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Becoming full-time web artist: Interview with Jim Andrews

By Roberto Simanowski

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Abstract

Jim Andrews is a web artist with an extensive background, ranging from studies in English, Mathematics and Computer Science to being a percussionist in several bands. Andrews run a literary radio show and magazine, and organized venues for weekly poetry readings. Working as a freelance programmer and technical writer has propelled Andrews to cultivate his talents within the digital realm, creating work based in the emerging field of audio-visual poetry (see review in dd). Roberto Simanowski questions Andrews about the relationship in his work between programming skills and conceptual concerns, Andrews's opinion about the differences between European and North American net art, and the proverbial problem of the "media melting pot" which subordinates one medium into another.

1. person

dd: Your Web-CV introduces you as "Multimedia Developer, Visual Poet, Essayist, Mathematician, Senior Technical Writer". This seems to be precisely the conflation of abilities that digital aesthetics demands from its artists. How did you start and how did this wide variety finally emerge?

JA: I did a degree in English and Math in the late seventies/early eighties. Then I did a literary radio show called *Fine Lines* and, later, ?Frame? for six years that concentrated on audio writing, sound poetry, and so on. It was all analog, but I got a feel for all the radio production gear, for working artistically with tech. Still, I hadn't touched a computer and recall the fear and trembling associated with my first few sessions on a computer, which was available at the radio station. Where's the right button???? Help!!!! Where is the great one who knows the magic button???? Ah, I feel like an idiot running to her again! Where is she? I think we learned a bit of Wordperfect and Lotus 1-2-3 pre-Windows or something. Somehow there was more fear involved in starting to use computers than the analog sound equipment-

-there was always the prospect of losing your work, for instance. I recall coming to feel eventually that it wasn't much different from working in the recording studio in the sense that you need to just get in there, hit all the buttons, learn to read the docs, see what happens, and eventually you own it. And I also approached it as 'just another form of language,' which seemed to help, since I was more familiar with language than machines.

The radio show had begun with interviews of Canadian print-writers and productions for radio of traditional print-work poetry and fiction. And some sound poetry. But as I got into radio more, I discovered audio writing by artists such as Gregory Whitehead, Susan Stone, Helen Thorington, and blackhumour, who have writerly backgrounds but go far beyond either writing or radio drama in their recorded works. That and my reading of McLuhan convinced me that there was more interesting work to be done and listened to by treating radio and recorded sound as artistic media, rather than transferring work from print to radio and recorded sound. I've tried to carry that idea in the other media I've worked in. And I started to correspond with audio writers and avant garde writers in North America and Europe, many of whom have, like myself, moved primarily to the net. Helen Thorington, for instance, does turbulence.org now whereas in the eighties she produced New American Radio for National Public Radio in the USA.

The last thing I picked up in six years of producing radio/recorded sound was a sense and practice of composition for recorded and live sound. Sort of like hearing voices and sounds in the head. But also composing with the razor blade and tape, and opening up to the value of the random and experimentation. I'm trying to develop a similar type of sense of composition concerning interactive multimedia for the Web. Though of course most of it happens in the act of working with the material itself, rather than sitting down to do something that I have completely composed in my head.

After the radio show ended around 1989, I went back to University to study Mathematics and Computer Science, which I hadn't done during my degree studies. Education was relatively affordable back then in Canada. I did three years of that. I had a UNIX account and access to the Internet, and the Web was starting to happen at that time. But I was more into doing a literary magazine called And Yet and reading lots of poetry and writing during that time, which I did in PageMaker and started using CorelDraw 2.01 and bitmap programs for visual poetry.

After I quit University, I went into biz as a freelance programmer and technical writer and was in a couple of bands as a percussionist. I learned Visual Basic and Delphi, which are fun visual programming environments, and relate strongly to Director, which I use now. C++ is very flexible, of course, but I was never interested in working that far within system stuff or, worse yet, database stuff, was always more drawn

to the interface and working at the application level rather than making industrial widgets.

Then in 95 I started and hosted a weekly live poetry reading venue (lively media!) in Victoria BC Canada, my hometown. That's still running, though I am not part of it at this point. And the Web was really starting to kick in, so I learned HTML, Javascript, and some Java, and met Ted Warnell, Talan Memmott, Claire Dinsmore, David Knoebel, Jennifer Ley, Reiner Strasser, Philippe Castellin, Miekal And and some other digital writers on the net. My site started out as a listing of the upcoming events at the poetry reading series, and I started to get in touch with writers around the world, which I had longed to be able to do for some time.

The first Web project I participated in was Florian Cramer's wonderful Seven By Nine Squares project in 95, though I didn't have a clue what Neoism was at that time. Four years later, I met Maris Kundzins in Seattle, who was in on the beginnings of Neoism. We had great fun a couple of evenings as he recounted the history of neoism to me and I showed him Florian's neoist project and much else on the Web. That was around 99 or so, during the time I lived in Seattle from 97-2000. I worked as a technical writer and solutions architect there for networkcommerce.com during the web boom. I'd end up going to bed at 3 a.m. after working on the vispo.com site, and dragged myself into work in the mornings. I knew few people in Seattle, so that was my opportunity to hunker down into my own work and do less community work.

I've since moved back to Victoria and am doing the web.art full time now.

2. concrete/visual poetry

dd: Your website is called vispo.com for visual poetry. It contains works which explore how the aesthetics of concrete poetry can be extended when features of digital media are employed. What can concrete poetry gain from digital media?

JA: I prefer the term 'visual poetry' to 'concrete poetry' because 'concrete poetry' has more historical specificity than 'visual poetry', I mean 'concrete' to me refers to a certain period of visual poetry and a certain often mimetic approach to the work. The term 'visual poetry' has some historical baggage too, I'm sure. I'd thought when I bought the domain vispo.com that it was my own term, but the term 'vispo' preceded my use of it, not surprisingly. I expect that the term was used frequently by the sorts of visual poets published on Karl Young's site Light & Dust, which is a great archive of pre-Web avant garde visual poetry.

dd: Let me jump in here and just explain why I prefer the term 'concrete poetry'. I am using Klaus Peter Dencker's terminology in this instance. Dencker's distinction was based on the observation that visual poetry creates a type of montage of letters and images whereas concrete poetry draws attention to the material qualities of the language: graphic forms of letters, font, size, color, constellation on the page and to each other. It is visual since one has to see it. The message would be lost hearing it in the radio. I find this to be a useful and appropriate distinction, since with visual poetry the intermedial aspect lies in the product itself, whereas with concrete poetry the distinction is found in the act of perception. That's why I consider your pieces Seattle Drift, Enigma n or Arteroids more in the tradition of concrete than of visual poetry. But as Dencker acknowledges: concrete poetry is often used synonymously with visual poetry. His essay was released in German in 1997 and has appeared in English on Karl Young's *Light & Dust* ("From Concrete to Visual Poetry, with a Glance into the Electronic Future") With respect to the glance into the Electronic Future, Dencker unfortunately fails to discuss the how concrete poetry benefits when letters can move and react to reader inputs.

JA: I just read the Dencker essay. That's one of the pleasures of doing interviews via email. Thanks for the link. Very interesting and well done, a valuable look into history and the future/present. However, he says at one point that concrete poetry is not mimetic. Perhaps he meant 'not mimetic' in some other sense than the one I'm thinking of. But I do find much concrete poetry rather simply mimetic in the sense that the meaning of the word is often mimed in the shape of the word or the shape is otherwise quite closely related to the meaning of the word. Not all of it is that simple, of course. But those "postulates of concrete poetry—to be simple, understandable, communicative, essential, and exact" Dencker mentions, along with "the idea of a universal [concrete] common poetry" did make too often for a simple-minded mimeticism that restricts much concrete in its range of thought and feeling. Nonetheless, as you point out, concrete gives off a strong sense of the materiality of language and, yes, that is something I appreciate about concrete.

In any case, visual poetry or concrete poetry and the Web—they go together extremely well, don't they. They involve awareness of media, and the Web is multi in that regard, and very visual—in a way that is too expensive in print to be practiced by you and me. Also, the monitor can handle many more colors than the printing process. Not necessarily all at once!—visual artists ask if I have taken too much acid—yet they often have a painterly sense rather than a sense of color for the monitor. The monitor is a very special and unusual visual display, appreciated correctly. It's color range is unparalleled but its resolution is not as fine as in print. It needn't appear pixelated but you need to know what you're doing to avoid pixelation—I have never been of the 'rectilinear' school of net.art, though there is some fine work in that style. I like curves too much.

Even before the Web, visual poets often worked in various media, and those who did/do sound poetry often resort/ed to visual poetry for various fairly obvious reasons. I like to refer to the words of Apollinaire on this matter. In 1917, in his essay *L'Esprit Nouveau et les Poètes*, said:

Typographical artifices worked out with great audacity have the advantage of bringing to life a visual lyricism which was almost unknown before our age. These artifices can still go much further and achieve the synthesis of the arts, of music, painting, and literature ... One should not be astonished if, with only the means they have now at their disposal, they set themselves to preparing this new art (vaster than the plain art of words) in which, like conductors of an orchestra of unbelievable scope they will have at their disposal the entire world, its noises and its appearances, the thought and language of man, song, dance, all the arts and all the artifices, still more mirages than Morgane could summon up on the hill of Gibel, with which to compose the visible and unfolded book of the future.... Even if it is true that there is nothing new under the sun, the new spirit does not refrain from discovering new profundities in all this that is not new under the sun. Good sense is its guide, and this guide leads it into corners, if not new, at least unknown. But is there nothing new under the sun? It remains to be seen.

So working in several media simultaneously is not new to visual poetry. What is new is the way they can be combined with programming, and the resulting interactivity, and the types of interrelations between media and arts. Also, everything that is digital is 'just' a string of binary digits, in a sense, and so transformations of objects and even media types are beyond the surreal, well into voodoo. I suppose this is commonly called the 'hyperreal,' which predates the digital. I remember hearing that term applied to some of Jean Paul Curtay's sound compositions, for instance, in the eighties, and yes they were highly transformative in the invisibility of sound. Not psychedelic, but hypereal. Transformation in one style or another is often crucial to art. It is as though the styles of transformation in an art somehow carry much of the grammar of the world views.

Also, you know, there has long been a fine tradition in the avant garde of publishing one's own work and partaking of the communications network that exists in the avant garde outside of institutional conduits. The Web strengthens and broadens this network. Which is obviously important to you also at *dichtung-digital*.

dd: Indeed, digital media provides a new means of aesthetic expression, and the Web allows for this activity to occur independently within a new network. In this instance one would probably be best to dismiss what Foucault referred to as the internal and external police of discourse. But back to aesthetics. Let's talk about "Arteroids", a "literary computer game for the Web" that allows players to shoot words. How does "Arteroids" work and what is the deeper meaning behind it?

JA: After I did Nio there were various things I wanted to explore in more interactive audio work. The game. Keyboard control. And I want to make language and image more integral to the work, and maybe some sort of narrative or other human event-oriented progression to complement the progression of song and composition and visual art composition, because I think that interactive audio can be a fab alternative to the music video as well as bring about new forms of music. And I wanted to learn how to save info to the player's computer so that I could save their compositions to disk. Also, collision detection is the basis of some forms of generative music you may have seen on the Web.

Arteroids 1.0 does most of these things, but there's no audio! Yet. I hope to add more levels of play to it. I put in about six months on 1.0, but six months of dev with a one-man-team doesn't go so far in making a good computer game for the Web.

One of the things I learned is that when you look at the code of a 'shoot em up,' there is nothing inherently 'shoot-em-up' about the code. Instead, it deals with collision detection and message passing between objects. So that there are many possibilities in the code beyond the typically homicidal 'shoot and destroy' paradigm that shoot-em-ups display.

Part of my aspiration with *Arteroids* is to find the gems on the other side of the 'shoot-em-up' over the course of several levels. A kind of evolution from the shoot-em-up toward something more significant than shooting and beating the clock. But that's what I want to do in the future. What is it now?

Well, when I've sent out notices about *Arteroids*, I've said that it is a literary computer game for the Web and that it requires some coordination and a desire to create and destroy texts. Canto One (level 1) I think of as the battle of poetry against itself and the forces of dullness.

I wanted to try to take poetry in a direction that I hadn't seen before, and make the game nicely playable, fast moving. Most arty computer games you encounter on the Web are in slow motion and they don't play well as computer games. The artists are forced by their lack of programming skills to stress the conceptual because the game aspect just isn't there either in terms of speed of play or usually game design.

dd: This is an interesting aspect and provokes the question as to whether or not this assumption can be reversed: Does a plethora of programming skills greatly reduce the need for attention to conceptual detail?

JA: Is that a polite way of saying programmers usually suck at art? Yeah, they do. To answer your question, though, it could if you wanted it to, I suppose, or didn't know any better. But that isn't my aspiration.

If you meet the computer game on its own turf, it will give you some resistance. Just as the visual and interactive in web.art can easily overwhelm language to the point

where one doesn't care to read the text, so too computer games will vie for attention to their interactivity and the game, and possibly overwhelm the language or whatever else one might want attention drawn toward. That's partly why I put the text editor in Canto Two (level 2), to focus attention on the language dynamics of the piece.

Still, when you are actually playing, I'm not sure how many people read the texts. It is an interesting challenge, I hope, to do so, to read in such a way, to understand the conflicts set up in the texts and not just conflicts but the idea that here we're dealing with the word and what is inside the word, the word cracked open, the word exploded, the outer word and the inner word.

And though the green and blue texts are separate, they stream together perhaps into a new text, however you read it.

dd: New text which, since the letters do not form to words, denies any meaning. The clash of poetry (at least at level 1 where the word poetry is fighting the word poetry) leaves behind letters pertinent only in their graphic form and constellation on the page.

JA: I was thinking of the way you can read the blue and green texts together before they explode. After they explode, you can read them partially (the letters are in the same order, only arranged in circles) but it might cost you your life. Allow me to dedicate the game to those who would prefer to die but play on to see what will happen next.

Still, in future levels I would like to make the reading experience more integral to the game play, ie, you have to read it to progress in the game, and so on. Yet to come!

dd: So, it would turn from an action game into an adventure game where one needs to pick up passwords in order to proceed?

JA: I'm not sure yet. In any case, one would not want to reduce it to riddle but permit mystery to find its place in the game.

Design is, in part, about understanding what draws the eye's attention first (and second...). There are similar issues associated with activities (game play 'vs' reading etc) that involve not only the eye. When possible, it is best not to totally resist the medium but to push it to its fullest and find/create mystery within the dynamics opened by the medium rather than attempt to impose one's preconceptions.

I find writers often speak about resisting the nature of the medium, and certainly it's a good thing to have one's own purposes and ends and 'voice'. Yet there are certain types of resistance that are counter-productive, that stop you from working with the poetential energies of media. There's been a value judgement on the energies of the media as being thoughtless or undesirable whereas maybe they're simply unexplored and offer possibilities that we aren't 'reading' right. There's a certain

amount of fear and ignorance involved in decisions not to go there at all, not to see how the energy of the media can be bended.

What I'm getting at is that to integrate reading and text more integrally, maybe I need to get deeper into the game and the action, not step back from it as a bookish person. You can see that idea at work so far in *Arteroids* in that I've been trying to work toward something that is eminently playable, though I don't think it's there yet.

3. sound poetry

dd: With *Nio* you turn to sound poetry and visual music. Here one can choose to activate six of 16 sound loops represented through 16 letters or icons arranged in a circle. These icons activate the appropriate sound and animation. What does *Nio* mean to you in contrast to your work in kinetic concrete poetry?

JA: Yes, that's 'verse one' of *Nio*. Verse two is a bit different, as you know. Verse one deals with layers of sound and animations, whereas verse two deals with sequences and layers of sound and animation.

All during the nineties I was concentrating on writing, on the visual, and on programming. Interactive audio for the Web wasn't feasible for a long time for bandwidth and tech reasons, as you know. I did hardly any audio work at all during the nineties though, as I've mentioned, in the eighties I did much audio work. So it was a great pleasure to get back to audio and combine it with what I learned in the nineties. *Nio* was a kind of connection of the work I did in the eighties with the work I did in the nineties. Sound poetry and music and voice are important to me. I am excited to combine those with kinetic poetry, which I love also. So *Nio* was sort of twenty years in the making. It was an advance for me but also a return.

dd: As you say in a former [interview](#) about *Nio* with Randy Adams you like "to watch the ways letters and words hang out together". You call *Nio* "a kind of lettristic dance", an "alternative music video". This reminds me of a statement of Squid Soup about the aim of their work [Untitled](#) "A feeling of being somewhere". *Untitled* and *Nio* are both audio-visual pieces, both interactive and kind of hypnotic. They seem to fit with what Andrew Darley pins down about visual digital culture: "a shift away from prior modes of spectator experience based on symbolic concerns (and 'interpretative models') towards recipients who are seeking intensities of direct sensual stimulation." (Visual Digital Culture. Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres. London und New York: Routledge 2000) In this "aesthetics of the sensual" the point is the "curiosity or fascination with the materiality and mechanics (artifice) of the image itself". I have exactly this feeling dealing with *NIO* and "Untitled": it draws me in, I can't help it, and it is not about semantic interpretation

anymore, it is all about experimenting. I am not a reader anymore, I have become a player. How do you see the relation of NIO and similar interactive audio-visual pieces to immersion, contemplation, semantics?

JA: I recall a recent conversation in which people were comparing European net.art and North American net.art. Someone said that in Europe there is more concern with language and politics and culture whereas in North America, it's 'blow my mind or get off the fucking road.'

And, you know, there is a crassness to that latter mentality, of course, that is congruent with North American culture not just on the Web. Yet there is also in it a certain imperative to dig in as an artist as deep as you can and make that box and the monitor and the speakers and the keyboard and mouse and the whole thing jump into your face and your whole head and, yeah, blow your mind. So, oddly enough, it has its plusses as well as obvious drawbacks (like is there anything left of that mind to blow?).

The guitar; the electric guitar. The pen; the electric pen. When music underwent that transformation, it must have seemed destructive of music to many, and it probably was destructive of a lot of musics, in certain ways. But music was and is very broad, and getting broader, often via the electric and now the digital.

And we associate with the electric guitar an especially sensual, primal crawdad or full-blood dynamo hum. Oddly, electric guitar is often associated with music in which we sense a huge engine. The rock and the roll in rock and roll is partly human, part engine, dynamo. Rock and roll is an odd, raucous synthesis of humanity and the machine.

I do think it's inevitable that the electric and digital will change writing--in many ways--but also via this infusion you speak of concerning the sensual into the material of language. I don't think that portends a diminishing of the contemplative in writing, though, any more than music with the electric guitar is incapable of the contemplative. We will learn to read both sensually and contemplatively, thoughtfully. And write in such a way. Text, sound, image, and interactivity will enjoy more intimate relations than they do now.

When we look back at the birth of electric music, we see that there was resistance to it, though it was mainly billed as a youth/age conflict. This one isn't so much a youth/age thing--I'm an old fart myself--but you know it's hard to resist electricity for long when it gets into media and arts.

dd: You are certainly right to draw this analogy. Digital aesthetics will become as ubiquitous as electric guitar is today. However, there are different things an electric guitar or synthesizer can do as well as a guitar or piano. The sound can be pleasing and intense or sophisticated and demanding. Maybe it is not primarily a matter of the medium but of the cultural background or patterns as you pointed it out. And

maybe then the medium helps to spread out these cultural patterns like McDonald's Burgers. I have the feeling the digital medium with its animation and click gesture is by default not the right place for contemplatively, thoughtful writing. It demands a certain power, and courage, to do so and to stop and stay in the middle of the 'fucking road' (though, in the Web are so many bypasses ;).

JA: I suppose there would be a question about the types of contemplation. Do we contemplate poems, pictures, music etc differently? Suggesting different themes, meanings, etc and then leaving it up to the wreader to make of it what they will has a way of letting people bring their own creativity and meditation to things rather than 'spelling it out'. Art is always already interactive in this sense. Also, meditation can also occur as reflection after the fact.

One reads at one's leisure. There is no timer. This is one of the ways in which meditation is naturally a part of reading. I do try to make my stuff so that the wreader has that sort of control over it. Pause buttons. The ability to go back and forward in the piece as one pleases.

I imagine that when the electric guitar emerged there were objections to its lack of thoughtfulness. But that changes over time, as we find the full range of our humanity in the art, find the full range of the art.

The mouse is one of the ways to interact with work. There's also the keyboard, which has been known to be occasionally involved with contemplative activity.

4. money and media stew

dd: *Nio* is half a piece of art half a program that you can use to produce your own music at home. Do you think about making money out of *Nio*?

JA: Well, I'm trying to spend my life at this work full-time, and have for the last year and a half. So I have to make a buck somehow. I can't live on arts grants forever. It isn't *Nio* so much as interactive audio for the Web that I have in mind. I think that there are new forms of music emerging from the Web, and that's exciting artistically. I want to be a part of that. Right now I'd say I'm concentrating on the art, research, tech, and biz of interactive audio for the Web. Instead of *Nio*, I could have spent more time on developing the tech to greater sophistication than is present in *Nio*, but I thought, well, it'd be more fun to go whole hog on the art, I am moved more strongly in that direction and, incidentally, a strong piece of art would be more convincing concerning the possibilities of the tech and the biz than an empty shell of technology would be.

I've laid out some of the possibilities for the art, tech, and biz in an essay called [Nio and the Art of Interactive Audio for the Web](#)".

The arts councils seem to be convinced. Now if I can just get some businesses such as Sonic Foundry interested in it!

dd: Last can of worms. Whereas your kinetic-concrete poetry could be attached to digital literature your audio-visual poetry rather belongs to digital art - if such a distinction is appropriate at all, what actually happens in the Net where sites are explicitly dedicated to netart or netliterature. How do you see this issue? What is your experience about the ongoing discussion online and offline about digital art and literature, or even about the existence of digital aesthetics at all?

JA: I try to synthesize arts and media and programming in my work. So some net writers see what I'm doing as reductive of poetry. Etc. Certainly it's true that when you synthesize arts and media, certain things are lost or discarded from a particular art, at least in a particular piece. Yet it's also true that other things are gained in the synthesis.

Joseph Keppler used to publish a magazine called *Poets.Painters.Composers*. I asked him about the periods in the title, what they were there for. He said that although the magazine and its other projects contained many collaborations and syntheses between arts, it is nonetheless useful to distinguish the arts. Synergy is between distinct entities. I agree with him.

I appreciate *dichtung-digital* for its strong emphasis on digital writing. There isn't too much on your site about digital art more broadly, and that is not a problem. Each medium and art has its own peculiar phenomenology. It is important to understand these on their own terms when you combine and synthesize arts and media. Rather than treat them indiscriminately in a media stew that subordinates one medium or art to another, or mistakes writing for visual art, etc.

dd: It is interesting that we started our interview with a remark on the synthesis of abilities that digital media demand and now end with the conclusion still to distinguish the arts. This discussion is to be continued. For now, thank you so much for this interview.

JA: Thank you, Roberto. And thanks for your *dichtung-digital.de* site--well done!