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#TCVol4HammerUnglitched

Editor's Note: Because of the nature of this piece and its deliberately glitched orthography, we have elected to publish two versions: the glitched and authoritative version, which is the only one that ought to be cited, and the unglitched version, linked below. Citation of this essay should be from the glitched version.

Glitched Version

Abstract

For almost as long as the field of rhetoric and composition has been using digital technologies, its scholars, teachers, and practitioners have been warning against using writing technologies uncritically. Our writing technologies, after all, are neither inert nor objective. They are complex, political, subjective systems, and human authors work with them, not simply on or through them. In this article, I offer approaches to practicing and teaching composition by combining theory-practices of the digital art practices known as glitch and dirty new media with network-based models of authorship.

Glitch art and dirty new media (DNM) are two interrelated yet distinct contemporary art movements concerned with disrupting and interrupting signals, patterns, and structures of various media and data to produce work that highlights the ways that technologies (mal)function. Glitch and DNM artists exploit the very tools and interfaces that are often portrayed or understood to society at large as seamless, functional extensions of ourselves in order to reveal the fallibility of technologies and systems. In many ways, these theory-practices may serve as a critical framework through which we can view technologies and their often-invisible subjectivities, limitations, and shapers of the human experience.

I suggest that we approach composition—from our scholarly works to teaching our first-year composition courses—in a way that explicitly acknowledges the material and contextual means of production: a composition in which we reveal our technologies as coauthors; a composition in which we perform with our technologies and reveal our processes; a composition in which we subtly—shift our writing style(s) to not only write with or about technology, but to write technology.

Essay

_Our goal is simply to point out irregularity as a device, to show the necessity and the importance of irregularity in Δrt._

(A. Kruchenykh, 1913)

_The glitch is a wonderful experience of an interruption that shifts an object away from its ordinary form and discourse._

(R. Menkman, 2010)

Introduction: A(nother) Message to the Fish

A few weeks before I revised this article, I heard Justin Lincoln give an inspiring presentation at Computers and Writing in Menomonie, Wisconsin. Referring to Shannon and Weaver's Information Theory, Lincoln commented that while he once thought of the artist (or composer, or writer…) as occupying the "information source" position on the diagram (below), he was beginning to think that the artist was the "noise source." Lincoln's artist engages in pattern signal recognition and disruption, not as a mere purveyor of information or messages that must endure or triumph over noise.

I was reminded immediately of Marshall McLuhan's discussion of fish, water, and artists in his book, _War and Peace in the Global Village_. McLuhan argues,
G is for glitch.

In his 2012 book Writing keynote address, Alex Reid used a word most readers will recognize immediately, but seldom in the context of rhetoric and composition research: *glitch*. The rapid proliferation of technological innovation (and certainly our dependence on such technologies) ensures that most of us encounter glitches rather frequently, from operating system error messages to slight lags—and subsequent crashes—of streaming audio and video. But first, a short story.

I have two young children, and they have battery-powered toys. Lots of them. Keyboards and laptops and drums and talking/dancing stuffed animals and various other noisemakers. For many hours, a toy like Playskool’s “Big Hugs Elmo Figure” is a reasonably accurate metaspace depiction of the Elmo seen on television. Elmo moves and sings and presumably teaches. But sooner or later, the batteries begin to fade. There is this wonderful and terrifying moment between Elmo’s intended functionality (full battery power) and failure (no battery power). Elmo’s speech slows, the tone of its voice deepens significantly, and it begins to resemble something much more sinister. It is a moment of interruption in the way that we interact with and perceive Elmo. Instead of listening to Elmo’s rendition of the ABC song, we hear the breakdown of Elmo’s digital voice, the high-pitched vibration of the speaker embedded within its body, the swooshing of a compressed audio file stored in its circuit-organs.

When Elmo breaks down, my daughter Lily begins to ask why. I say it is because Elmo needs battery power in order to play audio samples stored in its circuit. We talk for a little while about circuits and sound. We open Elmo’s body and find a box that contains batteries and has several wires extending into Elmo’s head, arms, and legs. We open the box and look at the circuit board. Someday, when Lily is older, maybe we will circuit-bend Elmo to see what other kinds of strange sounds it is capable of producing. But for now, I am content in pulling back the curtain of a consumer technology to reveal something other than a lovable character: an arrangement of stored digital samples, resistors, capacitors, wire, electricity...

This educational moment was brought to you by the letter G.
In many ways, glitch and dirty new media are enthusiastic explorations similar to Reid's anti-modernist future of composition, yet these movements have been neither deeply explored nor sufficiently applied to spaces and practices of composition. My aim, therefore, is to gesture toward a glitch-centric approach to composition, a way to write (dirty) new media, to play on the title of Wysocki, Johnson-Eiola, Selfe, and Siric's 2004 text. I propose a glitch, or dirty, approach to composition, one in which composers a) actively acknowledge their many coauthors (especially nonhumans) and the networked nature of composition, and b) reveal the materiality and subjectivity of the technologies involved with the production of composed works. I will first provide an overview of glitch and dirty new media, theorize the movements while calling on some of their important and oft-ignored precursors, and then apply these theory-practices to contemporary digital writing practices and pedagogies.

Glitch art and dirty new media (DNM) are two interrelated yet distinct contemporary art movements centered primarily in Chicago, IL, USA, and Amsterdam, NL. At their most basic level, the movements are concerned with disrupting and interrupting signals, patterns, and structures of various media and data to produce work that highlights the ways that technologies (mal)function. Glitch and DNM artists exploit the very tools and interfaces that are often portrayed or understood to society at large as seamless, functional extensions of ourselves in order to reveal the fallibility of technologies and systems. In many ways, glitch—but especially DNM—serves as a critical framework through which we can view technologies and their often-invisible subjectivities, limitations, and shapers of the human experience.

Rather than attempting an all-inclusive historical account of these movements, I will provide a brief account of formal events and publications devoted to the movements. Selecting texts and voices of glitch and DNM inevitably requires that I ignore others, of course, and this is another reason this should not be read as a comprehensive guide to the movements. Instead, my interest lies in extracting those philosophies and methods that lend themselves to theoretical transportability and my own construction of a glitch/dirty approach to composition practices.

While present manifestations of glitch and DNM are certainly distinct and pushing at boundaries of the art world, they are also firmly rooted in artistic and philosophical traditions. Nick Briz identifies pre-glitch practices in analytical cubism, dada, structural-materialist filmmakers, pop art, Robert Smithson, Andy Kaufman, Gordon Matta-Clark, and John Cage.

Nick Briz, "Glitch Art Historie[s]: Contextualizing Glitch Art, a Perpetual Beta." Accessed February 28, 2013, nickbriz/glitchsearch/GlitchArtHistories2011.pdf Manon and Temkin add Nam June Paik, Annie Albers, Hiroshi Kawano, Max Headroom, Lou Reed, Iannis Xenakis, Reed Ghazala and others to the list of precursors.

Hmm...
Cloninger makes an even more important observation, one that this article is extending: "The glitch event is not 'unnatural.' It is just that we humans are still acclimating ourselves to it. We are less used to seamlessly absorbing its affect. Analog affect is more qualitatively gradual, whereas digital affect can dramatically spike" (31). While this is not always correct, he helpfully differentiates the digital from the analog while allowing glitch to remain applicable and theoretically useful to both. Above all, he establishes that the glitch is a more-or-less "normal" feature of both digital and analog environments. This deployment of glitch as a theoretical concept rather than a specified event under specified conditions is central to my own argument. Glitch is certainly a malfunction within a network, but it is ever-present in a variety of networks. Networks—digital, analog, and otherwise—are always already glitching.

Dirty New Media, a Chicago-based branch of New Media art, was first articulated by jonCates as a direct response to the surplus of clean, seamless digital art. Cates recounts the development of DNM as a means "to express a contrast with the kind of cleanliness that I associate with more commercial or corporate styles of digital art and design." Like Reid and others, Cates understands that "brokenness is a primary feature" and "humans live in a noisy, glitch, messy + broken world." Cates foregrounds DNM as a response to a techno-culture that is increasingly hidden, obscured behind a veil of Western "progress."

Technology is a field typically associated with smooth screens, organized interfaces, and on a larger scale, with the pride and "progress" of western civilization. Dirty New Media, a branch of New Media art, seeks to subvert these unquestioned assumptions by problematizing, rather than idealizing, common technologies. The "dirty" stems from the movement's deliberate incorporation of brokenness as artists, hackers, and activists alike hack, reconstruct, and complicate aspects of computer culture. By embracing the cyber flaws, short circuits, and disjointed components, Dirty New Media refers to a menagerie of alternative practices and subcultures spanning from punk and digital sampling to piracy and pornography. In my writings with Shawné Holloway, a Chicago-based DNM artist and scholar, we have argued that DNM's frequent attention to bodies—in the form of pornographic images, for example—highlights the situated ontology of human and nonhuman actors in new media spaces. That is, DNM highlights the materiality of both digital media and the human body: "DNM is an act of...liberating the object from thing-ness (resisting the modernist hyperdichotomization machine) and the subject from formlessness. The hybrid body-object emerges. DNM is simultaneous subjectivity + object-ness." In other words, drawing on object-oriented ontology, we argue that DNM recognizes both the ways that bodies are objectified (both ideologically and technologically) in digital spaces and the ways that nonhuman objects actively contribute to artistic production. Holloway and I argue that DNM reveals not only the "dirtiness" of media and interfaces, but also the layers of inherent and performed subjectivity contained within technologies. That is, much like Ian Bogost's discussion of the interpretive agency of the Sigma camera in Alien Phenomenology, DNM reveals the materiality of increasingly invisible and actively obscured technologies.

Nowhere is the critique of clean, seamless, invisible technologies more apparent than Nick Briz's 2013 work titled "Apple Computers," an open letter to Apple Computers and "prosumer manifesto," that addresses "issues of planned obsolescence, upgrade culture, technological self-reliance, control and copying." DNMs direct and confrontational approach to the politics of new media art and emerging media technologies is rooted in hacker/diy culture, and in this way DNM begins to blur the lines between artist and activist.

There's Not Much Glitch in Glitch Art

While the concept and term "glitch" is an essential component of this article, it is neither static (i.e., well-developed and widely agreed upon) nor unproblematic. Before I move on, then, I would like to briefly address three important critiques of glitch/art that have emerged from within the glitch/DNM communities.

Daniel Temkin's 2014 article "Glitch && Human/Computer Interaction" problematizes glitch (the concept and the art) in very useful ways, commenting, "The glitch aesthetic may be rooted in the look of malfunction, but when it comes to actual practice, there's often not much glitch in glitch art. Yes, some glitch artists are actually exploiting bugs to get their results — but for most it would be more accurate to describe these methods as introducing noisy data to functional algorithms or applying these algorithms in unconventional ways. " Temkin argues that what has come to signify a glitch is the application of noise to logical systems, not an actual failure or malfunction within the system. A "glitched" JPEG, for instance, if truly broken or corrupted, would fail to display anything at all; "if we still see an image, the JPEG algorithm has successfully rendered it. Even if we somehow make the file undisplayable...we risk no failure — there's nothing at risk when digital files are effortto substitute or duplicate and store" (Temkin). Instead, Temkin suggests that most glitch art is, at least in practice, an activity of (re)producing an aesthetic consistent with traditional glitch art.

Temkin is not the only artist/theorist hesitant to embrace contemporary manifestations of art increasingly wrapped up in aesthetic (re)production. In my correspondence with Jon Satrom and Ben Syverson (PoxParty), we discussed our own issues with the term "glitch/art," rooted primarily in our own creative endeavors.

Jon: Glitch art people have expectations of what glitch art should look like, and it needs to be glitchy. This program that we made, it slogs all the processors on your computer, and makes everything slow and, not glitchy but it's with that glitch ethos. You know, so I think it's like glitch art but it bumps up against where things need to go for that now genre.

Ben: Yeah, and half of that is how we talk about it. Like, the most important aspect of it is that it slows your computer down, it brings you back to
Noise is an essential ontological and phenomenological feature of systems.

Glitch art and DNM both place emphasis on the illusory nature of technological progress and improvement. That is not to say that technologies are not changing and becoming more sophisticated or advanced, of course; there is little doubt that technology is changing at an incredible pace, particularly in the last half century. The objection to the so-called “progress” of technological innovation instead centers on the assumption that new technologies are somehow closer to perfect, that they are efficient, streamlined, and becoming more perfect extensions of our own bodies. To be sure, the rhetoric of emerging media marketing promotes this illusion. Apple, for instance, consistently touts their products with language like “life-like,” “easy,” and “works perfectly.”

The prevalence of gestural technology also contributes to the increasingly obscured material nature of emerging technologies. These devices are natural, invisible, intuitive. In many ways, these technologies and marketing strategies begin to resemble Marshall McLuhan’s arguments about changing relationships between bodies and media, “all media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical.” Our interfaces and wares are presented and received as highly functional, intuitive extensions of a monolithic objectivity, composition, and so on. In other words, as the producers of interfaces and wares claim increasingly seamless integration between their products and users, knowledge, relationships, and so on, humans (and certainly other organic/nonorganic actors) are thus increasingly defined by the marketing philosophies, if not also in compartments to break out of them.”

In many ways, glitch has become an increasingly complicated movement/genre/philosophy/aesthetic, one filled with contradictions and problems. Yet as its practitioners work to navigate just what glitch means (or veer away from the label glitch altogether while retaining some of its methods and underpinning philosophies), I likewise find many of its conversations, though certainly “compartmentalized,” to be fruitful when positioned in composition, rhetoric, communication studies, and the humanities at large. While I am admittedly hesitant to use the term “glitch” composition, it will have to do for the moment.

THEORIZING A GLITCH COMPOSITION

...
irregularity onto—or in a new way, and the more disorder we introduce into the sentence structure the better.”

“Irregular structuring of a sentence (in terms of logic and word formation) generates disorder, irregularity, dissonance, and the unexpected. dizzy contemporary life and the even more impetuous future,” according to Kruchenykh, one that preceded fixed and rational meaning and instead embraced the fact that up to the present the word has been shackled is provided by its

The same year, he published “New Ways of the Word (the language of the future, death to Symbolism),” in which he argues, “clear and conclusive proof of non-there is znamia—language:

Kruchenykh called zaum—language:

Together, Burliuk, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, and Khlebnikov penned the first Cubo-Futurist manifesto, titled A Slap in the Face of Public Taste, in which they expressed disdain for traditional literature and poetry and “[felt] an insurmountable hatred for the language existing before their time.”

Regardless of the extent to which Russian Cubo-Futurism was initially indebted to Italian Futurism, by 1914 the Russians had altered the trajectory of their movement and a new perception of the world

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Kruchenykh’s zaum was, above all, transrational. That is, it was a linguistic system that transcended the possibility of fixed meanings but was meaningful nonetheless. His 1913 manifesto, “Declaration of the Word as Such,” while in some respects resembling Khlebnikov’s more calculated approach (e.g., Kruchenykh’s assertion that a poetry consisting solely of vowels can restore a kind of pure, universal language, which would soon fade from his theorizing), also argues against static signifier-signified relationships: “a language which does not have any definite meaning (not frozen), a transrational language.”

The same year, he published “New Ways of the Word (the language of the future, death to Symbolism),” in which he argues, “clear and conclusive proof of the fact that up to the present the word has been shackled is provided by its subordination to rational thought.” A new language was required to “depict the incomprehensibility, the alogicality of life and its horror, or to depict the mystery of life. [Russian writers] make recourse time and again to the same expression in which words’ meanings were indefinite or indeterminate.

Irregular methods are always already present in composition processes. Within a glitch composition, we have the opportunity and obligation to write about the occurrence of the glitch—for instance, in a literary or cinematic text—but also write in glitch. Just as Kruchenykh, Cixous, and countless others have advocated for new languages to express divergent identities and experiences, so too have glitch artists. Menkman advocates for "Glitchspeak…expressions [that] teach the speaker something about the inherent norms, presumptions and expectations of a language: what is not being said, what is left out.” To perform glitch criticism is not only to seek evidence of interruption within objects or systems; it is also to enact, perform, and write glitch. Glitch composition itself is a disruption, interruption, and corruption of dominant models of production and critique.

Understanding glitch as a method, rather than a product or aesthetic, is only one half of glitch composition, however. We must also identify the methods employed by the glitch artist/scholar/critic. As I have stated before, many have constructed lists of proto- or pre-glitch avant-garde traditions, and we must certainly consider those sources as models for glitch criticism. John Cage’s work with indeterminacy, chance, and hardware hacking for instance, undoubtedly bears significant influence on glitch composition.

Cage’s most notable work explored chance operations in the composition process and culminated in his Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra (1950-51). Briefly, the prepared piano consisted of various objects, including “bolts, screws, strips of plastic and rubber…as well as a ‘plastic bridge,’” inserted systematically between the strings of the piano, thus creating a new set of tonal possibilities previously unexplored by traditional composers. His Concerto also included various traditional orchestral instruments as well as a few unconventional instruments, including a “radio, an amplified coil of wire, a buzzer, and a recording of a generator.” Cage succeeded not only in imagining new sonic landscapes and orchestral configurations, no doubt drawing from Luigi Russolo’s Futurist Manifesto, but he actually undertook a largely unchallenged technology in radically modifying the piano. Cage’s groundbreaking ideas and works in what we might now call “hardware hacking” proliferated in the work of Keith Rowe’s prepared guitar, and later in the work of Q. Reed Ghazala, which I will expand on later in this article.

While a full exploration of Cage—as well as countless other pre-glitch artists—is certainly warranted, several scholars have already linked Cage’s work to contemporary glitch art. I will instead turn my attention to a model largely ignored in glitch and DNMM literature, Alexei Kruchenykh’s notion of zaum. Not only did Kruchenykh embrace procedural conceptions of artistic production, but he also proposed that artists employ methods of irregularity in order to achieve a representation of changing socio-technological contexts. I will now turn my attention to Kruchenykh in order to extract this notion, so that we might consider the ways to deploy methods of irregularity as composers, scholars, and pedagogues.

The Russian Cubo-Futurists emerged in the early twentieth century as a result of influence from the Italian Futurists and French Cubists. Yet to dismiss the Russian Cubo-Futurists as purely derivative would be an egregious error; Douglas notes the symbiotic nature of early 20th century movements, “[t]here is a logical bridge between the stringed instruments and the piano. Cage’s groundbreaking ideas and works in what we might now call “hardware hacking” proliferated in the work of Keith Rowe’s prepared guitar, and later in the work of Q. Reed Ghazala, which I will expand on later in this article.

In other words, due to increased mobility, the purity any one artistic movement in early 20th century Europe is highly suspect, if not impossible.

Regardless of the extent to which Russian Cubo-Futurism was initially indebted to Italian Futurism, by 1914 the Russians had altered the trajectory of their theories and practices in very different—and certainly more radical—ways. Multimedia artists/poets such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, Benedikt Livshits, Vasily Kamensky, and David Burlyuk are most associated with this short-lived movement (1912-1915). When "intellectual and refined Symbolism had exhausted itself in Russia," in 1910, the so-called Hylea group of Cubo-Futurism emerged seeking to “[start] art again.” Together, Buriul, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, and Khlebnikov penned the first Cubo-Futurist manifesto, titled A Slap in the Face of Public Taste, in which they expressed disdain for traditional literature and poetry and “[felt] an insurmountable hatred for the language existing before their time.”

Perhaps the most radically disruptive, prominent, and in many ways still avant-garde innovation to emerge from Russian Cubo-Futurism is what Aleksei Kruchenykh called zaum. Zaum, a combination of za [across; beyond; to the other side of] and um [mind; intellect; head], denoted a new mode of linguistic expression in which words’ meanings were indefinite or indeterminate. Zaum has been translated as “trans-mental,” “metaphorical,” “transrational” or “beyondsense.” Together with other zaumniks including Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Ilya Zdanovitch, Kruchenykh began experimenting with a formal language, a language capable of expressing to escape the static and stale language incapable of expressing to escape the static and stale language incapable of expressing the experience. Media and systems—and certainly humans—exist and perform experience. Media and systems—and certainly humans—exist and perform as much in terms of failure as in terms of function, as much in terms of accident as intention, as much in terms of indeterminacy as order. As such, glitch critics must look beyond the successful, intentional, consistent, and otherwise orderly features of systems and objects. Glitch composition ignores the clear, legible signals in favor of that which interrupts, disrupts, and corrupts the order of the object or system in question. Such deviations are of paramount importance not only in reconstructing the narratives of control, precision, and intentionality in the composing process, but also but also in the revelation of the previously invisible structures underlying the production and reception of texts. More on this later.

Irregular methods are always already present in composition processes. Within a glitch composition, we have the opportunity and obligation to write about the occurrence of the glitch—for instance, in a literary or cinematic text—but also write in glitch. Just as Kruchenykh, Cixous, and

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Kruuchenkh proposed some specific methods of imposing irregularity onto—or glitching, if you will—language:

“Irregular structuring of a sentence (in terms of logic and word formation) generates movement and a new perception of the world…we must combine words in a new way, and the more disorder we introduce into the sentence structure the better.”
several others became active circuit-bending performers and educators and to "underscore the great significance for art of all strident elements, discordant sounds (dissonances) and purely primitive roughness" (emphasis added). Further, Kruchenykh's zaum was not simply a method of destructive manufacture of nonsense (this is the significant difference between zaum and its contemporaries in experimental sound poetry/word art, namely Dada); zaum was a means of discovery: "Our new devices teach a new understanding of the world." Kruchenykh exclaims, "We split the object open! We started seeing the world through to the core. We learned how to look at the world backward, we enjoy this reverse motion.

Not only does Kruchenykh provide us with some specific methods for employing irregularity in written works, but his philosophy encourages a kind of technocriticism strangely reminiscent of DNM artists/activists. "Splitting the object open," gaining new perspective through irregular interactions with language, media, and "the world," are precisely the sentiments touted by Cates, Britz, Menkman, Cloninger, and others. By drawing specifically on Kruchenykh, we can more easily build bridges from the digitally-based approaches and concerns of glitch and DNM to much broader compositional environments. In other words, for a glitch composition to traverse disciplinary boundaries, we must frame methodologies broadly in terms of irregularity or interruption, rather than rooting glitch practices solely in digital/new media art contexts.

Glitches reveal the already present imperfections, or glitch potentiality, within systems typically associated with seamless functionality. In this way, the glitch composition practitioner is simultaneously an artist, activist, and techno-critic.

A glitch model of composition and criticism extends beyond an examination of form and the performance of disruptive writing. It is also an approach concerned with the analysis and critique of the material production of objects and systems as well as the often "clean" and seemingly-seamless technologies that produce, curate, and guide reception of various industries. In this text, a glitch composition draws heavily from jonCates' articulation of dirty new media:

i meant to express a contrast with the kind of cleanliness that i associate with more commercial or corporate styles of Digital art and Design. The graphic and industrial design styles of Apple Computers is a perfect example of the kind of clean, smooth, slick style i am referring to. My reason for saying Dirty New Media is to express a difference or resistance to these imaginary forms of cleanliness. My and our communities' work is thereby intentionally more raw, direct, dirty, glitchy, noisy, etc.

Likewise, glitch composition is interested in resisting the culturally fostered narratives of cleanliness, effortlessness, and pure intentionality that revolve around technoc-cultural production and consumption. The glitch practitioner should certainly observe and interpret through a lens of malfunction, seeking the ways a given text's production results from various overt malfunctioning systems and processes. Yet this is only one half of the glitch practitioner's task. Her other task is to critique the ways in which the given text obscures its own materiality, its own production, its noise and malfunction. By design, most texts conceal these characteristics in favor of a highly polished exterior, and the glitch critic must locate, highlight, and foreground the noise contained within each system, and attempt to reveal the means and politics behind such obfuscation.

The glitch is a posthuman phenomenological happening; it shapes and is shaped by both human and nonhuman actors. Indeed, all composition emerges from complex networks of actors.

While it is important to understand the glitch as an essential ontological condition of all objects and systems, as I have discussed, we must also discuss the phenomenological concerns of glitch theory. While objects and networks exist in perpetual glitch-potentiality, the glitch is indeed a momentary event in-between functionality and failure. It is a moment, a happening, which is documented and re-presented in the form of glitch art. Therefore, we need to briefly explore the moment of the glitch in terms of experience and perception.

There is no doubt that glitch composition (or glitch studies, or glitch art) is a tool intended for humans to apply as a sort of heuristic; in this way, Menkman is correct in framing glitch studies as both a technological and socially constructed affair. Yet her claim that "[glitches] do not exist outside of human perception" is problematic. It is true that glitch art does not exist outside of human perception; glitch art is bound within human constructions of aesthetic qualities and production. The glitch as a phenomenological happening, however, as a fluid state of malfunction, must exist outside of human perception; the results of various glitch acts have very real impacts on the forms, functions, and alliances experienced by a range of actors, both human and nonhuman.

To illustrate this point, we might look toward a direct influence of glitch art and DNM, circuit-bending. Q. Reed Ghazala first articulated the folk art known as circuit-bending in 1996 as "the process of creative short-circuiting by which standard audio electronics are radically modified to produce unique experimental instruments."

Ghazala recounts the his first circuit-bending experience as quite accidental:

Sometime during the psychodelic 1966–1967 "Summer of Love" era, in a rush to find a forgotten item for a lost-in-time project, I closed my desk drawer and the world changed... In my drawer a small battery-powered amplifier's back had fallen off, exposing the circuit. It was shorting out against something metallic, causing the circuit to act as an audio oscillator. In fact, the pitch was continuously sweeping upward to a peak, over and over again.

Ghazala's encounter with electronic failure, the sound of malfunction, began what would be a lifelong pursuit:

I immediately thought: If this can happen by accident, what can be made to happen purposefully? If this can happen to an amp, not supposed to make a sound on its own, what might happen if one were to short out circuits that already make a sound, such as keyboards and radios and toys?

Ghazala soon modified his amplifier with various electronic components, added body-contacts and photoresistors, and rehoused the circuit several times, and performing his alien instrument much to the confusion of those around him. The innovation of and accessibility to new, more complex circuits caused new circuit-bent instruments to emerge from Ghazala's laboratory. He would continue to work on the creative short-circuiting of various sound-making devices.

By the time Wiley Press published Ghazala's comprehensive 2004 book, Circuit-Bending: Build Your Own Alien Instruments, a host of other circuit bends had emerged worldwide. Due especially to the accessibility to the art of circuit bending, both in terms of minimal cost and required knowledge, circuit-bending became a growing phenomena in the early 2000s. Artists such as Pete Edwards (aka Casper Electronics), Andy Ben, Phillip Stearns, Dave Wright, and several others became active circuit-bending performers and educators in the United States. Yet circuit-bending also grew rapidly in Western Europe,
Circuit-benders often describe their instruments in the language of organic beings: Ghazala calls some of his creations (as well as other, non-circuit-bent instruments) “new, albeit temporary creature[s]” that are much more like people than usually understood:

Conceptually, a living instrument is somewhat more difficult. You and I are living instruments. We accept that our voices will change, becoming deeper over time, quieter in the end, and some day failing. We accept that our friends and lovers will change as they age. However, can we accept this in our musical instruments?


Another artist describes circuit-bending as a process of “rewiring the veins within the organism so that it bleeds differently.” While these articulations of instruments as living beings are neither official nor consistent (Ghazala also refers to his instruments as devices, machines, instruments, for example), even the brief explorations of such articulations suggest very different approaches to composition and conceptualizations of the composer/instrument relationship.

In fact, to distinguish the composer from the instrument is an error long committed by those living and writing in a culture still in the shadows of Modernism (the fabrication and enforcement of a nature-culture distinction). Circuit-bending circumvents the traditions that drive an imperialist wedge between humans and nonhumans in the creative process, suggesting instead a sort of amalgamated, hybridized event-as-composer. Ghazala’s writings over and again address the joining of human and nonhuman. One of Ghazala’s first explorations in circuit bending included the integration of human bodies into the circuitry via “body contacts,” which are simply metal contacts—drawer knobs, threaded brass light fixture balls, whatever—that are wired to the pair of circuit-bending points. Each of the two circuit points goes to its own body-contact. Nothing is wired between them at all... no switches, potentiometers, sensors... nothing. These contacts, when mounted on the instrument’s case, are meant to be bridged by the player’s body. This placing of human flesh amidst the circuitry, now conducting electricity as surely as any other component on the board, turns the body into a potentiometer of sorts. A variable human resistor (but then, mustn’t we all be already?).

The body-contact certainly begins to suggest changes in the human-nonhuman relationship. Not only has the circuit become a sort of living flesh, but the human has become an electrical component, a resistor, a part of the circuit. Ghazala continues: “Body-contacting was one of the very first things I found possible within the bend processing. From the start I had the feeling that I was transformed in some way when body-contacting an instrument, myself becoming a part of the circuitry as surely as any capacitor soldered in place.” Further, Ghazala understood that the happening, the moment of sonic creation in circuit-bending was not merely a result of two distinct entities interacting; instead, a sort of hybridization had occurred, a “new creation” was born when he could no longer “see where either the amp or I began or ended. We were one.” Ghazala named this new creature a BEAsape, “*Bio-Electronic AudioSpian*. Instrument or animal, hybrid or mutant, musically as well as zoologically we clearly have a horse of a different color. Yes, the BEAsape’s material is temporary, its existence momentary. Like you and me.

Returning to my critique of Menkman’s argument that the glitch is only perceivable by humans, let us briefly consider the case of a circuit bent toy keyboard. As the bend constructs new networks of switches, buttons, and potentiometers, the instrument changes both in terms of its constituent materiality and its sonic expression. Such expression is certainly perceived by humans as a glitch (or glitch art); yet the glitch in this case is not perceived directly by the human. The human observer only observes the artifact, the proof of the glitch. The actual glitch is felt only by the instrument, sometimes to the point of complete electronic failure or inaudible expression. Further, occasionally a combination of “bends” fails to yield any perceivable output whatsoever. In this case, neither the glitch nor the glitch artifact are evident to human actors (except in the form of silence), but remain very real to the instrument and its components.

I do not mean to imply here that nonhuman actors are somehow aware or conscious in the same way as their human counterparts, as the word “perception” frequently requires. Nor do I wish to somehow deprive humans of consciousness, relegating them to mere objects. Rather, I dispute the anthropocentric assessment of the glitch as a phenomenon relegated to human perception. Instead, we might consider Ian Bogost’s *Alien Phenomenology*, in which he argues for a metaphysical model in which all objects, human and nonhuman, material and conceptual, experience the world in relation to one another. In this way, glitch theory resists the anthropocentric, modernist impulse to set opposite culture and nature, humanity and “everything else.” Glitch composition borrows from object-oriented ontology and Speculative Realism in its placing of all objects (or actants) on equal ontological and phenomenological footing. All objects exist equally, and all objects experience the world equally (i.e., independently of human interpretation and/or observation).

The glitch critic, then, must move beyond the ways in which failure, malfunction, and error affects human actors, especially the author(s) and audience(s). Instead, she must understand textual and cultural production in more complex, ecological terms. In other words, following Latour’s knowledge production is a collaborative affair co-performed by humans and various inscription devices. Similarly, we must understand reception as a supra-human affair, as texts interact with and are perceived/received by a number of non-human objects.

**Writing Dirty New Media**

Thus far I have made only beginning gestures toward theorizing glitch composition. I have proposed that we approach composition as an inherently noisy, critical, post-human collaboration in which we seek and highlight malfunction within systems. If I have adequately made the case for such an approach, how might we now conduct electricity as surely as any other component on the board, turns the body into a potentiometer of sorts. A variable human resistor (but then, mustn’t we all be already?).

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**Writing Dirty New Media**

Thus far I have made only beginning gestures toward theorizing glitch composition. I have proposed that we approach composition as an inherently noisy, critical, post-human collaboration in which we seek and highlight malfunction within systems. If I have adequately made the case for such an approach, how then do we carry this out as writers and as teachers of writing? How do these ideas translate into our work, and most importantly, what do we gain from a new, “glitchy” approach to composition?

Most of the thoughts behind this work stem from reading the opening chapter of *Writing New Media* as a graduate student, in which Anne Wysocki defines new media texts in really simple terms: “as texts where we keep their materiality visible, both as we work to make them and as we hold them before us” (19). In fact, what I am about to propose as writing *dirty* new media is revisiting, expanding, and illustrating Wysocki’s call for composers to both be aware of and communicate to their audiences the materialities, subjectivities, and networked nature of their text. But whereas Wysocki seems to propose a composition that makes use of *adding* and *combining* various modes and media to enhance the visibility of the text’s materiality, I propose a composition that *alters or disrupts or interrupts* the content of the text and imposes a kind of discomfort on the audience. For, in order to know of the water, the fish must be removed from the water, and such a removal is dangerous and suffocating and sometimes fatal. But surely, upon returning to the water, the fish can distinguish the water.
In some contexts, we need to write texts that are traditionally formatted, academic disquisitions, professional and technical writing, (some) articles and books, and so on. If we cannot radically disrupt flows of information, as I will describe later in this section, how do we reveal our technological, nonhuman, ambient coauthors? We might simply include a narrative or acknowledgment with the text that explains and describes these actors’ impact on the production of the work. In my own teaching, I ask students to submit a reflective companion to each of their works. These reflections require students to trace their composition process through technologies, and discuss how they influence both the production and reception of the work. Students are also asked to describe accidents, unexpected changes, and failures of the process. Such an exercise urges composers to think through and reflect on their composition process as a networked affair that enlists the influence of subjective, political technological actors.

This practice is neither new nor radical. Writers and artists have been talking about this for a very long time, though sometimes not in the language of post-human collaboration. In her book Writing on Drugs, Sadie Plant describes the ways in which a range of drugs—from opium to hashish to LSD—not only emerged as subjects of literature throughout history, but as active agents in writing processes themselves. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous poem "Kubla Kahn," a classic of the Romantic period in which the genius author is often said to have emerged, was in fact not a result of individual genius, but of extensive opium use. Coleridge himself described the material conditions of the poem’s production after he fell into a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed could be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. on awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his ink, pen, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here presented. (Qtd. in Plant 11)

Likewise, Robert Louis Stevenson’s classic tale The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was written during a cocaine binge lasting nearly a week. Stevenson described his work not as a figurative collaboration, but as a literal, personified collaboration between him and characters that would visit him in his dreams. “The Little People, or Brownies, the characters who…wrote his plots and dreamed his scenes for him…who do half my work for me while I am fast asleep, and in all human likelihood, do the rest for me as well, when I am wide awake and fondly suppose I do it for myself” (Plant 76).

Plant’s book is a wonderful example of a glitch approach to understanding literature and authorship. She seeks the interruptions, the noise, the stories of our stories that are forgotten or muted because they do not adhere to the clean model of the individual, inspired genius. The authors she interrogates, especially those that are sometimes treated historically as geniuses, have often themselves acknowledged their nonhuman collaborators. This is writing dirty new media. This is glitch composition.

Thomas Rickert makes a similar, though brief, gesture in the acknowledgments section of his book ambient Rhetoric. He writes, a book on ambience will have much to acknowledge—people, events, places, music, moods, and more…a number of locations have proved to be important for writing and revising this work…Greyhouse Coffee Shop, Scotty’s Brewhouse, and my basement, with its vintage 1970s stereo (aR-98LS and now Snell Type a II speakers) and a large selection of ambient, electronic, prog, and jazz vinyl…The seed essay for this book, “In the House of Doing,” was written in 2004 while I was on prednisone for an allergic reaction, and oddly, in 2012, at project’s end, I find myself again on prednisone. (xxi-xxii)

Rickert’s acknowledgments are brief and do not give us much of an idea how the nonhuman factors impact his work, nor does it seem to be a rigorous cataloguing of collaborators. Yet Rickert’s gesture is important to the kind of composition I propose here. What if our disciplinary body of scholarly work was transparent in terms of technologies used, personal experiences lived, chemicals ingested, dis/abilities accounted for, and so on? Would the quality or effectiveness of the final product suffer? Would our perception of brilliant work fade? I doubt either of these fates. I suspect that we would find that we all have much more in common that previously thought, and that the sometimes intimidating undertaking that is scholarly production would become much less mystical and much more approachable.

Lest I fail to perform that which I ask you to perform: this article grew out of my dissertation, which grew out of seminar papers taken in Russian art & architecture with Dr. Kris Groberg, a Seminar on Authorship Theory with Dr. Amy Taggart, and sections of my comprehensive exams directed by my director and advisor, Dr. Andrew Mara. I wrote half of this article in TextEdit on a Macbook Pro, and finished/edited it in Microsoft Word. A significant portion of this text (and in some ways the overarching argument) was written after comments from Technoculture reviewers. I ingest chemicals, some prescribed and some not prescribed, for ADHD, anxiety, and depression, and bipolar (dis)order. Before words reach the word processing interfaces, I use a Pilot G-2 pen on a sketch notebook to collect, gather, and rearrange my thoughts. I am writing in the basement of my ex-wife’s home, where I have spent this summer with my children. Perhaps such a list could go on indefinitely, but these come to mind as especially influential factors on my present states and intellectual/material production.

When I write about the material, chemical, social, and physical/psychological conditions of the production of this article, I am struck at how complex and strange composition really is. How so many situations, states, events, humans, technologies, interfaces, places, chemicals, feelings, etc. collide to form a written work. Yet this is seldom spoken of, even less seldom stated openly. This kind of closeted authorship bears a striking resemblance to the kind of slick, polished, invisible interfaces with which so much of our culture consumes uncritically. Perhaps Modernist authorship is the black box we ought to break open, disrupt, and reimagine.

So in our articles, monographs, conference presentations, disquisitions, a glitch composition calls for our transparency. We might signal those contexts and actors in our writing, we might list them in acknowledgements. Perhaps footnotes or endnotes. Likewise, we can teach our students to examine their own working relationships with compositional interfaces, tools, and contexts, and ask them to be similarly transparent with one another. With enough observation, we can all make careful choices when choosing the material conditions of composition. We can choose our coauthors carefully.

Performances

While acknowledgments include strategies for those spaces in which there is little room for formal irregularity (i.e., when composers must adhere to a specific genre or perform institutionally-sanctioned writing practices), "writing" is increasingly understood not only as words on a page, virtual or analog. From college composition courses to web-based journals in Rhetoric and Composition (Technculture, Kairos, Enculturation, and more), what counts as "writing" has expanded into sound, video, images, games, and more. These spaces offer composers opportunities not just to explore the possibilities of new media composition, but to perform composition in a way that foregrounds technological collaborators and networks, embraces errors, and immerses the audience in a highly visible technological environment.

Here I turn to the work of Daniel Anderson, rhetoric and composition scholar and artist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Much of Anderson’s work takes the form of screencasts, in which the audience witnesses the happenings on the desktop of his computer. Traditionally used for tutorials and screensharing, screencasting offers us a way to write that does not hide behind a finished document or an edited and rendered video or a polished webpage. When we watch Anderson’s work, we see his cursor move. We see him make (and fix) typing errors. We see them change his mind. We see him open the wrong window. We see what programs he is using. We see the time of day this was written. His technological coauthors are completely visible to
Anderson’s work is not only captivating and beautiful despite its moments of error and malfunction, it is captivating and beautiful because of those moments. They remind us of our own gestures and movements and writing behaviors, the way we move a cursor over a desktop, the way we write and delete and rewrite. The way we make a wrong click. The way our keystrokes and cursor movements. It retains many formal features of a documentary film, but allows the audience into the environment in which it was produced. The work becomes transparent as the nonhuman coauthors become visible. This is glitch composition. This is writing dirty new media.

When I teach composition and digital media production, I find that teaching the screencast is vital to asking students to consider technologies and interfaces as coauthors. There is often great resistance, or perhaps anxiety is a better word, because the final product does not look much like a final product. It is a real-time performance, and most writing is an asynchronous performance that we can shape and hone before it reaches an audience. But when we perform writing in something like a screencast, our moves and thoughts and decisions are visible, our strategies and tricks are revealed. Like in the previous section when I discussed acknowledgments, we reveal ourselves. We become vulnerable writers. We cannot hide behind editing and post-production.

Modulations

In special circumstances, we are not only able to acknowledge and perform a networked, collaborative composition, but we have the freedom to radically alter, disrupt, or otherwise modulate symbolic systems or interfaces with which we compose. In many ways, modulations serve as a kind of speed bump to the audience, forcing them to more slowly and consume the text more carefully. I have performed some of these modulations in this text, though I have attempted to err on the side of conservatively altering the text so that it is readable. For instance, because this text is digital in nature (both in its production and publication), I have substituted characters in the tradition of leet, or 1337, or leetspeak. These are intended to signal this text’s digital materiality and interrupt audiences’ typical reading rhythms/practices.

In their 2006 work, “Hacking Open Together: New Media art, activism and Computer Counter Cultures,” jonCates and Jake Elliot argued that the vocabulary at the edge of ‘hackerdom’ is a kind of populist coded satire of elitism called i33t. i33t becomes not only a vocabulary but a pervasive affect. ‘The’ becomes ‘the’ and ‘owned’ becomes ‘pwned’ as mistakes fold into the language, dirty glitch becomes linguistic atom moving horizontally + playfully rather than being controlled by linguistic legitimacy.

These practices are not attempts to make their work unintelligible, but rather a kind of linguistic performance and illustration of DNM. That is, when they theorize about noise and dirtiness and disruption, they also write in that style, use those devices in written texts. Below is a screenshot of glitch.us, the home of Cates’ “unstable book for an unstable art.” His use of language is highly irregular, sometimes illegible, but unmistakably digital and hacker-influenced. Cates’ writing reminds us that in order to break from the technoculture of cleanliness and mythical functionality, we must also break from the home of Cates’ “unstable book for an unstable art.” His use of language is highly irregular, sometimes illegible, but unmistakably digital and hacker-influenced. Cates’ writing reminds us that in order to break from the technoculture of cleanliness and mythical functionality, we must also break from the

Glitch/DNM artist Nick Briz also makes use of screencasting, though in a way that more closely resembles documentary filmmaking. Consider his work below, titled Apple Computers. Like Anderson, Briz performs his composition by opening and closing various windows, revealing the technologies with which he is composing, his own keystrokes and cursor movements. He translates various data files as audio, then used those sounds to compose with compression artifacts, sampling error to build rhetorical texts. We might simply draw directly from the techniques of glitch and DNM. We might databend or pixeldrift or datamosh. We might intentionally degrade the quality of media files to highlight their materiality, such as this audio tool. We might simply compose with compression artifacts, sampling error to build rhetorical texts. See and teach the work of stallio!, namely his 2004 album True Data, in which he translated various data files as audio, then used those sounds to produce music.

When I teach multimedia composition courses, I present many of these methods and ask students to produce small glitch art portfolios in which they both seek and provoke malfunctions in systems. While a strange concept at
first, many students produce thoughtful and critical work. Students have taken on issues such as the artificially polished nature of popular culture, the representation of women in art, even representing their failed romantic relationships.

However we modulate our own texts as composers, the salient idea and purpose of glitch composition is quite simple. Locate and highlight the many invisible languages of composition. Some languages, like HTML, are invisible because they are not meant to be read by humans, at least not in this context. But they are not inert languages. Nor are the languages in which we compose. They are built, promoted, and regulated by those they benefit. We must write our interfaces, write our environments. Our writing can make strange the invisible waters of contemporary technoculture, a culture still enamored with upgrades and updates and user-friendliness.

the end is here

From glitch composition, we gain the kind of practice—both as composers and as audiences—that Hawisher, Selfe, Selfe, Wysocki, and so many others have prompted and challenged us to undertake. Such practices are dangerous and uncomfortable, and they require much unlearning. We must compose

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Notes

1. Later in this article, I will explain circuit-bending’s origins and applications. But briefly, circuit-bending is the act of creatively short circuiting electronic devices to create new instruments.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
8. It is important to note here that glitch and dirty new media are, by design, decentralized movements. In fact, when I say “centered primarily in Chicago and Amsterdam.” I refer to common meeting places for organized festivals and conferences like gli.tc/h. But admittedly, I spend most of my time discussing the work of artists/thinkers out of the gli.tc/h community.
13. Ibid, 11.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. See Menkman, The Glitch Moment(um) in which she states “I do not feel locked into one medium or between contradictions like real vs. virtual or digital vs. analog.” (p. 55), and Curt Cloninger, “GlitchLinguistics,” which calls for several Platonic “dichotomies to be exploded” (23-24).
19. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Cloninger’s assessment of the analog glitch as being slower and more gradual is correct in a majority of instances. Several examples of nearly immediate analog glitches exist, however: various physical, chemical, and electrical interruptions occur in the human body, for instance. We might consider the use of Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, for instance, a method of using magnetic pulses to noninvasively manipulate the polarity of neurons in the human brain. In the words of Mark George of the Medical University of South Carolina, “We can turn a part of the brain up or down, or temporarily turn it off.” TMS is indeed an immediate and sudden (analog) glitch.
24. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
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“Dirty New Media is the bastard stepchild of glitch,” says SAIC student Shawne Holloway. “The stepchild who smokes pot with the Mayor’s daughter before prom.” While Dirty New Media artists may utilize glitch methods in their practices, this is just one of the tools at their disposal. The formal achievements of Dirty New Media may be equal to those achieved in glitch art, but that isn't the primary focus. The emphasis is instead on emotive content over form. According to an article on the history of Dirty New Media, written by Joel Kuennen for ArtSlant, Morton and Sandin wrote a treatise called “Distribution Religion” wherein they laid out their principles for open-source sharing of technology, innovation and theory.