Beyond Paper: Postmedia and Experimental Art

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My intent in this paper is to elaborate on the general concept of 'experimental poetry', its potential application in interpreting poetry as an experimental artistic practice, and to highlight some specific situations in postmedia and flexible work in art, subverting the boundaries between poetry and the visual arts, that is, between society and culture.

The Experiment and the *New:* Contexts

The concept of research emerged in modern art when it seemed as if the poetic platforms of creativity as a technical craft had been exhausted. In art, research is viewed as an *open activity* that characterises working in art:

> The important difference between research and non-research art therefore seems predicated on the fact that non-research art sets out from established values, whereas research art seeks to establish those values and its own self as a value. Indeed, the first aesthetics that dealt with the very problem of art and its place among the activities of the spirit were born when art was first posited as research and when it first undertook to explore itself. (Argan 154)

Artists act, the bounds of their activities are consciously marked, although not every step in their activities, i.e. research, can be envisioned and they face discovering and choosing new domains of action. Research in art is often posited as a heuristic procedure. Heuristic is a self-motivated type of research that, in the absence of a precise programme or algorithm of research, proceeds from one instance to another, using the method of trial and error. Therefore it denotes the principle of researching/exploring, in the sense of a creative programme. Heuristic research/exploration treats the totality of reflecting and the procedures of seeking and finding new, i.e. authentic realisations or possibilities of producing a work of art. Heuristic research accepts in advance the possibilities of failure, error, fallacy, illusion, and mistake. Its procedure does not rest on a system of

131

rules, but on discovering, confirming, and rejecting what has been accomplished. Art is thereby reoriented, away from 'creating works of art' (Heidegger's Ge-Stell) into the world and toward an uncertain *quest* or *research* leading toward the unknown and unexpected – authentic and new – in both traditional and new media, as well as in human relations, which are established in art (Heidegger 302). Research highlights the retreat from creating *works of art* (*techne + poïesis*) toward the concepts of *artistic projects*.
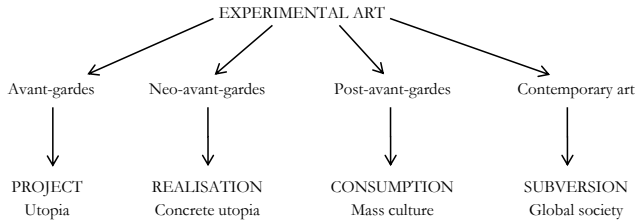
The concept of research emerged as the basis for the establishment of the concept of experimental art, i.e. art that supplants creating artworks with the 'process of research', leading toward new perceptions, experiences, knowledge, and statuses of art in the field of the aesthetic, cultural, and social. Experimental art thus emerges as a planned and organised research situation leading toward 'the artistically new'.

In principle, the concept of experimental art is historicised in two ways.

Experimental art is an aspect of the avant-gardes. In that sense, one might say that *avant-garde* (or vanguard, in English) denotes any super-style, radical, excessive, critical, experimental, projective, programmatic, and inter-disciplinary practice in art. These terms determine the character of the avant-garde and complement one another. For instance, the radicalism of avant-garde artists appears in their rejection of traditional art, bourgeois culture and society. Excessive practices are those whose phenomenality, appearance, sense, and meanings provoke and shock bourgeois society. Those excesses may be aesthetic, moral, or political. Excess has often been an artist's ideologically inarticulate gesture that determined her/him as an exotic social individual to whom anything was allowed (the artist as a bohemian). By assuming a critical and political status, excess has become a thoroughly planned procedure meant to provoke and destroy the autonomy of modernist art and bourgeois culture. The experimental status of avant-garde art suggests that the object of artistic work is not the creativity of an artisan or the production of an artwork, but to explore and change the nature of art. Avant-garde art strives for a complete transformation of art, culture, and society, and therefore has a projective character. The notion of the project determines the sense of avant-garde activism, in terms of ideology, values, and meanings. The concept of optimal projection was developed by literature historian Aleksandar Flaker (Flaker 107–113). Optimal projection denotes moving and choosing the optimal variant of one's artistic work in overcoming social reality. The avant-garde is inter-disciplinary, because avant-garde artworks are not made within the confines of determined and autonomous media and disciplines. Rather, they are made by transgressing, critiquing, and destroying the boundaries of media, disciplines, and genres of art. Avant-garde work in art either pinpoints the

boundaries of media (from impressionism to abstract art), or transgresses them, producing citational, collage, assemblage, and readymade objects, situations, events, and textual structures (Dada, constructivism).

Otherwise, the concept of experimental art is also posited as a more general concept than the avant-garde, in which case it signifies various artistic practices from the long 20th and early 21st century that pursue research and critical work in the virtually infinite domain of the hybrid and flexible possibilities of contemporary art, culture, and society. The diagram below may serve to demonstrate this complex construct:

EXPERIMENTAL ART

Avant-gardes	Neo-avant-gardes	Post-avant-gardes	Contemporary art
PROJECT	REALISATION	CONSUMPTION	SUBVERSION
Utopia	Concrete utopia	Mass culture	Global society

In other words, the concept of 'experimental art', as a more general concept of research artistic practice, refers to various research, critical, and inter-disciplinary practices, which I chose to classify in four potential formations.

Avant-gardes or, more precisely, historical or early avant-gardes (*c.* 1900–1933) are characterised by explorations leading toward a project (utopian draft) of a future or ideally imagined modern art, culture, or society. The avant-garde is thus almost literally the vanguard or reconnaissance patrol of modernism, that is, avant-gardes are an expression of a radical modernisation. They perceive the new (the novel, novelty) as genuinely new, anticipated and craved.

The neo-avant-gardes (*c.* 1949–1968) which may be conceptualised as a critique and overcoming of Cold War, established high modernism, by means of multimedia, pro-science, and political explorations of its antagonisms and limitations. The neo-avant-gardes already belong to 'the tradition of the new'. They were an expression of the intent to realise the new there and then – for instance, the concrete utopianism of neo-constructivism. That is, the neo-avant-gardes subvert the 'canonisation of the new'. The new, losing its novel character due to its modernist canonisation, becomes subject to subversive and critical work on the part of artists (Neo-Dada, Fluxus).

The concept of 'post-avant-garde' (after 1980) points to postmodern, that is, postmodernist artistic practices, which recycle or simulate strategies of experimentation, transgression, and critical provocation under the conditions of the post-modern mass market and popular culture. In ad-

dition to 'post-avant-garde', one also encounters the terms 'retro-avant-garde' and 'post-pop'. Retro-avant-garde signifies a variety of retro approaches that signify, under 'post-modern plural conditions', the recycling of clichés or *stylistic patterns* of the avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes, as well as, certainly, various modernist samples, ranging from *Fin-de-siècle* clichés to those of the roaring '20s and the gloomy '30s to the cliché of the Cold War '50s. Post-pop signifies tactics of appropriating and simulating popular and/or mass culture in experimental art and its orientation toward the contemporary everyday. The new emerges against the backdrop of the 'tradition of the new', which has become one of the old or completed traditions of modernity and modernism.

The term 'contemporary art' signifies post-media, critical, subversive, and politicised artistic practices in the age of global transitions, so to speak, after post-modernity. These practices unfolded in the antagonisms of the 1990s global transition societies and continue to unfold under the conditions of the economic crisis characteristic of post-2000 neoliberal capitalism. These practices are closer to the flexible, production technologies of mass media culture than they are to traditional artistic or literary mediums. The term 'contemporary' signifies that which is taking place in the present and reflecting and problematising the actuality of geographic areas. Experimentality no longer denotes the diachronic moving of borders from the mastered toward the new, but a synchronic re-examination of the conditions and circumstances of geographical and global contemporaneity itself, in relation to the media, political, cultural, aesthetic, and, although quite rarely, the traditionally artistic. Furthermore, today's totalising economy and its corresponding global culture have posited the 'new' as a temporary market quality. Quite quickly, the plurality of the new is replaced by the plurality of the newer still. This generates a staggering hyper-production of the new and its totalising, almost instantaneous global supply. Contemporary art, dealing with contemporaneity, is at the same time the new mainstream (the undisputed style or cliché of the actualisation of time and space) that affirms the neoliberal conditions and circumstances of social reproduction and subversions of the dominant representations of the market's power. But paradoxically, if successful, every rebellion transforms into a market value of mainstream culture.

Medium, Media and Postmedium

The contexts described above (the avant-garde, neo-avant-garde, post-avant-garde, contemporary art) enable locating the widest possible array of conditions for extremely varied experimental artistic practices that all stem

from the visual arts, performing arts, new-media arts, and, certainly, literature. This concerns the hybridisation of the traditional and homogeneous disciplines of art and their expansion into the open field of experimentation, inter-disciplinary, and inter-media crossing between various domains of art and culture. For instance, letterist, concrete, and visual poetry stepped out of literature and into the field of the visual, performing, and media arts. This was a move out of the verbal, literary text, toward the visual poetic text (for instance, Jiři Valoch, *Optical Poem*, 1966). Conceptual art abandoned the stable boundaries of painting and sculpture as mediums. Visual artists moved into the field of theoretical competence of the humanities, the philosophy of language and society, and, often, literature (poetry, prose, essay writing). A famous example is an essay by the Art&Language group (Art&Language 31), which discusses the situation of mounting an essay on essay writing on a museum or gallery wall. An entirely indeterminate and expansive field of textual-visual productions may be surveyed from dada (Schwitters, Picabia) and surrealism (René Magritte, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, 1929), via Neo-Dada and Fluxus, to conceptual art and post-modern and contemporary practices (Joseph Kosuth, Robert Barry, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer). Most of these works inhabit the extra-disciplinary domain of visual-textual experimental or critical exchanges and constructions (Selby).

Turning now to the work of art in poetry, we may introduce certain conceptual delineations. I will outline those delineations by progressing from the written record of the poetic text (in phenomenological terms, from the paper bearing the inscription of the poetic text) and from collecting poetic texts (written records or imprints on paper). Such a move takes one toward the body of the book (in phenomenological terms, from the zero body of paper to the full body of the book) and then on to the transformation of poetic text into an object, situation, or event. Let us look at the table below:

From technical support via medium to media	Paper
From technical support via medium to media	Book
Media	Book *qua* object, installation, event
Media	Object
Postmedia	Installation
Medium	Sound
Postmedia	Event
Postmedia	Text and Image
Media	Screen
Postmedia	Web/Network

The left column introduces the general conceptual identifications od different technical mediators: technical support, medium, media and post-media. Each of those terms has a multitude of meanings and conditions of use; therefore, I will redefine them with specific uses in the context of the present discussion and connect them to the terms in the right column. The right column represents very specific and concrete tools in artistic communication, for example: paper, book, object, instalation, sound, event, text, image, Screen, web-network.

Technical support denotes various means of creation, production, communication, and presentation, which are used to make, present, communicate, and exchange works of art/literature; those means do not constitute the character of an artwork, but make it accessible in the conventional sense of reception. In other words, a 'technical means' is not an integral part of the work, but only its necessary agent, whose phenomenal characteristics do not constitute the work's aesthetic, poetic, or artistic character. In yet other words, we may read a poem by Petrarch or Haroldo de Campos from a small or large book, a luxurious volume using 120-gsm paper, or a cheap volume using 60-gsm paper, etc. The only thing that matters is that the imprint has to be technically adequate, legible, but legibility is not part of the intent of Petrarch's or de Campos's poetry. Legibility goes without saying, as a necessary technical prerequisite for communicating a poetic text that is not equivalent to the imprint itself.

'Medium' is a problematic term. Entirely joking, I might say that it denotes people endowed with extraordinary supersensory abilities that enable them to communicate with beings beyond our world of experience. In the present context, however, that is not the meaning of 'medium' I have in mind. In the context of this discussion, the term signifies the totality of all material conditions and aspects, i.e. things that are required in the production, emergence, exchange, and communication of a work of art as such in the artworld, culture, and society. A medium is much more than technical support, because it includes a complex poetic and aesthetic relationship with technical support. For example, the medium of Petrarch's poetry comprises his internal life, the Latin language, the spoken and written language of renaissance Florence, as well as the multiplicity of possible modes of reciting his poetry out loud and to oneself, and writing his poetry by hand on a suitable surface or printing it mechanically, or, nowadays, presenting it using any means of presentation whatsoever (ranging from printed to onscreen and audiovisual images). All of this is further complicated by adding possible techniques of translation from one language into another that are built into the medium characteristic of his poetry. By contrast, a concrete poem by de Campos (for instance, *fala / prate / cala /*

ouro…), in addition to all the aspects of medium that Petrarch's poetry has, also bears certain characteristics of the visual. Its visuality is a constitutive aspect of its medium, as poetically relevant as is the role of linguistic language. In Petrarch's poetry, the visual has no such import, that is, it is only a necessary condition for the legibility of an inscription whose messages and aesthetic characteristics are not an effect of that legibility. By contrast, de Campos's poetry 'works' with the relationship of legibility and visibility as constitutive aspects of a work of poetry. It may be noted that the concept of medium also includes the conditions wherein a work comes into being, those of communicating, i.e. exchanging the work, as well as those of its reception. In literature, the medium of poetry often also includes aspects that are not in the work itself, but relate to the receiver (reader, listener), who memorises the work, with her/his potential abilities to reproduce it in her/his memories, writing, or oral communication.

'Media' are technical means built in and presented as a constitutive poetic and aesthetic aspect of a work of art. A 'technical means' is not auxiliary support, as in the literal usage of the term, but an important demonstrative aesthetic and poetic aspect of a work of poetry, which means that it is constituent of the work, which also shows and problematizes it. Marshall McLuhan's well-known phrase, „The medium is the message" (McLuhan 7), states that the medium is embodied in the message. In other words, the totality of all material conditions and circumstances is embodied, i.e. demonstratively materialised in the message (a work of poetry). If the totality of all material conditions is reduced to 'technical means' and 'technical support', then one may say that the media of art is an applied technical means problematised and thematised by means of a poetic work of art. For instance, the Russian avant-garde (e.g. Alexei Kruchyonykh, Olga Rozanova, *Universal War*, 1916), Slovenian reism (e.g. I. G. Plamen, *Embrionalna knjiga*, 1968), and German conceptual art (Franz Erhard Walther, *Large Cloth Book*, 1963−1969) treated artistic poetry books as a medium to be explored in artistic research and used to present that research. Russian avant-garde books explored the relationship between verbal and visual technical means (means of support), which constitute the expressive (sensory/aesthetic) properties of a book. A book is not an 'agent', but the content of, communication. In Slovenian reism and especially in *Embrionalna knjiga* (The Embryonic Book), the poetry book itself was the object of a phenomenologically motivated exploration of the 'character of the book as a medium ' and the 'boundaries of the book as a medium'. As for Franz Erhard Walther, his *Large Cloth Book* is a sizable object, produced in the form of a book comprising 68 pages. It is used as an unexpected space for putting performing bodies into specific relations.

The book as a medium of research is thereby brought to the performing 'condition of a postmedium'.

The postmedia artistic or poetry practice may be interpreted as a hybrid linking of various artistic, poetic, and extra-artistic phenomena in the presentation of political, aesthetic, ethical, and poetic/artistic ideas. Postmedia works are poetic/artistic or aesthetic events realised as objects, installations, performances, that is, appropriations of extra-artistic objects, situations, events, institutions, and modes of behaviour, that is, data aesthetics or documentary practices. My preferred term, 'postmedia artistic practice', is indebted to the term 'the post-medium condition', developed by American theorist and art historian Rosalind Krauss ("A Voyage" 32 and 45; *Perpetual* xii and 89). The difference between her usage of the term 'the post-medium condition', itself indebted to Lyotard's 'postmodern condition' (*la condition postmoderne*), and my own construct is that my construct does not engage in a comparative polemic concerning the importance and value that the medium and media may have as opposed to the postmedium and postmedia in the phenomenological-aesthetic sense, but merely describes the condition of the contemporary hybrid artistic and poetic practice, no longer predicated on the traditional modern mediums and media of poetry, the fine and the visual arts. These are hybrid artistic practices that traverse various formats of performing poetic, artistic, and aesthetic concepts, stances, discourses, and apparatuses. The traditional and modern poet or artist was determined by a 'specialised poetic ontology', which was essentially determined by the *nature* of her/his preferred medium or media (painting, poetry, prose, photography, theatre, film, etc.). The contemporary artist and/or poet addresses the *format* whereby his ideas (concepts, stances, discourses, and apparatuses) are realised. In other words, before, one was an artist or poet by virtue of using a certain medium or media in a canonical or individual way. Today, by contrast, artists or poets are identified as such regardless of the medium or media they employ. They select the best suited format for realising their ideas and introducing them into the field of social or cultural contexts. The concept of format refers not to a 'poetic ontology' that determines an artist, but to her/his strategy of acting in art, culture, and society. In contemporary art and poetry, strategy takes us from 'style' toward a 'political platform'. Therefore, the *format* is not a necessary way of creating or expressing, but a disciplinary or inter-disciplinary set of modalities for realising artistic and poetic ideas, selected from one instance to the next. Such a set of modalities may rest on the medium or media of a particular discipline of art, or on inter-disciplinary moving between various disciplines of art, as well as on media from other cultural and social practices (bureaucracy, politics,

social work, creative industries, mass media, everyday forms of life, etc.). A format is not an artist's or poet's choice of a specific poetics of art/poetry, but a real or ostensible choice of performing a politics of art/poetry.

There are many examples of postmedia artistic and poetic practices – here are some of them! Bálint Szombathy has realised 'found poetry' (*Found Visual Poems: Rock Letters*, 1976). These are works of poetry realised in the format of land art. Szombathy looked for rocks in the ground and used them to produce letters in it. The resulting work is located outdoors (Pico del Teide, Tenerife). In the world of art, Szombathy's work of poetry is present by means of photo-documents.

In 1970, the Bosch + Bosch group performed *Art,* an interventional poetry action. They used cardboard to make the letters A, R, and T, and installed them outdoors, on the ground or in water.

Visual artist Josip Stošić worked with the format of the poetic installation of objects (*Verbalno preparirani predmeti* [Verbally Prepared Objects], 1970) and behavioural interactive action (*Premetaljka* [Anagram], 1971) in gallery spaces and other types of interior. His installation *HA-HA* (1964–84) was realised as a simulacrum of a theatre melodrama. For instance, when the curtain rises, the improvised stage features the letters HA … HA, cut out of paper. The letters constitute the actors of the play, its décor, and poetic text, all at once.

The performance format was developed in various situations, for instance, in the context of the poetic voice as the medium and/or media of poetry (Kurt Schwitters, *Ursonate*, 1922–32) and in the experimental hybrid poetic practice of 'oral, audio, or verbal poetry' (Henry Chopin, Katalin Ladik, John Cage).

In this context, one might also mention complex theatricalised poetic performances, such as *More* (The Sea), a 1969 action by the OHO group and Tomaž Šalamun; Katalin Ladik's *Vabljenje* (1968); Carolee Schneemann's feminist poetry performance *Interior Scroll* (1975); Attila Csernik's body poetry from the 1970s; and Charles Bernstein's language poetry performances (*Futurist Manifestos*, 2009).

An example of postmedia poetry practice based on digital interactive visual-textual models was presented at the Vienna Airport in 2012 (*ZeitRaum*, a project realised by Ars Electronica Futurelab, in collaboration with Jussi Ängeslevä, Yugo Nakamura, and Robert Huber). Digital poetry, for instance, has developed from media (computer poetry, hyper-textual poetry) to postmedia poetry (internet or net poetry, interactive poetry, digital performance) – characteristic artists include Eduardo Kac, Catherine Davinio, etc. Today, new media, i.e. digital technologies have globalised the field of postmedia artistic practices and brought it to the dominant

'flexible possibility' of practising as well as applying experimental poetry/art.

In the contemporary world, the ideas of postmedia working with hybridised and flexible artistic, poetic, and literary formats have emerged in two antagonistic roles:

1. that of art suited to the de-territorialised and flexible corporate and market demands of mass consumption (the advertising industry, political propaganda, cultural creative activism, the construction of the public social sphere, mass consumption), and

2. that of art suited to the demands for permanent emancipation and critique of contemporary structures of political and economic power (activist politicised art).

These two roles are not unconnected; on the contrary, they are connected in the antagonism that we recognise as the constitutive conflict of contemporaneity.

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Onstran papirja. Postmediji in eksperimentalna umetnost

Ključne besede: avantgarda / avantgardna umetnost / poezija in vizualne umetnosti / eksperimentalna poezija / neoavantgarda / postavantgarda / postmoderna / umetnost in družba / intermedialnost

V kratki razpravi obdelam splošni pojem »eksperimentalna umetnost«, njegovo mogočo uporabnost pri interpretaciji poezije kot eksperimentalne umetniške prakse, in pokažem na specifičen položaj medijskega in post-medijskega umetniškega dela, ki subvertira meje med poezijo in vizualnimi umetnostmi oziroma med družbo in kulturo. Eksperimentalna umetnost je ena od oblik avantgarde. Mogoče je reči, da je avantgarda (fr. avant-garde, ang. vanguard) ime za nadstilno, radikalno, ekscesno, kritično, eksperimen-talno, projektivno, programsko in interdisciplinarno prakso v umetnosti. Skupek navedenih pojmov, ki se vzajemno dopolnjujejo, opredeljuje značaj avantgarde. Denimo, radikalizem avantgardnega umetnika se kaže v tem, da ne pristaja na tradicionalno umetnost, meščansko kulturo in družbo. Ekscesne so tiste umetniške prakse, katerih pojavnost, izgled, smisel in pomen provocirajo in šokirajo meščansko družbo. Ekscesi so lahko estet-ski, moralni in politični. Ekses je pogosto neartikulirana gesta umetnika; ta gesta ga opredeli kot eksotičnega družbenega posameznika, ki mu je vse dovoljeno (umetnik kot boem). S tem ko so ekscesu dodali še kritični in politični status, je ta postal osmišljeni postopek provokacije in destrukcije avtonomije modernistične umetnosti in buržoazne kulture. Eksperimentalni status avantgardne umetnosti kaže na to, da cilj delovanja v umetnosti ni mojstrsko ustvarjanje ali proizvodnja umetniškega dela, pač pa raziskovanje in spreminjanje narave umetnosti. Avantgardna umetnost si prizadeva za popolno preobrazbo umetnosti, kulture in družbe, zaradi česar ima projek-tivni značaj. Ideja projekta opredeljuje ideološki, vrednostni in pomenski smisel avantgardističnega delovanja. Avantgarda je interdisciplinarna, saj umetniška dela ne nastajajo v okviru posameznih in avtonomnih medijev in disciplin. Nastajajo s prestopanjem, kritiko in destrukcijo ločnic med mediji, umetniškimi disciplinami in žanri. Avantgardno umetniško delo bodisi kaže meje medija (od impresionizma do abstraktne umetnosti) bodisi jih prestopa, ko proizvaja citatne, kolažne, asemblažne in readymade predmete, situa-cije, dogodke in tekstne strukture (dada, konstruktivizem). Neoavantgarde si je mogoče predstavljati kot kritiko in preseganje etabliranega visokega modernizma hladne vojne z multimedijskim, proznanstvenim ali političnim raziskovanjem antagonizmov in meja modernizma. Neoavantgarde so že

del »tradicije novega«. Izražale so namero po dejanskem ustvarjanju novega tu in takrat, konkretni utopizem konstruktivizma, na primer. V neoavant-gardah pravzaprav pride do subvertiranja »kanonizacije novega«. Novo, ki z modernistično kanonizacijo izgublja značaj novosti, je podvrženo subverzivnemu in kritičnemu delu umetnika (neodada, fluxus). Pojem »postavantgarda« (po letu 1980) kaže na umetniške prakse postmoderne oziroma postmodernizma, s katerimi se reciklirajo ali simulirajo strategije eksperimenta, transgresije ali kritične provokacije v okoliščinah postmo-dernega množičnega tržišča in popularne kulture. V sodobnem svetu se koncepti postmedijskega dela s hibridiziranimi in fleksibilnimi umetniškimi, pesniškimi in književnimi formati kažejo v dvojni antagonistični vlogi:

1. umetnosti, lastne deteritorializiranim in fleksibilnim korporacijskim in tržnim zahtevam množične potrošnje (reklamna industrija, politična propaganda, kulturni kreativni aktivizem, konstrukcija javne družbene sfere, množična potrošnja) in

2. umetnosti, lastne zahtevam po nenehni emancipaciji in kritiki sodobnih struktur politične in ekonomske moči (aktivistična spolitizirana umetnost).

Obe zahtevi nista nepovezani; nasprotno, povezani sta v antagonizmu, ki ga prepoznavamo kot konstitutivni konflikt sodobnosti. Tekst pojasn-juje dela eksperimentalnih pesnikov: Aleksej Kručonih, Kurt Scwitters, I. G. Plamen, Tomaž Šalamun, Katalin Ladik, Balint Szombathy, Attila Csernik, Carolle Schneemann, Charles Bernstein, Josip Stošiš itn.

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