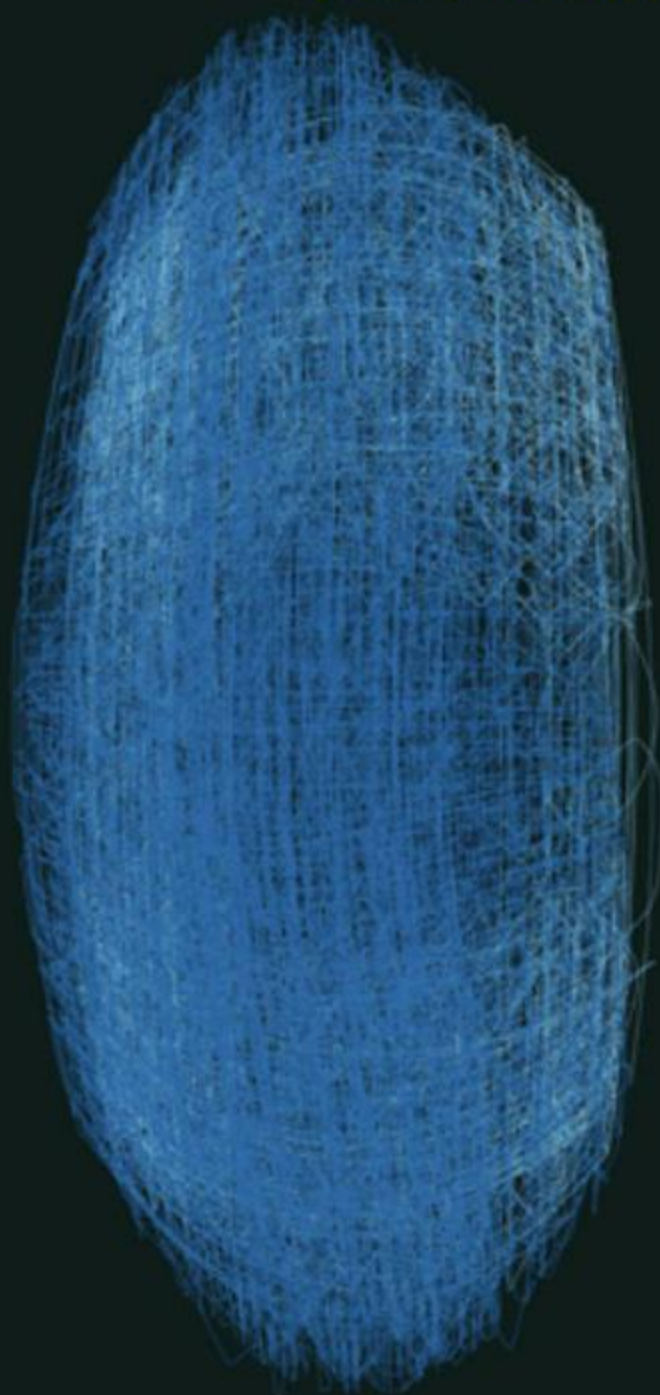


NEW DIRECTIONS IN DIGITAL POETRY

C.T. FUNKHOUSER



VOLUME 1

INTERNATIONAL TEXTS IN CRITICAL MEDIA AESTHETICS

FOUNDING EDITOR: FRANCISCO J. RICARDO

New Directions in Digital Poetry

BY

C.T. FUNKHOUSER



The Continuum International Publishing Group
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

www.continuumbooks.com

www.newdirectionsindigitalpoetry.net

© C.T. Funkhouser, 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publishers.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN: 978-1-4411-9567-8

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN

Contents

Introduction	vii
Francisco J. Ricardo	
1 Poetic mouldings on the Web	1
2 Encounters with a digital poem	23
3 Case Studies 1: continuity & diversity in online works	37
4 Case Studies 2: digital poetry early in the twenty-first century	107
5 Case Studies 3: poems of the Web, by the Web, for the Web	179
6 In stages, on stages: attentions in digital poetry	211
Epilogue	249
Acknowledgements	251
Notes	253
Bibliography	311
Index	319

beyond a handful of screens. Engineering an online dictionary and search engines together is a significant feat, and Tisselli's exercise succeeds precisely because the combination of word and image in the program's output operates on multiple levels. *Synonymovie* functions as an odd literary entertainment, giving life to new narrational possibilities in automated, technologically hybridized digital poetry.

Jody Zellen

Without a Trace (2008–9)⁵³

Concentrating on urban culture, webdesigner and artist Jody Zellen's works often incorporate materials repurposed and processed from mass-media news outlets.⁵⁴ Zellen initially developed a remarkable manual technique that involves tracing over the newspaper and transforming both images and headlines/text into elementary but revealing line drawings.⁵⁵ She juxtaposed these line drawings in automatic static arrangements and in Flash animations. Eventually she began to use computer software to automate the tracing process. 'By selecting specific Photoshop filters,' she writes, 'I can make a news image look like a black and white line drawing. The computer's drawing uses an algorithm, whereas my drawings are based on subjectivity.'⁵⁶ Zellen's handmade drawings are imprecise; likewise the computer's drawings are also raw and abstract. Most present a discernible image but reflect the context, subject and activity unclearly; traced lines essentially portray delicate outlines of figures and words. Using the Internet as a 'sculptural space', Zellen embeds figurative copies of mechanized drawings and newspaper articles into several her works.⁵⁷

Without a Trace, commissioned by turbulence.org, uses the *New York Times* as one of its sources.⁵⁸ Zellen randomly juxtaposes a live RSS text feed and an image taken from the daily paper, processed into a line drawing rendered by computer. She accompanies these elements with 'balloons' taken from 'Real Life Adventures' comic strip panels (stripped of text), a text excerpted from a comic, and a trace drawing of her own creation.⁵⁹ As seen below (Diag. 5.6),

Zellen aligns the balloon and trace drawings in a column on the left. Beside it, in a wider column, she inserts a larger machine-drawn image at the top, and sandwiches the newsfeed between it and a three line comic passage at the bottom. In 2009, the combination of elements changed once per day, resulting in what Zellen calls a 'calendar of juxtapositions – the days of which look similar but are not identical.'⁶⁰ While actively under construction on the WWW (2009), viewing *Without a Trace* involved no more than visiting the site and clicking a 'Daily Image enter' button.⁶¹ Output drawn automatically appeared as a static projection on the screen, requiring no further physical input. Beyond accessing the interface, *Without a Trace* was non-interactive and contained no sound component. Today, viewers have three choices when exploring the work: to see a 'random version', 'daily image' or 'archives'.⁶² Choosing 'daily image' when the piece was 'live' produced that day's static output, formed as described above and identical even after refreshing the screen. The 'random version' produces the same essential template, but when the browser refreshes, the appearance of every visual aspect changes except the headline.⁶³



Diag. 5.6. Jody Zellen. *Without a Trace*.

As with other net-poetry, Zellen's *Without a Trace* contains variable language components. As seen in Diag. 5.6, text appears via the headline newsfeed, appearing in a grey box in the middle on right, and in the comic situated below it. Often, but not always, words appear in the drawings produced by Zellen. Automated drawings (top right) sometimes feature incidental text, but the emptied comic strip balloons (top left) never contain text, though certainly invite viewers to consider its absence as part of the projected dialogue and imaginatively fill it.

In this example, created on August 19, 2009, the headline for the day, 'C.I.A. Sought Blackwater's Help in Plan to Kill Jihadists', refers to a current event involving the 'War on Terror' in the Middle East. Zellen's program always takes headlines from front page news stories, so the focus of this textual component typically concerns major global or national economic or political issues. Archived headlines for the week 15–21 August 2009 – the sequence including Diag. 5.6 – typically reflect Zellen's current events context: 'Retailers See Back-to-School Sales Slowing'; 'Competing Ads on Health Care Plan Swamp the Airwaves'; 'More Troops Are Sought for Iraq's Restive North'; 'Frailty Lingers in Housing and Producer Price Reports'; 'Turnout Seen as Uneven in Afganistan as Polls Close'; and 'Fed Chairman Says American Economy Is Poised to Grow'.⁶⁴ No matter what method of comprehension a viewer practises, *Without a Trace* addresses significant political and/or cultural issues due to this particular authorial design decision. Since accompanying texts tend towards the graphical, Zellen creates a circumstance in which the viewer's receptive tasks rely on interpreting visually connections brought forth by the contrasting arrangements. Incidentally, as in Tisselli's *Dadanewsfeed*, or looking further back, to the written poetry of Allen Ginsberg circa *The Fall of America*, the litany of headlines reads like a poem guided by significant news of the day.⁶⁵ If we read the lines above in a linear fashion, the first line sets the stage for a series of observations, mostly involving various types of unrest, which here happen to lead to a positive determination at the end of the week (i.e. 'Economy is Poised to Grow').⁶⁶

The inclusion of three short lines of text in hand-written font beneath the headline help make Zellen's work more poetic.⁶⁷ Text beneath the headline in Diag. 5.6, excerpted from a comic,

'Experience./Game./Little', always appears in three cryptic lines. If we compare this text to the headline text, it seems to suggest that the experience of a game or experiencing a game – any sort of game – is something small in comparison to the sources of turmoil found in the headlines or in Zellen's drawing. In this manner *Without a Trace*, as a poem, juxtaposes multiple, inherently separate, text areas. Viewers must work, against any apparent discrepancies, to make unifying connections, and then attempt to integrate other available information (textual or graphical) into a conceptual model or understanding. In the week sequence referenced above (August 2009), the following sequences of words appear: 'government/change/officials'; 'sadly./choose/left'; 'depends./made/face'; 'speak/this/talking'; 'experience./game./ little'; 'this/kill/finish'; and 'will/sentences./sea'.⁶⁸ These snippets from comics, in spite of quirky punctuation, can be seen – especially cumulatively – as poems that contain messages readers may apply to the surrounding combination of images and perhaps connect thematically to headlines.

Zellen's drawing in Diag. 5.6 includes six lines of text (more than usual) clearly appropriated from a human needs campaign; illustrating cause and effect relations, it encourages people with resources to help those who do not. The illustration also contains a solitary figure walking away (on the right) and raised hands. Reconciling the human needs text with the 'game' aspect presents little difficulty. A clear concern for *polis* arises in this circumstance: introducing the domain of human suffering puts any sort of game, or gaming, into its proper context: in the category of folly or non-essential activity. Beyond these characteristics, this example shows three different-shaped comic balloons and an automated drawing from the *New York Times*, which appears to be a desolate alley that coincidentally captures clearly a sign for an ATM Machine.⁶⁹ Text surrounding the headlines, when and where it exists, does not always immediately connect to cultural or political concerns, so it becomes the viewer's challenge and task to fuse textual elements. Chance appearance of the ATM sign only serves to solidify the role that capital plays across all walks of life, thereby providing a certain slant for a unified reading of the materials. Zellen's empty comic balloons, as always, represent visually space that could be filled in with comments about the combination of these variables, a dialogue about the issues at hand to be

completed by the viewer, or perhaps indicate that responses to the conditions conveyed by the textual events cannot be found.

As indicated, *Without a Trace* features text beyond headlines. These other 'voices' and ghost voices and images – part of every sampling – become a type of virtual oracle or medium that uses purposely disconnected attributes as a response to fragmentary conditions experienced by denizens of contemporary culture. If only fractionally, Zellen's project traces random aspects of global culture – as filtered through news and other media – that can be re-traced in the archive configured by the site. By exploring the archive, the reader can track not only a course of (then) current events but also gauge successes and failures of cultural initiatives and predicaments, such as the war on terror or the economy, as well as consider and interpret what Zellen's 'oracle' had to say on any given day.

Of her work *All the News That's Fit to Print* – which exclusively uses image and headline feeds from the *New York Times* – Zellen writes, 'The new juxtapositions become wrong, sad, funny, inexplicable, and often to the point.'⁷⁰ Its unique graphical qualities aside, the fact that resources inscribed in *Without a Trace* include and transcend the newspaper while not necessarily broadening its focus allows for expressive variation and capacity within the 'wrong, sad, funny'. Information taken (and reduced) from the comic arts particularly promote the artistic qualities of her work, as more influences and considerations for participation spice up the equation. Minimalist, slow and abstractly pictographic, *Without a Trace* maintains focus by connecting to a news source without relying on that source entirely to incite a viewer's reaction or convey meaning. Although viewers could generate multiple different samples by using the 'random version' section of the piece, only one sample of output was produced per day. Viewers could have difficulty bridging incongruent materials projected by *Without a Trace*, but its static presentation eliminates the type of chaotic shifts that occur in many other net-poetry works, and this characteristic provides ample time for contemplation.

The notion of 'trace' or 'tracing' plays an important role in Zellen's work: she traces over images to make new images and traces across the (transitory) news headlines to acquire transmitted content. In her project, Zellen mixes together fleeting information – temporarily highlighted by the news media – and reorganizes it into

a meditative poem that gradually progresses over a year. *Without a Trace* changes daily, yet contains no kinetic properties; its transformations occur behind the scenes in the computer's processors and in the solitary acts of the poet. In her comments on the piece, Zellen claims its construction, 'takes as its point of departure the idea of a daily ritual.'⁷¹ Thus, despite the computer's intervention on several levels, a human aspect and scheme remains at the core of the work. As news flows across the network during a given day, headlines and news images always shift. By uniting initially stand-alone text and creating new juxtapositions while at the same time introducing new variables, Zellen's combinations broaden and deliver a type of interconnected awareness that singular representations cannot.

Now let us step back and take another look at the case studies in this chapter as a whole. As we have seen, Lehto, Tisselli and Andrews impressively base their digital poems on perpetually shifting core foundations, thereby producing results unobtainable by print authors. Queneau's famous slotted poem is expansive, but its materials are fixed. Using the network's processes to attain varying output of expression extends collage technique at its roots. Kinetic manifestations of pastiche language and image, *Google Poem Generator*, *dbCinema*, *Synonymovie* and *Without a Trace* are historically unmatched due to their utterly contemporary methods of acquisition and projection; treatments enabled by computer and network bring new possibilities to literary endeavours. Lehto's work, using the world's largest information index, widely stretches the boundaries of information constraint within a poem; never before has such a broadly informed resource that draws from all aspects of human culture been so readily available for an author to use. The same holds true for Tisselli's work and *dbCinema*. No doubt many poets have made cut-up poems with the nation's 'paper of record', but how many of these poems have been seamlessly fused with a range of other materials? Only digital technology makes it possible to present a daily serial poem that features a combination of hand-made and automatically generated components. By incorporating network mechanisms, we discover unforeseen connections between words, images and all aspects of culture – how people, places and ideas can be presented and associated through language and technology. As