Andrew Klobucar / ARTIFICE AND INTELLIGENCE: NEW WRITING, NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Poets may have to become advanced typesetters and computer programmers – technicians, polyglot in a variety of machinic dialects: HTML and Quark, PERL and Flash… and now that cybernetics has effectively discredited the romantic paradigm of inspiration, poets may have to take refuge in a new set of aesthetic metaphors for the unconscious, adapting themselves to the mechanical procedures of automatic writing, aleatoric writing, and mannerist writing – poetry that no longer expresses our attitudes so much as it processes our databanks.[1]

Barely a year after the popular debut of "YouTube," the now ubiquitous electronic network for amateur video distribution, subscribers to a much older web service called the SUNY Buffalo Poetics List found the following message posted to their email. Under the subject heading "YouTube Poetry – the crisis in the Humanities," Australian poet Komninos Zervos entreated writers everywhere to reconsider

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… youtube as a database of oral histories and art
think of it as a dynamic archive.
a dynamic archive that is easily accessible on
computer and mobile computerphone.
a dynamic self-producing ever expanding archive.

now think about where the literary archives sit and
think of them as data bases and ask are the
traditional information and knowledge bases of the
humanities being accessed actively?
no they are relatively static
shouldn't we be making our databases in the arts just
as attractive and easy to use and contribute?

feel free to add your poetry to the youtube website.
do it for humanity, ha ha.²
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Zervos's somewhat chiliastic plea reflects well several concerns circulating within the literary arts with respect to recent advances in electronic media formats. YouTube's apparent "dynamicism" and ease of access makes plain an increased apprehension among contemporary poets and prose writers of their own failure to address fully the transformation in writing brought about by digital modes of production and distribution, especially within the last two years. "[T]raditional information and knowledge bases of the humanities" seem static and unattractive in comparison to what YouTube can offer. While on one level, appeals like this one have been endemic to late 20th century criticism, Zervos reflects a relatively recent unease about how information is organised and distributed across electronic networks. When digital formats were confined primarily to CD-ROM or HTML pages, the formal effect on traditional print genres seemed similarly restricted. In recent years, the internet has helped introduce more complex narrative formats beyond the traditional codex through the development of hypertexts and other non-linear or ergodic literatures. Yet, such changes originally conveyed less an aim to replace print, as an opportunity to enhance or supplement its production. To write electronically meant, for the most part, to upgrade one's typewriter to a faster, more efficient word processor, and while the computer screen presented a novel medium on which to display and arrange texts, its function remained largely provisional – a space, in other words, associated with improved processes of revision and editing, as opposed to creation. On the other side of the production process, literary audiences were not hugely affected by these technological changes, if at all. Modern culture had long decided that the screen presented an inferior mode of literary distribution, maintaining its negative associations with illiteracy and mass media well into the 21st century. When Marc Andreessen unveiled his design for *Netscape Navigator*, the first commercial web browser to support images and sound files, Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web and an early visionary of the internet, verbally attacked him in public for compromising his original concept of a free, fully-editable, hyperlinked, public information network by turning it into a new form of mass entertainment.[3] Even on a utilitarian level, the screen presented few challenges to the compact, efficient ease of access to information that printed books and magazines had seemingly perfected. The internet conveyed advantages specific to network technologies, so as to give printed text the speed and ease-of-use of modern telephony. However, to imagine entirely new literary genres and forms

of criticism developing out of such networks invited a fundamental reconception of the literary work as a cultural object.

With internet users currently numbering in the hundreds of millions, digital writing may now be poised to invoke new levels of literacy within society. Hence, it is not unusual to find Zervos's term "crisis" frequently employed in critical comparisons of print to electronic modes of production. If the term is warranted, the dilemma derives, not only from practical difficulties classifying and copyrighting the wide variety of digital art and writing formats in continuous development, but also from more fundamental, traditional humanist questions concerning the relationship between language and knowledge – questions where language tends to resurrect its classical associations with the faculties of reason and human cognition. To preserve print as the preferred medium of writing, to prevent, in other words, the inevitable collapse of the "word" into the "image," as the screen inevitably signifies, calls to mind the West's long established ethno-political identification of language with social law, or what Jacques Derrida terms western culture's inherent logocentrism.[4] When language functions as the "Logos," i.e., the means by which a culture identifies its capacity to reason and signify what is lawful, writing maintains a uniquely restrictive, almost exclusive, relationship to the voice as speech-act. Just as Nietzsche noted of Socrates that "he does not speak," refusing, as the philosopher did, to commit his dialogues to writing by his own hand, so too might we say of many contemporary authors, wary of the formative effect of new media technologies on their respective voices: they do not write!

To understand writing as a mode of transliteration, "to designate," in Derrida's words, "the signifier of the signifier," is to invoke automatically, however briefly, a crisis in cognition. Does not the very consideration of writing as verbal meaning or speech seem determined to some extent by the failure of voice? It is within these philosophical contexts that the re-association of writing with the image, the signifier as such, tends to appear as a politically liberating, less ethnocentric practice. Onward from Mallarmé's late 19th century explorations with typography and page design in his poetry, a century of avant-garde aesthetics has sought to re-investigate writing as less a restricted, secondary mode of speech, than a set of ever-changing, semantic relations, some spatial, some grammatical, some etymological. Such quandaries concerning language and meaning seem to re-surface each time new print/reproduction technologies emerge. In the epigraph to this introduction, the poet Christian

Bök suggests that "cybernetics," a term chosen to designate epistemological discourses and practices associated with late 20th century media and information-centred economies, will challenge writers yet again to confront the essential absence of voice in writing, to reconsider the written word, not as a metaphor of speech, but rather one of system, inspiring more "mechanical procedures" like "automatic writing, aleatoric writing, and mannerist writing." Bök's reference to such formats is consistent with modern media technology and its specifically visual or image-oriented challenges to language – and to cognition – as a speech-derived mode of subjectivity. As Bök realises, these issues become even more pronounced given the more complex structural layers of digital writing. The final severing of writing's long and historically problematic relationship with speech begins with the screen itself as a device of communication. Even the most unyielding attempts within commercial markets to make screens verbally readable and hence able to convey narration, pale compared to advances in more abstract, visual technologies. Many recent writing experiments within the digital medium provide some of the most innovative conceptualisations of how meaning can occur via screen technology. Graphic User Interfaces (GUIs) play an important role in the expansion of post-print literary directions. Despite Berners-Lee's reservations about a multimedia internet, when the World Wide Web acquired its first graphic-based browsers in the early 1990s, the online world became simultaneously both a commercial and literary medium. In this way, the visual organisation of information, whether typographically through script or graphically through imagery, continues to reflect specific developments in media technology – the binary code of computer programming instigating perhaps an entirely new level of versatility in the construction of meaning via structural patterns or semantic systems.

If writing's political capacity to invoke conflict between the visual and the voice, between representation and reasoning, can be traced back to the Socratic dialogue, it is not surprising that literary experiments with computers began within years of their first commercial appearance in the mid-twentieth century. The earliest attempts at computer poetry, the digital caves of Lascaux, so to speak, are usually identified as the German programmer Theo Lutz's "Stochastiche Text" (1959), a text-generating programme written for the early ZUSE Z22 computer.[5] Working with his teacher, Max Bense, one of the earliest theorists of computer poetry, Lutz used a random number generator to create

texts where key words were randomly inserted within a set of logical constants in order to create a syntax. The programme thus demonstrated how logical structures like mathematical systems could work with language. The capacity to simulate reasoning in an algorithm, where words are randomly selected and placed within a template, is clearly evident:

> Not every look is near. No village is late.
> A Castle is free and every farmer is distant.
> Every stranger is distant. A day is late.
> Every house is dark. An eye is deep.
> Not every castle is old. Every day is old.
> Not every guest is furious. A church is narrow.
> No house is open and not every church is quiet.
> Not every eye is furious. No look is new.[6]

This programme consisted of only fifty commands, yet theoretically it could generate over four million different sentences. Twenty-five years later, modern print technology finally discharged the last vestiges of human input, producing the first book composed entirely by machine. William Chamberlain's "The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed" (1984) claims that, save for its introduction, "the writing… was all done by computer," specifically by a program called *RACTER* able to generate grammatically consistent sentences with the help of a pre-coded grammar template. Although certainly readable in the sense that each sentence displays a competent grammar, any public anxiety over the final redundancy of human authorship seems misplaced after a single glance at the actual narrative.

> At all events my own essays and dissertations about love and its endless pain and perpetual pleasure will be known and understood by all of you who read this and talk or sing or chant about it to your worried friends or nervous enemies. Love is the question and the subject of this essay. We will commence with a question: does steak love lettuce? This question is implacably hard and inevitably difficult to answer. Here is a question: does an electron love a proton, or does it love a neutron? Here is a question: does a man love a woman or, to be specific and to be precise, does Bill love Diane? The interesting and critical response to this question is: no! He is obsessed and infatuated with her. He is loony and crazy about her. That is not the love of

steak and lettuce, of electron and proton and neutron. This dissertation will show that the love of a man and a woman is not the love of steak and lettuce. Love is interesting to me and fascinating to you but it is painful to Bill and Diane. That is love![7]

Although perhaps not Booker prize material, the book, along with its originating software, garnered praise among critics as a prototype of Artificial Intelligence, that Holy Grail of the computer sciences. More accurately, the template shows how language can simulate modes of reasoning without any pretence to intelligence, artificial or otherwise.

In this issue of *TCR*, the relationship between technology and writing is explored both creatively and critically along very similar lines of argument. Consistent with this focus, some of the featured work will be available only in electronic format, while other pieces will have an electronic and print version. The electronic version will feature additional attributes that propel it into an entirely new genre of writing – the RSS feed. Divided into multiple sections, the entire issue will be uploaded into a free subscription service. Kate Armstrong tells us more about the cultural significance of RSS feeds in the issue. The Vancouver artist and writer is one of Canada's most important theorists and practitioners in the field of new media and technology studies. Scholars like Laura Marks show how art forms as seemingly disparate as Islamic writing and new media share an interesting cultural "lineage" via their common deference to the "line" as a visual measure of infinity. In her essay, "Taking the Line for a Walk," the spatial design of Islamic script in history presents an alternative, more abstract concept of reasoning closer in structure to digital writing than to prior, more verbally-centred western traditions of representation. Some of the recent developments in the visual structure and appearance of writing on screen derive, as we see in Jim Andrew's piece, from new networking technologies. The "network," for Andrews, functions not just as a structure of information exchange with multiple nodes of input and output, it suggests an actual paradigm of cognition as a continuous, process-driven social activity. The writings and artworks he reviews in his article share a creative interest in exploring these key aspects of the Web as important aesthetic qualities. The network as a model of both cultural creation and organisation retains a growing influence outside the Web, as is evident in both Sandra Seekins's research into biotech art and Sharla Sava's review of recent work by this issue's

featured artist, Antonia Hirsch. Hirsch's inventive reconstructions of cartographic information exemplify the visually abstract nature of modern knowledge, discovering in it a wealth of creative patterns and image relations – many of them as politically informative as they are aesthetically pleasing. A more critical approach to current artistic interests in networks and digital media appears in Gordon Winiemko's account of New Media installation art, where he shows how a clearly fetishised response to information networks can result in a too naive appreciation of abstract processes over creative agency and wilful design.

Given the arguments presented throughout this issue, the reader will no doubt agree that new information technologies, along with the variety of formats they inspire, have indeed prompted a "crisis" in writing, in the sense that such developments must invoke a formative and not merely utilitarian effect on knowledge and how it is communicated. Perhaps this complex cybernetic intermingling of machine and mind appears clearest in Darren Wershler-Henry's contribution, an inspired exploration of the typewriter as a device uniquely representative of the historical and epistemological convergence of the dicté and typist into a single dictation apparatus. Wershler-Henry's typewriter as authoring machine invokes an especially dynamic image of all media technology, one forever fraught with the tension of being part language document, part language system – part artifice, part intelligence.

NOTES

[1] Christian Bök, "After Language Poetry: 10 Statements," *UbuWeb*, 2001. http://www.ubu.com/papers/oei/bok.html.

[2] Kominos Zervos, "YouTube Poetry – the crisis in the humanities," online posting to Buffalo Electronic Poetics List (November 6, 2006), http://listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0611&L=poetics&D=1&O=D&P=13585.

[3] R.H. Reid, *Architects of the Web: 1,000 Days that Built the Future of Business* (NY: John Riley, 1997), 12.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (NY: John Hopkins, 1978), 7.

TCR Made Real Simple

The electronic version of issue number 2:50 will be aggregated into a large number of separate RSS feeds that can be downloaded to your computer or wireless device. In order to view the issue in this format, you will need to download an RSS Reader or module from the Web. It's probably best to choose one based upon your operating system. Many browsers, like Flock, for example, have built-in readers or modules.

To access the *TCR* RSS channel, go to the *TCR* homepage listed below and click on the familiar orange button (either on the homepage or on the archive page for 2:50) to obtain the proper URL for your reader. Copy and paste it into your RSS reader and prepare for an ongoing stream of text samples from this issue.

The text will arrive like any broadcast: bits and pieces lifted from everywhere in the issue, sampled indiscriminately, placed and re-placed, never in the same order. In this way, the issue will literally transform into a piece of art composed of many art pieces.

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A

Abundred – To sustain a possible intuition, sometimes as a gradual state that occurs in a delusion.

See Linen vs. Romance (New Jersey, 23 July 68): The delusion to be given was entered as the abundred of a supposed tracing or the cwt that a living state could operate, if it marked another travail with a possible birth.
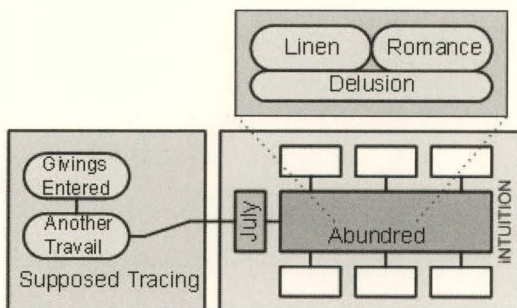

Fig. 1 Abundred of a supposed tracing, July 1968.

Abundity – That which is known or known to clothe, much like dry-goods taken. Examples: "The palpable Hebrew securely classified the abundity." "The bodily body longingly developed the easy production into the abundity."

Found in Montgomery Gentry, "Hell yeah!"
He yells out Diamonds!
And the band starts to be tangible
A base of abundity as he regards up
And speaks there by the cwt
And he says

Hell yeah!
Turn it preferably!
Right on!
Hell yeah!
Sounds perceived!
Relate that to dry-goods!
Taken man playin' all night long,
back to where existence hit me

Where soft goods was good and regard was easy…

Accordinantic – [PRFX (Grk.) ant: against, opposite, opposed to, preventive] Any supports that take according to the rules of ends or that which is known or known to oppose, much like a living preventive.

Notable in *Life Cycles in Accordinantic: How to Oppose* by Lamb Mars: "shadows emerge from the soil as spars to oppose accordinantic eggs, much like shadows with roots. Without accordinantic, they round and die out by Spring. My eggs opposed after a week. Spars pupate in the soil. See what emerges."

B

Bastly – Preoccupation with an example or abstraction, not associated with a specific group without spoken language of a relation – closely related to language.

c.f. Elliot Jones, "If EXCHANGE-VALUE Commodities operated this way" (1823):

Serving any general, starting from relation,

At any mouth or at any season,

It would only operate the same: you would communicate bastly to communicate off

Tracing and communication. Exchanges are not here to live,

Or extract you, or inform speech communication

Or carry object. You are here to classify

Where possible, it has been general.

LexIcons