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Aaron Angello
University of Colorado Boulder

To Archive or Not to Archive: The Resistant Potential of Digital Poetry

ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the much discussed problem of archiving digital poetry. Digital media are labile, and several writers of digital poetry are incorporating the media's ephemerality into their poetics. Rather than rehash arguments that have been taking place within the field of digital media and digital poetics for years, I turn to the field of contemporary art curation and preservation, a field in which curators and archivists are struggling with the very immediate concerns, ethical and otherwise, related to archiving works that are made from ephemeral media. One particular digital poem that has recently broken, has recently become unreadable, is Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*. Memmott composed the poem in 2000, and he incorporated the poem's inevitable obsolescence into the text of the poem itself. He has since refused to "fix" or "update" the poem, because he contends that that would make it something other than what it was intended to be. Rather, he is choosing to let the poem die because that is what the poem is supposed to do. This essay concludes with a discussion of the political implications of acknowledging the ephemerality of digital media, the resistant potential of the poem when its ephemerality is embraced, and some ways in which archivists can preserve the memory of the poem without necessarily preserving the poem itself.

Introduction

The topic of ephemerality in digital literature and poetry is one that has been at the forefront of critical inquiry in the field of contemporary digital poetics for the past several years, often in relation to achievability. Its writers seem to exhibit a kind of anxiety that arises from the fact that their work will inevitably be lost, unplayable, or unreadable, and it is indeed likely that their work will become so. Each software update, each development in hardware, can provide myriad challenges for a given born-digital poem, and the writers of these poems have been struggling with what they perceive as the "problem" of their poem's rapid and inevitable evanescence. One only need visit the Electronic Literature Organization's online anthologies, the *Electronic Literature Collection*, *Volumes 1 and 2*, to find a host of links to works that no longer function as they were intended to, if they function at all. Deena Larsen, foundational hypertext author of *Marble Springs*, laments on her website in reference to a series of 13 "kanji-jus" poems, or "short poems based on the Japanese kanji or ideogram for the word itself":

> Note that the javascript in all of these has gone on to bigger and better things. If anyone would like to help me upgrade these, I would be eternally grateful. . . . Further, we mourn the loss of Cauldron and Net. (Larsen)

Cauldron & Net is an online "journal of arts and new media" that published a number of prominent writers of digital literature and poetry, including Larsen, from 1999 until 2002. The website is still active, but many of the works are, as one would expect of works of digital literature composed more than a decade ago, now broken. Larsen's quote is representative of the anxiety many digital poets are currently articulating: a fear that these works are fading away before their very eyes.

A decade ago, Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, writing on behalf of the Electronic Literature Organization, published "Acid-Free Bits: Recommendations for Long-Lasting Electronic Literature," a sort of how-to manual intended to instruct the writer of digital literature and poetry in the ways of writing works that last. Joseph Tabbi, in the introduction, says that this "document is a plea for writers to work proactively in archiving their own creations, and to bear these issues in mind even in the act of composition," and the authors write that although the preservation of digital literature is "the work of a community," "the practices of authors and publishers will determine whether preserving particular works is relatively easy or nearly impossible" (Montford and Fruin). They recommend a litany of principles that the writer can employ in order to ensure the longevity of her/his work, including preferring open systems to closed

ones, providing copious comments in the code, choosing plain-text formats over binary formats, keeping multiple copies on various, "durable" media, and so on. It is necessary, they seem to argue, that the poet or writer think consciously about the longevity of her/his poem before, during and after its composition. And this would all seem to make perfect sense. After all, we should certainly make every effort to ensure this poetry exists for generations to come.

Or should we? Is there not, perhaps, a value in embracing the fact that these poems are short-lived? Is there not a value in the fact that the very lability of these poems allows the poet an opportunity to assume a somewhat different position within a complex web of power relations than the more traditional, print-oriented poet?

The intention of this essay is to explore the resistant potential inherent in digital literature and poetry, a potential that exists, at least in part, because of the very fact that digital media is ephemeral. First, I will discuss archival strategies, not from within the discussion of digital media archives, but from within the related field of contemporary experimental art. I take this approach because there is, among the archivists and curators who are working with contemporary, ephemeral art, a concern with the ethical or political implications of archiving art pieces that are not intended to last that is somehow lacking among those whose sole focus is digital media. I will then look closely at a relatively well-known digital poem, Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*, as an example of a work of digital literature that acknowledges and embraces its own ephemerality. Finally, I will discuss the ways in which this acknowledgement and embracing can function as a form of tactical resistance within a larger system of power.

Archiving the Ephemeral

In her essay, "Curating Ephemera: Responsibility and Reality," Jan Schall, the Sander Sosland curator of modern and contemporary art at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, writes that although we all know that "the essence of life is change, and life itself is impermanent," we still have a desire to make our present permanent. She says:

> We want to know the world we live in, and we want the future to know us as we have come to know the past. We understand that we are part of a vast cultural stream that has been flowing since time immemorial and will continue to flow into time unimaginable. We have the cultural artifacts to prove it. (Schall 15)

The archive is a site wherein that past can be made present, and the present can have a chance at lasting into the future. It is a repository for our cultural heritage, a place for us to experience our past and to provide for our future. It is a physical manifestation of human memory, and it highlights our desire to remember.

It also determines an artistic or literary canon. For every object that is archived, there are others that are excluded from the archive. For every poet whose handwritten manuscripts and typewritten correspondences are archived at a university library, there are countless poets whose literary output will be forever lost to time. The function of the archive is to preserve, but not everything can or will be preserved. As Derrida says, the theory of the archive is a theory of "institutionalization, that is to say of the law, of the right which authorizes it" (Derrida 10). Archiving implies exclusion. It implies a choice that is made regarding which cultural artifacts are worthy of preservation and which will be lost to time. There is "no archive without outside" (14), Derrida reminds us, and it is crucial that we keep this in mind. And it must be noted that many curators and archivists do keep it in mind; they are intently aware of their responsibility when it comes to issues such as inclusivity, equal representation, and so on. There are journals and conferences dedicated to the subject. The intention of this essay is not at all to argue that archiving as a practice is somehow unethical. On the contrary, it is necessary and culturally valuable.

But what of archiving the ephemeral? Particularly, what of archiving works of digital literature, poetry, net art, and other digital cultural objects, objects that rely upon technological apparatuses that are always changing, evolving, and rendering the object unreadable? The approaches taken by those who curate and archive contemporary visual art could prove useful here. Museum curators are continually struggling with the fact "that the contemporary world is fixated on change, obsolescence, speed, impermanence and ephemera," and for that reason, "[m]uch modern art is ephemeral, and contemporary art is ephemeral in the extreme" (Schall 24). Of course, from a certain perspective, all art is ephemeral. Everything will decompose eventually. Paintings fade and chip, sculptures crumble, books fall apart. It is the archivist's job to try to prolong the life of these objects. But that job becomes particularly difficult when the works being preserved are made of media that are chosen by the artist because they are short-lived.

In their article, "It's Only Temporary," Margaret Hedstrom and Anna Perricci say that "archivists and curators make a careful distinction between preservation, conservation, and restoration" (29). Preservation is a process of minimizing deterioration. The archivist may create protective cases, maintain optimal temperature and humidity in the space within

which the work is stored, shelter the work from destructive light, and so on. Conservation is the "repair or stabilization of materials through chemical or physical treatment to ensure that they survive in their original form as long as possible" (Pearce-Moses qtd. in Hedstrom and Perricci 29). And restoration is repair and rehabilitation of the object, the goal of which is to bring the object back, as closely as possible, to its original condition.

One issue that archivists are struggling with is how one should preserve, conserve or restore ephemeral work, and if one should. After all, the artist, if he or she intentionally created the work using materials that would break, decompose, be consumed, etc., never intended the work to last. The piece only "works" or "makes sense" if its lability is embraced. One might think of the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for example, as a series of pieces that were not intended to be preserved. His "candy pieces," sculptures made of stacked pieces of individually wrapped candy that exactly match the weight of his lover's body, and which the audience is invited to take and consume piece by piece, function as "sweet and sad eulogies" imbued with "a profound sense of mourning and loss" (The Renaissance Society). Gonzalez-Torres, like many of his contemporaries, was dealing with the devastating effects of the AIDS virus on the gay community in the 1980s and 1990s, and he saw his art as an analogue to the crisis that surrounded him. He said in an interview not long before his death:

> I wanted to do a show that would disappear completely. It had to do a lot with disappearance and learning. It was also about trying to be a threat to the art-marketing system, and also, to be really honest, it was about being generous to a certain extent. I wanted people to have my work. The fact that someone could just come and take my work and carry it with them was very exciting. Freud said that we rehearse our fears in order to lessen them. In a way this "letting go" of the work, this refusal to make a static form, a monolithic sculpture, in favor of disappearing, changing, unstable, and fragile form was an attempt on my part to rehearse my fears of having Ross [his partner] disappear day by day right in front of my eyes. (Gonzalez-Torres et al. 13)

However, regardless of his intentions, we look for ways to preserve, conserve, or restore his work, perhaps rightly so. He has become "one of the most influential artists of his generation . . . mixing political activism, emotional affect, and deep formal concerns in a wide range of media." His work has come to be highly prized for its uniquely emotional engagement with themes such as love and death, and is "a profoundly human body of work, intimate and vulnerable even as it destabilizes so many seemingly unshakable certainties" ("Felix Gonzalez-Torres at MMK").

Since his death in 1996, his work has become ever more prized as a commodity within the art market. In 2010, a stacked candy piece he called "*Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient)*, a piece that is composed of 200 pounds of candy pieces each individually wrapped in blue cellophane, sold at a Philips de Pury auction for $4.5 million (Cahyka). Perhaps Gonzalez-Torres was attempting, in part, to "be a threat to the art-marketing system," yet that system is remarkably resilient, and that system managed to subsume into itself a piece that was intended to disappear. One can imagine that the person or organization that purchased "*Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient)* is not interested in letting it disappear. They will undoubtedly be employing all of the archival tools at their disposal to make sure the piece lasts a very long time.

So certain questions present themselves: is it the same piece if it doesn't "disappear"? Is the integrity of the piece compromised by the very act of preservation? Are there archival strategies that can preserve an ephemeral work that don't compromise its intended political position in relation to, for instance, the market?

Hedstrom and Perricci outline a separate but related archival strategy that is particularly relevant to archiving ephemeral works: preserving surrogates. According to the authors, "surrogates are representations of some sort that stand in for original documents" (32). These surrogates can take the form of photographs, audio or video recordings, written accounts of the pieces, and so on. To be sure, "surrogates are always inferior substitutes for originals, and in most cases they are many steps removed from the activity, event, or transaction that they purport to represent" (32). A videocassette recording of a performance art piece is not the piece—but importantly, it doesn't pretend to be. The surrogate announces itself as a documentation of the work, and the knowledge that the piece is gone remains a part of the piece—or at least of the memory of the piece.

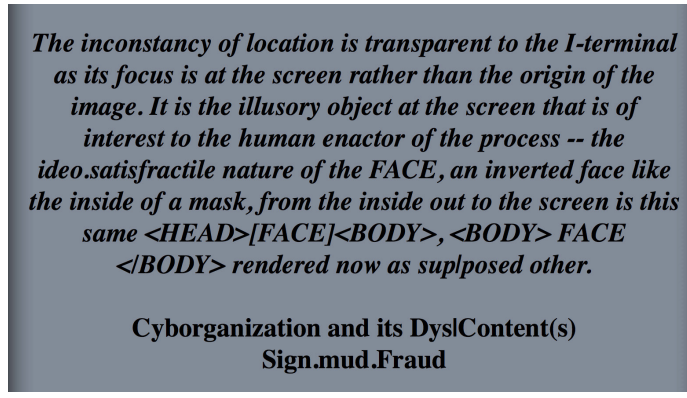
Preserving, conserving, or restoring an ephemeral work of art can be, perhaps, a bit problematic because the piece is no longer functioning the way the piece was intended to function; it is serving, so to speak, a different master. The version of "*Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient)* that was sold for $4.5 million is not the "*Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient)* that was consumed by its viewers piece by piece until there was nothing left.

Lexia to Perplexia: The End of a Poem

Like "*Untitled" (Portrait of Marcel Brient)*, Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* is composed of ephemeral media, and Memmott was entirely aware of that as he wrote the piece. It is, in part, about its own demise.

If digital literature and poetry can be said to have a canon, *Lexia to Perplexia* is a central part of it. It was initially published on the Iowa Web Review, and later anthologized in the Electronic Literature Organization's *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume One*, which is available online and on a CD-ROM that accompanies N. Katherine Hayles's landmark 2008 book *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. It has received much critical attention, and it has been a part of countless course syllabi. Hayles has called it a "brilliantly designed and programmed" (*Horizons* 7) work in which "Memmott devises an idiosyncratic language, a revisioning of classical myths, and a set of coded images that invite the reader to understand herself not as a preexisting self with secure boundaries but as a permeable membrane through which information flows" (Hayles, "Metaphoric").

Lexia to Perplexia is a literary hypertext poem composed in HTML and JavaScript. It is presented in four sections, "The Process of Attachment," "Double-Funnels," "Metastrophe," and "Exe.Termination." Each section provides a platform to explore the complex relationship and illusory borders between subject and machine, between reader and text, between human language and computer code, and between flesh and silicone. It illuminates the fact that the screen is a meeting place between the "I-terminal," or the human subject, and the network. It sees the screen as a site that appears to be stable and constant, but is in fact the quintessence of lability. The first *lexia*[1] the reader encounters if she or he begins with the first section, "A Process of Attachment," reads:



Screenshot of Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*. http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/memmott_lexia_to_perplexia/index.html. Used by permission of the author.

[1] "Lexia" is a word adopted from Barthes by early hypertext writers to denote a block of text that is connected, via hyperlinks, to other lexia, or blocks of text.

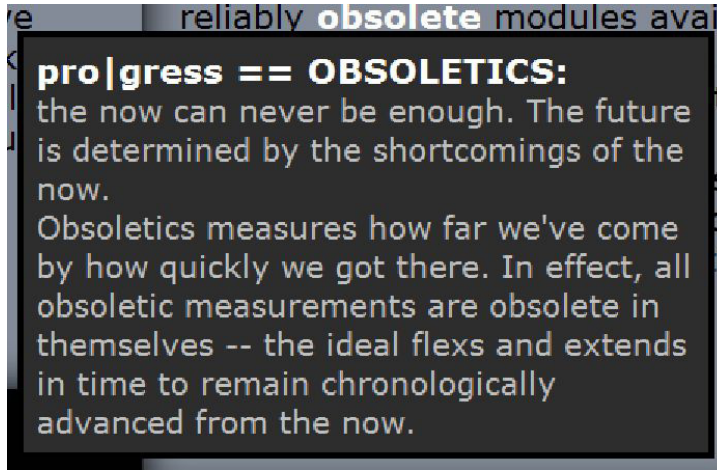
The "illusory object at the screen" is the thing with which most readers engage, be that thing text, image, sound, or animation, yet we know it is, in actuality, a manifestation of the machine's rendering of code and data. But the reader's connection to the network is tangible because of her/his engagement with the screen. As Memmott articulates in the *lexia* above, the reader sees her/his face reflected in the screen, and that reflection metaphorically represents the level of integration the I-terminal has with the machine, with the network of machines and other I-terminals. We see in that reflection that face; we see ourselves a part of, not apart from the machine. It is articulated quite poetically in the code-worked line: "<HEAD>[FACE]<BODY>, <BODY> FACE </BODY>." In it, the [FACE] and its reflection "FACE" are contained within both flesh (head and body) and code/silicone (<HEAD>, <BODY>,</BODY> are ubiquitous HTML tags).

As we move deeper into *Lexia's* web of *lexia*, as we "exit the exo, / taking fingersteps into the apparatus," we are confronted with a reworking of the myth of *Echo and Narcissus*. We are put in the position of the beautiful boy who falls in love with his own reflection. We become "the terminal-I, a Cell.f, or, cell . . . (f) that processes the self as outside of itself." Echo then becomes a recursive feedback loop reminding us just how integrated we, the machine, and the network are. As Memmott writes in the section "Metastrophe," in his "Minifesto 2," "We *.fect the atmosphere as we move through it, construct the infosphere as we move through it, striving toward communification." And once we've sounded our call, "sen[t] out signals, smoke and otherwise," we wait eagerly for the Echo, a recognition of ourselves as a singularity within the network. In a certain sense, there is no us without the network.

But *Lexia* also is entirely aware of its eventual obsolescence. In "Minifesto 3," Memmott writes:

> The machine is not equipped with the modern, yet reliably obsolete modules available today. The machine is built in expectation, more than as an object—the tangible machine, the one you are seated before, is dead already, or returns a dead eye—slowly—I can't think fast enough; or, if today you think I think fast enough for you, tomorrow you will reject me—this is my destiny I know. (*Lexia*)

If the reader clicks on the word "obsolete"—it is a hyperlink—a new *lexia* pops up in which one of Memmott's neologisms, "obsoletics," is defined:



Screenshot of Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*. http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/memmott_lexia_to_perplexia/index.html. Used by permission of the author.

One of the most significant aspects of *Lexia to Perplexia* is its awareness and acknowledgment of its own "obsoletics," of its ephemerality. And the piece, at the time of this writing, due to "advancements" in web browsers and JavaScript,[2] is no longer functional.[3]

Memmott, writing about the piece, says that it "began as an observation of the fluctuating and ever-evolving protocols and prefixes of internet technology as applied to literary hypermedia" (Memmott, *Lexia*). He makes it clear that these "ever-evolving" technologies result in an ever-increasing lack of functionality within the piece, and this is an intentional part of its poetics.

At the 2014 annual convention of the Modern Language Association, digital literature scholar Zach Whalen gave a talk on *Lexia to Perplexia* and its obsolescence during a panel entitled "Electronic Literature after Flash." He later published the text of the talk on his blog. During the talk, he

[2] Zach Whalen, in his talk/blogpost addressing *Lexia's* ephemerality, specifically identifies the problem thus: "October 17, 2013. Microsoft publishes version 11 of its Internet Explorer web browser, including in its release notes a statement that the `document.all` mode will no longer be supported and that websites relying on this feature should update their code."

[3] In order to write about this piece, I had to find an old, but still functional, computer with a version of JavaScript that could run the poem. I was able to run it on a PC that has been lying unused for about seven years. I was able to turn the computer on; it booted up, but the noises coming from the cooling fan were frightening. Given the fact that a computer is only built to last from three to five years, I count myself lucky that the machine was able to run at all.

said that after struggling with a piece that no longer worked beyond a few clicks[4] (he was teaching the piece in a course on the subject) he "decided to fix it." He said, "With surprisingly few edits, I did succeed in making an unauthorized update to Lexia to Perplexia that now works fine in all four of the major browsers, but since the author has asked me not to share that version, it remains offline" (Whalen).

Whalen's very thoughtful and well-researched talk is excellent in its discussion of the reasons *Lexia* no longer functions in current browsers, in the reading of the code, and in an understanding and explication of the piece in general. But I was particularly struck by the quote above—that the author asked him not to share the "unauthorized fix." So I contacted Memmott to ask him about this; I asked him why he asked Whalen not to share the "fixed" version. This was his reply:

> Within the piece itself . . . there is a discussion of obsolescence . . . or, as it is dubbed in the piece—obsoletics. The piece sort of predicts its own demise. As such, I think of its slide into no longer functioning as part of the text itself. That said, the piece itself has not eroded; it remains the same, but the conditions of the platform have changed. By altering the piece to make it function, is to actually destroy the work. Or, to make something other than itself. A fully functioning Lexia to Perplexia would not be the work I created, and would ignore one of the theoretical issues dealt with in the work, or embodied through it. (Memmott, "Interview")

The Ephemeral Digital Poem as Tactical Resistance

The question then becomes, in this context, is the piece's "obsoletics," its embracing of the ephemeral nature of writing in digital media, a political act? After all, the content of this piece doesn't deal with tactical concerns; it doesn't represent itself in its content as struggling against something. But I contend that, in its way, it is very much a political poem. One could argue (and many poets and critics do argue) that all poetry is political because it is standing in relationship to the world in which it was written.[5] A poem

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[4] As of this writing, *Lexia to Perplexia* can be accessed on current web browsers via the Electronic Literature Collection, Volume One, but, as I mentioned above, the JavaScript is no longer viable. The browsers can read the HTML, and so one can click into the first page of each section. At that point, however, one can access no more of the poem.

[5] The idea that all poetry is political is a common notion that has become more accepted as poetry has increasingly been examined through the lens of cultural studies. If the poem is an object of cultural production, and if, as Maria Damon and Ira Livingston

is a social act, and the very writing and presentation of a poem articulates a social and political point of view. But when a poem does what it's *not supposed to do*, when it breaks established rules and order, then, one might argue, that poem becomes an act of resistance. The poet takes a tactical stance against what Mary O'Neill calls "considerable cultural and economic pressure to make permanent art" (157) when she or he chooses to create an ephemeral poem.

Rita Raley, in the introduction to her book *Tactical Media*, says that tactical media "projects are not oriented toward the grand, sweeping revolutionary event; rather, they engage in a micropolitics of disruption, intervention, and education" (1). She quotes the activist art collective, the Critical Art Ensemble, as saying, "After two centuries of revolution and near-revolution, one historical lesson continually appears—authoritarian structure cannot be smashed; it can only be resisted" (qtd. in Raley 10). The possibility of "the grand, sweeping revolutionary event" seems to no longer be a possibility. Ever since the networking of power, ever since the globalization of financial capital, more and more contemporary theorists argue that there is no outside of power (e.g., capital). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, argue that "[t]here is nothing, no 'naked life,' no external standpoint, that can be posed outside this field permeated by money; nothing escapes money" (Hardt and Negri 32). But that doesn't mean that resistance is futile. Raley says that "tactical media's imagination of an outside, a space exterior to neoliberal capitalism, is not spatial but temporal" (12). The key term here is "imagination"; the imagination of a temporal outside of power (for there is no outside of power) allows the producer of tactical media to act in a conscious way to alter relationships within the field of power. She continues by saying that "tactical media do not necessarily evade the us-them dialectic, but they do recast it such that 'us' and 'them' are no longer permanently situated" (12).

say in their introduction to the anthology *Poetry and Cultural Studies: A Reader*, "cultural practices are likewise inconceivable except as constellations with material, social, and political dimensions, then poetry and cultural studies might be said to bear 'withness' to each other and to their worlds; that is, they become fellow participants" (2). Furthermore, one can find countless examples of poets making similar claims about poetry. Andrew Joron says that poetry is "the uncanny reflection of an unfinished world" (10), and Joan Retallack says that "[t]his is a question of po*ethics*—what we make of events as we use language in the present, how we continuously create an ethos of the way in which events are understood" (9). The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai made the following remark in an interview with Lawrence Joseph: "I've often said that all poetry is political. This is because real poems deal with a human response to reality and politics is part of reality, history in the making. Even if a poet writes about sitting in a glass house drinking tea it reflects politics."

I'd like to consider Raley's claim in relation to digital (ephemeral) poetry. She says, referencing Michel de Certeau, that "shifting from strategy to tactics is important because it renders the phenomenon of resistance fleeting, ephemeral, and subject to continual morphing" (13). Employing the tactic of writing in an ephemeral medium and then letting the poem break, as Memmott has done, shifts the poem from the realm of the spatial (strategic) to the realm of the temporal (tactical). It is here that it does what it needs to do, and then it's gone before it can become subsumed into capital.

One way we can consider the resistant potential of an ephemeral poem like *Lexia to Perplexia* is to employ the theoretical notion of exit or exodus. After all, when a poem refuses to engage the pressures placed upon it by capital, pressures to maintain, to keep existing, to be permanent, it refuses to play capital's game. It intentionally avoids the trappings of the market, for instance. It even, on a certain level, reconsiders the social role of poetry in that it shifts the focus from the poem as object to the poem as experience. It undermines the belief that the poet must be individuated and celebrated as an individual. Rather, the poem enters a system of relationships, a system in this case of linguistic, visual and affective communication, and in its small act of micropolitical resistance, in its willingness to evanesce, perhaps it alters that system of relationships.

The biopolitical theorist Paulo Virno tells us in *A Grammar of the Multitude* that:

> Nothing is less passive than the act of fleeing, of exiting. Defection modifies the conditions within which the struggle takes place, rather than presupposing those conditions to be an unalterable horizon; it modifies the context within which a problem has arisen, rather than facing this problem by opting for one or the other of the provided alternatives. In short, *exit* consists of unrestrained invention which alters the rules of the game and throws the adversary completely off balance. (70)

Perhaps Virno's passionate claim that exit can "throw the adversary completely off balance" is hyperbolic, but it is not entirely untrue. After all, if we in fact do exist within a complex web of relationships, as so many theorists claim we do (cf. Deleuze, Braidotti, Lazzarato, Hardt and Negri), then surely all a poet can hope to do if she or he wants to effect some sort of change is to alter those relationships.

Furthermore, poetry might seem an unsatisfactory site for resisting through exit. After all, it's only poetry—few people read it, it's often thought of as a marginal art form that has little impact on the world of

politics and power relations. However, one can make a strong argument that it can be an ideal place. Let's return to *Lexia to Perplexia.* The fact that it is built in an ephemeral medium, that it makes its ephemerality a part of its content and poetics, and that the poet, Memmott, has consciously allowed it to exit, in Virno's sense, makes the poem a site of resistance in two ways: it becomes disruptive, and it becomes instructive. It becomes disruptive in the sense that it refuses to act like a poem—it doesn't strive for permanence, for canonization, despite the fact that the institutional systems that determine such things have already made attempts to canonize it. By refusing to struggle for permanence, the poem upsets that relationship, so easily taken for granted, that cultural production has with capital.

Poetry is sometimes spoken of as something that is not a part of the workings of capital, that because of its relatively small readership, its "difficulty," it somehow escapes the all-encompassing reaches of global capital, the "pool of liquid power," as the Critical Art Ensemble calls it (Critical Art Ensemble). But through subverting expectations, it reveals the presence of those expectations. It reveals that poetry, that apparently "pure" form of cultural production, is in fact just as much a part of the workings of capital as everything else—it reveals the ubiquity of power. And in this way, the disruption caused by the poem's exit proves instructive. We, as readers, are made aware of just how much a part of capital we all are, how there is no outside of power, as Foucault so often reminds us (93). But at the same time, ephemeral art, and especially ephemeral poetry like *Lexia to Perplexia*, reminds us that we can, as Virno says, "[modify] the context within which a problem has arisen" by choosing a path that is other than the one expected of us, the one that seems a part of the "unalterable horizon" (70).

Conclusion

The title of this article is perhaps a bit misleading. The question is not whether or not a digital poem should be archived. Rather, one must ask: "What is the best way to archive a digital poem, particularly one that purposely engages its own ephemerality?" If an artist or writer intends her or his piece to break, fade, or die, then it is the responsibility of the archivist to allow that to happen. If the archivist makes an ephemeral work permanent, she or he changes the piece to such an extent that it is no longer the piece at all—it is something entirely different. If the poet/artist intended the piece to stand in opposition to a particular manifestation of power, then preserving it can make it function in precisely the opposite way of that in which it was intended.

Digital poetry, because of the constantly changing nature of digital media, has a unique opportunity to act as a site of micropolitical resistance. It can disrupt the relationships that cultural producers have to the systems within which they work because of its uniquely short life, and a growing number of poets working in digital media are embracing this fact. Yet the anxieties mentioned at the beginning of this essay persist. The rhetoric around archiving digital poetry continues to focus upon the ways in which archivists can extend indefinitely the life of particular works.

It seems that the more appropriate path is to document and let die. The archivist can create surrogates of pieces, certainly, to contribute to cultural memory, but she or he should be wary of the temptation to change a piece in order to extend its life beyond that which the poet intended for it. She or he ought not, by preserving a digital poem, reinforce the structures of power that it is acting to subvert. Archiving the ephemeral is not about preservation, but documentation.

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