media/rep/

Repositorium für die Medienwissenschaft

Performative Reading: Attending *The Last Performance [dot org]*

By Scott Rettberg

No. 40 – 2010

Abstract

The Last Performance [dot org] by Judd Morrissey, Mark Jeffrey, the Goat Island Collective, and more than 100 other contributors, is a work of database literature that exists in a number of different manifestations online, in performance, and in museum installations. The work-in-progress was initiated in 2008. It was composed using a constraint-driven collaborative writing process that invites user contributions. In this essay, Scott Rettberg considers the difficulties of attempting a close reading of this type of electronic literature, and suggests some strategies for attentive reading, driven by close reading of fragments of the work and awareness of how the work functions as a computational and narrative system.

The room is dark, and an author stands in shadows at the back of the room in front of three laptop computers, each connected to its own projector. The opening screen lights up the room, a circle of words against a black screen. A horse is heard neighing. A single tone begins to sound, over and over again. The author begins to read. As he reads, the circle of words on the screen begins to come apart, and to move in complex patterns. The words begin to recombine in new arrangements. The words begin to move in time. The words begin to dance.

A man wearing a collarless Beatles suit approaches the front of the room, pacing in a measured martial dance, followed by a woman in a blue dress. The man carries a mask of a horse's head. As he reaches the front of the room, the walls behind him fill with texts in intersecting arcs. He puts on the mask and begins to move as if he himself has become a horse. As you attempt to read the text, three projected screens across, you realize that the arcing texts seem to be arranged in patterns that have more in common with architecture than they do with the stanzas of a poem. While the horse in the Beatles jacket and the woman in the blue dress continue their time-based performance, the operator in the back of the room scrolls across and down the projected work. The pattern of intersecting arcs of texts extends far off the screen in seemingly endless virtual space. Reading the work feels

very much like trying to make out the details of an intricately detailed cupola as you stare up and walk around underneath it.[1]

Fig. 1. *Goat Island* performs *The Last Performance [dot org]* at the Electronic Literature in Europe Conference. Landmark Café Bergen, Norway, 12.09.2008.

Judd Morrissey, Mark Jeffrey, Goat Island, and 145+ additional writers are contributing to the web-based component of the work-in-progress *The Last Performance [dot org]*. The project's developers describe it as "a constraint-based collaborative writing, archiving and text-visualization project responding to the theme of *lastness* in relation to architectural forms, acts of building, a final performance, and the interruption (that becomes the promise) of community." The work is a kind of hopeful monster[2], a mutated form of literature that combines elements of dance and performance, information and physical architecture, and Oulipian constraint-driven approaches to writing. The visual design of the project is based on the structure and details of the Džamija, a mosque built on top of an old church in Zagreb, Croatia. Elements of the structure were derived from a dance performance by Goat Island, a Chicago-based performance collective. Organizational principles of the text are largely algorithmic and procedural. Individual texts are written in response to a series of odd, seemingly arbitrary constraints such as "Construct a last performance in the form of a heavy foot that weighs two tons and remains in good condition." Contributors include both a close-knit group of authors and performers who worked most closely on the project for two years, and random readers who stumble across the work on the Web and decide to contribute a text by responding to a constraint or to one of the other texts.

Like many works of electronic literature, *The Last Performance [dot org]* is functioning in several different media modalities simultaneously, and can be read in a number of different ways. By this I mean not only can the reader apply different interpretative strategies to the text, as one could with any work of literature, but that the work offers the reader a wide variety of physical configurations of its constituent parts. While each of the short texts in the work can be read individually on a single page, the work also includes a presentation of the entire database called "minaret" which builds a visualization of the entire text on the basis of word frequency. The constraints form a kind of thematic infrastructure for the work. Because individual fragments are presented and linked together, we may begin to see connections between them whether or not those connections actually exist: if for example we encounter two texts linked to each other that mention both war and feet, our impulse towards closure is such that we are likely to consider a thematic relationship between the two fragments, even if the linkage was constructed arbitrarily by a system. A sort of double-reading takes place in that while individual fragments of text are distinct from one another, the reader is also compelled to regard them as modular parts of a larger whole in one sense, and as pure data in another. To further complicate matters, the work can be encountered in a number of different contexts: as it is performed live as in the above example, as encountered on the individual computer screen, or as an art installation as it was exhibited in 2008 at the Haus Der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. A film interpretation of the project with the working title *Curtain Call* is also in progress.
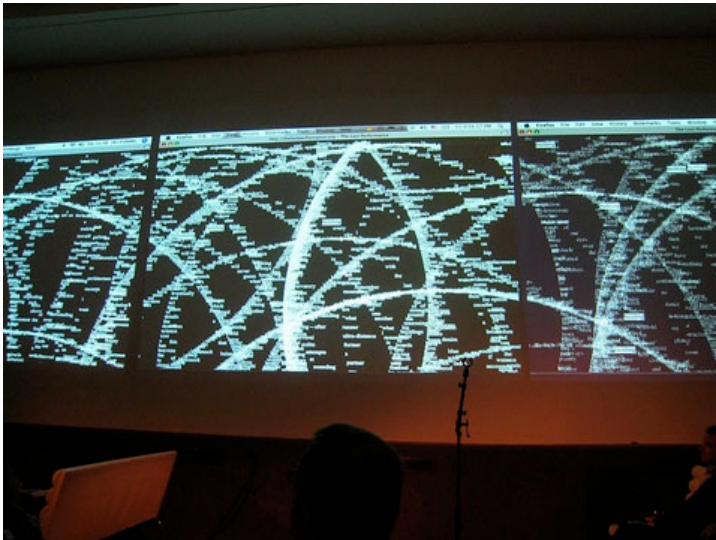

Fig. 2. *The Last Performance [dot org]* displayed at the Electronic Literature in Europe Conference. Landmark Café Bergen, Norway, 12.09.2008.

Strategies for Attentive Reading

In attempting a "close reading" of a work of this kind, certain challenges present themselves: conventional assumptions about thematic cohesion do not apply well to a collective narrative of this kind. The nodes of the work are multiply authored by a fairly large group of people, each of whom interprets the constraints that structure the work differently. The arrangement and order in which any reader will encounter the many nodes of text is variable. Entries are however date-stamped and each author is clearly indicated, so a type of chronological reading is possible[3], and it is also possible to follow the contributions of any given individual author.
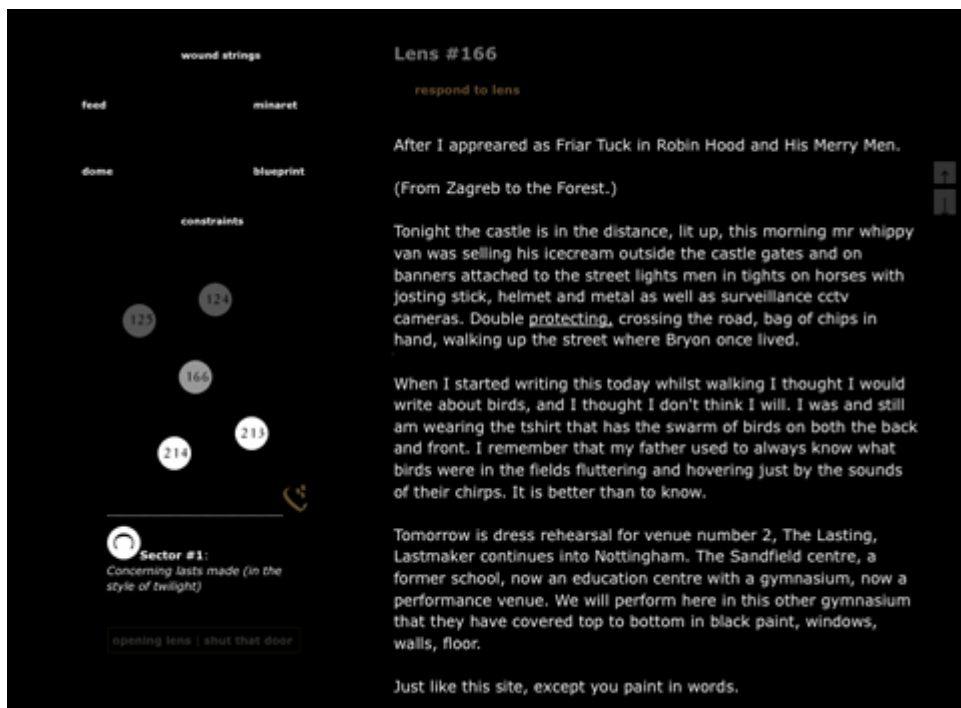
Fig. 3. Individual Node from *The Last Performance [dot org]*.

At the same time, by reading in this selective way, we pull the texts out of the context in which they were created. One can assume that each individual author was not only reading what he or she had written individually and building a thematic arc on that basis, but rather was also responding to texts that other contributors created.

I will fail to provide a true and complete reading of this work, since I have not and likely never will read the entirety of *The Last Performance*. There are many, many

nodes of text in the work, perhaps 1000, and there will likely be more by the next time I read it. The work will remain in progress for some time to come, perhaps three or five years. We cannot even say in any definite way that it will ever be definitively finished. A "close reading" of this type of work should also involve reading the interface. And as I think we all know by now, the code underlying the text that we see is also the text, and a more comprehensive reading might start with the writing at that operable level, or even at the level of the platform on which the code is read.[4] Rather than performing an actual close reading in the sense that one might for instance attempt to closely and completely read a print novel, I will instead suggest some strategies for reading the work *attentively*. That is to say: my work as a reader of almost any type of hypertext literature confounds some of the basic assumptions I developed as a student of literature made for print media, such as the idea that a close reading should be a *complete* reading. The medium lends itself to fragmentary, partial experiences of texts, which are indeed formally *intended* to be experienced incompletely. At the risk of sounding like an early 21st Century Willie Loman, however, I want to insist that more "attention must be paid" to works of electronic literature at the level of language, and to the phenomenological experience not only of navigating or operating the text machine but also reading the work and deriving meaning from that experience.

Contemporary critics are struggling to develop a vocabulary for reading works of electronic literature attentively. On the one hand, this type of reading is not the same as the "close reading" of the New Critics, in that critics are not treating a text as if it should be read as a "well wrought urn" apart from a world of social contexts or authorial intent. That would not make sense in the context of contemporary electronic literature. Authors in this world often put a great deal of effort into contextualizing their work and framing their intentions in "artist statements" that are closely related to the type of framing done by contemporary conceptual artists. Many works are further so deeply embedded in contemporary discourses of technology and society that they cannot be divorced from those contexts. A work of electronic literature is most often also a computer program, built on other computer programs, all of which are produced in distinct cultural contexts. Contemporary e-lit authors are not only alive, but also working in close proximity to their critics. We cannot pretend that the intentions of the authors do not matter. The authors are, in a sense, breathing the same air, in the room with us. As critical readers we often require the authors' assistance, not at the level of interpreting the language of the work, but at an even more essential level: without an explanation from the author, readers in some cases would not even know how to operate the work, how to negotiate the interface of the text-machine in order to traverse the text. User's manuals are often necessary. The living author writing on the network might furthermore change a work published on the network at any given time in essential ways that could fundamentally alter our experience of the work. So we cannot do

close readings in the sense of pretending that a fixed linguistic artifact exists independent of the context that surrounds it and in which it was produced.

Too often however critics exhaust their energies either in simply describing the technological architecture of the work, or placing it within a spectrum of genre, or describing it as a manifestation or materialization of a particular literary theory. While all of those sorts of reading have some value, we should not forget that on some level works of electronic literature are working on the level of language, and that poems and stories, however complex their technological architecture, also demand to be read on the level of words, and lines, and poetics, and narratives. A work must be understood as a digital artifact, but something is also being said, and that literary aspect should not be neglected or forgotten. But how does one begin a literary reading of a database written by a crowd?

The title of this work itself might provide us with some indication of how to read it: *The Last Performance* refers explicitly to the last series of collective acts of the Goat Island performance group, but also to the textual nature of the work produced here. It is probably not best understood purely as artifact, but as a performance that has some sustained duration, that "lasts" and manifests itself in multiple modalities and instantiations. The contributors to the work are performing by producing original writing and by responding to other texts, but readers are also performing by operating the work as a textual instrument[5], and by taking part in collective authorship, in both conscious and in unwitting ways. I did not feel that I had a real understanding of the nature of *The Last Performance* until, after several reading sessions, I took the work up on its suggestion and began to contribute to it, to write into it. In terms of performance, this is a text that brings its readers slowly towards its magic circle, until the distinction between performers and audience is indistinguishable. It is ultimately difficult to differentiate between *The Last Performance* as textual artifact or digital object and *The Last Performance* as a participatory action.

There are a number of inherent contradictions at work in *The Last Performance*. While it is at present a "constructive" hypertext[6] built around a participatory performance, it is also conceived as a volumetric space. When 4680 nodes are filled with text, the work will be full, finished, somewhat arbitrarily complete, and it will at that point become an exploratory hypertext. *The Last Performance* is not an open system that will go on changing forever, but right now it is a system in which each individual text functions as a sort of cellular automata, inspiring and subject to response by future readers who choose to become co-authors in ongoing feedback loops. It is a performance in progress, which will end at some point in time, and become a fixed, stable digital artifact.

the
sense
of
continuing
in
time;
surviving;
remaining
in
good
condition.
Last
is
a
block
or
form
shaped
(as a staircase)   like
a
human
foot
and
used
in
the
making
of
shoes.
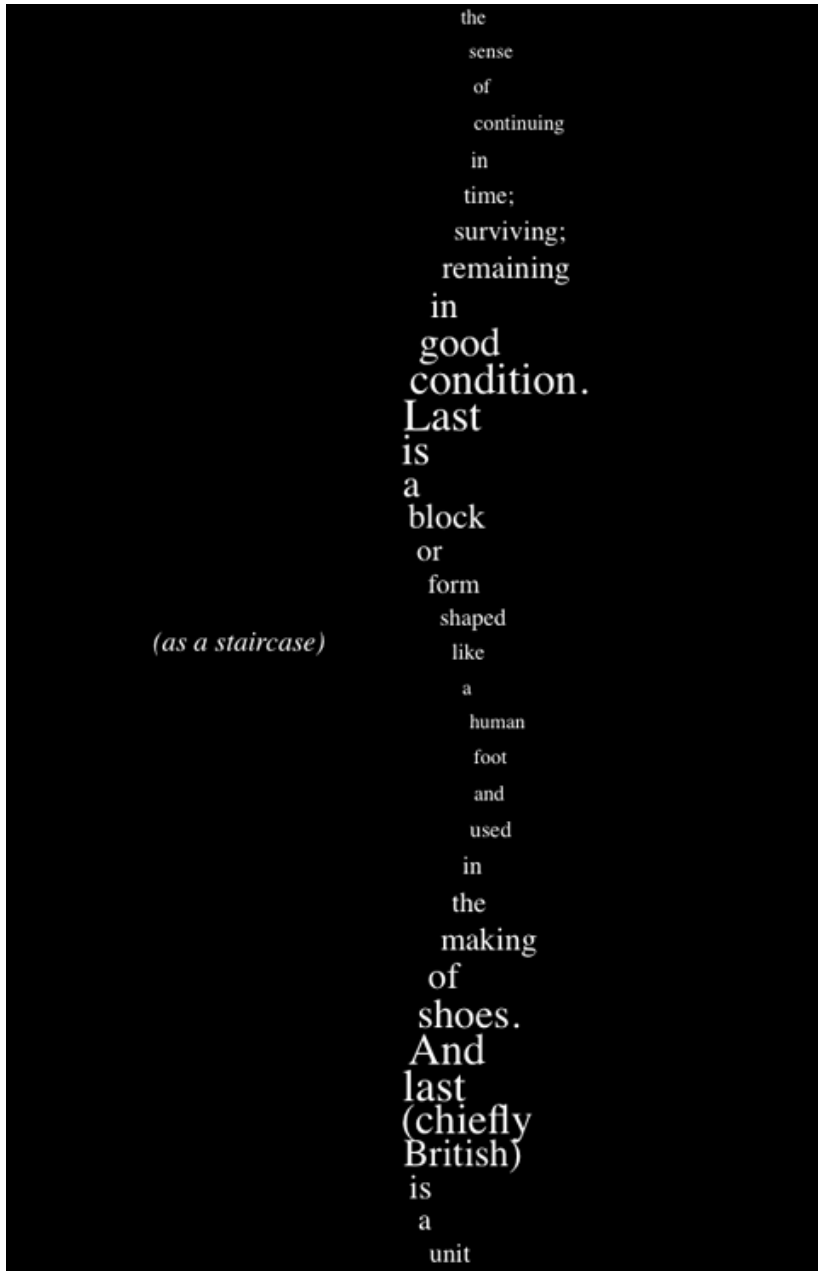And
last
(chiefly
British)
is
a
unit

Fig. 4. Screenshot from *The Last Performance [dot org]*.

Reading by Node / Lens

Each node in *The Last Performance* can be read both in isolation from and in relation to the other nodes in the work. Like many works of hypertext literature, *The Last Performance* invites atomistic reading: an individual reading of any given node will be influenced by the other nodes read previously and those read subsequently, but because there are many different ways of navigating to and from any given node of the next, there is no necessary singular order or chronological structure or even consistent associative logic to the work.

The work is nevertheless thematically structured, albeit in a loose fashion. The writers of each node are either supposed to be responding to a specific constraint (a "directive") or responding to another previously written node. Each node in the piece is conceptualized as a "lens." The logic of referring to each node as a lens is that the work as a whole is based on the architecture of a mosque-turned-museum in Croatia. In the "dome" view of the work, the text is visualized as if the reader were looking up at the cupola of a massive dome. Each text is presented there in a truncated fashion, as if it were a window or lens we are looking through towards the sky, and each fragment is a kind of window to the longer text that lies beyond it. Each text is also a conceptual "lens" in the sense that it is in an interpretive filtering of the constraint it responds to.

The text authored by Judd Morrissey, which we always encounter first in the dance view, responds to the constraint "Concerning losts made (in the style of twilight)" and reads as follows:

> The end of a man's life can be inferred from the meticulous collapse of his horse. His most basic qualities are reflected in its style. The players form a still horizontal line in the jousting lane and the sound of trampling cuts through them. Do you have a move yet, for your death? Lenny Bruce falls and her shoes are carried off. My heart is breaking apart.

There is a good deal of narrative ambiguity and poetic complexity in this fragment. Does the passage refer to the end of a specific man's life, or is it an observation of mortality in a more general sense? In what way can the collapse of a horse be "meticulous"? Who are the players? Are they jousting in a literal sense or in some figurative way? Are they jousting with death or with each other? Is death riding a pale horse? Am I one of the players? Is the author jousting with the reader? What sort of "move" can one make for one's death? The image of the collapsing horse calls to mind Picasso's *Guernica*, and the artist Picasso revealing his own most basic qualities through emblematic images of creatures — the Minotaur, the harlequin, the cock, the horse. The notion of making a move for my death reminds me of the image of death playing chess with a knight in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. Is the sound of trampling merely the horses pounding down the jousting lane,

or are the riders themselves being trampled? And then we have Lenny Bruce falling? Is this the death of Lenny Bruce? Is the horse the "white horse" heroin addiction that led to his demise? Who is *she*? The horse? Why are her shoes carried off? Who is the speaker and why is his heart breaking apart?
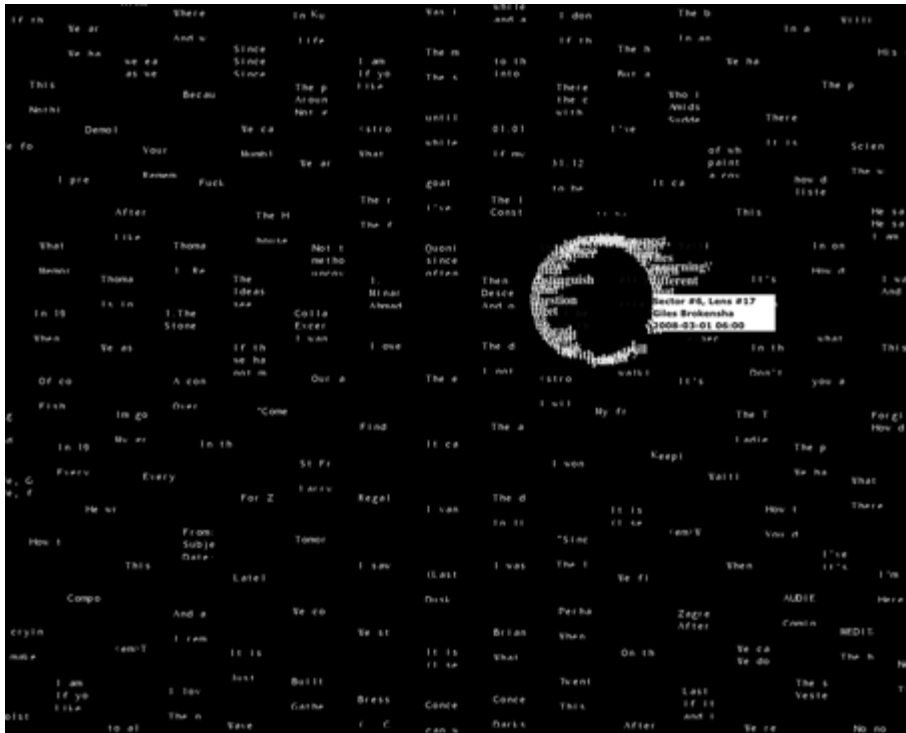
Fig. 5. Screenshot from *The Last Performance [dot org]*.

The text itself is enigmatic and epigrammatic, yet it establishes a sort of system of motifs that will be repeated and referenced again in other texts in the work. As we move through the text, we will often hear the sound of a neighing horse, and horse imagery is reiterated. There is a clear interest in many of the texts in death and its accompanying rituals. Shoes are likewise featured or discussed in many of the texts. Also throughout the work, we might well have the feeling that some sort of game is being played. Though we encounter the work first as observers and as readers, as we dig deeper into the text, we are invited to ourselves respond to the constraints, to make our own moves in a language game, to help "construct a last" and further build upon the architecture of this textual cathedral, or mosque, or mausoleum, or museum made of words.

Reading by Constraint

About constraints, the Oulipan novelist Harry Mathews writes:

> The Oulipo supplies writers with hard games to play. They are adult games insofar as children cannot play most of them; otherwise they bring us back to a familiar home ground of our childhood. Like Capture the Flag, the games have demanding rules that we must never forget (well, hardly ever), and these rules are moreover active ones: satisfying them keeps us too busy to worry about being reasonable.

As with any form of procedural writing, in *The Last Performance,* we might consider whether constraints function as scaffolding or bindings. Do constraints free the writers of *The Last Performance* or suffocate them?

The constraints *The Last Performance* writers respond to include:

1. Concerning losts made (in the style of twilight
2. Consider the style of old words in new times
3. Collaboration as architecture: Double Building
4. Catalogue of codes for impossible tasks and mighty optical illusions
5. Construct a Last Performance in the form of a human foot that weighs two tons and remains in good condition
6. Coda: The scattering and the performance to come

In comparison, say to George Perec's exercise in *A Void (La Disparition)* of writing a novel without using the letter e, these constraints are ambiguous, and are not directive in the sense of determining technique or style. They are "soft" constraints. Some of them are expressly absurd, more riddle than recipe. A human foot cannot, for example, weigh two tons. And had I not encountered this instruction, I might have never even entertained the possibility that such an immense foot could remain in good condition, much less contemplated how I could go about constructing a performance to that effect. The constraints in *The Last Performance* have the effect Mathews suggests, to push the contributing writers beyond the bounds of the reasonable.

Because individual nodes are authored by a variety of contributors over a long time scale, the degree to which the style of the writing and the nature of the text fragments cohere is not determined by any single author or any master plan, but organically, by happenstance, juxtaposition, and the ad hoc decisions of the individual writers responding to previously written texts. This is not to say that there are no recurring motifs. I would suggest that the constraints themselves suggest certain ideas, themes, and symbols, which are woven across the work, although

they are integrated and processed differently by all of the contributing authors, and experienced differently by each reader. Among these are loss, memory, twilight, language games, dissolution, collaboration, architecture, impossible tasks and impossible objects, feet, and performance. While the writers are usually responding to a specific constraint, many of the fragments reference more than one constraint. In the above-referenced lens, while Morrissey was specifically responding to the first constraint, he nonetheless also mentions feet, and final performances. The text could just as easily been responding to constraint #5 or #6 as to #1. There is a sfumato effect to these constraints—they have porous borders and blur into one another, and so do the texts that respond to them.

Reading Contextually

While the work is not coherently structured by any single intelligence, structural elements of the work encourage thematic returns and build a sense of coherence. The people who contribute to *The Last Performance* are not generally coming to the work cold and parachuting in a chunk of text. Readers become contributors, as they are invited to respond and write texts after having read a number of other nodes of the work. The way into the writing interface is via the reading interface. So those who "perform" *The Last Performance* are always part of the audience of the performance before they themselves join in the construction. In the simplest reading view of individual nodes the reader is invited to "respond to this lens." Much of the early writing of *The Last Performance* was done around some particular event. The work as a whole is conceived of as part of the final project (or more appropriately, last projects) of the Goat Island collective, a time-based performance group. Many of the texts in the work respond specifically to the situation of that group and the circumstances of its dissolution. There was also a kind of originary research trip at the center of the project, to the Džamija in Zagreb, Croatia. An art museum before World War II, it was converted into a mosque for Bosniaks under the Independent State of Croatia, to again become a Museum of Revolution in post-war Yugoslavia. This place, which is now a performance space, served as a kind of substitute for the Hagia Sophia, which the project's developers used as an early conceptual model for the piece. The performances in Croatia and in other performances (in Nottingham, Bergen, Barcelona, Chicago and elsewhere) thus play a role not only as opportunities for the work to be read and shown, but also as occasions for writing, for recruiting new author contributors, and for engendering thematic references within the work itself.

In Lens #18, Morrissey writes:

> The appearance of interplanetary dust signals the first call to prayer. This is the time when lack of visibility on the ground makes for military opportunities. But what is the unseen event around which the performance circumambulates like a compass with its pencil upside down? What shoes does one wear to a civil war? We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. 4000 holes. The president, speaking out against ending, invoked Vietnam. At least he didn't compare it to the hundred years war, joked Moe Rocca to laughter and applause.

In this text, the author is moving across different contexts. We might assume that the setting here is the mosque in Croatia. The reference to the civil war suggests the author is referencing the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. At the same time, of course, the text is referencing the more contemporary war in Iraq. The president invoking Vietnam and arguing for a sustained war was of course George Bush. The comedian Moe Rocca's astute joke about the Hundred Years War was explicitly about the war on terror, or the "long war" as the George W. Bush administration sometimes described it. The unseen event could either be the war in progress in Iraq, happening at the same time as the authors and performers were developing the work in Croatia, or the after-effects of the Bosnian war, the memories of which are embedded both in the landscape and in the population of people living in the immediate surroundings of the performance space. The "band of brothers" is of course a line from the Saint Crispen's Day speech in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, which is emblematic of the type of vainglorious bloodlust-driven cheerleading that commanders of soldiers have practiced across the ages, and of the naïve "with us or against us" rhetoric of the Bush administration. The 4000 holes might be the windows in the dome above. They might be a reference to the Beatles' song "Day in the Life" with its 4000 holes in Blackburn Lancashire, (the number of holes it takes the fill the Albert Hall) or it might be the graves of the first 4000 Americans to die in Iraq by the spring of 2008, or the first 4000 Iraqis to die in that war, or the graves of Bosnians, Croatians, and Serbs who died in that war. The text comments on the fact that while the writers, performers, and readers make their work and go about their lives, the unseen event or unspoken memories are unavoidably present. In wondering what shoes one might wear to a civil war, the text might be commenting on the absurdity of being a writer, or a performer, or a cultural tourist, at the site of mass graves. In spite of the limited capacities of art to describe or make sense of the horrors of unnecessary wars, those acts cannot be abstracted away from the process of making art in the present moment. Our wars are in the room with us, in the air around us.

The Croatian setting recurs in a number of other texts, such as Lens #878:

> I saw a woman hoovering the hills where once there was and perhaps still is a security wall. Another painted the tanks white. These men and boys seem more concerned with their own clean feet. They stumble out of mosques, untied, walking on their heels, holding on to one another for balance, still between worlds. They leave behind the smell of bodies and socks.

We could read this text literally, and assume that the author is describing a scene of everyday life in Croatia.[7] The white tanks may suggest the UN security forces that were eventually brought in to secure the peace. The absurd image of a woman hoovering the hills might be a comment on the effort to restore a sense of normality, of quotidian everydayness, to a country rent by conflict, a sort of Sisyphean effort to vacuum up painful memories blasted into the land itself. The men stumbling out of the mosque are between worlds. One might read between the religious space and the mundane, but also between the world of the conflict and that of everyday life. When the men leave behind the smell of bodies and socks, the text is presumably referring to the actual odor of the passing men, but the line also suggests the smell of bodies of people killed during a brutal war, a smell which, like the unseen stains in the landscape, cannot easily be washed away.

In focusing on these three individual nodes, and attempting to trace some of the metaphors embedded in the thread, I am of course doing a very limited kind of reading. Judd Morrissey wrote all the three nodes that I have cited, and I'm making some assumptions—that the author is following a certain kind of intentional arc, and that there are thematic and metaphoric connections between the nodes. I'm not sure if it matters whether or not such connections are intended by the author. The nature of cognitive impulse towards closure will lead us to thematize even completely arbitrary juxtapositions of texts within any given work. But I think this type of reading—moving through the texts contributed by individual authors—is suggested by the fact that the work indexes contributions in this way[8], and is one valid strategy towards understanding *The Last Performance*. While the project is a collective endeavor, it is not collective in the sense of a choir singing in unison. Individual authors retain their distinctive voices and identities.

A converse and equally valid reading strategy would be to follow not the contributions of individual authors, but to read the work as a series of conversations between the various contributors. In addition to the constraints, the work invites its readers to respond to individual lenses. The new texts are then "seen" by the database as closely related to the text they are responding to, and the system generates links to navigate between the related texts. The constraints themselves constitute a sort of conversational rhetoric, a Rorschach test for writers. Through the individual writers' responses both to the constraints and to one another's texts, we can learn a great deal about their preoccupations and styles. The stimuli are

shared, but the responses are multiple, as likely in contradiction as in agreement. The project also borrows from the conventions of Web 2.0 social media, allowing authors to label their texts with tags, which would enable readers to search by keywords and clearly labeled themes.

Reading Textual Cannibalism

We could also consider *The Last Performance* in Chris Funkhouser and Roberto Simanowski's terms of "cultural anthropophagy." In his essay "Le(s) Mange Texte(s): Creative Cannibalism and Digital Poetry," Funkhouser describes the anthropophagic text as one "in which the author or authors engage with multiple languages or idioms, devours other texts, icons, and is free to remix discrepant methods and philosophical approaches" (2). In his 2009 E-Poetry Festival keynote address, "Understanding Text That Moves: Two Close Readings," Simanowski takes the concept of textual cannibalism in a different direction, demonstrating how in certain works, such as Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv's *Text Rain* or Jason Lewis and Bruno Nadeau' *Still Standing,* "Text is devoured . . . regurgitated as visual object, sound, and performance. In those works, text is somehow present, although in a 'devoured' way, stripped of its original feature as linguistic message" (2). It is certainly possible to "read" *The Last Performance* in entirely visual or spectacular terms. In both the dance view and the dome view of the work, while texts are legible, our primary activity in experiencing the work is not reading, but something in between reading and the contemplation of a moving image. The words in the dance circle, cluster, collapse, spiral and explode, and as they do so, etch ephemeral traces against the black background. In the dome view, only a few words of each node are visible until we mouse over the lens, at which point a portion of the text is visualized as a circle. When we click through, however, we reach a "plain" view of the text that is clearly legible. So the nature of textual cannibalism in *The Last Performance* is quite different from that of *Text Rain* or *Still Standing*. As in those pieces, in several of its views, the text of *The Last Performance* is used in a purely visual way, and we experience the words as forms, as pixels rather than as poem or narrative. These purely visual views however serve as a form of navigation to a view of an individual text that is highly legible. So the visualization does not completely cannibalize any of the individual texts, but instead offers passages towards, away from, and through them. The work constantly cannibalizes itself, without ever being entirely consumed, and in doing so expands the possibilities of reading. This is a kind of cannibalism that sustains and provides new angles of approach to the work. In this sense, it is an example of what we might call "reproductive autophagy." *The Last Performance* is eating and growing itself simultaneously.

Fig. 6. Screenshot from *The Last Performance [dot org]*.

A text is a text is a text, except for when a text is also something else. By providing us with multiple views of all of the texts in multiple instantiations, *The Last Performance* foregrounds certain material aspects of networked writing. The individual nodes of *The Last Performance* are narratives, or nonfiction, or poems, but they are also malleable and processable, image and data. The nature of the text as data is foregrounded in particular in the base and shaft view[9], which shows the most frequently used words by frequency. As in the dome view, here all of the texts are seen as together in one representation, again cannibalized from their discrete meaningful context, but with simple hooks back to that context. The word frequency information again offers us some new avenues for reading, and a sort of glimpse into the collective unconscious of the project's contributors. We might wonder, for instance, why the word "byzantine" recurs 112 times across these texts, or if there is something about the process of responding to these constraints that has inspired the authors to use the word "awkward" 136 times. In this context, the text as a whole

is exploded into its constituent bits of information. In this instantiation, we are reading not narratives and poems, but words as data.

Reading Networked Reading

The Last Performance is built in PHP, in an extensively modified installation of Drupal, a common and widely used contemporary content management system. *The Last Performance* makes use of conventions from widely used web technologies, such as social networks and text visualization software, and exploits them for artistic purposes. When we consider the cultural functions that electronic literature can play within digital culture, one of the most important is to provide us with opportunities to consider how our language and social practices have changed and will continue to change as our world is increasingly cyborganized.[10] At the same time as we have become prolific authors of emails and instant messages, carry out much of our social interaction on Facebook, and entrust our photographs and memories to Flickr, we take relatively few opportunities to reflect on how these changes in textual practices are changing the phenomenological nature of our relationship to the world. In repurposing widely utilized web technologies to artistic ends, works like *The Last Performance* defamiliarize our interactions with these technologies and enable us to pause and reconsider what order of textual creatures we are in the process of becoming.

Works Cited

Funkhouser, Chris. "Le(s) Mange texte(s) : Creative Cannibalism and Digital Poetry" Conference paper: Paris E-Poetry Festival 2007. 28.11.2010 http://www.epo-etry2007.net/english/papers/funkhouseruk.pdf

Hayles, N. Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008.

Joyce, Michael. "Siren Shapes: Exploratory and Constructive Hypertexts." In N. Wardrip-Fruin and N. Montfort, eds., *The New Media Reader.* MIT Press, 2003. 613-24.

Mathews, Harry. "Translation and the Oulipo: The Case of the Persevering Maltese." *Electronic Book Review*. 3 Jan 1997. 28.11.2010 http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/ethno-linguist

Memmott, Talan. "Interview with Talan Memmott by Peter Olivetti." Histories of Internet Art: Fictions and Factions: Net Practice. Spring 2001. 28.11.2010 http://art.colorado.edu/hiaff/interview.php?id=46&cid=3

Morrissey, Judd, et al. *The Last Performance [dot org]*. 2007-2010. 28.11.2010 http://thelastperformance.org/

Moulthrop, Stuart. "An Interview with Stuart Moulthrop by Noah Wardrip-Fruin." *The Iowa Review Web* Volume 5, 2003. 28.11.2010 http://iowareview.uiowa.edu/TIRW/TIRW_Archive/tirweb/feature/moulthrop/index.html

Simanowski, Roberto. "Understanding Text That Moves: Two Close Readings." Keynote address, Barcelona E-Poetry Festival 2009. Unpublished.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah. "From Textual Instrument to Instrumental Text." Conference paper: Melbourne Digital Arts and Culture Conference, 2003. 28.11.2010 http://www.hyperfiction.org/texts/textualInstrumentsShort.pdf

Notes

1. This is a description of the work as it was performed at the "Electronic Literature in Europe" seminar in Landmark Café at Bergen Kunsthall, Norway in September 2008.

2. In her *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, N. Katherine Hayles writes that "Electronic literature is a 'hopeful monster' (as geneticists call adaptive mutations) composed of parts taken from diverse traditions that may not always fit neatly together. Hybrid by nature, it comprises a 'trading zone' (as Peter Galison calls it in a different context) in which different vocabularies, expertises, and expectations come together to see what might emerge from their intercourse" (4).

3. The available chronology is that of when the nodes were authored, and has no relation to any overall plot or causal connections between the individual nodes.

4. While I value readings of this kind, which engage code and platform as core poetic elements of works of electronic literature, I do not advocate the "beyond the black box" methodologies of platform studies as *the only* valid way to read electronic literature critically. We need also be mindful of the experience of the general reader, who experiences the work only in its intended "surface" manifestation. By analogy: a mechanic can tell you a great deal about a car by taking apart and reassembling its engine, but you can also learn a great deal about the same car by simply taking it for a long drive.

5. John Cayley, Stuart Moulthrop, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin are among the writers and critics who put this term into circulation. In a 2003 interview published in the *Iowa Review Web* about his work *Pax*, Moulthrop said to Wardrip-Fruin, "You have, with instruments, a text with behavior and temporal dimensions that in some ways maps onto the temporal experience and interactive possibilities in game design." In his 2003 Melbourne DAC paper "From Instrumental Texts to Textual Instruments" Wardrip-Fruin describes a textual instrument as a tool for textual performance which may be used to play a variety of compositions" (3).

6. In his classic essay "Siren Shapes: Exploratory and Constructive Hypertexts," Michael Joyce wrote "Scriptors use constructive hypertexts to develop a body of information which they map according to their needs, their interests, and the transformations they discover as they invent, gather, and act upon that information. Moreso than with exploratory hypertexts, constructive hypertexts require a capability to act: to create, to change, and to recover particular encounters within the developing body of knowledge" (616).

7. After presenting this essay at the E-Poetry 2009 Festival. I discussed this node with Judd Morissey. Judd said that the image of the woman hoovering the hills actually came to him from a video art piece by Palestinian artist Raeda Sa'adeh that he saw exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago. Rather than Croatia, the image comes from a scene near the security wall in Palestine. Interestingly, my untutored interpretation of the image is equally applicable to the Middle East conflict zone as it is to Croatia.

8. In contrast to print fiction, where the reading order of parts of the text is most often implicit, on the basis of the sequence in which the work is printed, in a large hypertext work, authors provide readers with explicit reading strategies by offering them multiple navigational apparatus, such as links, indexes, tags, image-maps, etc. Authors might suggest multiple, distinctly different strategies for reading the same text, resulting a different experience of the same work.

9. Again referencing the physical architecture of the mosque in a visualization of information architecture.

10. Talan Memmott's term for the hybridized "Cell . . . f". I first encountered it in his work *Lexia to Perplexia.* In a 2001 interview, Memmott asserted that cyborganized consciousness extends beyond the interaction with an interface: "Even prior to logging on, when first seated at the terminal we are cyborganized and reconfigured to operate within this hybrid state."