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On Internet Collaboration

An internet collaboration might seem a mere matter of logistics, an extension of the increasingly complex and commodified process of creating contemporary artwork . Even solitary artwork increasingly demands from its inception that one range outward through a network, not merely for vision, ideas and materials, but also for exhibition, publication, performance or distribution, including making provision for one's own marketing, publicity, notice, review, critical reception, and so on. Artwork is increasingly a process of *intramediation*, an organization of the scope, dissemination, reproduction and representation of one's own work among several interlinked media— a process akin to what commercial interests call branding.

The internet so considered acts as a circuit board connecting what my friend the sociologist Howard S. Becker describes as art worlds, "that is, all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art." The joint purpose of collaborative work under such circumstances is a kind of semiosis wherein what is produced is a negotiation of shared difference. Says Becker, "Members of the art world co-ordinate the activities by which work is produced by referring to a body of conventional understandings embodied in common practice and in ...artifacts."

Another perhaps more interesting kind of collaboration is not so much enabled by the internet as it is experienced there as presence. It is a variety of what Jean-Luc Nancy means when he characterizes *historia* as "a collection or recollection of occurrences...past and... yet to come, subtracted from memory and expectation." Our networked history, this *historia*, becomes a place of sorts, an instantiation within time conducted by those who, as Nancy suggests

open space-time each time, those who from within nature distance nature, the technicians of presence: makers of steles, stanzas and instants. They are there grasped in their formidable absence, indistinguishable and unfigurable, artists, artisans, artificers.

As technicians of presence-in-absence we might indeed make works together but their production is not a negotiation of difference, not semiosis, but rather autopoiesis, the experience of emergence. Mitchell Resnick from MIT Media Lab once defined emergence rather elegantly as "how objects and patterns can arise from simple interactions in ways that are surprising and counter-intuitive." Emergent collaborations involve working together *through*, not working together *on*. Art objects—Nancy's "steles, stanzas and instants"—move into, and dissipate in, space-time. Collaborative networked artworks become a kind of joint consultancy, to use Gregory Ulmer's term. Ulmer describes his emerAgency consultancy as using "the prosthesis of digital technologies to help us grasp [the] new location of thinking as our civilization moves into a new apparatus (the social machine of electracry)."

Operating from a position that if "a law could be generalized from a composite of statements made by artists about creativity, it might come down to a saying ... the outside is inside," Ulmer describes these collaborative consultancies as a way of "confronting an intractable problem" by "bring[ing] to bear irrelevant criteria." While this might seem at first glance to constitute a critique of the kinds of art worlds Howie Becker locates in a communal "referring to a body of conventional understandings," I think Ulmer instead suggests an advancement upon Becker's notion. Irrelevant criteria trouble our sense of conventional understandings, common practice, and artifact alike.

I am currently involved in three networked collaborations besides the one we have presented here. In the past two years I have begun working with Los Angeles visual artist, Alexandra Grant in creating a series of collaborative text-image artworks called, in a somewhat Cixousian turn, "*indécritions*." These collaborative works are meant to examine the flow from image to text and vice-versa, looking at ideas of coding, correspondences, and mediation. The portmanteau word *indécritions* plays upon the notions of unwriting and undrawing alike, which in our work emerge through investigations of translation not only from language to language, but also from text to image, spoken language to written word, and representations in two dimensions to three dimensional objects. Calling our work *indécritions* also casts a sly look at how any collaboration between a man and a woman, especially one conducted over generations, almost despite them seems indiscrete.

Our collaboration began after Alexandra Googled the word "domesticity" and came up with a text bearing that title from a hyperfiction of mine published in the *Iowa Review Online*. That hypertext, "Reach," the only of my electronic works since my 1987 electronic novel *afternoon* not collaboratively authored, thus now coincidentally and recursively has likewise become so.

In an LA gallery show dedicated to new drawing, Alexandra showed a large scale (ten foot by four foot) drawing based upon a complex process of intramediation from text to twisted wire textual sculpture to a reinscription and tracing of the sculpture's cast shadows upon the drawing paper. Thereafter we began collaborating more explicitly, exchanging work, designs, and ideas as well as exhibition and publication strategies over the internet. One such work, "Nimbus," a large, kinetic wire sculpture based on a text of mine involves a network of twisted wire words woven backwards into a spinning globular form about seven feet tall. Its shifting shadows projected against the gallery walls made ethereal filaments glimmer when seen from the street. The text has disappeared into its form, in Alexandra's phrase "held in confidence rather than revealed." Just recently I've written texts for – and contributed minimal drawing and underpainting to– a four panel series of 10x4 foot paintings on paper which take their inspiration from Hélène Cixous' *Three Steps on a Ladder of Writing*. A young feminist web artist, author and publisher of zines and hand-made books, Roxanne Carter has just joined this collaboration as we document and adapt our work for a special online issue of the *Notre Dame Review* regarding image-text issues.

Speaking of Cixous, another collaboration has involved me with Cixous' current research assistant and former student, the Serbian philosopher and writer, Sanja Milutinović. We recently contributed a collaborative essay/essay meditation on networked artwork in English and Serbian, "One More Trap, Instead of the Performance, Code of Performance," to the special "Walking Theory" issue of the *Journal for performing arts theory* in Belgrade. The "essay" is an electronic collage of email fragments, network postings, screenshots, Photoshop files and the like, part of which meditates upon Gregory Chatonsky's *Se toucher toi: installation pour trois espaces a distance*.

The newest, and still most fragile, networked collaboration is with Linda Walker, an Australian writer, artist and curator who teaches in the Louis Laybourne Smith School of Architecture & Design in Adelaide. Walker describes herself as "interested in the banal and the ordinary, and the writing of that. And in some way the sadness and loss and abandonment of all that that means in terms of the 'search' for the meaningful - whatever that is."

We found ourselves collaborating after I emailed her seeking an essay of de Certeau's which she had cited but I was unable to find elsewhere. She sent along an off-print of the essay, "Tools for Body Writing," and without warning asked, "Do you want to collaborate?" We do not yet know what form that collaboration will take but are currently discussing (online of course) creating miniature rafts constructed of biodegradable texts and image as well as various organic building materials which we will set sail toward each other— me from the Hudson River, she from the Indian Ocean—

as simultaneously hopeless and yet hopeful gestures of sanctuary and shelter set forth upon the oldest network, the waters of the earth.

In each of these collaborative projects my interest as a writer is increasingly in the dissolution of my texts which for me seems not unlike the kind of flow and dissolution which hypertext borrowed from a century of literary and visual experimentation. I have come to love the word in its lack and loss which the surface of any text represents and which collaboration commemorates.

Linda Walker's investigation of "an archaeology of surfaces" brings us back to Jean-Luc Nancy's *historia* of occurrences, and will bring these remarks of mine to a close as well. In an online essay Walker describes the surfaces of everyday places in a way that informs my sense of networked collaboration. For her these surfaces "have no special or particular quality, and are as much about juxtaposition, or in-company, as they are about themselves... a remembrance of neglect, disrepair, isolation, forgetfulness, destruction; and yet ... also of care, repair, remembering, constructing, hoping, loving. " In reflecting more recently upon our particular collaboration Walker proposes

work which comes together, not work that is worked-together - that is, [where] each worker works to give toward the other 'their' work - but [where] each worker works in their own voice and when the voices come together they are not 'in tune' - they are together in their dis-harmony, their difference and their strangeness ... a form of corruption, infection ... a drifting away 'with' oneself, surface to surface, by provocation...creating a new truly weird and absorbing and

thrilling space...forced to texts and music and artists unheard of
...[but which] retain 'breakability' [and] 'uncertainty' moment
to moment -.

Works Cited

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