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Language's Newest Role

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Language Alters Imagery

While poets have always had a deep and intimate knowledge of language's capabilities — formally and emotionally — the video above demonstrates that technology has made language act in ways that I don't think we've conceived of before. In it, words aren't used to express anything: they don't sing, emote, or pull heartstrings. Instead, language is pure material: active and affective, more akin to clay or a sledgehammer than a transparent (or opaque) communicator (or miscommunicator).

Never before has language had so much materiality — fluidity, plasticity, malleability — begging to be actively managed by the writer. Before digital language, words were almost always found imprisoned on a page. How different it is today, when digitized language can be poured into any conceivable container: text typed into a Microsoft Word document can be parsed into a database, visually morphed in Photoshop, animated in Flash, pumped into online text-mangling engines, spammed to thousands of e-mail addresses, and imported into a sound-editing program and spit out as music — the possibilities are endless.

It's just another reminder that, in the future, words very well might not only be written to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated, sometimes by humans, more often by machines, providing us with an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider what writing is and to define new roles for the writer. While traditional notions of writing are primarily focused on "originality" and "creativity," the digital environment fosters new skill sets that include "manipulation" and "management" of the heaps of already existent and ever-increasing language. While the writer today is challenged by having to "go up" against a proliferation of words and compete for attention, she can use this proliferation in unexpected ways to create works that are as expressive and meaningful as works constructed in more traditional ways.

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