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A Web Site Grows New Poems, Sometimes Right Before Readers' Eyes

By ZOE INGALLS

SUNY-Buffalo's Electronic Poetry Center connects poets and scholars from around the world

In "grain: a prairie poem," lowercase g's scatter across the computer screen like seeds on the wind. They plant themselves in a row along the bottom of the page, their tails growing like stalks of wheat, their oval heads filling with smaller g's like winged seeds that then burst into the air to begin the process again.

The poem, by Darren Wershler-Henry, is a new, digital incarnation of concrete poetry, a form of experimental verse popular in the 1950's and 60's. And that makes "Grain" a perfect candidate for the World Wide Web site on which it appears: the Electronic Poetry Center, created and maintained by scholars at the State University of New York at Buffalo (http://epc.buffalo.edu).

Dedicated to contemporary, innovative poetry -- a broad term that embraces a wide variety of avant-garde and experimental work -- the Electronic Poetry Center is designed to preserve, distribute, study, and, above all, promote connections -- between print and

digital versions of concrete poetry, for example, or among communities of poets, scholars, and students around the world. The site logs 10 million visits a year from users in some 90 countries.

"We use the E.P.C. resources constantly this end of the world," says Michele Leggott, a senior lecturer in English at the University of Auckland, in New Zealand. "Basically, the E.P.C. is a hub for the poetics we're interested in, and when we start teaching, students are immediately referred to it."

What her students find is a combination library (new, old, and hard-to-find works), scholarly forum, information clearing-house, and digital-poetry publisher. One of the first things many visitors seek out is the site's "Author" section, a collection of materials by and about more than 150 poets and critics.

The materials vary from author to author, but all follow a standard format, including, at the least, biographical material, a bibliography, scholarly criticism, and samples of the author's work. (In the case of living authors, the versions are approved by the author before they are posted.)

Some of the author pages go well beyond the minimum -- for example, those of Robert Creeley, a major figure in innovative poetry and a professor of poetry at Buffalo. Some of his most famous works have involved collaborations with painters and sculptors and are meant to be displayed in conjunction with that art, whether in exhibitions or in books. As a result, their availability to a wide readership is limited: The exhibitions close, and the books are generally limited-edition and prohibitively expensive, even if any could be located. Through links on the poetry center's site, though,

many of the books and even some of the exhibition catalogs are available online.

There are other examples: The pages devoted to Frank O'Hara, a poet of the "New York School" of the 1950's and 60's, includes links to a magazine article that features "poem paintings" he made in collaboration with the artist Norman Bluhm and copies of the art reviews -- now in demand, but difficult to come by -- that he wrote for ArtNews between 1953 and 1955.

Jackson Mac Low's pages feature audio recordings of the poet reading from his own works, and a half-hour interview conducted under the auspices of LINEbreak, a radio program produced at Buffalo. (The poetry center has all of those programs in its archives.)

Juliana Spahr, an assistant professor of English at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, uses the site in both her survey and her contemporary-poetry courses. "If I'm teaching Bernadette Mayer," she says by way of example, "I send students to her page to listen to the audio," which is available there. And "if I need to find a certain article by Marjorie Perloff," she adds, mentioning a major critic in the field, "I know it's there."

Ms. Perloff herself calls the Electronic Poetry Center "much the best poetry site," and says she uses it "all the time." She regularly checks the "New" section, which on a given day might include "new books about people I might not know of, a new press, a new magazine, a poet who's here from France, a video of Robert Creeley's lecture at Kelly Writers House in Philadelphia," she says, referring to a program run by the University of Pennsylvania. (A handful of other poetry sites are similar to the center, though varying in what they

offer. They include the Academy of American Poets (http://www.poets.org/index.cfm), and Modern American Poetry, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps).

Among its many other resources, the poetry center also provides an alphabetized list of links to other important poetry sites; a list of poetry magazines, both digital and print; the full texts of the digital magazines; and a list of Web sites for presses that publish innovative poetry, from Alt-X to Zasterle Press.

The magazines and small presses are particularly important to innovative poetry, which, as a rule, is "not supported by university presses or major New York publishing houses," says Ms. Spahr. "So it's always been this thing that has survived through its own ingenuity, publishing itself."

Indeed, the Web is an important medium for poetry, which is "very sensitive to the cheapest means of distribution and production," says Charles Bernstein, a noted poet who is a professor of English at Buffalo and executive editor of the poetry center. He views the site as being "kind of like the mimeo and Xerox poetry magazines of the 50's and 60's.

"We are a central switchboard to provide archives of this material, information about it, and direct access to it."

One of the strengths of the poetry center is the meticulous attention paid to what goes into the site -- and what doesn't. Its lists and links are "hand curated" and edited constantly, says Loss Pequeno Glazier, the poetry center's director, who runs the center on a

day-to-day basis. In that and other ways, the center reflects the interests and training of Mr. Glazier, a poet who worked as a curator of the American-literature collection at the University of Southern California and as a bibliographer of English and American literature in the libraries at Buffalo before earning a doctorate in poetics here.

For the poetry center, an additional strength lies in being university-based and in having the imprimatur of Buffalo's well-regarded Poetics Program, which gives it a scholarly heft and makes it "qualitatively different" from other poetry sites on the Web, says Al Filreis, a professor of English at Penn. Besides, he adds, "the E.P.C. happens to be particularly dedicated and has energetic leadership."

The Electronic Poetry Center is sponsored by the English department and the College of Arts and Sciences at Buffalo. The office of the college's dean pays $26,000, about half of Mr. Glazier's annual salary, although there is no formal budget line for the center. "It really operates through the good graces of various interested parties at U.B.," Mr. Glazier says. The center grew out of the Poetics Program, founded in 1991 by Mr. Bernstein and Mr. Creeley. Like the program, it was a natural evolution of a focus on avant-garde and experimental poetry at Buffalo that began in the 1960's with the arrival of Charles Olson and Mr. Creeley, two of the most influential members of the "Black Mountain" school of experimental poetry, which challenged the mainstream "academic" poetry of the 1950's and 60's.

Mr. Olson, who died in 1970, was here for only two years, but Mr. Creeley now occupies a named chair in poetry and the humanities.

The university's emphasis on experimental poetry was further solidified in 1990 with the arrival of Mr. Bernstein, a major figure among the "language poets," who once characterized mainstream poetry as "militantly middle of the road."

"This is a community dedicated to a certain kind of poetry," says Mr. Filreis, who describes himself as a "user and a fan" of the poetry center. "This is not the place you would go for a discussion of Robert Frost. You're going to get [Gertrude] Stein, not Frost. You'll get Frank O'Hara but not Mark Strand."

Scholars interested in Stein, O'Hara, and any of the other hundreds of innovative poets find kindred spirits on one of the poetry center's most heavily used features, a discussion group via an electronic mailing list.

Although the group can "get out of hand," Ms. Perloff says, with people bickering or sniping at one another, Mr. Filreis views it as an important gathering place for the relatively small group of scholars devoted to this kind of poetry. The poetry center has established itself "as the place to go for discussion about this particular field," he says.

"People get incredibly involved in these arguments about contemporary poetry," he continues. "You get to see a discussion staged about things society at large is not interested in -- but these are real people with passion about these things."

Mr. Filreis, who teaches modern American poetry online to students around the world, uses the discussions as a window on what he calls "poetry as a live practice."

"Say we're discussing the work of Ron Silliman," he says, mentioning a well-regarded language poet. To students, "he's abstract. He might as well be Elizabeth Barrett Browning. He's someone who writes famous poems that the teacher says you should like."

"But I can read Ron Silliman on poetics, on writings, or on the political thinking of the day on E.P.C., and forward what he wrote to my group and give them access to Ron's voice as a live thing. It may be something he said or wrote only a few hours earlier.

"At the same time, I can write to Ron and ask him to participate in my discussions, which he has done. So you suddenly have access not only to this work, but to Ron himself."

In addition to making abstract poets more real to students, the poetry center provides an important forum for what Mr. Glazier calls "e-poetry," which, "by definition, can't exist on the printed page," he says. And there's a subcategory of e-poetry that exists only on the Web, where external links are an integral part of the poem's makeup.

The poetry center has a section devoted to e-poetry, highlighting "the most interesting and visionary" works in the new category, says Mr. Glazier. Electronic poets -- he calls them "poet programmers" -- can consider myriad possibilities that are simply unavailable in print: movement, sound, images, even programmable elements. Words, lines, or stanzas can change color or transmogrify into other images. Entire poems can move across the page, as occurs in "SeattleDrift," by Jim Andrews.

In Mr. Glazier's "White Bromeliads," words and phrases change

places with one another every 10 seconds, offering 256 variations on the same poem. In Tammy McGovern's "TranceMissions," the user clicks on a black screen and words appear, accompanied by a voice that pronounces them. By moving the cursor, you can create a poem -- or a cacophony, depending on your mood. It's like an audio version of those magnetic words and phrases you stick on your refrigerator.

And in a programming tour de force, Aya Karpinska has created "ek-stasis," in which the poem appears to be three-dimensional, and the viewer can "walk around" inside it, viewing the words from different vantage points.

The roots of e-poetry can be found in the melding of words and images that was a common occurrence before the invention of the printing press, Mr. Glazier believes. "Once the printing press became widespread," he says, "it became too expensive to include many images, and the image and the word were separated -- tragically separated."

But with the computer, word and image are easily reunited after 500 years. "I just think it's a wonderful time to be alive and writing poetry," says Mr. Glazier. "That was a long drought."

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