UC Santa Barbara
UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

Txtual Practice

Permalink

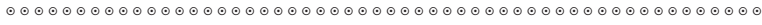https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1t98x642

Author

Raley, Rita

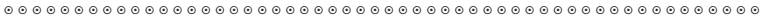**Publication Date**

2013

Peer reviewed

COMPARATIVE TEXTUAL MEDIA

TRANSFORMING THE HUMANITIES IN THE POSTPRINT ERA

N. KATHERINE HAYLES AND JESSICA PRESSMAN, EDITORS

Electronic Mediations, Volume 42

1
# TXTual Practice

Rita Raley

We demand that art turns into a life-changing force. We seek to
abolish the separation between poetry and mass communication,
to reclaim the power of media from the merchants and
return it to the poets and the sages. . . . We will sing to the
infinity of the present and abandon the illusion of a future.
—Franco Berardi, *The Post-futurist Manifesto*

Does art have a point? Is this art? Does it have a point?
—anonymous contribution to *Urban_diary*

ARE TEXT MESSAGES displayed on large video screens or mobile
variable message signs, or projected on building facades or on
open ground in public squares, meaningful or not meaningful? And
what is the structural form or logic of these scenes of reading and
writing that would command critical attention? Would a lauda-
tory or skeptical tone predominate in an analysis of interactive
text installations, the expressive heights of which at times run the
gamut from "u r gorgeous" to "This wall is way more popular than
me"? Were one to approach these works by focusing on linguistic
content alone, regarding, or attempting to regard, each line or set
of lines as literary utterance with the interpretative method that
implies, most likely it should be the skeptical, but to consider only
the substance of any particular text message would be to occlude all
of the moving parts of each installation: hardware, software, screen
or projection surface, audience, physical environment, telecom-
munications infrastructure, and all of the social and technological
protocols that govern the production and reception of the projected
messages. The urge to read, to do more than acknowledge or see
the words, is not so easily disregarded, but the transitory aspect
of the messages means that the subjectivity constituted in relation
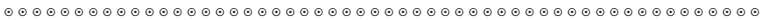
to the text cannot be understood to be literary as it has historically been understood. The exact temporal structure of each art project, each installation, differs, but what they necessarily share is the evental form. Unlike billboards, posters, signs, and even video art installations, they are live, continually refreshed; they are said to "run" for a set number of days or hours per day, and the messages on display are thus impermanent.[1] What one reads with a momentary peripheral glance is likely not to return and, though the moment of textual consumption might be captured and replayed through recorded documentation, that moment cannot be restaged or reenacted. Any installation might, of course, suffer all manner of glitches and errors that would cause the text to freeze, but in their fully operational state, the displays are dynamic, the trajectory is forward, and the already mined phrases are not available for further mining.

The public art installations I address in this chapter are *interactive* (remote and on-site participants are invited to contribute an SMS message of their own to the data feed); *sited* (they cannot but engage the specificities of each place and, by extension, prompt a consideration of what is "public" and what is "private"); and *social* (participants are continually negotiating their relationship to the audience, crowd, and readerly communities that are themselves continually mutating). For example, in Matt Locke and Jaap de Jonge's *Speakers' Corner* (2001–), participants contributed text to the live feed on a fifteen-meter LED display wrapped around the corner of the Media Centre building in Huddersfield, shouting by SMS, through a web interface, or by voice message from a phone booth. Its title invoking the ritual performance of public speech as civic participation, the eventual fate of *Speakers' Corner* was entirely fitting: the screen was hacked, the external booth was vandalized, and a library of expletives accrued after the contributions were filtered in response to municipal complaints.[2] What was at stake was less the physical parts of the work than a negotiation of control over property, technological systems, and public speech. A similar experiment with civic dialogue was performed by Johannes Gees with *Hello Mr. President,* a laser projection on a mountainside of text messages sent to its ostensibly singular addressee, then-president Bush, during the World Economic Forum

in Davos in 2001 (the signature message from this event: "I feel poor"). About the sociocultural function of this installation, along with that of his Hello World series, which was installed in four locations around the world during the United Nations summit in 2003, Gees notes, "We speak about public space and that it belongs to everybody, but the use of public space is actually set into regimentation. . . . You can buy the space for advertising, but that takes money. Or you can do graffiti, but that's illegal" (quoted in Bounegru 2009, 208–9). The extant discourse on text messaging for open display is remarkably thorough in its concern with urban environments, interventions in public space, and audience participation.[3] But the installations or events in question have not yet been considered, as I think they ought to be, as scenes of reading and writing that are particular to the moment of ubiquitous mobile media and that make visible certain transformations that are occurring in our relationship to text in the ordinary sense of linguistic signs. The premise of my analysis is that understanding what is happening in these new scenes of reading and writing, that is to say, the rhetoric of interactive text events, can help us more fully to understand the dynamics of ephemerality and vernacularity that are at the heart of the way we read and write now.

In a taxonomic account of what I am calling TXTual practice that takes as its core examples some of the more widely known and installed SMS installations—those that have both a critical and a geographic reach—I mean then to contribute to the conversation about comparative textual media by taking account of communicative technologies in use.[4] A concrete example related to my analysis of TXTual practice will illustrate this point. Erkki Huhtamo (2004) has for some time made a persuasive case for the development of what he calls "screenology," a historicized phenomenology of the screen that focuses not only on "screens as designed artifacts, but also on their uses, their intermedial relations with other cultural forms and on the discourses that have enveloped them in different times and places" (see Huhtamo 2004, 31–82).[5] The artifactual and genealogical work he does toward this end is richly narrated, extending well beyond what we might call a mechanistic or positivist formulation of the screen to account not only for shadow theater and modes of visual storytelling that

lack a traditional technological apparatus but also for the social rituals, discursive conventions, and bodily habits that they have engendered. The media archaeological approach to screens that he performs and for which he calls is neither narrowly technological nor strictly aesthetic; the "screen" as an object of inquiry is identifiable as such only in relation to other medial forms, and the task of the critic is to understand its social uses and its embeddedness in a particular historical moment and technological–geographic milieu.

Comparable work needs to be done for writing within digital environments. There is by now well-known and definitive scholarship on the formal features of digital writing and the embodied apprehension, especially sense perception, that is at the heart of the reading experience. Many critics have carefully delineated the signifying components—for example, structures of interaction, sound, kineticism, and temporal processes—that are particular to writing with networked and programmable media.[6] Compositional uses of locative and mobile media, writing "beyond the screen," are receiving more critical attention, but here, too, the emphasis tends to fall on the phenomenological, on affect and sensation (see Schäfer and Gendolla 2010).[7] This is all important work, but it relies on an articulation of born-digital works as works (e.g., a Flash poem) that have a dependable and documentable structure that produces an accountable experience, as opposed to born-digital textual practices, an important analytical distinction given that we now clearly confront a variety of expressive activities that are neither formalizable as "electronic literature" nor reducible to a singular medium. We confront, in other words, expanded textual practices that are not–electronic literature, not-print, not-codex, not–mobile messaging, not-game, not-conversation, not–algorithmic instructions, not–data mining, not–collaborative content creation, but that which is situated in the interstitial field.[8] This rhetorical abstraction of writing from material substrate (to which it, of course, remains concretely tethered) is productive because it allows us to think across media, platforms, and genres and to articulate a discourse on textual practices that are sited, social, and live.

I read texting for public display as a practice, following Nigel Thrift (2007, 8), for whom "practices [are to be] understood as

material bodies of work or styles that have gained enough stability over time, through, for example, the establishment of corporeal routines and specialized devices, to reproduce themselves." Practices unfold within a structure of bodily habit, a set of physical activities that, while modular, nonetheless cohere when ordered by a procedural script. This script is necessarily repeatable, and it is the repetition that allows a practice to emerge as a practice. *Practice*—from the French *practiser,* "to strive," and *pratiquei,* "fit for action," and the Greek *praktikos,* from *prassein,* "to experience, negotiate, perform"—is that which is experiential and enacted in the moment, but it follows in the wake of what has been, retracing routinized activities that have been performed in the past and necessarily directed toward the reenactment of these routinized activities in the future. The actors within these procedural scripts are not only humans but encompass the whole of the object world and specifically the material presence of "specialized devices" that are neither inert nor simply used. As Bruno Latour and others have made clear, the world is a complex mixture of discrete actors, human and nonhuman, with each actor mediating and thereby transforming the other. Devices then play a necessary role in the digital textual practices I am outlining, but the installation–event–performance spaces as a whole are concrete assemblages of bodies, mobile devices, screens, wires, signs, architectural structures, and barricades in the form of walls and fences governing the movement of traffic. In other words, these practices are not reducible to artifacts and technological apparatuses, nor are they explicable as aftereffect or consequence, as in the notion that the activities that unfold are simply the result of a script that has been programmed and put into play. Rather practices are themselves generative; again, they "reproduce themselves." They are not products but processes, always embedded within human and nonhuman networks of relation that are themselves constituted through performative acts.

For scholarly investigations within the framework of comparative textual media, TXTual practice can present certain challenges precisely because there is no durable object to recover and preserve for future study. Certainly the individual events can be documented with photography, video, and narrative description; the hardware and software preserved and/or emulated; and the

eyewitness accounts and explanatory statements by artists critically explored. Site analyses might be performed to record the dimensions and placement of screens or projection surfaces, lines of sight, and variables in the viewing conditions, particularly those concerning the quality of light and sound. (Indeed, my analysis is entirely dependent on all these archival techniques. It would not be possible for it to be otherwise.) The displayed messages are also incidentally archived, though archiving is a technological by-product rather than part of the structural logic of the work. But these practices are importantly live, enacted and decoded in the moment, and participants aspire to be part of that moment, to contribute to events as they unfold, rather than to be part of the permanent record. In this regard, these practices might in part be situated under the rubric of performance studies, much like the Electronic Disturbance Theater, which is known for its interventionist distributed denial-of-service attacks and announces its affiliation with performance in its very name. But arts practices that are participative and discursive, multimodal, multiplatform, and multisited, exceed even the performative, so a better analog might be Natalie Jeremijenko's (2004) OneTrees project, which delineates cloning procedures, gallery exhibition, site-specific planting and physical tours of the same, A-Life trees, virtual landscapes, and public response as component parts of what she terms both "information environment" and "bioinformatic instrument" but is really only intuitively legible under the rubric of "project" itself. A project, however, is singular, whereas a practice is reiterative. It functions within a certain material structure that is shareable and translatable to different contexts, and it is that structure that is available to critical scrutiny.

THERE ARE MULTIPLE GENEALOGIES for SMS artworks for public space, almost all of which discuss Chaos Computer Club's *Blinkenlights* (2001–2), an interactive work that invited participants to engage with and contribute content to a pixelated display screen formed out of a lighting system installed in the windows of the top eight floors of a building in Berlin's Alexanderplatz (see, e.g., Struppek 2006; Bounegru 2009).[9] Less discussed as precursors are two works that primarily used web interfaces for remote participation

but are nonetheless part of the history of the reconfiguration of relations between production and reception that are at the core of the broadcast and print model, an ontological and practical distinction fundamentally complicated by mobile and digital technologies and replaced by a model of participation. The first is *Clickscape* (1998), a work of "clickable public space" with projections on two buildings on either side of the Danube in Linz; in this instance, remote participants were invited to transmit messages for display, and on-site visitors were made aware of their (tele)presence.[10] Around the same time, Hans Muller, in collaboration with Zwarts/Jansma Architecten, installed *Internettunnel* in the Leidschenveen Tunnel, an electronic display to which people were invited to contribute messages via a web interface.[11] But the projects out of which my thinking on TXTual practice fully emerged involve participation on a much larger scale, either in terms of sheer numbers of messages, duration, or geographic reach: rude_architecture's *Urban_diary* (November 2001 to February 2002),[12] a screen-based installation on the platform of the Alexanderplatz underground station in Berlin that garnered approximately ten thousand entries throughout the course of its three-month exhibit; Paul Notzold's *TXTual Healing* (2006–10), a series of performances produced with a laptop and mobile projector in Brooklyn, Baltimore, San Francisco, Munich, Hamburg, Bucharest, Rotterdam, Beijing, and other cities; and *Cityspeak,* a project from Obx Labs at Concordia University that uses large LED screens and has been installed nearly twenty times in cities throughout North America since it was first used as a proto–chat wall during a mobile digital commons workshop at Upgrade! Montreal in May 2005 (Figure 1.1).[13]

A truly comprehensive catalog of real-time interactive text projection is well beyond the scope of this chapter, but an overview of these three projects will allow me to outline the distinctive aspects or rhetoric of TXTual practice, which encompasses a range of handhelds (phones and PDAs), along with web-to-SMS, and is not limited to a particular hardware architecture. Input devices and projection technologies may vary, and certainly, for many of these projects, multiple platforms are enabled to allow for audience contributions (e.g., kiosks or voice messaging systems).[14] While I recognize the importance of the recent proliferation of

FIGURE 1.1. *Cityspeak,* illustration. Courtesy of Jason Lewis, Obx Labs.

scholarship on the material specificities of hardware and software, an expansive and transmedial concept of public messaging allows me to articulate TXTual practice as such and identify the aspects that are relatively stable across a diverse range of events and installations. Such a critical move need not be subject to the charge of "screen essentialism" as Matthew Kirschenbaum outlines it in his refutation of a "medial ideology," which is our seduction by flickering signifiers and blindness to inscriptive acts (see Kirschenbaum 2008, esp. 31–45).[15] That one type of project should require only a portable projector and mobile phone, another should be programmed for a virtual environment from which it cannot be exported, and another should involve extensive preliminary work on site, along with the negotiation of civic and commercial strictures, does matter, but matter—the material, whether framed in terms of inscription, apparatus, platform, or technological object—cannot alone account for their significance. To think exclusively in terms of material specificities is to lose sight of the intermedial and social systems in which the object or thing

is embedded, the myriad ways in which they are used and experienced, and the micro-communities they engender. The emphasis Lisa Gitelman (2006, 7) places on the "vernacular experience" of what is now termed forensic materiality is to the point, as is her definition of media as "socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated [social, economic, material] protocols." The argument is not particular to comparative textual media; Charles Acland (2012, 168), for example, makes a similar case in his prescriptive sketch of the discipline of screen studies:

> Technical specifications—screen size, aspect ratio, resolution, frame and refresh rate, brightness, color scale—might help us define what we are talking about in a specific instance, or better yet complicate what we presume we know about media. But the mechanical level only gets us so far in our job of actually understanding the related senses, sensibilities, and practices that form as a consequence of media use. All those unruly features of human existence simply can't be neatly confined and appended to medium specificity.

Accounting for the absolute physical singularity of a medial object affords a certain readerly satisfaction—as with Homeric narration, there are no descriptive gaps, no questions left unanswered—but it is equally important to integrate that object into a discursive field, to situate it in relation, or nonrelation, to other medial objects, so as to pose questions about social habits and experiences held in common. Here, too, one might consider Adriana de Souza e Silva's suggestion in chapter 2 of this volume that net locality is best understood in terms of social practices rather than specific technologies.

    To become mired in the assessment of comparable specifications for each particular SMS artwork in public space would be to fix each as a static, single-state entity, with the dynamic and temporal properties stripped away and no conceptual means by which to account for qualitative and evolutionary changes as the minutes, hours, and days unfold. A notion of TXTual practice—based on public contribution of 140- to 160-character messages and visible

display—instead makes it possible to recognize structural logics that are both shared and repeatable in different social and technological contexts. Though my analysis of TXTual practice does not directly engage Charles Musser's (1994) pivotal work on the history of "screen practice," there is a crucial point of intersection in the notion that practices emerge as such through the stability of styles and presentational schema. At the core of Musser's account of the "emergence of cinema," which not incidentally informs Huhtamo's (2004) work on screenology, is the notion that cinema itself is one of many screen practices based on projected images and accompanying sound. Framing the discipline in this manner circumvents the inevitable determinist account of what is and is not properly cinema. So, too, TXTual practice circumvents the inevitable ontological distinctions between the algorithmic and nonalgorithmic, which would have the effect of retroactively ascribing technological foundations, converting means into ends, and establishing parameters for a set of projects based on criteria secondary to the artists' and designers' investments. The purpose is not to articulate a definitive category that would serve as a critical heuristic; many such descriptors—for example, SMS artworks, interactive text events—suffice for the practical purpose of indicating the objects at hand. The purpose rather is to sketch the field of inquiry in such a way as to account for reading and writing practices that are sited yet virtual, computational and live, distributed and social, and a challenge to the human capacity to synthesize discrete data flows that need not be recognized or responded to as such.

For the *Urban_diary* installation, the rude_architecture group (Gesa Glück, Tobias Neumann, and Friedrich von Borries) invited passersby to submit 160-character diary entries that were then anonymously projected onto three advertising billboards on the Alexanderplatz station walls after a twenty-four-hour interval, the temporal lag between reception and projection allowing the contributor to become part of the audience and preventing direct physical address in the form of hailing, yet still allowing participants to seek ordinary responses or self-affirming feedback, or even simply to make some noise.[16] The only explanatory information in the station during the one hundred days it was installed was a

web address and telephone number on the fade-out of individual messages; the effect of this withholding (in that there were no wall labels or flyers in circulation) was to create a sense of secrecy, the knowledge of the project transmitted through the same popular word-of-mouth channels that circulate rumors and gossip. The practical intervention was to "design and install interfaces between streams of technical information, on the one hand, and perceptible urban spaces on the other," that is, to construct a new public space, one that would be situated in between the actual and physical, on one hand, and the virtual, on the other. This newly imagined public space functions as a sandbox, a tool kit with which to think, experiment, and play, and as such constitutes a sharp refusal of the impoverished technocratic imaginations of the so-termed creative industries. The overarching purpose of the installation, however, was even more provocative: it was, as the architecture team explains, "to give place to—to re-place or re-locate—existing communicative potentialities within urban space." Instead of a melancholic lament for a public space overwritten by neoliberal economic interests, then, it was an affirmative gesture, an invitation to its audience to exploit the latent potentiality within the communicative field, in other words, to produce something new. What matters is not the substance of any one message, powerful as it may be to provide the infrastructure for the expression of political and economic frustration. (Anonymous contributor: "I just wanted to say that ever since the Euro, I am paying more for practically everything, but I'm not earning any more!") What matters rather is in fact that infrastructure, which extends well beyond hardware and software to include the conditions of possibility for the actualization of those potentialities. *Urban_diary* is in this sense, as the architects assert, "a reclamation, a winning back of life itself."

More modest, in terms of both technology and philosophical commitments, was Paul Notzold's staging of his *TXTual Healing* events in cities throughout North America and Europe.[17] Using a building facade as a projection screen and writing spaces demarcated with speech bubbles or geometric shapes, Notzold essentially set up temporary shop on street corners and distributed his mobile number to passersby, soliciting messages that were displayed auto-

matically, anonymously, and in real time. Unlike the *Urban_diary* installation, for which the messages were scanned and those that violated extant privacy laws, along with others having to do with data transmission, were intercepted, the messages sent during the *TXTual Healing* events are not filtered. What results is a mishmash of babble, general commentary, interpersonal dialogue, and anonymous self-articulation—utterances in the form of "I am, I like, I love" that allow a participant to establish a certain relationship to herself and to risk self-exposure in exchange for affirmation from others. The fleeting affective component of the various utterances is reminiscent of Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin's *Listening Post* or the sentiment analysis visualizations such as "We Feel Fine" and "Twistori" in that the projected text messages capture a mood by presenting the murmurs of the crowd. The projected messages also seem to represent the "idle mutterings of ourselves to ourselves," as was noted about another visualization, *London Wall,* which culled publicly available status updates from social networking sites over a ten-day period in 2010, the data from which have been preserved as "instantaneous social history."[18] However, *TXTual Healing,* along with other interactive installations of the sort that I am describing here, are crucially different in that they are instances of distributed writing and synchronous communication rather than data collection. Moreover, the modality of TXTual practice is not collective in aggregate but rather disparate individuals acting and speaking in common, a mass of subjective articulations that masquerade as collective consciousness. (Not "we feel fine" but "my loneliness is killin me."[19])

Texting for public display reroutes the circuit between input and output, making the writing space visible and allowing participants to ping a channel, any channel, seeking ordinary response or self-affirming feedback, or sometimes simply to make some noise. (Hello world.) The virtuosity, then, is that of the common speaker rather than the technically proficient or conceptually sophisticated performance artist, for, as Paolo Virno (2004, 55) reminds us, "the fundamental mode of virtuosity, the experience which is the base of the concept, is *the activity of the speaker.* This is not the activity of a knowledgeable and erudite locutor, but of *any* locutor." For Virno, it is precisely the vacancy and transitory nature of what

he terms "idle talk" that makes it generative; because it is not anchored in philosophical, historical, or emotional substance, it can function as a free-floating site of discursive invention. As he notes, "idle talk resembles *background noise*: insignificant in and of itself . . . yet it offers a sketch from which significant variances, unusual modulations, sudden articulations can be derived" (90). "Background noise" is in this analysis a zone of potentiality, a site that may give rise to creativity and inventiveness. Put another way, it provides the structural conditions of possibility for improvisation, unpredictable opportunities, and aleatory performances. Communicative activities thus do not reflect but rather produce the state of things. The utter ordinariness of most of the messages on display—"I would like a hot chocolate"—is thus entirely the point.[20] Expertise is shifted from the professional and granted to the ordinary speaker, whose "idle talk" might be insignificant but for this very reason can remain open to swerves, divergences, and unforeseen interactions.

Cityspeak, from Jason Lewis and Obx Labs at Concordia University, is an exemplary instance of background noise, a field of communicative activity that has the potential to generate something new (Figure 1.2). Whether in a city square or the more contained space of an art gallery, *Cityspeak* invites passersby to read and contribute what the project designers term "ephemeral graffiti," with text messages taking the form of multiple layered data streams displayed on large LED screens.[21] With this project, Obx Labs has been able to realize its investment in "massively multi-contributor texts," where "massive" refers both to the display screens and, in certain settings, to the size of the audience. (In the weeklong Victory Park installation in Dallas in June 2007, for example, they were able to work with the largest outdoor LED screen system in North America.) A custom Java library manipulates the visual appearance of the text: the contributions of individual senders are color-coded; new messages appear in larger font in the foreground; and previous texts scroll right-to-left and upward in the background. The transition between the two states is visually accomplished by a "pixel eater" in the lower right corner; new messages are pulled into it, pixelated, and then reformulated letter by letter for the conversational history in the background. As befits a project that

encourages "ephemeral graffiti," the significance and meaning of the *Cityspeak* installations derive in part from their interventions in public space and their effects on their immediate environment. In practical terms, this might take the form of repurposing spaces given over to advertising, appropriating spaces of composition that are traditionally given over to consumption. In this respect, they transform both the form and function of the large-screen video displays, from commercial broadcasting to participatory circuits that include the public. Monologic advertisements instead become bulletin boards and chat spaces. Scott McQuire (2006) suggests more generally that tactical interventions into commercial spaces "provide a striking comparison to manufactured 'media events,' where the media simultaneously desires spontaneity as a way of attracting an audience, but generally occludes the spontaneous by imposing standardized frames in order to minimize the risk that 'nothing happens.'" What is important about *Cityspeak* as a site for the generation of "idle talk" is that something might indeed happen at any moment. But so, too, something might not, and in this context, it is worth noting that the external forces working against the emergence of "unusual modulations" include not only social and linguistic protocols but also the law. (*Cityspeak* is presented as an artwork but regulated as a public broadcast, so contributions are filtered and offending texts are anagramatically reformulated in such a way that a participant can recognize her input and recognize as well that it has been scrambled.)

Even with content filters in place, however, interactive text projection is necessarily spontaneous rather than rehearsed because one cannot predict what information will be input. Multicontributor SMS events are not in themselves new, but something emerges in the process of "city speak" that is performatively and operatively different from texts with single input channels. The streaming of multiple messages makes stabilizing a singular voice impossible, the collective quality announced in the visual and verbal density of palimpsestic displays of text. And the signature of the individual author or artist then becomes displaced onto the design of the installation itself, particularly the construction of the site, the algorithms that manage text display, and the structures of participation. Michael Giesecke (2002) delineates the historical
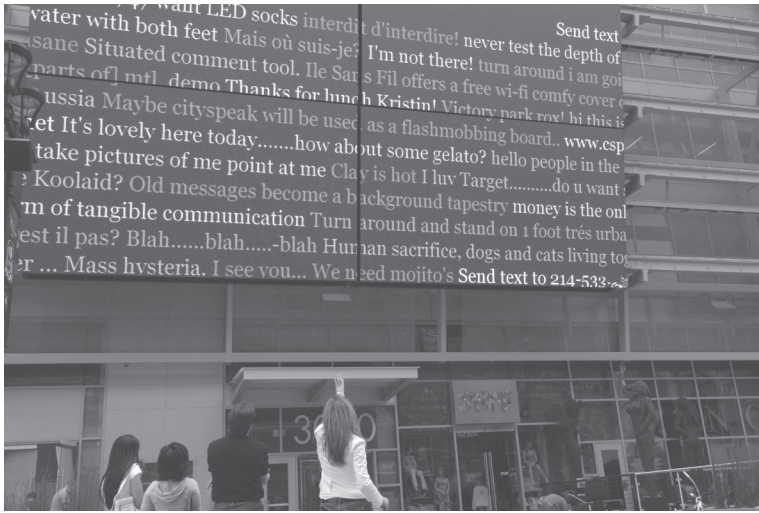
FIGURE 1.2. *Cityspeak,* Victory Park Plaza, Dallas, Texas, June 2007. Courtesy of Jason Lewis, Obx Labs.

context for the prioritizing of multiple communication channels operating in real time. In his account, as mass communication—with its minimizing of participation—gives way to a culture of interactivity, feedback, and recursivity, we see a deep sociocultural, literary, and aesthetic investment in "face-to-face communication as the situation of maximal interactivity and multimediality" (13). Once media breaks from the print market model and develops to the point of synchronic feedback between production and reception, the issue of "synchronization between communicators" (or interactive channels) necessarily emerges at the fore. If one follows the logic here, text-based interactive installations would be the paradigmatic instance of media communication in our present moment. They are a rich investigative site both for me and for the artists involved from and through which to explore the fundamental experiential transformations that have occurred in our reading and writing practices.

What, then, are the implications for comparative textual media—or for literary studies or the humanities—of a textual practice that is manifestly about transient display and process rather than the artifact? How do we approach a "literary document," such as

Urban_diary, that is "constantly transformed during the interval of its installation," or an installation with a textual display that moves at such a rapid rate that the words cannot be parsed by a human reader? How can we understand the significance of events that are "pure process," "pure performance," "pure participation": objects of analysis that, on the face of it, seem to disappear rather than endure? In what sense, if at all, does the *experience* of ephemerality push the parameters of a discourse on comparative textual media to a kind of limit? These textual practices are antihermeneutic to an extent perhaps not even imagined by those who advocate for "surface reading" as a turning away from interpretation and symptomatic reading, from a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that seeks out the hidden meanings of a text, that which is masked or buried deep within its linguistic folds, that which is not said but needs to be brought to light. Surface, in the words of Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009, 9), who introduce this approach, is "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through.*" But the screenic surfaces I am describing here as representative of the move away from a hermeneutic are such because there is no stable text that one can look *at* for a meaningful period of time. They are not texts but text effects. The sociotechnological context for such a practice is the shift from static pages to real-time streaming data. And the philosophical context is work that draws our attention to techniques and practices of mediation, as with Alex Galloway's (2012) recent argument that we need to think in terms of the "interface effect" rather than in terms of objects and things.

IN THE CASE of an interactive media arts installation to which the audience might contribute bodily activity but not actual content—as, for example, Camille Utterback's *Text Rain*—the participatory script will differ from encounter to encounter, but the piece can still be regarded as an artifact that has a distinct form and structure that can be mapped both at the level of code and at the level of interface, with fairly precise verbico-visual constructions of what

we read and see. So, though we may recognize the fluidity and mutability of the projected text in *Text Rain,* we can also think in practical terms of a stable and fixed entity because of a legible connection between cause and effect (if I move my arm a certain way, the movement of the words will correspond). In the case of an interactive installation driven entirely by crowd-generated content, conversely, there is the problem of articulating underlying form as it has been understood in humanistic inquiry. Participatory SMS-based installations are not scripted, unlike many mobile media projects, the structured forms of which (e.g., guided walks) hearken back to Myron Krueger's (1977) notion that interactive environments work best when they compose the user's experience. A participant may be given a phone number but no instructions directing textual content or mode of contribution. Participation is spontaneous, improvisational, and nonchoreographed rather than programmed.[22] "Text," then, is the whole of the event, its physical, logical, and conceptual architecture; the enactment and experience; its temporal structures; and associated social and juridical protocols. Text events are communication circuits: feedback as opposed to the data separation inherent in the archive. The display surface may be a writing surface, but it is not a scene of inscription or a graphic technē but rather chance juxtapositions, the play of dialogue, conversation. Compare an instance of TXTual practice with a work by Jenny Holzer: with the latter, a singular input for a speech act manifesting as linguistic spectacle, and with the former, multiple inputs that produce a dynamic interactive conversation that is experienced as momentary.[23] The basic units of analysis, then, are durational: how long does the text hover in the foreground; how long does the audience remain in place; how long is the work installed?

The projected messages are *experienced* as ephemeral and eruptive, part of the still-pertinent history of "flickering signifiers" that one can trace at least in part to Eduardo Kac's (1996a, 247) work to develop a poetic language that was "malleable, fluid, and elastic" and not tethered to the page. The result of Kac's experimentation with the display of linguistic forms in different media was the "new syntax" of holopoetry, the defining quality of which "is not the fact that a given text is recorded on holographic

film"—not, in other words, the forensic materiality (Kac 1996b, 186). Rather, "what matters is the creation of a new syntax, exploring mobility, non-linearity, interactivity, fluidity, discontinuity and dynamic behavior" (186). The ever-increasing prominence of text analysis—as methodology, practice, and core project of the digital humanities—has arguably had the effect of enforcing an institutional imaginary of text as a static entity that awaits the search query. While techniques or practices of "deformance" might suggest a certain dynamic quality, in other words, text as such lies inert until it is reformed in accordance with algorithmic procedures. Text analysis performs a certain epistemological translation of text into data that is manipulable and mutable, but the notion of that very mutability relies on the practical fact of text as a thing that can be altered and made to change states. The tension here might seem to be that of the poetic versus the empirical, but the empirical has become hegemonic, a disciplinary truth of text in relation to which "flickering" language is putatively frivolous, merely and inconsequentially poetic.

TXTual practice has the potential to generate immediacy, a sense of being-in-the-moment, a real time that is an enactment rather than a destruction of the present. Contra Paul Virilio (1994, 4)—for whom the technologies of real time "kill 'present' time by isolating it from its presence *here and now* for the sake of another commutative space that is no longer composed of our 'concrete presence' in the world, but of a 'discrete telepresence' whose enigma remains forever intact"—an interactive text event does not displace present time from itself. Rather, the event itself is composed in the moment of performance; it is not in this respect a replay. To pursue this line of thinking further, contrast the potential to generate immediacy, a sense of being-in-the-moment, with our cultural obsession with storage and archiving, perfectly illustrated by Chris Mendoza's *Every Word I Saved*: an alphabetized list of all the words the artist saved to his hard drives from 2000 to 2006. Even a poetics of "radical mimesis," such as Kenneth Goldsmith's "uncreative" retyping of the September 1, 2000, edition of the *New York Times* word for word in *Day,* does archival work, all claims to function as a "monument to the ephemeral" notwithstanding. And consider, again, the London Wall installation, the data from

which have been preserved as a "museum of ordinary London" in the form of A3 posters.[24]

Although texting for public display may be framed in terms of "ephemeral graffiti," graffiti is a highly skilled practice that at once articulates and consolidates identificatory group formations. The bar for participating in text events, conversely, is quite low. No particularly specialized literacy or skill is required; everyone has an invitation to participate; and no communicative device is more widely available.[25] Indeed, at this point, there are many text-to-screen systems available for commercial use, and it is colloquially said that every first-year media student worth his salt makes a project in this vein, interactive and social works that make prominent use of messaging. As with Flash mobs, too, the cultural consciousness of text events far exceeds the actual participants, so it is possible to claim that they are commonly accessible even if they are not commonly (actually) experienced. Along the same lines, TXTual practice might seem specialized in terms of generation (Generation M, the texting generation), habit, or media environment, and a first-time reader–viewer might initially be noncomprehending, overwhelmed, bemused in her search for meaningful signifiers, or at least uncertain about how to construct a meaningful lexical structure around the display. Fragments, words, and lines are discontinuous, voices and genres are mixed, scenes are jumped. Sequentiality exists only insofar as there is an actual spatiotemporal connection between fragments or messages, and there is no governing discursive frame that would bring them into order either retrospectively or in real time. Here it is helpful to refer to Roger Chartier's (2004, 151) commentary on the connections between form and the mode and experience of reading, as in the case of encyclopedias, the reading of which is "segmented, fragmented, discontinuous," because the structure and design of the text is such. Much the same could be said about reading projected text messages, but absent the firsthand knowledge of sender and receiver, they also crucially lack a discursive context, indexicality, and the kind of navigational menus that cross-referencing can provide.

The use of a single screen might seem to function as a focal point for the audience's attention, but as Erica Robles, Clifford

Nass, and Adam Kahn (2009, 73) have persuasively argued, a shared screen does not necessarily correlate with shared information, and "co-orientation toward a central source" is dependent on the alignment of context (the single screen) and mode of address (the articulation of a common audience). Co-orientation toward a central source would also necessitate the management of ordinary environmental factors, such as noise and obstructed views, and even if a programmable text were to fulfill all of the internal and external conditions necessary to function as a single focal point, it would do so only momentarily. All the different text displays are intended to be to some degree legible, but semiotic certainty can only ever be partial, and sustained attentive reading is practically improbable. Were one to approach these works and focus on linguistic content alone, regarding, or attempting to regard, each line or set of lines as literary utterance with the interpretative method that implies, one would quickly come up against the practical—and familiar—problem of the limits of cognitive apprehension when there are multiple data streams. But this scene of apprehension cannot be understood as it once was as a problem of sensorial overload. That is, we could be, or we are even now, being inaugurated into different practices of reading and viewing such that complex screen environments are becoming ever more quotidian. Our so-called distracted reading is thus only such in relation to the conventional symbolic structures beyond which we are conditioning ourselves to move, and it is entirely possible to imagine that the socially mediated displays are able to hold the sustained attention of at least some of the participants.

In a recent media archaeological investigation of public media interfaces, Huhtamo (2011, 38) concludes with a brief account of the structural transformations in the screenic landscape of Los Angeles in 2009, identifying the LED billboards as a "new medium" that at the time of writing had not been fully integrated into the urban environment. So rapid has the pace of technological change been, however, that now these brightly glowing billboards can only be considered "new" in relation to prior screen technologies; they are no longer new in the sense of newly encountered. They are objects more likely of habituated perception, so ordinary as not to provoke the need to orient, even so ordinary as perhaps

to escape notice. In other words, large-scale displays, while on one hand directing attention, are also ambient, foregrounds that function as a kind of background, ambient but not necessarily in the sense of managing behavior and perception. Responses by the audience—acknowledgments of the receipt of messages, recognition of repeated or threaded messages, even the communication of boredom—suggest a certain conditioning to want more stimulus. The varied responses remind us that individual lines or phrases can be processed—that is, received, recognized, contextualized. It follows, then, that modes of engagement are both conscious and aperceptive: semiotic structures that are so manifest as to be interpreted without the reader–viewer ever becoming self-conscious about that interpretation. Here we might recall Johanna Drucker's (1998, 99) observation that "as we observe words in the landscape, they charge and activate the environment, sometimes undermining, sometimes reinforcing our perceptions."

Interactive text events invite collective attention, not in a pernicious fashion, but rather in the sense of propagandistic manipulation. The group or collective (audience) is held together by the transmission of affect; the unity is thus to be understood as functional, operational. As Nicolas Bourriaud (2002, 61) says of relational aesthetics, that which substitutes intersubjectivity, the experience of being together, for the private symbolic space of art, "the audience concept must not be mythicized—the idea of a unified 'mass' has more to do with a Fascist aesthetic than with these momentary experiences, where everyone has to hang on to his/her identity. It is a matter of predefined coding and restricted to a contract, and not a matter of a social binding hardening around totems of identity." The contract specifies a momentary experience, an immediacy that has both a temporal and spatial dimension: it is about what happens in a particular place at a particular moment. Individual subject and collective are linked by processes of exchange: an inner life might be projected to an indeterminate audience, thus making it collective. And another's affect, the affect of the crowd or gathering, might become one's own. (Anonymous contribution to *Urban_diary*: "It's going to get worse.") The coalescence of a crowd and the mobilization of affects are temporary, though nonetheless inextricably linked, as Teresa

Brennan (2004, 51) explains in her account of "how a gathering is constituted, in part, through the transmission of energetic affects (which may add up to something more than the individual affects of the group's members)."[26] Relationality, then, is enacted rather than harnessed or captured, which is all the more meaningful in a sociotechnological milieu that is in no small measure dependent on the manufacturing and regulation of mutuality. (Anonymous contribution to *TXTual Healing*: "I'm so over audience participation. No. Let's talk it out face 2 face it's complex.")

Interactive text events that have been installed or performed in different times and places might share the same structure, but they would not have the same content in the sense that external forces would shape each event differently; thus individual motivations (teleology) and characteristics (volatility, unpredictability) result in different manifestations of a reiterable practice. The microcommunities that emerge from the anonymized mass or crowd are contingent, the occupation of physical space temporary, the negotiation of relations to that space and to others fluid, dynamic, emergent. They are then counterpublics, which, for Michael Warner (2002, 88), are "spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poeisis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely." Counterpublics, idle talk, background noise: these are fields of energy the transformative potential of which remains to be exploited. To hope that they will be exploited is to speculate; to communicate, to enact rather than transmit, is to open up a space for creativity, experimentation, and invention. The significance of TXTual practice is precisely this: to provide the ground for ephemeral "idle talk," the communicative flotsam and jetsam out of which something new might emerge.

What is the relation, then, between a cultural imaginary of the humanities as pragmatically and theoretically structured by an archival impulse, on one hand, and TXTual practice as an instance of the subjective experience of ephemerality on the other (Figure 1.3)? Perhaps we might consider the extent to which the humanities might stake its public claim not only on the basis of the historicist work of accumulation, classification, and narration but also on the basis of its capacity to reflect on the contemporary, not simply the everyday but the momentary as well. In other words,
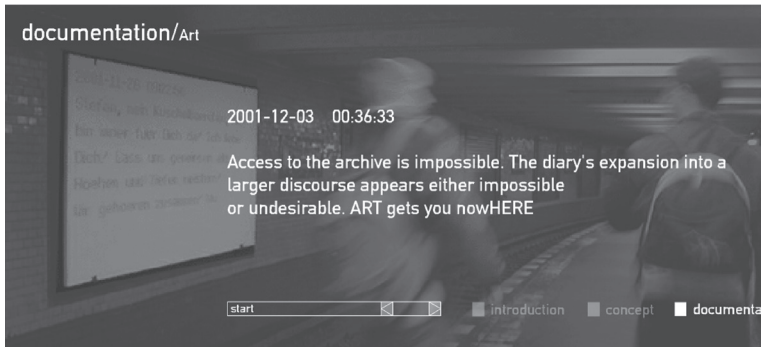
FIGURE 1.3. Anonymous contribution to *Urban_diary*. Courtesy of rude_architecture.

a nontrivial project of the humanities ought to be to consider the production of meaning that may not necessarily be preserved, to understand the significance of medial objects and cultural processes that seem to go away. We have a clear vested interest in forms of monumentality (archives, canons, durable inscriptions), but we have a less-recognized interest in maintaining a continuous connection to ephemeral production—in recognizing that which would otherwise disappear. TXTual practice has a certain place in the conversation about comparative textual media precisely because it reminds us of this interest in taking account of things as they happen in real time—a present time that is not isolated from its presence here and now but one that nonetheless allows for critical reflection.

NOTES

1 Henkin's (1998) wonderfully narrated account of "city reading" in antebellum New York offers a historical counterpoint that highlights quantitative and qualitative differences between the commercial advertisements, broadsides, and political broadsides of a modern capitalist era and the guerrilla laser projections and institutionally sponsored art installations of a postindustrial sociotechnological milieu. The two forms of spectatorship Henkin identifies—browsing and quoting—would in the present moment need to be expanded to include annotation and collaborative creation. So, too, the material differences in production (paper vs. computational media) necessarily entail differences in reception (sense perception).

2 Conversation with Jaap de Jonge, Dutch Foundation for Literature, December 14, 2011.

3 The discourse on the urban screen phenomenon itself predominantly concerns questions of publics, spectacle, and socialization: of particular note are the series of conferences held in Amsterdam (2005), Manchester (2007), and Melbourne (2008) and related publications, among them Scott McQuire, Meredith Martin, and Sabine Niederer (2009) and a special issue of *First Monday,* "Urban Screens: Discovering the Potential of Outdoor Screens for Urban Society" (2006), http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/issue/view/217. Also see Mirjam Struppek's Urban Screens Initiative at http://urbanscreens.org/.

4 My syntactical formulation is borrowed from Paul Notzold's *TXTual Healing* performances (2006), which I discuss later in this chapter.

5 Also see "Screen Tests" (Huhtamo 2012), in which he argues that screenology is necessary so as to "break the illusion of timelessness, of media without history" (145).

6 John Zuern's essay in this volume (chapter 11) is one representative example, along with extensive work by N. Katherine Hayles, Espen Aarseth, John Cayley, Roberto Simanowski, Serge Bouchardon, Jan

Baetens, Maria Engberg, and others too numerous to name here.

7   In *Digital Art and Meaning,* Simanowski (2011) suggests that the emphasis on sensation, affect, and experience has come at the expense of reflective semiotic analysis.

8   Here I appropriate Rosalind Krauss's (1979) definitive statement on "Sculpture in the Expanded Field."

9   For a project description, see http://www.blinkenlights.de. A second iteration, "Arcade," was installed on the Bibliothèque nationale (September–October 2002).

10   Visual and textual documentation is available from http://www.servus.at/clickscape98.

11   Documentation is available from http://www.zwarts.jansma.nl/page/560/nl.

12   Documentation is available from web archive http://web.archive.org/web/20070218152223/http:/www.urban-diary.de.

13   See http://cspeak.net.

14   It is important for my analysis of TXTual practice that the events be enacted in real time. This will exclude a number of SMS projects with fixed output, e.g., Ananny, Biddick, and Strohecker's (2003) *TexTales,* which invited participants to text captions for community photos that were then installed in an apartment complex in Dublin on the verge of being demolished and rebuilt. An encyclopedic catalog of interactive text events would necessarily need to take account of the different experiments with outputs, whether text, sound, image, or directed action. Indeed, experimentation with output is usually one of the central objectives of such projects.

15   Kirschenbaum appropriates the phrase "screen essentialism" from Nick Montfort; for each, the field of new media studies has been misguided in its privileging of the graphical user interface, which, for Kirschenbaum, is "often uncritically accepted as the ground zero of the user's experience" (34). His intervention—to redirect critical attention to inscriptive acts—has unquestionably changed the paradigm of the field of electronic textuality, but it risks a certain overcorrection if investigations of phenomenological experience, interface design, and semiosis are foreclosed.

16   *Urban_diary* was part of "Berlin Alexanderplatz U," organized by Neuen Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK). All of the visual and textual documentation cited here is available from the archived versions of http://urban-diary.de. The site contains representative messages from the installation, documentation from which was also shown in the exhibit "Reality Bites: Making Avant-Garde Art

in Post-Wall Germany," at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum (Washington University, St. Louis, 2007).

17 Notzold's (2006) most recent SMS event appears to have been October 2010. Notzold has also collaborated with Graffiti Research Lab to compile do-it-yourself instructions for public projecting.

18 All quotations from the BBC London radio interview (2010). The London Wall project culled data from local and publicly available social media accounts in the interests of creating an ordinary museum of London, but participants could also contribute to the database by text message. See http://www.thomson-craighead.net/docs/london-wall.html.

19 Anonymous contributor to Stefhan Caddick's *Storyboard,* commissioned for "May You Live In Interesting Times," Cardiff's Festival of Creative Technology (2005). The public was invited to text messages for mobile variable message signs, the usual purpose of which is to display traffic and weather information. Documentation is available from http://www.axisweb.org/ofSARF.aspx?SELECTIONID=112.

20 Anonymous contribution to *TXTual Healing.*

21 All of the visual and textual documentation cited here is available from http://cspeak.net. *Cityspeak* continues to have an average of two showings a year, the most recent as of this writing in Quebec City in fall 2011.

22 One could choreograph participation to a certain extent by asking a set of participants to execute the same set of actions every day of an installation, but it would be a performance of repetition rather than an actual repetition.

23 Here the irony of articulating a rhetoric of a practice that is inherently antiarchival must be noted. Capturing a snapshot, a synchronic slice of a dynamic work, turns it into a Jenny Holzer–like object. A synchronic slice, whether a screen capture or wall label, fixes a particular work as a work in space and time, thus reducing process to object.

24 Robert Elms, BBC London radio interview with Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead, 2010, http://www.thomson-craighead.net/mini-movies/londonwall.mp3.

25 London-based Troika's *SMS Guerrilla Projector* (2003/2007), essentially a do-it-yourself portable projector with a mobile phone, is a representative example of the growing openness of text projection technologies. Documentation is available from http://troika.uk.com/node/44.

26 Commentary along the lines of Brennan on the biochemical basis of entrainment—the linking of human affective responses—is beyond

the scope of my analysis, but her work does address salient questions about collective understandings and collective drive, as opposed to thinking in terms of an assemblage of self-contained rational, individual actors.

REFERENCES

Acland, Charles. 2012. "The Crack in the Electric Window." *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2: 167–71.

Ananny, Mike, Kathleen Biddick, and Carol Strohecker. 2003. "Constructing Public Discourse with Ethnographic/SMS 'Texts.'" *Human-Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices and Services* 2795:368–73.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. 2009. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108, no. 1: 1–21.

Bounegru, Liliana. 2009. "Interactive Media Artworks for Public Space." In *Urban Screens Reader,* edited by Scott McQuire, Meredith Martin, and Sabine Niederer, 199–213. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2002. *Relational Aesthetics.* Translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Paris: Les presses du réel.

Brennan, Teresa. 2004. *The Transmission of Affect.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Chartier, Roger. 2004. "Languages, Books, and Reading from the Printed Word to the Digital Text." Translated by T. L. Fagan. *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1: 133–52.

Drucker, Johanna. 1998. *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics.* New York: Granary Books.

Galloway, Alexander R. 2012. *The Interface Effect.* London: Polity.

Giesecke, Michael. 2002. "Literature as Product and Medium of Ecological Communication." *Configurations* 10, no. 1: 11–35.

Gitelman, Lisa. 2006. *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Henkin, David M. 1998. *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Huhtamo, Erkki. 2004. "Elements of Screenology: Toward an Archaeology of the Screen." *ICONICS: International Studies of the Modern Image* 7:31–82.

———. 2011. "Monumental Attractions: Toward an Archaeology of Public Media Interfaces." In *Interface Criticism: Aesthetics beyond the Buttons,* edited by Christian Ulrik Andersen and Søren Bro Pold, 21–42. Copenhagen: Aarhus University Press.

———. 2012. "Screen Tests: Why Do We Need an Archaeology of the Screen?" *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2: 144–48.

Jeremijenko, Natalie. 2004. "OneTrees." http://www.nyu.edu/projects/xdesign/onetrees/.

Kac, Eduardo. 1996a. "Key Concepts of Holopoetry." In *Experimental—Visual—Concrete: Avant-Garde Poetry since the 1960s,* edited by K. David Jackson, Eric Vos, and Johanna Drucker, 247–57. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

———. 1996b. "Holopoetry." *Visible Language* 30, no. 2: 184–212.

Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. 2008. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Krauss, Rosalind. 1979. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October* 8:30–44.

Krueger, Myron. 1977. In *AFIPS 46 National Computer Conference Proceedings,* 423–33. Montvale, N.J.: AFIPS Press.

McQuire, Scott. 2006. "The Politics of Public Space in the Media City." *First Monday,* special issue no. 4. http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1544.

McQuire, Scott, Meredith Martin, and Sabine Niederer, eds. 2009. *Urban Screens Reader.* Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

Musser, Charles. 1994. *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Notzold, Paul. 2006. "TXTual Healing." http://www.txtualhealing.com/.

Robles, Erica, Clifford Nass, and Adam Kahn. 2009. "The Social Life of Information Displays: How Screens Shape Psychological Responses in Social Contexts." *Human-Computer Interaction* 24:48–78.

Schäfer, Jörgen, and Peter Gendolla, eds. 2010. *Beyond the Screen: Transformations of Literary Structures, Interfaces, and Genres.* Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript/Transaction.

Simanowski, Roberto. 2011. *Digital Art and Meaning.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Struppek, Mirjam. 2006. "The Social Potential of Urban Screens." *Visual Communication* 5, no. 2: 173–88.

Thrift, Nigel. 2007. *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect.* New York: Routledge.

Virilio, Paul. 1994. "The Third Interval." In *Rethinking Technologies,* edited by Verena Conley, 3–12. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Virno, Paolo. 2004. *The Grammar of the Multitude.* Translated by Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson. New York: Semiotext(e).

Warner, Michael. 2002. *Publics and Counterpublics.* New York: Zone Books.