsfeld* (2003). In 2004, artist Gerhard Richter’s *War Cut* combined 216 detailed photographs of his *Abstract Painting No. 648–52* and arranged them with excerpts from the *New York Times* that documented the Iraq War (2012, 328). In addition, the union of poetics, politics, and new media appears in many digital works, such as Sandy Baldwin’s *New Word Order: Basra* (2003), *Regime Change* by Noah Wardrip-Fruin, David Durand, Brion Moss, and Elaine Froehlich (2004), J.R. Carpenter’s *In Absentia* (2008), and Jim Andrews’s *The Club* (2011). Lastly, Eva and Franco Mattes, also known as 0100101110101101.org, have been performing a model of anticommercial transmedia since 1995. In the performance *Freedom* (2010), they attempt to build a virtual artwork in an online war videogame while begging other players not to shoot them, without any success (Mattes and Mattes 2010). We can thus read *Circulars* in the context of a body of literature that explores
documentary and activism through a combination of poetic form, language, and iterative strategies, such as appropriation.

*Circulars* emphasizes this broader context of politically engaged avant-garde poetics by including contributions from a number of Stefans’s contemporaries, who share his commitment to thinking about the politics of avant-garde poetics. Contributors included Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Kasey Silem Mohammed, Charles Bernstein, Darren Wershler, David Perry, Jonathan Skinner, Angela Rawlings, Patrick Durgin, Joshua Clover, Alfred Schein, Kristin Prevallet, and Daniel Bouchard. Stefans, however, contributed the most author posts by far: 318 out of 460 individual entries. In Chapter 1, the relations between the individual and community become especially foregrounded in the Poetics List colloquium when various contributions generated a successive chain of responses in a moderated environment. The key difference between the Poetics List and *Circulars* is that Stefans was the main architect of the blog: *Circulars* centred primarily on his activities and posts. Despite the quantity of Stefans’s contributions, we can still view *Circulars* in the context of a tradition of avant-garde collaborative practice that formulated a poetic platform for political dissent. In this climate of peer-to-peer sharing, *Circulars* facilitated communication between individuals, allowing readers to post comments and engage with other web users. As Marjorie Perloff notes, reader responses can reshape poetry blogs by “producing a curious amalgam of voices” (2010, 4). *Circulars* demonstrates her point wherever reader discussion involves divisive exchanges between poets. Since 2003, spambots have also further complicated the site’s material by posting incoherent and obscene chunks of text that also appear to talk back to the original poster. The media-specific properties of a blog platform stage the noise of different voices, thereby enriching its material as well as foregrounding this kind of interactive, multiple, and appropriative poetics as integral to its politics.

This noise is particularly evident in a series of lively exchanges that began on March 29, 2003, when Stefans posted Barrett Watten’s paper “War=Language,” which Watten had delivered three days earlier at Wayne State University. The
essay interrogates the relation between language and the social world. In addition, the reader commentary demonstrates how the blog medium appears to contextualize itself outside normative mass media while still enacting the conventions of a social network.

Watten is a significant theorist and literary historian of Language writing, editing *This* and *Poetics Journal*, which were crucial venues for disseminating poetic and theoretical Language works. As a scholar, he has explored the development of Language writing as well as the social construction of avant-garde textuality in such works as *Total Syntax* (1985) and *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (2003). As I discussed in chapter 1, Language writing was part of the divisive San Francisco Bay Area poetry scene in the 1970s and the 1980s, where it existed as a visible grouping of poets with a more or less defined aesthetic position. Language poets underscored the connections between language and social systems, reminding the reader that writing and language work “to record or construct or reactivate the social body” (Andrews 2001). In “War=Language,” Watten argues that conventional uses of language run the risk of straightjacketing public and poetic responses to the Iraq War. The incessant use of clichés, tired metaphors, and worn narratives, he suggests, are “reinforced by their stultifying redundancy.” As a result, language is “emptied of anything but its dumbed-down significance” (Watten 2003). For Watten, the repetition of poetic tropes weakens a reader’s capacity to engage pernicious news media and bureaucratic information with discerning awareness. Furthermore, to accept uncritically the metaphorical representations of war normalizes the manifestation of real-time, real world conflict.

The paper’s epigraph is a fragment from Allen Ginsberg’s 1966 antiwar poem, “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” and it concisely sums up the tone of Watten’s argument. Dictated into his tape recorder as Ginsberg crossed the American Midwest, the poem perforates a meditation on the Vietnam War with snippets of radio reports, the Kansas landscape, and Ginsberg’s organic chanting. The fragment reads:
The war is language,
language abused
for Advertisement
language used
like magic for power on the planet.

The line breaks mimic each vocalized thought that Ginsberg spoke into his recorder. In addition, the capitalization of “Advertisement” speaks of the omnipresence of billboards and radio frequencies as Ginsberg journeyed across Kansas state. Watten’s essay gestures towards the use and abuse of language that shape perception. In an age where information bombards the reader from all directions—television, radio, the World Wide Web, and billboard advertising—Watten dismantles the poetic filters that obfuscate one’s experiences with the world. His technique is similar to Ginsberg’s: just as Ginsberg captures radio reports, Watten uplifts quotations and fragments from news sources, such as the Washington Post and the New York Times. The result is a methodical listing of poetic tropes, accompanied with appropriated quotations. A typical example reads:

Personification: “‘This is the head-of-the-snake conundrum,’ said one senior official who was deeply involved in the planning for a post-Hussein Iraq.”

Euphemism: “No one wants to commit themselves until it is clear a regime change is happening.”

A Google search reveals that Watten has uplifted these two quotations from an article titled “A Nation at War: Intelligence; Decade of Plans to Topple Hussein Yield Mixed Results,” published in the New York Times on March 26, 2003. By disentangling the quotes from their source, Watten brings their poetic special effects into clarity. In the same fashion, he lists examples of “tautology,” “non-sequitur,” “metonymy,” “poetry,” and “narrative.” Watten’s tone is forthright and castigatory against the “pseudo-rationality,” “pseudo-objectivity,” and
“delusional conclusions” that the “language of war” conveys. Watten shows that one cannot escape poetic redundancy. Just as poetic devices mediate language, the essay also interlaces the war-driven visual tropes into its own rhetoric. Watten uses descriptions such as “barrage of language” and “interpretative targets.” He names “truth” as the “casualty of war.” The subtext infers the impossibility of placing oneself outside rhetoric, or as Watten has previously asserted, “the necessary/impossible dilemma of acting from a position outside the system” (2002, 170; italics in original). In fact, Watten raises a difficult question: how can we use language to protest and overthrow oppression when language itself is part of the problem? Watten does not endorse the kind of straightforward rhetoric that Hamill’s group, Poets Against the War, favoured. Rather, he suggests that innovative aesthetic strategies can be used to rupture political rhetoric. In the end, he surmises that the only position of dissent is to hijack this rhetoric through “[c]ritical intervention,” thereby reinvesting language with signification and freedom from redundancy. In his Circulars’s essay, Watten suggests that to set up a position of resistance, one must “begin with language itself” (2003).

In chapter 1, I traced how Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s linguistic disruptions of gender and sexual binaries reflect an alternative dream space of free, homophonic, and expressive language. “War=Language” proposes an intervention in language to undermine the rhetorical structures that are pervasive in mass media. Yet Watten’s essay also ignores the rhetorical structures and conventions of digital media—including the hyperlink and the blog platform—that poems, such as “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword,” integrate into their discourse. Watten’s post generated substantial discussion, prompting eighty-five comments (excluding spam). These comments covered a miscellany of topics including the politics of gender, the manipulation of consent, the dichotomy between academic intellectualism and real world action, personal attacks, and poetry by Rae Armantrout and W. S. Merwin. Blog frameworks potentially streamline conversations into linear frameworks: posts and reader comments appear reasonably ordered, arranged chronologically one after the other. This framework
creates the semblance of continuity and moderation that is not present in the e-mail exchanges of the Poetics List. (Although the colloquium proves to be an exception: the successive e-mails engineered a generative, linear exchange, as I discussed in chapter 1.) The blog framework enacts an alternative authority, reflecting the fact that, as Charles Bernstein has noted, “[a]uthority is never abolished but constantly reinscribes itself in new places” (2011, 181). While we might imagine blogs to be open, democratic technologies that exist in utopian spaces, they can also evince wider problems of restrictive political forms and rhetoric in the digital context.

One person who countered Watten’s argument was the poet Kent Johnson. In his comments on Watten’s essay, dated March 30, 2003, Johnson argues that a political critique grounded in an experimental aesthetic is as restrictive and oppressive as the kind of mainstream modes that poets like Watten rejected. To articulate a resistance in language, he argues, foments division “when the building of dialogic strategies and ethics in the cultural community is an urgent matter.” Johnson suggests that “attitudes of mutual tolerance and respect” informs an effective poetics of resistance (2003). If one positions a language writing aesthetic as the sole authority for a poetics, then one runs the risk of alienating helpful allies. As Erica Hunt has also argued, this kind of poetics threatens to narrow readership “for whom new meaning is produced” (1990, 204). For Johnson, Watten’s rejection of conventional language works against new and simultaneous relations with projects that share a common political terrain with linguistic innovation.

It is possible that blogsites illustrate the kind of plural and conversational strategies that Johnson desired. With respect to Watten’s paper, Circulars permitted a range from favourable to negative comments. Yet blogs also attract unwelcome guests. Following September 6, 2003, spambots bombarded Watten’s post, along with many others on the site, with diet and e-commerce links. Spambots have nothing to say to Watten’s essay and simply post semicoherent text that is completely devoid of any significance. Yet in another way, this bizarre
shift in the commentary direction illustrates the difficulty of sustaining a protest website on the World Wide Web. On this website, these spam comments reflect the extreme spectacle of online spaces where automated programs poorly mask themselves as human. The spambots disrupt the activist poetics that Circulars contributors developed, interrupting an advertising-free website with their brand of commercial sex and advertising. Like the broken links in “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword,” spambots work not only against the ordered regulation that we imagine the World Wide Web to be, but they also point to the difficulty of sustaining an online protest using the anticommercial aesthetics of the pre-digital avant-garde.

Stefans may have intended Circulars to be a concerted response to the American political climate in 2003, but the blog did not uphold the vision of a cybernetic utopia that critics like John Perry Barlow and Howard Rheingold proposed in “A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace” (1996) and The Virtual Community ([1991] 2000) respectively. The unruly and divisive commentary under Watten’s essay prompted Stefans to temporally close down the post’s comment section on April 2, 2003. Although the shut down by the site administrator may seem counterintuitive to the anti-authoritarianism of the Situationist International, it does demonstrate a paradox. Circulars—as with any political blogsite—was a tool to stimulate conversation, but it also regulated and directed dialogue. In this respect, Circulars keenly reflected the offline world: full of disagreements, personal attacks, and brief moments of community agreement.

Where is the Situation in Circulars?

The three texts—“W’s Victory Speech: Gangsta Version,” “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword,” and “War=Language”—exemplify a type of poetics at work in Circulars that meshes World Wide Web technologies with the poetics and politics of the twenty-first century. The question remains whether Circulars itself is a détourned website that critiques the spectacle of the World Wide Web. The programming involved in producing these texts also works against the Situationist
International ideology. For Debord, automation and information emphasize the transmission of orders, thereby erasing the “redundancies” of freedom (Debord 1981, 117). The infrastructure of the World Wide Web affirms regulation and automated management of the highways of information, thus undermining the wandering that the tactic of dérive permits. Paradoxically, the World Wide Web is also space where the multiple desires and frustrations of humanity are played out. In this way, the World Wide Web resists hegemonic structures, therefore making it difficult to enunciate a Situationist International model of resistance. If we hold that the World Wide Web exemplifies the electronic interdependences that allude to McLuhan’s vision of the “global village” (2011, 36), the immense scope of the Web and its multifarious networks make it almost impossible to find a position from which to détourne it.

Through its network ecology, *Circulars* reveals on a very small scale that the World Wide Web mirrors the social and political positions of race, identity, and ideology. The relation of rhetoric to digital forms, such as user-comments and the hyperlink, seem invisible because they are familiar features in the twenty-first century. Yet spambots and link rot also point to moments where the World Wide Web seems to détourne itself, thus exposing its structures and processes—its spectacle—to the user. The real significance of *Circulars* manifests what Bruce Andrews has described as a “conception of writing as politics” (1996, 50; italics in original). That is to say, *Circulars* investigates the politics inside the structures of cultural signs, including language and the strategies of the Situationist International. Stefans’s examination of the microlevel of language is integral to his digital poetics. The strict languages of code intensify the difficulty of questioning the structures of human language through avant-garde strategies, such as digital détournement, and this difficulty becomes even greater in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” to which I now turn.
Chapter 3
Futurism in the Digital Age: “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)”

He will begin by brutally destroying the syntax of his speech. He wastes no time in building sentences. Punctuation and the right adjectives will mean nothing to him. He will despise subtleties and nuances of language. Breathlessly he will assault your nerves with visual, auditory, olfactory sensations, just as they come to him. (Marinetti 2009a, 145)

The word is broader than the thought. (Kruchenykh 2004a, 70)

Stefans’s rewritings of feminist, concrete, and Situationist International texts and strategies interrogate the avant-garde use of language and text conventions. His use of the formal structures of code and programming also exacerbates the problem for the avant-garde of finding alternative paradigms of rhetoric and form. The media-specific qualities of his technotexts—such as the mechanisms that support e-mail formatting and Flash (chapter 1), blogging platforms and web templates (chapter 2)—illustrate that the digital realm binds text and language within standardized programming structures. Digital spaces also inscribe political and cultural identities. For example, the mechanical translation of George W. Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” speech points to the way that programming can project racist stereotyping of African-Americans onto a borrowed text. The digital context is thus not a free and disembodied space. Stefans’s model of digital poetics demonstrates a continuation of monolithic and homogenizing structures in ways that require a rethink of aesthetic strategies in the digital world.

This chapter expands my argument from chapters 1 and 2 that Stefans’s works highlight the similarities and differences between earlier and print-based avant-garde and digital avant-garde positions. Oppositional politics of language, text, and form also remains highly problematic in the digital context. In particular, Stefans’s use of futurist poetics and news media in the animation “Suicide in an
Airplane (1919)” (2010) highlights how code and algorithms work with and against modernist and avant-garde approaches while also negotiating the futurist glorification of machine, war, and totalitarian politics. “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” reveals that animation cannot eschew the conventional politics of language, text, and form, as well as those structures vital for programming languages.

In the first section on this chapter, I analyze the relationship between “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” futurism, and the futurist celebration of the machine and war. My starting point is the audio part of Stefans’s work: overlaying the animation is a futurist piano accompaniment by Russian-born célèbre, Leo Ornstein, to whose work the title “Suicide in an Airplane” refers. In the second section, I closely read two recorded iterations of Stefans’s animation, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” and I explore the interplay between the rewritten text and the original source. In the first reading, I investigate the way that the animation reflects the differences and similarities between pre-digital and digital avant-garde by interrogating the futurists’ destructive impulse towards language. Secondly, I address the role that the animation plays in continuing to explode these common structures of linguistic codes. Futurist strategies find their digital analogies in the randomized machinic processes that reproduce the letterforms on the electronic surface. By disrupting the common structures of the letter, word, and grammar, futurists challenged broader political and cultural ideologies that safeguarded dominant social groups. “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” explores those properties of the machine—the bits of data and algorithms—that embody political positions of oppositionality. As a result, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” enforces the conflation of politics and aesthetics. In the second recording, I analyze how this animation also resists and reinforces conventions of the machine. Although the futurist project to break out of linguistic convention seems to conflict with the digital text’s necessary adherence to programming rules, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” uses error as a signifying strategy. This use of error unsettles the programming systems that also structure language, text, and form. Finally, I
interrogate how Stefans’s animation addresses the rhetoric and form of mass media through code and handwriting. As in The Vaneigem Series, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” scrutinizes the properties of news media that reinforce normative ideological positions as universal truths. Ultimately, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” uses digital media to challenge ideas of absolutes—such as transparency and authority—in the text.

**Audio and Animation**

“Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” exemplifies the hidden computational processes that handle the dynamic and even dramatic motion of the text on the electronic surface. As in The Vaneigem Series, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” détournes the normative rhetorical forms of mass media to generate fresh perspectives on a contemporary global conflict. In this case, Stefans has uplifted the source text of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” from an article that was initially published in the New York Times on May 10, 2009. The original article documents the rising toll of civilian causalities resulting from American airstrikes against Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, Stefans is highly provocative in his strategy. Although the newspaper’s owner had previously served Stefans a cease-and-desist order after he blatantly copied the paper’s online template (Stefans and Beiguelman 2006, 248), in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” Stefans hijacks the New York Times’s material once again. This time, the détournement differs substantially from the earlier experiment: in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” algorithms parse the source text to unpick visibly the coherence of natural syntax at the level of the individual letter. The resulting text undoes the factual reportage of the original article from the New York Times. The animation illustrates Stefans’s ongoing online challenge to American global policies and to the persistent mobilization of the nation’s military forces.

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12 Appendix A contains a transcription of the source text file.
Like “the dreamlife of letters,” “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” is composed of kinetic letterforms that travel around the dimensions of the electronic screen. The earlier poem, “the dreamlife of letters,” unfolds on a fixed timeline. Every time that the poem plays, the software application replicates the text for the viewer in exactly the same way. In contrast, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” is an example of a “real-time reiterative programmable poem,” a term that Adelaide Morris uses to describe a randomly generated poetry-machine that engineers countless permutations of text (2006, 26). More specifically, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” utilizes ActionScripts, an object-orientated programming language. Object-orientated programming represents concepts as objects, consisting of variables, and a set of methods that describes the behaviour of the object. That is, the methods detail exactly what the object is capable of doing within fixed parameters (Bruce 2002, 17). In “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” algorithmic instructions execute a precise set of commands that parse and randomly select verbs, nouns, and proper names from the source text file (Iota Center 2010). These selections produce node-like units of information that, when combined, build a larger structure of text. On screen, the nodes simulate the appearance of messy pencil scribbles in varying black to light-grey shades that either compress or tear themselves apart as each stroke of the letter migrates along random trajectories on the solid white backdrop. The resulting poem not only releases noisy textual explosions that permit varying degrees of legibility but also fixes the reader’s attention on the representation of the text, including its simulation of a pen writing on paper.13

“Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” also differs from “the dreamlife of letters” in another significant way. The silence of “the dreamlife of letters” focuses the viewer entirely on the visual arrangement as it unfolds dynamically on the screen.

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13 Appendix B contains zip files for Mac and PC versions of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).” These files can be extracted onto, and run directly from, a computer’s desktop.
In contrast, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” combines the visual presentation with audio to engineer poetic meaning. The musical score—also titled “Suicide in an Airplane”—is a belligerent soundscape that asserts aggressive aural dissonance. Composed by Russian-born futurist Leo Ornstein, the accompaniment delivers dramatic, rapid-fire tonal clusters that relentlessly exploit the physical registers of both the piano and the pianist. The bass ostinato motifs, the accelerating repetition of dissonant tones, simulate the sound of airplane propellers throttling at full thrust through the air. As Vivian Perlis has noted, these tonal clusters are not the result of “random slapping” on the piano keys but, rather, illustrate Ornstein’s careful orchestration of sound groups “by overtones” (1975, 741). As a consequence, the score alludes to the vibrant and thundering momentum of mechanical flight while the difficulty of the composition demands intense precision and the focused energy of the pianist who performs it.

Ornstein’s “Suicide in an Airplane” reflects some key characteristics of futurism—namely, the glorification of violent restlessness, rapid and efficient motion, and radical new occurrences in transportation technology at the turn of the twentieth century. Motifs of war, wireless communications, trains, automobiles, airplanes, and electricity occur repeatedly in futurist poetry and paintings, such as Antonio Sant’Elia’s Central Electric Plant (1914), Kazimir Malevich’s Simultaneous Death of a Man in an Airplane and on the Railroad (1913), and F.T. Marinetti’s 8 Souls in a Bomb (1919). By deploying Ornstein’s “Suicide in an Airplane” in his own project, Stefans taps into what Poggioli calls an excitable futurist “state of mind,” in which innovative aesthetics intersect with the “arena of agitation” (1968, 69). This “arena of agitation” describes the rapid and, at times, frightening changes that technological advances brought to Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. I want to detail briefly a couple of immediate observations concerning the audio-text relationship in order to enunciate some possible—and even uncomfortable—responses to the futurist connection in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).”
Of immediate note is the way that the audio sets the tone for the poem: it compresses the text into the experience of flight. As the letterforms tear apart on screen, the audio becomes implicated with the incendiary materiality of text. The tonal repetitions structure the highly iterative poem. From the viewer’s initial perspective, the audio score is the only consistent media element in the animation: it is perfectly reproducible from one viewing to the next. In spite of its noisy content, the tonal clusters of roughly equal sounds are highly repetitive and controlled: they appear to counter the chance processes of the visual display that stress fragmentation and difference. Yet while the audio conveys a sense of haste and urgency, the focus on propeller airplanes as a symbol of speed and acceleration seems rather outmoded in a twenty-first-century aesthetic, in which software technologies deliver near instantaneous graphics. The animation thus brings to the fore a jarring tension between the representation of a slow twentieth-century analogue technology and a twenty-first-century animation that enables the rapid dissemination of digital information.

The tension between the futurist and digital avant-garde leads to a second observation that, likely, other political registers must also be at work in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).” Futurist politics are a vexed issue in context of the totalitarian climate of the early twentieth century in which the movement was rooted. As Emilio Gentile notes, Fascist and Italian futurist movements advocated a similar “modernist nationalism” that emphasized explosive expansions of economic and political power (2003, 44-45). Following the conclusion of World War I, Italian futurists, such as F.T. Marinetti, developed various strategic alliances with ex-combatant groups, including Benito Mussolini’s *fasci di combattimento* (Adamson 2010, 861). The convergence of totalitarian politics with the avant-garde was not restricted to Italian futurism. As David Ohana has suggested, the victory of the October Revolution in 1917 fuelled confidence in a Communist state-sponsored avant-garde culture that Russian futurists like Vladimir Mayakovsky hoped to
lead (2010, 105). Russian and Italian futurism synchronized artistic and literary praxis with a revolutionary political program that came to be aligned with distinctive totalitarian ideologies.

It is thus intriguing that Stefans has selected Ornstein’s composition “Suicide in an Airplane” to accompany his animation, which, on the surface, scrutinizes American combat operations in Afghanistan. By connecting a futurist score that mimics prop airplanes with a newspaper account of air bombardment, the animation points to the difficult relationship between the futurists’ celebratory representation of war and a contemporary American conflict staged in Afghanistan. For Italian futurists like Marinetti, war represented “the only hygiene of the world” (Marinetti 2009b, 51). “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” relates this futurist celebration of the destructive properties of war to the consequences of American global policy. The post-Bush climate of hope and change, promised by President Barack Obama, gives way to a cynical portrayal of the relentless American war machine that had followed 9/11.

The audio is crucial for this sardonic reading. The noisy simulation of outdated airplane technology, along with the futurist glorification of nationalist and militant expansion, proposes a rather harsh commentary on the state of American global policy, which has supported and enforced the American presence

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in Afghanistan. If the alliance of militant avant-garde, Fascism, Communism, and American foreign policy seems too facile a judgment, the visual display—the exploding letterforms—plays a critical role in developing, but also complicating, this theme of violence in the animation. In this respect, the animation alludes to the structures of the American war machine. The poem not only criticizes the physical catastrophes of air bombardment, but it also indicts the clichés and redundancies of metaphor that repeat the cultural norms in language and foster the public’s normalization of American militarism abroad.

In “War=Language,” Barrett Watten had argued that “[t]o dismantle this war, in its causes and consequences, we must begin with language itself” (Watten 2003). In the second section of this chapter, I consider the disassembling and reassembling of politically charged words in the animation, and the implications of this process for dismantling the rhetorical structures. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to two separate iterations of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919), which I have recorded as a QuickTime Movie. Like “the dreamlife of letters,” “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” is a noninteractive poem: it does not demand overt gestures by the viewer in order to progress the text to its conclusion. Yet the animation does require substantial engagement through ocular movement to keep up with the disintegrating text. The text, therefore, resists a traditional reading strategy because the letterforms move constantly and are, at times, illegible. The illegibility of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” differentiates the poem from “the dreamlife of letters.” In the latter animation, the text not only retains the individual integrity of each letterform (that is to say, the words and letters are still readable) but can also be reproduced perfectly for the viewer over multiple readings. In contrast, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” belongs to a body of digital literature in which the

15 The poem is downloadable in different formats for Mac and PC. Additionally, the viewer can also play the animation online in a web browser. Downloading the PC files, I have recorded two versions. These recordings are available in Appendix B on the CD-Rom.
machine continuously effaces the text. By recording the text, I recognize that I have worked against the animation’s real-time reiterative properties.\(^\text{16}\) However, my reading strategy is to slow down the velocity of the letterforms in order to enunciate the relations of the media forms to language. This strategy is, undoubtedly, a practice of rereading. Although, as David Ciccoricco has stated, the digital text does not necessitate “slow reading in the service of close reading,” rereading deepens comprehension when previously acquired information recombines with new elements (2012). My strategy of rereading seeks to highlight the intersection of poetics and politics as well as to clarify the moments where the conventions of language, text, and writing are under examination.

**“Suicide in an Airplane (1919)”: First Recording**

“Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” belongs to a set of experiments by Stefans that interrogates the brief handwritten properties of letterforms. In an earlier work, “So Much Depends” (n.d.), Stefans uses William Carlos Williams’s poem “XXII” — popularly known as “The Red Wheelbarrow” — as its source text.\(^\text{17}\) “So Much Depends” illustrates many of the later features found in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” including a focus on a source text (in this case, Williams’s poem) that the programming progressively breaks down into individual letters. Yet “So Much Depends” lacks the dynamic kinetic energy of the later animation “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).” The letterforms in this earlier work do not migrate across the electronic screen. Instead, this poem retains a level of syntactical coherence, even as the letters fragment until the animation erases them. In contrast, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” is a particularly compelling example of a new media poem that

\(^\text{16}\) Recording the animation via mechanisms such as QuickTime or Debut Video Capture also shows another complexity when CPU processing speeds, which are native to one brand of computer, can impede the smooth operations of the recording. Such is the case in my recordings where the animation appears to skip or arrest itself.

\(^\text{17}\) A zip file for “So Much Depends” is available in Appendix B on the CD-Rom.
represents the instability of language by literally moving the text around the surface of the screen.

“Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” foregrounds some of the attributes of pre-digital avant-garde in this new digital context. In this recording, I want to focus on the instantiation of futurist characteristics in the visual presentation of a twenty-first-century aesthetic. In particular, I consider the futurist drive towards disrupting structures of language. As with “the dreamlife of letters,” Circulars, and The Vaneigem Series, this animation considers the signifying properties of the structures of language, form, text, and digital technologies, asking the question, “what is the politics inside the work, inside its work” (Andrews 1990, 24; italics in original). Stefans’s approach stresses that the politics of a text are not restricted to what a text says. By looking at the structures of language and form, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” reveals, at the linguistic level, the political and cultural hegemonies that operate in the world.

The animation runs for approximately three minutes and thirty seconds. In the following transcription of the first recording, I have included the nodes that I can identify after cross-referencing with the source text. The entire poem reads:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Code</th>
<th>Node</th>
<th>Source Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>00:00:03</td>
<td>[title board]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:09</td>
<td>PERSUSRE</td>
<td>pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:15</td>
<td>STATES AIRSTRIKES</td>
<td>states airstrikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:21</td>
<td>BCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ123456789</td>
<td>states airstrikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:22</td>
<td>BCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ123456789</td>
<td>states airstrikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:36</td>
<td>AIRSTRIKES</td>
<td>airstrikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:39</td>
<td>THREAT</td>
<td>threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:41</td>
<td>CERTAINLY</td>
<td>certainly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:46</td>
<td>ASUALTIES</td>
<td>casualties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:49</td>
<td>ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ123456789</td>
<td>states airstrikes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tierney 99

00:00:52 PUSH push
00:00:54 WHERE where
00:00:56 CHANGE change
00:00:57 SAID said
00:01:00 FEARs fears
01:05 ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ123456789
00:01:08 SPOKESMAN KLAEDEN FOREIGN POLICY spokesman Klaeden foreign policy
00:01:15 NSCIVILIA civilians
00:01:16 NOPQRSTUVARWXYZCDEFGHIJKLM123456789
00:01:19 ORTRESP reports
00:01:20 SECURITY security
00:01:20 AFGHAN PRESIDENT KNEW Afghan president knew
00:01:28 ADVISER adviser
00:01:29 LDOOSRCCHHGEARNHEEAR [unidentifiable]
00:01:39 MILITANTS militants
00:01:43 IGNCAMPA campaign
00:01:43 BERLIN Berlin
00:01:43 PASSPHSTOGEOOM [unidentifiable]
00:01:48 ORTREREP report/reporter
00:01:52 FOREIGN POLICY CORRCTION SPOK MSAN corruption said Eckhart von Klaeden foreign policy spokesman
00:01:52 SAID ECKHART VON KLAEDEN
00:01:54 MEEETWEHYAGR three way meeting
Tierney 100

00:01:59  ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ123456789

00:02:07  HOW

00:02:14  ADMINISTRATION CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

00:02:15  PUSH

00:02:17  3456789ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ12

00:02:24  VILLAGES

00:02:25  MANY CIVILIANS

00:02:28  MEETING

00:02:28  TO MANY CIVILIANS

00:02:29  AIRSTRIKES

00:02:29  VIILSSEOICA

00:02:33  CASUALTIES

00:02:39  REPORTERS

00:02:42  FEARS

00:02:43  LLDQUSETEFFOCICASEG

00:02:52  AMNILSIT

00:03:06  KARZAI

00:03:07  SOME

00:03:11  S EFFORT

00:03:12  SAID

00:03:14  KARZAI

00:03:15  CHANCELLOR ANGELA
For Marinetti, the “imagination of the poet must weave together distant things without connecting wires” (2009a, 146; italics in original). Marinetti’s idea of the “wireless imagination” conceptualizes poetic expression without the use of standard rules of grammar and punctuation, thereby freeing language and expression from its “connecting wires” of syntax (2009a, 146). Without grammar, punctuation, or even context to connect a word to a set of meanings, language and text become malleable to the poet’s experiences. These “words-in-freedom” — Marinetti’s description for the condition where signs are stripped of their “conventional order” (2009a, 145)—find exemplification with the nonnormative syntax that the ActionScripts create in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).” Here, the real-time destruction of vocabulary creates odd word and letter combinations. Strange formulations, such as “VILSSOICA,” “PASSPHSTOGEOOM,” and “LLDQUSETTFFOCICASEG,” demonstrate the creation of neologisms when the ActionScripts impose machinic logic onto the source text. In “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” these mechanical processes defamiliarize expected word units while they also create new ones.

One can compare the effect of these new linguistic formulations to the Russian futurist zaum poem. Zaum or zaumnnyy yazyk describes a language or words that transcend familiar comprehension. Zaum has been variously translated into English as “transrational,” “trans-mental,” “trans-sense,” and “beyonsense” (Janecek 1996, 1). Each of these translations suggest the topographical sense of the
“outside.” As Gerald Janecek has noted, zaum is a succinct designation for “something beyond rational intelligible discourse” (1996, 1). It is, however, not mere nonsense. The Russian futurist Alexei Kruchenykh proposed that zaum created a universal language of “fuller expression” (2004b, 67). This model of poetry proposes that all components of a word, including its sounds, engineer signification. In short, zaum privileges the slippages in language, holding the possibilities and indeterminacies of all its parts to be vital to poetic expression.

Zaum also suggests the inadequacies of conventional language, which is seen as too determinate and too restrictive to broaden meaning. Stefans’s piece raises the question whether ActionScripts can generate a model of zaum poetry in digital media. The programming in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” reduces its nodes to linguistic atoms while it simultaneously creates new formations. From its title board until its conclusion, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” is incessant as it obliterates every word and letterform that it displaces while also creating surprising new combinations on the screen. The result is an odd paradox where the animation plays out linguistic tensions between familiar and unfamiliar words, such as “AIRSTRIKES,” “VILSSOICA,” and “CASUALTIES,” in real-time.

There is, however, another alternative explanation to consider. Notwithstanding the defamiliarization of the text by the moving letterforms, the new textual combinations in this recording are still drawn from the linguistic resources that are already available in the source text. The effect creates anagrams—“IGNCAMPA” (“campaign”), for example—as the algorithms redistribute the letterforms into new orders. The first evidence for this wordplay comes immediately after the title board when the eye is first drawn to “PERSUSRE” placed centre-left of the upper half of the frame. Other anagrams are also evident, such as “NSCIVILIA” (“civilians”), “ORTRERP” (“report” or “reporter”), “MEEETWEHYAGR” (“three-way meeting”), and “AMNILSIT” (“militants”). These words illustrate the high level of redundancy operating in the English language. As Group µ suggested, redundancy is the unique function of a language’s “autocorrection of errors” that enables intelligibility and readability
when noise—such as poor grammar, stammering, or missing text—contaminates a message (Dubois et al. 1981, 33–34). Redundancy is the linguistic function that permits the viewer to complete missing letters in words, such as “CERTAINLY,” and “ASUALTIES.” In this respect, the anagrams and incomplete words permit double readings since they come to the viewer as multiple signs. In other words, the viewer observes the new word combination whilst recognizing its other preexisting forms. Like a détourned work, anagrams contain clues to their alternative identities. Consequently, the viewer incorporates the new combination and its alternative conditions into her reading of the text.

Even if the effects of the ActionScripts do not replicate an exact model of zaum poetry in a twenty-first-century aesthetic, they do, nevertheless, reproduce some of its effects: “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” stakes no claims to grammatical hierarchies. Composed of dissected nouns and verbs, the animation challenges the naturalness of relations that normal syntax creates. Stefans does, indeed, “scatter one’s nouns” randomly (Marinetti 2009c, 119). The ActionScripts resist reinforcing normal relations between words by chopping up the natural syntax of the source text. The language of programming in this work facilitates the very randomness in the text that natural human languages otherwise restrict.

The removal of punctuation from the source text file also aids the defamiliarization of the normative syntax. To “abolish all punctuation,” as Marinetti suggested, is to eliminate the dangerous inertia of language that creates stagnation through the use of grammar (2009c, 120). By ignoring these established cultural rules, futurists subverted the familiar linguistic structures. Punctuation is a management system that regulates the delivery of information to a recipient. Looking at the source text in the data folder of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” it becomes clear that Stefans has eliminated most punctuation signs aside from a single question mark and a final period where the source text finishes. Here, Stefans has minimized the signifying properties of punctuation. The defamiliarization foregrounds the degree that punctuation is a cultural artefact in the sense that it serves to manage and deliver information to the reader. If, as
Gertrude Stein suggests, “writing should go on” unrestricted by punctuation (1935, 217), then the lack of periods and commas should augment the reader’s pace of reading through Stefans’s text. However, paradoxically, the lack of punctuation also slows the reader. In the source text, its absence permits the reader to attend minutely to the various phrases in order to rebuild and comprehend the various relations between clauses. The sole punctuation marks—a period and a question mark—come as a surprise. The rhetorical question—“How can you expect a people who keep losing their children to remain friendly?”—is particularly charged in its grammatical isolation, thus foregrounding the explicit signifying power of the question sign.

The absent punctuation in the source text means also that the algorithms select words units without additional signs to mark their context or provide extra information. Yet the absence of punctuation does not imply that the text lacks restraint. The parameters of the object-orientated programming determine the selections and the behaviour of the text. Although the nodes are selected randomly, this particular iteration of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” shows a surprisingly high level of repetition within the poem itself. “AIRSTRIKES,” “REPORTS,” “CASUALTIES,” “CIVILIANS,” “MILTIANTS,” “KARZAI,” “PUSH,” and “FEARS,” and their various reformulations, occur more than once. In addition, the poem repetitively displays the Latin alphabet and the Arabic numbers zero to nine, which, as an ordered sequence, is actually not found in the source text file.18

Coupled with the repetitions of words like “AIRSTRIKES” and “CASUALTIES,” the motif of the alphabet gives the text the appearance of looping back on itself. The motif is not entirely abnormal since its letterforms exhibit the same behavioural patterns as the nodes that precede and follow it. In other words, the alphabet letterforms roam and fragment across the surface plane. All the same,

18 To clarify, the values for each letter and number are, however, available as txt files in the poem’s data folder.
the motif appears out of place in the context of words like “AIRSTRIKES,” “THREAT,” “CASUALTIES,” and “ATTACKS,” especially when the audio of simulated flight intensifies the sense of danger and crisis that these particular words convey.

The repetitive patterning of the alphabet invites a variety of readings since it engenders ambiguous relations with the word nodes that the programming selects from the source text. It is also one of the more predictable features of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” occurring frequently in multiple iterations of the poem. The motif is, therefore, an oddity that the viewer can anticipate. The motif of the alphabet appears to break the rhythm of the nodes that comprise selected words from the New York Times. In this version, the display of the alphabet appears to serve as a default setting that claws the text back to its basic building blocks when the programming reaches its numerous explosive high points. As the first nodes “PERSUSRE” and “STATES AIRSTRIKES” separate (figure 16 and 17), the nodal alphabet and number sequence, “BCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ123456789,” temporarily refocuses attention back on the basic constituents of language (figure 18). “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” does not merely interrogate the New York Times source text. Rather, the animation allows the reader to attend to the twenty-six letters and nine digits upon which written communication in English is based.

“Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” thus explores the slippery semantic slippages between letters. Yet with a missing “A” in figure 18, the first node of the alphabet is clearly incomplete, and this leads to a second observation. Here, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” subverts the conventional organization of the letterforms by challenging their identities. Twenty-two seconds into the first recording, one node of the alphabet is haphazardly arranged on the right hand side of the frame (figure 19). The culturally determined sequence of A to Z is utterly undone as some letterforms thicken and entangle themselves while others separate and unravel. The poem exhibits in real-time a process of defamiliarization where algorithms undo the culturally standard sequence of the alphabet as well as
Figure 16: Screenshot detail of “PERSUSRE” at 00:00:10, first recording, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).”

Figure 17: Screenshot detail of “STATES AIRSTRIKES” at 00:00:18, first recording, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).”
Figure 18: Screenshot detail of “ALPHABET” at 00:00:21, first recording, "Suicide in an Airplane (1919)."

Figure 19: Screenshot detail of “ALPHABET” at 00:00:38, first recording, "Suicide in an Airplane (1919)."
the integrity of their forms. As a result, the standardized set of alphabetical letters becomes unfamiliar: the programming rearranges the letterforms into surprising new sequences. “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” short-circuits the familiar economy of the alphabet, inviting the reader into a new relationship with the various representations of the sounds that the alphabet usually conveys.

In the second recording, I want interrogate the use of code to challenge the structures and conventions of mass media. If, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, words “are already populated with the social intentions of others” (1981, 300), we might ask what happens to these intentions when code reconstructs the visible language at the screen surface. “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” illustrates the necessity of considering the synthesis of politics with binary code and circuitry because the combination of processing and hardware are integral to the reconstruction of cultural signs at the level of the electronic screen. “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” shows that digital media are not neutral devices or processes. Rather, here, Stefans redirects the conventions of object-orientated programming to establish connections between totalitarian futurist strategies and a contemporary global conflict. As a result, these conventions become, themselves, brimming with social and political intent.

“Suicide in an Airplane (1919)”: Second Recording

Up until this point, I have assessed the more localized effects of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” namely, the way it engineers fresh combinations from the original content-driven New York Times article, as well as the tension between the destructive futurist impulse and the technotext. Like Circulars and The Vaneigem Series, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” addresses the global geopolitical engagements of the United States. Without a doubt, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” is highly critical of the American involvement in Afghanistan. As the previous chapter illustrated, Stefans established Circulars to oppose the United States invasion of Iraq by distributing the dissenting voices of a small group of writers and artists on the World Wide Web. “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)”
similarly opposes the United States foreign policy by collaging together borrowed language with digital technologies on a shared terrain of a global conflict. Yet to view “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” as focusing exclusively on Afghanistan is myopic at best: it ignores the formal elements of the animation aimed at interrupting the rhetorical forms of news media with much broader implications for global geopolitics. My purpose in the second recording, then, is to examine the interruptive properties of digital media that unsettle the structures and conventions of news media through code and handwriting. The resulting text thus works against media presentations of ideological positions as absolute truths.

The transcription for the second recording reads:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Code</th>
<th>Node</th>
<th>Source Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>00:00:02</td>
<td>[title board]</td>
<td>[possibly “said”]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:07</td>
<td>SAI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:11</td>
<td>ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ123456789</td>
<td>Merkel told reporters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:15</td>
<td>SMER KEL TOLD REPO RTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:29</td>
<td>WEEK</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:30</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>[unidentifiable]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:30</td>
<td>CERTAINLY</td>
<td>certainly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:31</td>
<td>INADEQUATE EFFORTS</td>
<td>inadequate efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:31</td>
<td>WEEK</td>
<td>week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:34</td>
<td>CIVILIAN CASUALTIES</td>
<td>civilian casualties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:36</td>
<td>ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ123456789</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00:00:36</td>
<td>THREE WAY MEETING</td>
<td>three way meeting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THERE

EXTREMISTS

RODGERCHA

APPROACH LAST WEEK MR KARZAI

ISLAMABAD

IMPORTANT

23456789 ABCDEFG HIJKLM NOPQRSTUVWXYZ

IST EN CE RT EMX

STATES

BCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ123456789

CENTRAL COMMAND SAID

ONRLYA

STATES

IEW MR KARZAI INT ERV

LMXYZNOCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

EFFORT

ENTFGOVAESRNM

STATES

L JONES IX DAYS JAME SPOKE

Tierney 110
As with the first recording, this iteration of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” shows a level of repetition within itself. The animation displays some nodes more than once, such as “STATES,” “GOVERNMENT,” and “AFGHANISTAN,” along with the recurring theme of the alphabet and numbers. Yet of particular note are a frozen cluster of letterforms, “SAI,” that appear immediately after the title board (figure 20). These letterforms simply do not move. It is an odd feature for a poem that otherwise stresses motion. The inertia of these letters points to a programming glitch that Stefans has previously admitted to incorporating into the animation as an aesthetic statement (Iota Center 2010). While the letterforms will normally migrate and fragment, on occasion they will freeze or splatter, remaining inert until a new word or phrase replaces them all together.

Treating error in electronic literature as a property of the work means a move away from the assumptions that a reader should have access to unadulterated meaning of a text and, by extension, the author’s intention. I want to consider error in relation to a different term: “feature.” “Feature” has a peculiar meaning in the context of programming. The hacker’s apothegm “it’s not a bug, it’s a feature!” applies to computational glitches that are rather facetiously glossed
Figure 20: Screenshot detail of “SAI” at 00:00:07, second recording, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).”
over as an intended attribute. However, “feature” can also refer to the “undocumented features” of a software application for which no support documentation exists. In this context, a “feature” is a “surprising property or behavior; in particular, one that is purposely inconsistent because it works better that way” (Raymond 1992). Accordingly, an undocumented feature may describe unanticipated program glitches that permit computer gamers to cheat or to create new skins—also known as visual styles—in gaming or other software environments.

Reading the programming glitch in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” as a feature might seem to undermine the notion of this being an error in the first place. As Dworkin states, there is “a strong temptation to recuperate the resisting and unsettling potential of ‘noise’ as a ‘message,’ which can be absorbed into the very code it challenges” (2003, 49). If we read the error in Stefans’s work as a feature, we might similarly negate its unsettling potential. Yet the programming glitch in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” retains its uncertainty: as a “surprising property” of the poem, we can never fully anticipate where or when it might appear in the text. In this way, the poem resists fully recuperating the error whilst it, nevertheless, absorbs its effects into the textual ecology. As a result, the glitch retains its status of error, albeit as a feature, which is made integral to the animation.

In this version, the cluster “SAI” demonstrates the first example of the error. Coupled with the incompleteness of the word, the text brings to the fore the peculiar dynamics between redundancy and error. On the one hand, the reader can derive “said” from “SAI” because her preexistent knowledge of the English language allows her to fill in the linguistic blanks. Indeed, the absence of letters in a word does not necessarily prevent its comprehension, highlighting the efficiency of the English language to eradicate a mistake. On the other hand, the programming glitch counters the anticipated wanderings of letterforms that the animation normally allows. “SAI” focuses the reader’s attention on the pauses in the communication that, in this case, the ActionScripts impose on the text.
The error does not prevent the program from running, but it does highlight the tension between the news media source that stresses delivery of information and a model of digital media, which accepts error and miscommunication as a natural and fundamental part of its message. Here, error upsets the ideological position of the New York Times, which otherwise emphasizes authority and transparency in its dissemination of information. The error joins moments where the text does not appear to correspond with the source text (for example, “ONRLYA”) and where the text is either too messy (for example, at 00:02:16) or too small to read (at 00:01:48). The combination of programming error and illegible text underscores the same difficulty of instantiating authority and communication in a digital text as in a print-based medium.

The effect of error, small, or oversized words not only prevents the viewer from gaining access to the text but also attunes her to the textual authority in the New York Times source text. “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” stakes its own claims to political writing—a “writing as politics” (Andrews 1990, 24; italics in original)—and to writing that rejects any easy equation between words and meanings. Instead, this recorded version points to the lacunae in language and the possibilities they enable. Misunderstanding and misreading become a part of the reading strategy because illegibility defamiliarizes the anticipated linguistic codes. The slippage between illegibility and readability is one way to undermine the certitude of the New York Times.

In “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” the use of handwriting scribbles further unsettles the clear communication of the source text. In contrast to the clear typeface of the New York Times, the messy handwriting suggests immediate and even anxious acts of writing by the invisible author. The text alludes to the presence of the subject while traditional journalism otherwise underlines objective and impersonal text. The sense of the human element in the animation proposes that language—and in this case, the rhetoric of the New York Times—is not transparent but rather mediated by the social world.
Stefans’s use of handwriting has its parallels in Russian futurist books. “[T]he mood changes one’s longhand during the process of writing,” according to Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh. “[T]he longhand peculiarly modified by one’s mood conveys that mood to the reader, independently of the words” (Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh 2004, 63). Here, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh recognize the signifying power of the visual form of letters, which is expressively independent from the word itself. Alexei Kruchenykh’s *Old Fashioned Love* (1912), for example, is a lithographical publication that combines handwritten text with primitive illustrations. As Gerald Janecek observes, *Old Fashioned Love* alludes to a “visual unity” of text and image (1984, 72). In this way, the publication uses the materiality of the book as a politicized form to oppose the elegance and order of modern bookmaking.

Approaching “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” against this backdrop of makeshift publication leads to a paradoxical observation. The handwriting scribbles contrast with the clean typography that one finds in the print and online editions of the *New York Times*. At the surface level, the handwriting in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” represents a closer intimacy with the words on the screen page than a typeface would permit. However, the intimacy is an illusion: far from being a makeshift work, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” is a highly orchestrated arrangement of new media elements. One minute and thirty-three seconds into the animation, the letterforms “ISTENCERTEMX” freeze revealing the cleanliness of the letterforms: the smooth edging and uniform colour (figure 21). In spite of the appearance of handwriting, the glitch betrays the digital nature of the text. Far from lessening the distance between the author and the text in a way that handwriting permits, the ActionScripts highly mediate the text in the animation. The individuality of handwritten cultural signs is undone by algorithmic precision. The human presence is not real. Rather, it is the programming language—not the author—who controls and speaks for the text. The paradox reveals an ambiguous relationship with futurism, but it is also worth remembering that the lithographical publications of Russian futurists required a similar
Figure 21: Screenshot detail of “ISTENCERTEMX” at 00:01:33, second recording, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919).”
orchestration between twentieth-century technology and the author. In “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” futurism and Stefans’s digital media poetics is part of an ongoing dialogue between the avant-garde and technology.

The effects of digital handwriting, together with the error and illegible text, also demonstrate another model of authority at work in this animation. The viewer can neither evade the repetitive tonal clusters of the audio nor interact with the structures of the object-orientated programming, which exerts its own totalitarian authority onto the borrowed text. While “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” appears to loosen the structures of language and form at the level of the screen, the animation is, nevertheless, grounded in the fixed language of code. The variations of the text are built on set, codified variables. As Lev Manovich says, “the principal of variability is closely connected to automation” (2001, 36). In other words, the programming mechanically assembles different versions of the text, a process that is independent of a human author. The text of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” looks fluid and fragile on the surface because predetermined databases and algorithms are reconstructing a precise representation of its data on the screen. Digital media evince this careful interplay of representation and preconfiguration. The purported freedom from syntax is possible only because the strict conventions of the machine enable such freedom. “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” thus exhibits a tension between the anarchic impulse of futurism to destroy language and the regulation and management of the machine to eliminate (and create) chaos.

One can argue that “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” foregrounds the “algorithmic imagination,” a term that Johanna Drucker uses to conceptualize code as a poetic device. Digital textuality, she argues, is “a realm of porous, multivalent, nodal, and intertextual speculation” (2002, 689). In other words, programming languages are laden with aesthetic intent that in turn invests the visible text with uncertainty and anticipation. From a viewer’s perspective, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” foregrounds what cannot be known in advance. In particular, the poem investigates the unpredictability of letterforms that
continuously move in and out legibility. The text demands a conscious engagement by the viewer to assimilate quickly the combinations of wordplay before the programming language destroys the natural language of the source text. “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” thus stresses a tension between legibility and resistance to the structures and conventions of language in addition to playing out the relation of binary codes to poetic communication. Put another way, the animation highlights that the friction between “the need for the machine to work through logic” and “the capacity of human language to function through and on account of . . . its illogic” is irreconcilable (Drucker 1998, 219).

On the electronic screen, Stefans demonstrates that there are times when language appears to eschew conventions of syntactical systems, including the punctuation and grammar rules, which close the meaning of a text. The meaning of “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” is, therefore, open and multiple. Relentlessly iterative, the viewer cannot ascertain the totality of the text. Yet while Stefans uses algorithms to challenge the conventions of syntax and the alphabet—systems that make communication in English possible—his work nevertheless exists within the parameters of machine logic.

The components of programming languages may assume the appearance of disembodied, neutral vessels, but Stefans demonstrates that one can utilize code for very distinctive political ends. Just as language embodies structures and identities of race, gender, sexuality, and politics, digital code and its relationship to language stages normative and restrictive identities. We see in “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” a possible futurist tradition that upsets existing structures of written language. The animation emphasizes a basic component, alphabetical letterforms upon which English written communication—including the rhetoric of text-based news media—is based. The conventions of object-orientated programming enable the real-time fragmentation of the readable, informational language that the New York Times uses. Yet while the programming obscures the informational language of news media, the restrictive parameters of the machine also delimit the text within a set of calculated possibilities. Object-orientated
programming does not realize the utopian revolutionary praxis for which futurists yearned but, rather, confines such praxis to another rigid system.
Conclusion

The Avant-Garde in the Age of Digital Information

All poetics is political
All poetry is politics
All politics is poetics (Bernstein 2013, 9)

Brian Kim Stefans’s use of borrowed texts and avant-garde strategies illustrates that print-based and the digital avant-garde face similar problems in challenging structures and conventions of language, text, and form. In “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters” (chapter 1), *Circulars* and *The Vaneigem Series* (chapter 2), and “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” (chapter 3), the media-specific properties of code, algorithm, and blog platforms become implicated in the questioning of convention-based systems in digital spaces. Stefans’s digital poetics gives prominence to the interplay between programming logic and the illogic of natural language. His technotexts interrogate the relationships between what we see on the screen and the invisible bits and databases that, when combined, create what we call electronic literature.

For the feminist, concrete, Situationist International, and futurist avant-gardes, language and form are not neutral constructs. Rather, they constitute crucial social, political, and cultural ideas about the world in which we live. Yet such paradigms of language, text, and form are not easily overcome through linguistic disruption. For the avant-garde, a common question arises: how can writers use language and form to break through convention-based systems in order to create alternative, democratic, and nonhegemonic spaces for literature. This question is just, if not more, relevant in our age of digital media. In attempting to address this problem, Stefans turns repeatedly to pre-digital and print-based avant-garde strategies that have sought to unsettle common structures of language, text, and form in order to criticize broader political and cultural conventions of our social world.
These tactics of the avant-gardes vary according to their historical context and political objectives. Dodie Bellamy, for example, interrupts narrative sequences to undermine textual linearity and to challenge her own authority as the author. Rachel Blau DuPlessis stages her resistance in the interplay between homophonic and standard language, parodying Julia Kristeva’s fixed binaries of the semiotic ordering and the symbolic law. For the Situationist International, strategies of détournement legitimize plagiarism and defamiliarize common cultural signs. Likewise, futurist acts of resistance foreground the destruction of syntax, punctuation, and the letter in order to reinvigorate the tired systems of expression. Yet when Stefans recontextualizes avant-garde strategies in the digital context, he demonstrates that texts remain entrapped within fixed paradigms. One may need to work within such normative paradigms in order to criticize them.

For Stefans, earlier avant-gardes and contemporary models of innovative aesthetics pay rich dividends, providing interruptive strategies and textual resources for appropriating and dissembling contemporary source texts. “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters” draw on Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s interrogation of normative gender and sexual binaries. Her text—which itself mediates Dodie Bellamy’s narrative “Sex/Body/Writing”—examines Julia Kristeva’s binary of the gendered semiotic ordering and the symbolic law. Stefans’s response to DuPlessis’s mix of homophonic and standard language replaces her system with an alphabetic order. One might view Stefans’s rewriting through the alphabet as reinscribing a different—but equally oppressive—model of authority onto her text. In the case of “the dreamlife of letters,” this authority even extends to the programming language of the Flash software used to reproduce the animation. At the same time, the concrete aesthetic—an avant-garde model that normally opposes normative syntactical structures—intervenes to displace coherent syntax. The resulting work leads to a pervasive ambivalence: the surface level text both inscribes and undermines authority while the software and e-mail conventions of writing also bind the text to totalitarian structures of the machine.
The Poetics List colloquium, “Dick’s Sister,” and “the dreamlife of letters” introduce the idea that the machine, its codes and conventions of encoding, are invested with human intention. These intentions include ideas of gender and sexuality that readers bring to the text. As much as “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters” invest the text with the authority of the standard ordering of the alphabet, DuPlessis and Stefans also illustrate that, as readers, we approach the written mark with our own gender and sexual histories. In Bellamy’s “Sex/Body/Writing,” DuPlessis’s “Untitled Response,” and Stefans’s “Dick’s Sister” and “the dreamlife of letters,” not only does the machine become enmeshed with eroticism but the performance of writing—the act of typing—becomes a highly erotic act. In very different ways, Bellamy, DuPlessis, and Stefans highlight that language, text, and writing are not apolitical constructions but have very human origins. The politics of gender, sexuality, and text blend with the formal conventions of the machine. As a result, the texts show that language and the act of writing do not stage unquestionable truths in the digital world.

For Stefans, this idea of the opacity of language and the digital text is integral to his poetics. For the texts following 9/11—The Vaneigem Series, Circulars, and “Suicide an Airplane (1919)”—Stefans redirects the issue of textual veracity towards the rhetoric of mass news media. In these technotexts, Stefans explores the formal structures of rhetoric, thereby interrogating how mass media texts construct and disseminate information. The implication is that the appropriation and rewriting of source texts, such as those in The Vaneigem Series and “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” are not too dissimilar to the formal construction of information by the New York Times. In fact, Stefans foregrounds this reconstruction of information. The absurd convergence of Raoul Vaneigem’s Contributions to the Revolutionary Struggle with the New York Times article, “Daschle Denounces Bush Remarks on Iraq as Partisan” is clearly satirical. At stake, Stefans suggests, is not only textual authority but also the reader’s critical engagement—her ability to recognize and assess the rhetorical structures in mass media.
Technotexts can, therefore, stage critical investigations of the war machine as well as the rhetorical structures of mass media and global policy. My tutor texts demonstrate a distinctive approach that aligns digital forms with an independent, left-wing politics, and avant-garde poetics. Stefans’s avant-garde position entails strategies that are orientated towards the defamiliarization of common word units, morphemes, and letterforms. His rewritings of appropriated texts endeavour to reinvigorate commonplace signs in order to ascertain a deeper understanding of the political and social rationales that are operating in the twenty-first century. The Vaneigem Series and Circulars foreground the Situationist International strategies of détourment and dérive. By hijacking familiar source texts from their initial purposes, Stefans explores the utility of these strategies on the World Wide Web. The act of dérive, for example, appears naturalized in the set pathways of web surfing. However, the fixed structures of the World Wide Web—such as web templates and hyperlinks—contradict the ambulatory nature that the act of dérive is meant to entail. In addition, the widespread use of détourment on the World Wide Web highlights the overfamiliarization of a tactic that Debord intended to estrange cultural artefacts. We might, therefore, consider that The Vaneigem Series and Circulars stage the possible failure of digital détournings and dérive on the World Wide Web. In other words, détourment and dérive lose their political efficacy if they are normalized through overuse.

Close readings of the texts in Circulars and The Vaneigem Series demonstrate that détourment and dérive must thus be reexamined for how they respond to the complexity of the digital world. Circulars and The Vaneigem Series utilize the rhetorical and ideological positions of the World Wide Web. For instance, Circulars’s own rhetorical position uses the efficient mechanisms of the hyperlink. The failure of the link in the hypertext poem “Revolution Is Not an AOL Keyword” points not only to the way that the World Wide Web can undermine its own regulatory systems but also to how Stefans has constructed Circulars in an equally conventional programming form. Put another way, one must revise aesthetic strategies of détourment and dérive if they are to remain usable as a
politically effective destabilizing tactic in an environment that depends on fixed and preconfigured systems for expression.

“Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” offers a similar perspective on the way that digital media restage pre-digital and print-based avant-garde in the twenty-first-century digital environment. The union of futurist and digital information in the animation highlights a tension between the futurist aesthetic, which celebrates the cleansing properties of war, and a criticism of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. While ActionScripts mimic futuristic tactics that upset the structures of language, text, and form, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” posits that the fixed structures of the machine counter the free spirit of futurism. In this work, the logic of code enables the illegible text. While programming errors highlight the resistance of the machine to its own regulation, “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” also uses error as a signifying strategy.

Although employed for different ends, each of the pre-digital and print-based avant-garde traditions explored in this thesis—feminist, concrete, Situationist International, and futurism—have also sought to destabilize, misread, or interrupt language and form. The components of programming languages assume the appearance of disembodied, neutral vessels, but Stefans uses code for very distinctive political ends. Code reflects social and cultural identities of race, gender, sexuality, and politics. Stefans’s technotexts invoke uncomfortable questions whether counterhegemonic positions on race, gender, sexuality, and politics are available to a twenty-first-century innovative aesthetic. Has avant-garde experimentalism in language simply run its course? Have the avant-gardes exhausted all possibilities for linguistic disruption?

Stefans’s entanglement of programming and natural language may be a logical conclusion to these questions. The effects of programming instantiate language in dimensions that exploit the perspective and motion of the letterform. As a result, computer languages displace the structures and conventions of language and textuality. Yet the union of poetic ingenuity and the machine is hardly a new aesthetic for the avant-gardes. Contemporary poets, including
Stefans, must therefore address the question of whether pre-digital strategies can adequately respond to the challenges of critique in a world where representations of war, rhetoric, and mass media enjoin and reinforce each other.

Stefans’s avant-garde digital poetics forces us to rethink our approaches to innovative aesthetics in a digital ecology where determinate structures are vital for the smooth operations of the machine. Avant-garde strategies of disruption are now normal online practices. To undertake critique in digital media, one must be conscious of the mechanical constraints of the wider system in which language, text, and form are staged. Or, put another way, as readers of technotexts, we must pay just as much, if not more, attention to the politics and poetics of the machine as we apply to the structures of the text.
Appendix A

“Suicide in an Airplane (1919)” Source Text

This appendix contains the source text for “Suicide in an Airplane (1919),” which appears in the animation’s txt file “terrorists.” This text is also available in the animation’s zip files. Copies of these zip files can be found in “Suicide in an Airplane Downloads” folder on the CD-Rom.

President Obamas top national security adviser said on Sunday that the United States would likely continue conducting airstrikes against extremists in Afghanistan despite a sharp warning from President Hamid Karzai that civilian casualties were fast turning ordinary Afghans against the United States. In a pre-taped interview with NBC’s Meet the Press, Mr. Karzai suggested that the United States risked losing a moral fight against the Taliban if too many civilians died in American attacks. But Mr. Karzai has also come under pressure from the United States for what advisers call inadequate efforts to fight corruption and received a similar warning on Sunday by Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany. The security adviser General James L. Jones spoke six days after Afghans blamed United States airstrikes in western Afghanistan for the deaths of scores of civilians. American officials apologized for the deaths and said that they are investigating the incident. Still, they say that reports of a death toll exceeding 100 were exaggerated and that Taliban militants who were being targeted might have forced civilians to serve as human shields. Were going to take a look at trying to make sure we correct those things we can correct but certainly to tie the hands of our commanders and say were not going to conduct airstrikes would be imprudent. General Jones said on ABCs This Week. We cant fight with one hand tied behind our back he said without flatly ruling out the possibility of a change in approach. Last week Mr. Karzai and the Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari held a three-way meeting with Mr. Obama at the White House while the Pakistani military launched an intense offensive against surging Taliban extremists in the northwest part of that country. General David H. Petraeus who heads the US Central Command said on Sunday
that the United States had real concerns about Pakistans survival. But he also said he believed there was adequate security around Pakistans nuclear arsenal. Certainly the next few weeks will be very important in this effort to roll back if you will this existential threat a true threat to Pakistans very existence he said. The general welcomed the latest Pakistani offensive as qualitatively different from previous efforts to contain militants. The Talibans push toward Islamabad he told Fox News Sunday seems to have galvanized all of Pakistan not just the president and prime minister. General Petraeus said he was also heartened that Pakistan had shifted some forces from the east where they face India to the northwest as United States officials had urged. He also said he had named a brigadier general to study the use of airstrikes in Afghanistan. In a lengthy meeting in Berlin Mrs. Merkel warned Mr. Karzai to crack down on corruption and improve security in northern Afghanistan where more than 3800 German soldiers are based. The Karzai government needed to act more decisively against corruption said Eckhart von Klaedens foreign policy spokesman for Mrs. Merkels conservative bloc. The Merkel government fears that the Taliban might increasingly target German soldiers as German federal elections in September near to pressure Berlin to withdraw all its troops. Polls show most Germans would support a withdrawal though they also support Mr. Obama who is increasing the United States effort in Afghanistan. In 2002 the Social Democrat chancellor Gerhard Schroder was narrowly re-elected after running a strong anti-war and anti-US campaign. That led to a serious rift with the United States that took years to heal. Despite her concerns Mrs. Merkel told reporters that Germany would continue its military engagement in Afghanistan and would put more effort into training Afghan police. In his pretaped interview Mr. Karzai said: Our villages are not where the terrorists are. And thats what we kept telling the US administration. Civilian casualties are undermining support in the Afghan people for the war on terrorism and for the relations with America. How can you expect a people who keep losing their children to remain friendly? The people are still with us Mr. Karzai added. But there is a limit. General Jones suggested however that the Afghan president knew
that airstrikes were unlikely to end I think he understands we have to have a full complement of our offensive military power when we need it the general said. The the the the the.
Appendix B

Contents of Enclosed CD-ROM

On the enclosed CD-Rom, I have included supplementary material for chapters 1, 2, and 3 that have aided the analysis of my thesis topic. The disk contains three folders: two folders contain animations that are discussed in chapters 1 and 3. The animations are in mov format and are playable on either PC or Mac using QuickTime, Media Player, or similar mov-supported movie player. In addition, I have included a full list of Circulars’s hyperlinks (excluding URI mail schemes).

The following list illustrates the folder structure and contents on the CD-Rom.

Chapter 1 Feminist Avant-Gardes and the Digital Text
This folder contains a screen recording of “the dreamlife of letters.” Duration of the animation is twelve minutes and sixteen seconds. The screen capture includes a brief visual examination of the prologue. The animation is also available online at http://www.arras.net/RNG/flash/dreamlife/dreamlife_index.html.

Chapter 2 Circulars Refreshed: The Situationist International Online
This folder contains a complete list of hyperlinks (in excel).

Chapter 3 Futurism in the Digital Age: “Suicide in an Airplane (1919)”
This folder contains three subfolders:

1. Suicide in an Airplane Downloads. This subfolder contains two zip files: “Suicide in an Airplane, 1919 for PC” and “Suicide in an Airplane, 1919 for Mac.” Extracting either file will install and run the animation from the desktop. Both zip files include data folders that contain the letterform txt files and the source txt file (labelled as “terrorists”).

2. Suicide in an Airplane Screen Recordings. This subfolder contains two recordings of the animation in mov format.
3. Scriptor Test So Much Depends. This subfolder contains a zip file for an earlier test of the letterform creation program.
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