

## **The Bride Stripped Bare: Nude Media and The Dematerialization of Tony Curtis**

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In May of 2000, I received the following email at UbuWeb:

i really enjoyed your site. it made me think about different cultures other than the ones i experience daily living in a small texas town. –meredith

I can't imagine that much of UbuWeb's materials are available in Meredith's local library. Chances are that they don't have much, if any, sound poetry, and I'll bet that their concrete poetry section is lacking as well. Odds are that the local bookstore isn't chockfull of this stuff either. If Meredith were ambitious, she might try searching the web and buying these items online. But then she'd have to fork out \$125 to buy a used copy of Emmett Williams' *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* or \$90 to purchase the newly released *OU Revue* box set that compiles the entire run of the legendary French sound poetry magazine from the 1960s. Those two items comprise a miniscule amount of what's available to Meredith for free on UbuWeb, right in the comfort of her own living room.

Meredith's note succinctly summed up what I had wished to achieve with UbuWeb: the creation of a distribution center for out of print, hard-to-find, small run, obscure materials, available at no cost from any point on the globe. UbuWeb embraces the distributive possibilities inherent in the web's original technologies: call it radical forms of distribution.

When I began my engagement with this material in the late 1980s, there was not much of it to be found, even in New York City. Generally produced in small, poorly distributed editions during the 60s and 70s, sound and concrete poetry by the 1980s seemed to be a moribund genre. Over the next 5 years, though, I managed to track

down a small but generative collection of books, journals, LPs and tapes of concrete and sound poetry.

Over the next decade, through a confluence of interests -- pop culture, nostalgia, the marketplace, and the web -- this situation would radically change. In January 1996, a friend showed me Netscape. The first image I saw appear on the screen was a slowly unfurling interlaced gif. And as the text and image filled in with alternating lines, it reminded me of sequential movement poems like Jean François Bory's "The worldWord is..." which, when printed across several pages, resembles a flipbook. Over the next few months, the proliferation of slick graphic images on the web -- most often used for advertising -- also reminded me of concrete works such as bp Nichol's "Eyes" from the mid 60s and Décio Pignitari's "beba coca cola" from the late 50s.

### **History completes itself**

UbuWeb was launched in November of 1996. It felt right to move my collection to the web: scanning the images and seeing them backlit by the computer screen made everything seem fresh, as did other recontextualizations of the work. Freed from the dusty bookstores and flea markets, sprung from their yellowing pages, these images were revitalized; concrete poetry was once again in dialogue with contemporary culture.

There was something formally astonishing about the way that the computer screen and concrete poetry seemed to work naturally together. It seemed a fulfillment of concrete poetry's original premise. In 1958, the Brazilian Noigandres group defined concrete poetry as "[the] tension of thing-words in space-time."<sup>1</sup> When we look at early concrete poetry manifestos, we can't help but recognize this

web environment. The physical attributes the Noigandres group found inspiring in various poetic precursors reappears in the space of the screen:

... space ("blancs") and typographical devices as substantive elements of composition. ...ideogrammic method... word-ideogram; organic interpenetration of time and space... atomization of words, physiognomical typography; ... the vision, rather than the praxis... direct speech, economy and functional architecture...<sup>2</sup>

As early as 1968, Mary Ellen Solt noted the relationship between commercial graphics and concrete poetry in her introduction to her book *Concrete Poetry: A World View*:

Uses of language in poetry of the traditional type are not keeping pace with live processes of language and rapid methods of communication at work in our contemporary world. Contemporary languages exhibit the following tendencies...: a move toward "formal simplification," abbreviated statement on all levels of communication from the headline, the advertising slogan, to the scientific formula--the quick, concentrated visual message.<sup>3</sup>

Early concrete poetry's hard-line allegiance to modernism adapts itself perfectly to the flat mediums of the interface and the screen. These poets adhered closely to Greenbergian modernist tenets concerning non-illusionistic space and full autonomy of the artwork. Looking through examples of early concrete works, in fact, none are illusionistic; instead, unadorned sans-serif language inhabits the plane of the white page and, as Greenberg says, "[the] shapes flatten and spread in the dense, two-dimensional atmosphere."<sup>4</sup> In doing so, the emotional temperature is intentionally kept cool, perfectly adapting itself to the environment of the computer.

The interface design of UbuWeb is intentionally modeled to emphasize these same qualities: flat, cool, and minimal qualities. Illusionistic depth-of-space, 3D

modeling and decoration of any sort is avoided. UbuWeb's form is meant to fit its function.

UbuWeb has moved a distance from its beginnings as a repository for visual, concrete, and sound poetry; we dropped the suffix "poetry" from our name. We're now simply UbuWeb. UbuWeb is becoming a clearinghouse for the avant-garde, something the web sorely needs. By releasing ourselves from the obligation of just presenting one sort of poetry -- or limiting ourselves to *only* poetry -- we open ourselves up to worlds of related ideas, all of which are easily absorbed under UbuWeb's scalable umbrella.

### **The bride stripped bare: nude media**

Our sound section is the most popular section of UbuWeb, which is no surprise given the immense interest in MP3 file-sharing over the past few years. What does surprise me, however, is that enormous numbers of people are actually interested in avant-garde sound works. But what I'm learning is that while many of these people are enjoying or studying these files as they are, many others are using them as source material for new compositions, remixes, or the process of stitching several tracks together that's come to be known as bootlegging or smushing.

In thinking about the way that UbuWeb (and many other types of file sharing systems) distribute their warez, I've come up with a term: *nude media*. What I mean by this is that once, say, an MP3 file is downloaded from the context of a site such as UbuWeb, it's free or naked, stripped bare of the normative external signifiers that tend to give as much meaning to an artwork as the contents of the artwork itself. Unadorned with branding or scholarly liner notes, emanating from no authoritative source, these objects are nude, not clothed. Thrown into open peer-to-peer distribution systems, nude media files often lose even their historical

significance and blur into free-floating sound works, traveling in circles that they would not normally reach if clad in their conventional clothing.

### **Tony Curtis defrocked**

All forms of traditional media that are morphed onto the web are in some way defrocked. An article about Tony Curtis, for example, which appeared in the Sunday Arts & Leisure section of *The New York Times*, is fully clothed in the authoritative conventions of *The New York Times*. Everything from the typeface to the pull quote to the photo layout bespeaks the authority of the paper of record. There's something comforting about reading the Arts & Leisure section on Sunday which the visual presentation of the paper both produces and reinforces. *The New York Times* represents stability in every way (figure 1).



(Figure 1 – Tony Curtis, *New York Times*, Sunday, October 6, 2002)

If we look at that same article on the *New York Times* website, however, we find that much of what gave the piece its rock steadiness in the traditional print version is gone. For starters, there's a big red sans-serif "W" for Washington instead of the classic black serifed "T" for Tony. Thus, the message is that the place in which the interview happened has greater significance than the subject of the article. Other things have changed as well, most notably the size and character of the typeface.

The default typeface on any browser is Times Roman, but if we look at the newspaper compared to the screen, we'll see that Times Roman is never New York Times Roman (Figure 2).



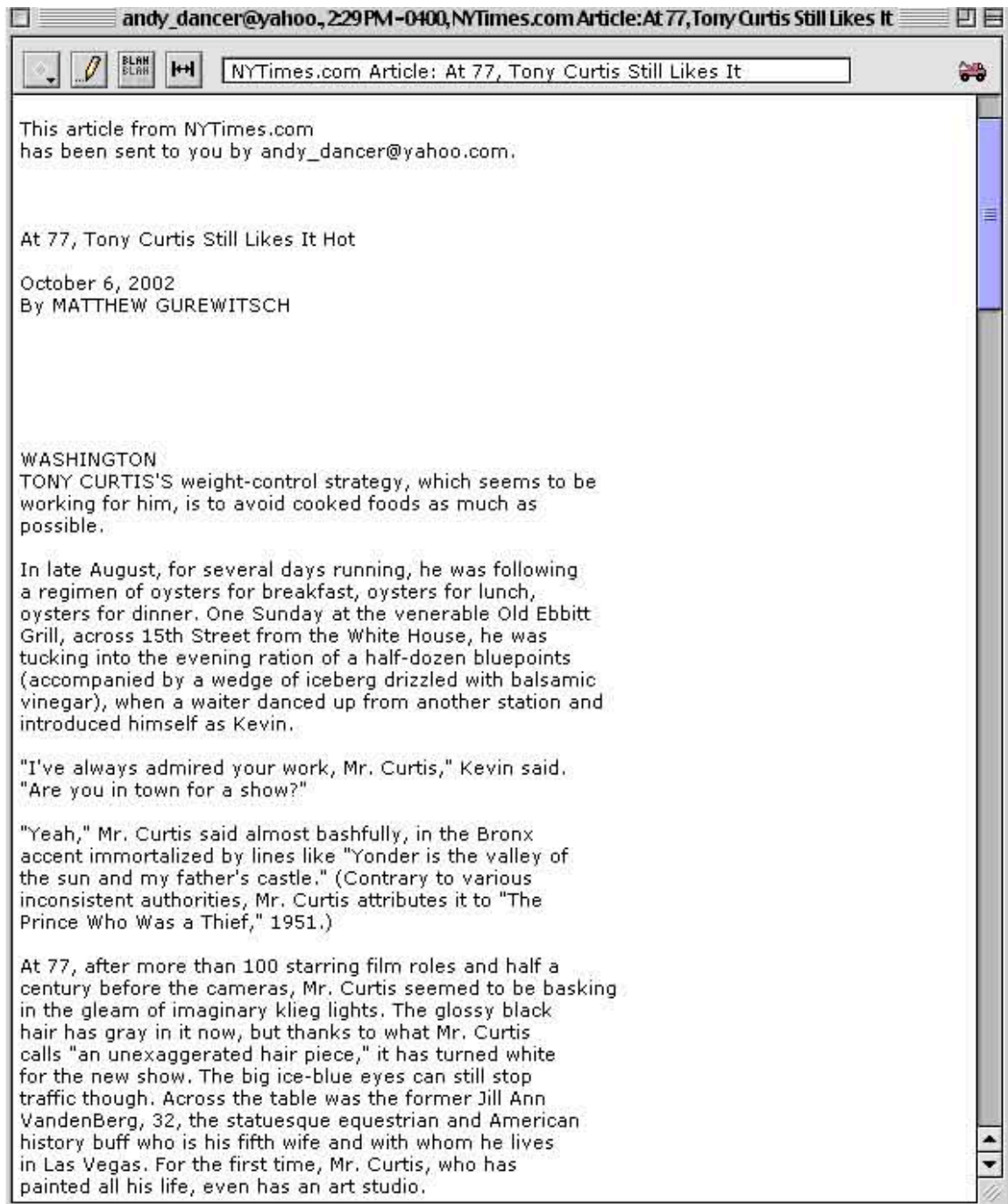
(Figure 2 – Tony Curtis, *nytimes.com*, Sunday, October 6, 2002)

The image of Mr. Curtis, too, is different. It's shoved over to the side and shrunk. The Starbucks ad -- which appears nowhere in the print edition<sup>5</sup> -- almost functions as a caption. I could go on and on but I think the point is obvious. The

web version of the article might be termed scantily clad. While not entirely nude, the stability and authority of *The New York Times* "brand" is under siege.<sup>6</sup>

In the upper right hand corner of the web page is an option to email the article. When we do that, what arrives in our inbox is extremely stripped down compared to the web page. It's just a text. The only indication that it comes from *The New York Times* is a line at the top that says "This article from NYTimes.com has been sent to you by...." The Times font has vanished, to be replaced -- at least in my inbox -- by Microsoft's proprietary sans-serif screen font Verdana. There are no images, no pull quotes, and no typographical treatments, save the capitalization of the words "WASHINGTON" and "TONY CURTIS'S." How easy it would be to strip out the words "NYTimes.com." If we do that, this file becomes detached from any authority, completely naked. In fact, it is entirely indistinguishable from any number of text-based attachments that arrive in my inbox daily (figure 3).

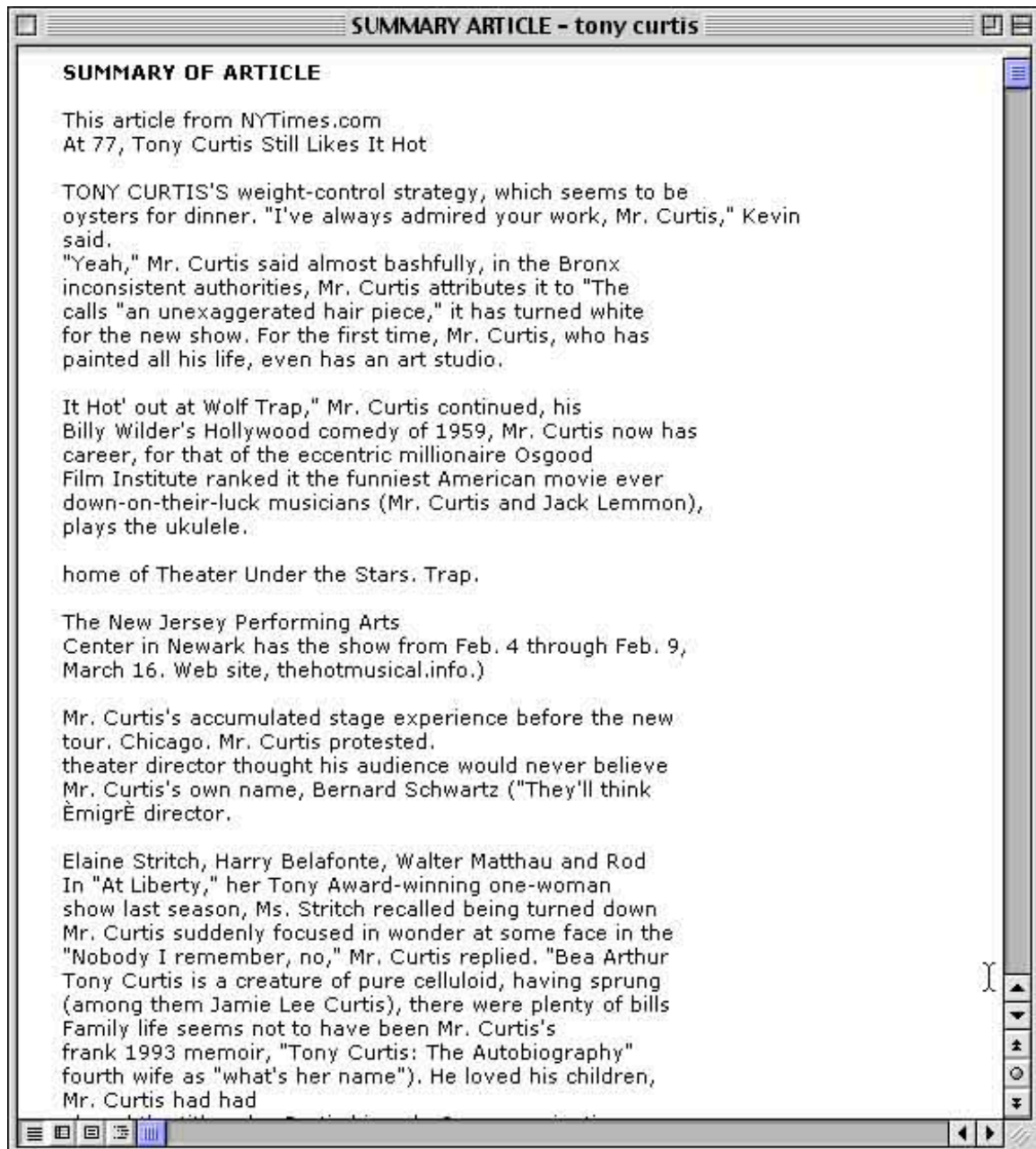




(Figure 3 – Tony Curtis emailed)

To go one step further, if we cut and paste the *text* -- and it is a text and no longer an "article" -- into Microsoft Word and run a primitive altering function on it, for example the auto summarize feature, we end up with something bearing

minimal resemblance to the original article as printed in the paper or on the web. Now the lead line is "SUMMARY OF ARTICLE," followed by its provenance and then the headline. Curiously, the word "Washington," which figured so prominently in prior versions, is nowhere to be found. The body text, too, now becomes radically unhinged and stripped down (figure 4).



(Figure 4 – Tony Curtis autosummarized)

If I were to take this text and either email it to a number of people or enter it into an online text-mangling machine, the nude media game could continue ad-infinitum. Think of it as an ever-evolving game of telephone. Free-floating media files around the net are subject to continuous morphing and manipulation as they become further removed from their sources.

When destabilized texts are recontextualized and reclothed back into “authoritative” structures, the results can be jarring. Examples of this include the Pornolizer (pornolize.com) machine (figure 5), which turns all web pages into smutty, potty-mouthed documents while retaining their authoritative clothing.



(Figure 5 – Tony Curtis pornolized)

## **Disinformation wants to be free**

Believers in the inherent stability of media, regardless of its form, might argue that this phenomenon leads to little more than a tangle of disinformation. But recontextualization has been the basis for innumerable radical works of art. With the advent of file-sharing we've seen this approach explode.

On UbuWeb, although we encode our MP3s with the ID3 tags -- which, on the MP3 player, identify the artist, the title of the cut, etc. -- we do not encode provenance information, such as "Courtesy of UbuWeb." When an MP3 leaves our site it is, in essence, returned to the common space of the web: it leaves nude.

## **Flogging a dead poem**

We can only guess what happens to our files after they leave our site, but I'd like briefly to consider the previous journey of an MP3 that can be found on UbuWeb. Over the course of the last half century, Henri Chopin's sound poem "Rouge" has been subjected to various mutations, both clothed and unclothed.

Chopin began his tape recorder experiments in the mid-50s, and "Rouge," recorded in 1956, was one of his first pieces.<sup>7</sup> It's a literal sound painting, with the names of colors repeated with different emphasis, almost like varying brushstrokes. Manipulated audio techniques and track layering build up an increasingly dense surface. The piece reflects its time: think of it as an abstract expressionist canvas. It, too, is Greenbergian: its form is its content.

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In its day, "Rouge" never made it to LP as an "official" release by a record label. It was born naked and remained that way, unreleased and without a publisher until 24 years later when it was put out by a German gallery.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Chopin's highly visible work as a promoter and publisher of sound poetry, however, tapes of his work were making the rounds in advanced musical circles of the day.<sup>9</sup>

A decade after "Rouge's" recording, it curiously appears in the first "Region" of Karlheinz Stockhausen's 1966 composition *Hymnen*, an electronic and *musique concrete* melange of national anthems. Although truncated, "Rouge" forms the basis for a short spoken-word section based around varieties of the color "red." Chopin's voice alternates with German-inflected voices reading a portion of a list of Windsor Newton paints. To listen to this excerpt alone and decontextualized, it sounds like an extension of Chopin's sound painting. But squeezed between magnetic tape deconstructions of "The Internationale" and "The Marseillaise," its meaning becomes very different. The nude poem is now clothed in the garments of leftist politics.

Twenty-one years later, in 1997, the sampling group called Stock Hausen and Walkman (note the group's name) brought "Rouge" into an entirely different context: that of ironic pop in a cut called "Flogging" (flogging = flayed "rouge" skin). Amidst the cheesy vocals, snappy drumbeats and appropriated mathematical recitations from children's records, Chopin's piece is snatched away from Stockhausen's political agenda and returned closer to its formalist origins. But it's an emptying gesture: finally "Rouge" is just one sample of many, part of a noisy landscape, in which sounds are easily obtained and just as easily manipulated. In such a landscape, no sound appears to have more meaning than any other.

## **Pop goes the avant-garde**

Stockhausen and Walkman are known for their graphical sense. They understand how to create a package that visually approximates their musical practice. Packaging -- or, in our terms, dressing -- creates a context of value. Stockhausen and Walkman's redressing of "Rouge" places Chopin's poem back into circulation fully clothed.

In the clothed realm, popular culture's fetishization of the historical avant-garde reached a plateau a few years ago when the enormously successful rock band Sonic Youth released a CD called *Goodbye 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. On it, the one-time rockers rattled their way through cover versions of some of the more difficult works by John Cage and George Maciunas, among others. Through a curious confluence of Downtown sensibility and mass marketing, thousands of rock-loving, Lollapalooza-attending Sonic Youth fans bought the disc and were exposed to what until very recently has resided on the fringes of the historical avant-garde.

Through gestures like these, the avant-garde becomes hip and well-marketed. Stroll through any good record store or museum gift shop and you'll notice hundreds of artifacts of the historical avant-garde gorgeously repackaged to be snapped up by consumers.

As soon as these items are purchased, however they can be recruited as nude media, via peer-to-peer file sharing. In the case of some of this material, what was originally created as an anti-authoritarian gesture has, thanks to the Internet, been restored to its original radical intentions. Due to the manipulative properties of digital media, such artworks are susceptible to remixing and mangling on a mass scale, hence never having *the* one authoritative version bestowed upon these objects in traditional media. They are ever-changing works-in-progress operating in the most widespread gift economy yet known.

Such circumstances raise many questions: How does having a variety of contexts influence the cultural reception of such objects? Who or what determines an avant-garde artifact's value, both commercially and intellectually? How does this in turn impact the artist's reputation, both commercially and intellectually? If artifacts are always in flux, when is an historical work determined to be "finished"?

It is little too early to answer such questions. We are a bridge generation. Brought up on books and records – media in a clothed and stable form – it's hard for us to accept cultural artifacts in constant flux as "genuine." Once *Ulysses* arrived on our shelves, the only new versions of the book that came along were typesetters' corrections and annotated editions, which only reified our sense that Joyce was a singular genius. With the exception of Xeroxing and collaging, remixing texts on the scale of *Ulysses* was difficult.

While it's hard to predict how computer users who have come of age in this environment will assign values and form canons, it might be useful to look at how quickly bootleg remixes became legitimized. A 2002 MTV article reports that:

The art of bootleg remixes, mash-ups or sound clashes (take your pick) emerged as an Internet phenomenon two years ago but is now scratching its way into the commercial music market, especially overseas.

In Europe the pioneers of the movement, such as Kurtis Rush, Soulwax, Osymyso and Freelance Hellraiser, have become household names, headlining popular clubs and spinning their creations on radio shows. One mash-up artist, Richard X, even recently topped the UK singles chart with "Freak Like Me," which layers vocals from the Sugababes and Adina Howard over new-wave hero Gary Numan's "Are Friends Electric."

[...]

Electronic music luminary BT, who also produced 'NSYNC's "Pop," was so impressed with a mash-up of his "Mercury And Solace," he tracked down the remixer and released it.

"I love having people do unsolicited remixes of my stuff. In fact, I'm thinking about posting vocals of the whole next album on my Web site when it's done," BT said. "I believe that everyone uses sounds in a case-specific and different manner than other people who use the same sounds."

BT is especially fond of mash-ups that pair drastically different songs. "I'm an avid believer in crossing boundary lines and idiom subdivisions in the

music-making process, and if we need to mix Willie Nelson with John Cage to push the envelope in the right direction, then bring it," he said." <sup>10</sup>

When big business sniffs a trend -- even one as formally "radical" as bootlegging -- they invest in it, turning outlaws into stars overnight. It's not the first time this has happened with sampled material. Composer John Oswald's legendary 1989 CD *Plunderphonic* was destroyed after successful litigation from CBS Records and Michael Jackson for unauthorized use of images and samples. Soon afterwards, however, Oswald received a call from the head of Elektra Records, asking him to remix Elektra's archive on the occasion of the company's 40-year anniversary. The subsequent release, *Rubaiyat*, was a fully legitimate corporate-endorsed bootleg, which was just one of many records at the time comprised entirely of samples (big selling Hip-Hop and Jamaican music had been employing the remix for several years).

When it comes to text, we haven't seen anything nearly like the bootlegging phenomenon. I'm hard pressed to come up with any peer-to-peer *text* sharing communities. But musical examples might hold clues as to how such systems might operate in the future. In this light, it's no surprise to see John Cage, an early advocate of *intermedia* and *nude media*, mentioned in the MTV context. As early as 1983, Cage predicted and embraced the idea of unstable electronic texts as potential source texts for remixing:

Technology essentially is a way of getting more done with less effort. And it's a good thing rather than a bad thing... The publishers, my music publisher, my book publisher -- they know that Xerox is a real threat to their continuing; however, they continue. What must be done eventually is the elimination not only of the publication but of the need for Xeroxing, and to connect it with the telephone so that anyone can have anything he wishes at any time. And erase it -- so that your copy of Homer, I mean, can become a



copy of Shakespeare, mmm? By quick erasure and quick printing, mmm?...  
Because that's the – electronic immediacy is what we're moving toward.<sup>11</sup>

While vast libraries containing intact texts are stored online, few offer textual remixes, even the sort that Cage alluded to twenty years ago. One encouraging example is the online zine *xStream*. According to its mission statement, "Every issue consists of two parts: the Regular issue, which is a selection of poetry submitted to *xStream*, and Autoissue which is a computer-generated version of regular issue."<sup>12</sup>

Although a step in the right direction, *xStream* doesn't go far enough. While the methodology regarding the computer-generated content is not made apparent, it appears that the manipulation was done by the editor of *xStream* and posted on the website. But unlike peer-to-peer systems, the text stops here. Certainly one could cut and paste the text, so as to continue the destabilization, but the site doesn't encourage it. Instead, even though the site's content is purposefully skewed, it remains on the site as securely as it was printed on the page. I could imagine another scenario: the computer-generated manipulations are available as text files to be downloaded. Then, in turn, they are remanipulated and re-uploaded for further processing by users.

### **... (and we've got to get ourselves) back to the garden**

How, then, do all these new conditions position a resource like UbuWeb? Suddenly, our idea of "radical distribution" is changing again: UbuWeb is not *the* resource but instead just another *source*; our "radical distribution" might not be so radical after all. We've become subsumed in the mechanics of *redistribution*. It's

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apparent that our function has changed. Our authority has been undermined by our own process.

UbuWeb is now positioned on a two-way street. Imagine these altered files returning back to the source from which they came, clothed and housed momentarily before being sent back out into the world again. Like the files themselves, UbuWeb is becoming less stabilized in its identity as a center. Instead, we're just another brief stopover point on the road to instability and nudity.

#### Notes

1. Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 71-72.
2. *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, 71
3. *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, 10
4. Greenberg, Clement, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Art In Theory 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 558.
5. The printed *New York Times* page is bereft of all ads.
6. Curiously, in a bid to regain control of these exact issues, *The New York Times* offers an option on their homepage to "See it in the same format as the physical newspaper." What is offered is a clumsy proprietary reader, an enormous download and no significant savings to readers of the newspaper. The website, at the time of this writing, is free.
7. "Rouge," a rather traditional sound poem, is quite unlike the type of electronic work based on bodily sounds that he would be later be closely identified with.

8. Hundermark Gallery, Germany, 1981. It's since been released many times on various compilations.
9. Chopin's energies as a publisher and enthusiast for electronic sound poetry were highly visible throughout the 1950s and 60s culminating in 1964 when his *Revue Ou* began publication and its work regularly aired on the BBC.
10. MTV Asia News, "Bootleg Remixes: Music's Latest Craze," August 2, 2002, <<http://www.mtvasia.com/news/International/Items/0208/0208010.html>>.
11. Interview with John Cage, in *The Guests Go in to Supper* (Oakland: Burning Books, 1986), 25.
12. *xStream*. <<http://xstream.xpressed.org/>>.

## References

Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 71-72.

Chopin, Henry. "Rouge." <<http://www.ubu.com/sound/chopin.html>>.

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MTV Asia News, "Bootleg Remixes: Music's Latest Craze," August 2, 2002, <<http://www.mtvasia.com/news/International/>>.

*Pornolizer*. <[www.pornolize.com](http://www.pornolize.com)>.

*Revue Ou*. Alga Marghen, 4 CD boxset, ALGA045.

Sonic Youth. *Goodbye 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Sonic Youth Recordings. SYR 4.

Stock, Hausen and Walkman. "Flogging." *Ventilating Deer*.

*UbuWeb*. < <http://www.ubu.com/>>.

Emmett Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1990).

*Xstream*. <<http://xstream.xpressed.org/>>.