Electronic Literature as Paratextual Construction

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ABSTRACT

The following discussion aims to reflect on how electronic literature and affiliated or related fields describe themselves paratextually. I will argue that the social construction of 'electronic literature' is dominated by its systemic self-description. The paratextual construction basically works with the ascription of the genre name 'electronic literature' and discursive descriptions or reflections to phenomena of artistic practice and has been institutionalized in no small part by the Electronic Literature Organization. The argument is developed by observing paratextual practices in founding narratives, archives and collections related to the ELO. This perspective is contextualized by looking at self-descriptions in the pre-history of e-lit within the artistic program of poietic experimentation.

KEYWORDS

systemic self-description; experimental poetry; institutionalization; poetological signals.

RESUMO

A discussão que aqui se apresenta tem como objetivo refletir acerca do modo como a literatura eletrónica e os campos a ela filiados ou relacionados se autodescrevem paratextualmente. Argumentarei que a construção social da 'literatura eletrónica' é dominada pela sua autodescrição sistémica. A construção paratextual trabalha com a atribuição do nome de género 'literatura eletrónica' e descrições discursivas ou reflexões sobre fenómenos da prática artística e foi institucionalizada em grande medida pela Electronic Literature Organization. O argumento é desenvolvido observando práticas paratextuais em narrativas fundadoras, arquivos e coleções relacionadas com a ELO. Esta perspectiva é contextualizada examinando as autodescrições na pré-história da e-lit dentro do programa artístico de experimentação poiética.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

paratexto; autodescrição sistémica; poesia experimental; institucionalização; sinais poetológicos.

I.ELEPHANTS AND MAHOUTS

> And if the text without its paratext is sometimes like an ele-
> phant without a mahout, a power disabled, the paratext with-
> out its text is a mahout without an elephant, a silly show.
> Gérard Genette (1997: 410)

One might not necessarily regard an elephant wandering free as a power disabled. But a paratext without its text does, at first glance, appear to be a silly thing. At times, paratexts — termed an 'accessory' in the German edition of Genette's *Paratexts* — seem to live a life of their own. They take on their own dimensions and turn things upside down: Artistic texts become an accessory to their paratexts and institutional framing.

The following discussion aims to reflect on how electronic literature and affiliated or related fields describe themselves paratextually. I will focus on metatexts which address the e-lit field or genre as a whole, rather than individual works.[1] Self-description is a crucial factor of electronic literature and related forms, especially when one's personal or collaborative practice depends on strong institutional structures, as in the case of e-lit. I contend that there would be no electronic literature without self-description, and that — much more than in 'literature' or 'art' as such — the social construction of 'electronic literature' is dominated by the paratextual, poetological or academic description of e-lit. This paratextual construction basically works with the ascription of the genre name 'electronic literature' and discursive descriptions or reflections to phenomena of artistic practice and has been institutionalized in no small part by the Electronic Literature Organization, whose founding story is referenced in what follows. This perspective will then be extended by observing paratextual practices in archives and collections related to the ELO.[2] It is interesting to look at self-description in e-lit not only within the framework of the Electronic Literature Organization, but also from the point of view of the history and — to quote Chris Funkhouser — the pre-history of e-lit and of digital, cyber-, or net-literature, (new) media-, and computer poetry, etc. I will draw a line back to the roots in the late 1950's, when artists began to experiment with computers in the context of poetic programs for the first time, and discursive texts were attached to

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1 This is an additional perspective to the contributions in the instructive volume about paratextuality
  in digital culture edited by Nadine Desrochers and Daniel Apollon (2014).
2 For a detailed systemic reflection about the similar construction of so called 'digital poetry' within
  and through curatorial and paratextual practice see Block (2010).

the artistic process and results. I suggest that contextual and historical affiliations of self-description have influenced the identity of e-lit and have helped keep it flexible.

II. TABLE TALKS ABOUT THE BEGINNING

To begin, let's look at two texts which narrate a field being formed. These reported events lie 44 years apart.

The first story is about electronic literature. One can equate its founding story with that of the ELO.[3] In contrast to the short, sober information found on the ELO-history-page about its foundation, Scott Rettberg (2012) writes a major story published in the journal *Dichtung Digital* relating to the ELMCIP project (Electronic Literature as a Model for Creativity in Practice). The title sounds like a confirmation of my first thesis: "Developing an Identity for the Field of Electronic Literature." First of all, the story is about the history of the ELO, and the narrative begins with the hour of its birth during the *Technology Platforms for 21st Century Literature* conference held at Brown University in 1999: "During the conference banquet," Rettberg reports, "I found myself sitting at a table with Coover and Ballowe (…)", and he recalls how he outlined his ideas:

> (…) to find ways to support the new art forms and to apply some capital to the situation of experimental literature (…) I could see the usefulness of a non-profit organization for electronic literature, modeled to some extent on existing literary non-profit organizations. To my surprise, both Ballowe and Coover embraced these ideas.

Rettberg informs us that the name 'electronic literature' was consciously chosen at this early stage because of its openness compared to 'hypertext.'

This story reminds me of a short text about the foundation of concrete poetry (see Fig. 1).
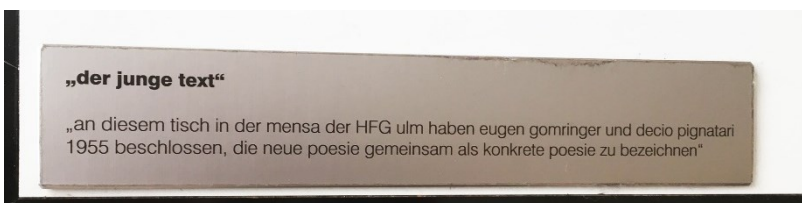
Figure 1. Exhibition label fixed on the object of description. Translation of the text: "the young text. / at this table in the refectory of the Ulm School of Design, in 1955, eugen gomringer and decio pignatari decided they would both call the new poetry concrete poetry."

3 Jill Walker Rettberg (2012) argues in the same way, also by quantitatively analyzing the use of the term 'electronic literature' compared with other related notions, as does Lori Emerson (2011): "However, what did not exist until the founding of the Electronic Literature Organization in 1999 (thanks to Scott Rettberg, Robert Coover, and Jeff Ballowe) is a name, a concept, even a brand with which a remarkably diverse range of digital writing practices could identify: electronic literature."

Today, this table is on show at the Institute for Constructive Art and Concrete Poetry in Rehau, Bavaria, where 93-year-old Eugen Gomringer has his home.

It would be interesting to ponder the connection between tables, creations and foundations, but that is another story. However, these two very different accounts both describe conversations around a table, a situation which seemed to trigger what one might call a social structure of art connected with a given genre or system name. We will come back to this idea. Later on, for example, I will examine the form of the genre and system name 'electronic literature,' which is syntactically related to 'concrete poetry,' in order to discuss the poetic concepts or programs this form may imply.

Stories like these often include certain poetological and historical correlations. For example, in an essay from 1960 about concrete poetry, Gomringer highlights concrete art and the poetry of Mallarmé, Ball, Cummings, Pound, Futurism and Dadaists.

In the above passage by Scott Rettberg, we can read the keyword "experimental literature." His text distinctively links to hypertext literature from the 1980s as a starting point, as do e.g. paratexts on the ELO website or N. Katherine Hayles' essay "Electronic Literature: What is it?" (2007). The first use of the term 'electronic literature' is localized in this context, namely in an essay by Jay David Bolter from 1985.[4] An earlier mention can be found in Jean A. Baudot's book *La machine à écrire* from 1964.[5] The status of both examples as paratexts within the self-description of literature and art may seem dubious. They neither address a certain literary text or ergon. Each rather refers to a field as such, providing it with a name and parameters and thus giving it its own identity.

III. PARATEXTUAL SELF-DESCRIPTION IN THE SYSTEM OF E-LIT

In her sophisticated essay on paratexts in digital literature, Yra van Dijk (2014) points out the particular variety of paratexts on the Internet and their specific connection to the text. She also highlights strategic and framing functions of paratexts in the field of electronic literature. My focus is on framing. Here the concept of 'self-description' according to Niklas Luhmann's systems theory is helpful. Although Bourdieu's 'field' metaphor is far more appealing, the 'field' is regarded as a self-organizing 'system of communication' with interdependent factors such as communications, cognitions, agents in different roles of activity, messages in certain media formats, poetological programs, institutions etc.[6] 'Self-description' occurs when a social system is described "by the system" itself.

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4 Jay David Bolter (1985), quoted from Scott Rettberg (2012).
5 "Il ne me répugne pas d'imaginer que, bientôt, la machine électronique complétera l'homme – et entrera même en compétition avec lui – dans le domaine de la création poétique, comme elle le fait, en ce moment, dans celui du raisonnement mathématique. La littérature électronique? Pourquois pas?" (Roux, 1964: 88).
6 This structural differentiation of the system of art is adopted from the writings of Siegfried J. Schmidt.

It is an operation "by which systems generate their internal identity." (Luhmann, 2000: 248). By describing itself, a system creates a more or less flexible framework and its own specific environment. Luhmann is referring to meta-discourses from inside the art system such as poetological paratexts, rather than aesthetic texts which address the system from outside e.g. from philosophy or scholarly research. Paratextual self-description is the perfect medium to place the question: "What is e-lit?" or "Electronic literature: What is it?" (Hayles, 2007). The complex identity of the system bearing this name is constructed by a multitude of themes and arguments. We are all familiar with the interest in reflection and theory within the frame of e-lit, a characteristic shared with related forms of advanced language art.

In the context of working with databases, one line of opinion suggests that literary works 'live' only through publication in combination with commentaries, such as on the *CELL* project's *About:* "The life of a literary work is defined through a trail of linked commentaries and active responses, the gathering and identification of works becomes itself a creative and scholarly activity."[7]

The interest in certain theoretical, artistic and non-artistic subjects, especially in media culture, is another functional aspect of discursive self-description. Artistic conceptualization also plays a role: The reflective interest in methods and models, the 'software' of creative work.

In its framing function, self-description is much more effective where it is interrelated with certain formats of social and symbolic institutionalization and where relatively stable types and commitments of activity and communication are established, namely: Internet platforms, databases, archives, collections, anthologies, exhibitions, festivals, congresses, or any of these aspects integrated into an institution with a strong academic character such as the Electronic Literature Organization. These aspects also present themselves as systemic self-description, as compact forms which integrate discursive or paratextual forms.

We are, in fact, dealing with multi-framing here, an embrace of both individual artistic phenomena (works or agents) and more complex structures such as literature, art and science as a whole: As soon as e-lit is reflected as a system within the social system of art, in critical relation to its environment including other specific art forms (e.g. so called 'print literature'), or in relation to the environment of the art system as a whole (e.g. science or politics), we may observe that interrelated systemic boundaries are communicated. This may lead to feedback, irritation, and instability, but should not be seen as a disadvantage.

In order to reap the benefits of adaptation and modulation, complex forms of communication require not only institutionalization, but also a high degree of instability and change (Luhmann, 1995: 357ff). How much room is there for destabilization within the stabilizing organization of electronic literature? Implicit and explicit affiliations of self-description may help to produce flexibility. They are as manifold as the agents and their ways of thinking and working in

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7 http://cellproject.net/about

the interdisciplinary system of e-lit. To pursue this perspective, I will focus on some of the mentioned compact forms, namely on archives and collections with their inscribed paratexts. These are paratexts which embrace the whole system and help to frame and create the identity of e-lit and its relatives, even though they may be following other goals. I also hope to highlight some of the poetological affiliations that can be found in e-lit self-description.

IV. POETOLOGICAL SIGNALS WITHIN *CELL* AND *PO-EX.NET*

Since the historical avant-gardes, manifestos have been a pointed form of the paratextual self-description of art. In his manifesto for the *CELL* project, Joseph Tabbi explicitly reflects and confirms the institutionalizing function of this meta-database and the related discursive and curatorial practice.[8] He also presents catchwords which imply two different concepts of modern literature. The first catchword is 'OULIPO': It illustrates the argument, that taxonomies should be conceived like constraints which drive literary production and its terms of understanding. This relates to a program of advanced literature which appeared in the 1960's. The other catchword leads back to the beginnings of modern literature: Mentioning Goethe's concept of 'Weltliteratur,' Tabbi argues that *CELL* and the field of electronic literature will realize and enact the ideal of 'digital world literature.' In self-description, such paratextual catchwords function like markers or signals and economically evoke more complex contexts. Concerning 'Weltliteratur,' we recall that this concept, which Goethe first coined in 1827, aims at international and direct communication between literary agents connected by a type of universal 'Geist/mind,' and influenced by technological and scientific evolution. A similar kind of internationality has been characteristic of experimental language art since the 1950s.

Paratextual and poetological signals can also be found within *po-ex.net*, the impressive digital archive of Portuguese experimental literature (*Arquivo Digital da Literatura Experimental Portuguesa*) which Rui Torres and his colleagues have been providing and developing since 2005, and which is also a part of *CELL*. This archive serves the exploration and distribution of *PO.EX*, i.e. all experimental literature and poetry from Portugal since the early 1960s. Thus, it not only concentrates on born-digital forms, but also includes them in a larger complex of experimental language art.

Alongside creative works, *po-ex.net* has collected a huge metatextual corpus documenting self-description. At the same time, new self-descriptions are created by and in the archive. For instance, right at the top of the po-ex.net start page, we are welcomed by poetological signals and a very compact genealogy.[9]

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8 Joseph Tabbi, "Manifesto," http://cellproject.net/manifesto: "A wider recognition that scholarship and creative writing advance as much, or more, through articles and actively evaluative curatorial practices (than through capture alone) is a primary institutional goal for the CELL project."

9 https://po-ex.net/about-po-ex-net/: "Poesia Experimental [Experimental Poetry] is the title of a magazine organized by António Aragão & Herberto Helder (Number 1, 1964) and António Aragão, E.

This genealogy takes us from the journal *Poesia Experimental* in the early 1960s via the *PO.EX* project from 1980 to the current digital archive. The terms 'poesia' and 'experimental' are dominantly present; they have been used for the project names and are, especially in combination, already referring to certain poetological patterns of thought. The same is true for the lists of categorization, such as the following one under the rubric 'Géneros,' [Genres] which lists form and genre terms in alphabetic order, with short definitions: Antecedents, Experimental Fiction, Performance, Concrete Poetry, Digital Poetry, Spatial Poetry, Sound Poetry, Visual Poetry, Videopoetry, PO.EX.[10]

M. de Melo e Castro & Herberto Helder (Number 2, 1966). PO.EX is an acronym of POesia.EXperimental [EXperimental.POetry] created by E. M. de Melo e Castro for the exhibit PO.EX/80 (National Gallery of Modern Art, Lisbon) and used in the title of the book 'PO.EX: Theoretical Texts and Documents of the Portuguese Experimental Poetry' (org. E. M. de Melo e Castro & Ana Hatherly, 1981). *Po-ex.net* is the web domain created for the study and dissemination of PO.EX (2005)."
10 https://po-ex.net/structure/genres/

Genres

Antecedents

Remote idealizations and achievements; pioneers; aesthetic and material antecedents of experimental poetry. Included in this category are the visual texts of the 17th and 18th centuries – Labyrinths, Acrostics, Anagrams; but also some texts of Futurism and Dadaism that tended towards visuality.

Experimental Fiction

Form of narrative, prose, or fictional structure based in a non-linear organization of the signifiers, promoting the fragmentation of traditional narrative diegesis, as well as the use of unexpected relationships between writing, sound, and image – as well as its relationship at the level of meaning.

Performance Poetry

Form of poetry based on multidisciplinary live action, thereby extending the poetic field to the expressiveness of the body and to the social and spatial context of the performed action. (Also known as: Perfopoetry; Poetry-performance;

News   The Project   Authors   Genres   Taxonomy   Exhibits   English ⌄

Concrete Poetry

Form of poetry based on the spatial organization and constellation of signifiers, leading to the abandonment of lines and stanzas as major rhythmic-formal units which are replaced by homologies and iconic relations between writing, sound, image and meaning.

Digital Poetry

Form of poetry that uses the computer as a creative machine, thereby promoting a symbiosis between artist and machine based on the exploration of combinatorial, random, multimodal and interactive algorithms. (Also known as: Cybernetic poetry; Electronic poetry; Cyberliterature).

Spatial Poetry

Form of poetry based on intersemiotic processes in which various sign systems (visual, audible, verbal, kinetic, performative) and materialities (three dimensional, objectual, media) are invoked and used in an expressive way.

Sound Poetry

Form of poetry based on the expressiveness of the phonetic aspects of language, as well as the vocal processes involved in sound emission, thereby extending the concept of poem to that of musical composition, usually associated with performative manifestations and live actions, but also produced either by audio recordings or by the visual representation of the score. (Also known as: Phonetic poetry).

Visual Poetry

Form of poetry based on the dissolution of the boundaries between visual and literary genres, in which the poem becomes a hybrid and intermedia entity, thereby overcoming the exclusive use of verbal and typographic elements, which are placed in dynamic interaction with visual elements.

Videopoetry

Form of poetry based on the grammatical and communicative possibilities of the language of video, where the sign is iconized in a spatio-temporal action, articulating expressive elements such as the autonomous movement of shapes and colors, the integration of sound, and the interrelation space/time.

PO.EX

EXperimental POetry – Term proposed by E. M. de Melo e Castro to contextualize the activities of Portuguese authors connected to visual, sound and concrete poetry from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Figure 2. Screenshot detail from the Genres list at *po-ex.net.*

Such lists occur frequently, for example in texts such as "What is E-Lit?" at *eliterature.org* or "What is E-Poetry?" at *iloveepoetry.com*, the "encyclopedic resource on e-poetry." Similar lists can be found in the prefaces to the catalog of the *p0es1s exhibition* (2000), Eduardo Kac's anthology *New Media Poetry* (1996) and Richard Bailey's anthology *Computer Poems* (1973).

It is logical and remarkable that the *po-ex.net* list presents the category nearest to 'electronic literature,' namely 'poesia digital' — or 'poesia cibernética; poesia electrónica; ciberliteratura' — as part of a net of forms. Other lists concentrate on an electronic genre which is, however, differentiated in itself in an analogous way.

This structure strongly recalls earlier lists such as the categorization in the manifesto *Position I du Movement International* from 1963, which was published by Pierre Garnier (1964) in his journal *Les Lettres.*[11]

— poésie concrète : travaillant le langage-matière, créant avec lui des structures, transméttant une information d'abord esthétique;

— poésie phonétique : fondée sur les phonèmes, corps sonores du langage et d'une façon générale sur tous les sons émis par les organes vocaux de l'homme, travaillés au magnétophone et tendant à la création d'un espace sonore;
— poésie objective : arrangement pictural, graphique, sculptural, musical, grâce à l'active collaboration de peintres, de sculpteurs, de musiciens, de typographes;
— poésie visuelle : le mot ou ses éléments pris en tant qu'objets et centres d'énergie visuelle;
— poésie phonique : poème composé directement sur bande magnétique, le mot et les phrases étant pris comme objets et centres d'énergie auditive;
— poésies cybernétiques, sérielles, permutationnelles, verbophonie, etc.

Figure 3. *Position I du Movement International*, list of categorization.

This manifesto was signed by 25 artists from 16 countries, including Ernesto de Melo e Castro from Portugal who later created the label *PO.EX* for the experimental literature of Portugal.[12] The manifesto from 1963 not only presents — as do the other lists — what Joseph Tabbi calls constraints with Oulipotian character. Anticipating by half a century Tabbi's manifesto for CELL, the 1963 manifesto also implicitly presents a manifestation of Goethe's concept of 'world literature' in the self-description of a 'new' experimental language art.

The above observations are selective. However, they provoke the following argument: The self-description in the system of electronic literature is coined to a great extent by conceptual and discursive patterns which were already formed around 1960 and which had a strong influence and have been developed since then. Or in other words: What we call 'electronic literature' is developing to a great extent as a specific realization of the program of experimental language art. I have also encountered this in my curatorial practice. We are dealing with a compact affiliation which integrates a variety of further affiliations, as the lists of forms clearly demonstrate.[13]

V. PREFACES TO COLLECTIONS (OF WORKS RESCUED FROM 'ARCHIVES')

Poetological programs in the system of art consist of certain concepts, principles, values, working attitudes, aesthetic questions and goals, which orient and control artistic events and manifestations. Such programs develop specific systemic values — eigenvalues, so to speak — which function both as a result of and a condition for artistic processes and which call for a characteristic signifier, mostly genre names, and also names for movements or systems. In the main, programs develop by acts of self-description within the system of art.

A basic concept in the experimental program is the reflexive artistic use of language and its conditions in media technology and culture. As far as the "stand-alone or networked computer" is concerned, this concept is omnipresent in e-lit self-descriptions and can be illustrated by looking at the paratexts (and most noticeably, the prefaces) of some collections.

Archives, databases, collections or anthologies all focus on something which transcends the single work, namely a genre, field or theme. But in contrast to *archives* which aim to access a corpus more or less completely, *collections* make aesthetic, often academically confirmed decisions. Traditionally, they focus on representing the best or the most characteristic examples of a field; they create identity within a multitude, and in this sense they offer a counter-narrative to the mere enfolding of our literary corpus within streams of data. This purpose

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12 Melo e Castro provided a list of definitions that also inspired the above mentioned list at *po-ex.net*, as "types of experimental poetry", published in 1965, and translated in: Melo e Castro (2014: 74).
13 A selection of essays from two decades of curatorial and research practice was published in German: Friedrich W. Block (2015).

is respectively followed by prefaces and paratexts similarly applied by the editors to orientate their audience. Thus, programmatic arguments such as the artistic reflection of language in computational environments carry weight.

This concept is prominently located in the preface or 'About' of the 3rd. volume of the *Electronic Literature Collection*. The keyword 'experimental' can again be noted:

> (...) explore the affordances and constraints of computational processes, multimodal interfaces, network access, global positioning, or augmented reality [...] the form and content of literature are continually expanding through those experimental practices of digital-born writing and electronic literature.[14]

We can trace this concept back to the 1960s, linked to different poetological aspects, in prefaces of anthologies and catalogs. And we might close this section with a synopsis of some more examples.

In the catalog preface for the second international p0es1s exhibition in year 2000, the concept is related to "the tradition of experimental and intermedial poetry of the 20th century," (Block, 2000) while in 1996 it is also largely connected to the value of 'innovation' in the title and preface of Eduardo Kac's anthology *New Media Poetry: Innovation and New Technology*.[15] Similarly, the French group LAIRE, which includes the term 'innovation' in its name, announces new possibilities of writing and reading in the first edition of its journal *alire* in 1989.[16] In 1984, the same is told in the preface of the discourse anthology edited by the French group ALAMO, where some members link with their names directly to OULIPO.[17] In 1973, Richard Bailey highlights aleatoric aspects according to his time and assigns some of the collected works to concrete poetry, sound poetry or imagistic poetry.[18] Last but not least, Jasia Reichardt who, on Max Bense's recommendation, in 1965 started curating the international exhibition *Cybernetic Serendipity — the computer and the arts* with a section of computer poems and texts, emphasizes in her catalog from 1968 new possibilities for the computer in new fields "such as visual music notation and the parameters of concrete poetry." The aim is creative activity, "which manifests artist's involvement with science, and the scientist's involvement with the arts."[19]

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14 http://collection.eliterature.org/3/about.html: "e-lit does not operate as a fixed ontological category, but marks a historical moment in which diverse communities of practitioners are exploring experimental modes of poetic and creative practice at a particular moment in time."

15 This is the first anthology to document a radically new poetry, one that is impossible to present directly in books and that challenges even the innovations of recent and contemporary experimental poetics. (...) This new media poetry inserts itself in the field of experimental poetics (...)." (Kac, 1996: 98)

16 "Quelque chose s'entreprend dans *alire* entre écriture et machine (...) Quelque chose, qui exige un investissement d'un autre ordre. D'une mise à lire. D'une prise à écrire nouvelle." (LAIRE, 1989).

17 "L'A.L.A.M.O (Atelier de Littérature par la Mathématique et les Ordinateurs) est un groupe constitué d'écrivains et d'informaticiens (...) rassemblés autour du projet d'utiliser, de toutes les facons possibles, et sans aucune exclusive préalable, l'ordinateur au service de la littérature." (A.L.A.M.O., 1984: 3).

18 "The poet-programmer finds this [the computer's randomized] power a tool to create a new set of dice." (Bailey, 1973).

19 "The aim is to present an area of activity which manifests the artist's involvement with science, and the scientist's involvement with the arts." (...) "New media, such as plastics, or new systems such as visual music notation and the parameters of concrete poetry, inevitably alter the shape of art, the characteristics of music, and the content of poetry. New possibilities extend the range of

VI. THE CONCEPT 'EXPERIMENTAL'

Alongside early poetic experiments on mainframes at that time, we also find self-descriptions of language art, which include a clear focus on cybernetic and computational methods. This could be seen in the manifesto *Position I du Movement International.* In the same year, 1963, the OULIPO manifesto *Le Lipo* by François Le Lionnais demanded work with programming languages to be Oulipotian methods. In 1964, Max Bense and Reinhard Döhl wrote in their manifesto *Zur Lage* that "experimental poetry" as "poietike techné" tended towards "artificial poetry," especially as "stochastic" and "cybernetic" poetry.[20] These keywords, which can also be found in Jasia Reichardt's catalog, stand for concepts which Bense had developed in his text theory. By the end of the 1950s, in this poetological context, Bense also inspired his student Theo Lutz to create a program for "Stochastic Texts" on the Z22 mainframe at the Technical University of Stuttgart.[21] The notion 'experimental,' which we encountered in po-ex.net and in the e-lit Collection III or the founding story of the ELO, became a programmatic concept around the same time. This is also evidenced in the first issue of the previously mentioned Portuguese magazine *Poesia Experimental* in 1964.

The idea that creative or poetic practice should be realized with principles of (quasi) scientific experiments has been apparent ever since the writing of Novalis in the early 19th century. However, the epochal turn around 1960 meant that the concept was then concretely formed to function as a poetic program. In my observation, this program is still under development and modulation, not least by or as electronic literature. Synoptically, the program can be outlined as follows:

'Experimental' means that we can rely on the openness of artistic functions and a variety of expectations; that a definite canon of themes, methods and forms is not accepted; that possibilities of creation should be developed and realized by experimentation without fixed results. We can count on epistemological interests, which may flirt with science but would act with other suppositions and in quite different ways. The main issue is the reflection of language itself, its inner world, materiality, textuality, the medial conditions, its cognitive and communicative pragmatics, the constitution of meaning and understanding, etc. The constantly changing circumstances motivated by new technologies are of crucial interest (not least because of the tendency toward obsolescence and forgetfulness that inhere in the upgrade path). The act of literary reflexivity, that is meant in part to counter a mindless march of "the new," has also been marked by the concept 'concrete,' which historically stands for the paradigmatic change to the primacy of linguistic and medial self-reference.

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expression of those creative people whom we identity as painters, film makers, composers, and poets. (...) This has happened with the advent of computers." (Reichardt, 1968: 5).
20 http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/zur_lage.htm
21 See Theo Lutz's paratext from 1959 about his project: http://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/lutz_schule_en.htm

In the era of technological obsolescence, artists who describe their own work as 'new' are not necessarily embracing an aggressive progression or the logic of economical exchange. This is said with some caution regarding Eduardo Kac and some others whose self-description as 'new' or 'avant' is arguably a response to the struggle for attention. In related contexts, however, 'innovative' or 'new' have been connoted in a different way, notably by the *Bielefelder Colloquium Neue Poesie.* This international consortium of language artists met annually for 25 years from 1978. Here, 'new' is understood as experimental openness and flexibility, as exploration of what is not, or is no longer conscious, change from works to processes, extension of potential spaces for perception, thought, action, the productive sensitivity for cultural, social, political, or artistic developments.

We are dealing with basic orientations and values which are mutually dependent and inscribe themselves into a poetological program such as electronic literature.

VII. 'ELECTRONIC LITERATURE' AND 'POETRY' AS PARATEXTUAL SIGNALS

But how explicitly, one might ask, is this inscription being realized? Aside from discursive arguments, we find short conceptual signals at prominent places within the frame of e-lit. So let us return to these highly economical paratextual forms. Here, my focus is on the genre or system name 'electronic literature,' especially concerning its material form, and on the use of the notion 'poetry'.

In the taxonomies of the e-lit collections we find 'poetry' defined as one of 36 to 56 "keywords." Equally in both the first two volumes of the *Electronic Literature Collection:*

> Writing native to the electronic environment is under continual construction (poiesis) by its creators and receivers. Works of electronic literature are 'poietic' in this sense, and are often constructed by strategies analogous to those found in experimental print poetry, or cinema, as well as by strategies native to the digital environment.[22]

This is such a fundamental, general and, in my view, appropriate conception of 'poetry' that one wonders why just a slim fourth of the collected works in the 1st and 2nd volumes is related to the keyword 'poetry.'

Definition and situation have changed with the keywords of the 3rd volume:

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22 *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 1,* "Contents by Keyword," http://collection.eliterature.org/1/aux/keywords.html; *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 2,* "Contents by Keyword," http://collection.eliterature.org/2/extra/keywords.html.

> Electronic poetry, or e-poetry, explores the poetics of language through forms that incorporate motion, algorithmic generation, computation, sound, video, interaction, and other new media affordances.[23]

The later definition has a much more medial specificity and also a historical connotation. Here, nearly half of the works are related to 'poetry.' With its syntactical form, 'electronic poetry' is also nearer to 'electronic literature' — as well as to all the names which connect 'literature' or 'poetry' with an attribute.

This syntactical form of the name 'electronic literature' implies the general formula '(x) poetry' or '(x) literature,' and the program of experimental language art is paratextually signalized by this formula. We have already seen compact lists using this form, where 'x' specifies a vague meaning of 'poetry' and 'literature,' and this specification tends towards concepts of 'experimental' and reflexivity. 'Electronic' corresponds to reflexivity of media technology, such as typewriter-, radio-, TV-, video-, intermedia-, holo-, computer- etc. poetry or literature.

Against this programmatic background, users of the term 'poetry' might balk at its status as a subcategory of e-lit in the Collections and elsewhere. The notion either functions non-hierarchically, as at po-ex.net, or it vertically irritates the set conditions.

Compared to 'literature,' the notion of 'poetry' radicalizes the concept of language art. While connecting reflexivity with potentiality, poetry implies all kinds and phenomena of language art. These poetic configurations may become systemically fixed — a fixation, which is signalized by terms such as 'literature' or 'electronic literature,' especially if tied to institutionalization.[24]

VIII. CONCLUSION

How can we assess the relation between elephant and mahout in what is called 'electronic literature'? Institutionalization such as organization, archives, databases, representative collections, congresses, research and teaching programs, accompanied by a huge corpus of meta-texts and the hope for world-literary rank tends more to systemic stability and fixity. Thus we may ask, with Genette (1997: 410), whether this accessory might "turn itself into an impediment, from then on playing its own game to the detriment of its text's game," or the game of artistic processes, respectively. From the standpoint of the artistic process or project, this fixity can easily become flexible again, because these processes unfold a reality of their own, working crossways even if being influenced by self-description and institutionalization. What about — just one example — Michael Mandiberg's project *Print Wikipedia* as a work of electronic literature? The same is valid for individual artists with a comprehensive spectrum of work, a type of

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23 *Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 3,* "Works by Keyword," http://collection.elitera-ture.org/3/keyword.html.
24 For a more detailed reflection see: Friedrich W. Block (2010).

artist who may temporarily and partially adapt herself to institutional structures to get advantages of attention, but remains relatively independent from these structures. I am thinking of artists such as Giselle Beiguelman, Simon Biggs, Rozalie Hirs, Eduardo Kac, Jörg Piringer, Camille Utterback — just to drop some names, but there are numerous examples in the field of e-lit.

Flexibility is also achieved if the reflexivity of the artistic use of language and media generally irritates the status of language actions, including para- or meta-textual actions.

As has been shown, electronic literature carries many contemporary and historical affiliations, including an open variety of experimental language art. These affiliations ensure change and adaptability. Looking at poetry in the above mentioned radical sense, electronic literature continues to form itself anew on the grounds of openness and potentiality, or in other words: electronic literature forms itself anew in the poietic medium of the non-formed.

As said before, self-description generates textual multi-framing and is able to stay flexible by recursion. Our discourse should not forget, as Genette warns, "that it bears on a discourse that bears on a discourse, and that the meaning of its object depends on the object of this meaning, which is yet another meaning. A threshold exists to be crossed." (1997: 410)

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