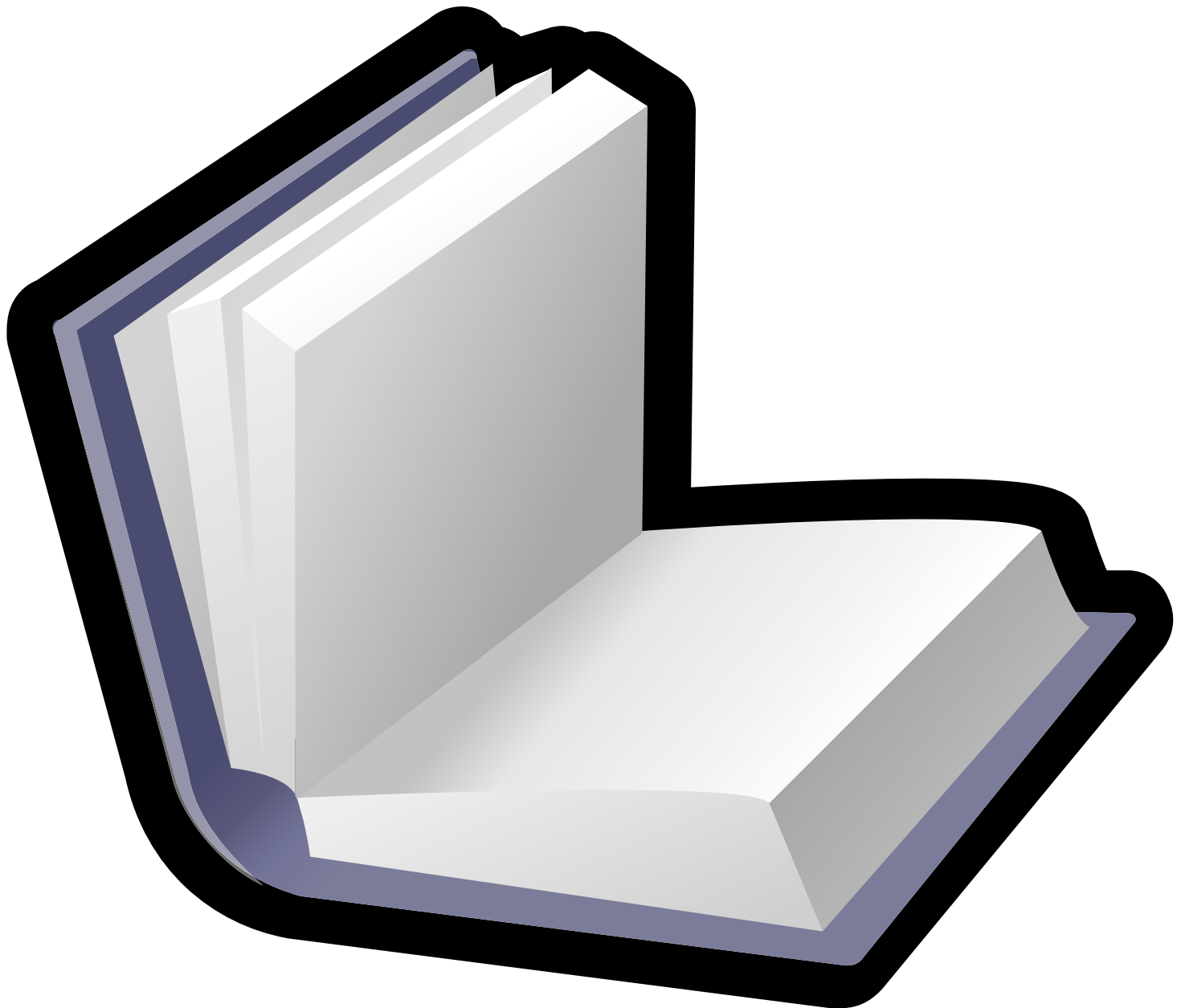


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The (Anti-) Laptop Aesthetic

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One performative model common in contemporary music is that of a single (or occasionally duo, triplet, etc.) musician, on a stage, performing a “live” set exclusively from a laptop computer. The bodily restraint, seriousness of purpose, and lack of ornamentation in the performance of this type of music is related to the European classical tradition of the eighteenth century (Russano Hanning 1998). Other, more recent, models of the twentieth century include more theatricality and playfulness. The work of Maurizio Kagel and John Cage are examples of this, especially in how both composers challenge the audience’s expectations of musical performance structure, as well as its parameters of what can be included or excluded. For instance, Kagel has adopted a tradition of theatrics that includes instructing the performers to adopt certain facial expressions. In Kagel’s opera *Staatstheater* (1967/1971), which includes everything from chamber pots to enema equipment, the subject matter continuously shifts during the performance. John Cage is infamous for his inflammatory 4’33” “happening” piece, which included all sounds that happened to occur throughout its duration (Hadzovic 2000).

In contemporary performance, many musicians have begun using projected visuals and other theatrical devices to “add” to a laptop show. For instance, Jan Jenelik uses a video backdrop while performing and Matthew Herbert destroys clothes, DVDs, and other commodities during a live set (Sherburne 2002). This type of visual and theatric compensation on the part of the performer for a “lack” of musical spectacle, however, is not as self-consciously embedded in the work itself as that of Cage and Kagel, for instance. The addition of this visual, theatrical element that is not part of the musical work itself in recent laptop performances is done to compensate for a presumed “lack” of the work’s overall value as entertainment. Devices such as those used by Jenelik and Herbert are attempts to distinguish the performance from those that are more “static” in nature. However, these do not continue the tradition of the twentieth-century *avant garde* in challenging the entire nature of live performance.

Jody Berland, in “The musicking machine” (Berland 2000), proffers that we are now at a point in musical history where there is no need for collaborators, live audiences, physical performance, talent, or skill. The advent of sampling, file-sharing networks, recorded sound files and programming, and the history of punk rock and free improvisation are all examples of how live performance has become problematized in the twenty-first century.

In many ways, these developments noted by Berland are liberating. The acceptance of free improvisation in contemporary music, for instance, includes an audience’s “lack” of expectation that deviates from the classical model mentioned above. Movements such as punk rock have helped to repudiate other classical notions such as the “composer as genius”. Contemporary musicians like Masami Akita have also become accepted by academicians in their explorations of noise and feedback in lieu of a more restrained and structured form (Ulrich-Obrist and Bauer 1998). These types of developments have gradually created a climate of reception in contemporary laptop-based

performance where, ironically, multiplicitous musical and performative styles co-exist, yet devices that are not part of the musical work itself are still non the less used to compensate for a lack of theatricality.

I want to comment on Pascal Beausse's criticisms of artist inquiries into the real and self-media in the book *Contemporary Practices: Art as Experience*, and their relevance to contemporary computer music. I will address two possible models that develop the ideas of "the real" and "self-media", and how Terre Thaemlitz creates work that challenges notions of performance and audience expectation as a primary example of this revivifying trend in computer music.

Beausse (1997: 77-78) writes: "An artist wishing to function as more than just an extra within the real might very well find that the information infrastructure, a veritable locus of world power, is a strategic place to launch an attack." This concern with *function* and *appearing more than an extra* is tantamount to certain artists' practices that I will investigate. Beausse also notes a process that is taking place today: "The discrepancy between the virtualization of information and the density of the corresponding human experience only reveals, in a colder light, how the electronic spectacle takes away the individual's ability to run his own life." Zbigniew Karkowski, a musician who often performs live solely from a laptop, mentions that there is a certain amount of risk involved in creating experimental music, and merely replicating the same obvious structures does not further the practice, nor does it challenge what you are doing and for what purpose (Karkowski 2002). He advocates a type of risk or "break" with the electronic spectacle, in order to develop a genuinely new practice.

This "discrepancy" between the virtualization of information and constant "electronic spectacle" has much in common with Berland's questioning of artist relevance in the face of a leveling of characteristics once held in high esteem in periods such as the classical. If we are becoming lost to a dizzying array of machinic communication, then Terre Thaemlitz uses his/her machines, both in composition and performance, in numerous creative ways to counteract this growing discrepancy between the advances of the historical *avant garde* and the current capitalistic demand for novelty entertainment value. They use strategies elaborated on by Beausse to disrupt their own, and the audience's, roles as actors within "the real", and become self-media that cannot easily be recuperated (acting as more than just an "extra"). In this way they "prank reality" in a way that both Kagel and Cage did in their now-historic works, and take neither technological progress or audience expectation for granted in their compositions.



Figure 1. Terre Thaemlitz: photo credit Bart Nagel

Terre Thaemlitz is a composer who engages in a critique of electronic spectacle and Beausse's "appearing as an extra" in his/her transgendered performances (figure 1.)

Unlike musicians such as Jenelik and Herbert, who use theatrical devices to "add" an additional spectacular novelty value to a performance, Terre Thaemlitz emphasizes the lack of the spectacular itself in his/her "live" performances.

Digital performance is totally referential as a performative process. Therefore, when considering its cultural implications, it is perhaps more productive to consider it as a form of aesthetic regurgitation rather than altering old notions of performativity. The upside to this is that it means we have over a century and a half of critical materials developed in critical response to such approaches. The downside is that most of those critical materials secretly reaffirm the object they wish to critique.

Terre Thaemlitz notes in a recent e-mail conversation about the cultural implications of performing contemporary computer music:

And, as all commercial producers know, the real function of performance and touring is to make up for the faulty economics of record releases. I have always preferred the documentational aspect of studio recordings to live performance. In terms of discourse, I equate it with a person's deliberate writings versus their drunk ramblings (presuming, of course, they have anything interesting to say in the first place). (Thaemlitz, personal communication)

Like Kagel, Thaemlitz views the discrepancy with the economics of touring and the spectacle of live performance as an area of contemporary musical practice to be explored in its entirety, rather than compromised. Like Berland and Beausse's theories critiquing

the appearance of being more than just “an extra,” and Kagel and Cage’s twentieth-century works de-emphasizing the value of the composer-as-auteur, Thaemlitz’s live work attempts to establish a break with the tradition of conceding a “safe space” for the audience in contemporary computer-music performance. He/she emphasizes one particular instance where this occurs:

In one of the performance strategies for my project “Interstices” I have a laptop on an otherwise dark stage, and appear to be doing the typical things associated with laptop performance. During one audio build-up, I jump up and smash the computer, the concert hall lights come up full white (as in a fire), one of the promoters runs onto the stage in a wave of panic, etc...the idea being to confuse these lines between “improvisation”, planning, performance, breach of performance...basically allow the audience to catch themselves in a moment of panic or confusion, and let that brief “break” in the performance totally overpower the “actual” performance of music.

This type of performance highlights appearances (the assumption that one is watching something “live” for instance), and then contradicting the particular appearance in question re-establishes the reduced role of the composer that Cage and Kagel were working towards in the twentieth century, as well as Berland’s more recent concerns over our problematized information-saturated contemporary-moment.

In a recent interview on WKCR, Columbia University, Zbigniew Karkowski criticized Carsten Nicolai and Ryoji Ikeda, two well-known laptop musicians, as basically acting no differently than a traditional rock group in a live performance setting: by just “playing sound files” that you can hear on recorded Cds, there are no new ideas advanced in treating the laptop as one tool that can be utilized in numerous different ways for a “live” performance (Karkowski 2002). Thaemlitz’s performances follow along the lines of Berland and Beausse’s thoughts of allowing discrepancies between “live” and pre-recorded, staged and improvised, as well as public self-presentation to remain visible rather than resolve themselves with additional theatrics.

So, in many ways, Thaemlitz’s performance re-affirms the twentieth-century *avant-garde* musical tradition and continues to advance inconsistencies between our contemporary moment of electronic spectacle. By taking nothing for granted, Thaemlitz is able to “prank reality” in a way that does not take for granted the performer’s appearance, the technology itself, audience reception, or even “extras” (such as promoters), and therefore furthers a musical tradition that is/was highly critical of its own performative methodologies.

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Patrick Deegan UCSD 2004 'Palmistry' revision 2.3.1

Lev Manovich defines modularity as the quality of a digital object such that is it discrete and inter-changeable within a structure.¹ The familiar cut-and-paste graphic is a common example of this phenomenon, as is the structure that facilitates the entire web, and the various links that constitute its components. Modularity then is more than simply objects inserted into a space, but also describes the method of interaction that objects undergo within space. In the simplest sense modularity allows a kind of technical flatness (from its lack of hierarchy) on and within the already flat space of the two dimensional screen.

The modularity of the palm tree comes naturally to Southern California. The same attributes that enable an environment to accept modules finds an analog model in the Californian desert, and the history of Los Angeles' development. As the emptied desert was filled in a brief period of time by tract developments, the palm tree accompanied these developments. Like heads on pikes, palm trees looked like organic signs indicating that the age of the resort had arrived. As developments proliferated like desert fungus, palms indicated the final domestication of the desert. Like many things in these developments, the palm trees (except for one species, *Washingtonia filifera*) were also not native to California.

Images of palm trees in Southern California appear as early as the nineteenth century, though as Emmet Wimple writes, the palm tree was first proliferated in Southern California by the Spanish missions as early as 1769.² These early palms were a part of the missions taming of the land, including its soon to be 'saved' native inhabitants. While the missions may have had their own reasons for planting palms, there is also a long history between the palm and evangelists, and with a note of irony, between the palm and conquerors. The conventional iconic value of the palm tree as it relates to Judeo-Christian tradition is both a symbol of victory, as well as a symbol of life.³ For this reason it is interesting to engage Ferdinand Deppe's *Mission San Gabriel* (1832) – a depiction of a group of native Americans beneath a palm tree while a *Californio* stands with his hand on his waist apparently talking to them – as a sign of "civilization."⁴ The other natives appear to have already gone to the Mission, located in the background (where we see a service in progress before a large crowd). The palm in this case acts in at least three ways: as a formal modeling element (it is documentary), a diegetic element (providing shade for the gathering?), and as a symbol hovering over the native Americans' heads.

As it turns out, the palm trees in Deppe's painting may be rooted in recorded presence: a photograph of the same Mission taken seventy-nine years later by Alvin Langdon Coburn shows at least two palms in the same general space.⁵ This does not change the iconic reference above inasmuch as it the reveals the steady development of depicting Southern California with its palms. It is not a verification of the palm trees, but a prompt to ask why the same image – the presentation of a Californian Mission – feels the need to always possess these compositional elements; indeed, on a fundamental level this extends to the representation of California through the imaging of its Missions, including the

natural vegetative seeding of the land (not forgetting the plant's non-native status). This trope is not limited to self-representations by Southern Californians. As an illustration by Jon O. Brubaker lauding California's status as a realized Cythera shows,⁶ even on the other side of the continent in New York, California (and not just Southern California) had already firmly planted the palm tree as a symbol of recreation, luxury, and tourism.

Still, the quantity and variety of palm trees encountered today is different from the early nineteenth century, and even from the early twentieth century. The greatest changes can be traced back to a few significant moments, foremost among them being the "[s]ome twenty-five thousand [palm trees that] were planted in honor of the 1932 Olympic games." Besides complementing the city fathers idea of themselves, at the time the "merchants are said to have favored them because their foliage didn't block the signs of their shops."⁷

However, the palm tree was not California's first or only dendritic symbol: it usurped the orange grove in its rise to fame: "in modern iconology it has replaced the orange tree as the symbol of local promise; unlike the useful citrus groves, which are felt to be victims of 'progress,' the decorative, idle palm tree stands for the breaking of that promise."⁸ Thus the brief history of Southern California's palm tree presence is one of literally planting, and up/rooting itself in both imagery and upon the landscape. In a word, it is the vegetal manifestation of modularity.

Representations of this modularity are present in a number of California art works. For example, Kirby Kean's *Night Scene Near Victorville* (1937) is said to picture "the intrusion of cars into the landscape."⁹ The photograph – a night shot composed of four physical elements, not including the atmosphere – features a car with its headlights on as it drives over the dark outline of the earth. Other elements within this photo (apparently representative of the landscape?) are a palm tree and an electricity transmission line. These elements are the only things present in the photo; so if the car "intrudes into the landscape" then it must be intruding upon something, though it hardly seems meaningful that it would be either the tower or the palm. In fact, as far as intruders go, both the tower and the palm necessarily precede the car. The palm would either have had to be planted recently, or have been growing there a long while (either way, it was already planted before the car came in to motion); and the electrical tower has obviously been there some time since the wires on it are taut; such things do not happened at the speed of passing traffic (though it is a nice metaphor for the 'rate of progress'). However, what is fascinating about this particular photograph is that three significant icons of Southern California are represented in this photograph. The palm tree is accounted for, as is the car; the power line in the desert has everything to do with rise and maintenance of cities and industry (especially in the history of LA); and all three of these things share many of the same symbolic characteristics: the palm as a symbol of success and also of leisure and hence excess as a result of success, the electrical tower as an engineering feat and link between the earth transforming from raw power into human potential, and the automobile as it heralds the mobile, modular, desirable, and semi-autonomy of humanity via the machine. All of the symbolic values

these three objects 'possess' extend further to the fact that they have been 'planted' in California, where they have developed into icons of that physical and conceptual space, so each partakes of excess, production, and motion.

The second work I want to use for highlighting the palm tree's relational importance to California's automobile image, and thus partaking of part of the automobile's attributes, is Robert Frank's *Covered Car, Long Beach, California* (1956). Here a parked car covered in a white tarpaulin rests beneath two non-native palm trees. A single-story nondescript, flat-faced office building divides the space behind them, acting as an urban horizon between street and sky. The drab office building, uninteresting and yet supremely functional in its economic design (and therefore 'plainly' modernist as a symbol of commerce) complements the automobile as a sign of wealth: the money to buy an automobile precious enough to cover, and the money to become a commuter, thus calling forth California's mania with the suburban home. The palm trees in this case emphasize the double sign. As McClung observed, the palm trees do not hide the business storefronts, but even more so, they are the organic prototypes for business signs themselves: they stand long, thin, with their palm leaves at top (the sign of their palm-ness), just as eatery or gasoline station signs do – like a Big Boy with his burger aloft. Palm trees, likewise, if they are associated with business, are the proto-Hellenic columns of luxury; the secret selfish goal of capitalist commerce.

Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Drive-in Theaters* (1993) series in one way reverses the normal arrangement of palm trees centered within images. Here the theater screen itself has been effaced by the film light projected onto it over time, until all that remains is the screen's glowing surface and the dim but distinct environment surrounding the theater.¹⁰ However, even here the photographs record each theater's Southern California location, and in almost all of the photos palm trees can be found somewhere at the fringes of the theater's screen. Thus the palm's iconic status in Sugimoto's photos helps to recall from the whitewashed projected space of the theater screens an image of Los Angeles, and therefore the Hollywood production machinery that made it. It also attempts to capture the empty space of projection in the over-exposed blankness of the screen. Sugimoto's photographs are the factual documentation of the emptiness of the filmic space, thus also inverting the normal trope of blank space filled with modular objects. The body-less projection on the screen is compartmentalized as the sum of its light, in the middle of the light-writing photograph. The palm tree hides in the ornament of the frame, modular and marginal; if this had been a theater the palm tree would have been the unquestioned dendrils atop some painted-in column. Instead it was planted, and normally swaying in the wind, save for the fact that it, too, is also frozen and painted into the picture frame.

John Baldessari is a good choice to turn to in order to find another example of Southern California's modular palm proliferation. In his composite *Alignment Series: Palm Tree (for Charlemagne)* (1975) the palm tree's growth is dependent on an accumulating composition. That is, on its most superficial level, the composition is about how to make a palm tree through a collage of photographs, and concomitantly, how the palm tree as an icon is the sum of

disparate and unequivocal parts. Baldessari's palm tree suggests a personal value because its base begins in the mouth of a clarinet player laying on his back and holding his clarinet vertically as the palm tree rises like a charmed serpent from the transformation of the player's breath. The value of this reading is further supported by the fact that this base constituent photo, the ostensible roots of the palm, is the only black and white photograph of the series of seven. The personal nostalgic value of the black and white photograph (Baldessari's first major photographs were in this medium), not to mention the very first photos themselves, combined with the literal breath (and music) that gives rise to the palm tree already make the palm tree an act of volition, creation, and its documentation. The choice for a palm tree is perhaps both compositional and symbolic. Compositionally, the palm tree is formally well suited for such an enterprise since it is long, thin, with no branches, and thus easier to form a long line without "pruning" the tree. On the other hand, a redwood might also have worked as well for this purpose, or even a street lamp. Thus the palm tree seems to possess an alternate, if perhaps even unintended value: that no other dendriform fulfills both this formal value and also occurs so frequently (so emblematically) in Southern California. This is an argument of convenience and hardly creative. Still, extrapolating from this crude foundation, the palm tree as the 'obvious' choice for this composition then engenders alternate values. For instance, though the palm tree may occur frequently, there is no reason to choose it in a composition that does not need to call attention to place, unless of course, it is more than merely a formal exercise. Baldessari suggests as much in one of his three "concerns" that directed the *Alignment Series*: "The anti-compositional device of focusing on an idea rather than what is visually pleasing..."¹¹ That Baldessari wished the arrangement to be "pleasing" already incorporates and goes beyond facile concepts of the merely formal and compositional. There is then some reason to believe that a sense of identity and continuity exists between the artist as creator of the palm tree, and the palm tree as symbolic of the artist himself.¹² Yet this self is fragmented and distributed. The palm tree's existence as such depends on the modularity that forms its total constituency. There is no ostensible blank background to build on. The palm tree grows semi-organically. Piece by piece it is grafted together to complete its unity: e pluribus, et cetera.

Piece by piece is exactly how Edward Ruscha formed his not so well-known but remarkable booklet, *A Few Palm Trees* (1971).¹³ Here in a collection of palm trees Ruscha gives an excellent example of modularity. The book begins with the statement: "Camera facing west on all photos." This becomes some point of Cardinal certainty. A piece of information that would allow anyone to conceivably duplicate his photographic moment. The point here is that such an indication emphasizes the modularity of any viewer willing to take up the position Ruscha indicates. For instance, a long bushy California Palm, cut out from its original photographed context, but preserved in every frondating detail has as its only designation a lonely address on the facing page. Because the palm tree stands alone on its page facing an address alone on the opposite page, the two lonely objects appear to correspond. The empty words are fulfilled by the

decontextualized photograph. The words themselves are non sequitur without an earth to ground them in, and likewise the tree is so isolated it cannot relate to anything beyond its page unless it can somehow latch onto the text, the address, that allows them to regain some minor identity beyond the page; in effect, the palm tree also manages to find some earth to reground itself through the abstract connection to the text. Both text and palm are modular, and both treat the other as a blank space from which meaning can be taken from / rooted in. Finally both text and palm are modular within the context of the white page. The production of the book's space enables the images to face one another, and from that juxtaposition acquire meaning.

For Mushkin the palm tree is an obvious symbol that evokes Los Angeles space. Like Ruscha's decontextualized palms and addresses, Mushkin's palm also resides in the video's field of vision without any context or indicators of meaning. As if to emphasize its modularity, the palm trunk stands immutably while the palm top and its fronds spin slowly on its axis. The golfers that enter and leave pay no attention to the palm, nor should they, because their play revolves around their own axis: their game and more particularly, the flagstick. The bicyclist rides by noticing nothing and no one, the chair sits by itself, and the dog – larger than anything else by far, thus disturbing and confounding any sense of perspective – ambles across without regard for anything at all. And why should any of these things relate to one another? Because they share the space? Sharing space is a relation, but necessarily one fixed within a dynamic. Each object on screen follows its own rules because they are all modules inserted into the blankness of the video space. Even the blankness is a textured thing that is scripted upon dead pixels and their zero charge (or the CRT which does or does not fire).

For Mushkin modularity is sublimated into an aesthetic, instead of simply an operating structure. While her piece may have depended on software that was itself modular, and operated on its object in a modular-layered fashion (Manovich uses the example of a Director film, which is a program Mushkin used), the instances of modularity I want to address are the still and moving objects that appear in her installation. The palm tree, the chair, and the flagstick never leave the screen. The chair is the only object that does not move – it is static and sitting – while the palm tree 'sways' mechanically and the flagstick is at one point laid on the ground to let some golfers putt. The dog, golfers, cloud, and bicycle all enter and leave at intervals. Yet all of these actors are modular within the video as we see it. The key aesthetic indicator is the background. The soft texture of the park lawn, or golf green, reveals no information except for the objects that appear on top of it. If the objects and their shadows (because we must keep in mind these objects had no shadows until they were endowed with them) were removed what would remain would be a sickly yellow-green mottled backdrop, something you would expect in a portrait photographer's studio if day-glo were the new rage. The background has no topographic information and no perspectival indicators for depth of field. Without the objects upon it, the 'park' would be totally flat, vertically and horizontally. And it is precisely this utter

blankness, the lack of visual cues, that makes every other visual object seem inserted, superficial, even pataphysical.

I have tried to show that modularity is a common element in these various examples, and that it takes form in a supposedly open undeveloped space awaiting some kind of fulfillment. That fulfillment can take place by inserting bodies, or investing ideas – even the idea of an “open” space. The ideas have no natural nor primary claim upon the space. They can be placed, removed, or otherwise altered as necessary. What is necessary however is the recognition that the two aspects are inseparable, each requires the other for its definition. The ease of which these two facets can be determined, over-determined, and exposed is something that Southern California (Los Angeles) seems to excel at beyond other spaces: from a blank space of an unknown frontier, to a palm painted at a Mission, a spinning digital palm tree top, to the denouement of all palm trees: the mobile phone tower ‘disguised’ as a palm tree.[Fig. 5] Rather than a true disguise though, the cellular palm (might we call it a mobile?) is the evolution of the palm tree, the next iteration in an interminable line. It literally communicates play, work, and leisure. It is fabricated, synthetic, exotic and still emic to the system of the palm tree already present in Southern California. This is a modular example of the modularity-blankness system that is Southern California.

It is the very desert-ness, perhaps the quality of light, the relative pressure of the atmosphere, and the ceaseless techno-bustle of the world’s fifth largest economy that constructs the Southern California city. There is the historical development of Southern California cities from arid space to urban sprawl that parallels the settlers’ dreams of creating in an empty space a manifestation of their dreams.¹⁴ Building a city on the desert floor is to build from the imagination. It is to put on to the blank space something that is other to it, different from it, an expression upon the face.¹⁵ Yet as an expression its meaning is derived in part from the dependent relation it has to the blank surface. The desert was the *tabula rasa* where ‘developers’ could construct their desires (from their ‘machines of desire’). In this sense Southern California is the very real product of a *utopia* as William McClung argues, and Los Angeles is the paradigm of Southern California as the built landscape. Before it was a landscape it was transformed from a desert. This strictly ideological desert is the same transformation that Vidler notes in spatial relationships from a ‘horror vacui’ to a ‘*tabula rasa*.’¹⁶ From a space where blankness was dangerous and threatened to consume (through desiccation), to a space where blankness was a fully inscribable ‘place,’ Los Angeles cum Southern California underwent a process of transformation.

The transformation can be viewed through the changing relationship of the space to its name, but most importantly it should be viewed as a space developed ideologically in order to develop physically. McClung notes that: “Los Angeles, which has developed on so many different scales and at so many different paces, offered plenty of blank canvases upon which futures could be built.”¹⁷ Thus Los Angeles is a *utopia* in that it is a construct upon blankness, but as a construct it is still blank itself (its meaning relies on the desert-face-blankness system); furthermore, as a dream-city atop the blank, Los Angeles is

the epicenter of (constructed) modularity. If Los Angeles seems *real* juxtaposed to the desert, then one need only remember Baudrillard's comparison between Los Angeles and Disneyland, where the former is the blank space for the artifice of the latter as it becomes the *real imaginary*. From this it is easy to see how the construct of the blank (and the artifice of its construct: the modular) fabricates its meaning in the counter signification (the *play*) of its modules. Where one needs *presence* it takes presence from its other, describing itself apart from the other as the *absence*. It is the truest form of an ideological binary manifest in space. The desert either is, or it is a vacuum; the city is defined against the desert; Disneyland against Los Angeles; the singular versus the infinite; human presence versus inhuman absence, module atop the blank; inscription on surface; light and space; everything nothing; and when we see the top of the palm tree swaying, we'll know we're back home.

¹ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001; p.30-31.

² Wimple, E. "Image of a City" in *Los Angeles and the Palm Tree*. Los Angeles: ARCO Center for Visual Art, 1984; p.7-8.

³ Uses of the palm as a symbol of victory are already a part of common lexia; consider the OED's definition of palm used figuratively: "Put emblematically for Victory, triumph; supreme honour or excellence, prize; esp. in such phrases as to bear the palm, yield the palm, etc." [from the Oxford English Dictionary Online (<http://dictionary.oed.com>)]. As a symbol of life, consider the numerous Judeo-Christian references, which also reference the synecdochic value of the palm for the oasis, and thus water and life [consider Jesus' triumphant entry fanned by palm fronds as recounted in John 12:12-13, which as a custom apparently is derivative from Roman traditions].

⁴ Cf. Walter Benjamin: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

⁵ Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Giant Palm Trees, California Mission* (1911).

⁶ Jon O. Brubaker, *California: America's Vacation Land* (1930); poster produced by New York Central Lines; cf. Barron, Stephanie. *Made in California: art, image, identity, 1900-2000; exhibition catalog for LACMA*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. Hereafter Barron 2000.

⁷ McClung, William Alexander. *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; p. 125.

⁸ *ibid.*, 55.

⁹ Bernstein, Sheri. "Contested Eden: 1920-1940" in Barron 2000; p. 122.

¹⁰ cf. Baudrillard: We lived once in a world where the realm of the imaginary was governed by the mirror, by dividing one into two, by theatre, by otherness and alienation. Today that realm is the realm of the screen, of interfaces and duplication, of contiguity and networks. All our machines are screens, and the interactivity of humans has been the replaced by the interactivity of screens. ... That we fall so easily into the screen's coma of the imagination is due to the fact that the screen presents a perpetual void that we are

invited to fill. ¹⁰ Baudrillard, Jean. *The Transparency of Evil*. Trans. by James Benedict. New York: Verso, 1993; p. 54-55.

¹¹ Quoted from van Bruggen, Coosje. *John Baldessari; exhibition catalogue from MoCA, Los Angeles*. New York: Rizzoli, 1991; 31.

¹² This line of reasoning seems further supported by Baldessari's recent *Overlap Series: Palms (with cyclist) and pianist* (2000) and *Palm (with cityscape) and climbers*, (2000); not to mention the odd palm tree tops that appear like onlooking Dr. Seuss heads in *Throwing Four Balls in the Air To Get a Square (Best of 36 Tries)* (1974). (cf. Baldessari, John. *John Baldessari; exhibition catalogue from Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea de Trento e Rovereto*. Milano: Skira, 2000; p.120-21.

¹³ Ruscha, Edward. *A Few Palm Trees*. Hollywood: Heavy Industry Publications, 1971.

¹⁴ cf. Calvino's *Le Città Invisibili*.

¹⁵ Cf. Deleuze and Guattari's "Year Zero: Faciality."

¹⁶ Vidler, Anthony. *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press 2000.

¹⁷ McClung, William Alexander. *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press; p.4-5.

technology

Killed

the new

media star

Parts of a whole into parts:

Conversations on current work with Rachel Beth Egenhoefer



Rachel Beth

is a jet setting artist who makes visceral representations of binary structures in candy and knitting. She considers her Commodore 64 and Fisher Price Loom to be defining

objects of her childhood.

Is passionate about... her Sunday brunches, likes lime green, is an obsessive list maker, reads her horoscope every Wednesday, and is proud to have obtained platinum elite status in frequent flier miles as a result of her travels.

When she was 10 she... learned how to knit from her grandma and collected anything that could have possibly been collected.

Right now... Her work is currently showing in the Russell Space Gallery at the University of California, San Diego.



NMGurl is the co-founder of the newmediaghetto.org and longs for the day when new media will end its fetishizations with technology and create works of art that conceptually, ideologically,

and aesthetically are able to speak across disciplines.

She luvs... pink dresses, shiny external hard drives, and trendy fresh hot new media. She insists on having her toenails painted, secretly reads too much smut, and drinks tall skinny lattes with an extra shot.

When she was 10 she... had a filing cabinet of alphabetized travel brochures, a pink bike which was transformed into a motorcycle with smoke bombs from her brother, and wore pink jelly shoes.

Currently... she's been making photo essays with her new digital camera.



Esther is the coach and one of the founding members of the award-winning Sassy Synchronized Swimmers; founded in Banff Canada where

she studied with Canadian psychoanalytical and synchronized swimming analysts.

She enjoys... back floating, hats with flowers & matching gloves, and baking on the weekends.

When she was 10 she... was on her first synchronized swim team, aspired to be in water ski shows and practiced synchronized ski ballet with her cousins. She performed paino duets in recitals and lip sank oldies songs in poodle skirts with her best friend for the talent show.

Most recently... she appeared in the film Sink or Swim filmed in Banff Canada.

Esther: Your new work feels a bit different from earlier works. It's softer and very minimal, but we see a lot more unique materials. Before you dealt a lot with direct manipulation of code, and translating literal meanings. Are you still as concerned with exact meaning?

Rachel Beth: No, not as much. I've kind of come to terms with the fact code is constantly changing and impossible to actually represent. All the representations are just representations, the literal meanings get messy and complicated. I wanted to get away from the code a little bit.

NMGurl: But you still seem to have this fetish for complex computer codes.

Rachel Beth: I always try in my work to allow multiple entry points so people can relate to it on many different levels. Maybe you don't understand machines or computer codes, but you can understand the ideas of information, order, or curiosity. My new work especially has a lot to do with our efforts to understand the intangibly unknown. I think many people can relate to that.

NMGurl: What is that supposed to mean?

Rachel Beth: The manifestations we take on to fulfill our desires to create order in a world we know we won't understand. For me, this is the impossible quest to find binary numbers. I know I will never see them, yet I still desire to find them, to touch them, to hold them, and eat them. An obsession...

NMGurl: How did you get yourself to the philosophical after dealing with the scientific for so long?

Rachel Beth: I started reading several philosophers who dealt with everything from candy and consumption to desire and order. I began reading Foucault again.

NMGurl: I think sometimes he talks in circles.

Rachel Beth: In "The Order of Things" he talks about the ways in which we choose to order information and thoughts. This, of course, is interesting to me. "One first considers the whole and then divides it up into parts." [1]

NMGurl: I'm not sure about that. I tend to think that order is the accumulation of the parts. Organizing the parts to create a whole. That's where part of your desire comes from, isn't it? The desire to create a whole, not the desire to divide into parts.

Esther: I think the desire is more about organization. Just like synchronized swimmers, floating in the pool, swimming into different formations. Each body an individual but also a part of the whole. I think you have to look at it both ways simultaneously; the pool, the formation, and each swimmer in it; the whole, and the parts.

Rachel Beth: Perhaps subconsciously we know that the whole exists, we divide it up into parts to compare their relationships with one another as a way in which we come to understand and organize information. "One cannot know the order of things 'in their isolated nature' but by discovering that which is the simplest, then that which is the next simplest, one can progress inevitably to the most complex things of all." [2]

NMGurl: This is what doesn't make sense to me, he says things are a whole but he also talks about comparing these units to a common unit to understand them, but order is created without reference to an exterior unit. That doesn't really make sense.

Esther: I kind of like to think of the "exterior unit" as our "template" or "formative years" in psychoanalysis, our personal experiences that we compare new information to that which we already know or have experienced and previously categorized.

NMGurl: But if so, or even if not, wouldn't that comparison effect the way in which something is ordered? Just the principal that you are comparing something so that you can better understand it, the relation to what it is being compared to has to effect the way you understand it and the way you order or categorize it.

Rachel Beth: Similar to the comparisons made in analog-digital translation; connecting plotted points based on comparison of voltage.

NMGurl: Right, but you can order things by one comparison, but then if you change the relations of comparison, you have a different order, the comparison is never constant.

Rachel Beth: Like rearranged zeros and ones of a .jpeg become a .tiff... "Knowledge is based on identity and difference." [3] This is also what Kilter talks about; all information is broken down to zeros and ones.

NMGurl: The total connection of all media; through digitalization all information becomes numbers, with which nothing is impossible. [4]

Esther: Right, Foucault also says this: "...this order or generalized form of comparison can be established only according to its position in the body of our acquired knowledge..." The order and its significance can change based on relationships. [5]

NMGurl: It could be similar to looking at clouds, one person sees a dinosaur in the shapes, and another person sees the same clouds as being a cathedral... fluctuating intangibility.

Esther: I've also heard you talk about eating the candy as a way of embodying information.

Rachel Beth: In some respects yes. One of the characteristics that fascinates me so much is that information is intangible and immaterial.

Esther: Information in itself is almost like a bodiless fluid that can flow between different substrates. The body it takes on makes it tangible, embodiment creates a context.

NMGurl: So what are you embodying in your work?

Rachel Beth: My work is talking about the embodiment. It's giving form to these intangibilities. And also giving it a form that is physically able to be embodied. The candy can be eaten.

NMGurl: Did you eat any of the candy off of your abacus?

Rachel Beth: No, but some did fall off while I was making it. At first this bothered me and I was going to restring it, but then it made more sense to leave it missing, the fluxuating, intangible, eatable information.

NMGurl: You keep talking about ordering information, but really the viewer isn't rearranging information, they are eating or subtracting information instead.

Rachel Beth: Yes. Technically I could argue that they are reordering by subtracting, but yes this is something I think about, I'm asking people to take away from the order I've made.

NMGurl: And then you organize and reorganize its parts over and over again.

Esther: There's an element of repetition to it. Almost like a ritual. When information takes on the same body repetitively, it creates a memory or a history of that event.

NMGurl: Like your cache on your computer.

Rachel Beth: Yes maybe, embodiment can have a history... sometimes.

NMGurl: Or how we take on repetitive actions ourselves. Doing things over and over again until a habit forms that doesn't even require our consciousness. We can drive home without thinking about which street to turn down, or type on the keyboard without having to think of which letter is where on the keyboard.

Esther: Your work also leaves behind a history.

Rachel Beth: Yes, the pieces that require subtracting or eating. There is an empty wrapper, candy residue, you knew something was once there, there is a record of it.

Esther: Almost like a journal.

Rachel Beth: A lot of my work I think of as diaries, journals, or documents. Weaving lines together to create stories, or almost documenting with candy. Or also as bundles, collections, treasures, things people secretly hoard and collect.

NMGurl: A collection, or an obsession?

Rachel Beth: The collections are obsessions. The obsession of trying to embody information and a desire to understand these bodies.

NMGurl: How do you really talk about desire though?

Esther: I see what NMGurl is asking, it is a complicated subject to talk about. Desire is not an object but rather something experienced. It requires a different language. [6]

NMGurl: ...and therefore talking about it almost seems endlessly impossible.

Rachel Beth: To some extent I think this is true. There is something that seems endless about trying to define or calculate human experiences such as pain or desire. But this is also what I'm trying to get at- infinite information without concrete answers; attempting to understand these phenomena that defy our understanding.

NMGurl: Repetitive behaviors that are fully conscious of their hopelessness... has anyone ever told you that you have O.C.D.?

Esther: But you still make reference to psychoanalysis and desire.

Rachel Beth: Yes, some. I'm not using it as a direct reference. A lot of things in psychoanalysis you can relate to my work. At first I thought I was going to make more of a connection to it, but now I just see it as something I looked at during my process... ideas of "the template", oral fixations, and desire.

Esther: Meaning the events taking place in your "template", or formative years, structure the way you order your thoughts/ world etc. [7]

NMGurl: And then after a certain point you just relive these experiences over and over again. And you can't really change who you are, but you can kind of come to terms with or learn to deal with the way you choose to organize yourself.

Rachel Beth: My question with this is always I guess that I'm looking for some concrete thing that happened, or a direct cause and effect. And because I can't remember much from when I was 0-5 its hard for me to believe that what ever happened then directly results in why I am now obsessed with binary numbers.

NMGurl: Whereas you can see other events that happened after this that are a reason?

Esther: I think this does relate to your work though. Candy is referential to childhood and to desire and you are obviously ordering it. I think it relates more to psychoanalysis than you think. The idea of the unconscious being random at birth and then in the infantile states patterns and order is formed based on desires.

NMGurl: There was an article in Cosmo about this, about why you chose to date the same type of men over and over again. A lot of the reasons why had to do with your childhood and your family and stuff... obsessions with order and the need to create drama to mess it up so you can reorder it again... so all this could be my desires to replay formative events? [8]

Esther: Perhaps this also relates to you making work that allows viewers to eat or subtract from your calculated grids of candy information.

Rachel Beth: Yes, it is about an odd obsession that is most likely unique to me...

NMGurl: ...I'm not sure I know anyone else as obsessed with binary numbers as you are...

Rachel Beth: Yes but its not specifically about 'my' obsession.

Esther: There's something interesting about your obsession and its mix of old and new technologies. Ignoring new computers and technology and going back to the punch cards.

Rachel Beth: Similar to the 1940's style Synchro Super 8 films you appeared in just this year, Sink or Swim.

NMGurl: You're all indecisive Libra's, what did you expect? It's the scales.

Rachel Beth: Yes there's something interesting about the indecisive space in-between, the spectrum between the zeros and ones.

Esther: Buoyancy... like floating in water...

Rachel Beth: I admit I am very indecisive but it's not always indecisiveness though. I've always talked about the direct relation between old and new technology.

NMGurl: Yes we know... the Jacquard Loom was the first computer... blah blah blah...

Rachel Beth: Yes but also in terms of structural ideology- weaving and sewing; a stitch next to a stitch creates a line; which on top of another line creates a plane; which intersected with another plane creates space.

NMGurl: In the same way that numbers next to numbers create codes that creates scripts to generate programs.

Esther: Fiber also has the tangibility and materiality that you are searching for in codes.

Rachel Beth: Yes, that's exactly where it all started, I like to be able to touch things.

Esther: So this idea of stitches creating lines, is that what's behind your 'sewn painting' pieces?

Rachel Beth: It's something that's actually behind all of my work. It's my foundation. When I made the 'sewn paintings' they were just simply about telephone lines. Later I realized they really had much more to do with the analog-digital translation I mentioned earlier.

Esther: The digitalesque stitches sewing lines of information.

Rachel Beth: There is a threshold, when the line is so high it becomes a one; when it is so low it turns into a zero. I'm interested in this intersection; the point of change.

Esther: It's how we make decisions.

Rachel Beth: Yes, the threshold of decisions.

NMGurl: So some of these new videos you made, 'lines and dots' are they about this threshold?

Rachel Beth: About the spectrum that exists in the threshold, yes, translating dots to lines and lines to dots.

NMGurl: These are all pretty complex things you are putting into just simple "lines and dots", do you think all of this comes across in the work?

Rachel Beth: Maybe not to everyone, but I hope it does. I think a lot can be said for simple lines and dots.

Esther: You've removed all the color, candy dots traditionally are brightly colored. Why the subtraction?

Rachel Beth: I didn't see a need for it. Metaphorically I wanted to strip it down to raw data. Just talk about the information and not have color complicate things.

Esther: The screen prints on interfacing are nice. I like their quiet simplicity without the colors. There are many similarities in the process of silk-screening and information.

Rachel Beth: The whole assembly line, repetitive motion... as well as the actual idea of the silk screen. The information (ink) either transfers to the cloth or is resisted by the screen.

Esther: That seems important.

Rachel Beth: Yes, I want the process and the materials to relate to the concepts. That is always important to me.

NMGurl: Try telling that to a symposium filled with technological fetish driven "new media artists".

Rachel Beth: Yes we all read your manifesto...

NMGurl: "The new media field is facing a danger of becoming a ghetto whose participants are united by their fetishism of the latest computer technology, rather than by any deeper conceptual, ideological or aesthetic issues..." [9]

Esther: So do you see yourself in the new media camp?

Rachel Beth: I'd like not to. I can relate to them and I can talk to them, but I'm also interested in speaking to a larger audience and not limiting myself to only being associated with one clan.

NMGurl: So what is it exactly that you are trying to say again?

Rachel Beth: In general I'm much more interested in drawing connections and posing questions than I am in making definitive statements. I'm interested in the idiosyncrasies revealed in our desires to organize the world. Seeking answers we will never find. For me, this is the desire to make mass quantities of white candy dots that fill a room, or decode computer files to reveal their binary code.

NMGurl: So really maybe the computer is similar to the brain, and the quest to understand how the zeros and ones work is a quest to understand how we order, structure, and consume information.

Esther: There are many relationships between computers and brains; neural networking, binary synapse firing, coding and functioning.

Rachel Beth: Yes, I think about the brain a lot too. 'When things happen in your mind as opposed to the real world a threshold is crossed.' [10]

NMGurl: Or when things happen inside the computer for that matter.

Rachel Beth: Embodying the patterns created from translated thresholds.

Esther: With a hopeful hopelessness.

NMGurl: An obsession.

Rachel Beth: With lines and dots.

[1], [2]. [3] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1966, Vintage Books Edition 1973) Chapter 3, Section 2; *Representing, Order*, p. 50-58, p.53 [4] Fredrich Kittler, *Literature Media* (G & B Arts, 1997) Gramophone, Film, Typewriter; p. 31-32 [5] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1966, Vintage Books Edition 1973) Chapter 3, Section 2; *Representing, Order*, p. 50-58, p.54 [6] Jeanne Randolph in reference to D.W. Winnicott's *On Human Nature*, in conversation with at the Banff Centre for the Arts, May 2003. [7] Jeanne Randolph, in conversation with at the Banff Centre for the Arts, May 2003. [8] "I Always Fall for Bad Boys, and Four Other Life Dilemmas Resolved", *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, Hearst Publications, March 2003 [9] *New Media Ghetto Manifesto*, 2003, www.newmediagheto.org [10] Dave Wilson, Key Note Speech: *Objects, Display Culture, and Interpretation*; Banff Centre for the Arts, May 6, 2003

other resources:

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Alvis Evans; *Basic Digital Electronics*, Master Publishing, 1996

Distributed Writing, or Geodiscursive Writing¹

Prolegomena: of non-newness, and one trajectory of its historicity.

There is a disconnected history of distributed writing, and it is this multivalent history, and the multivalence of history, that survives in the shadows of deficit; unrecognized. From the accretionary oral revisions performed under the guise of pathos in Greek epic poetry, the globalism of the Gothic Mediaeval Cathedral, the canal system of Nanjing, Cortazar's *Hopscotch*, the plateau of human achievement landscaped by Deleuze and Guatari: all systems in their own right of distributed writing; each of them denying their conventional formations and in so doing establishing a second order form (in sequence, the denial of time, function, space, narrative, and authorship, and then the subsequent reinvention of each of these same forms). The compilation of particular histories themselves (of this history in particular) reflecting the choice in trajectory and belying the disconnection.

Microscope: neural paths and biological information; the secret life of ideas transcribing their morphophoric energies in bioinformatic branching from host to offspring, virally from host to host, and fanning in explosive diversities of spontaneous evolutions and mutations. Deleuze rightly speaks through biology: "...as Kant's *Critiques* were (roughly speaking) the epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics of a world of Euclidean space, Aristotelian time, and Newtonian physics-and just as they (perhaps inadvertently) pinpointed biology as the key science that did not fit that world - Deleuze works to provide the philosophical concepts that make sense of our world of fractal geometry, anticipatory effects, and non-linear dynamics- and to highlight biology as the key science of our time."² The oft-used notion of the *rhizome* indicates enough of a parallelism, distribution of resource, and biological transcription to begin the restructuring of both history - making the implicit explicit - and the present.

The matter at hand suggests that distributive writing is the unacknowledged child (the excremental product, the excretion awaiting symbiotic usage)³ of experience. It seems that all histories, and all products therein, partake of a long, and more or less unmapped inter-dialogic foundation. In simple cases, the accretionary and evolutionary process of narrative (oral sediments building to stories) and in complicated cases the distribution is covered by layers of other (distributive) elements: the plagiarized idea, the anonymous work, the collective consciousness, the unexplained aberration. Texts intend their veneer of singularity and finality to convince of, if not uniqueness, then of its "sum of all histories"⁴, while eschewing recognition of their true teratogenesis; the frankenstein-stitching of the limbs and organs, the hybrid covalence of molecular information. Historically, the moments of clairvoyance reveal the concept of distribution clothed in the animus of a demiurge, fomenting in the poet of the stream

¹ This document was produced in an "acute" session of distributed writing, and as such spends little time on overt reference to other creative research. We have tried to footnote the most densely packed areas, and extract an originator of a thought, or two, but it must be said that- in living in the vanguard of exactly what this document proposes- we willfully contribute to the dissolution of distracting quotation and move towards the biological logic of digestion.

² <http://www.artsci.lsu.edu/fai/Faculty/Professors/Protevi/Introduction.html>

³ note: this is, of course, Bataille, but with a Deleuzean twist.

⁴ Note: along the lines of Richard Feynman's work in quantum mechanics.

of consciousness, plaguing the nightmares of Jung, or Enlightening the universal planet through the *weltanschauung*, the *Zeitgeist* boogeyman beneath Jung's bed. In all of these cases, even where the concept of distribution might have something to discuss (and not *be* just the discussion), it has maintained a mythical status, shadowing in operation the missing hand of the creator God and putting in its stead the amorphous false democracy of a multitude. Even presently, while the "fuzzy geography"⁵ of our communication-in-flux-networks offers up a fertile field of multi-planar growth opportunities, we are still deprived of its nourishing illuminations by the shadow an authorial monolith.

Out-lining: non-newness in a newly configurable space.

"We have built pyramids when we are in the process of again becoming nomads, when an architecture for a new exodus is needed." -Pierre Levy

In this particular case the interest lies in exhibiting, developing, and maximizing the modes of distribution as they relate to *voice (parole)* in the digital realm. That such distribution may occur elsewhere is both true and irrelevant to the project at hand. The distinct goal, and unsung hero of this text, is the proposal for the creation of just such a digital repository of writings; a new form of journal that makes prominent the modes of creation believed to be essential but considered of atrophied significance. Explicitly, this possibility of developing a platform for distributive writing over clustered networks lies precisely in the fact that the network can (and will) be exposed: the only place to find writing with provenance and pedigree.

While notions of pedigree often define a status of purity, and provenance associates a value in its history of *taste*, distribution in this case merely offers a receipt for the speaker each time 'two-cents' are added. Or, in a generative model, distribution provides both the materials and structure for adding to (mutating) the genetic code. Speciation, the theorized teratogenesis of evolutive mutation, suggests that a mutation may finally (and quite arbitrarily) be so different so as to be *called* a new entity; in this case, all entities are no longer ontologically (ontogenetically) isolated (their genetic progress always being documented), nor are they ever dependant (the mapping of such progress can always be repositioned according to the map-readers preferences). How is this possible?

There are at least two distinct levels to consider here, both of which are mutually interrelated. The first level is that of the productive structure, the second are the entities that form its constituents. Neither of these relationships are immutable for any aspect under scrutiny.

Structurally the flat space of the digital screen appears to deny the modes of its production. In this case, the format of each [resolution] must define to a greater or lesser extent the boundaries of its presentation: the 3:4 ratio of the monitor, the range of possible colours, the dependence upon the OS and upon the browser, the limits of language (both as a subtextual programming interface, and as the interface itself). Yet as Manovich has successfully argued, these parameters are also deceptively unfixed.⁶ The boundary of the rectangle forces an interior collapse:

⁵ Note: as if there were a geo-spatial analog to fuzzy logic or fuzzy numbers.

⁶Manovich, Lev. *Language of New Media*.

everything within the rectangle can swirl like gas (*kaos*), its modularity is not just 'plug-and-play', it is add and stir, mix and match, excrete and digest.

In this case the open space between the rectangle becomes a surface area for representing vectors of data (data visualization: statistical, analytical, aesthetic, etc.). It may not be limited to a single visualization, or any visualization at all. In fact, it is quite susceptible to infinite collapse, a fractal depth of mathematical and semiotic strata. No matter how it may come to pass, the rectangle is a pre-fabricated dynamic space corralled to expose itself as self-reflexively as possible through the implementation of, among other data visualizations, a diagram of valences between the collected informations that populate the repository - the data objects.

This data object, the so-called second entity, initially takes several more conventional forms: image, sound, text, are among the most common; other types may include game, 'raw' code or applet, link, etc.. These bodies are placed into the general structural mechanism by contributing 'authors' where they can thereby act upon and be acted upon by other contributions. Each contribution (organism) receives upon entry a designation instantiating its positional uniqueness (dp). Subsequent reiterations, interactions, mutations by users of the [resolution] will not be tracked as alterations, but as generations; thereby acquiring their own dp.

The data object does not necessarily maintain any kind of bodily primacy or integrity. It can be altered within its own content-type, or used as fodder for another related or separate process. The text (or a string form the text) can be used to generate a visual, vice versa, ad infinitum, etc., with each subsequent resubstantiation constituting a generation (a new data object), and also presenting the possibility of establishing a new content-type.

The nexus itself will be the shifting architectures of connecting "lines" between contributors: a clustering of resources (primarily distributed memory) and participant's "client" interfaces - visual or textual software that arrange and engage the population of data. Assuredly, visual conceits to the interconnectedness of the structure will be initially coded and distributed; in that, the impetus is to construct "viewers" (software interfaces) that can comprehensibly represent not only the pedigree but the connections (of extractable elements) between data-objects thriving even in disparate "evolutionary" threads.

Ultimately, this becomes a question of cartography, of making explicit the topography and geology of vast tracts of consciousness and praxis; each a shadowed inner landscape that has informed the dreaming of our poets and explorers but has never been traced to this extent, has never been so accessible and still resistant to the capriciousness of *the wind*.

Tagging: glimpsing the midnight writers with a pen light, and other stories

Moving lithely around manifestos, the songs of drunkards in a tavern of ideas, we move around the corner and into the dark alley. Here we encounter all of the signs we expected to encounter. A flickering street lamp fading into dark night, an alley cat in a dumpster with fishbones under its paws, the pungent smell of alcoholics' piss, the cardboard villages for nomads – not the Christian Dior or Diesel Nomad who is resident to the world entire, but the dispossessed, the

nomad who is so because there cannot be a home anywhere but in water soluble *unité d'habitations*,⁷ of puddles that never evaporate, and at the very end of this alley, an opening that goes no where in particular. This is where we wish to be. It is where we may begin to catch sight of writing that is beyond the manifesto, and beyond their poetic clichés. Beyond the alley's other opening, its end and the beginning of the *other*, the space reopens and three (de)central things confront us: the lights and air of our megalopolis city, the horizon demarcated by the convolutions of the fluvial freeways, and the billboards that radiate their *signs* onto the countless byway bypassers by bylines. Bye bye manifesto, hello transphysical organic network.

In that distributive writing has been re-cognized, so we must admit that it is because it has its foundation in an organic network that is apparent on several levels. For starters, we view in our city the churning, the din, the no more ebb and flow but the constant on the go; we see the surfaces it occurs on (the air paths, the highways, the surface roads, the beaten paths, and the *signs* of spatial possession). We notice it in our systems which purport to mimic certain cognitive structures of our minds.⁸ We connect seamlessly, or so we wish to imagine it as such, across a digital spread spectrum, from Cellphone to WiFi; information superhighways that clog or cruise, and all of them meeting their ends in the wasteland of the deeply rural space; the city slickers version of Icarus' sun. Finally, through these channels we witness our communications, linguistic and otherwise. As a disjunctive community we speak across channels, from bat-phone to SMS, from post-it-note to email, from poster to Congressional print. More importantly, we interrupt one another constantly, yet the final product is always continuous. Continuously broken, fragmented, but so nearly periodic that it appears to reflect the periodization of high-frequency sampling; in short, existential hyper frames.

This is the organic network. It corresponds to how we are; we build it to do just that. It reflects structures of our power, it amplifies those already in possession of agency. But it also provides blank surfaces awaiting reinscriptions (because nothing is truly *blank*; it only waits for the intentionality of fulfillment, the semiosis that is its communicative chrysalis, which brings it from some *blank* to some other *blank*). What distributive writing does is take advantage of as many of these surfaces as possible. It does this precisely because it is already implicated in the network. The difference in this case, however, rests in the acknowledgement of this condition. The surfaces are not somehow 'free' and 'open'; *blankness* is always confiscated from some alternate territory. But it is different from a Situationist subversion (though Situationism could be easily incorporated, along side the corporate network). The difference here is that distributive writing does not take place in opposition to a dominant position; in fact, it uses both dominance and submission. Distributive writing writes across the network. It writes in fragments that are, perhaps, later reconnected. It writes as we speak, or don't speak; it writes across everything already built, razed, or developed. It is an exercise in writing that mimics the organic network, and yet here there is an attempt to make it less elusive. This is an attempt to catch writing always in enaction.

Blinking dotted lights act as nexus for the city. They are joined by the network that has grown up with them, and the two, lights and network, mark out the city and freeways above. But what

⁷ cf. Virilio, Paul. *Crepuscular Dawn*. Trans. by Mark Taormina. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002.

⁸ cf. Dallow, Peter. "Digital Media as Simulation of the Analogical Mind" in *Technospaces: Inside the New Media*. Ed. By Sally R. Munt. New York: Continuum, 2001; p. 57-70.

of the signs? They are the so-called blank spaces. They are the writings joined to earth, but written in the sky and illumined by metal halide suns. But there is more than just the sign post, or the sign itself. As any freeway driver will tell you: they are often covered or marked by various 'tags,' symbols of territorial possession beyond the civic authority. These tags are edits upon the signs, but as such, they add to the sign rather than detract from it. There is a sedimentation that occurs. On the surface is the tag, beneath lay the traces of the sign, then beneath that are other signs and other tags, and at the bottom of these layers is the slate of the billboard, the scaffolding, the construct of the sign. Then there is also the compounding of signs upon signs. The sign is tagged by a sign because of its proclamative position as a sign: it is a well-lighted billboard and everyone can see it, so it is reclaimed by the tag. No doubt the 'taggers' likely don't care so much for the aesthetic contribution to the sign as a whole, so much as they do the accuracy with which their own signs (their tags) may be observed. Unbeknownst to them however, they have partaken in the layering of a collage, and their meanings register within the framework of this style. Yet the collage is also affected. Each tag is more or less indecipherable to the greater public, and to this extent then each tag looks similar to any other tag. A homogenization of the strangest variety occurs. A plainness in subversion occurs on the surface of the common (billboard) sign. The layers of meaning add to and cancel out each other in various ways and according to different viewings. Thus the sign is complicated in at least two ways: in its physical layering, and in its semiotic layering.

This layering is identical to the scenario of distributive writing. In the dwz there is a layering of time (specific times pertaining to when changes are made), a physical layering through versioning sediments, mutations, branching, and simple edits, and finally there is a semiotic layering that occurs when layers are impacted through time and through interaction, proximity, relation, etc.. There is also a distinct lack of attributable authorship and possession; because traceable authorship is identical to territorial claims and ownership of space. The homogenization that occurs is not one of ideological impact, for readers of the signs always know what the signs mean to them. It occurs in that aside from the knowledge that the sign exists, there is no known author; and for those that merely pass by and pay no heed – for this is a bona fide option – the dwz is a meaningless intrusion upon a bland space: a disruption on the level of a fruit fly; small, insignificant, a minor nuisance; noticeable only in the most liminal proprioceptors. Baudrillard has his endless simulacra because he cannot stop to look. It simulates only because it writes and only because it is read as writing. It is still only blank space. At any moment someone, some thing may possess it and write upon it. At any moment something can be added, and something can be subtracted (erasure is also (re)writing).

In the dwz there is the problem of authorship. Authors are replaced by position indicators; tags upon tags, if you will. Each tag on the modular body (the text) is tagged with a stamp indicating its relative position. The position includes its relative time to the body and to other tags. It indicates value of change and frequency, how many and what kind. Unlike the physical sign, the dwz is transparent, or its genealogy is present and discernable. All layers can be viewed simultaneously, and one at a time, depending on the framing of the space and the interface layout conditions. Anything is possible, but this is the key: anything must be possible.

Authorship should dissolve entirely. If anything must be possible then the tag must account for complete erasure, or absolute absurdity. It must account for loquacity, silence, redundancy, and

absence. It can trace by means of valences the number and position of any qualia within a preset range,⁹ and that range can be preset to anything present, and if beyond the present, then demarcate the limit space of absolute zero. At points, it seems prudent to have a system that compiles all of the changes into a kind of new-modular body, a type of meta-index known as versioning. The conditions under which this occurs are not clear, and the version itself may be more accurately depicted as a significant branch instead of the sole heir to some lexical lineage. The numerous options for multiplicity reflect the possibilities encountered in lived existence. Authorship is an artificial function designed to commodify and control space. What any author states only has meaning in the context of the relational value of the statement. The dwz is only context, and the writing is its fodder. What is on the table are the ideas, and egos are checked at the gateway. Thus if the statement is what we hear (the author is first the word, and the body proceeds from this function as per Foucault), then the statement is the value. It is no longer about tagging to control space, but pinging to know who's out there to read the tag, and then adding more tags, tagging tags, writing everywhere. It does not matter who writes it. What must be considered first is the value of the statement to the project of all writings' momentum. The concept of authorship preservation is exactly what haunts and contributes to the failure of earlier attempts: Quilt, Duplex, Jabber, AIM, IRC, enCore, Buddyspace; besides individual drawbacks, each system was obsessed with maintaining the clear identity of traceable authorship. This is especially true in synchronous modes of dwz where simultaneous changes are effected (in an asynchronous dwz whole modules are downloaded and uploaded as discrete mutations).

Instead the system branches. Mutations are any subsequent addition, whereas branching is a change in vector, related but distinct as a subset. The two are not exclusive. One is vertical the other is lateral. Each object, be it mutation or branch, can be viewed singularly, or in relation vertically or laterally, or as a three dimensional space (vertical, lateral and occipital): mutation, branch, and time. A valence algorithm would disrupt this further by adding user specifiable dimensions, new categories of relationship; the mutation, the frequency of $f(x)$, the time when $f(y)$, the cartography of branching as perceived through $f(\text{time} * z)$. Anything that can be written can act as a category or variable; everything is writing. When something branches, it also mutates, and vice versa. The dwz must account for these possibilities as a condition for its historical depth (it could not do otherwise anyway).

Lastly, to detail this is only to catch a glimpse. We see the writing and make conclusions based on what we'd like to believe we're seeing. It's another kind of hermeneutic circle. As the project unfolds we learn more about the nature of tags, their power, and their limits. We learn what surfaces archive the inscriptions and what surfaces explode with perception but fade quickly from view. This is all achieved through a conscious desire to design a memory for memory. And yet it is achieved in crepuscular light. We think the shadows are what we wish them to be. Yet we already understand that the shadow is already always an effect. So we post a sign on a utility pole: lost signs, please call if found; and thereby add ourselves to the dialogue of presence.

⁹ cf. Benjamin Fry's *Valence* project. <<http://acg.media.mit.edu/people/fry/valence/>>

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