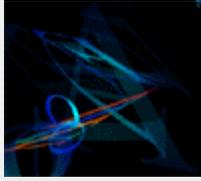


[German Version](#) / [Interview with Jim Andrews](#)



Fighting/Dancing Words Jim Andrews' Kinetic, Concrete Audiovisual Poetry

by Roberto Simanowski

The poem that has drifted from the scene, the computer game that shuts up poetry in the name of poetry, the A Capella as hypertext and "letristic dance" ... [Andrews'](#) kinetic-concrete, audio-visual poetry is an ironic approach to the materiality of text and provides both visual and cognitive pleasure. And as dessert: the metamorphosis of the beast.

English translation by Florian Cramer

from [Webartery](#) - Newsgroup on November 26, 2001

1.

Seattle Drift is a short animated poem—animated gramatically as well as physically—which pretends to have lost its proper shape:

I'm a bad text.
I used to be a poem
but drifted from the scene.
Do me.
I just want you to do me.

If you follow its ironical and charming imperative by clicking "Do the text", you will witness how the words leave their place, spread over the screen to the right and to the bottom, getting totally confused in the process. As long as you don't click "Stop the text", and "Discipline the text" to restore the default arrangement, the white words expand the space more and more; they get practically lost in the blackness of the screen, on which you can track them by scrolling vertically and horizontally. The poem continues to write itself until the user ceases the "Do the text" command with a stop click: interaction as waiting.

Do the text Stop the text Discipline the text

SEATTLE DRIFT

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I just want you to do me.

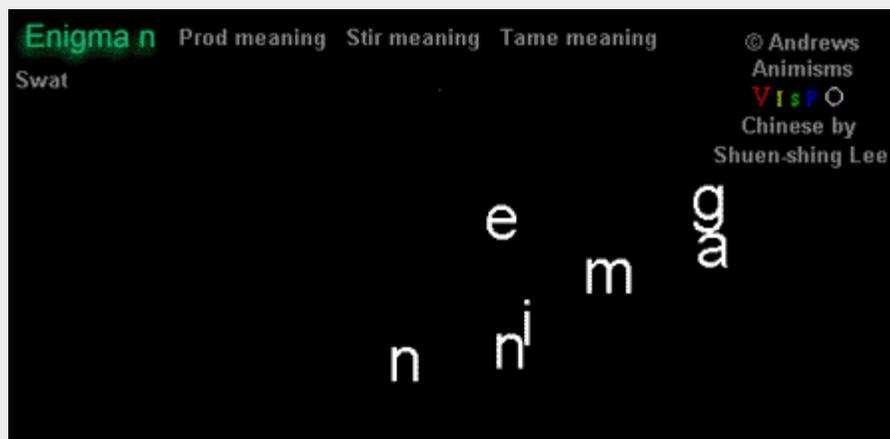
The irony intermedially results from the contrast between the naming of the lost original disposition (which the reader reads) and the result of restoring it (which the reader sees): I drifter from the scene, says the poem when it is in proper order, but ends up all the more in the void when you try to help it. As if the order of the lines went against the real order of being, an order of permanent shifts and of the unspeakable. As the theory of *différance*, whose playful adaption "Seattle Drift" seems to be, tells us, to name something is to reduce it.

Do the text Stop the text Discipline the text



"Enigma n" keeps the principle and the programming (DHTML) of "Seattle Drift," although it is much shorter and remains, despite all its motion, within the limits of the visible screen. You find the word "meaning" and the clickable option "Prod meaning / Stir meaning / Tame meaning". This meaning is generated by letters dancing over the screen, an action which can be modified or stopped with additional options (Swat / Speed / Spell). Clicking "Spell" results in *>meaning<*, whose anagrammatical relation to *>enigma n<*

has become quite obvious.



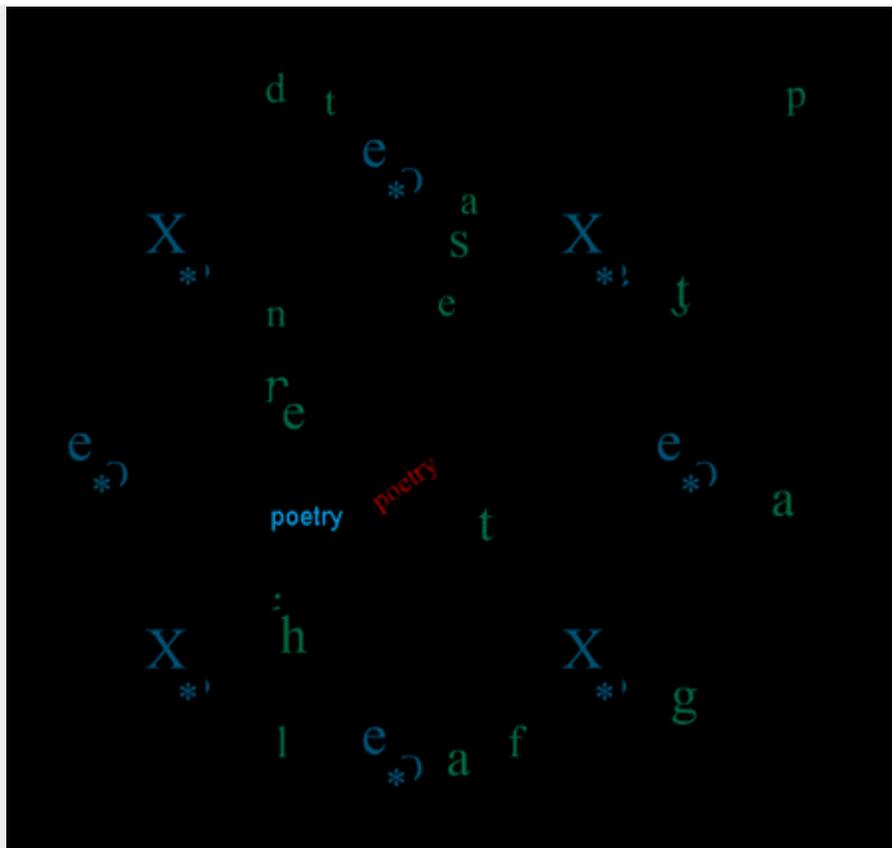
Anagrammatical games traditionally belong to the tools of experimental / concrete poetry. In the digital medium, it is helped by the temporality of the performance: through the perpetual motion of letters—which concrete poetry couldn't achieve on paper—the relation between them continually changes, so that the formal "meaning is an enigma" is modified with the attribute "unsolvable". The letters have not only ended up in an arbitrary combination—which one could follow—they also change it perpetually, so that even the anagrammatically useless letter "n" acquires a more profound meaning: as the unknown variable.

To inject more meaning into this riddle on meaning, you might declare it—in comparison with its static variant on paper—the transition from Saussure to Derrida: the act of giving something a meaning is not only anti-substantial and relational, it is also an infinite process because every signified ends up being the signifier of another signified. The transcendental signifier, which Saussure still allows, only materializes when the semantic play has been stopped. The self-description of the poetry in the end—"enigma n is a philosophical poetry toy for poets and philosophers from the age of 4 up"—actually allows such a laborious interpretation. And if Andrews calls "Seattle Drift" a metareflexive text which embodies itself (see the source code), this all the more applies to *Enigma n*:

Stylistically, the piece is similar to the pop-up poems (though not in behavior) in that the text talks about itself. I like this approach because it focusses attention on the questions and also allows me to develop character. The character is the text itself, and the character commenting on its own nature and behavior, though embodying that nature and behavior also, beyond it but within it, like the rest of us.

2.

Just as ironical as "Seattle Drift" and "Enigma n", but more visually oriented is *Arteroids*, a "literary computer game for the Web". It allows you to shoot down words. Pressing the key S, A, K, L, you can move the red word "Poetry" on the screen, and with the space bar you can shoot at the green



poetry (blue) destroys poetry (red)

If you don't like the default setup, you may compose the words on the screen yourself. For green and blue you can take, among others: "What's inside"; "I am the other"; "I am of two minds; coretext; write me ...". For the red word there is a form for your own input, as with the other texts. Below the text-box for the red line, it reads: "Identity"; so those who are courageous may type in their own name.

What sense does this 'poetic shoot-them-up game' make? First, it's an irony on all other shoot-them-up games. Normally, you shoot people or chicken (as in moorhuhn.de): But words?! *Arteroids* makes the words the enemies or the victims, respectively.

Secondly, the more skillful you play, the more words you read/understand, until you will be able to construct sentences: "The battle of Poetry against itself and the forces of dullness", and "poetry poetry all is poetry destroyed and created." The attempt to decipher these words (sometimes twisted by 180 degrees) absorbs the attention one needs to fight attackers: reading is threatening your life, like on any battlefield. The text can be accessed through an ability which usually is thought to be the opposite of poetry: the talent to evade the enemy and hit him. The rhetoric of shoot-them-up-games is getting appropriated, deconstructed and semantically redefined. And what else does poetry do but alienate the clichés and expectations of the language system in a different approach?

But you may as well take the battle and the deconstruction very literally. There are the words which get disassembled by poetry into new complexes which are rather visually appealing than cognitive and semantic. What seems to be a fixed word loses its ordinary shape as soon as it has been hit by the

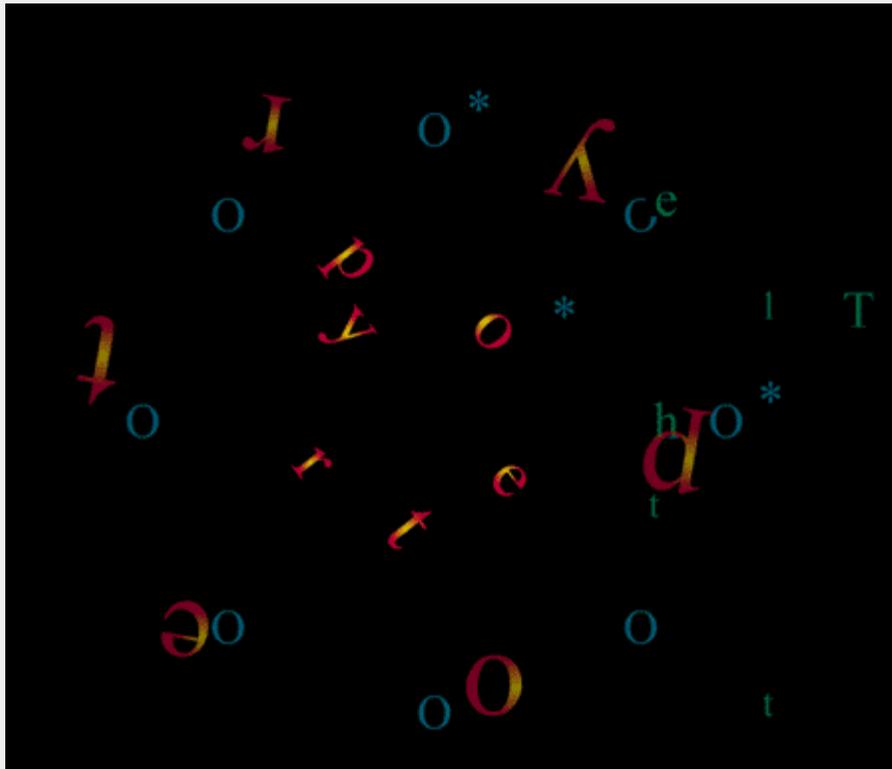
projectile of poetry. Rilke once put this basic feeling into one of his early poems:

Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort.
Sie sprechen alles so deutlich aus;
Und dieses heißt Hund und jendes heißt Haus,
und hier ist Beginn und das Ende ist dort.

(I fear people's words so much.
They name everything so strict;
And this means dog and that means house;
and here's the beginning and there's the end.)

After being hit by the poetry-bullet these so strictly set words are no longer what they used to be. Poetry overcame. The destruction of the old precedes the new perspective on things. Andrews expands concrete poetry with the syntax of time and interaction. Just like Gomringer tells what wind is simply by the arrangement of the word **w**ind in his poem, and just as Jandl visualizes the Niagara Falls only through the vertical space between the letters "niagaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa" and "ra felle", Andrews articulates his message on the surface of the materiality of the signs.

This materiality is sinister though, for it includes much more than only the graphical existence of signs. While traditional concrete poetry may work with color, it can't mediate the information that the word "poetry" falls back into a simple red after its colorful explosion (in red-yellow letters). The falling back itself of course follows the logic of such shoot-them-up games, however, the specific colorfulness of the explosion does not—and it truly is a visual experience. As a player, you would want to get hit all the time because the explosion of one's own word is what's most beautiful here.



Is this, too, a sign? Or is the richness of color only an arbitrary design

decision? Here you are confronted with the very old hermeneutical question: What did the poet/programmer want to tell us? Well, perhaps, that one shouldn't always fight back. That one shouldn't always look for access to the outside world. And this is different from the deconstruction described above. Because this deconstruction is based on a clearly defined action/narrative and only substitutes one arrangement by another. Perhaps the true love of the poet lies in refraining from all possessive energy and wholly exposing himself to the world. Not accidentally, Rilke's mourning on those strong in giving names ends with the claim to abstain:

Ich will immer warnen und wehren: Bleibt fern.
Die Dinge singen hör ich so gern.
Ihr rührt sie an: sie sind starr und stumm.
Ihr bringt mir alle die Dinge um.

(I always want to warn and defend: Stay away.
I like so much to hear the things singing.
You touch them; they are fixed and mute.
You are killing all the things.

Even more explicitly, Rilke pronounced being an object, being married with things in his later poetry:

Und ich gehe und ich weiß nicht weiter,
ich vergaß, was ich zu sagen kam,
alles will, ich soll ein Streiter
werden, und ich bin ein Bräutigam.

(And I go and I don't know how to proceed,
I forgot what I had come to say,
everything wants me to become a fighter,
and I am a bridegroom.

You don't win in the victory, but in the defeat.

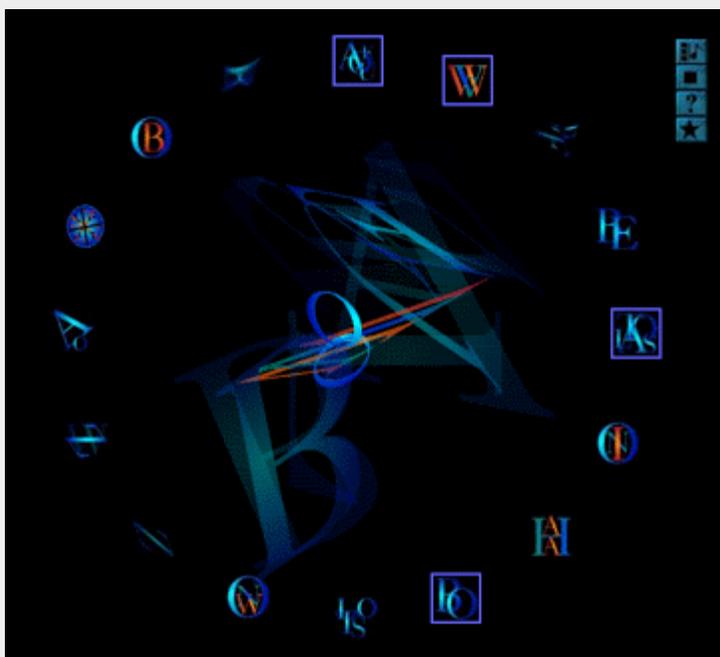
This all is not sure, of course. Not more at least than the thoughts provoked by abstract paintings. In both cases, it all boils down to a question of the cognitive energy set free by the work beyond its occasional visual quality, be it a black square or a word bursting. With the according background, one may associate Rilke and Deconstructionism. Others, whose background is rather a shooting booth of an amusement park, will simply use the poetry to shoot the blue and green words and hope they both would rather be persons or at least chicken.

3.

While Andrews explores in "Seattle Drift" and "Arteroids" the new possibilities of concrete poetry under the conditions of their being digital, with his piece NIO he turns to sound poetry and visual music. His focus is again on interaction, and beyond that on the integration of the acoustic medium and the reinforcement of the intermedia factor: "I'm trying to synthesize and transform image, sound, and text, not simply juxtapose them", says Andrews on his [website](#); "my work is all about synthesis of arts and media", he states in an [interview](#).

NIO is a collection of sound loops which can be combined at will by the user. Its 16 sound loops are represented with 16 letters or icons arranged in a circle. If you click them, you activate the sound belonging to it. An animation or composition of the icons involved is to be seen in the middle of the circle while music plays. The sounds, which all have the same length, have been recorded with Cakewalk and edited in Sound Forge. The animated images are made in Flash. The underlying program is written in Lingo and functions as an engine/player which synchronizes the various layers of sound sequences and animations.

In any state, you can activate only 6 of the 16 sound loops. A restriction of the program? Or does Andrews have pedagogical intentions, making his pupils follow an aesthetics of reduction? Perhaps too many sound loops involved would obscure the fact that some of the animations are a visual rhythms to the sound, others phonetizations of it.



Andrews calls NIO "a kind of lettristic dance" (interview), an "alternative music video" ([Art of Interactive Audio](#)) and emphasizes that it subverts a conventional dominance:

Most programming languages are set up so that the visual dominates and controls the audio. In Nio, when a new sound begins playing, it causes the animations to change, which is a case of the audio controlling the visual.

But NIO is a remarkable example not only of the fusion of text, image and sound. It is, as Andrews emphasizes in the interview, also a progress in relation to the restricted interactive possibilities in the preceding projects:

in Seattle Drift, you can 'Do the text' or 'Stop the text' or 'Discipline the text'. I wanted the actions that you could take to be personally and literarily [sic] meaningful.

With this stress on interaction, the project follows the rhetoric of the

hypertext: You no longer get your text/music ready-made from the author/composer, but you arrange it yourself according to options provided by the other. Is what always failed to be convincing in literature better in respect to music and images?

Andrews himself explains in his essays [✎ *Stir Frys and Cut Ups*](#) on hypertext and cut up aesthetics: "one of the things you'd like in a cut up is meaningful association, not just widely combinatorial permutation." Most hypertexts only provide infinite possibilities of combinations whose meaningfulness can't be assured simply because even the author cannot preview all variations. (Raymond Queneau calculated for the 100 000 billion variants of his sonnet combination "Cent Mille Millions de poèmes" (!961) more than 190 Million years of ceaseless reading.) Can Andrews really hope for meaningful associations?

NIO's advantage is that it speaks to different senses. While a lack of clearly composed narrative links hurts in hypertext, it is a refreshing possibility here to enrich the a capella with variations which perfectly integrate into the whole. Also, the geometrical shapes which move in front of the reader's eye like a screen saver are visually pleasing. The "lettristic dance" is not about meaning, it is, like dance in general, an example of the "aesthetics of the sensual" which Andrew Darley describes as a tendency for the semantic and visual arts (like film) in his book "Visual Digital Culture". Jim Andrews' audiovisual projects increase the interactive character at the cost of the semantic aspect. They are no longer about semantic interpretation, unlike his works of kinetic-concrete poetry, but about experimenting. The activity of the users as player replaces their activity as reader.

The involvement of the player and tinker, though, is what Andrews aims at, as he says in the interview:

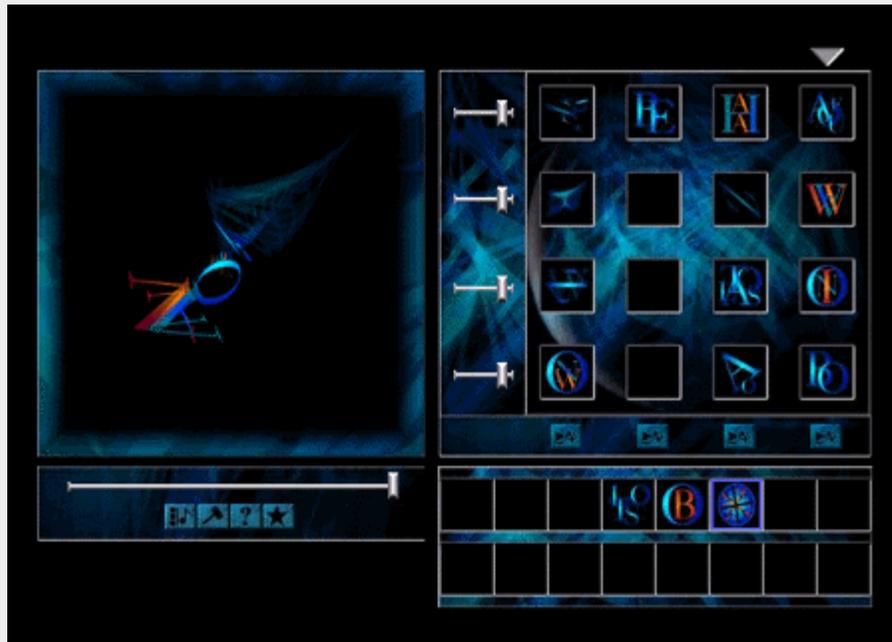
One of the things about Nio is that it can deal with layers of rhythmic music. So you can take songs and chop them up into loops (even better if you have different recordings of the vocals, drums, etc) and then allow people to rearrange the music arbitrarily or with constraints. And you can associate one or more animations (which themselves may be interactive) with each of the pieces of the song, so that you end up with a very different sort of music video for the Web than we have seen so far and perhaps a different song than you started out with. Very interactive and engagingly compositional both sonically and visually, hopefully.

The pioneer of this concept is Brian Eno, who in 1995, in an [✎ interview](#) published in the online magazine "Wired," outlined what he calls "unfinished music" [1] rather than interactive music:

What people are going to be selling more of in the future is not pieces of music, but systems by which people can customize listening experiences for themselves. Change some of the parameters and see what you get. So, in that sense, musicians would be offering unfinished pieces of music - pieces of raw material, but highly evolved raw material, that has a strong flavor to it already. [...] Such an experience falls in a nice new

place - between art and science and playing. This is where I expect artists to be working more and more in the future.

Andrews subscribes to this vision of stochastic music. In May 2001, he initiated a discussion on Eno's thoughts on [Webartery](#). NIO is Andrews' practical answer, which indeed blurs the boundaries between program and art. "Nio is part 'tool' and part heap of art", Andrews writes. In the next version, he wants to offer 60 instead of the 16 sounds currently available. Those who want may replace the 16 sounds by others. Since August 2001, the [source code](#) of NIO is public: "if people use the code, it increases my value as a programmer and artist." So everyone may create their own a capellas with their own sound loops, with Andrews' voice staying the background voice (for the inventor of the program wil, as everyone knows, always be the first author before the user). Those who prefer to remain on the surface of the screen have to live with what Andrews has to offer; perhaps they come to like NIO's "verse two," which allows you to put the 16 sound loops into four groups and play the composition in this order.



Notes:

1. This distinction can already be found in Umberto Eco's book "The Open Artwork". Eco calls works like Kafka's "Castle" open artworks because of the richness of the readings they make possible. On the other hand, he calls such works which get completed only in the process of their performance (like Karlheinz Stockhausen's Piano Piece XI and Henri Pousseur's Scambi) "unfinished works", which the artist hands over to the performer "more or less like parts of a puzzle game, seemingly disengaged about what it will end up like."

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