

## THE HYPERSTITIAL POETICS OF NETWORK MEDIA

**SIMON BIGGS**

*Remediating the Social* was a conference and exhibition, with a focus on creative works and activities, developed within the domain of new media arts practice that feature a particular engagement with literary form - an area often known as electronic literature or digital poetics. This text will treat these terms interchangeably and will focus on the exhibition component of the project.

*Remediating the Social* engaged creativity as a property emergent from a multi-modal social apparatus rather than, as is often assumed, an attribute of individual or group human agency. The event sought, as many artists who work with digital media do, to problematize conventional notions of authorship. The key proposition was formulated within the context of an expanded understanding of individual and collective ontology that regards selfhood, in large part, as a socially contingent construct and, in this sense, a creation of the social space from which it emerges and is sustained within. Here, creativity is apprehended as a reflexive property of the inter-agency of social interactions, rather than as an activity concerned with the origination of novel things or a capability invested in an individual or group of individuals.

In this context it is recognized that social agents might not be people, whether individual or collective, but also systems, devices, media and artefacts. In this respect the role of technology is considered of particular import, especially the computer which, with a measure of autonomy, is a technology with a particularly distinct social agency. Further to this, as a linguistic device, the computer can also be considered part of, indeed a form of, language and thus implicated not only in communication but also social formation; if we are to accept that social formation is driven, in large part, by linguistic parameters, as has been argued by numerous linguists, cognitive scientists and philosophers as diverse as Noam Chomsky, Daniel Dennett, Marshall MacLuhan and Michel Foucault.

*Remediating the Social* sought to explore this proposition through considering instances of creative practice that employ digital and networked systems, in their structure and function, and evidence these emergent characteristics in the processes involved in their making. This is how we apprehend creative works

that are critically reflexive concerning their ‘born digital’ status. The focus of the exhibition was social media—but not social media in the sense of media that are concerned with enabling social interactions (e.g.: Facebook or Twitter,<sup>1</sup> although these might have been within the remit of the event and incorporated into specific art works) but media that are part of the apparatus we identify as the social in action. The most fundamental medium that exhibits this property is language itself. The Foucauldian concept of the Dispositif is directly relevant here, and a helpful proposition in aiding our insights, particularly in its engagement with discourse and language within a context where agency need not be identified only, or even primarily, with human intention and action. As we have already observed, the computer is itself a linguistic system, thus it is probably no surprise that many of the artists encountered in this context, where the digital and computation are key to practice, often work with language and literary form. However, as was evident in many of the works, the linguistic was deployed within a complex material and social context, echoing Gilles Deleuze’s questioning of the Dispositif.

Foucault’s philosophy is often presented as an analysis of concrete “dispositifs” or apparatuses. But what is an apparatus? First of all, it is a skein, a multilinear whole. It is composed of lines of different natures. The lines in the apparatus do not encircle or surround systems that are homogeneous in themselves, the object, the subject, language, etc., but follow directions, trace processes that are always out of balance, that sometimes move closer together and sometimes farther away. Each line is broken, subject to *changes in direction*, bifurcating and forked, and subjected to *derivations*. Visible objects, articulable utterances, forces in use, subjects in position are like vectors or tensors. (Deleuze 2007)

The description of the structure of the apparatus in this text evokes many key aspects of digital network media and its literary form, suggesting the viral dynamics that link the elements of the network. Here the origin of things and their effects can be difficult to determine.

As was observed in the introductory catalog essay for the *Remediating the Social* exhibition:

---

<sup>1</sup> Twitter was employed, along with the Bambuser video streaming service, in *Remediating the Social* to enable remote interactive participation in the conference. Remote attendees were able to observe proceedings via a live video stream and ask questions or make comments to the conference via a Twitter feed that was video projected on one of the conference hall walls. Whilst the conference attracted over 100 delegates to physically attend the event the streaming records show that over 540 remote attendees logged into watch the live video stream, over a three day period, and the Twitter feed was composed of 636 individual Tweets.

artists and authors involved in *Remediating the Social* work with digital and networked systems. One way or another, they work with computers. Their practice engages people, individually and collectively, as mediated by (sometimes generated or emergent from within) machines. Such practice demands we ask, where is agency? This question is key to the work of many of these artists. Indeed, one would suspect that many of the artists and authors, whose work is documented and discussed here, choose to work with computers and networks because the issue of agency is key to their inquiry - they seek to question the inter-agency of author, reader and medium, often by problematising our apprehension of where the work originates. They ask us to consider how agency might be identified within constantly changing patterns of socially contingent inter-agency. (Biggs 2012)

The works for *Remediating the Social* were all commissioned for the event and thus the artists engaged the event’s theme from the outset. The works that emerged from this engagement shared certain attributes, particularly in relation to their mediality, but offered diverse views on, and approaches to, the key premise of the exhibition. This text will seek to unpack and interpret each of the art works in the exhibition from this perspective.

The works and artists featured in the exhibition, in the alphabetical order of the artists’ last names, were *Huis Clos / No Exit* by Annie Abrahams, *Re:Mix* by Mark Amerika, Garden Library Database by Romy Achituv, Search Trilogy by Johannes Auer, Beat Suter and René Bauer, *Small Uncomfortable Reading Poems* by Philippe Bootz, *\_The\_Tem(Cor)p(oral)\_Body\_* by Mez Breeze, *Duel* by Andy Campbell and Kate Pullinger, *The Broadside of a Yarn* by J. R. Carpenter, *Common Tongues* by John Cayley and Daniel Howe, *Baby Work* by Shu Lea Cheang, *B A C K L I T* by Cris Cheek, *Natural History* by Johannes Helden, *Exquisite Code* by Brendan Howell, *Absurd in Public* by Aya Karpinska, *Borderline* by Donna Leishman, *The Final Problem* by Judd Morrissey and Mark Jeffery and *Textual Skyline* by Jason Nelson.

## THE WORKS

Annie Abrahams’ project, *Huis Clos / No Exit*, was a distributed performance work involving five performers. The performers were all linked through an artist’s developed and authored multi-channel audiovisual conferencing software platform that allowed the participants to all be seen and heard simultaneously by each other and the audience within a single computer desktop window.

Each of the performers was at a different international location and had a distinct first language. They were Annie Abrahams (Netherlands), Ruth Catlow (UK), Ursula Endlicher (Austria), Nicholas Frespech (France), and Igor Stromajer (Slovenia). The premise of the work was that the performance would emerge from the interactions of the performers, who were disallowed from speaking in any shared spoken language.



Fig. 1 Performance of *Huis Clos*.

The performers were given three themes to engage, concerning the *new aesthetic*, the *newer aesthetic*, and the assertion that the Internet is not as good as it was yesterday. The interpretation and articulation of the themes was left to the individual performers to determine as they wished. The performance evolved, over a period of twenty minutes or so, as the performers, often hilariously, sought to share their thoughts on the themes and develop a degree of discourse with each other. Was this an example of an identifiable community emerging from some form of innate shared humanity or an exposition of our limits as human beings to communicate and understand one another? Arguably it was both, portraying an equivocal view of human interaction as pervaded with potential failure as it was pregnant with (often serendipitous) creative potential.

*Re:Mix*, by Mark Amerika, was the artist's response to the curated exhibition and conference papers, developed in the later stages of the event's gestation. The premise of Amerika's contribution—in line with much of his recent work on remixing and glitch aesthetics—was to present the work as a response to other contributions, establishing an explicitly discursive relationship between his own contribution and the other works in the exhibition. Whilst the piece built on the consideration and re-reading of other works the mode of presentation had the feel of an improvisation, as is often the case with works that employ remix or mash-up tech-

niques. Amerika's contribution to the catalogue even remixed and referenced historical pop-rock, in the form of Pink Floyd's "Welcome to the (Remediated Social) Machine."



Fig. 2 Mark Amerika performing *Re:Mix*.

Romy Achituv's *Garden Library Database* employed a remix strategy, although with almost the opposite intention of Mark Amerika's intervention. In this work the *first* reader is not the artist but the audience, the library's user. As with any lending library, the user can borrow books and when read, return them. However, unlike a conventional library, the borrower can return the book to anywhere in the library they determine is appropriate, using a color coding system to indicate where they have chosen to lodge the volume. This renders the library a constantly shifting colorful taxonomy of material, reflecting the understanding by the readers of a book's subject, rather than that of a librarian or Library of Congress classification. The *Garden Library Database* thus functions as a co-creative remixing of knowledge classifications, a dynamic taxonomic mapping of the contents of the books the collection contains. This in turn drives a continuous process of change in the visual coding system that describes that mapping, creating an animated visual structure that allows us to reflect on how knowledge can be represented and interacted with as a living epistemology.

*Search Trilogy* was an installation and performance (in the case of *Search Sonata*) by Johannes Auer, Beat Suter and René Bauer. In these closely related works texts found through employing internet search algorithms are converted into sound poems in real-time. In this work not only are the search results

'mashed-up' into new texts but the algorithms that enable this capability are themselves the outcome of a process of bricolage, with code acquired from the multiple authors as well as historical sources, as diverse as 1950s computer code experiments to J. S. Bach's rule-based musical systems, where musical staves were classified as letters of the alphabet, facilitating exchange between musical and textual symbolic forms. In *Search Trilogy* these structured approaches to the generation of data (music and/or text) are reverse-engineered to enable the emergence of a hybrid media-poetry machine, existing somewhere between search engine, generative music system and audio performance platform. For *Remediating the Social* the work *Search Sonata* was performed live by Christiane Maschajechi, interpreting the textual data and sonic structures resulting from the live search process as structured improvised song emergent from what was effectively a complex constraint-based system—an algorithmic process that explicitly rendered the common linguistic foundations of the human-machine apparatus.

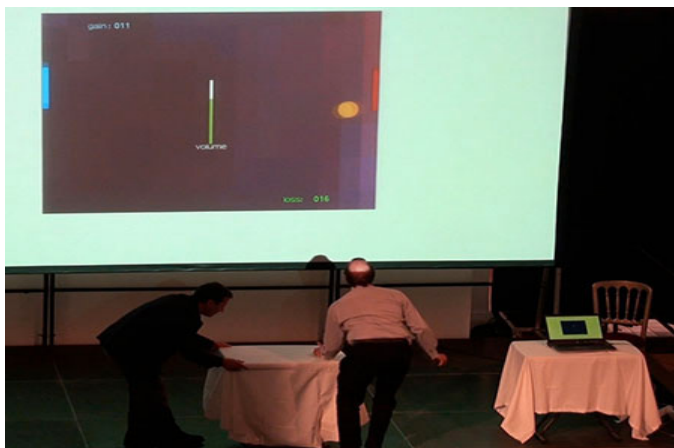


Fig. 4 Bootz performing one of the *Small Uncomfortable Reading Poems* which involved a game of Pong operated with a laptop and a mouse, which were being slowly pulled away from each other as he ran frantically between them.

Philippe Bootz's *Small Uncomfortable Reading Poems*, like *Search Sonata*, also exist in both installation and performance forms. Again, similar to *Search Sonata*, and particularly in its performed form, *Small Uncomfortable Reading Poems* encouraged reflection upon the hybrid human-machine system that is person, computer, and language together. Arguably, a key concept that is helpful for fully appreciating Bootz's work is that of entropy. Philippe Bootz has two doctor-

ates in the sciences (Physics and Information Science) but works primarily as a writer and artist exploring the algorithmic potential of computer based poetry. However, his background in theoretical science gives him a deep appreciation of theories such as the Third Law of Thermodynamics. While entropy offers us a framework for understanding how energy is conserved—with systems perpetually and unerringly running down towards stasis, as energy moves from one state to another—it also gives us a model for the poetic principle. As energy in a system increases, the number of states the system can be in also increases. Poetry could be viewed as that form of language where negative-entropy is at its maximum, where the polyvalence of potential symbolic states is at its most amplified, allowing us to engage multiple interpretations of even simple discrete phenomena, as a hyperstitialized form of *reading*.

The term hyperstitial emerged in the mid 1990's to describe those elements of web pages, often advertisements, that are displayed whilst the main elements of a web page are rendered by the web browser. However, just as the term interstitial can be employed to indicate the gaps between things in general, the term hyperstitial can be re-purposed to describe those points of interpretation between things that can exist in multiple states - something we are familiar with from poetry. The proposition here is that the hyperstitial can be considered as kind of 'pleasure principle' of the poetic, the small moment of rapture that emerges when interpretation is in a suspended and/or equivocal state. Deleuze's description of the dispositif as "Each line is broken, subject to changes in direction, bifurcating and forked, and subjected to derivations" (ibid) resonates here, drawing our attention to the hyperstitial in action. Another key aspect of Bootz's approach to language and performance is humor, with the artist's performative recognition that entropic forces govern not only the physical world but also the processes of reading, writing and performing. Thus a Bootz performance shares the tragi-comic characteristics of a Buster Keaton film, as both performer and audience await the (entropic) outcome of the event, with the poet-performer ultimately unable to bridge the yawning physical (interstitial) gap that the performance space becomes.

The work of Mez Breeze, represented in *Remediating the Social* by the projected text work *\_The\_Tem(Cor)p(oral)\_Body\_*, is another relevant example here, allowing us to reflect further on a poetic principle that might be understood as a form of negative-entropy. Mez's work, written in her own language



Mezangelle, exists as a hybridized human-machine code that can exist in multiple states at the same time, depending on how you choose to interpret it. In this sense Mezangelle is, in its foundations, a poetic language—even though in many ways it resembles computer code. This equivocal set of characteristics can, itself, be considered as a property of a hyperstitionalized linguistic form which encourages us to consider the shared ontology of people and machines. A Mez text demands that we carefully consider every step in its interpretation, requiring of its reader a machine-like capacity to parse the text between multiple states.

Mezangelle's unique polyvalent form, employing square and curved brackets and other typographic structuring elements more likely to be encountered in scientific programming languages like C, Java or Prolog, demands the reader never falls back on linguistic assumptions or common textual tropes. In this context every instance of reading is multiplied into a number of different threads that need to be simultaneously sustained, the meanings emergent not from any single or combination of threads but from the spaces between them. This form of hyperstitional reading presents as a symbolic representation for the co-evolution of people and machines, proposing a form of emergent *cyborg pidgin*. As with *Bootz*, we are left suspecting that the artist derives perverse pleasure from the tragi-comic proposition that humans and machines are enmeshed within the forces of inevitable entropy. In this respect such projects allow us a particular perspective on what might be implied in the proposition and processes of remediating the social.



Fig. 6 Kate Pullinger and Andy Campbell perform *Duel*.

By contrast, Andy Campbell and Kate Pullinger's work *Duel* appears, on some levels, to be a conventional novel, employing the usual narrative forms of plot and characterisation. However, *Duel* exists in the hyper-spatialized and temporalized form of an interactive multimedia serialized mystery-thriller, in some respects sharing more with the format of a dungeon and dragon's puzzle

game than that of the novel. *Duel* has been developed to be “read” across multiple media devices, such as desktop and laptop computers, tablets and other mobile devices, including smart-phones. Exploiting the geo-locative, and other, sensors that such mobile media devices generally possess, the narrative of the work is encountered not in the linear space of the printed page but the fragmented and hyperspatial form of a geo-located and urbanized internet. The premise of the narrative is that of the murder-mystery and the reader is drawn into this as much as protagonist as in the more familiar role of observer, their actions in the real world having direct consequence for the development of the story. The narrative of *Duel* is time-constrained in the real world (delivered over a fixed time frame), enveloping the reader in a time-space that exists both within the narrative and in their everyday life. The work draws on its many readers' experiences and interpretations to add further layers, allowing the work to gain complexity through a process of crowd-sourced or communal active reading.

J. R. Carpenter's *The Broadside of a Yarn* also employed geography as a key element, using the map as its central visual and structural trope. Carpenter's works, over a period of years, have employed generative techniques in their writing. In this new work, she has sought to develop a context for authoring and encountering such texts. To quote the artist:

*The Broadside of a Yarn* is a multi-modal performative pervasive networked narrative attempt to chart fictional fragments of new and long-ago stories of near and far-away seas with nought but a QR code reader and an unbound atlas of hand-made maps of dubious accuracy. (Carpenter 2013)

The central premise of *The Broadside of a Yarn* concerns what might happen when the less than reliable mappings of a remembered childhood in Nova Scotia, Canada, are reimagined and remapped onto the locale and characteristics of contemporary Edinburgh, Scotland. In short, the work was conceived as a response to place—or, rather, places both remembered and yet to be encountered—but within the framework of an unreliable, or even devious, writer's intent. As the artist explains,

*The Broadside of a Yarn* remediates the broadside, a form of networked narrative popular from 16th century onward. Broadside were written on a wide range of topical subjects, cheaply printed on single sheets of paper (often with images), widely distributed, and posted and per-

formed in public. During the *Remediating the Social* exhibition, *The Broadside of a Yarn* will be posted as a grid of A3-sized square maps at Inspace gallery, and freely distributed as broadside-sized sheet. (Carpenter 2013)

The work, once installed in the dual context of the gallery and the city, was then performed by the reader as they employed the QR code reading and geolocative capabilities of their mobile devices to interpret the artist's imagined maps as guides to their own journeys through the city. Notably, Carpenter was not alone amongst the artists in employing such a strategy to enable the emergence of a crowd-sourced psychogeography, as we will see.

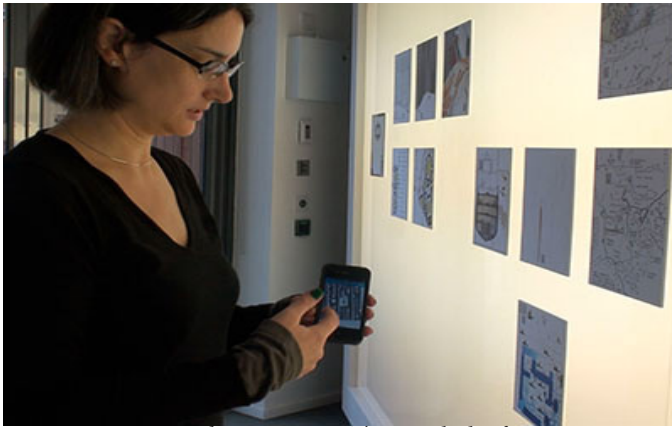


Fig. 7 J.R. Carpenter demonstrating *The Broadside of a Yarn*.

John Cayley and Daniel Howe's *Common Tongues*, like so many of the works in *Remediating the Social*, directly engaged the multifaceted and polyvalent nature of language when it is hyperspatialized and temporalized through the Internet. *Common Tongues* is part of Cayley and Howe's larger *Readers Project*, which seeks new apprehensions of what reading can be in a time of networked writing. Based on *How It Is*, a text by Samuel Beckett, *Common Tongues* engages the Internet not only as a new platform for writing but as the context for new forms of reading. To quote the artists:

The indexing and statistical analysis of everything that has been inscribed into the realm of big data allows us to search and retrieve textual fragments from a vast, increasingly comprehensive literary and linguistic corpus in arrangements that are first "read" by algorithmic and statistical models and then offered up to us in finely composed—and often illustrated, multimediated—pages that precede and predetermine any further

or deeper "human" reading. Perhaps this is how we are now inclined to read, as our relationship with language and language-making changes fundamentally? Is the algorithmically composed reading "social" or "posthuman?" Is our subsequent "deep" reading a solipsistic throwback? (Cayley and Howe 2013)

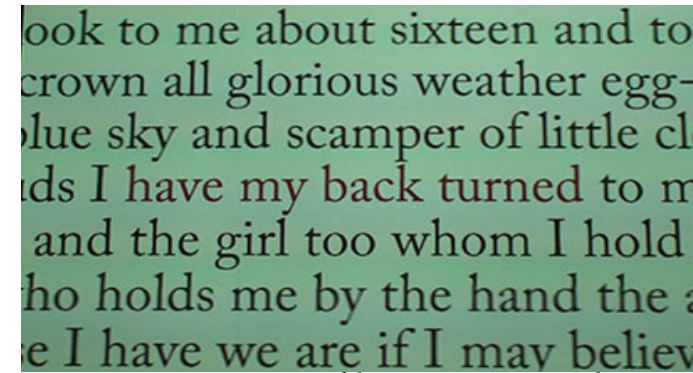


Fig. 8 An interactive projection of the *Common Tongues* reader.

In this project, the artists propose that reading is as much a social as personal activity, performed in the shared hyper-mediated linguistic data-space that is the Internet. In this regard, *Common Tongues* directly engages the core conceptual premise of *Remediating the Social*.

Shu Lea Cheang's *Baby Work* approached the concept of the social from an entirely different perspective, proposing a socio-economic critique of how the new reading and writing systems we employ are manufactured, particularly in relation to child labor and other highly suspect manufacturing processes we choose to turn a blind eye to when using our tablets and laptop computers. Entering the installation space, the visitor was required to navigate around a floor littered with the thousands of individual keys stripped from hundreds of computer keyboards. Visitors could select these keys and fix them to still fully functional circuit boards, ripped from their keyboard cases and mounted on the walls nearby. As keys were added or removed from the keyboard *mural*, the visual appearance of the work evolved and so too did its aural condition. The arrangement of the keys on the *circuit-wall* directly controlled the selection and sequencing of numerous audio samples that further evoked the conditions of contemporary labor.

*Baby Work* reflected on the conditions of labor in emerging economies not only in its presentation but also its production. To prepare the work numerous nimble hands and fingers were required, spending hundreds of hours in the

gallery, stripping the keys from the keyboards and carefully removing their circuit boards, without damaging any of the delicate connections or substrates. In order to achieve this minor feat of Sisyphean labor, a general call was put out to students within the College hosting the event. Of the many who responded, a core of around eight students provided the bulk of the labor. Entirely by accident, but ironically, all of these students were of Chinese origin like Shu Lea. In a period when we regularly read of the questionable labor practices in Apple's Chinese fabrication plants, the spectacle of the preparation of *Baby Work* was as evocative of the themes the work addressed as the final exhibit.

cris cheek chose to focus on the social in the physical form of the intimately personal in his work *B A C K L I T*. A deceptively simple performance piece, the work involved the artist sitting on the stage with their back to the audience. A powerful video projector projected images onto the naked upper-torso of the artist, rendering it a three dimensional screen—what the artist has termed an “illuminated figure.”<sup>2</sup> The projected images were carefully selected and framed such that each precisely interacted with the form of the body, creating a phenomena that was far richer and visually disturbing than can be evoked in this description. The images themselves were crowd-sourced by the artist from other artists and collaborators from around the world, through the many listservs and other social media channels we routinely use in our contemporary social and professional interactions. In a very real sense, the artist was offering up their body for others to inscribe as they wished through the images they proposed, bringing into consideration the place, role, and representation of the body in the virtual informational spaces of networked culture.

*Natural History*, by Johannes Helden, like many of this artist's other projects, explicitly reflects upon processes of entropy in nature, echoing concerns that are evident in many of the other artists' works presented in the context of the *Remediating the Social* exhibition. However, where many artists here are concerned with entropy in social and/or technological systems, Helden's focus is upon these dynamics in nature and how this innate principle of life pervades our social and personal formation. Positing nature as both abundant with promise and threatening with chaos, Helden states:

In my work I let nature and technology meet, to create meaning and new structures in the flow of information, structures to point out cracks where new possibilities, in language and aesthetically, can shine through and create order in chaos. Each artwork becomes a fictive system, its main operators being technology and nature, hope for the future and dystopia. Even though reality dissolves and what's left is a meaningless jumble, there is still something that gives hope, an idea of progress. (Helden 2013)

Helden could be considered here to be implicitly referencing the concept of the hyperstitional, previously discussed in reference to the work of Philippe Bootz and Mez Breeze. This appears to be a principle evident, to a greater or lesser extent, in each of the artist's works discussed here. *Natural History* was one of the few works in the exhibition that featured a substantial physical artifact produced in advance of the event by the artist. A plan-view model of a group of small islands, mounted on the wall, functioned as a three dimensional projection screen which the viewer could interact with to reveal further layers of information and narrative, creating in effect a geographic palimpsest. Palimpsests are texts—or, more precisely, pages—that incorporate their histories within them, even if often semi-erased. In *Natural History*, referencing Charles Darwin's concepts of natural selection and evolution, the subject is, however, not the past but our possible imaginary futures. The work existed as a visual archaeology of the future, a form of sci-fi mirage that the reader navigated in the mini psychogeographic space of the installation, as a series of projected layers and veils of visual and textual information.

Another project that existed as a palimpsest, but in this instance one that exists in the temporal rather than spatial dimension, was Brendan Howell's *Exquisite Code*. Referencing the surrealist pastime of the exquisite corpse, in this durational performance a group of writers are engaged in a process of collective writing that is governed not by a single authorial vision, nor by some form of group determined narrative, but by a small piece of software the artist has dubbed the *edit worm*. This is a software device that iteratively and interactively engages with human writers, directing, interpreting, and redacting the emerging text in real-time. Howell has envisaged the human writers as small algorithmic sub-units or functions (or cogs, to use a mechanical term) in a larger writing system that, in many ways, functions as a literal representation of a Turing Machine—a simple logical operating system designed to demonstrate Turing's key concepts of computability.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from the original untitled proposal for *Remediating the Social* by cris cheek.



As has been outlined in the introduction to this text, *Remediating the Social* sought to envisage agency as not only a property associated with people, whether individual or collective, but also of artificial and natural systems, including technical devices, media, and artifacts. For this proposition to be meaningful it is helpful to understand Turing's work on computational theory and how it fundamentally re-envisaged, in the first instance, what *writing* could be and, secondly, what the implications of this for agency might be.

Turing's core insight was that language itself could have agency if, and this is a key point, it was able to internally represent and operate upon itself, as a symbolic continuum, so as to shift from one condition or state to another. In effect, Turing's proposition was that it could be possible to create a form of writing that was able to (re-) write itself—a process we see in the recombinant life determining activities of DNA—and through this process gain agency in relation to itself and any other elements it might interact with. Within fifty years of Turing developing this principle, civilization is pervaded and in large part determined by the computer and its outcomes.

Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela's concept of autopoiesis developed, in part, from Turing's work, representing a core proposition in what is known as third order cybernetics. Drawing on empirical research in cellular biology, concerning how single cell organisms reproduce themselves, Maturana and Varela developed a theory for how symbolic systems could evolve with the characteristics of agency that Turing envisaged. The term autopoiesis refers to the capacity for something to create itself and incorporates the term "poiesis" (from the Greek for "to create").

An autopoietic machine is a machine organized (defined as a unity) as a network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) of components which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network. (Maturana and Varela 1980)

The word "poetry" also has its etymological roots in the Greek "poiesis" and suggests that poetic language is language at its most generative—where language exists in order to make novel instances of itself. Artists, such as Mez Breeze—with the form of the language she deploys—and Brendan Howell—with

the hybrid human-machine apparatus he constructs as a writing machine—are seeking methods for evidencing how language does this. They create circumstances where their texts are read through a *constructive* algorithmic method, the instance of writing conscientiously and reflexively constructed by the reader each step of the way, revealing how language can be, perhaps innately is, generative. This is a theme that is recurrent in each of the works in *Remediating the Social*.

Aya Karpinska's project, *Absurd in Public*, like many of the artists' in *Remediating the Social*, deals with signs. However, in this instance, the signs are literally that—road signs. Karpinska's signs are, at first glance, similar to any road sign you would see on the side of the road in a city like New York (where the artist is based). However, on closer inspection, the symbols on the signs appear ambiguous—more evocative of connections and disconnections between things than the usual directives we expect signs to consist of. Each sign also features a QR code, which the visitor can scan with their mobile device to be taken to a web page related to the specific sign. Karpinska has described the formation of these signs as "curious mashups"<sup>3</sup> designed to highlight how communities form social codes. Within the context of the exhibition, visitors were asked to interact with the signs, using their mobile devices, and they were also asked to make a contribution to the definition of each of the signs and their constituent parts, thus facilitating the emergence of a collective apprehension of their potential meanings. However, *Remediating the Social* happened to be contemporaneous with Hurricane Sandy, which cut a destructive swathe along the East Coast of the United States late in 2012, flooding downtown Manhattan (where Karpinska lives) and closing New York's airports. The artist's plan had been to oversee the installation of the signs and to then perform the sign definitions collected during the event. Due to the circumstances, this was not possible, although the signs, with QR codes, were exhibited, and visitors were still able to contribute to and read the crowd-sourced definitions.

*Borderline*, by Donna Leishman, existed primarily as an installation that the viewer could interact with to create an audiovisual improvisation reminiscent of what a VJ, or live-coder, might produce. The physical interface to the work was two Wacom graphic tablets, with pens, rather than the usual mouse. This allowed a far more gestural approach to how the interactor could engage the work,

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the original artist's proposal for *Remediating the Social* by Aya Karpinska.



so that there were two inputs rather than one permitted interaction—not only between interactor and machine but also between the two interactors, as mediated by the audiovisual system. *Borderline* was also performed by the artist, and the collaborator Steve Gibson, as part of the opening of the exhibition. Leishman cites Mark Amerika in observing that much VJ work consists of abstract material often devoid of content. Leishman's intent was the opposite of this, to produce a work with the improvised immediacy of the live performed VJ's set with the addition of carefully considered content. The main theme of the work was *dualism*, as represented in the duality of interaction that allowed each instance of the work to be performed into being. A key premise of the work was that the two participants directly engaged in the piece could choose to be social, working with one another to produce the work, or antisocial, creating a performance of conflict and disjuncture. Interestingly, whichever modality of engagement the interactors chose, the work never failed to manifest.

A number of works in *Remediating the Social* engaged directly with geography and urban space and did so using the geo-locative capabilities of a new generation of mobile devices. *Remediating the Social*, within the context of the ELMCIP project, seeks to avoid any reductivist analysis implicit in a technological determinist understanding of why this might be. However, as argued above,<sup>4</sup> we would propose that together, people and the systems they develop, interact as novel forms of creative practice. Geo-locative media art works, often in the form of interactive psychogeographies, are at this time a highly evident trope that should, no doubt, give us reason to reconsider how we exist in space and interact with our environment, whether natural or urban.

Judd Morrissey and Mark Jeffery's project *The Final Problem (Free Lunch Movement)* employed geo-locative technologies as key in its conception, production, and exhibition. This was a large and ambitious work, a performance, with objects and systems, filling the expansive Georgian architecture of the Sculpture Court at Edinburgh College of Art. The artists described the work as follows:

a year-long, city-specific, multi-disciplinary project encompassing elements of writing, text mining, data-visualization, and community psychogeography, woven together through algorithmic composition. The piece will loosely appropriate the conventions and mechanics of a crime

<sup>4</sup> The author's essay immediately prior to this one was titled "An Evolving Apparatus" and considered the premise of the coevolution of a homo-technical apparatus as a stage in an expanded concept of human evolution (Biggs 2013).

novel as constraints for the filtering and framing of content and the development of narrative rules. (Morrissey and Jeffery 2013)

It is in Arthur Conan Doyle's short story of the same title that the mysterious criminal genius Professor Moriarty was first introduced to readers of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes mystery novels. In the original story, Holmes and Dr. Watson journey across Europe in pursuit of Moriarty as they seek to thwart his secret criminal society's international activities. It is a story containing many other stories, some salient to the larger narrative and some, in classic Conan Doyle style, entirely irrelevant. Telling which was which has always been the challenge of such stories. Similarly, in Morrissey and Jeffery's theatrical exposition, it is often difficult to locate the real narrative focus of the activity or determine whether there is one. Indeed, the means by which the narrative of the work was assembled, employing "geo-specific data APIs indicating weather conditions, celestial bodies, local transportation, and historical information" (Morrissey and Jeffery 2013), suggests a process of acute creative bricolage that is unlikely to lead to anything resembling a conventional narrative.

The final work existed as a set of five large tables, one incorporating an interactive visual display (connected to a large video projection), upon which several performers enacted a discontinuous and fractured series of vignettes. These vignettes were in part determined by a performer working with the interactive display, in a similar manner to a casino croupier working the roulette wheel, in the midst of the conference and event attendees as they sat, or stood, eating their lunch. The blurring of performance, exhibition, and functional space through this process further evoked the multi-layered unrealities of both Conan Doyle's original novella and Morrissey's and Jeffery's performance-manifesto. This was a work of tortuous allusions consisting of ever receding references that any detective-mystery lover would relish, including the rendering of the conference attendees, eating their lunches, as key elements in the work:

*Free Lunch Movement* is derived from the saying "there ain't no such thing as a free lunch" or *tanstaafl*, popularized in a science fiction novel by Robert Heinlein where Sherlock Holmes' older brother, Mycroft, appears as an intelligent machine. No free lunch is a phrase implying that nothing comes without a cost: to have one thing we like, we must give up something else. Free lunch problems are at the core of computer science and economics as well as questions as to whether software and data should be open and free. In problem solving algorithms utilizing com-

putational random walks, no free lunch is the point at which no solution is superior to any other (because every unique optimization necessitates a trade-off of resources elsewhere). In the spirit of open data, reciprocity, and complexity, *The Final Problem* chooses lunch as its currency for exchange. (Morrissey and Jeffery 2013)

It might be possible to understand the concept of “no free lunch” as equivalent to, or even as another term for, entropy and the preservation and transfer of energy.

Jason Nelson’s project *Textual Skyline* explicitly engaged social media such as blogs, RSS feeds, and community media sites, like Boing Boing and Metafilter. Elisabeth Nesheim describes its focus and intent as follows:

Our webscapes and netvilles are increasingly dominated by short bursts of emotional language, brief stabs of charged textual opinion. And every minute those words build small cities of influence, beauty and terror, creating brief communities of poetic power. *Textual Skyline* explores these notions through a net-based interactive, generative and multidimensional flash engine/interface using RSS news feeds to create a digital poetry city. (Nesheim 2013)

Nelson envisages a dystopian networked urban environment—if it was a face it would probably be demented grinning clown—composed as a mesh of social discourses which, while meaningful or meaningless in themselves, are always poetic in the generative capacity of their emergent phenomena and the dynamic relations that flow between them. For Nelson, this is an existential concern as he considers how we, as individuals, navigate social media not only in search of information or even other people but, perhaps primarily, in search of ourselves, recognizing (most likely unconsciously) that what we will find (if we are lucky) is our own absence as a moment of silence in that noise. For Nelson, *Remediating the Social* is less a psychogeographic topic than an opportunity to dissect a living patient’s brain, the patient being our collective selves, as mediated and represented in the network and urban space.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to note here that the development and curation of the *Remediating the Social* exhibition, as with the conference strand of the event, was undertaken through a process of peer review. This is not a novel approach to

creating an exhibition. Indeed, there are many prior examples of this curatorial method being employed, whether in academic contexts or with non-academic examples, such as the annual SIGGRAPH exhibition, the International Symposia on Electronic Art, the selection of works for events associated with the Electronic Literature Organization, or the E-Poetry series of international conferences and exhibitions. These events have employed peer review for selecting creative works, in some instances, for over two decades, and it is the case that some of the reviewers who selected works for *Remediating the Social* have had prior experience with the selection process of SIGGRAPH, ISEA, ELO, and E-Poetry.

Nevertheless, such selection methods raise certain issues in the final outcome—the exhibition—which need to be addressed and managed. The resulting selection procedures might be criticized for lacking curatorial coherence of vision, for example, and it certainly does present challenges for the exhibition coordinators to establish clear thematic links between the works. We can only hope that, in developing our rationale for the event, we were able to establish a clear call for works that offered artists a framework for developing their proposals and that we employed a criteria for selection that ensured the works functioned to succinctly articulate the key concerns of the event and the ELMCIP research project.

We should take this opportunity to recognize the contribution of the peer reviewers to the exhibition. Although the author chaired and coordinated the exhibition, the process of selecting works, and to some extent the development of its rationale, was a collective effort—perhaps offering us another reflexive example of the core theme of the event—and all those involved should be recognized. The international peer review committee consisted of Giselle Beiguelman (Sao Paulo), Simon Biggs (Edinburgh), Friedrich Block (Kassel), Laura Borràs Castanyer (Barcelona), Mark Daniels (Edinburgh), Yra van Dijk (Amsterdam), Jerome Fletcher (Falmouth), Raine Koskimaa (Jyväskylä), Talan Memmott (Bleckinge), Scott Rettberg (Bergen), and Janez Strehovec (Ljubljana). It was through their collective deliberations and process of review that the works were selected and the foundations of the exhibition established.

Once the selection was complete, the exhibition was coordinated by the exhibition committee, comprising Simon Biggs, Mark Daniels, Jerome Fletcher, and Scott Rettberg. Mark Daniels had particular responsibility for the presentation of the installations at Inspace (the University of Edinburgh) and Jerome

Fletcher for the performance program at Edinburgh College of Art's Sculpture Court. The overall event was coordinated by Elizabeth Hodson. I would like to thank all of my collaborators for making *Remediating the Social* possible and, therefore, for their contributions (explicit or implicit) to this text.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Amerika, Mark. 2005. Excerpts from "Portrait of the VJ." *Fibreculture Journal* 7. Accessed February 2. <[http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue7/issue7\\_portraits\\_amerika.pdf](http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue7/issue7_portraits_amerika.pdf)>.
- Biggs, Simon. 2012. *Remediating the Social*. Proceedings from ELMCIP Conference on Remediating the Social, Bergen.
- . Forthcoming 2013. "An Evolving Apparatus." *A Web of Networks: get linked in or locked out*. Vitoria, Brazil: Seminarios Internacionais Museu Vale.
- Carpenter, J. R. 2013. *The Broadside of a Yarn*. Accessed February 1. <<http://luckysoup.com/broadside/>>.
- Cayley, John and Daniel Howe. 2013. *Common Tongues*. Accessed February 2. <<http://thereadersproject.org/index.php?p=installation/rts2012/common-tongues.html>>.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 2007. "What is a Dispositif?" *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Helden, Johannes. 2013. Stene Projects. Accessed February 2. <<http://www.steneprojects.se/Johannes-Helden-SWE>>.
- Maturana, Humberto and Francesco Varela. 1980. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: the Realization of the Living*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co.
- Morrissey, Judd and Mark Jeffery. 2013. *The Final Problem*. Accessed February 2. <<http://www.thefinalproblem.org/freelunchmovement/>>.
- Nesheim, Elisabeth. 2013. ELMCIP Knowledge Base entry for *Textual Skyline*. Accessed February 2. <<http://elmcip.net/node/4678>>.