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ПОЭЗИИ

PRIMARY SOURCE

## FRANCESCA CAPONE

PRIMARY SOURCE
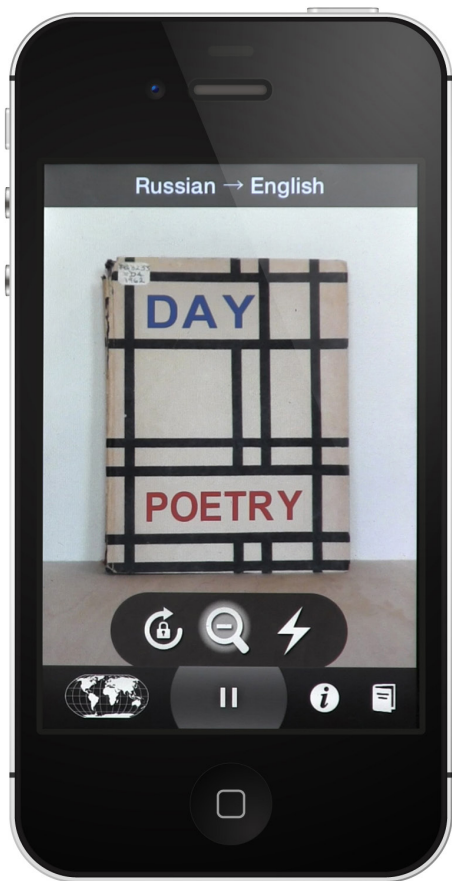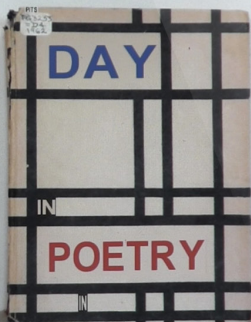
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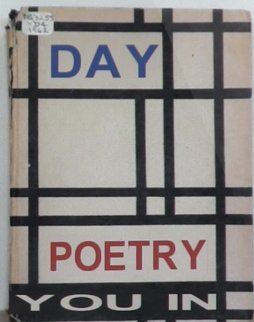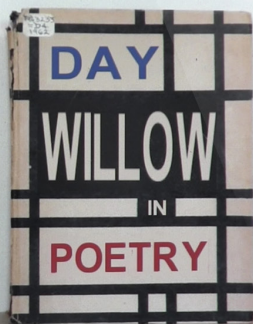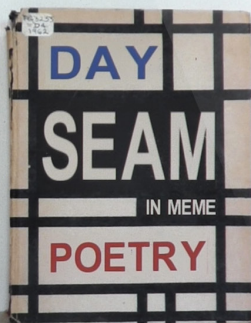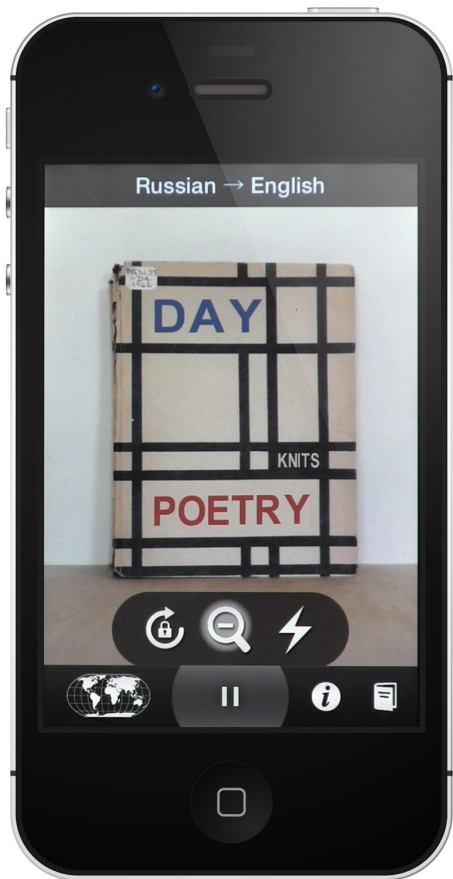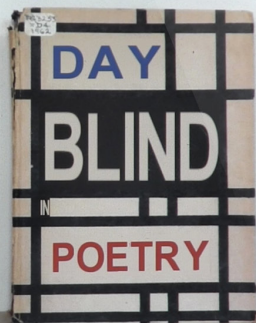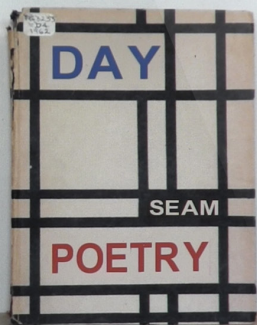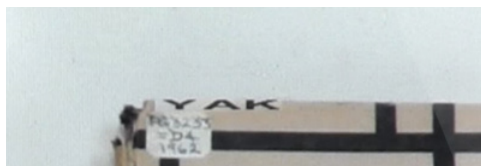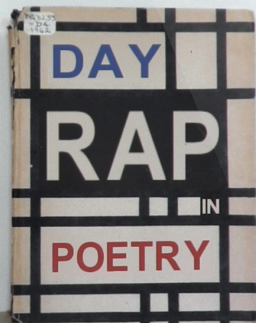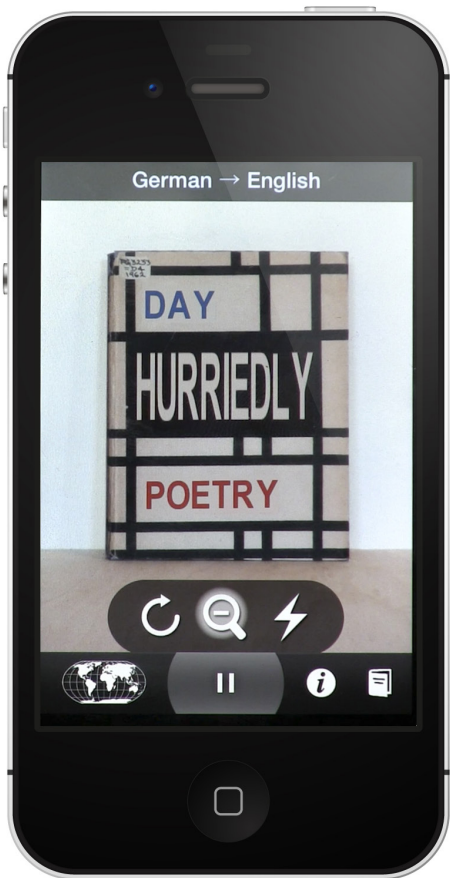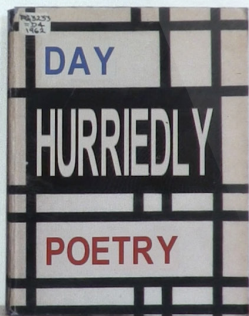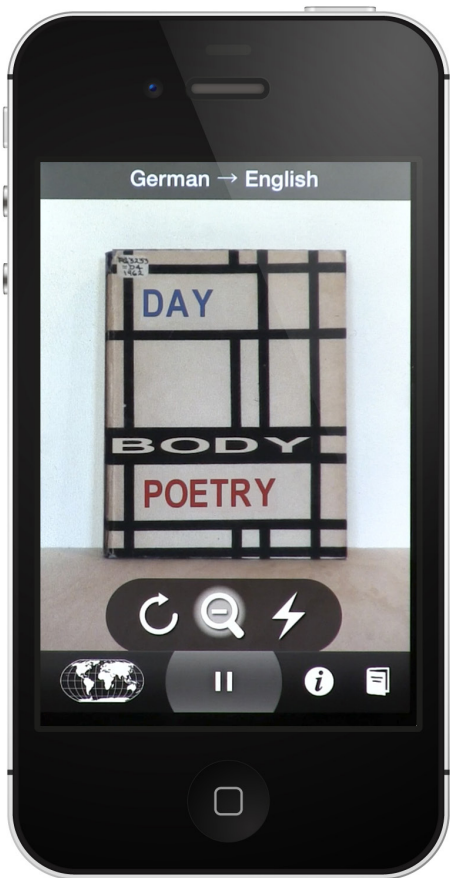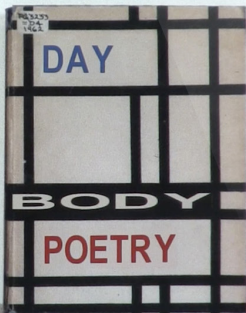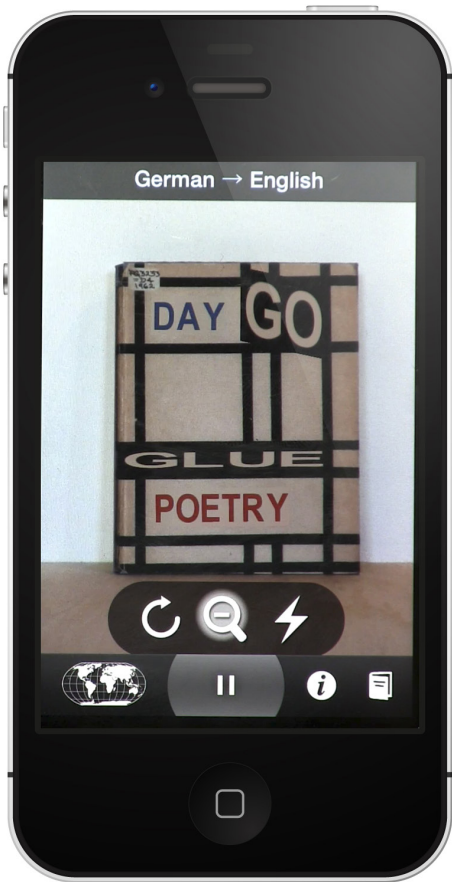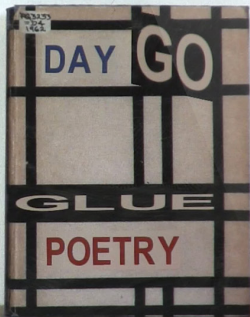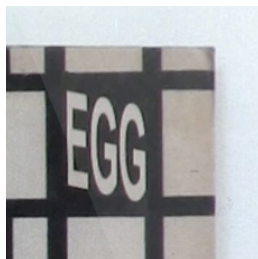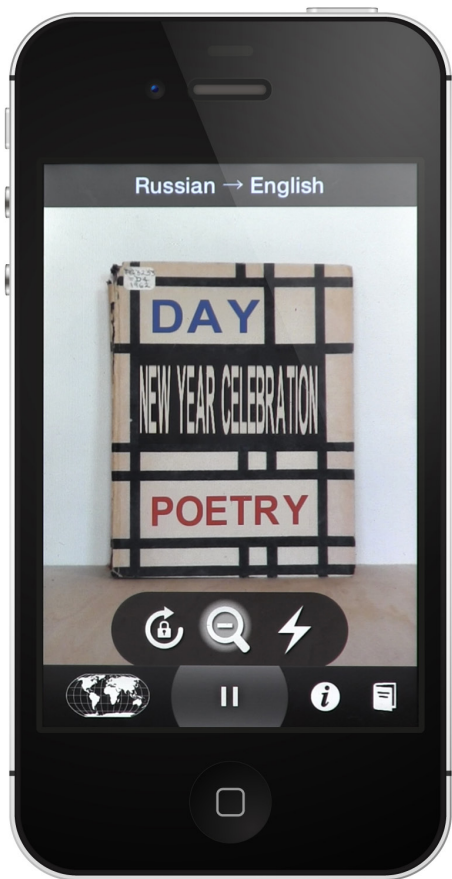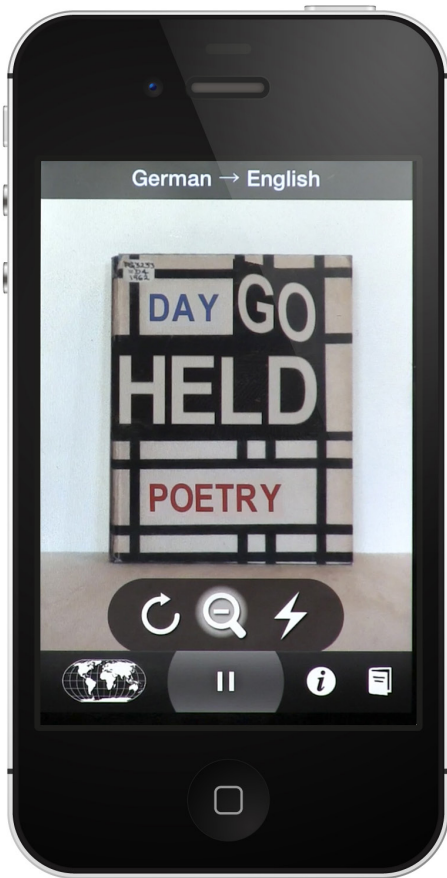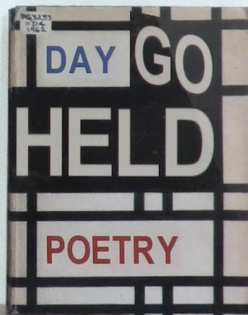
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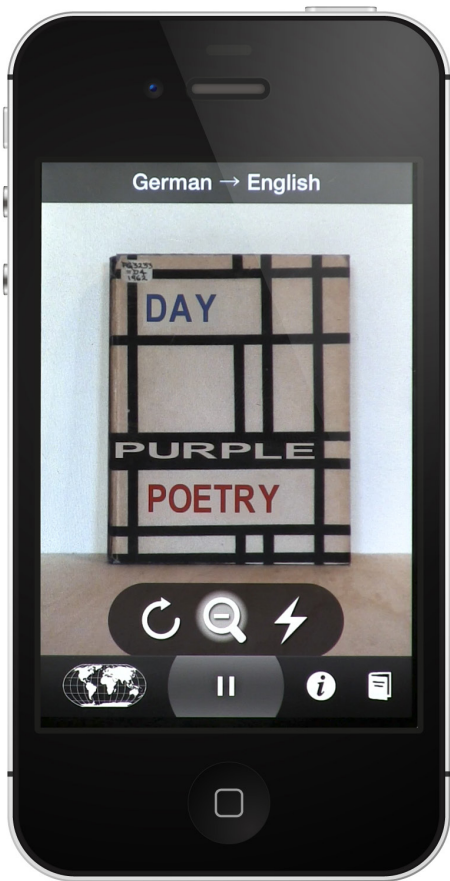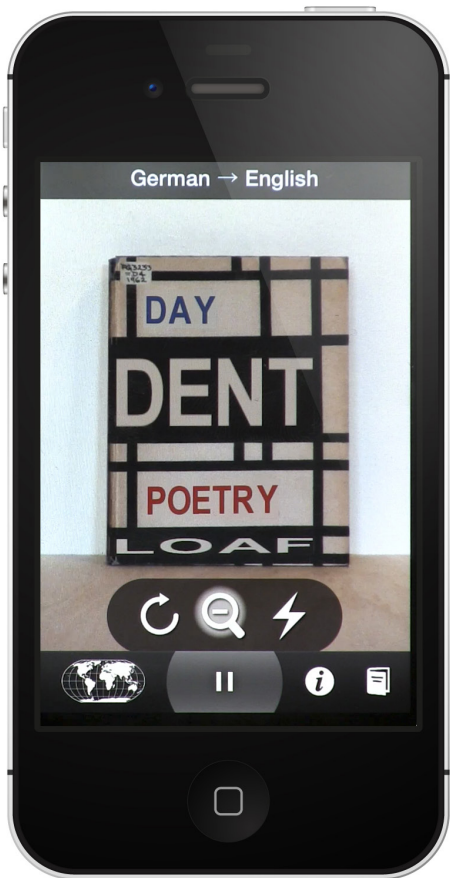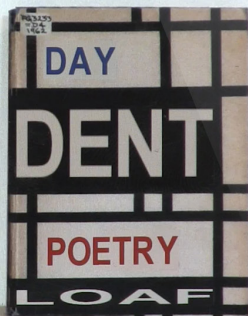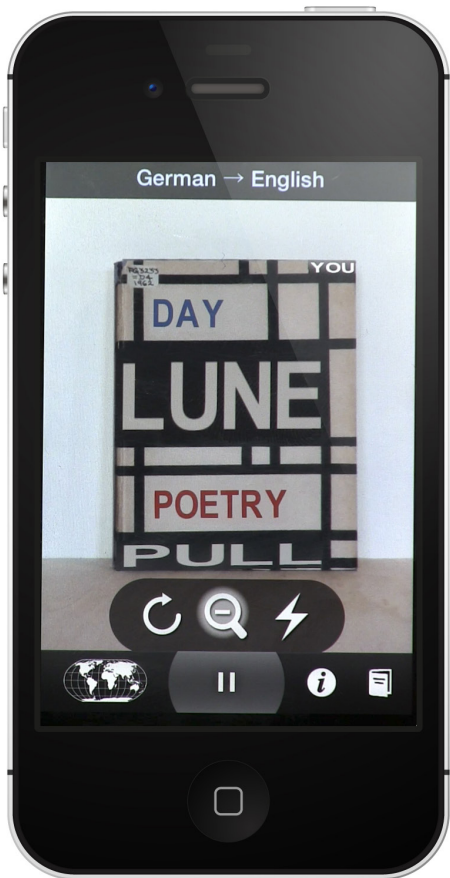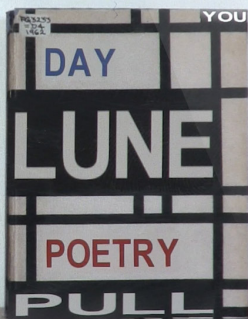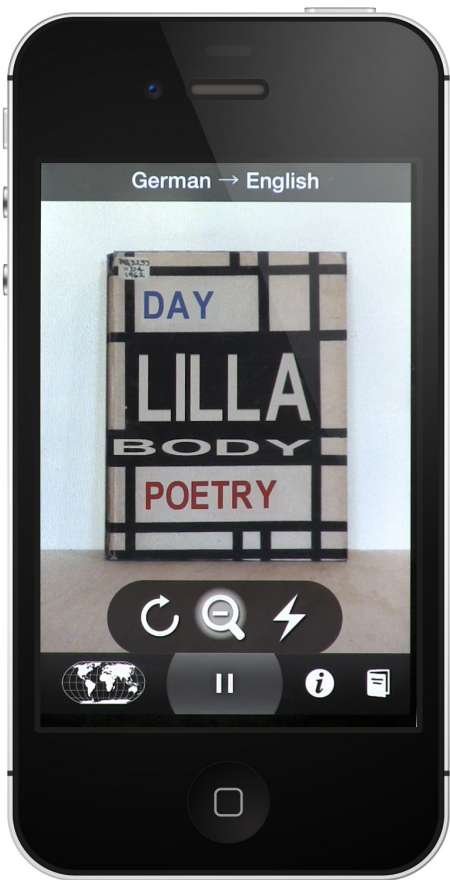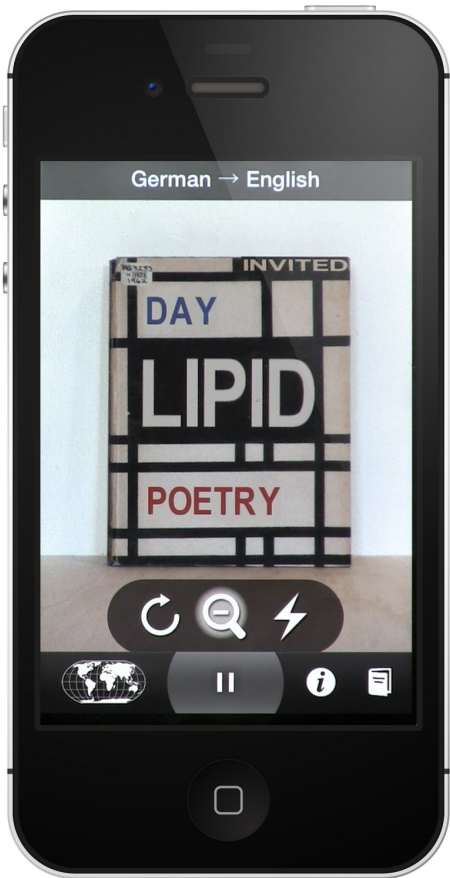
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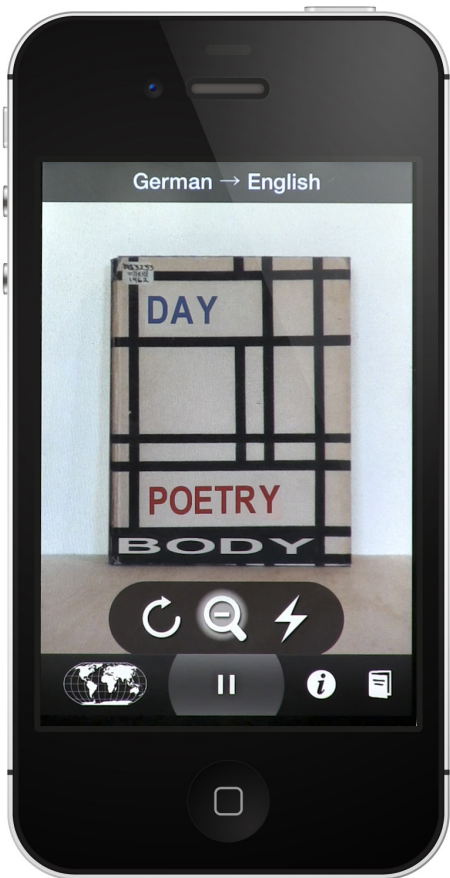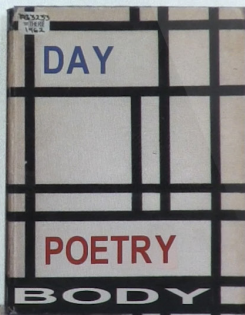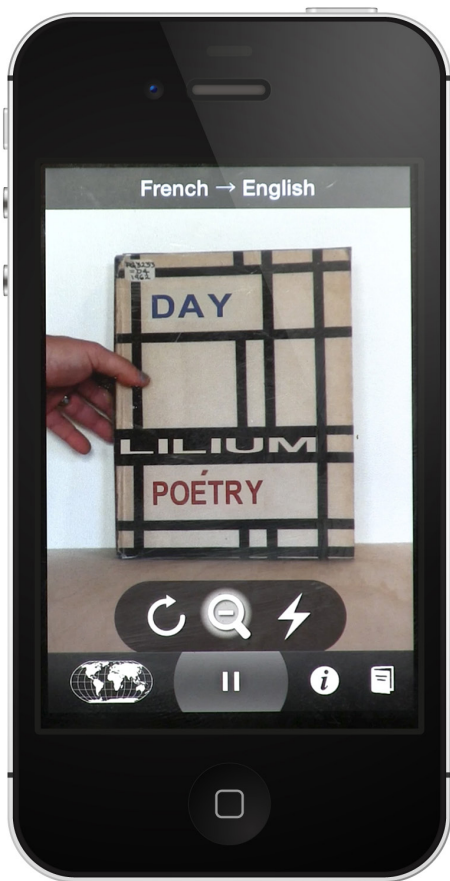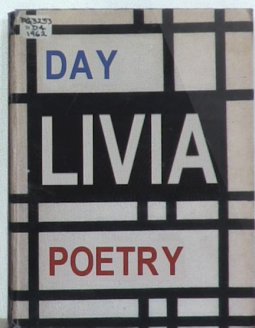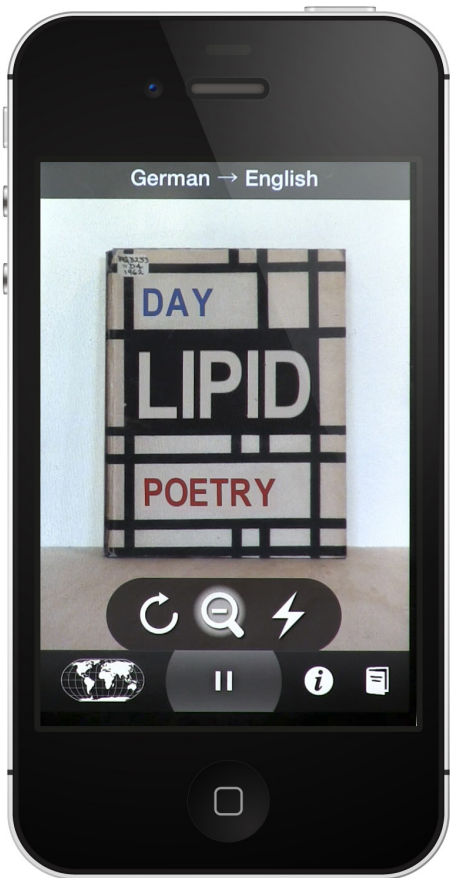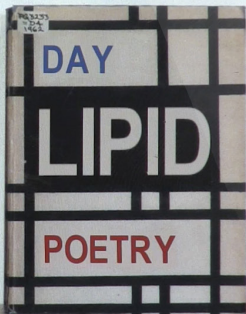
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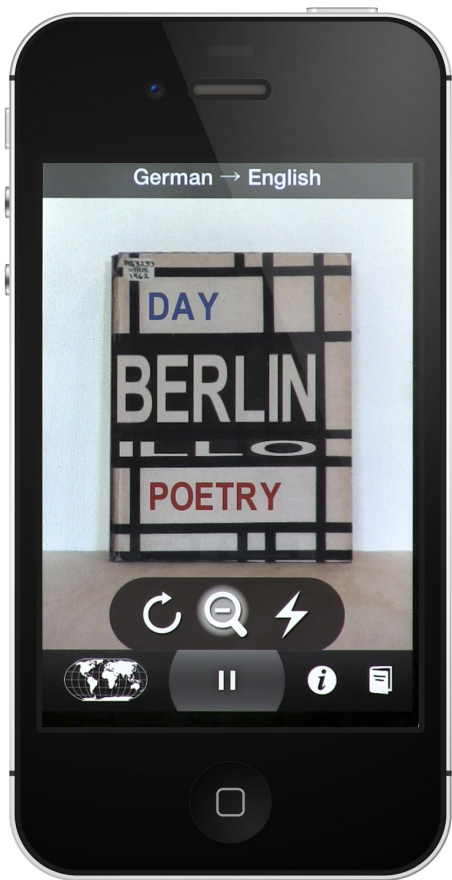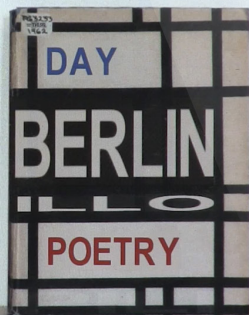
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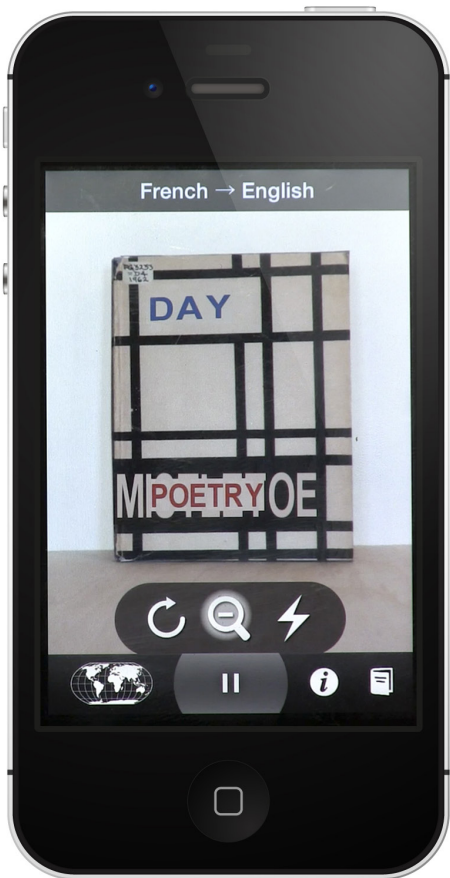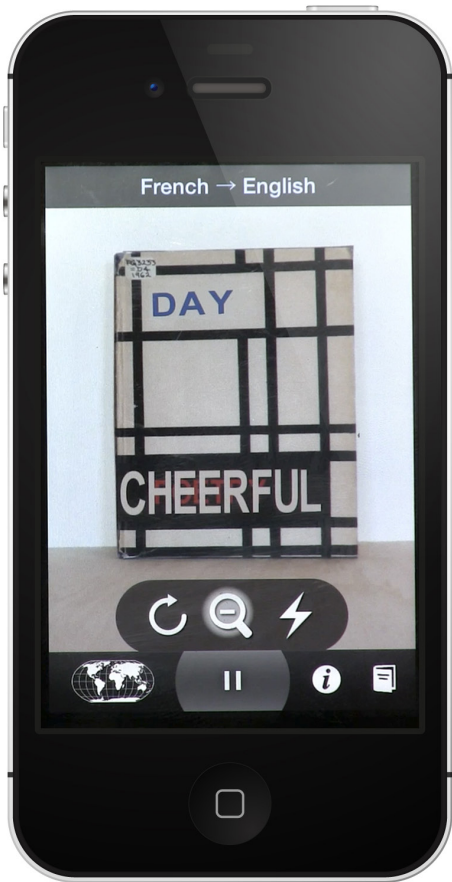
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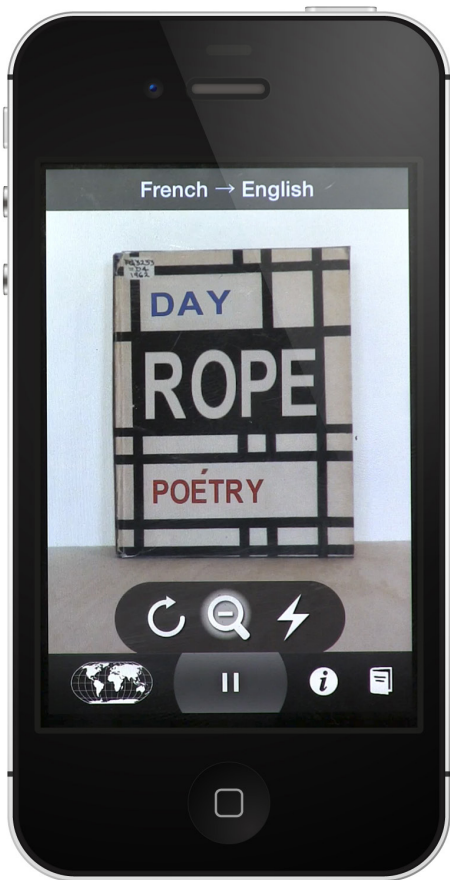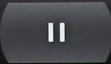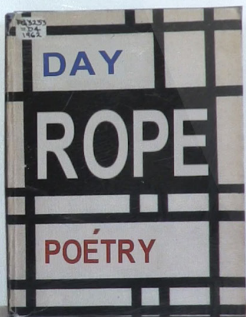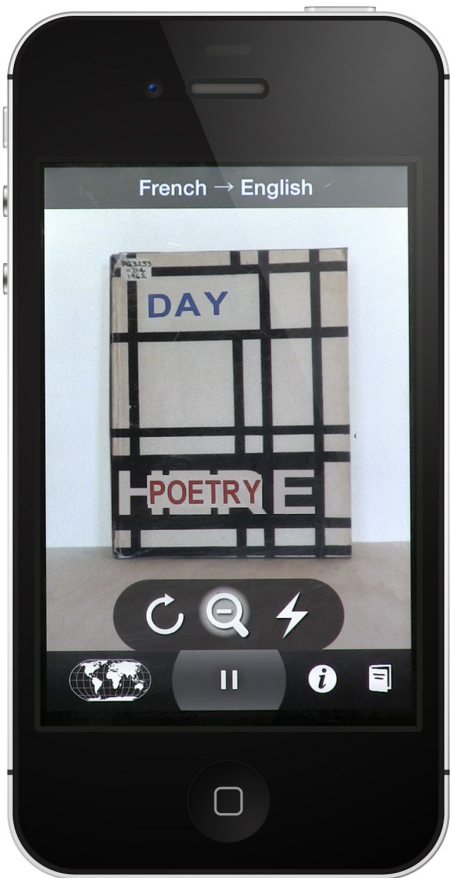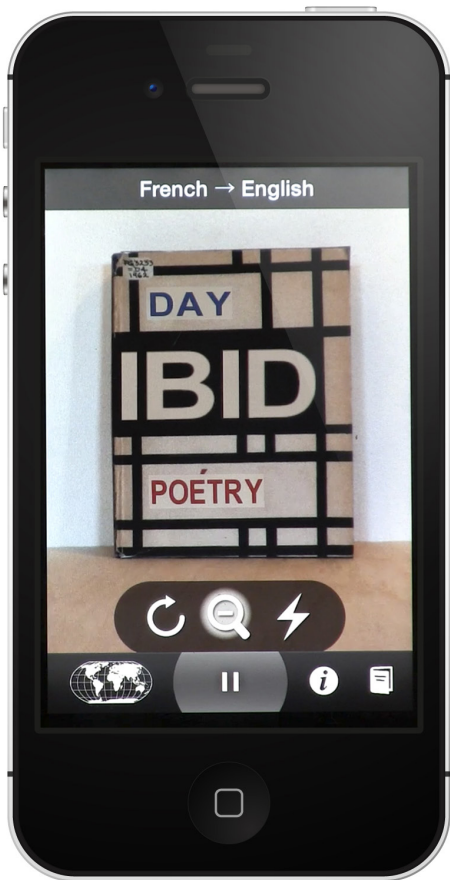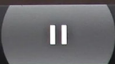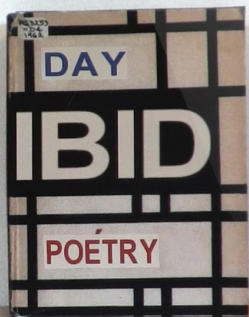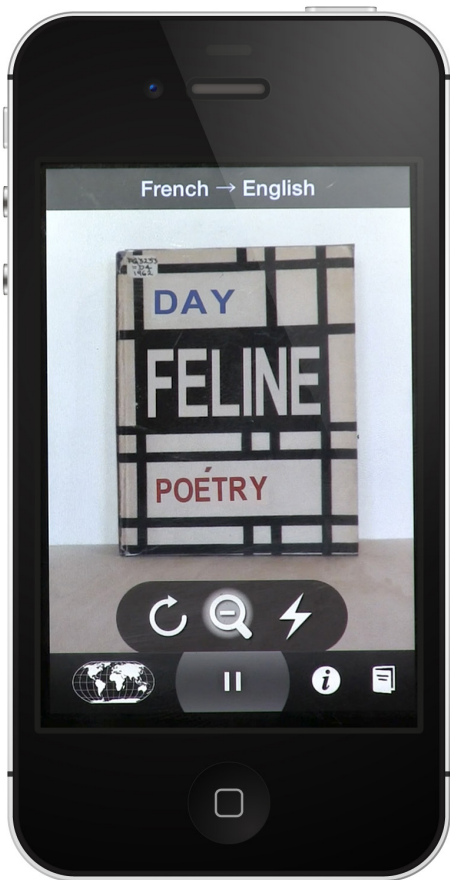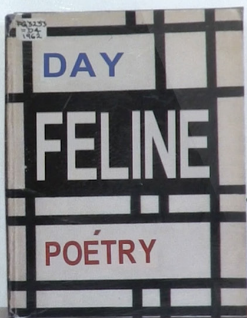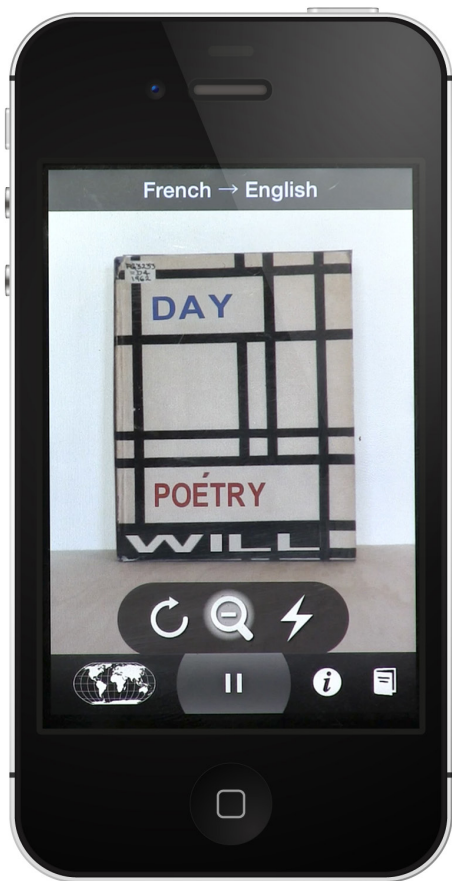
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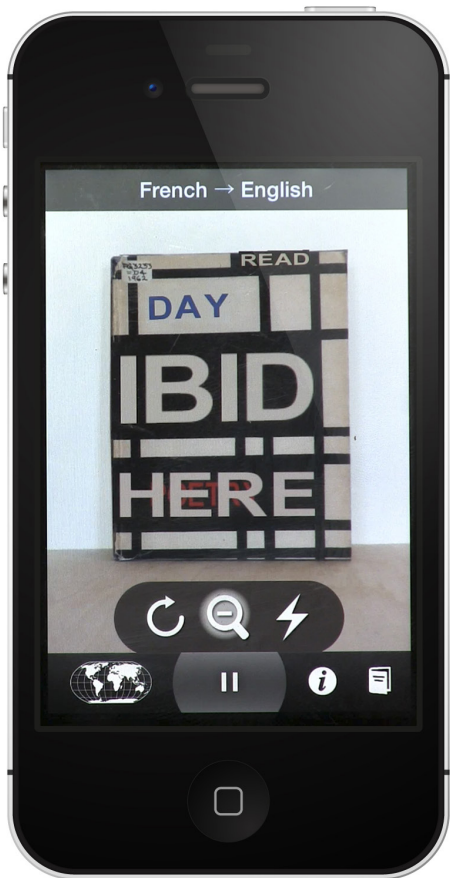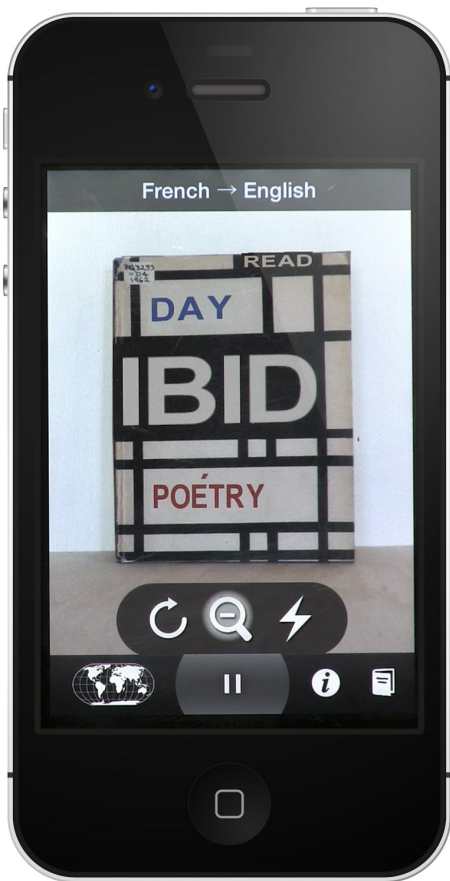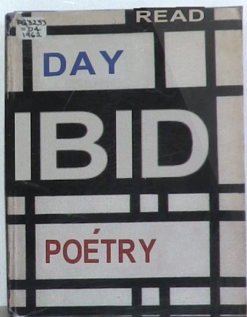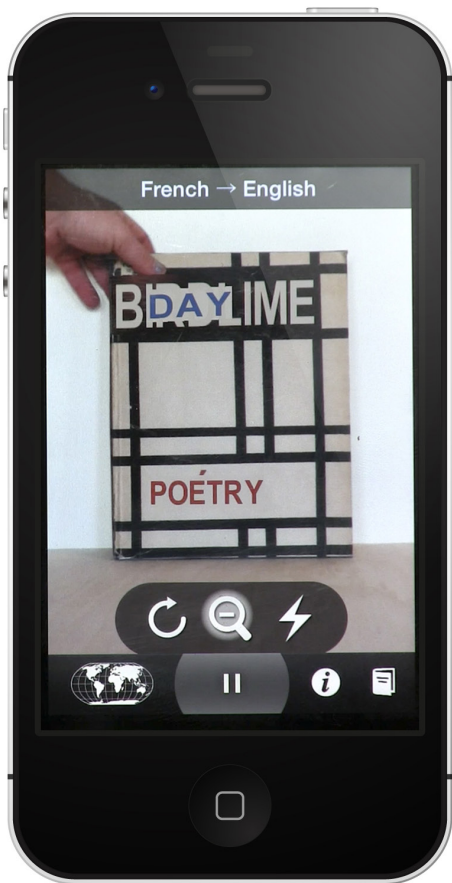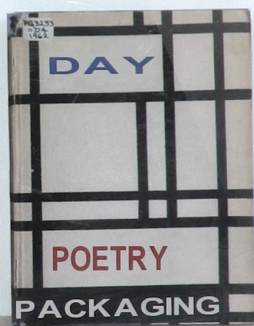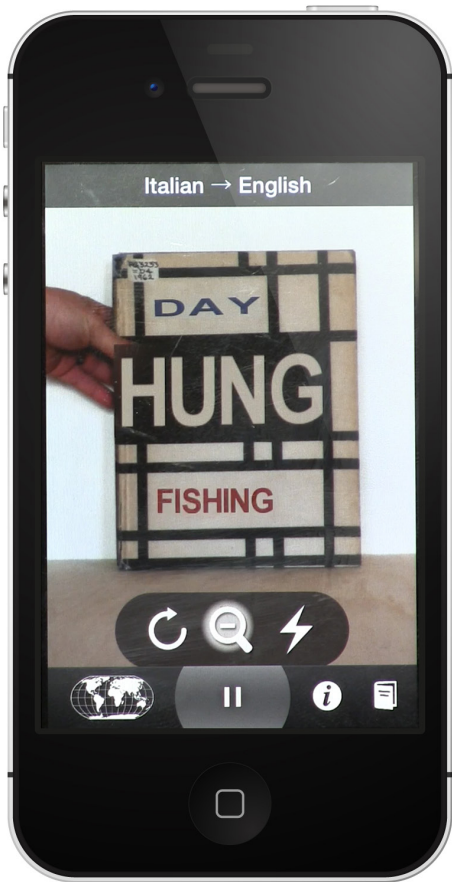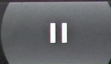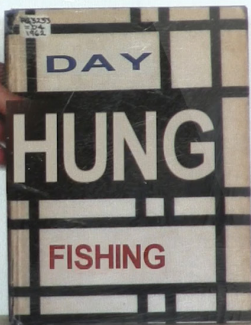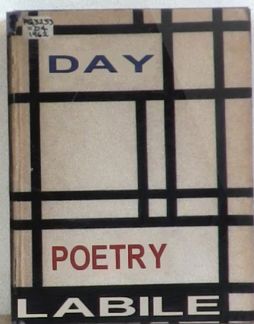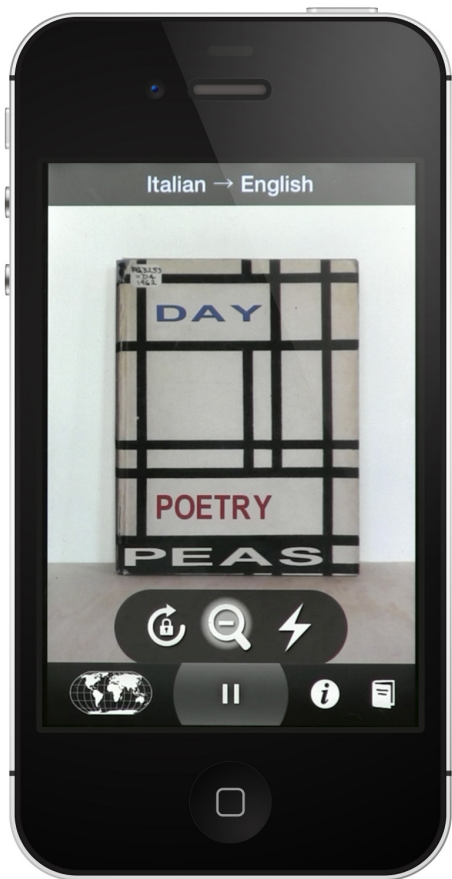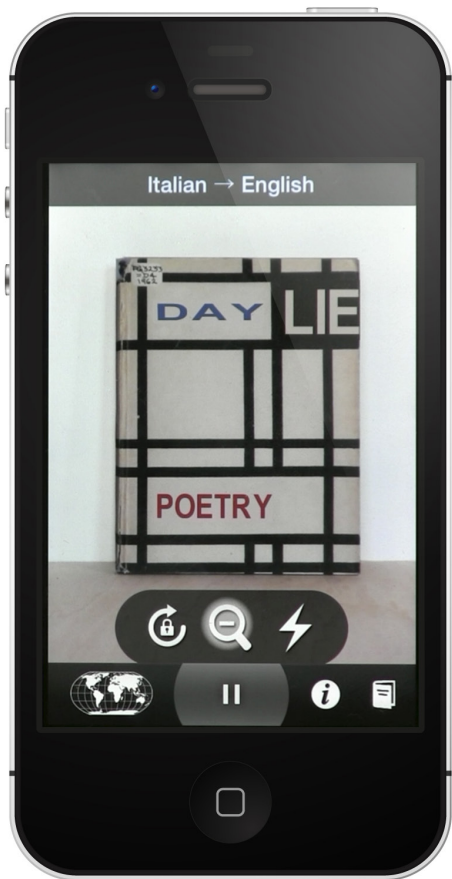
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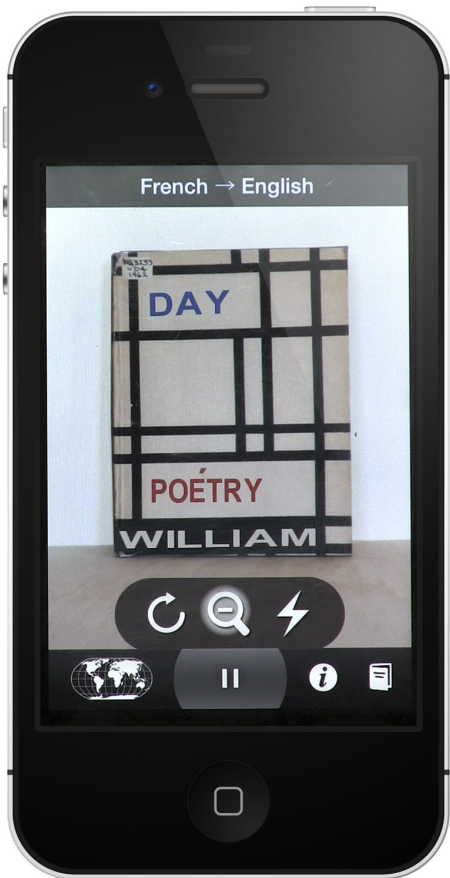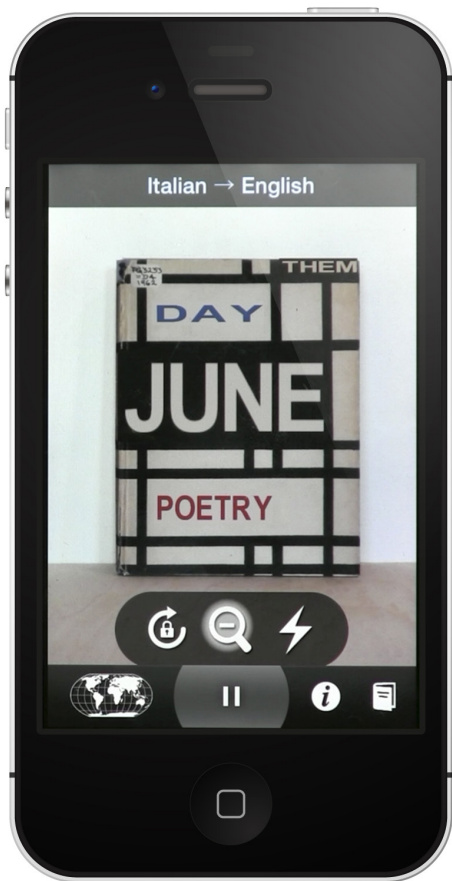
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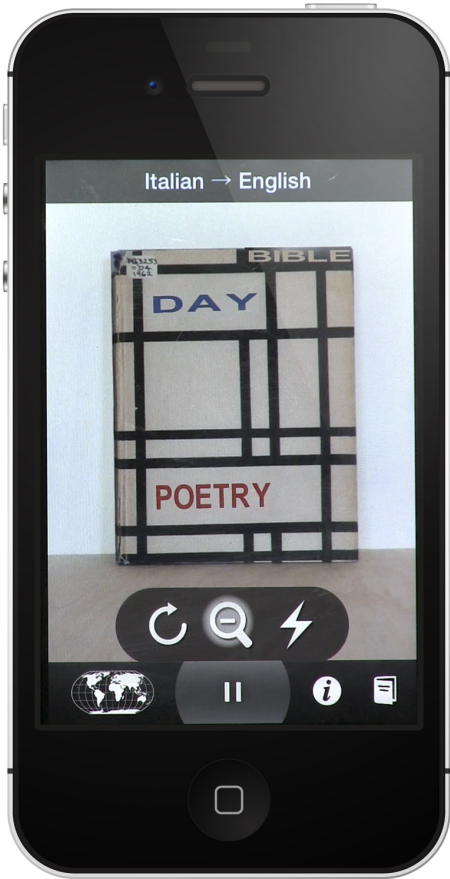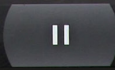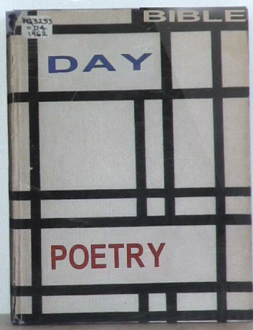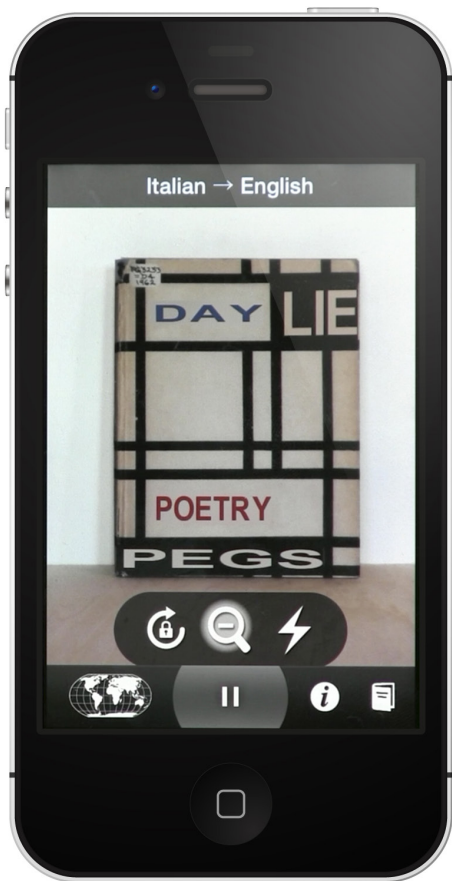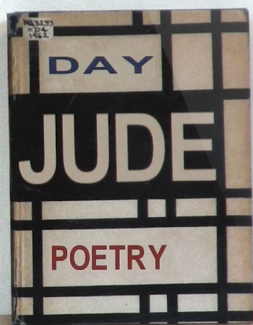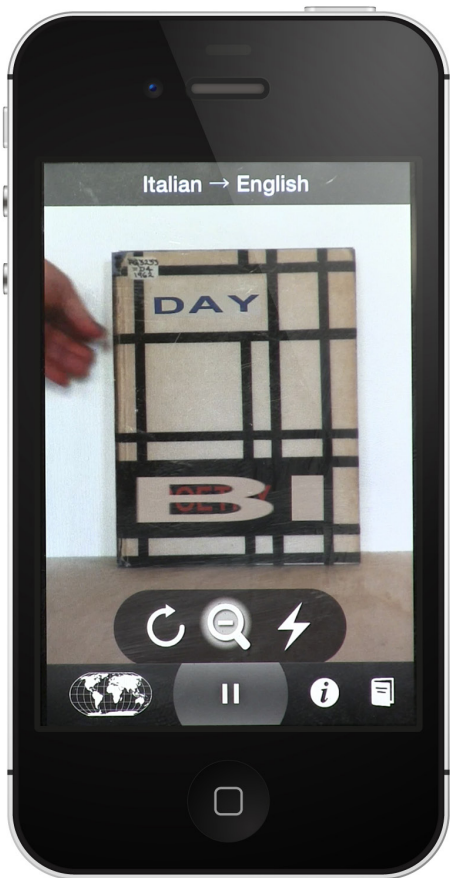
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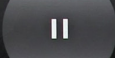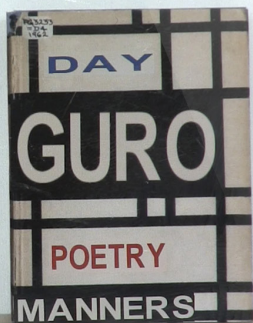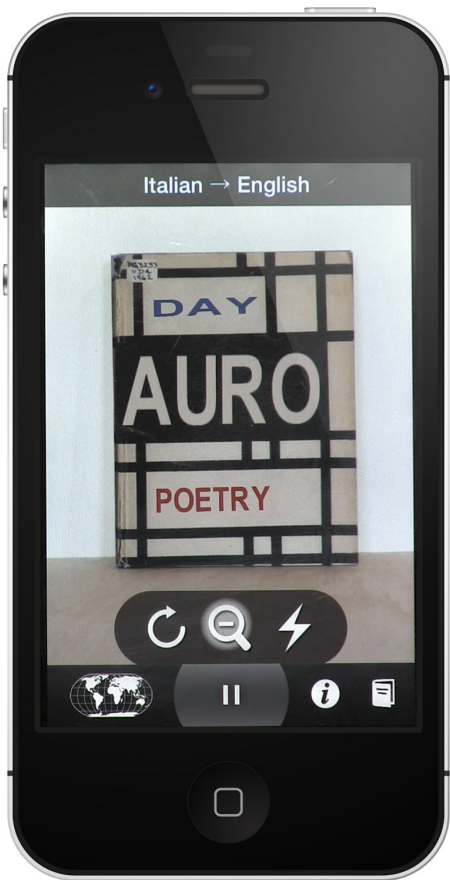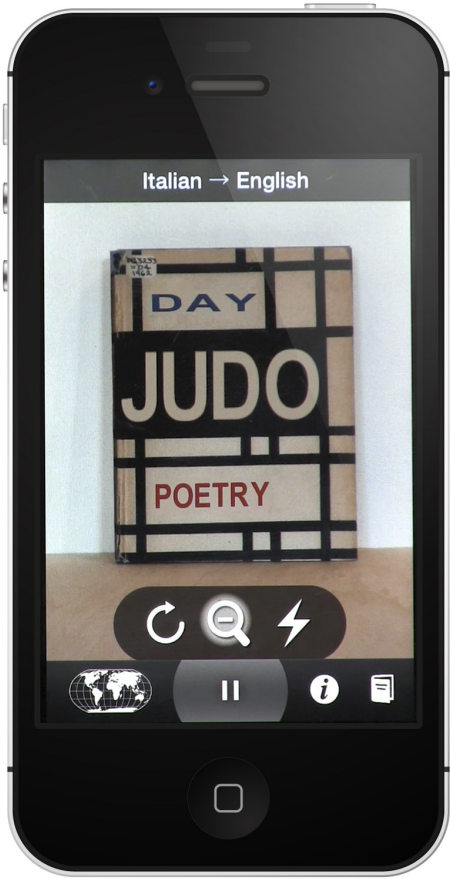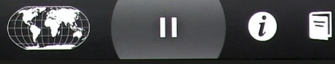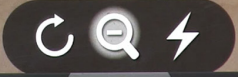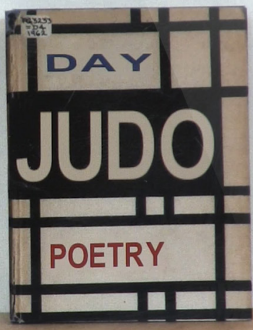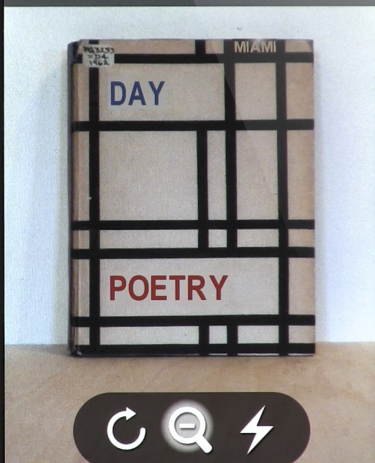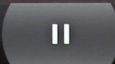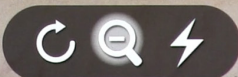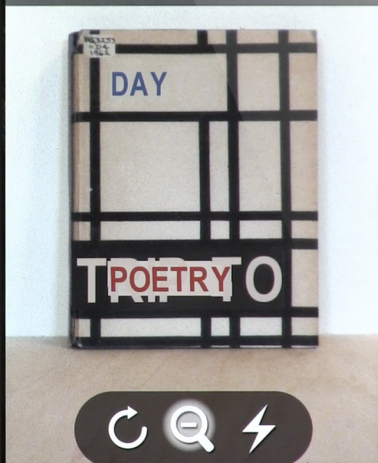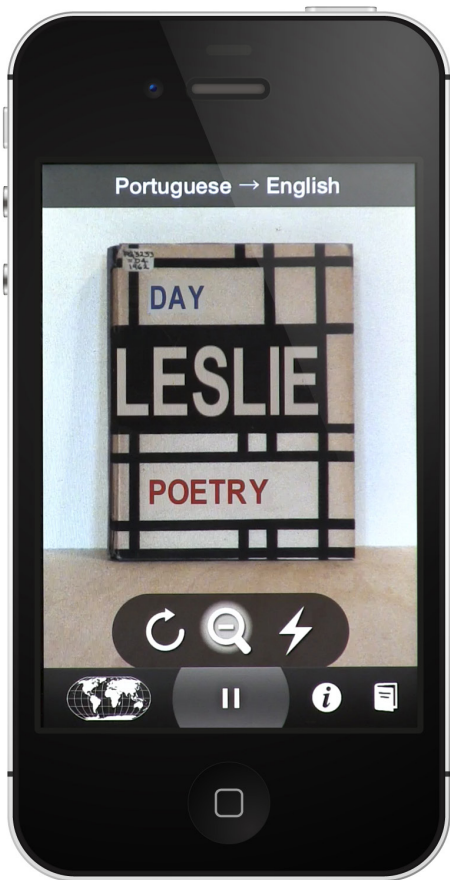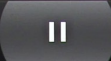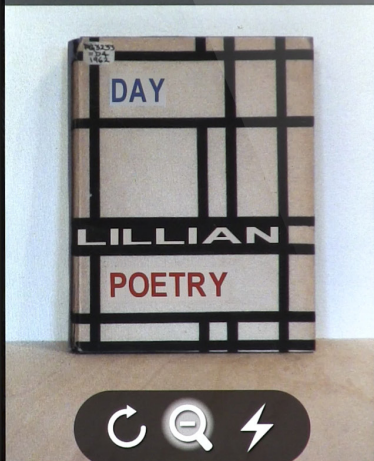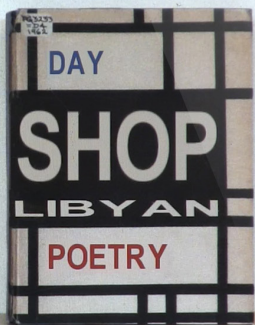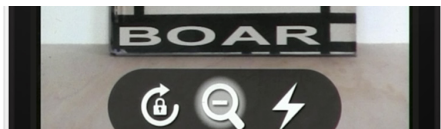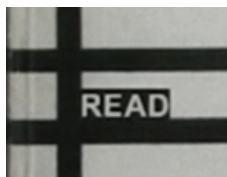
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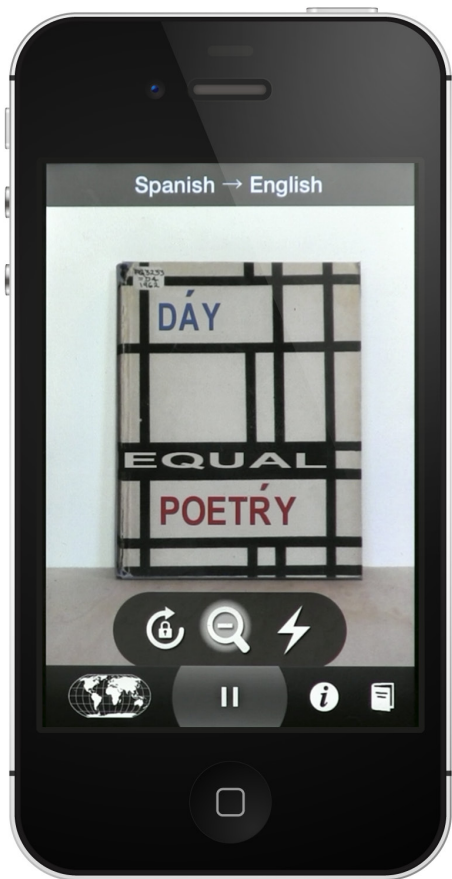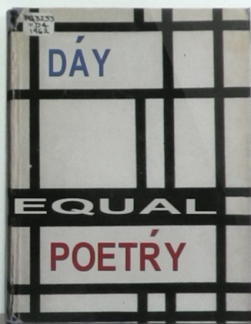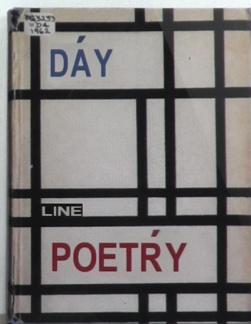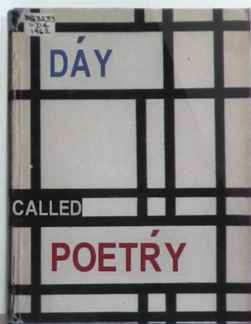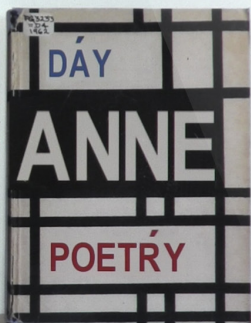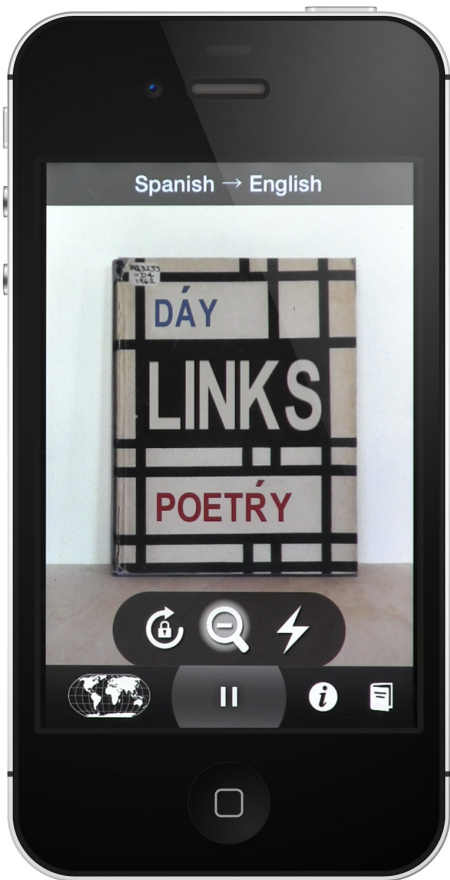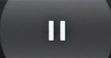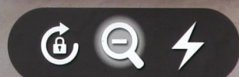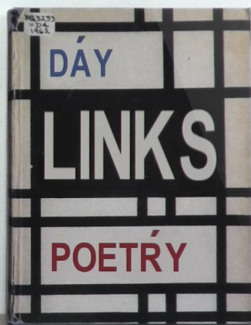
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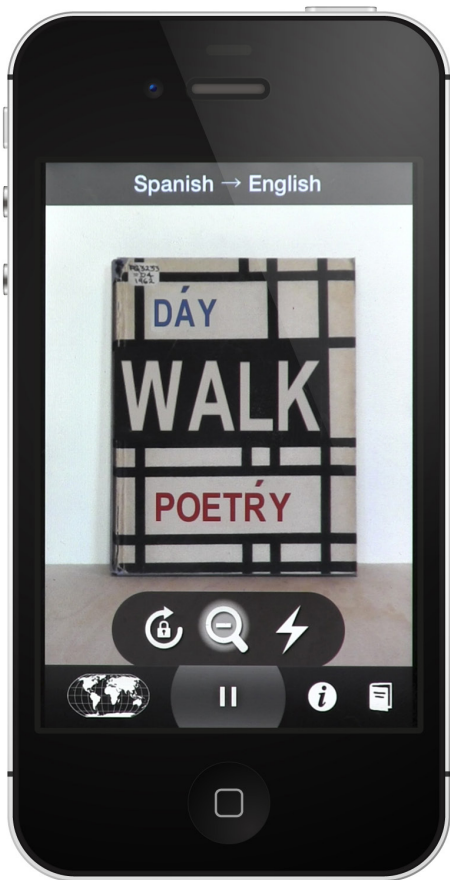
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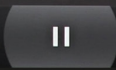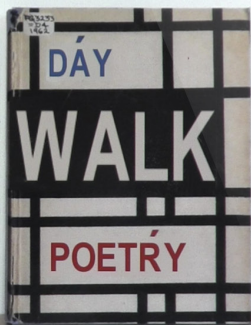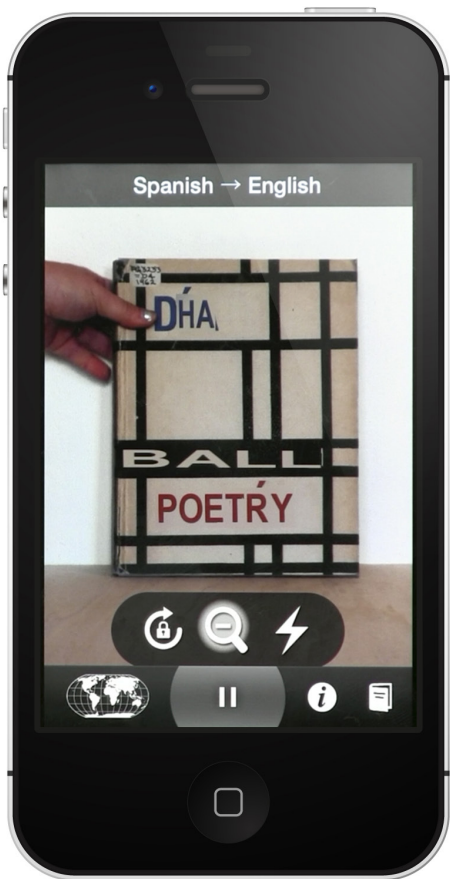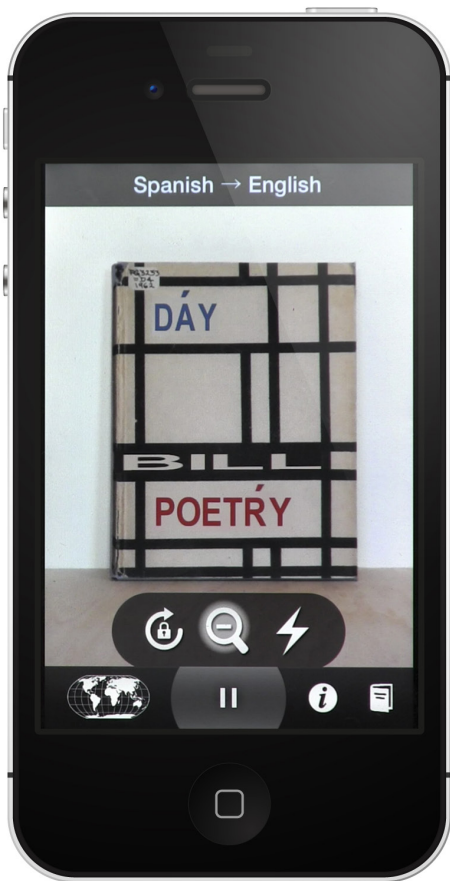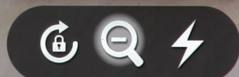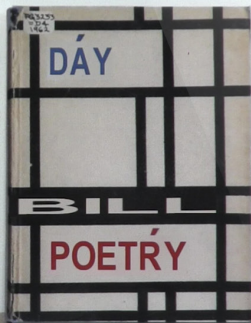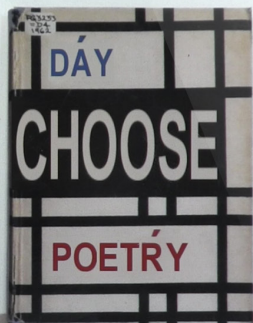
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PINBALL

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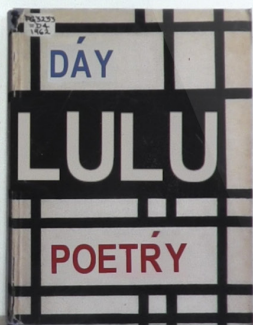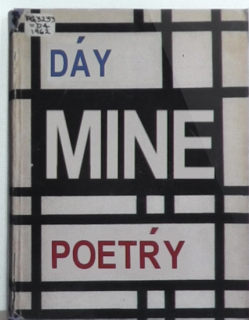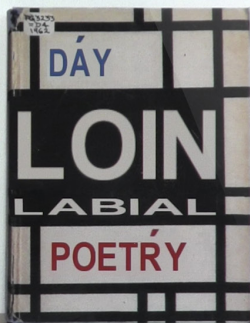
DIN
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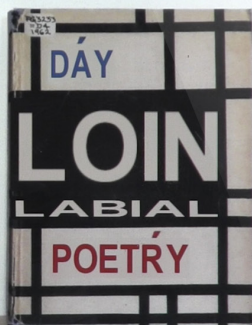
WOULD GO

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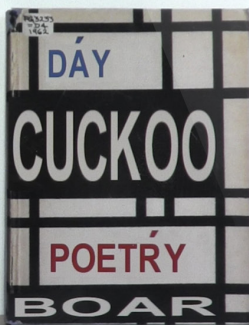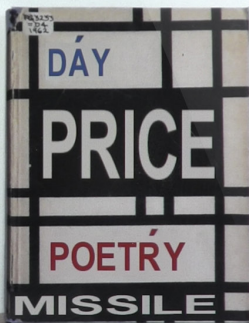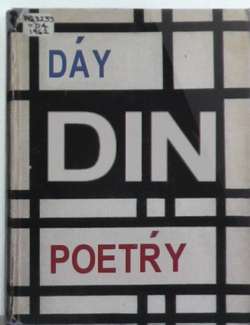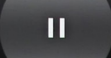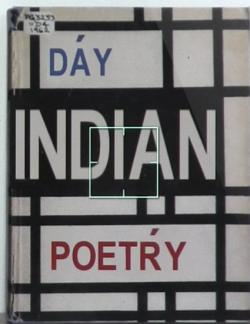
John Cayley on Primary Source

Primary Source

A series of works in various media and configurations, Francesca Capone's *Primary Source* presents us with a number of questions concerning contemporary aesthetic practice, particularly its relationship with technology, media, interdisciplinarity, and their convergence. What is it that has been made by the artist? Or should we ask, What has been discovered? Already and typically, Capone works at the intersection of—embodied, constructed—visual image and poetic text, the latter composed with an engaged sensitivity to those very processes with which she has made her visual, most often woven, constructions. In fact, Capone's work attempts to problematize or remove the distinctions of weaving and writing, such that both practices compose her imagetexts simultaneously. But *Primary Source* manifested itself in the course of research, when the artist discovered, on a library's subterranean poetry shelves, a Russian book with striking cover design, set with a quasi-regular grid in the manner of Mondrian and De Stijl,

sparsely populated with the words of the book's title.[1] These words, Russian in the cyrillic alphabet, were initially unreadable to Capone. Intrigued, she made use of the WordLens app on her mobile phone to try and decipher the title. WordLens, released by Octavio Good in 2010 is an application broadly associated with so-called augmented reality. Typically, such applications use the camera of a mobile device to capture images from the 'real' world and then 'augment' these images with layers of visual or textual information. WordLens tries to find and capture the images of words—the graphic forms of words in any language—and then translate these words or phrases into one of a number of possible host languages, selected by the user and would-be reader. On screen, WordLens then replaces the reality-supplied word-image with the image of a supposedly corresponding— 'translated'—word in the user's selected language. WordLens worked remarkably well. It was acquired by Google in 2014 and is now incorporated into Google Translate.

1 This *Den' poézii* (*Day of Poetry*) is, in fact, the 1962 volume of an annual published by the Soviet Writer publishing house in Moscow from 1956.

When WordLens was applied to the grid-embedded title of this Russian book, Capone discovered a virtual linguistic beauty in the augmented reality that it proposed to her. WordLens successfully translated the title itself, but its would-be prosthetic, word-form seeking sensory apparatus was 'confused' by the cover's De Stijl grid. It is likely that WordLens looks for text as, itself, a more or less regular grid-like pattern, and so it also tries to 'read' what to our non-augmented eyes is purely formal grid, finding language-symbolic 'differences' where we do not. Moreover, the differences that WordLens sees are tiny, affected by slight moments or changes of focus and light. These cause WordLens to revise its reading continually and, effectively, to produce an animated sequence of textual events as it reads and rereads the grid and successively augments its screen-projected reality with changing virtual text. What we see has immediate appeal for us as creatures who read. It is not simply that WordLens distorts and disturbs the visual field in a way that is merely, sensually pleasant for us.

WordLens pretends to read the image itself and there it finds language for us—meaningful, after all, to us alone—in a structured field the potential symbolic understanding of which is, perhaps, expressed at a resolution or in a form that eludes our merely human visual acuity. What Capone saw had a even more striking resonance for her and her work since it spoke, literally, to her own long-standing attempts to translate the grid-like structures of woven coloured, textured, threaded visuality into the literal structures of poetry.

When such phenomena are presented as art or even as amusing anomalies or potential memes, because they are produced by programmed technologies, a first instinct is to treat them as the consequence of error in the apparatus or as the result of unanticipated edge conditions generating unpredictable behaviors in the system. And when such error or unpredictability is aestheticized as such, we call this glitch or glitch aesthetics. However recently, since about 2010, artists and critics of work in or involving computational media have

begun to recognize that, especially when proposed as art, the reduction of certain admittedly related phenomena to glitch does them a critical injustice. The work associated with *Primary Source* comes into this category. One relatively non-indicative name for these computationally generated phenomena-as-art is 'new aesthetic,' the term promoted by James Bridle and discussed by many curators and commentators including Curt Cloninger in an insightful piece.[2] By highlighting the crucial role that computation plays in this art, and by noting that the generated phenomena—let's call them 'images' with the understanding that this sense of image comprehends any perceptible aspect of an aestheticized artifact or thing—are not properly or exhaustively explained as error, as glitch, the new aesthetic at least allows us to consider more fully what is at stake when such art is made or appreciated, and also how this reflects on its wider cultural resonances and influences—how computation makes us see differently and find new meanings in, as here, a

2 Curt Cloninger, "Manifesto for a theory of the 'New Aesthetic'" *Mute* 3.4 (2013) pp. 16-27.

proposed augmented reality. I would rather commit myself critically, just a little further, call these aestheticized phenomena 'symbolic image,' and then go on to develop, with others, an aesthetics of the symbolic image in the context of computationally inflected culture. But for now, introducing *Primary Source*, this inclination must simply begin to articulate our sense of poetic delight and wonder, as a once unreadable book, assumed to contain poetry, is addressed by an apparatus—intimate to its artist and potentially also to us—and gives the cover of this book to speak, and to speak something that we can read as poetry, a poetry and a poetics of its symbolic image.

As a final word, we must not fail to remember that what I've called an 'intimate apparatus,' operating 'on' and 'with' our mobiles, our digital familiars, is itself an artifact. In this circumstance, WordLens appears as software that was engineered by someone like us, and then perhaps by a collaborative team, but now it is owned and developed by a much more powerful legal individual,

one that has already gone on to augment the real interpretative power of its popular translation engine with a perceiving algorithm that can read—for us? for whom?—certain unreadable symbolic grids transcending cultures and disciplines. This is extraordinary power that becomes, daily, ever more familiar, to the extent that we are desensitized to its profound effects. Works like *Primary Source* may also serve to remind us of what such algorithms can, and will continue to, do.

This book was designed and published
as part of the work titled *Primary Source.*
It was exhibited with the group show
~~Maximum Sideline~~**: Postscript** that
occurred at Proxy, an exhibition and
series of web based works at a curatorial
platform currently located in a downtown
storefront in Providence, RI.