



EDITED BY JANIS JEFFERIES AND SARAH KEMBER

Whose Book is it Anyway?

A View from Elsewhere on Publishing,
Copyright and Creativity



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10. Writing on the Cusp of Becoming Something Else

J. R. Carpenter

As an academic writer, researcher, and educator I am necessarily invested in the rules of citation. As an author of three literary books published by small presses, with a fourth on the way, I am acutely aware of how little money there is to be made by all but a very few writers through the sale of books. As an artist and author of artist's books, zines, and web-based works of digital literature, I have made extensive use of 'found' materials. Over the past twenty years I have mixed my own writing, drawing, programming, and photography with images, texts, diagrams, and maps cut and copied from old magazines and textbooks, and source code 'borrowed' from dusty corners of the web. This chapter aims to reconcile these seemingly oppositional tendencies in two ways. First, by framing publication not as an end point but rather part of an on-going compositional process. And second, by framing the material appropriation of image and text both as integral to this compositional process and as a contribution to a larger cultural project. In making this argument this chapter draws upon performance-writing methodology. Performance writing takes a conceptually broad, historically long, and overtly interdisciplinary approach to considering the performance of text in relation to a wide range of social, cultural, material, mediatic, and disciplinary contexts. This contextual or pragmatic approach to writing is particularly well suited to expanding and adapting in order to accommodate new questions posed by new critical contexts. Digital writing, for example, presents complex new contexts for reading,

writing, and publishing in which divisions between original and copy, user and product, reader and consumer, and author and publisher are becoming increasingly unclear.

Iteration

Writing is an iterative process. Written texts may start far from the page, as thoughts, sounds, smells, emotions, or spoken words. Written texts may go through many drafts, employing a plethora of writing media along the way. These media may include pencils, pens, paper, phones, computers, printers, digital networks, postal networks, USB memory sticks and other offline storage devices. Written texts may refer directly or indirectly to other texts, as well as to cultural outputs in other media, including films, visual art works, music, dance, architecture, or landscapes. Written texts may be translated into other languages and adapted for other media such as radio, stage, or film. I linger on the fluidity of the compositional process here, as it seems increasingly disassociated from the popular conception of the book as a finished product.

In order for a novel, memoir, or other monograph to become a print book a writer must aim for completion, resolution, a fixed, final, stable text. For centuries this condition, imposed by the materiality of print media, has aided and abetted the aims and objectives of academic literary scholarship and the publishing industry. Both of these fields remain heavily invested in the entwined notions of the originality of authorship and the fixity of text. These notions are reinforced by intellectual property law and the pervasiveness of Saussurian linguistic models, which conceive of language as a stable system, internal to itself, unconcerned by societal influences. Performance-writing methodology, with its insistence on contextual enquiry, continuously calls attention to the shifting societal, material, and temporal conditions in which texts are written and read. In *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle observes that, far from being stable, language is in fact a constructed system, 'constantly subject to historical change' and calls instead for a conception of 'language not as a stable, arrested system, but as a *system of variations*'.¹ Taking up this call, this chapter argues for

1 Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 11, emphasis in the original.

an updated conception of publishing better suited to iterative variable forms of writing that resist the fixity of the page.

Digital writing operates within and across a cacophony of code languages, operating systems, communication protocols, devices, and levels of encryption. These radically multimodal and atemporal reading and writing conditions make the constructed and variable nature of written language more readily apparent than in past print regimes. In 'The Time of Digital Poetry: From Object to Event' N. Katherine Hayles argues that, in digital media, the text 'ceases to exist as a self-contained object and instead becomes a process, an event brought into existence when the program runs'.² In 'What is Digital Materiality,' Johanna Drucker puts this more succinctly: 'Writing is an event, not an entity'.³ In order for a digital text to perform across multiple platforms, browsers, and devices a digital writer must also be a performance writer, incorporating variability, instability, transformation, and change into the process of composition. Like all writing for live performance, digital writing is never fixed, final, or stable but rather, constantly subject to change. In this transformative spirit, the title of this chapter appropriates and adapts a line from John Hall's formative essay 'Thirteen Ways of Talking About Performance Writing': 'The performance writer writes the space between the writing and the performing, where the writing is always about to leave to become something else'.⁴ Hall's essay, it must be noted, began as a talk presented at a live event and moved through a number of print iterations before becoming the text cited here.

Iterative or recursive writing repeatedly applies processes to successive results. Each new iteration allows for a new interrogation of the process of writing as it is unfolding, invites new ways of reading, and engenders new ways of writing. Texts resulting from an iterative compositional process bear the traces of their own making. For example, throughout my practice-led doctoral research⁵ I performed the writing and rewriting,

2 N. Katherine Hayles, 'The Time of Digital Poetry: From Object to Event' in Adelaide Morris and Thomas Swiss (eds.), *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 181–210 (pp. 181–82).

3 Johanna Drucker, *What Is? Nine Epistemological Essays* (Berkley, CA: Cuneiform Press, 2013), p. 127.

4 John Hall, *On Performance Writing, with Pedagogical Sketches: Essays on Performance Writing, Poetics and Poetry*, vol. 1 (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2013), p. 24.

5 J. R. Carpenter, 'Writing Coastlines: Locating Narrative Resonance in Transatlantic Communications Networks', PhD thesis, University of the Arts London and Falmouth University, 2015, <http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/7825/>

reading and rereading, sounding and resounding of texts through a continuum of forms and contexts. Many portions of the resulting thesis underwent multiple iterations. Passages were read, underlined, discussed, overheard, remembered, spoken, written by hand, typed, blogged, copied, pasted, tagged, encoded, animated, uploaded, downloaded, run, parsed, projected, published, presented in artist's talks, rewritten, presented in academic papers, read silently, read aloud, represented in a performance script, read aloud in multiple voices, listened to live, watched on screen, interacted with, edited, re-purposed, re-mixed, and so on. Methods for performing these individual tasks came from diverse fields of practice. For example, writing a computer program is a standard method in the field of digital literature. A contextual approach to writing and about writing computer programs goes further, situating the act of writing within a collaborative dialogic compositional process. The aim of writing a computer program may be articulated as the creation of a text that will only ever be read by humans in translation, through a web browser. A fixed source code may produce a highly unstable, variable text on screen. These concurrent texts may then be re-contextualised into non-digital contexts. A live performance iteration, for example, may result in the generation of a new text, such as a performance script. This contextual approach to reading and writing about digital text draws attention to the close association between the code languages and the natural languages they perform on screen. A pragmatic performance-writing-inflected methodology offers a fluid conceptual framework through which to observe and articulate the transformations a text undergoes and elicits as it moves through forms, methods, and modes of practice.

In 'What do we Mean by Performance Writing?' a keynote address delivered at the opening of the first Symposium of Performance Writing, which took place at Dartington College of Arts, 12 April 1996, Caroline Bergvall proposed that:

the performance of writing would be this observation which seeks to locate expressedly [sic] the context and means for writing, both internal and external to language, whether these be activated for and through a stage, for and through a site, a time-frame, a performer's body, the body of a voice or the body of a page.⁶

6 Caroline Bergvall, 'What Do We Mean by Performance Writing?', keynote address delivered at the opening of the first Symposium of Performance Writing, Dartington

The democratic, inclusive and above all extensible nature of performance writing methodology allows, many years later, for the revising of Bergvall's statement for a digital literary landscape that barely existed at the time of her writing. In 'Performing Digital Texts in European Contexts,' a commentary column published in the online journal *Jacket2* in 2011, I re-framed Bergvall's statement as follows:

The performance of digital texts both internal and external to code languages may be activated for and through a CPU, a network, a browser, a hand-held device, a <body> tag, a performer's body, the body of a voice or the body of a page.⁷

To further underline the iterative nature of the performance writing methodology employed in this chapter, I will note here that the above-cited adaptation of Bergvall's text was later integrated into 'Call and Response: Toward a Digital Dramaturgy,' a presentation paper co-written and co-presented by Barbara Bridger and myself at *Performance Writing Weekend 2012*, Arnolfini, Bristol UK, May 2012. That paper was then expanded by Bridger and myself into an article of the same name published in *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*.⁸ The text(s) in/and question(s) perform(s) differently in each of these contexts. Many other lines of text and of reasoning presented in this essay have been revised, re-framed, and adapted from elsewhere in my own writing in a similar though often less overtly acknowledged fashion.

Détournement

In *Poésies*, two small brochures self-published in Paris the spring of 1870, Isidore-Lucien Ducasse, the self-styled Le Comte de Lautréamont, famously wrote: 'Plagiarism is necessary. It is implied in the idea of progress. It clasps the author's sentence tight, uses her expressions, eliminates a false idea, replaces it with the right idea.' This quotation

College of Arts, 12 April 1996, <http://www.carolinebergvall.com/content/text/BERGVALL-KEYNOTE.pdf>

7 J. R. Carpenter, 'Performing Digital Texts in European Contexts', *Jacket2*, 2011, <https://jacket2.org/commentary/performing-digital-texts-european-contexts>

8 Barbara Bridger and J. R. Carpenter, 'Call and Response: Toward a Digital Dramaturgy', *Journal of Writing and Creative Practice*, 6.3 (2013), 373–86, https://doi.org/10.1386/jwcp.6.3.373_1

has been so widely reproduced in books and articles on- and off-line that I offer it here unabashedly devoid of proper page citation. In *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International*, McKenzie Wark observes that in advocating for the elimination of false ideas in writing Lautréamont ‘corrects, not back to a lost purity or some ideal form, but forward — to a new possibility’.⁹ In this spirit, in quoting Lautréamont above I clasped the author’s sentence tight and used his expressions, but eliminated the false idea of an assumed universal male author, replacing his ‘his’ with ‘her’.

In the autumn of 1870 Lautréamont died of a fever at the age of twenty-four. His writing was rediscovered by the Belgian Symbolists in the 1890s and again independently in 1917 by the French Surrealists, who hailed him as a patron saint. In the early 1950s news broke that some of the most poetic passages of Lautréamont’s most well-known work, *The Songs of Maldoror* (1869), had been plagiarised from old text books. I would love to claim that this is where I got the idea from, but I began plagiarising old text books long before I’d ever heard of Lautréamont. The Letterist International credited Lautréamont with the discovery of a new method of writing which they termed ‘détournement’. To détourner is to detour, to lead astray, to appropriate — not a literary form, as in a style, a poetics, or a genre, but rather a material form, as in a sentence, a book, a film, a canvas. In this material approach to appropriation the Letterists lagged decades behind the Dadaist, Constructivist, and Surrealist collage and photomontage artists of the 1920s.

I went to art school, not law school. My aim is not to tear down the institution of citation but rather to offer some insight, to digital publishers and literary scholars in particular, into some of the compositional strategies currently employed in creating works of digital literature. I contend that these are not new strategies, but rather, that they have underpinned the transmutation of culture for thousands of years. Imagine, for example, if the Hesiod estate had sued Ovid for appropriation. Shakespeare would not have had the *Metamorphose* to borrow from so heavily.

I came to writing and publishing through the material practices of sewing, sawing, drawing, crochet, photography, photocopy, cutting

9 McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso Books, 2011), p. 34.

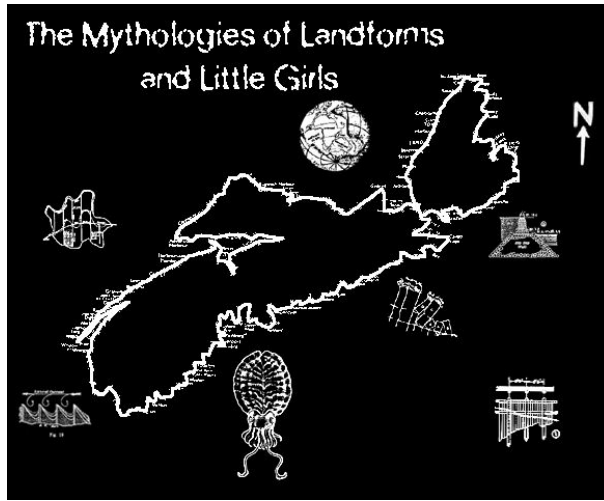


Fig. 10.1 Screenshot of J. R. Carpenter, *Mythologies of Landforms and Little Girls* (1996), <http://luckysoap.com/mythologies>

with scissors, and pasting with glue. In 1994 I began working on a non-linear, intertextual, multi-media short story that combined my own writing, in the form of a first-person fictional narrative, with diagrams and excerpts of technical writing from a civil engineering handbook published in the 1920s. The resulting story, *Mythologies of Landforms and Little Girls*, appeared in *Postscript, A Journal of Graduate Criticism and Theory* published by Memorial University in Newfoundland, Canada.¹⁰ Although I was happy to have work published in an academic journal at the tender age of twenty-three, I remained dissatisfied with both the fixed linear order of what I thought of as a non-linear narrative and with the limited distribution of the print journal. Despite the general assumption that publication is an end point, for me the work just didn't seem finished. In 1996 I made a HTML version of *Mythologies of Landforms and Little Girls*.¹¹ The main page presented a map of Nova Scotia surrounded by small clickable icons. Readers had to choose how they entered and moved through the story. The deadpan engineering

10 J. R. Carpenter, 'Mythologies of Landforms and Little Girls,' *Postscript, A Journal of Graduate Criticism and Theory*, 2.1 (1995), 80–86, <http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/compoundobject/collection/postscript/id/403/rec/3>

11 J. R. Carpenter, 'Mythologies of Landforms and Little Girls', 1996, <http://luckysoap.com/mythologies/>

descriptions of dikes, groins and mattress work added a perverse sexual overtone to the otherwise chaste first-person narrative. Between the open-ended navigational structure, the diagrammatic images, and the enigmatic subtexts, a meta-narrative emerged. The tensions inherent in the story — between the absurd and the inarticulate, desire and loss, place and displacement — could finally co-exist.

My early adoption of the web as a medium was due in part to the ease with which one could combine image and text in a non-linear and intertextual context. I was also attracted to the speed and independence with which one could share web-based work with a wide audience. To this day, most of my web-based work is funded by and distributed through media art exhibitions and festivals rather than through literary publications. The art world, with its commissioning model, has proven more adept at supporting new and experimental work than the literary world, with its pay-per-unit-sold model. Jay David Bolter has suggested that the field of digital literary scholarship should look to art theory for more advanced thinking on medium and multimodality.¹² Thus far, art theory has shown little sign of looking toward digital literary theory for more advanced thinking on intertextuality, translation, and the performance of code languages in digital art work. Many useful points of entry into thinking and writing about iteration, appropriation, materiality, scale, and spatiality in works of digital literature may be found in the range of hybrid visual art practices loosely termed ‘collage’. At *Wanderlust*, an exhibition of Joseph Cornell’s work at the Royal Academy in London in 2015, I was delighted to discover that in an untitled collage from 1934 Cornell had appropriated a black and white image from a magazine of a girl balancing a stack of suitcases on her head. I must have had the same magazine. This same image is one of several that have graced the front page of my website for many years.

In ‘Reorienting Narrative: E-lit as Psychogeography,’ digital literary author and critic Illya Szilak turns to collage to address questions of place and spatiality in my web-based work, observing: ‘Carpenter fabricates hybrid places that are both “virtual” and attached to real

12 Jay David Bolter, keynote presented at ‘From the Page to the Screen to Augmented Reality: New Modes of Language-Driven Technology-Mediated Research,’ roundtable event, Kingston University, London, 12 July 2010.



Fig. 10.2 Screenshot of J. R. Carpenter (1998–present), <http://luckysoap.com>

world locales'.¹³ Szilak likens these 'hybrid places' to a Max Ernst collage called 'The Master's Bedroom — It's Worth Spending A Night There' (1920):

In an elongated rectilinear view, we peer into a room populated with furniture and animals. Ernst copied these objects from a page in a teaching-aids catalog, preserving the spacing, but including only some of the objects. The result is disorienting. We cannot resolve the disparities in size within the Cartesian confines of the room. Despite the allusion to an intimate, familiar domestic space, we find ourselves in a very strange place.¹⁴

Reading and writing digital texts across multiple devices we find ourselves in very strange places: part visual, part textual, part material, part procedural, part embodied, part conceptual... Performance writing incorporates methods from visual, media, performance, and literary arts toward a conceptual framework within which we may consider these seemingly impossibly disparate elements all at once.

¹³ I. Szilak, 'Reorienting Narrative: E-lit as Psychogeography', *Huffington Post*, 11 June 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/illya-szilak/mapping-the-virtual-elit_b_3409727.html

¹⁴ Ibid.

Transparency

For centuries the printed book operated as a closed system, invested in concealing the structural processes of writing from the reader. In the 1920s the Russian artist El Lissitzky wrote that after the revolution the book itself was revolutionised, 'torn in separate pages, enlarged a hundred-fold, colored for greater intensity, and brought into the street as a poster [...] meant for people who would stand up quite close and read it over and make sense of it'.¹⁵ Throughout the 1970s Derrida insisted that, 'only in the book [...] could we indefinitely designate the writing beyond the book'.¹⁶ By the time of his last book, *Paper Machine*, Derrida was writing of the World Wide Web as the ubiquitous book finally reconstituted, as 'electronic writing, traveling at top speed from one spot on the globe to another, and linking together, beyond frontiers'.¹⁷ Though the shadow of the book still looms large over the fields of both digital literary scholarship and digital publishing, the web remains the most profoundly influential and accessible writing, publishing, and computing platform precisely because of its transparency. For most of the short history of the web, its pages have been read on desktop or laptop computers. Readers have had the option of right-clicking on any page and selecting View Page Source. From there readers can copy, paste, re-read, re-write, and re-publish the source code in their own web pages. In this manner, readers may become writers and writers may become publishers.

Like most authors, I learned to write by learning to read. I made my first web-based writing project during a visual arts thematic residency at The Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada in 1995. The theme of the residency was 'Telling Stories, Telling Tales'. In my application for the residency I wrote a fictional artist's statement in which I claimed to a writer, and they believed me. During the residency I tried to make a print book that told a circular story, but when people got to the end of the book they invariably stopped reading, because that's how books

15 I. Murray, 'Affirming the New: Art and Architecture in Soviet Avant-Garde Publications, 1918–1932', in *Architectural Drawings of the Russian Avant-Garde Publications 1917–1935* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1991), pp. 7–8.

16 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 294.

17 Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 15.

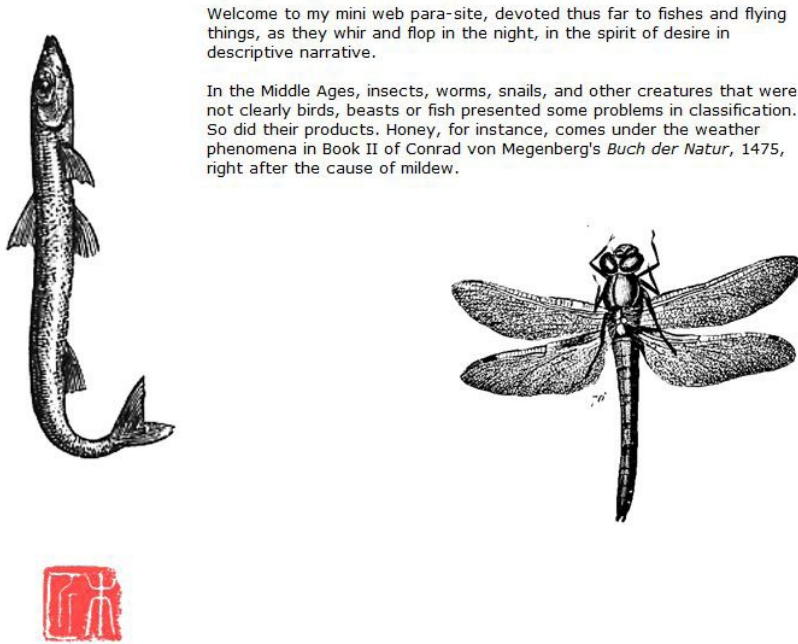


Fig. 10.3 Screenshot of J. R. Carpenter, *Fishes & Flying Things* (1995), <http://luckysoap.com/butterflies/parasite.html>

work. The artist in the studio next to mine informed me that if I wrote this story in HTML the last page could link to the first page and the reader could keep reading around and around. The web was simpler back then. This task was easily accomplished. The computer technician allowed me to upload the resulting work, *Fishes and Flying Things*,¹⁸ directly from the web-server's Unix command line to The Banff Centre's public website. The paper book iteration of *Fishes and Flying Things* was printed from a QuarkExpress file stored on a 44 MB SyQuest cartridge, which I still own but the contents of which I can no longer access. The images in the print and web iterations were digital scans of photocopies of borrowed books no longer in my possession. The text was based on the title of an installation art exhibition I had on in Montreal at the time, of which, other than an event poster, no physical or documentary evidence remains. When I returned to Montreal after the residency my artist friends informed me that web-based work was elitist, because so

18 J. R. Carpenter, 'Fishes & Flying Things', 1995, <http://luckysoap.com/butterflies/parasite.html>

few people could access it, and my writer friends assured me that the Internet would never catch on. Over twenty-two years later, the web-based iteration of *Fishes and Flying Things* is still online and it still works.

The Internet has changed a lot since 1995. The more proprietary, predatory, and puerile a place the web becomes the more committed I am to using it in poetic, transformative, and transparent ways. In *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*, Lori Emerson charts a critical shift in the meaning of 'transparency' away from a command line level of access to the machine's inner workings toward a 'user-friendly' graphic user interface (GUI) in which users have little or no comprehension of either the hardware or the software they consume. 'The user-friendly now takes the shape of keeping users steadfastly unaware and uninformed about how their computers, their reading/writing interfaces, work, let alone how they shape and determine their access to knowledge'.¹⁹ The publishing industry has been keen to corner the market on new user-friendly digital reading devices in which the book in the guise of the ebook continues to operate as a closed system. It has been painfully slow to acknowledge, let alone adapt to new modes of reading and writing engendered by the data structure of the computer or the wider, wilder non-linear, intertextual, multi-media world of the open web.

Mainstream media has been similarly reluctant to recognise decades of technological experimentation and formal innovation undertaken by digital authors, preferring instead to herald the late-breaking efforts of digital publishers as 'world's first' and 'brand new'. Writers have been responding to the new formal possibilities presented by digital devices since the rise of the mainframe computer. Noah Wardrip-Fruin attributes the 'first experiment with digital literature and digital art of any kind'²⁰ to Christopher Strachey, who programmed the Manchester University Computer to randomly generate love letters in 1952. It has been over thirty years since Judy Malloy first began writing and publishing her ground-breaking hypertext novella *Uncle Roger*.²¹ In an

19 Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 49.

20 N. Wardrip-Fruin, 'Digital Media Archaeology: Interpreting Computational Processes', in Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (eds.), *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley, CA and London: University California Press, 2011), pp. 302–22 (p. 302).

21 Judy Malloy, 'Uncle Roger,' *Electronic Literature Collection*, vol. 3, <http://collection.eliterature.org/3/work.html?work=uncle-roger>

interview published on *The Literary Platform* in 2014, Malloy stated: 'My vision was to create a computer-mediated novella in which the reader individually recreates a fictional environment by continually searching and retrieving narrative information'.²² The formal structure of the work is intertwined with the narrative of Silicon Valley culture and semiconductor industry lore. Malloy has since adapted and altered the work a number of times to suit emerging media environments ranging from early newsgroups to BASIC, UNIX, and the World Wide Web. A recent iteration of *Uncle Roger* published in the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3* is accompanied by documentation of Malloy's extended compositional process.²³ Malloy has incorporated transformation and change into her process of composition, resulting in writing that is not fixed, final, or stable but rather, constantly subject to change.

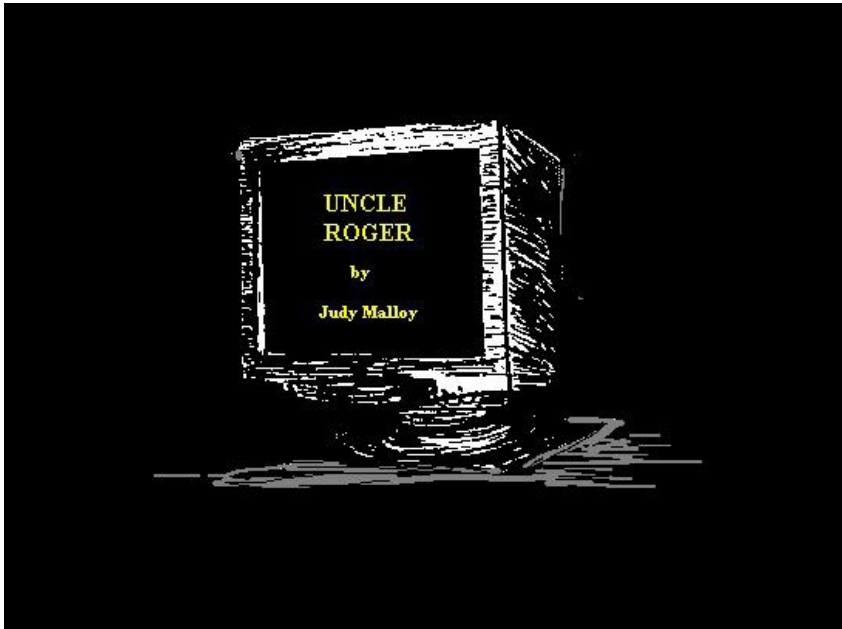


Fig. 10.4 Screenshot of Judy Malloy, *Uncle Roger* (1986), <http://collection.eliterature.org/3/works/uncle-roger/>

22 Alice McKeever, 'Digital Literature Pioneers: Judy Malloy on "Narrabases"', *The Literary Platform*, 24 April 2014, <http://theliteraryplatform.com/2014/04/digital-literature-pioneers-judy-malloy-on-narrabases-80s-silicon-valley-and-e-literature-today/>

23 Malloy, 'Uncle Roger'.

It is hardly surprising that digital publishing has embraced the iPhone and the iPad as reading platforms. Emerson states: 'The iPad works because users can't know how it works'.²⁴ It is a read-only device. Reading the web on an iPhone, iPad, or similar device, readers do not have the option of viewing the page source. The iPad provides consumers with access to materials created by others, but cannot easily be used as a tool in the crafting of new materials. A writer can produce a novel without knowing how a printing press works. In order for a writer to produce a non-linear, multimodal, inter-textual, interactive, or variable digital text, she must have some idea of the codes and protocols, the possibilities and constraints that call such a text into being. Digital publishing platforms that deny readers access to the full text of a work of digital literature in the name of Digital Rights Management risk closing down a part of the learning process that has been vital to literacy since the invention of writing.

Making Public

In November 2012 *The Independent on Sunday* online published an article called 'The Blogger's Guide To: New Media Writing',²⁵ by an anonymous author who shall be referred to hereafter as The Blogger. Ostensibly a write-up of works shortlisted for the New Media Writing Prize 2012, the article took a sarcastic, condescending, and reactionary tone to discussing new media writing, asserting: 'It's still OK to love real books, though.' The link to this article was widely tweeted by the international digital literature community. A number of digital writers took exception to the post's characterisation of new media writing as being: 'a new generation of publisher-produced content.' As Andy Campbell of Dreaming Methods was quick to quip on Twitter:

@dreamingmethods 25 November 2012 New Media Writing = 'a new generation of publisher-produced content'. Sorry? Did I miss something in the shortlist?, <https://twitter.com/dreamingmethods/status/272672634678956032>

24 Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces*, p. 15.

25 The Blogger, 'The Blogger's Guide To: New Media Writing', *Independent on Sunday*, 25 November 2012, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/the-bloggers-guide-to-new-media-writing-8348235.html>

Indeed, none of the work on the shortlist came into the world through a publisher, at least not in the sense that we now understand that term. To publish is to make public, to issue, announce or proclaim. My own New Media Writing Prize 2012 shortlisted work, 'CityFish',²⁶ has been exhibited, published, performed, and in other ways publicly presented in journals, festivals, conferences, galleries, and museums in Canada, the US, the UK, Germany, Italy, and Australia, but its content was entirely independently produced. I offer the following discussion of the iterative and appropriative compositional process through which I created 'CityFish' as an example of writing on the cusp of becoming something else.



Fig. 10.5 Screenshot of J. R. Carpenter, *CityFish* (2010), <http://luckysoup.com/cityfish>

Over a fifteen-year period, 'CityFish' has been written and rewritten, edited, photographed, Photoshopped, filmed, edited, programmed, tested, exhibited, performed, published online by myself and by others, written about in print and online by myself and others, taught, studied, and, most recently, appropriated by students. The title *détourne*s that of

26 J. R. Carpenter, 'CityFish', 2010, <http://luckysoup.com/cityfish>

Aesop's *Town Mouse Country Mouse* fable (sixth century BCE). 'CityFish' is a hybrid word, title of a hybrid work, tale of a hybrid creature. Part classical parable, part children's picture book, part literary fiction, part collage, part web art, 'CityFish' began in 1995 as a very short story told from the first-person point of view of a fish most unhappy about being caught, killed, and, piled unceremoniously in a heap on a sidewalk fishmonger's stall on a hot summer day, on a narrow, crowded street in Chinatown, New York. In 1998 I created a web-based iteration that incorporated a series of photographs shot on 35mm film in Chinatown, Toronto, circa 1996 and a line drawing of a fish with a tall building for a tail, drawn at around the same time. This web version was published in *IßWAS*, an exhibition at the Bavarian American Hotel in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1998. Twelve serially linked HTML pages each contained a small portion of text, an image, and a single navigational icon — a crudely drawn orange arrow. The arrow always pointed forward. No opportunities were offered for non-linear readings. As in the earlier example of *Mythologies of Landforms and Little Girls*, I remained dissatisfied with the linearity of the work. Even after it was published, I never quite felt it was finished.

'CityFish' continued to morph and expand over the years, as I sought its full extent, its proper shape. When the 'shape' of a work of literature is no longer defined in terms of the limits of the page or the size, length, or literary genre of a print book destined for a shop shelf, the compositional process becomes radically open-ended. The line drawing was made into a rubber stamp, a paper bookmark, and a transparent gif. The 35mm photographs were scanned and hundreds more digital photographs were taken in Chinatowns and fish markets in New York, San Francisco, Toronto, Montreal, and Barcelona. An eclectic archive of 'found images', maps, objects, video, source code, and quotations gradually accrued. A series of short videos were shot on location at Coney Island in 2005. They were edited during the 'Babel Babble Rabble: On Language and Art' visual arts thematic residency at The Banff Centre in Canada in 2006. The very short story expanded into a regular-sized short story during a writing residency at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York, in 2007. The web implementation was undertaken with financial support from the Canada Council for the Arts. Funding the production of the work through fellowships,

subsidised artist-in-residency programs, and public arts funding, and finding diverse modes of publicly disseminating the work as is was in a state of becoming allowed the work to evolve slowly over time. This exploratory process is especially vital in the composition of digital works. The constraints of the page are dissolving. The possibilities for non-linearity, multimodality, and interactivity are expanding rapidly. The digital author is tasked with finding the form of a story that is always on the cusp of becoming something else.

Returning to the Blogger's characterisation of digital writing as 'publisher-produced content' we must ask what differentiates writing from content in the digital age? This question is more elegantly posed by Alan Liu in the first paragraph of the introduction to his monumental book, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*: 'What is the future in general of the humanities and arts when the former seems destined only for what information industries call "content" and the latter for "multimedia entertainment"?'²⁷ Within this paradigm, it would seem that writing becomes content when seen at a remove from a contextual awareness of the compositional process. Further, it would seem that the literary arts are already perceived by digital publishers as multimedia entertainment aimed not at making public the work of writers but rather at packaging the work of publishers for a consumer audience. Perhaps the distinction then, is that writing is read as process and content is consumed as product.

Now we may begin to approach the source of tension belied by The Blogger's assertion, 'It's still OK to love real books, though.' Traditional publishers must believe and litigiously assert that they can and do own the exclusive right to sell a contained unit of content in order to stay in business. In this, the ebook and the app function in exactly the same way as the print book. As writers make less and less money from the sale of books, ebooks, and apps, these long-held beliefs hold less and less sway. I am not suggesting that copyright is not necessary; simply that it may become less of a concern to writers who aren't making any money anyway. Writers working in any media who openly defy or problematize the 'sale by unit' publishing paradigm — by the acts of self-publishing, offering their work for free, offering multiple iterations,

27 Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 1.

or inviting appropriation and remixing — may be perceived to be participating in the destruction of the cultural artefacts left by past generations. Yet the oft overlooked irony is, of course, that the bulk of those artefacts themselves contain the seeds of this destruction. Books are made of other books. Culture feeds on itself; culture is cannibalistic.

Liu suggests that cultural criticism and the creative arts have come to a conjuncture:

Where once the job of literature and the arts was creativity, now, in an age of total innovation, I think it must be history [...] a special, dark kind of history [...] the history not of things created [...] but of things destroyed in the name of creation [...]. Whether it is expressed as appropriation, sampling, defacement, or hacking, there will be nothing more cool [...] than committing acts of destruction against what is most valued [...] the content, form, or control of information.²⁸

We have of course come to this conjuncture many times before. Medieval Romans built blocks of flats in the ruins of once-great amphitheatres. Ovid and Virgil copied Hesiod. Early-modern English poets pillaged the epigrams of Roman satirists to flatter their patrons. Shakespeare was a known plagiarist, incorporating contemporary and classical sources alike. The Letterists and Situationists praised Lautréamont's praise of plagiarism as necessary for progress in order to advocate for creative destruction through *détournement*. Building on their work in *The Beach Beneath the Street*, half-way through a chapter on plagiarism McKenzie Wark states: 'Needless to say, the best lines in this chapter are plagiarized', brilliantly laying bare the process of his own writing as it is unfolding.²⁹

As an author and scholar of digital writing I re-read, re-search, and re-write print books in digital literary spaces. I publish my own works multiple times in multiple formats as part of a compositional process engaged in finding new forms for longstanding literary preoccupations. Not content, as it were, to produce content in a format compatible with ensuring a publisher stays in business, I have had to develop other ways to support the production of this new writing. I do not consider these approaches to be acts of destruction but rather of creation. I must be very cool.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁹ Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, p. 41.

Contributing to a Larger Cultural Project

Wark argues: 'For past works to become resources for the present requires [...] their appropriation as a collective inheritance, not as private property'.³⁰ Appropriation of past works was integral to the composition of 'CityFish'. Through a long and iterative and appropriative compositional process certain allegorical aspects of the story that had long been alluded to in the *détourné* title gradually became more apparent to me. As the point of view of the story shifted from first-person fish to third-person girl 'CityFish' became less about the fish and more about the city; it became a story of family, place, displacement, and difference emerging from immigration. The fish is still there, still pissed off, and still talking — an animal amongst humans, an impossible thinking speaking dead animal contesting the hot, smelly, stupid real. The fish operates on the threshold of language. What the country girl Lynne cannot speak, the city fish can think. None of the story's characters can hear the fish, but its readers can.

Aesop's fables often feature animals with human characteristics. Aesop himself is a quasi-mythical creature, part historical man, and part historical creation. He was almost certainly a slave in Greece in the mid-sixth century BCE. Aristotle, Herodotus and Plutarch each have him living and dying at different times and places. He was not born a slave; he became one by foreign capture. No one knows where he was captured from. No one knows if he wrote at all. The tales Aesop told may have been just that — told. Far too many have been attributed to him for them to have all originated from him. It may be that none originated from him. None of his writing survives, but many of the tales he told have been found on Egyptian papyri written between 800–1000 years before his time. A Mother Goose of the ancient world — a compiler, a re-teller, and an early practitioner of *détournement* — whether active or unwitting, Aesop was a central participant in the transmitting and transmuting of fables from ancient to modern, from oral into written forms.

'CityFish' furthers this process of transmutation of fable from oral to print in digital media. The digital text *détourne*s lines spoken by my own family members, long since dead and attributes these lines to other family members entirely imaginary. Within the main body of 'CityFish'

30 Ibid., p. 37.

and again in its credits I acknowledge the authors whose texts I have appropriated without their publishers' permission. *Détournement* would go further; *détournement* would not name these authors at all. I do so in order to underline the additive nature of the material appropriation of texts. I have not taken the words or ideas of the authors as my own but rather used them as material to make transparent the force of my influences.

Embedded within the body of the text is a Google Maps satellite view of Coney Island. Embedded within this map are ten short videos containing images of strangers, none of whom have signed consent forms. I am allowed to quote satellite images owned by Google, but within the terms of use agreement Google make it clear that they can change their terms of use without my agreement at any time. Three weeks before the New Media Writing Prize 2012 short-list was announced, Superstorm Sandy dramatically altered the coastline depicted in the proprietary Google Maps satellite images embedded in 'CityFish'. Google has since updated these images, but for a brief period, within the already elegiac fictional terrain of a fabled story structure set in one past and evoking a past yet further distant, a storm-ravaged coastline remained pictorially pristine, eerily unchanged.

Something Else

The browser-based web as we know it has only been around for twenty-three years or so, at the time of this writing — a short amount of time in terms of both practice and discourse. It took much longer yet for photography to be written about 'not' in terms of painting, for cinema to be written about 'not' in terms of theatre. How long will it take for digital writing to be written about 'not' in terms of a publishing industry built on the back of the book as a contained unit of commodity? We don't quite know what we're writing yet; let alone how to write about it. Critical and creative focus within both academic digital literary scholarship and within digital publishing would benefit from studying and supporting the new structures for reading and writing that digital writers and their writing are revealing through as yet experimental processes. Writing performs differently on the page, on the screen, and online. We need to think and write about writing as not residing in any of these media but rather operating across and through multiple media at multiple times.

This chapter has argued that iteration and *détournement* are methods central to digital authorship. Incorporating the cultural materials of the past into new contexts of reading and writing has been framed as part of an ongoing compositional process. This chapter has advocated for the preservation of transparency in publication platforms such as the open web, which allow readers to read both the source code and the text output on the screen, so that readers may become writers. All Internet-based writing and art works emerge from, refer to, and thus must be understood within the complex context of the Internet itself, which is in fact a conglomeration of contexts. For their function and for their intelligibility, Internet-based works are dependent upon the Internet and all its vagaries, from the constraints of its physical infrastructure to the menace of its many viruses, government spies, commercial trackers, cookies, and crawling bots, from the Babel babble of its multiple code languages to the competing visual and textual messages of its surface contents. How can works created for and within this highly provisional, seemingly immaterial, endlessly re-combinatory context be read, watched, interacted with, participated in, understood, or indeed commented upon in any other?

Working within the massively multi-authored context of the open web, the digital writer can and must incorporate iteration, appropriation, variation, and transformation into the processes of composition and publication. The result is writing that is never fixed, static, or stable but rather always simultaneously responding to past and current mediatic relations and correcting forward toward new possibilities. Rather than closing down these possibilities with proprietary platforms, we need to find new ways of funding and publicly presenting these new forms of writing, even as they are on the cusp of shifting and morphing into something else.

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