# Foreword DuctTape Collective

Florian Cramer

At the *(Not) Jammed Poetry Night* at Limestone Books Maastricht in 2022, seven writers read their poetry alongside “Scott”, a real-time printing system designed by the DuctTape Collective. Using Google’s English-language speech-to-text voice recognition system, it transcribed the spoken words in real time and printed them out on a dot-matrix printer manually operated by the two members of DuctTape. The transcriptions were flawed, misrecognizing spoken English words, or even fictitious when the poets read in Dutch. What’s more, the two members of DuctTape operated the printer’s paper roll in the manner of DJs scratching vinyl records, adjusting word and line spacing in real time so that the texts were printed not as conventional blocks of text, but as “parole in libertà” - a term coined in the early 20th century by the Italian futurist F.T. Marinetti - or quasi free-form visual poetry.

Jamming thus took on an expanded meaning: a poetry jam session, but also a printing jam session, with paper being “jammed” in both senses of the word.

The printer thus provided a medium for poetry in the same sense that the American art historian and sinologist Ernest Fenollosa, who lived in Japan, had described “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” in a homonymous essay published in 1920 by Ezra Pound. While Fenollosa’s linguistic scholarship has been debunked as incompetent,[[1]](#footnote-2) its value to modernist poets lay in its elaboration (however flawed) of the inherent visual-linguistic poetry of Chinese ideograms. Early forms of visual poetry are known from the Six Dynasties period (fourth century CE), where the poet Sū Huì 蘇蕙 wrote a poem about her husband’s infidelity in the form of a crossword puzzle that can be read in 7,940 different ways.

[picture: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Su\_Hui\_(poet)#/media/File:Xuanjitu.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Su_Hui_(poet)" \l "/media/File:Xuanjitu.png) ]

Comparing the poem and its inherent poetic function of Chinese characters with the way Scott the Printer worked under the influence of the poetry recitations at Limestone Books, Google’s automatic speech recognition, and the DuctTape Collective’s DJ-style paper jamming, the latter seems the clearest case of medium as message: Scott the printer functions as an apparatus with its own agency and meaning beyond the text it prints. McLuhan, whose media theory was grounded in modernist experimental art and poetry, explained his definition of medium as message as follows: “In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs”.[[2]](#footnote-3)

This means that no artificial intelligence whatsoever is required for any machine or apparatus to act not only as a transmitter, but as a co-author - purely by virtue of its technical capabilities, its constraints, and the modes of production it necessitates and enforces. When Friedrich Nietzsche first used a typewriter in 1882, he found its effect on his writing so profound that he concluded that “our writing tools co-write our thoughts”. His observation became a starting point for entire literary media theories, most notably that of Friedrich Kittler.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Three decades later, a considerable portion of Dadaist visual poetry literally grew out of the possibilities - namely, the industrially prefabricated letters - of lead type, such as Raoul Hausmann’s poem “fmsbw” [1918] and Kurt Schwitters’ children’s book “Die Scheuche” [1925]). In Schwitters’ book, the visual figures and shapes were literally determined by what was available as lead letters and punctuation marks. These design constraints became even stronger in post-World War II concrete and visual poetry written and designed on mechanical typewriters, such as the 1960s *Spatial Poems* of Japanese musician, composer, and Fluxus artist Mieko Shiomi, and the 1970s visual poetry of East German artist Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt and Mexican-Dutch artist Ulises Carrión. This poetry literally emerged from the artists’ dialogues with the possibilities and visual-expressive constraints of their mechanical typewriters, making Nietzsche’s aphorism very concrete.

In their time, however, these forms of writing were marginal. Today, they seem to be gaining more attention and importance, not only among poets and readers, but particularly among graphic designers. As print is no longer the mass medium it was in the 20th century, book publishing is gradually mutating from a generic industrial mass product to an artisanal practice. This is similar to the mutation of painting into a fine art practice in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, after photography replaced its function as an everyday medium of depiction. In 1960, art critic Clement Greenberg defined modernist painting as “all that was unique in the nature of its medium”.[[4]](#footnote-5) While this definition is controversial and problematic in its narrowness, medium specificity may be helpful in explaining the way today’s artists and designers approach printed matter and printing processes, focusing on and experimenting with their material aspects and qualities.

The DuctTape Collective’s poetry paper jamming can be seen as part of a larger contemporary movement of artist and designer book/zine making collectives, with artist- and designer-run bookstores serving as their public hubs. Its current lineage goes back at least to Extrapool/KNUST Press in Nijmegen and its 1983 reinvention of Riso printing, preceded by artist bookstores such as *Other Books and So* run by Ulises Carrión in 1970s Amsterdam and *Printed Matter* founded in New York in the same decade. The work of the DuctTape Collective, however, is post-digital in that it hybridizes analog print and computer-generated art and design, and is part of a larger experimental publishing practice between hacker culture and artist books.

An immediate parallel to the DuctTape Collective’s Scott printer is the Amsterdam-based collective Hackers & Designers’ *Momentary Zine* (2016) and *ChattyPub* (2021).[[5]](#footnote-6). Like Scott the Printer, *Momentary Zine* is based on computer speech recognition; it consists of a microphone, a computer program that assembles pages from recognized text and matching images found online, and prints everything in real time as the person speaks into the microphone. *ChattyPub* is a complete system for collaboratively writing and designing a print publication within an online chat system.

Upon its release, *Momentary Zine*’s speech recognition and image search components were controversial among open source and hacker activists because, like *Scott*, they relied on Google’s services, raising questions about corporate control and ownership as well as user privacy and data mining. In *Scott*, the misrecognition of spoken words by Google’s algorithms made it palpable to the audience how the apparatus interfered with writing.

What strikes me about such post-digital practices is not only the hybridization of digital and analog technology, but also the blurring of the disciplines of poetry, visual art, and graphic design - much more so than in visual poetry of the past, where the poet was usually either a DIY typesetter/graphic designer or collaborated with professional typesetters and graphic designers, sometimes with computer programmers. In today’s post-digital writing and publishing, the poetics shifts from a way of writing to the design of an apparatus that includes computer software, hardware, and the social design of participatory performance.

The idea that each apparatus has its own poetics and agency was highly controversial when it was first proposed by media theorists in the second half of the 20th century. Humanist and leftist scholars and activists in particular rejected it because it implied that existing apparatuses could never be radically repurposed. If, for example, radio remained structurally a one-to-many mass propaganda device, and if that was its very function and message, then alternative radio would be impossible. In the age of digital platform capitalism, however, the idea that the medium is the message, or that the apparatus has its own politics, no longer seems controversial. Systems like Scott the Printer (in conjunction with the social design of the *(Not) Jammed Poetry Night*) and *Momentary Zine* do not actually reject the concept of the platform, but function as their own micro-platforms. That *our writing tools co-write our thoughts* seems to have entered cultural consensus.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche’s claim needs to be nuanced because it has been overstated in later media theories. If devices are co-authors, they are not the sole authors, and they didn’t appear out of nowhere, but are designs and thus the results of (cultural, social, economic, political…) choices. This becomes very tangible, visible and readable in this book.

1. Kennedy, George A. “Fenollosa, Pound and the Chinese Character”. *Yale Literary Magazine*, vol. 126, no. 5, 1958, pp. 24-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. McLuhan, Marshall. Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man.\_ The MIT Press, 1994 (1964). p. 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Among others, in Kittler, Friedrich A. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Stanford University Press, 1999 (1986) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Greenberg, Clement. “Modernist Painting.” *Forum Lectures*, Voice of America, 1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Documentation of both projects can be found at https://www.hackersanddesigners.nl/momentary-zine.html and https://www.hackersanddesigners.nl/chattypub. Accessed January 18, 2025 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)