network (h)activity: Interview with Mark Amerika

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Abstract

Mark Amerika is author of two literary novels, "The Kafka Chronicles" and "Sexual Blood" (1995), and also the Founding Director of the Alt-X Online Network (started 1993). Mark Amerika's project GRAMMATRON is one of the most widely accessed art sites on the World Wide Web, has been exhibited internationally including the Whitney Biennial 2000. Amerika's most recent project, PHON:E:ME, an mp3 concept album with an accompanying "hyper:liner:notes," was released at the Walker Art Center's Gallery 9 web site in 1999. Roberto Simanowski talked to Mark Amerika about his works, authorship, 'Avant-Garde Capitalism', and New Media Writing competitions.

dd: Mark, could you tell us first, why you switched from writing books to writing hypertext?

MA: The short answer is that I wanted to continue experimenting with narrative form and to expand the concept of writing beyond the print culture. I have a background in making experimental film and was interested in the potential of hypertext and other emerging forms of new media, but did not take it seriously until I started developing my practice on the Internet in 1993. There is a longer answer too.

First of all, you have to keep in mind that, for me, writing is surviving. It is not a leisurely activity that I approach in terms of "oh, one day I would like to write a novel." Cocteau called writing a disease, and Bataille referred to it as a madness, something he could not NOT do. I can relate to those descriptions, although I may be more apt to think of writing in relation to Burroughs and his line about language being a virus and, from there, writing being an addiction.

The reason I am giving you all of these prefatory remarks is because it is actually difficult for me to compartmentalize my writing practice into different areas or genres. I write novels because I am intrigued with the idea of exploding what has become the standard model for narrative construction. Anyone who has read my

books knows that my novels came into being as multi-linear storyworlds made of language play, graphical page design and fictionalized states of desire. My novels actively work against narrative closure and are intentionally created to defamiliarize the reader's relationship to conventional narrative devices like character development, plot, setting, proper grammar and/or syntax, all of the things that we expect to get from the conventional book world and its one-size-fits-all novel experience. I see narrative art as a place to work against the pull of false consciousness that we find in so much predetermined fiction writing.

My first novel, *The Kafka Chronicles*, received a lot of attention in both the mainstream world but also, more importantly, in the alternative culture. It was taken seriously by the underground music world and this led to my increased interest in D-I-Y culture and the so-called zine scene. I saw great potential in creating distributed communities of niche audiences as opposed to the all-or-nothing go-for-broke mentality of the big publishers. It just made more sense to me as an artist and cultural producer to take the alternative culture more seriously. So the advent of the Internet as a potential compositional as well as distribution medium seemed the perfect fit for my evolving interests in creating viable alternatives to the mainstream publishing industry and its dependency on multi-national corporate capitalism.

By the time the second novel, *Sexual Blood*, came out, I had already started Alt-X, perhaps the oldest surviving online art and writing network, and when I went on my 16-city book tour for SB, all of the attention was on Alt-X. I would give a reading to a large audience in Seattle or Minneapolis or New York, and then, after the reading, I would ask for questions and expect to hear from fans of my first book, *The Kafka Chronicles*, since it went into three printings in a very short period of time. But no, most of the questions were about Alt-X and the future of writing and publishing in a network culture. This was on my mind too, and by the time I had finished the book tour, I realized I needed to explore these options more.

Meanwhile, I had already started the first draft of a new novel called GRAMMATRON, which was spurring interest from a few major publishing houses, but I was adamant about what I wanted to do and decided to create a unique work of Internet art that would be made available for free to readers all over the world.

Also, by this time, I had already developed a relationship with Brown University as a visiting artist, attending their Vanguard Narrative Festival produced by Bob Coover and then, later, the Pong Festival which was more focused on digital art. I applied to their program so I could develop the GRAMMATRON project, and was accepted, with a Creative Writing fellowship and, with the help of Coover, George Landow, and others, spent two years reworking GRAMMATRON, which I had already started in Boulder. Now I could focus on both writing and cultural production in electronic spaces without necessarily leaving my narrative art practice behind.

dd: Your web site Alt-X is widely praised and considered "the literary publishing model of the future" (Publisher's Weekly). What does this site contain, what is the concept behind it?

MA: Alt-X, believe it or not, is now over seven years old. In net years, that feels like a millennium. At first, I thought of Alt-X as an experimental art project, one that would create a distributed community of writers and artists from around the world who could build both individual and collaborative art works aimed at targeted literary audiences around the world. But something else happened very fast: we were immediately seen more generally as one of the most happening alternative culture sites on the web which, at the time, was a very alternative medium.

This mainstream international attention was fast and intense -- totally unexpected. All of a sudden, what I had been used to, i.e. producing the printed Black Ice literary magazine for about 1000 core readers, exploded into an online publishing site that was attracting between 75,000 and 100,000 visitors a month. The pressure to continually create new content every month and to turn it into a profitable business model was overwhelming. But the Alt-X team stuck to our guns and focused on creating even more challenging work than we had been creating up to that time. This is when we started rethinking the entire site as a multi-linear, multi-disciplinary network where the digerati meet the literati.

To this effect we have over the years created an incredible amount of work. We started off by publishing fiction, interviews with writers, artists and theorists, virtually reprinting Postmodern classics, an electronic book review and forum, irreverent manifestos and essays, and my *Amerika Online column*, which has since been translated into German at the ◢*Telepolis* site. Perhaps the areas of development that would be of most interest to your readers are Electronic Book Review, Black Ice, Virtual Imprints and Hyper-X.

◢Electronic Book Review, in particular, has continued to do things that no other serious online journal is doing right now. Joe Tabbi and Anne Burdick and the entire editorial and design team are creating an entirely new interface for critical interaction with new media and literary work, a space where critical artists of different backgrounds and interests radically reconfigure the ways in which graphic design, writing, editing and reading converge in the web-based interface. The interface itself, focused as it is on threads and interweaving, is a metaphor for what the site is doing with all of its rich content. And then there are the hundreds of contributors whose work constantly challenges our notions of writing and reading in relation to critical theory, network culture and the blurring of the visual with the textual.

Alt-X is also now about to launch its own Ebook series, mp3 label, Palm Pilot programs, and many other publishing projects. We're very lucky that our senior

editor, Ron Sukenick, who has been a kind of behind-the-scenes Pomo Godfather to the site, is directing the new publishing project out of New York.

Of course, on our way to inventing new modes of writing, reading and publishing, we found that the mainstream literary art world was emphatically opposed to our vision of literature's future. Calvin Reid at Publishers Weekly understood what we were doing, but not many others. Then, something changed. Something unexpected. The visual, conceptual and digital art worlds all started paying attention to what we were doing and we began getting a reputation for developing some of the early forms of Internet Art, which we were, even though we weren't calling it that at the time. In 1996-97, and especially after the release of my GRAMMATRON, the site started calling into question what had become the arbitrary differences between publishing and exhibiting, curating and editing, creating a work of hypertextually-driven narrative or poetic art and a new kind of net art or web art.

Our online exhibition, *Digital Studies: Being in Cyberspace*, was perhaps one of the first sincere attempts at blurring these distinctions and now, of course, everyone is doing it, from the Whitney Biennial 2000 to ZKM to gallery spaces all around the globe.

dd: Your project GRAMMATRON was released in June 1997 and has received praise from numerous publications. Wired writes that it "exemplifies how online literary creations are developing into an entire multi-media experience". What is the story of GRAMMATRON, how is it told?

MA: GRAMMATRON is many things at once. It's one of the earliest and more elaborate works of Internet Art that was created exclusively for the web as a way to track the developments of "web culture" in a networked-narrative environment. That is to say, GTRON is a metafictional narrativization of the network culture that was beginning to erupt at the time of its conception. My first notes started on yellow legal paper, but then quickly moved into an MS Word document that I now see was created on April 3, 1993. That's significant to me for a couple of reasons. One, the seed concept of GTRON is over seven years old! But, more importantly, that's exactly the same month that the beta-version of Mosaic, our first serious GUI-web browser, came onto the scene. The story-world that GTRON depicts, where writers become networking artists operating in cyberspace, predates my own [pseudo-]autobiographical development as kind of Internet artist and, in many ways, the story prophesizes not only my own future, but the future of the publishing and what it means to Go Digital.

In essence, the GTRON project used the evolving net culture itself, particularly the GUI-version of the web, as the perfect R&D platform to develop alternative story interfaces as well as new modes of distribution, reception and public presence (which we now often refer to as "web presence"). I was especially interested in how some of the vaporware language that was coming out of the growing new media

scene could be used against itself, to rub and / or remix alternative discourses together, everything from cyberpunk, dialectical materialism and California ideology to experimental narrative riffs from the likes of James Joyce, Arno Schmidt and Jean-Luc Godard, to name a few.

And then there is the Cabala. The old scripture, the metadocumentary, the Book of Creation, and the Golem myth. In many ways, GTRON is a retelling of the Golem myth remixed with narratological / rhetorical effects sampled from the alternative discourses mentioned above.

I was also very conscious of the fact that I wanted to experiment with many of the evolving technological features that the web could offer me, features that I would never have reason to consider when writing my novels. So there are time-based meta-tags, javascript-encoded cookies that create alternative and / or random linking structures, some very detailed and labor-intensive animated gifs, an original digital audio soundtrack, etc. These bits and pieces could only become a part of the story when the technology was made available to me. I remember when I first out about this Clear Audio compression technology and wondering how it could work for what I had in mind regarding streaming sound in the narrative environment. Clear Audio soon became Progressive Networks Real Audio which then became simply Real Networks. In those early days (not too long ago), there was a certain degree of co-dependency between GTRON and the new media industry that I felt very strongly as everything was developing, and I often took trips to corporate offices and trade shows and remember thinking, "I never had to do this when I was writing my novels."

dd: GRAMMATRON comes with a theoretical section about new storytelling and Hypertextual Consciousness. In it, you write that the readers or co-conspirators "create meaning out of the textual morass that they find themselves immersed in" (source). In another node the text reads "I link therefore I am" (source). Does the readers' activity lead to a shift from an aesthetics of contemplation to an aesthetics of activity or, to put it that way, of spectacle?

MA: It all depends on how the Internet art is created. Right now I'm working on more contemplative or, I prefer the word meditational, interfaces for my stories. It requires a greater investment of time and even patience to draw meaning from the work. The idea of readers becoming co-conspirators I have taken from Cortazar, who wrote the proto-hypertext novel *Hopscotch*. The reason I was emphasizing the need for readers to "create meaning out of the textual morass that they find themselves immersed in" has more to do with my approach to applied grammatology than any major theory on aesthetics. HTC is really more of a critifiction (to borrow Federman's term) than a straight theory piece. I see it as an early work of online conceptual art that remixes a lot of discourses, similar to what happens in the GTRON narrative, but with more post-structuralist and new media theory language

thrown in the mix to help accentuate the easy malleability of critical language. In this way, it becomes cite-specific, as well as site-specific, but with no citation to speak of. Just links -- or meta-refresheners that play on issues of speed, bandwidth, network-value, knowledge workers, the end of the book and the beginning of writing, etc.

What I liked about playing with HTC is that it became a work of conceptual art that soon was being exhibited, on its own, in many shows around the world. It got me to thinking about ideas I had read about "picturing theory" and allowed me to morph those ideas into ongoing ungoing practices of "exhibiting theory" which then led to various collaborations around the world using the piece in performance, musical composition and even techno-clubs. When theory itself begins to migrate into these other venues, these other modes of cultural production, I think we start seeing its optimum exit strategy.

dd: In your keynote address at the ◢DAC 2000 "Reconfiguring the Author: The Virtual Artist in Cyberspace" you discussed the tensions between text and image in digital art and the model of the individual author as genius. How do you see the impact of graphic design on the web writing process? How will the fact that web art is based on technology change authorship?

MA: Authorship is not necessarily disappearing, as in all of these "death of the author" scenarios we keep hearing about. Rather, it is being reconfigured into a more fluid, oftentimes collaborative, networking experience. Take my PHON:E:ME project for instance. Sure, I came up with the initial concepts and negotiated the funding and exhibition context for its eventual display, but the work itself was collectively-generated by both an internationally networked team of artists, DJs, writers, designers, programmers and curators who produced the work *as well as* a select group of artist-writers-theorists whose work got sampled into the project's Big Remix.

The idea was to use available technology in a way that would challenge various forms of narrative construction. For example, let's take the notion of "the author's voice." I am uncomfortable with this phrase. I remember my friend, the late-great novelist Kathy Acker, saying, in a radio dialogue she and I were part of, that she *has* no voice, that she just "steals shit." In her own straightforward way, Acker was really tapping into what so much work of the last 100 years is about -- appropriating, remixing, sampling, citing, mirroring, virtually republishing, etc. And in this way, I wanted to create a work that was fighting against notions of originality, genius, intellectual property and all of the things that bind one (an author and a reader) to a book and the political economy of meaning that we associate with such a tangible object. Of course, I had already begun investigating these issues in both GRAMMATRON and my novels, even though the latter were obviously bound by the slave-logic of the book.

So with PHON:E:ME, I started developing relationships with artists from various backgrounds and disciplines and I continued my investigations reconfiguring the writing practice into something else altogether different, an expanded concept of writing, and in so doing envisioned an mp3 concept album about concept art, where the author function becomes something more in tune with network conduction. The Author as Network Conductor has many implications and possibilities, which I won't get into here now, but the change is significant because it means that writers must make (h)activist cultural production a major part of their practice. I think this gets overlooked by too many intellectuals who are looking for the optimum comfort-zone for their theoretical musings and, needless to say, creates discomfort for many traditional writers who are bound by the book, intellectual property rights, and the big mainstream publishers and their publicity machines.

The first step in problematizing this notion of "the author's voice" was to digitally record my voice saying all of the phonemes in the English language. These digital recordings then became source-material for DJs to experiment with in their unique studio environments, taking what was supposedly the voice of the author, his utterances, the basic sound units that form sensible language, and manipulate them for their own (DJ) uses. I also recorded some spoken word rants that were themselves surf-sampled-and-manipulated language riffs taken from other sources. The two DJs involved in the project, Erik Belgum (Minneapolis) and Brendan Palmer (Sydney), were excellent collaborators and, especially with Belgum, who came up with the idea of creating a unique speech-synthesizer that would essentially provide the backbone or scaffolding for the emerging phonemic architecture, I was all-too-happy to let them do with my so-called voice whatever they wanted. That was liberating to me!

Then there was the creation of the *hyper:liner:notes* which accompanied and soon became a central feature of PHON:E:ME. These textual patterns that emerged and became the hyper:liner:notes were also heavily manipulated. You can see them as hypermediated text chunks that then become randomized within a Shockwave interface. In fact, we tried to limit the so-called "hypertextual" element as much as we could, reconceptualizing online narrative space as an anti-link (and thus anti-consumer) practice. We became more interested in what we started calling "openings," "wandings," "conducting," etc. The entire design of the site, directed by L.A. designer Anne Burdick with incredible artistic and programming collaboration from Cam Merton in Perth and Tom Bland in San Francisco, was -- as far as I am concerned -- part of the story. The animation, the color scheme, the use of typography, the hidden codes, and overall visual metaphor of the interface we developed for the project, all contribute to how the story works, or more importantly how the story works against conventional narrative structure and behavior.

In fact, the more I think about it, narrative and authorship, don't even feel like the right terms here. It feels more like process-oriented network art that has a story to

it, an ongoing ungoing story, we might say, although this should not be misconstrued with the sort of anything-goes, anyone-can-contribute, pseudo-utopian ideal of the Network as Author, since we all know that most of the projects that grow out of that false logic are, for the most part, uninteresting experiments in what ends up being chat-discussions camouflaged as fictitious discourses procured by hapless participants.

Still, though, coming to terms with language and meaning in this new media context is beginning to feel useless. For example, the term ebook. I don't like that term at all, and yet, if I think of PHON:E:ME as a heavily manipulated ebook -- well, when measured against the general usage of that term, i.e. repurposing book content in electronic format -- all of a sudden, it feels very far removed from old modes of cultural production like conventional book publishing, especially if you now think of an ebook as an mp3 concept album that is being exhibited as Internet art in traveling shows like the Walker Art Center's "Let's Entertain" or big industry shows like SIGGRAPH 2000.

dd: One of your considerations at DAC 2000 was the blurring of the lines between art, entertainment and what the corporate media industry likes to call content. How do you see the future of digital art? What role will 'Avant-Garde Capitalism', as you term it in an essay, play in this setting?

MA: Digital art distributed or taking place on the Internet can play a more (h)activist or interventionist role in the evolution of this new medium. The time it takes to get online and locate a unique cluster of interlinked, distributed communities (networked-audiences, online markets) is much less than what we had to deal with when developing cultural productions within the confines of older paradigms. One of the interesting things going on right at this moment is that the gold rush mentality that came and now went with all of the hype surrounding e-commerce has proven to many of us that the effects this medium will have on our international culture is very hard to track right now.

I was recently on a panel with the President of CNN, the former President of NBC and a few others, and when the TV correspondent who was moderating asked us all what we expect to see in 10 years, I deliberately suggested that "perhaps 10 years from now we will have found out that the network cannot be properly commodified by the big corporate enterprises and that there will be this move back to using the new media technology as a way to create alternative forms of art and communication." Now, some may immediately say "where is Amerika's head? he must be dreaming..." -- that I don't see the way the web has become overly commercialized. But even my students too are now beginning to create their own (h)activist Internet art practice, wherein we see all of this slick corporate net media as just more source-material, more source-code, to surf-sample-manipulate.

The main part of this (h)activist strategy is to blur the lines between fiction and faction, the Truth and the truth, content and advertising. This last blurring I mention, the one between content and advertising, is perhaps the most salient to me now because we are essentially playing the same game that the big corpo sites are playing. That is to say, many net artists are using their ingenuity to become serious players in the attantion-economy, especially as it exists on the WWW.

If, for example, Phillip Morris wants to distort the truth by creating web content that basically lies about their mission and, in so doing, falsely advertises how responsible they are as a multi-national corporation, then we can easily access that data and manipulate it to our own ends to tell a different story -- a kind of Phillip Morris remix that then gets distributed or channeled to our own elaborately networked communities -- although our version is fictional too, albeit a more robust, intellectually-provocative fiction. And we can not only get that out into the public domain in the time it takes to hit the Put button in our ftp program, we can also unleash an online media campaign that may increase the amount of traffic we get to our site. This isn't to say that the major corporations are not aware of these parallel strategies. The President of CNN came up to me after our panel and told me that he totally understands our strategy and that we essentially are delivering to our audience our version of the Truth, our version of history-in-the-making, the one we as Internet artist's are making up as we go along. Of course, we pose no threat to CNN or other mainstream news organizations, at least not yet, but our ability to actively "version" the (hi)stories of our contemporary lives on the Net changes things significantly. Artists/writers want a piece of the "reality-programming" action too.

dd: Alt-X and 🖉trAce have organized an International Hypertext Competition in 1998. In 2000 it is called 🖉Competition for New Media Writing. Have we already passed the Golden Age of Literary Hypertext, as Robert Coover has complained in his essay early 2000? The term New Media Writing does not refer to a specific structure of writing but to everything what can be done in the digital realm. What is this competition looking for and how is it going to judge who deserves the £1000?

MA: Good question. We are "feeling our way" through the cultural upheavals that are taking place in and around the evolving network culture, and have decided to use this competition as an event that celebrates an expanded concept of writing in online culture. New media writing could still be hypertext, but it could also be animated typography or experimental/poetic imagetext, like one of our winners last time, Jenny Rice's project called Rice. A good example of what I mean by New Media Writing can be found at the trAce incubation site by clicking on the "Salon Exhibitors." There you will see a summer show I curated entitled "ink.ubation" -- there is a wide range of work there that I contextualize in my curatorial statement "What in the World Wide Web is Happening to Writing?" As I mention there, much of the excitement being generated around online writing has to do with our ability as writers to use the net as a medium to

1) experiment with formal issues that have been exhausted in book form,
2) pioneer new modes of cultural production and distribution,
3) problematize the individual Author-As-Genius model by way of collaborative authoring networks that sustain non-hierarchical group production and teamwork.

I find a lot of this work infectious, like some kind of language virus I want to continue spreading...

dd: I look forward to reading the winner of this year's competition and all the new project which will appear in the future. Thank you very much for the interview.