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Screening the Page/ Paging the Screen: Digital Poetics and the Differential Text

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--Art is a series of perpetual differences.

Tristan Tzara, "Note on Poetry"¹

It is fundamentally problematic," writes Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, "to assign a fixed meaning to a procedure."² Bürger's reference is to montage/collage: he argues that just because two collages —say, a still life by Picasso and a satiric collage by Raoul Hausmann-- use similar techniques of paste-up and collocation of unlike material, doesn't mean that the two works actually have a shared aesthetic. On the contrary, Bürger observes, German Dadaists like Hausmann took what was, for Picasso, essentially an aesthetic form and adapted it for political purposes.

The same principle, I would suggest, applies to the new electronic poetics. As in the case of any medium in its early stages, digital poetry

today may seem to fetishize digital presentation as something in itself remarkable, as if to say, "Look what the computer can do!" But no medium or technique of production can in itself give the poet (or other kind of artist) the inspiration or imagination to produce works of art. And poetry is an especially vexed case because, however we choose to define it, poetry is the *language art*: it is, by all accounts, language that is somehow extraordinary, that can be processed only on re-reading. Consequently, the "new" techniques whereby letters and words can move around the screen, break up, and reassemble, or whereby the reader/viewer can decide by a mere click to reformat the electronic text or which part of it to access, become merely tedious unless the poetry in question is, in Ezra Pound's words, "charged with meaning."

Then, too, a strong claim has been made for the *interactivity* of electronic text—a claim I take to be largely illusory, especially when it comes to poetry. True, viewers can trace their own path through a given electronic text, can decide whether to move from A to B or B to Q, to rearrange word groups and stanzas, and so on. But is such activity really any more "interactive" than, say, the *Simms Family* games, which allow their players to "decide" what sort of house the family will live in, what their furniture will look like, and what their "personalities" are? For the Simms player, the personality and wallpaper choices are limited to a fixed set of options, produced by the makers of the game in the interest of mass appeal. As

children quickly learn—and this is why they soon tire of *Simms Family 1* and turn to *Simms Family on Vacation* or whatever other computer game—permission, as John Cage would have said, is granted, but hardly to do whatever you want. Indeed, the input is rigidly predetermined by the largely anonymous authors” and programmers. Adorno would have had a field day with this perfect cipher of the Culture Industries.

Nevertheless, electronic text does offer the poet exciting new possibilities, which I shall take up in a moment. First, however, I want to say something about the new dissemination of poetry and poetics that is occurring on the internet. Here a real revolution is taking place right in front of our eyes. Consider Kenneth Goldsmith’s beautifully designed site *Ubuweb* (www.ubuweb.com), where one can access an astonishing variety of avant-garde poetries from the early twentieth century to the present: from Russian Futurism and Dada to Fluxus and Ethnopoetics, to contemporary movements in visual and sound poetry. There are also critical essays on the poetries in question and, most important, portfolios of otherwise inaccessible work. Thus Craig Dworkin has produced *An Anthology of Conceptual Writing,*” with a superb introduction and examples from Samuel Beckett and Robert Barry to Christian Bök—an anthology actually much more adequate than anything currently available in print format. Again, Goldsmith has obtained the entire archive of the avant-garde “magazine in a box” *Aspen* (1965-72), which is unavailable even in leading research libraries, and has posted the entire run

(10 issues) on the web. And on Ubuweb, one can listen to Marinetti intone *Zang Tuum Tumb*, Henri Chopin recite his sound poetry, and Ron Silliman read his macabre question poem "Sunset Debris."

How will the dissemination of such rich and varied material affect the poetry-reading public? Like any revolution, this one will take some time to be felt in Establishment culture. Indeed, even as electronic poetics has become more and more sophisticated, the mainstream journals like *The Hudson Review* or *American Poetry Review* have moved in the opposite direction: their short lineated epiphanic free-verse lyrics, with their justified left (and often right) margins, surrounded by white space suggest that nothing has changed: a poem is a poem, period! Indeed, at a recent conference in Belfast on Transatlantic Poetics, I heard an English poet, Ruth Padel, say that there is no such thing as a designed book of poems; there are only separate intense lyrics and these are "a gift of God." And another poet chimed in that it's time to get away from "silly" concepts like *process* or the *open-ended* poetic sequence because the poet had jolly well better make up his or her mind how to *finish* the poem, how to make that crucial decision that determines its final shape.

No *Aspen* or Vito Acconci for this group, which still dominates university Creative Writing programs and the major newspapers and reviews. But it is only a matter of time till this situation changes, for obviously younger people, surfing the net, will come across sites like

Ubuweb and will absorb the materials posted. Here economics is central: concrete poetry, for example, was always very expensive to reproduce and print, especially in color formats, even as CDs of sound poetry are hard to come by. Today, if you can't afford to buy, say, the *Collected Poems of Haroldo and Augusto de Campos*, you can study their works online. True, the texture of the page and its actual lettering will be lost and the digitized artwork cannot quite match the colors of the original, but the fact is that now readers around the world can access the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay or Mary Ellen Solt—work that can now become part of the academic curriculum.

Another interesting facet of the digital dissemination of poetic texts is that electronic texts are likely to be truer to the original than are the usual reprints and anthology versions. The Norton Anthologies, for example, often adjust the visual format of a given poem so as to save space and hence money: intentional double-spacing becomes normal single-spacing, and so on. A classic case is that of George Oppen, who designed *Discrete Series* so as to have one poem per page, whereas the various reprintings have tended to crowd the short lyrics together, with the poems often broken up at the bottom of a given page and continuing on the next. On the screen, this needn't be the case; indeed, a website like *Futurism and Futurists* (www.futurism.org.uk) reproduces the various manifestos by Marinetti and Boccioni exactly as they were designed, whereas most reprints distort the typography, spacing, layout, and so on.

But what about digital poetry itself—the work now written expressly for the screen? The most interesting exemplars of digital poetics to date have tended to be what I have called elsewhere *differential* texts—that is to say, texts that exist in different material forms, with no single version being the definitive one.³ Thus a text like Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Fidget* has a print version, a digital version, and it also exists as an archive of its gallery installation—an installation whose use of visual and sound media gave it a rather different tone from the other two. Which is the “real” *Fidget*? One cannot say although each reader may well prefer one mode of production over the others.

The ability to move from one medium to another and back again allows the poet to experiment with temporal and spatial frames. And many of these differential electronic texts use procedural devices, following the example of *Oulipo* or, closer to home, the rule-governed compositions of John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, and Fluxus. Consider, for starters, Brian Kim Stefans’s sequence *the dreamlife of letters*.⁴ This is a flash piece in which the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, presented in alphabetic sequence (with secondary sequences based on the second letter in each word, and so on), produce words and phrases, all animated in various ways against the background of an orange square. The letters are black or white and dance around the screen in silence, producing new formations, splitting up, and regrouping. Some of the formations look like Cagean mesostics; others

insert words inside large capitals, others are produced by letter clashes, circular formations, lipograms, and a myriad other textual patterns, no two configurations being quite the same.

In the Prologue, which precedes the actual running of the flash text, Stefans explains the generative email procedure as follows:

In 1999, I, along with several other poets and writers, was asked to partake in an online “roundtable” on sexuality and literature. The event would be centered around a brief essay by the San Francisco novelist Dodie Bellamy. . . .

All of the participants were divided into groups, each individual having a position in that group. As I was the second in position, I was assigned to respond to the person in the first position, who in my case was the poet and feminist literary theorist Rachel Blau DuPlessis.

DuPlessis wrote a very textually detailed, nearly opaque response (to be found here **(o)**).⁵

A click on this link takes us to DuPlessis’ short piece for the roundtable (University of Buffalo Poetics Discussion Group, 30 September 2000). Here the poet uses passages of complex and suggestive phonetic spelling, alternating with their “translation” or transposition into “normal” English,

which constitutes DuPlessis's own commentary on the gender issues with which Bellamy deals. Thus the piece opens with the lines:

"gin dear hiss delight" sad dough tea bellum me wansin moo van bo
drop age tick tock 2 cum "gender is te nigt" said Dodie Bellamy once in
"Moving Borders" page TKTK (to come to 2 cum.zzz gindra delite ides
aye—ginestra scissors delays, hex you all in ties his duh nigh to
come). Is gender the night? I'd say—gender is the day, sexuality is
the night.

And it concludes, "Weiner hearing sense lay dunkel troubled nixed sensual
heft leveling ring uglies. We experience a doubled, tripled, mixed sexuality
of everything all ways."

Stefans seems to have been dissatisfied with this procedure for, despite the complex verbal and phonemic overlay, the DuPlessis piece makes very specific assertions about sexuality. He writes

I had decided that I wanted to respond to her text in a detailed manner, but I felt that normal prose would not suffice on my part, so I alphabetized the words in her text, and created my own series of very short "concrete" poems based on the chance meeting of words. My poem (which you can read here **(o)**⁶ along with a few short paragraphs in response to Bellamy, was my contribution to the roundtable.

As words almost invariably take on nearly obscene meanings, when they are left to linger on their own, and as DuPlessis's text was so loaded to begin with, I didn't enjoy that much. More importantly, as it was in a sort of antique "concrete" mode, it resembled a much older aesthetic, one well explored by Gomringer, the De Campos brothers and numerous others in the past fifty years and so it wasn't very interesting to me.

Here, for example, are sections #4 and #5 (**b** and **c**) of Stefans's concrete poem:

behoove bellamy bellum

ben bend bi bi big bike

binaries/ bo/ borders,

but

butt

buy

character?

chimneysweeper christ,

cinder cixous

com-round, combinatory:

come come)

comes

--conventional cunt curse. . .

cycle.

The alphabet rule is the also the one to be used in the digital version of *the dreamlife of letters*, but here the words are fixed and anchored in their lines, thus slighting the possibilities for pun, paragram, and *lettrism* available in the electronic text. In the Prologue, Stefans notes:

I don't wish to explain much more about the piece here, except to say that it is not interactive. I decided it was much more like a short film

than an interactive piece, and there didn't seem any natural place to let the viewer in that way. . . .

I don't think I reveal the dreamlife of letters in this piece; the letters have too many dreams, as I've discovered, though perhaps not enough for me in the end.

In its digital version, produced by "Reptilian Neoletterist Graphics Gallery," an orange square of "A's—about half of them upside-down, some white on black, some black on white, some plain—is complicated by a "Frozen Gifs Gallery" beneath the square, a gallery whose fifteen entries contain different *letterist* designs, somewhat reminiscent of Steve McCaffery's *Carnival*. One can run the whole *dreamlife of letters* in about eleven minutes; or one can go to the Index and access each letter section separately. Thus, the third section, "behoove to caucasians" uses exactly the same sixteen words or syllables as Concrete Poem #4, but the units now become actors in a more complex drama. First **behoove Bellamy bellum** appear on the lower left of the orange square. Next, the words **ben bend bi bi big bike** snake in from the upper right in zigzag form, bending, overlapping and jostling one another so as to produce a time sequence reflecting "Big Ben" (the clock), introducing bisexuality, and miming the movement of a bicycle across the screen. The "i's" of **binaries**, appearing in

the upper left, are momentarily missing, invoking **Benares** in India and only then coming together with **bo + orders**, constituting the **borders** of binary oppositions. Then **bo** is next given a giant **B** in final position producing **Bob**, and then the big **B** is inscribed with **but, butt, and buy**, all in small white letters and the black **caucasians** in the lower left, leading us to the next or "C" section.

The one word I feel is out of place here is **caucasians**, the reference in Du Plessis's text is to "the Phallus or regressive iden-tiff caucasians"--a too obvious counter, in Stefan's text, to the multivalent, multisexual images of the poet's dream alphabet. At the same time, the movement from the **ca** string of **Caucasians** to the first word of the next section, **character**, is seamless as are all the movements from one section to another. In #4, the phrase "character to cycle," gives way to the collocation of **chimneysweeper** and **Christ**, the two words floating in blurred wavy lines across the lower half of the screen. The words **cinder** and **cixous** (Hélène Cixous, the great feminist theorist of multivalent sexuality), first appear with their **i**'s missing; their stark simplicity is juxtaposed to the complex, designed mesostic on "**com-round, combinatory: /come, come) / comes**" that follows. Immediately thereafter, "Conventional," "cunt" and "curse" appear in quick succession around a giant circling **C**, the conjunction suggesting that although "curse" is the conventional prudish epithet for menstruation, it is also properly located in the **cunt**.

Here, then, is Stefans' poetic commentary on Dodie Bellamy's erotic fiction, as mediated by DuPlessis's analysis. *The dreamlife of letters* is elegant, beautiful to look at and spare, a new way of using language in its materiality so as to make meanings. Is it "better" than the poem, as Stefans himself thinks? Yes and no: the static visual text can be absorbed and studied much more readily than the moving picture. And the third alternative: the embedding of the lyrics in the larger situationist text, is also attractive.

A different variant on the "dreamlife of letters" is provided by Caroline Bergvall in a work called *Ambient Fish* (1999), available from the Electronic Poetry Center. Here typography is not elegant as in the Stefans piece, but the sound dimension is central to the piece, the poet reading aloud as we watch the screen [play CD]⁷ The viewer /listener is presented with two green buttons, ringed in red, on a blank screen. Click on these and they become pea-green breasts. Click on the "nipples" and four rows of four of the same buttons appear. Almost every button quickly gives way to a word or phrase, while the voiceover (Bergvall's very elegant, cool, and evenly pitched voice) pronounces "Ambient fish fuckflowers bloom in your mouth," the text then permutating these words and phrases by means of rhyme and consonance so that "ambient fish" becomes "alien fish" and "alien poche," "loose in your mouth," becomes "goose in your mouth," becomes "goose in your ouch" and "fuckfodder" becomes fuckfad," becomes "fish fat," while "

alien poche" ("pocket") becomes "alien poach," becomes "a lined peach patch." The refrain "will shock (or choke) your troubles away" or "stow ["throw"] your troubles away" thus becomes quite literal. After the buttons disappear, the voice says evenly "fuck fish goose in your bouche suck your oubli away." It is a riveting performance.

Ambient Fish evidently started out as a text-sound installation commissioned by a festival of mixed media in England.⁸ The refrain was used as a drone in the piece. On screen, the interrupted recordings of the voice make the absurd lines even more menacing as do the curious rhymes and repetitions in which French words like *oubli* ("forgotten") and *bouche* ("mouth), here pronounced *baush*, give the piece a faux-pornographic air. *Sucking your oubli*—it sounds pretty sinister! But what is especially unsettling is that when the buttons and words disappear within a minute or so, they leave only three words—*fish*, *face*, and *your* as well as a single breast-shape. Then "fish" and "your" disappear, the word "face" circles drunkenly about, and finally disappears too, leaving us with an isolated glowing red-green button.

What, one wants to know, are the relationships here between *fish* and *your*, between *tirer des eaux* and its rhyme partner in "stow" or "throw your troubles away"? The "loveliness" of the language is wholly deceptive—*fuckflowers* in the context sound pretty, rather like hollyhocks or gillyflowers. As for the buttons, their role is complicated by their

technological function. The standard TV remote control has, at the center of the number pad, usually next to the “5” a button with raised little dot within it that looks exactly like the button in *Ambient Fish*. Press the button and a new channel opens up its picture. But in *Ambient Fish*, no such thing happens: press the button and you get, not a pleasing image but only broken words and disappearing breasts. The anonymous, impersonal voice, with its proffer of sexual pleasures that will “throw your troubles away” or “suck your oubli away” becomes increasingly threatening.

Another intriguing Bergvall digital text is *Flèsh*, which can be found in a recent issue of *How 2* (I, no. 5, 2001). *Flèsh*, first called *Flèsh A Coeur*, illustrates Lev Manovich’s point that if one can make radically different versions of the art object—as is the case with electronic poetics—“the traditional strong link between the identity of an art object and its medium becomes broken.”⁹ The project, Bergvall tells us, was first developed to be one of twenty “Volumes of Vulnerability” artist’s books, used in a project produced by Gefn Press (London 2000) to celebrate the Millennium:

It is a tribute to four writers who, for all their cultural differences, share a trance-like understanding of the connections between text and physicality, between violence and verbal illumination, between the intimate and the public facets of sexual desire as also a desire for writing. In each their way, and these were frequently at odds with the

declared values of their time, they explored and pushed such connections both in their work and in their body.¹⁰

The four writers in question are St. Teresa of Avila, the German Surrealist painter Unica Zürn (whose torso tied up with string her artist husband Hans Bellmer transformed into an icon), the visionary language poet Hannah Wiener, and the erotic postmodern novelist Kathy Acker. In its artist's book version, *Flèsh A Coeur* was designed as "a set of 4 folded folios, very low-tech, which demands of the readers that they have to use French cuts with a knife or letter-opener to open each level of text."¹¹ Hence the "incorrect" French accent over the English word, reminding us that in French *flèche* means "arrow"; *Flèsh A Coeur* is thus the arrow to one's heart—the arrow of Romantic love as well as spiritual revelation, piercing the flesh. Indeed, in Bernini's famous sculpture, *St. Teresa in Ecstasy*, the saint's breast is just about to be penetrated by an arrow.

Cutting--the reader's need to cut the small yellow pages with a letter opener or knife as well as the cutting up of text we find in Bergvall's text—insures that the reading experience is intentionally slowed. But onscreen, redesigned with the help of Anya Lewin, *Flesh* appears as an impenetrable pink wall, the single word *Flèsh* suggesting, not only the cliché that it is the French who are best at enjoying the pleasures of the flesh, but that the click on the mere letters of the monosyllabic word will penetrate the flesh. And so, as one clicks on the four instances of *Flèsh*, first the four

names appear, then, with a further click, four extracts from their respective writings, and then, when these texts are opened up by a third click, we have the opposite: *underneath* the flesh, female desire, it turns out, has a common language.

Here is the St. Teresa section:

Things had been going rather well. Sex loot. Caravans of PushpUsh. Needy machines Easy To Please. Pissabout reFillable. Rubbed a Fff in It long enough to Suck Off thereafter. The stakes we'd lie in about. Everything pruned happy as shaved. Now-caught In The Grip of. JUMP's the Surf with a StartOff the ace. Oards dig holes in Every SinglePie own I had ed absent mindedly. Row and Row. Torn in the bell heat kicks up spare-Heads. Something's knocking against the SKin. large persistent bulks In the Air. Brutally pulled innards. Gut seizure GONGs concave.¹²

The language here, as we recognize from *Ambient Fish*, is Bergvall's own complex poetic word play--her astonishing, aggressive mix of the intellectual and the erotic, the hard and the soft, the "Needy machines" that are "easy to please." The harsh phonemic play and eye rhyme give Bergvall's text a kind of electric charge. Nothing is quite what we think it is: "spare-heads" replace "spare parts"; and "stakes" are not something "we'd lie about"

but—oddly-- “lie in about.” Half way through the passage, the speaker’s language breaks down so that “I had owned” in line 6 becomes “own I had ed.” Internal capitalization and the running together of words as in “PushpUsh” creates curious paragrams and the jamming of sounds and syllables introduces a note of artifice that befits Unica Zürn or Kathy Acker, as well as St. Teresa. In “Brutally pulled innards,” for example, double *lls* and *ns* twist the *u’s* and *a’s* in their midst. But the violent erotic scene also contains religious possibilities in those “Gut seizure GONGS concave” — possibilities appropriate for St. Teresa, as, in a different way, for Hannah Weiner.

The electronic screen thus brings out aspects of *Flèsh* that are not as prominent in the artist’s book. In reading the book, the four names are endowed with meanings to be compared, point by point, in what is an atemporal grid. On the screen, however, flesh is always an impenetrable exterior, a blank pink wall that the viewer/auditor must elect to “enter” *in time*. Then, again, when Bergvall performs *Flèsh* in a gallery situation, the vocal intricacies subordinate individual words and word images to a powerful sonic pattern. The relation of text to audience is thus markedly differential.

And this brings me to my next example, in which computer technology has been generative of text that is not itself electronic, at least not in its primary version. In 1997, Kenneth Goldsmith decided to record every word he spoke in a single week. For seven days—a unit that gives *Soliloquy*, as

the resulting work is called, its seven-act structure—Goldsmith went about his daily routine, wearing a wire and “collected” what became almost 500 pages of his own speech. The piece was first presented as a text installation, but since it needs to be read rather than seen, its more adequate realization is in the austere and sober gray volume published by Granary Books in 2001. A single long print block, *Soliloquy* is certainly a monster, if not a loose or baggy one. Indeed, the text is highly structured, the ground rule—that every word Goldsmith speaks, but not one word by his interlocutors or addressees, will be recorded and that periods of non-talking are not designated as such, , creates a seamless and curiously dense language network, a kind of post-Jamesian novel, where we know only what the narrator knows and says. The “characters” in this novel--Goldsmith’s friends, colleagues, associates, relatives, and assorted service people to whom he is speaking, as well as those others referred to in the third person—are given no voice; they can be known only through Goldsmith’s interpretations.

Is he a reliable narrator? Of course not, but what can “reliable” mean in these cyberdays? To read *Soliloquy* is to infer what prompted question A or disclaimer B or irritated response C? How does the author adjust his speech habits to the different people in his life? And what is the significance of the constant self-interruption, self-cancellation and deprecation that fills this fast, funny, irreverent, and terrifying volume? Terrifying, because, as

Goldsmith himself has remarked, it is “humiliating and humbling to see how little of ‘value’ I actually speak over the course of a typical week. How unprofound my life and my mind is; how petty, greedy and nasty I am in my normal speech. It’s absolutely horrifying.” “But,” he adds, “I dare any reader to try the same exercise and see how much more value they come up with in their life. I fear that they might discover, too, that their lives are filled with trivial linguistic exchanges with waiters and taxi drivers. Even those relationships we feel are so vital to our lives – our family and friends – in linguistic terms are really up for grabs.”¹³

The genesis of a text like *Soliloquy* clearly depends on digital technology as well as on advanced recording systems. Goldsmith’s relatives, friends, and lunch companions (myself included) evidently had no idea he was wearing a wire and thus spoke quite freely. Yet their words had to be eliminated so as to keep to the rules of the chosen frame—one man’s talk for seven days of the week. We think of talk as communal—an experience we share with others—but here the elimination of all those others creates a startling verbal scene. For unlike a real soliloquy or even dramatic monologue, the speech presented here is curiously decontextualized. We often have no idea whom the narrator is addressing and that address may change within a split second as Kenny hangs up the phone and picks up another call with a “Hi, how’re you doin’?” Furthermore, although his talking claims to be random, it is in fact carefully planned, the author setting

up the questions and raising the issues that will resound throughout the day. Thus, although the text of *Soliloquy* does not exploit visual devices, computer graphics, animation, or anything else but stone cold sober print, and although there are no icons to click or dots to connect, *Soliloquy* is, in fact, the ultimate digitally driven text, programmed as it is to eliminate “noise.”

Consider the following passage in Act 4 (Thursday), in which Kenny and his wife Cheryl (the video artist Cheryl Donegan) are having dinner in a local Indian restaurant:

Oh I didn't like that guy Alex that we met. The guy with the beard. He was an asshole. Did, you know, he never heard of Alfred Jarry. He goes Ubu? What's that. Yeah, you know, he never heard of any of that any connection with anything like that. Yeah. They did. Thank you. This food is so good. The crap they were serving up at that place for 20 bucks a plate. That was idiotic. The people in there, you know, it was a really stupid scene. I really gotta pee. OK. Ah, that's better. Is your chicken good? Tasty? No no no, it's alright. You like this red chicken? Hey, you know, you can't say we're not trying right. I know as if as if if being successful artists and writers isn't enough. Isn't it just amazing like all the work that we do to do our work and then all the work that we do to like try to do our work? It's insane, Cheryl, we're working two jobs. Yeah, no, I mean work is OK, but,

you know, it's it's just, you know, you do what you do. No wonder why we're so fucking exhausted every night and every day. Well, I mean, it's insane. I don't know how long we'll keep it up for. It's like a lot of artists, you know, well they kind of like paint like they get like Debra they get into their studios once a week or something like that, do think about it much. The fact I, we're doing both things. See this is the cheese. This is paneer. This is what you eat in India all the fucking time. You had paneer? You've had it, right? Paneer this is what you eat. You like eat saag paneer like constantly. You constantly eating like on a plane you get saag paneer. Somebody's milk. I'm tired. I just need some down time I think, you know, like quiet time. When I, when did he say that Cheryl? Oh that's so long ago? Halil? Liz Kotz was so nice last night. We have so much in common, it's insane. She's doing her dissertation. It's funny, when you scratch the surface of people, man, everybody's got something to say. I think everybody's nice. You got to get past the surface. I mean whoever would have thought Liz Kotz was anything, you know, other than what she appears to be? Hardcore man-hater. She's so nice. No, I didn't get apprehensive.

This passage allows the reader to be about as close to actually being there as is humanly possible in a retrospective situation. The conversation, or at

least Kenny's side of it, is at once inane and meaningful—meaningful in the context of the rest of the book where Jarry's *Ubu Roi* and Kenny's own *Ubuweb* play a big part, where Cheryl's recent art show is discussed again and again, and where Liz Kotz, a critic of avant-garde art/music/poetry, now teaching at the University of Minnesota, then still a graduate student, first appears at a lecture of my own that Kenny attended the night before at Columbia University .

Goldsmith's "natural" language is nothing if not artificial. The text provides us with all the normal tics of conversation—the prevalence of "like," "you know," and "yeah yeah," as well as the incompleteness of sentences, sloppy phraseology, and repetitive exclamations. But it is also artificial in that it splices together all instances of speech, omitting the silences and interruptions. Thus "I really gotta pee" is immediately followed by "Ok that's better," there having been nothing said in the minutes that elapse between going to the bathroom and returning to the table. The absence of breaks here and when Kenny is addressing the waiter as in "they did [take our order?]. Thank you," creates a monomaniacal drive as absurd and absorbing as Leopold Bloom's stream of consciousness in the "Lotus Eaters" chapter of *Ulysses*. For the continuity stands in odd relationship to the constant shift in subject matter—the digression from the talk of the red chicken to the serious and somewhat maudlin reflection on Our Lives and how we Overwork and are Underappreciated. Not that Kenny doesn't mean

it. But next thing you know, he's telling Cheryl all about Paneer cheese and how it's served in India. Then Liz Kotz's personality is put to the test, Kenny liking her despite her appearing to be a hard-core man-hater. Life, this text suggests, is like that: we grumble about our fates until the cheese course comes and we try to decide which to sample.

The artifice of *Soliloquy's* "random" and "casual" writing becomes clearer if we bear in mind that we have no access to the narrator's unspoken thoughts, his physical movements, his reading, his looking at art, his day-dreaming. Here, the book suggests, is what life would be like if human beings could do nothing but *talk*! The electronic version,¹⁴ on the other hand, calls that talk into question. It contains the entire book in seven sections, one for each day of the week, but when one accesses a given page or section, only bits of sentences appear on an otherwise empty screen. We soon discover that text is actually *there* but it is hidden: unless the mouse is pointed directly at a given word or sentence, it remains invisible. The mouse can obviously track the text word by word, sentence by sentence, but only one bit at a time, so that the reader, pointing at a particular phrase, doesn't know what comes before or after. Accordingly, the cybertext becomes an inverted Cagian writing-through, a form of play. Find one sentence and another vanishes. Sentences and phrases are thus fragmented and hidden, creating a conscious discontinuity in the interface. In this manner, the "cinema verité" quality of the book version is called into

question: if the “talk” in the book version looks “natural,” in the electronic text, the emphasis is on loss and disruption—on a curious kind of secrecy, as if the text doesn’t quite want to be read. Goldsmith’s is not, we should note, the non-sequentiality of Ron Silliman’s “New Sentence,” but rather a dialectic of appearance and disappearance, absence and presence.

What makes a generative text like *Soliloquy* poetic? Isn’t producing such a monster just a matter of following certain rules and using certain computer operations to eliminate the language of others, the pauses and silences? Couldn’t anyone do it?

There are two answers to this last question. The first is Cage’s “Of course they could. But they don’t”¹⁵—the willingness to *engage* in such a project and putting oneself on the line being half the battle. But—and this is true of Cage as well—the fact is that when one studies Goldsmith’s text, one quickly finds that it is much more structured than one might think. For it builds up, metonymically and synecdochically, a network of references that gives us a very particular portrait of the artist as young hustler. A New York artist, dependent on New York, running around the city, talking on his cell phone, making contacts, networking, eating out, trying different foods, meeting people for coffee, running into old acquaintances at all sorts of art galleries and events. How to make it through the day: this is half the battle but the narrator remains for the most part cheerful and purposive in his demeanor. The “Kenny” of this book is not necessarily a nice man—he’s a

user and he knows it and he also loves to gossip and lampoon people. But he is remarkably candid and honest with himself. And that draws the reader—even a suspicious reader like myself who did not originally enjoy my “portrait” in this book—into the linguistic web.

Are Goldsmith, Bergvall, and Stefans electronic poets? Yes and no. Certainly, in the examples given, these artists make the most of digital possibilities. But they shift medium easily: Goldsmith has collaborated with Joan La Barbara in producing verbal/musical texts and has made many installations, Bergvall has fused poetic material with theoretical analysis (in ordinary print format), made installations, worked with musicians, and so on. Her *Goan Atom* is, first and foremost, a book of “poems.” And Stefans has just published a book called *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2003), bringing together interviews, lyric poems, and prose “essays” that boast traditional bibliographies of the scholarly model with which we are all too familiar.

In evaluating electronic poetics, therefore, we should not subordinate the second term to the first. “I don’t like the label ‘video artist,’” the great video artist Bill Viola, once remarked. “I consider myself to be an artist. I happen to use video because I live in the last part of the twentieth century, and the medium of video (or television) is clearly the most relevant visual art form in contemporary life.”¹⁶ That was in 1985 and a decade or so later, video has been supplanted by the much greater fluidity and temporal-spatial

freedom of electronic space. But Viola's principle holds: the artist or poet uses a particular medium, not because it is "better" than others, but because it seems most relevant at his or her moment—currently, of course, the electronic screen, with its particular enticing challenge to the printed book. Does this make the poet in question a digital poet? Or, conversely, is the purveyor of the electronic word ipso facto an artist? "Chopsticks," Viola quipped, "can either be a simple eating utensil or a deadly weapon, depending on who uses them."¹⁷

FOOTNOTES

¹Tristan Tzara, "Notes on Poetry," *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries* (New York: Riverrun, 1981), p. 76

²Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 78.

³ See Marjorie Perloff, "Vocable Scriptsigns: Differential Poetics in Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget* and John Kinsella's *Kangaroo Virus*," in *Poetry, Value, and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Andrew Roberts and John Allison (Edinburgh Press, 2002), pp. 21-43.

⁴ <http://www.ubu.com/contemp/stefans/dream>

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⁵ The black parenthetical "o's" are used here to simulate the click circles for the connect to <http://listserv.acsu.buffalo.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2>

⁶ http://www.ubu.com/contemp/stefans/dream/the_dreamlife_poem.htm

⁷ <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bergvall/amfish/amfish.html>.

⁸ See Marjorie Perloff, "ex/Crème/ental/eaT/ing," An Interview with Caroline Bergvall, *Sources: Revue d'études Anglophones*, 12 (Spring, 2002): 123-35; see p. 130.

⁹ Lev Manovich, "Post-Media Aesthetics," p. 3, under *Articles*, www.manovich.net; cf. Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT, 2001), *passim*.

¹⁰ Caroline Bergvall, Notes to *Flèsh, How 2, Vol 1.5* (March 2001). Bergvall also provided helpful comments in an email to me, 9 September 2002.

¹¹ Caroline Bergvall, email to author, 1/13/03.

¹² In book form, *Flèsh* has only small portions of this text; but the whole piece (though with variations) is found in *Foil: Defining Poetry 1985-2000*, ed. Nicholas Johnson (London: Etruscan, 2001).

¹³ Marjorie Perloff, "A Conversation with Kenneth Goldsmith," *Jacket*, <<http://jacketmagazine.com>>, 21 (February 2002).

¹⁴ <http://www.epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/soliloquy/index.html>

¹⁵ John Cage, "History of Experimental Music in the United States" (1958), in *Silence* (Middletown, CT, 1973), p. 72.

¹⁶ Bill Viola, "Statements 1985," *Reasons for Knocking at an empty House: Writings 1973-1984*, ed. Robert Violette (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 152.

¹⁷ Viola, "The Porcupine and the Car" (1981), *Writings*, p. 71.