Heimo Ranzenbacher

Alforabit

Incidental Notes on the Thematic Exhibition "Print on Screen"

The line of tradition along which a decoupling of supposedly unambiguous interconnections of meaning and signs within language has been carried out is a long one. In literature, which propagates plots and narratives in accordance with diverse narrative techniques, the method of travesty—in which mythical patterns resonate through entire levels of plot and narrative, and which influence the canon of meaning of the story being told—may well mark the beginning. Plays on words—from the merely corny pun, to the experiments of the Russian Futurists à la Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Dadaists such as Kurt Schwitters, and all the way to the coinages by means of which James Joyce raised his art to the very summit of the literary Olympus—provide additional associations.

Later, linguistic symbols and characters began to semantically oscillate in the works of concrete poetry that corresponded to the visual poetry of the graphic and plastic arts. What all these undertakings had in common was the reference to the primarily physical exterior characteristics of pictography, ideography and alphabetic script.

From this decoupling that, in this brief sketch, gives the impression of having been a sequence running through artistic Modernism like a rebellious and highly strenuous series of actions playing themselves out over the course of almost a century, the possibilities of the computer unexpectedly engineered the transition of this process into a phase which seemingly no longer required art and literature. The representation of text and written characters on the monitor converted the formerly physical characteristics of their appearance into a transitory manifestation whose processing and interpretation constitute a reference rather less to the pixel than to the bits by means of which their illumination is processed. In contrast to, for example, a script materially represented on paper with primarily semantic references independent of the medium bearing them (paper produces not a single word :-), the reference of a word that appears on the monitor is also the processor; this would even be capable of even making words, texts, and typefaces speak. It is also possible by means of the computer to decouple words from their function as a semantic interface. Many artists share the expectation of proceeding in this way to advance perhaps even more deeply into the universe of the language and the alphabet.

"The history of the West from the alphabet to the computer," Derrick de Kerckhove[1] remarked, "is summarized by a play on words by James Joyce: 'alforabit,' which could be interpreted as meaning 'everything is in the details.'" "Alforabit" could also be the subtitle of the thematic exhibition *Print on Screen*. The installations being presented in conjunction with the Festival 2000 (which are described in more detail further below) have to do with typography, typefaces and text as a medium of interaction.

The project will continue to run after the end of the Festival and, beginning in the Fall, will be accompanied by a series of events treating various theoretical aspects of the material presented.

1 Derrick de Kerckhove: *Schriftgeburten. Vom Alphabet zum Computer*, Munich 1995