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The E-Poetry Festivals: Celebration, Art, and Imagination in Community

Loss Pequeño Glazier

The E-Poetry Festivals¹ was the first festival series conceived to celebrate literature's emergence in digital form; under the direction of the Electronic Poetry Center, Dept. of Media Study, SUNY Buffalo and in collaboration with numerous sister organizations, it consists of a series of international media poetics gatherings that have occurred over the past two decades in locations worldwide. Though other efforts existed before, in parallel, and in other manners responding to the field, no other organization can claim to have pre-dated the E-Poetry Festivals as an ongoing format and as a consistent conceptual frame. Though a curated event, founded and consistently directed by Loss Pequeño Glazier, it has largely been collective in spirit. Thus, diverse e-poetry community members and the EPC Advisory Board, among others, without whom the continuity and character of the E-Poetry Festivals, across more than a decade, could not have been sustained.

The festivals have made an indelible presence on the field. Not only did it inaugurate a new sensibility towards language as art in the digital age but it has always been focused in its attention to artistic expression.

¹<http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/e-poetry/archive/>.

The festivals were always about art as a locus of action in and of itself, not in relation to the academy, to canons, to grant agencies, to corporate apparatuses, or to the economic dot-con [stet] frenzy for irresponsible amounts of corporate wealth. Among other firsts, E-Poetry was the first to offer an electronic literature festival in the United States, the first to present one in Europe, the first to sponsor an event in the Caribbean, the first to bring a festival to Latin America, and the first to cross numerous gender, language, literary, and cultural thresholds.

At the outset, however, I want to make it clear that the E-Poetry Festivals, from the start, were conceived of as “festivals.” That is, “festivals” offered an occasion to celebrate, to present experiments, to exhilarate in the sculpted contours of new media formations. At this level, there was no hard-knuckled boasting nor chest-thumping nor posturing about these works as being harbingers of a “new canon” nor of this being a professional field or an organization to represent practitioners in a field defined by any given technology.

In this regard, the E-Poetry Festivals have also been distinct in presentation: no simultaneous panels are presented (if you present, you present to all); no keynote speakers are presented (all artists are equally presenting notes that are “key”), and, as with almost every exhibition and gallery or art or music festival in the world, the series is “curated.” Importantly, it is dedicated to bringing together participants from diverse geographic areas, language, and cultural contexts; it aims to encourage younger, emerging practitioners and women artists; to explore possibilities of performance; and, to foster conversation, intergeneration exchange, and an international perspective, with multiple language formations in mind.

E-Poetry Festivals: An Inventory

An annotated inventory, such as the following, allows us to see not just the geographical contours of path of the E-Poetry landscape but, as viewed from one perspective, suggests that the entire series of E-Poetry Festivals aims for a “total immersion” in the digital as part of an overall effort: that is, allowing for the context of related defining events, the E-Poetry Festivals describe an arc that is an idea, meditative, spiritual, and contemplative. Like an indigenous ritual or a work of Latin American magical reality, the Festivals view the changing field from a larger perspective, that of a total vision of literature as a continuous process of an emergent process. However, it could be said that the emphasis on E-Poetry has been on the art as practice (and criticism as observation of practice) rather than on any specific medium.

The First Decade

E-Poetry's first iteration occurred at a conference center at SUNY Buffalo (itself the site of so many literary firsts) in May, 2001. Through 2015, the E-Poetry Festival series has had eight iterations, starting in Buffalo and culminating in Buenos Aires, Argentina. All have been under consistent directorship, given occasional slippages and adjustments along the way. Nonetheless, each of the E-Poetry Festivals contribute to a clear, complete vision of the field. (More detailed resources for most of the E-Poetry events is available online at <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/e-poetry/archive/>.) Keep in mind that E-Poetry has been held on a regular basis, in a consistent format, and in the spirit of a festival since its inception.

I. E-Poetry 2001 Buffalo

Local organizers: Loss Pequeño Glazier and Ed Taylor; hosted by the Electronic Poetry Center, SUNY Buffalo and Just Buffalo Literary Center.

Certainly, there were precedents to E-Poetry. There was the work of Eduardo Kac, Jim Rosenberg, and John Cayley, notably in the original edition of their historic collection (1996) *New Media Poetry* published as *Visible Language*, Vol. 30, No. 2.² There were the events of the ACM Hypertext conferences and Digital Arts & Culture conferences that preceded E-Poetry. ACM Hypertext had some helpful moments. Nonetheless, E-Poetry was the first event to dedicate a full festival to literary activity in the field. It sought specifically to investigate, as did *Digital Poetics: the Making of E-Poetries* (Alabama University Press, 2002—the first university press book to do the same) to deal with the digital as literary space. Though digital poetry has been part of other digital conferences, “E-Poetry, 2001: An International Digital Poetry Festival” was a historic, landmark literary event as well as a coming-of-age event for new practices in digital literature and the first such event to dedicate itself entirely to the contemplation of digital literature as a topic in itself.

II. E-Poetry 2003 Morgantown

Local organizer: Sandy Baldwin; hosted by West Virginia University.

E-Poetry 2003 was, thanks to its organizer's appreciative spontaneity, a spin-off of the glorious communal energy of E-Poetry 2001. E-Poetry 2003 took place at West Virginia University, Morgantown West Virginia,

²<http://visiblelanguagejournal.com/issues/issue/110/>.

organized by Sandy Baldwin. Baldwin had appeared in E-Poetry 2001 as part of the Purkinge Group presenting “The Awopbop Groupuscule and the Forms of Improvisation,” a group based in Albany, NY, which included Baldwin, Don Byrd, Nancy Dunlop, Chris Funkhouser, Belle Gironda, Thomas Mackey, Christina Milletti, and Derek Owens, among others, one of the evenings events held at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Tri-Main Center, in Buffalo, as part of the festival. The second iteration of the festival was done in close collaboration with me, and Baldwin did a splendid job as local organizer. In addition, the French-based international group, *Transitoire Observable*, made its first international presentation at E-Poetry 2003, adding a distinctive contour to the series.

III. E-Poetry 2005 London

Local organizers: Piers Hugill, William Rowe, John Cayley; hosted by Birkbeck College, University of London.

For its 2005 festival, E-Poetry took a decisive turn across the Atlantic. E-Poetry 2005 was the first ongoing digital literature festival in Europe. The event was a curious collaboration, through the agency of foundational digital practitioner, John Cayley, between E-Poetry, SUNY Buffalo, the University at Buffalo, and Birkbeck College. Cayley deserves immense amounts of credit for making the necessary institutional connections. The festival could not have enjoyed a more celebratory occasion than its setting at the University of London campus in central London. Grad student Piers Hugill was an amiable collaborator and it was an honor to coordinate with Birkbeck College, and the acclaimed Professor William Rowe. It was exciting to think that there would be a connection with the legendary Contemporary Poetics Research Centre (CPRC), Birkbeck College, London. Rowe and Hugill were part of the experimental poetry scene. Without a doubt, local organizer John Cayley not only organized excellently, but his micro-publisher background was a tribute to the origins of the E-Poetry Festivals concept: the idea of language art produced through the technology at hand (in this case, digital), material born a sense of urgency because of its value to its authors themselves. These are works outside the institution, emanating from aesthetics rather than organizational objectives. E-Poetry’s renaissance in Europe occurred in the true spirit of its founding vision.

IV. E-Poetry 2007 Paris

Local organizer: Philippe Bootz, hosted by Le Laboratoire Paragraphe, Université de Paris VIII, Mots-Voir, Le Divan du Monde, Le Cube, and Le Point Ephémère.

In Paris for its 2007 event, months after the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) held its second major conference in Maryland, the E-Poetry Festival, drew from a different source and was colored by a completely different complexion than its earliest predecessors. E-Poetry 2007 was extraordinarily organized by Philippe Bootz with the added expertise of Patrick-Henri Burgaud, Jean Clément, and Alexandre Gherban. Further, E-Poetry had the singular honor of presenting the first regular international digital literature series to take place in Paris. The daytime events were held at the Université Paris VIII, at the very north edge of Paris, and its evening performances took place at some of the leading cultural venues in the city (Le Divan du Monde, Le Cube, and Le Point Ephémère). It was indeed an honor—and a tribute to the vision of its local facilitators—to present E-Poetry events at such cutting-edge venues. Thus, though I (and my vision of incubating the field through intimate activity across broad international contexts), Bootz and Burgaud had a different sense of mission in mind than previous E-Poetry festivals: their thought was that to get the events deeper into the public arena would create a greater momentum for the field, almost crossing a threshold into a kind of popular awareness. (And I must admit, if this were to be done, Paris would be the place to do it.) It may have marked the end of a period, rather than a broadening of the field. Nonetheless, aside from the logistics an individual had to navigate to arrive at evening locations and the distance itself to the daytime events, it was a visionary model.

V. E-Poetry 2009 Barcelona

Local organizer: Laura Borràs; hosted by Hermeneia Grup de Recerca, Universitat de Barcelona.

In 2009, E-Poetry took place in Barcelona, Spain. Its organizers were meticulous in their attention to every detail of the festival, from the selection of extraordinary and culturally-rich venues, programming, and coordination of events. In addition, as the precursor to the tenth anniversary celebration of E-Poetry (celebrated with a social event, cake, and special, small ceremony), this E-Poetry gave me to take stock of the trajectory of E-Poetry. Indeed, with four events under its belt, two in the United States and two in Europe, E-Poetry had a distinct trajectory. (Also, E-Poetry consciously does not divide the world into a European event, a US event, etc. The goal, despite the difficulties in attending when one occurs at a distance from one's home city, offset by its biennial gatherings, is to engage this worldwide aesthetic context.) The organization, under the direction of Laura Borràs, was exemplary—and the attention to detail unprecedented. One difference I had with the organization is that E-Poetry never presents “keynote” speakers. Among high points in cultural diversity was the presence of attending Catalan poets. As to the differences, all is well that ends well.

My somewhat removed role was due to shifting poetics that were seeming to draw the trajectory away from E-Poetry's original aesthetic. This, too, was a positive, because through this experience I saw that the sails needed some adjustment. I was determined to point E-Poetry back to its original course: for this reason, I scheduled the tenth anniversary celebration back to E-Poetry's founding venue at Buffalo, where I did my best to emphasize specific aspects of the range, vision, cultural breadth, and depth of analysis that would be possible for the Festival.

The Second Decade

I'll never forget opting out of one of Barcelona's evening events (one that featured works that bore less relation to "E-Poetry"); these were events with less interest to me than taking time to reflect on the present moment and the Festival-in-progress. I sat on the sidewalk absorbed in the motion of people going about their affairs, wanting to truly enjoy the exhilaration of being in Barcelona. I felt the evening air, the voices in the night, thought of the history of this particular place—and sat for a long time thought about how the literature of this place is a living palpable presence—not the novelty of electronics nor modes of engagement imposed from a specific technology. I spent a long time pondering, wondering if this was my lesson from Barcelona, not the event that I had passed up for this respite. (And all conference-goers do occasionally need a respite. There is simply a lot going on.)

It was during that time I realized what the idea of "curating" meant. I also realized that if everything is decided by large groups, one ends up with a lot of compromises; the result is a different outcome. If E-Poetry was to be an "E-Poetry" that pointed to a specific vision of poetics (and here I claim simply "a poetics" of the digital, one among many possible approaches); its vision had to be clear. Second, I realized that there was a larger tradition, an ongoing music that branches, crosses, and wends through the generations that were my reference point. E-Poetry was not so much about comical invented game interfaces, nor Second Life existences, nor a trio of voices creating a cacophony of sounds, nor data on a scale too immense for digestion. My aim all along had been to engage a distinct curating emphasis. That which E-Poetry means to me and to the E-Poetries Advisory Board is a path to investigating questions greater than ourselves through the folds, textures, and grace of language in its material presence. In terms of digital literature, this means code for me. It also means being in touch with what lines of investigation had preceded the present technology of literary expression. It also included numerous other types of experiments, different approaches, but with a "curated" tone. Thus, I realized that the

second decade of E-Poetry must begin with a clear expression of artistically driven, gender aware, multicultural, innovative, and inclusive (especially regarding younger practitioners) vision. It was clear that E-Poetry 2011 must return to Buffalo, to celebrate its anniversary, renew its roots, and energize an open field for digital poetics in a worldwide context.

VI. E-Poetry 2011 Buffalo

Local organizer: Loss Pequeño Glazier; co-organizer: Sandy Baldwin; hosted by the Dept. of Media Study, SUNY Buffalo.

For the tenth anniversary celebration of E-Poetry, the Festival returned to Buffalo. As it had been to Philippe Bootz in 2007, there was now a generational shift tangibly present. mIEKAL aND, for example, an early key voice in the movement no longer seemed to find the festival relevant. Neither Friedrich W. Block nor Florian Cramer were on the scene. Others had declared digital poetry “dead” or off their radar and had moved on. Some hung on and hung on in Second Life and other protocols, though they seemed to be going the way of MOOs and MUDs, but perhaps those worlds will serve us some day and I am wrong about the lack of general interest. It’s true that groups always change but it is like a family; it changes the dynamic when folks come and go. The era of E-Poetry 2001 was over. Curiously, with the incrementing of one digit (very digital), the E-Poetry 2011 decade was launched.

To signal the strength of curatorial vision and the range of artistic vision across disciplines (rather than prioritizing a specific technology in its “programming”)—and as a means of reasserting the literary, multicultural, gender-inclusive, and performance-inclusive direction of E-Poetry’s vision—a number of diverse artistic strands were interwoven to provide a cross-generational, cross-cultural vision. This decennial anniversary celebration included, in addition to a monumental program of new works and an entire half-day of new critical presentations crowned by a reading by prize-winning Cuban poet Reina María Rodríguez (with translation), a significant gallery exhibition diligently curated by Sandy Baldwin, screenings curated by Tammy McGovern, an impressive atrium installation-performance by Mark Jeffery and Judd Morrissey, a digital poetry and dance concert in a professional black box theater featuring dozens of dancers performing an entire evening’s program of digital-poetry-to-dance, directed by Anne Burnidge, along with readings by Jörg Piringer, Eugenio Tisselli, and Charles Bernstein and a closing night gala black box performance with stellar presenters Joan LaBarbara (a one-time collaborator of John Cage), an algorithmic visual-sound poetry performance by Lawrence Upton and John Drever (works invoking, in my mind, UK sound poetry legend Bob Cobbing), headlined by a young Cuban hip-hop poetry ensemble led by

Telmary, a key vocalist in Cuban's world-renowned band, Interactivo, where Telmary insisted everyone dance to hip-hop, partaking of rum. The idea behind the interdisciplinary approach was to signal, in a major way, that visual works, music, performance, philosophy, language, and computer-generation of language arts were not just interrelated in the present, but interwoven across avant-garde and multicultural historical precedents on a worldwide scale. Such an approach was, *per se*, a definition of the curatorial vision of the E-Poetry Festival series. There were some who wondered what the union of these elements meant—the text-based reading by renowned poet Charles Bernstein, the theatre-style dance concert, the musical and performance bent of the closing evening performance/party—had to do with E-Poetry. I was hoping to gesture to open doors to the integration of E-Poetry and the arts. E-Poetry would move to Europe for the following festival in 2013 and the E-Poetry Advisory Board was formed to shepherd coming events. The E-Poetry Advisory Board formed was diverse in its constitution across gender, culture, and geography, while being of a manageable size for effectiveness. The first E-Poetry Advisory Board consisted of Yves Abrioux/Serge Bouchardon (France), Amaranth Borsuk (USA), David Jhaye Johnston (Canada/Hong Kong), Leonardo Flores (Puerto Rico), Claudia Kozak (Argentina), Manuel Portela (Portugal), and Laura Shackelford (USA). The site of the next E-Poetry Festival would be Kingston University, London, on the banks of the Thames.

VII. E-Poetry 2013 Kingston, UK

Local convener: María Mencía; hosted by the Kingston Writing School (KWS), the Practice Research Unit (PRU), the School of Performance & Screen Studies, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences (FASS), Kingston University London, the Watermans Art Centre, and the Poetry Library, Southbank Centre, and the Tate Britain.

E-Poetry 2013's London adjacent venue allowed space for new voices, schools, and settings, specific to the tenor and location of the event. London-Kingston, under María Mencía's preparations as local convener, was an overwhelming success! The festival benefited from a most suitable venue on the Kingston campus during the days, with evening performances at extraordinary London venues, the Watermans Art Centre, the Tate Britain, and the Poetry Library, Southbank Centre, Royal Festival Hall. It included an extraordinary gallery, organized by Mencía, with one work in a separate small room by itself and a range of works, a stimulating range of expression and technological exploration, on panels in a riverfront hallway outside the entrance to the theatre. The festival performances themselves provided a stunning styles, true to the goal that, "The 'poetry' in 'E-Poetry' does not signal a genre preference but an origin. That is, making as a means of

realizing art, a delight in digital literary invention ...” Of great note was the involvement of the E-Poetry Board of Advisors, very active in all aspects of the event, with special thanks to Laura Shackelford, who provided key programming and administrative support in 2013 and 2015, in addition to presenting her own remarkable work. (Note: a review and descriptive article about E-Poetry 2013 appears as “Tangible expressions of a present poetic: A review of E-Poetry 2013 Festival London,” published in the online journal, *Jacket 2*, <http://jacket2.org/reviews/tangible-expressions-present-poetic>.)

VIII. E-Poetry 2015 Buenos Aires

Local organizer: Claudia Kozak; hosted by Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero.

E-Poetry 2015 was the first ongoing digital literature series to occur in Latin America. Given the logistics, subtleties of language, customs, cultural context, and distance, the logistics for this festival were a bit more difficult than others. However, due to the tireless and extraordinary work of Claudia Kozak, local organizer, the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, the Museo de la Inmigración/Centro de Arte Contemporáneo—UNTREF, a cultural gem, the historic nineteenth-century Teatro Margarita Xirgu in San Telmo (a classic nineteenth-century Spanish style architectural gem and the Centro Cultural Borges—UNTREF. There was a great breadth of new material to be shown in the world of digital literature. There were extraordinary panels on aspects of Latin American digital literature (seen from distinct global perspectives, including panels organized in the UK, France, and Argentina), a panel on women in digital literature (organized in the UK), incredible performances (notably those of Carlos Estevez, Judd Morrissey, Brian Kim Stefans, Philippe Bootz, Ethan Hayden, Ottar Ormstad, Pablo Gobira, Felipe Cussen/Ricardo Luna, and the first international performance of Orquesta de Poetas, among many others).

E-Poetry 2015 opened new vistas in the field and the pulsating, gargantuan, cultural monolith of Buenos Aires and its distinct neighborhoods added to the tempo and broad reach of the event. Indeed, E-Poetry 2015 Buenos Aires exhibited a “newness” to the many new voices drawn together in one venue, a spirit of discovery and camaraderie reminiscent of the first E-Poetry in 2001. It was a complete thrill.

Reflections on E-Poetry

Really, what I had longed for was a community that spread across organizations and continents. To me that was one benefit of the digital

age (along with new types of works, obviously)—the ability to embrace a broader consciousness. Thus, the E-Poetry Festivals were not about the fact of technology, nor the “end(s) of electronic literature” but about the transcendence of technology with the goal of a shared intelligence. This, perhaps, was even a romantic notion, admiring of other poetic/arts communities. For example, Ricardo Baeza marveling at the magnanimity with which Lorca and his peers spoke of one another in his treatise “A Generation and Its Poet” (Stainton: 172). Or Leslie Stainton has suggested, “Although ... among themselves they sometimes squabbled over ideas and personalities, their respect and affection for one another endured ‘We love each other, we adore each other, we’re all of us the same person,’ Lorca declared” (Stainton: 175). If not so idealized, a tangible group energy did move us forward.

It should be said that, though the E-Poetry is a curated series, it was never restricted to my own poetic vision. (Indeed, it could be said that, at this writing, my own poetic vision, except for occasional encouraging moments, has yet to be parsed.) Rather, having worked with literary figures such as Robert Creeley and Charles Bernstein and, years before, having been immersed in the activities of small press, the Mimeo Revolution, and various undertakings as tracked year after year in Len Fulton’s historic directories of little magazines, I believed in a certain responsibility of the poet to give to the community as well as taking. The spirit that the E-Poetry Festivals seek to capture share those same sentiments, digital age or not. We are at an intensely volatile moment from text to emoji to big data. But we do have a role. What makes sense on the “page”? We must move beyond exemplars of technological effects to the root matters that opens doors to expressive creation across cultures. To devote one to organizing, advancing, and drawing attention to works that have an undefinable poetic value, to the works of younger artists, and to works by women, underrepresented groups, and from the emerging world. The aim of E-Poetry is not to advance a specific technology or ideology (criteria that always change), but to present opportunities for the “poetic voice,” whatever that may be, and in numerous locations where it might be found.

I sincerely extend thanks to all local facilitators, co-directors, the E-Poetry Board of Advisors, and those many poets who have kept E-Poetry Festivals on their calendars across the years. I also thank the ELO for their contributions over the years. We have, indeed, been fortunate to have you among us.