Gesturing Towards Writing: Reflecting upon Inscription using Terrible Keyboards

I write about writing.

My interest in writing interfaces made me hone in on the Residual Media Depot's Aquarius home computer (came out in 1983), Atari 500 (1979), and the Commodore VIC-20 (1980; currently doesn't work). I tested out the Aquarius in the Depot by typing out some of the code programs, and I noted how difficult the keyboard was to use: it has a kind of gummy material that offers little in terms of tactile "give," and the placement of keys is unlike that of modern QWERTY keyboards. Later, I spoke to Darren Wershler about this keyboard: might its shittiness have anything to do with why the Aquarius was so quickly discontinued (4 – 5 months after it was released)? After a conversation about my research interests in inscription practices and writing technologies, Darren suggested that I look into the phenomenological experience of using these terrible keyboards for writing, especially in relation to existing discussions of the experience of writing using different tools.

He pointed me toward Vilém Flusser's "The Gesture of Writing" (1991).

Flusser offers an intricate exploration of how writing happens and what it means to write in an age of increasing "automatic writing" (which he admires but distrusts) and in which writing as he knows it moves away from the linear structures of thought (including historical thinking) that have been constructed through systems of alphabetical languages. Flusser argues that writing as a gesture has become habitual for us, and consequently, we no longer think about the "objective

resistance” of the writing process and the struggle/efforts to turn thoughts into writing. To understand these things further, he makes “external” and “internal” examinations of writing:
– Externally, writing is the physical impression or engraving of words upon materials that create a mutual and necessary relationship between “facta” (“things to be expressed”) and “data” (“writing utensiles [sic] and my knowledge of how to use them”). The writing tool is necessary and he stresses this “banal” point to say that the rise of “useless pseudo-writing” will “rende[r] literacy itself useless” (7).
– Internally, writing has the unique quality of translating abstract thought into structures of meaning (alphabetical letters, linguistic syntax, and universes of language); so without this “silent action” of thought, writing isn’t actually happening. By extension, I note that he discounts transcription and translation as “true” writing.

Branching from his essay, I will use a few terrible keyboards in the Residual Media Depot to write about Flusser’s idea of the gesture of writing as it shifts among practices of inscription described by Friedrich Kittler—another famous media theorist who wrote in German, interested in writing albeit among different tools. Inscription changes from Kittler’s Discourse Network 1800 to 1900, a shift from longhand to the typewriter. It arguably changes again as we lose the physicality of the paper in word processing and as writing becomes subject to a “parameterization” that Alan Liu describes in “Transcendental Data” (2004): the abstraction of content in the processes of computer transcoding, as a part of its processes of production and transmission. This Liu calls a “Discourse Network 2000.”

I will use these terrible keyboards to write about the changes to writing from DN to DN, focusing on how creativity is described within each age and how it’s shaped by writing instruments:

– DN 1800: Longhand. When Martin Heidegger observed the typewriter's separation of the "natural" relationship between hand and paper, he was speaking to a tradition of Romantic creative genius that I'll ponder over.
– DN 1900: Typewriter. As Kittler as well as Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz note, mechanical reproduction changed creativity by freeing the alphabet as a storage medium, thus enabling the semiotic play of letters, words, and typography. Can I write about this modernist-era of creativity and maybe participate in some of it with a shitty keyboard?
– DN 2000: Word processor. In this culture of assemblage, palimpsestuality, sampling, connectivity, cannibalization—whatever you want to call it—how do I write about an intertextual and intermedial creativity in which Lev Manovich calls the DJ the emblematic artist?

(SIDE NOTE: I'll probably use this practical part of my exploration to test the argument of my dissertation in which I discursively move away from Discourse Networks and towards historically transient inscriptive functions.)

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And yet, these writing exercises are not enough in themselves. I find myself returning to Flusser's statements about "true" writing as I think about my prior research on the abstraction and thus *dematerialization* of digital content. Taking a page out of Marie-Laure Ryan, I will then ask what these terrible keyboards afford and limit in my thinking and writing about the gesture of writing and how it is transformed by the inscriptive instrument; this seems fruitful relative to Flusser's other work on photographic apparatuses, which he argues limit the photographer just as much as they enable their agency/creativity.

Coming full circle after DN 2000, I need to test Flusser's gesture of writing against the digital (writing tool, platform, user interface). I want to have some fun playing

with his argument that the only real writing is that which happens in the moment in which thoughts are "forced" into actualized form. His understanding of "true" writing makes stages such as editing, revision, and publication, as well as the sociocultural engagement of writing, not as important as writing itself—not as important as *getting it out*. Whatever *it* is, Flusser argues that a writer's tragedy is that if *it* needs to be expressed, it must be articulated else the writer become sick from something akin to repression.

(SIDE NOTE: What about Mikhail Bakhtin, who, while he was trapped in Siberia, was so desperate for rolling papers for tobacco that he began to use sheets of his own work? Smoking took over as the greater internal need here in this over-the-top gesture of consumption: he literally smoked his own writing.)

So, if the original writing is the only true moment and actualization of my real thoughts—is the only true form of writing I can have—then let's actually write this thing, and then, in the spirit of deformance or maybe how Liu describes hactivism, let's destroy it: I'm going to erase it all. Then it can exist in singularity, does not have to be published, and remains as this "true" writing because it is ephemeral to begin with and leaves no visible trace (in the many meanings of the word) after it is gone.

Of course, I will cheat:

I will record videos myself writing and will take pictures of my texts, which are probably the most "untrue" forms of writing insofar as they will be remediations that stand in place for digital objects that don't exist in material counterparts (unlike Roland Barthes' "necessarily real" object; I'm riffing on Mark BN Hansen here) and which will not exist after I erase them. These remediations have to stand in for documents that are not physically "real" but that will be as real as I can manage, as I will actualize them according to

Flusser’s “true” writing: of the moment, not to be replicated or tampered with in textual transcription/translation.

But maybe Flusser’s “true” or real writing does not hold in an age when I’m not using paper. See, I’m not sure his idea of the gesture of writing holds in my project at all given that there is no physical engraving; where/what is the digital trace? Returning to my dissertation, what/where/when is digital materiality?

Also, returning to my dissertation, there is a kind of residue that lingers in the letters, in the politics and conditions of materiality of the apparatus, whether that is paper or the computer. The material resources, the people handling the devices, the production factories—they are real enough. Relative to digital infrastructure, sometimes I think that they are all that is real.

—LT

P.S. This post itself doesn’t even count as Flusser’s “true” writing, as I wrote all of it on paper first. I always do.