

## ***LEAD: New Media Poetics and Poetry with Manuel Portela***

*The "Leonardo Electronic Almanac Discussion" (LEAD) accompanies selected LEA Special Issues. LEAD has two components a live chat session with LEA authors and artists and a moderated discussion list for readers to engage with the special issue authors.*

The following is the unedited transcript from Monday's (23 October 2006) chat session with poet and critic Manuel Portela, part of the online discussion around the New Media Poetics special issue of the Leonardo Electronic Almanac (<http://leoalmanac.org/>). <Sandy Baldwin>

<begin transcript>

[4:02 PM]<Sandy> Hello Manuel!

[4:02 PM]<mportela> Hi, Sandy. Hi, Chris. This Manuel here

[4:03 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> ola

[4:03 PM]<mportela> olá

[4:03 PM]<Sandy> OK, we'll get started in one minute.

[4:03 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> tudo bem?

[4:03 PM]<Sandy> no fala

[4:03 PM]<mportela> tudo bem, muito trabalho, acabei de chegar de Coimbra

[4:04 PM]<mportela> Have you read my article?

[4:04 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> ah, trabalho, trabahlo, trab...

[4:04 PM]<Sandy> Hm. What does "acabei de chegar" mean?

[4:04 PM]<Sandy> Yes, read the article.

[4:04 PM]<mportela> Just arrived from

[4:04 PM]<Sandy> Thanks!

[4:04 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> I have read it

[4:04 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> & much enjoyed

[4:05 PM]<Sandy> Well, not many here today, but you can never tell - may be the time, who knows.

[4:05 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> though we have not met, our research is similar

[4:05 PM]<Sandy> Chris: in what way? Can you elaborate - directed towards Manuel?

[4:06 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> Well, several ways. The contents of MP's essay and some of the lectures I gave in malaysia last spring, have common ground

[4:06 PM]<mportela> Yes, I've also read an interview Chris gave in Brazil to Jorge Luiz Antonio two years ago

[4:07 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> I have published articles on melo e castro, videopoetry; i'm giving a lecture on concrete poetry & dig poat Yale next week

[4:07 PM]<mportela> Great

[4:07 PM]<Sandy> I see that you're both working in relation to concrete poetries, much of it Brazilian.

[4:07 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> yes, I call the paper A. de Campos, digital poetry, & the anthropophagic imperative

[4:08 PM]<mportela> A. Campos is one of my favourite poets

[4:08 PM]<Sandy> I was particularly interested in your article Manuel, where you pointed towards ways the digital poem fails in relation to the printed poem - becoming "didactic and, sometimes, they provide a poorer viewing/reading experience than the paper original." Can you talk about this some?

[4:08 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> it has been great going back through despoesia, viva vaia and nao

[4:08 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> not to mention the nao poemas cd-rom

[4:09 PM]<mportela> One of the issues I want to raise has to do with the question of code in digital poetry. Concrete poetry can be seen as a kind of metalanguage and the concrete poem is often written as a code for reading its visual surface. What do you think?

[4:10 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> this was an idea explored "back in the day" by pignatari, et al. Pinto did literally use codes, right?

[4:10 PM]<Sandy> By code you mean instructions, code as procedure to follow, on how to read?

[4:11 PM]<mportela> Yes, a representation of reading

[4:11 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> & now there are two levels of code. how does this complicate things?

[4:11 PM]<Sandy> Aren't there complex problems with iconicity here, since the code "in" the poem needs to represent the poem as a whole, i.e. the reading and the object...?

[4:12 PM]<Sandy> Chris: can you explain "two levels"?

[4:13 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> what i mean is that there is a code to crack (surface, level 1) and 2) the literal code (which in itself can contain poetry - in addition to making what happens on the screen

[4:13 PM]<mportela> I think that Campos in some of his digital poems is trying to address the specific phenomenology of reading in virtual spaces

[4:14 PM]<Sandy> e.g. Sem Saída?

[4:15 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> yes, for sure. the morphograms certainly reify michael joyce's mantra that electronic texts replace themselves

[4:15 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> sem saida does this For Sure

[4:15 PM]<Sandy> Sem Saída = in English?

[4:15 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> without end

[4:15 PM]<mportela> No exit. Yes, that is the ultimate example.

[4:16 PM]<Sandy> OK. So, I'

[4:16 PM]<mportela> Campos is representing the cyberlabyrinth of electronic language

[4:16 PM]<Sandy> oops, I'm curious to hear more about how the digital works in that poem

[4:17 PM]<mportela> It is structured around the mouse click

[4:17 PM]<Sandy> ok. What are some of the associations of the labyrinth here? Is it physical? Hermeneutic? Mythic? All of these?

[4:17 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> i view this piece as a highly anthropophagic work - in which the text continually eats itself

[4:17 PM]<mportela> It's all of those

[4:18 PM]<Sandy> - the mouse click. So, if the piece were "running on its own" the point would be lost...

[4:18 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> in Aarseth's terms it would be unicursal

[4:18 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> the piece would be like some of the pieces on the Alire cd-rom, animated narratives

[4:19 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> (if not interactive as it is)

[4:19 PM]<Sandy> Mouse clicking is temporal - punctual at least. How does reading time factor in here?

[4:19 PM]<mportela> What see there is a reflection on the relation between the semiotic (unfinished, dynamic

text) and the hermeneutic (interacting, reading, decyphering)

[4:19 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> well, first the user has to figure out how to make it work, that takes time...

[4:19 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> & will probably have to read more than once, more time

[4:20 PM]<mportela> Reading time is the central perceptual aspect

[4:20 PM]<Sandy> I see. So, there is reflection (on the part of the reader) and a picture of reflection (the work itself).

[4:20 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> then, at the end, when all the lines presented at once, more time consuming choices to be made

[4:21 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> i'd say could be (but not always) more work than "cracking the code" of a concrete poem (which could also be more complex and difficult as any dig poems

[4:23 PM]<mportela> Let me just try and describe the other work (a 3-D film) by Tiago Gomez Rodrigues (of which my article only includes two shots): this is very interesting also as a remediation of concreteness.

Cinematic perspective and synthetic music have been blended with selfsimilar ideograms

[4:24 PM]<Sandy> ok

[4:24 PM]<mportela> "Concretus" (that's its title) is indeed a digital concrete work

[4:25 PM]<mportela> Tiago has turned the simulated camera into a reader of the 3-D assemblages of letters

[4:26 PM]<mportela> It as if you travelled within literal space

[4:27 PM]<Sandy> I see connections to the Cave work John Cayley describes.

[4:27 PM]<mportela> Every sense of space, as suggested in John Cayley's piece, is a function of letter forms

[4:28 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> You must also be aware of Pablo Gyori's Virtual Poems?

[4:28 PM]<mportela> Actually, no. I don't think I've seen them.

[4:29 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> they exist mainly in demos. his idea is to use vrmf software to make these 3-d poetry galazies. He has a couple of essays about the work (with illustrations) on the web

[4:30 PM]<Sandy> So, there's a notion that each camera view in "Concretus" is a phenomenology of literal space, but also the notion that in the whole piece one gets a hypermediation of these discrete spaces?

[4:30 PM]<Sandy> Manuel, I'm curious to hear about digital poetry in Portugal - how it's seen in the university, about other poets working there, and so on.

[4:30 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> i think one of the demos is up on my server. if not i could upload one. there is an essay he wrote in the edition of visible language that kac edited in 97

[4:30 PM]<mportela> Yes, because this work is explicitly reworking 1960s ideograms

[4:31 PM]<mportela> I have to look that up

[4:31 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> & what of this camera motif?

[4:32 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> watching the poem thru a camera

[4:33 PM]<mportela> Sandy, there are not many people doing digital poetry around here. It's still only a handful. And not very many university programmes. I created one of the very first "Literature and Media in the Digital Age"

[4:33 PM]<Sandy> - well, wouldn't that sense - that experience - would be part of the hypermediation, i.e. the poem at a mediated/digitized distance (through a camera)?

[4:33 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> Pedro Barbosa is one of the pioneers - is he still in Porto?

[4:34 PM]<mportela> Yes, Pedro is still in Porto.

[4:34 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> MElo e Castro is there?

[4:34 PM]<Sandy> How do you frame it for the students? For example, is the link through concrete poetry immediate for students and for the academy there?

[4:35 PM]<Sandy> A different question: I notice, also, that you translated a number of American poets

including many l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e writers. Would you see the kind of inter-semiotics at work in concrete poetry also at work there?

[4:36 PM]<mportela> Chris, yes Melo e Castro is still there. He had a retrospective exhibition of his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Porto this year. And, Sandy, the connection between concrete and digital is pretty clear I think for everyone

[4:36 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> the lang poets are not nearly as graphical/visually based though

[4:37 PM]<mportela> I would say so. But you would have to think of them as more "interdiscursive" than intersemiotics

[4:37 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> (mp: i had an essay in the Serralves catalog)

[4:37 PM]<mportela> Oops, I have that catalogue at home

[4:38 PM]<Sandy> That makes sense to me. I think for us here, even in the more experimental university setting - and Chris can contradict me - there's an awareness of concrete poetry but it's not as immediately pertinent as, say, Bernstein or others.

[4:39 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> i'd say both are pretty much on the fringe, except for advanced students, where lang po having a much higher profile

[4:39 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> this may change as time passes, however

[4:39 PM]<Sandy> You make the strong claim, at the beginning of your essay, for an intrinsic connection between digital poetry and concrete poetry

[4:40 PM]<Sandy> I wonder, for example, whether the interdiscursive would apply as well?

[4:40 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> i'll bet that c.p. is a more impressionable form in the long run

[4:40 PM]<Sandy> explain impressionable?

[4:41 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> the visual aspects of it will be, in the future, more interesting than complex reading (or something like that)

[4:41 PM]<mportela> The critique of language and discourse that you find in Bernstein can be seen also as a possible poetics of hypertext. So there is a connection. The specificity of concrete poetry for the digital space has to do with the way it engages with issues of space and reading. But they're similarly metalinguistic in their own ways.

[4:42 PM]<Sandy> I see. So a distinction would be between the visual and the textual in digital poetry.

[4:42 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> Manuel, have you seen some of the early studies of computer poetry, like Carole McCauley's *\_Computers & Creativity\_* or Richard Bailey's *\_Computer Poems\_* (1970s)?

[4:43 PM]<mportela> Actually, I may have come across references to those works but never read them

[4:43 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> ever since the very beginning, critics have focused on c.p. as a direct influence on dig po

[4:44 PM]<mportela> I agree with that

[4:44 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> i see your exciting piece as the latest in a long chain of such essays (more recently by Simanowski & Block)

[4:44 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> I loved that you made the essay multimedia. I want to see more pieces done like that.

[4:44 PM]<mportela> Thank you for your words

[4:45 PM]<Sandy> Manuel, what are your thoughts on the politics of emphasizing the visual? What of an argument that a concern with hypertext - for example - is more closely directed towards the underlying codes and protocols...?

[4:45 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> the way i see it, it is the aesthetics of c.p. that is influential. i find the politics of the cp. to be much different than in any found in dig poems

[4:47 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> a lot of dig poems have the "tension of time-space" of the c. poem, but certainly

not all dig poems

[4:47 PM]<Sandy> well, i wonder - for either of you - whether the answer might be in terms of the body, since the concrete poem seems directed towards specific and everyday perceptions, and in this way reference the absent body ... ?

[4:47 PM]<mportela> I agree with Glazier when he talks about the distinction between writing on the surface and writing the code. Perhaps emphasis on the visual is too dependent on the interface design rather than on the structural features of programmable language

[4:50 PM]<Sandy> Manuel, given the intrinsic connection between concrete poetry and digital poetry, what directions do you see for digital poetry? i.e. if we take the concrete as a guiding aesthetics, what next?

[4:51 PM]<mportela> One of the contradictions of the visual is, I think, the way it sometimes turns the reader into a spectator. It is difficult to see what next. Maybe virtual immersive spaces where letters and images blend

[4:52 PM]<mportela> A combination of the abstractness of language and written signs with the artificial concreteness of digital images

[4:52 PM]<Sandy> so, perhaps in terms of spectatorship and the politic, digital works with greater breakdowns / merging of interface and interaction

[4:53 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> leaves a bit more room for subversion

[4:53 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> (perhaps)

[4:53 PM]<mportela> I don't know what the politics of reading will be in these forms

[4:54 PM]<Sandy> Rodrigues' "concretus" might point in this direction, towards increased hypermediation of views, construction of perceptions.

[4:54 PM]<Sandy> perhaps construction of politics as well.

[4:54 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> no doubt, Sandy

[4:55 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> the concrete poets in brazil, as had the russians before them, had to have some guise in the face of dictatorship around them

[4:55 PM]<Sandy> Perhaps all the more reason for concrete poetry in the US today.

[4:55 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> you couldn't even get a pc in brazil until the 90s

[4:56 PM]<mportela> hypermediation is also contradictory: gives you a sense of the medium, but, at the same time, tends to obliterate the real. to exhaust it in representation

[4:57 PM]<Sandy> Yes, I'm ambivalent about that vocabulary of remediation: in neither case a sense of the real, even immediacy. But: exhausting the real in representation, for me this again points to the bodily and the everyday. The lived through. Perhaps hypermediation as the more complexly lived through.

[4:57 PM]<mportela> and there's also the issue of the politics of writing in these media, as John Cayley mentions. The infrastructure and the institutional context where some of our work takes place

[4:58 PM]<mportela> Yes, I agree with Sandy.

[4:58 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> stefans calls the relationship between computer poems and institution/corporation "parasitic"

[4:58 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> without one, no other

[4:59 PM]<Sandy> Agreed, yes. Makes me wonder again about the Portuguese context. Is there a digital infrastructure (corporations etc.) and not a corresponding artistic/aesthetic sphere?

[4:59 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> i'm sorry to say that i must go now - my time's up - glad to meet you MP - & hope to in realidide sometime

[5:00 PM]<mportela> Digital art is still relatively marginal here

[5:00 PM]<Sandy> OK. Perhaps that's a good time to end.

[5:00 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> paz e felicidade....

[5:00 PM]<Sandy> Manuel: are there any other things you want to discuss?

[5:00 PM]<chrisfunkhouser> best to you both, bye, cf

[5:00 PM] chrisfunkhouser has left the room.

[5:01 PM]<Sandy> I'm sorry more people didn't attend. It's always variable.

[5:01 PM]<mportela> It's been lively. Thank you Sandy and Chris. Best. Bye

[5:01 PM]<Sandy> OK. I'll post the transcript. Thanks Manuel and best. Bye.

[5:01 PM]<mportela> Bye

<end transcript>

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## Leonardo Electronic Almanac (ISSN: 1071 4391)

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