Angles

New Perspectives on the Anglophone World

7 | 2018

Digital Subjectivities

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/angles/738>

DOI: 10.4000/angles.738

ISSN: 2274-2042

Publisher

Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur

Electronic reference

Jerome Fletcher, "Traces of the Body in Digital Performance", *Angles* [Online], 7 | 2018, Online since 01 November 2018, connection on 06 June 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/angles/738> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.738>

This text was automatically generated on 6 June 2022.

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Traces of the Body in Digital Performance

Jerome Fletcher

- 1 The aim of this paper is relatively straightforward. It seeks to explore the idea of embodiment in relation to digital subjectivities by presenting a number of digital text works which exhibit this idea in a variety of modes. In effect, the following constitutes something of a curated essay. For our purposes I am treating embodiment as an aspect of subjectivity, not as coterminous with it.
- 2 I want to begin by making it clear that here the term “embodiment” is being used both in its specific sense to refer to the presence, location and role of the *body* in the instantiation of a digital text, but also in its broad sense, to refer to the physical, visible form of an idea, quality, etc. The selection of digital textworks has been made to reflect this idea. Moreover, the textworks were chosen to exemplify how the body constitutes the *sine qua non* of their viewing. The works are not just received by individual subjectivities but are initiated by them and performed through them. The body is not external to the assemblage of the work, but forms a vital component of it. Each performance or instantiation is therefore renewed with each subsequent encounter.
- 3 Lurking behind embodiment, of course, is the notion of digital materiality, which is still problematic in certain quarters. There are those who persist in thinking that digital text is somehow ‘immaterial’. In the last of her *Nine Epistemological Essays*, Johanna Drucker writes of this attitude that it triggers a homicidal tendency in her. In “What is digital materiality?”, she says:

the rhetoric of data as difference and total abstract formalism still shrieks from the covers of popular publications just as surely as it sneaks into every undergraduate classroom session in which critical exegesis is applied to digital poetics. (Drucker 2013: 119)
- 4 And she goes on to wonder about those who continue to ignore the materiality of digital text:

what world of shades [do] they intend to wander in, once freed from their earthly embodied condition, and what kinds of ghostly machines [do] they intend to tap away on in that netherworld of phantom poetics. (Drucker 2013: 119)

- 5 I am not going to spell out Drucker's argument here, but I will summarise through quotation, under five headings, the conclusions she comes to in her essay.
1. Every word in the world is embodied. Digital code is not only *not* immaterial, its manifold and multiple materialities are complex.
 2. Embodiment is not inherency, but configuredness, and that may be thought in terms of relations as well as qualities.
 3. An embodied work obtains value through evidence of its making, facture.
 4. Association, configuration and relations also factor into the madeness of code, structuring protocols and making them performative according to specific qualities of their embodiment that are not simply a one-to-one correlation of mark to meaning, but work at the higher order of organisation and its emergent properties.
 5. Material properties are not fixed essences, but capabilities, performative and potential, provocative and suggestive, alive and distinct in each instance of use. (Drucker 2013: 125-6)
- 6 I would draw attention to two prevalent ideas in the above. Firstly, the idea of the making/madeness of a digital text and secondly, its performance and performativity. With this in mind, I'd like to look at four pieces of work which exemplify the concept of digital literature as being the making of a digital text through performance and the performative body. The following will explore this, before considering that apparently most immaterial aspect of digital writing — code — as a site of traces of the body and maybe as a body itself.

Four works

1. *Text Rain* (1999), by Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv. Interactive video installation

- 7 (The following link will take you to a short video which explains the technology, thinking and composition of the piece. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_u3sSffS78)

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- 8 This is a classic piece of digital writing. It dates back to the late 1990s, which makes it a piece of digital literary incunabula. The presence of the body is not only highly visible in this work, but it is a necessary condition for effective textual display. The body is required to intervene, to arrest the text in its fall in order for the poetic line to be read as significant text. The body becomes a vital part of the substrate which supports the textual display. However, this statement needs qualifying, because it is not the physical bodies that arrest the text. Within the installation, the bodies in performance are captured on video and it is the filmic trace of the body on the screen which is detected. It is this two-dimensional representation of the body which then causes the lines of the verse to be suspended in their fall long enough for the words to be read as an extended text. In effect two bodies need to be present.
- 9 Further to the materiality of the text, there is a playful inconsistency here. The program that runs this piece creates the illusion that the text has weight (gravitas,

even) as the individual letters tumble from the top to the bottom of the screen. And yet of course the one material quality which projected digital text does not possess is weight, it being composed of light.

- 10 So in *Text Rain* there is an interesting configuration of text, body and trace at play (or in performance) here, which picks up on Drucker's point that "embodiment is not inherency, but configuredness, and that may be thought in terms of relations..."

2. *Doe Den Tap Toe* (2013), by Jerome Fletcher, Thanos Polymenakos Lontiris & Adam Loveday Edwards. Digitally-triggered textwork and drum piece

- 11 (The following is a link is to a short video of the first performance of the piece at the 2103 Fascinate Conference, Falmouth. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XwTGJ_ftnA)

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Figure 3: Still from a performance of *Doe Den Tap Toe* (2013)

From the author's collection.

- 12 In this work, a body is very much present in the person of the performer. At the same time, traces of an absent body are on display — in this case, a recorded voice — as well as a number of references to marks/traces made on the body.
- 13 Tattoo — a writing on the skin. Drumming — a writing off the skin of the drum.
- 14 In English the word "tattoo" has two foreign derivatives:
1. From a Tahitian word meaning, among other things, "to strike."
 2. It also refers to a military parade and is a corruption of the Dutch word "taptoe." Taptoe is itself part of a Dutch phrase "doe den tap toe," which means "turn off the tap." This phrase was effectively beaten out by drummers in garrison towns during the Thirty Years War and it announced the curfew. The "taptoe" or tattoo told publicans and innkeepers to turn off

the beer taps, to stop selling drink to the soldiers and warned the latter to return to barracks. In this respect, it is a speech act.

- 15 In the first section of the work, the Dutch phrase is produced in a variety of combinations and repetitions.
- 16 Among the Nekgini-speaking people of Papua New Guinea, the drum is thought of as a man. It has a voice and is decorated with human features. A drum is made for a boy when he enters adulthood and it accompanies him throughout his life, such that when a man dies, the drum, together with the voice of the drum, dies with its owner. In the second section of the work, the recorded voice speaks a set of found texts taken from the essay "Drum and voice: aesthetics and social process on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea," by anthropologist James Leach (2002).

Figure 4: Photo: J. Leach

Source: James Leach, "Drum and voice: aesthetics and social process on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (8) 2002: 725. All rights reserved. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.00130>

- 17 The third section of the piece comprises phrases translated into English from Russian. The source of the phrases are criminal tattoos. These were gathered from various inmates of collective labour camps between 1948 and 1986 by a prison guard, Danzig Baldaev.

Figure 5: Danzig Baldaev. Print No. 30

© Sergei Vasiliev / FUEL. Source: <https://www.maxhetzler.com/exhibitions/fuel-fuel-present-original-works-russian-criminal-tattoo-encyclopaedia-2012/zoom-w/33>.

- 18 Obviously, within this work, the writing is not “given.” It is inert. It literally has to be beaten into life. Language, the voice, is beaten out of the drums, through an act of striking, an act of violence. The performance from the drummer therefore has a double-edged outcome. At times, he is able to prompt an audible spoken response — and at this point he effectively functions as both writer and reader. At other times, the force and volume of the performance overcomes the recorded speech, drowns it out, and the voice of the drum itself, as instrument, is asserted. For the performer in *Doe Den Tap Toe*, the writing becomes a strong reading — or maybe a misreading. For Jean-Jacques Lecercle, in *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, this process is at the heart of all acts of reading.

We understand why a strong reading has to be a misreading: the process of adjustment, in which the practice of reading consists, requires an active, and potentially violent, attitude of the reader towards the text, what the French language captures in the phrase ‘*un coup de force*’. (Lecercle 1999: 103)

- 19 Thus, in this work, writing/reading becomes a highly contextualised embodied performance born out of violence in order to construct meaning or to make meaning emerge, to force it into the open. Furthermore, in contrast to a writing machine like the typewriter, for example, where language is *pressed into* its physical support as imprint, here language could be said to be *ex-pressed* from its physical support. You could say that it is *ex-scribed* — an *ex-scription* rather than an *inscription*.

3. *Kind. Of. Or A Knot of Kind* (2013 and ongoing), by Annie Abrahams & Emmanuel Guez. Collaborative networked digital writing performance

- 20 (This link takes you to a video capture of an instantiation of the Reading Club which took place at the Jeu de Paume, Paris in November 2013: <http://readingclub.fr/events/528b45f0db03b5a945000006/0/text>)
- 21 The third work is taken from an ongoing project devised by Annie Abrahams and Emmanuel Guez entitled *The Reading Club*. In this project, a number of writers — typically four — are invited to participate in a live writing performance, or more accurately, a live editing, of a set text. This event is time-determined (typically 20 minutes) and the writers are remotely dispersed. The initial text varies with each performance. The one I worked on was a Raymond Queneau piece in translation.
- 22 The four participants are engaged in an embodied performance, and the process is then live projected to an audience who watch the text metamorphose and shift in real time. This projected performance is then captured on video and is archived online as the finished work in this form. With the Reading Club works, there is a close relationship between actual bodies and their traces. Again, what you're seeing here is the documentation of a live writing performance. The writing is collaborative and occasionally antagonistic. So, for twenty minutes a "working on the body of the text" takes place. Cutting/excising, sewing back together. A making and a re-making. The outcome was another body — a Frankensteinian monster of fragments which nodded in the direction of another digital literary classic, Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995).¹
- 23 One of the performative elements that I find intriguing about The Reading Club project in general is what could be described as the trace of the "thinking body." This is evident in the movements of the cursor — the shifts, pauses, corrections, etc. which all speak of a creative decision-making on the part of bodies which are removed from the immediate vicinity of the text but whose presence could be witnessed by the audience.

4. *Pentimento* (2010), by Jerome Fletcher, Geoffrey Olsen, Toby Holland. Digital text and image work

- 24 (See www.jeromefletcher.org.uk/projects/pentimento/ [last accessed June 2018] for a working version of this piece. As this is a Java applet you may need to reset your security settings on your browser to access this work.)

Figure 6: sample from *Pentimento*, by Jerome Fletcher, Geoffrey Olsen, Toby Holland

Jerome Fletcher, Geoffrey Olsen, Toby Holland.

- 25 A woman artist is incarcerated in a remote government “facility.” She is confined to a room where she is expected to produce a series of four murals as a donation to the State. In the process of composition, and through a process of interpretation on the part of the authorities, the painter politically betrays herself and others.

Figure 7: sample from *Pentimento*, by Jerome Fletcher, Geoffrey Olsen, Toby Holland

Jerome Fletcher, Geoffrey Olsen, Toby Holland.

- 26 The term *Pentimento*, from the Italian for repentance, refers to the trace in a painting of an alteration where the painter has changed their mind about the composition.

Figure 8: sample from *Pentimento*, by Jerome Fletcher, Geoffrey Olsen, Toby Holland

Jerome Fletcher, Geoffrey Olsen, Toby Holland.

- 27 In this work, the digital user/performer is certain respects stands in for the body of the painter. They occupy the space of the painter as they add layers of colour and texture digitally to the walls. Each section starts with the bare walls and, using the cursor, the performer works by a process of accretion to the finished surface. But this is also a paradoxical movement. The cursor not only conceals each layer, but reveals text on the new layer. The performer reads and interprets the text (and images) and is therefore also occupying the space of the political body; the political body which will condemn the painter. The performer effectively becomes tripartite through their embodied performance.

Figure 9: sample from *Pentimento*, by Jerome Fletcher, Geoffrey Olsen, Toby Holland.

Jerome Fletcher, Geoffrey Olsen, Toby Holland.

- 28 The still images are screenshots from a performance of *Pentimento*. Each time the performer accesses the work it can be re-written through an editing process, which

throws into doubt any stable notion of subjectivity in respect of the authorship of the work.

Code

- 29 I mentioned in the introduction that I would finish by looking briefly at what is often thought of as the most “immaterial” aspect of digital writing, namely, code. And yet, even here, it takes no great effort to detect traces of the body — some traces are very visible, some recondite, some implied. Moreover, code could be thought of not simply as bearing traces of the body but also as a body itself.
- 30 This will be something of a cursory overview, under three headings:

1. Live coding

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- 31 Live coding is a performative writing practice where the coder is very much present and visible within the performance, and invariably working in collaboration with another performer — a dancer, for example (see <https://vimeo.com/62323808> Alex McLean and Kate Sicchio). The process of writing code is in real time, improvisatory and durational. The spectators can watch the code writing process as a projection, a scenographic background to the live performer. Thus, they are invited to consider the relationship between the body of code as an output, the body of the performer and the process of coding. This is often a relationship that is not easy to discern and one which shifts around in terms of leading and response. Hence it may be that the coder responds to the movements of the performer, or that the movements of the performer respond to the output from the coder which is often sonic.

2. Code comments

- 32 As well as coding-as-performance, the code can also be a location for comment, explication and analysis. One such example is “The Sea and Spar between” by Nick Montfort and Stephanie Strickland (http://nickm.com/montfort_strickland/sea_and_spar_between/sea_spar.js). In this textwork, on accessing the source code, you can read within the lines a gloss on the digital work which does not appear at the front end of the work itself but is evidence of the trace of the writing/composing body. Here the presence of the writer/s is reinserted into the textwork.

3. Code development — individual and communal

- 33 In his essay on the “Performativity of code: Software and Cultures of Circulation,” Adrian MacKenzie makes an important distinction between the software of an operating system (in this case he is referring to Linux) and the hardware of the machine:

[An] operating system may not be reducible to a conventional commodified object if it constantly modulates as it moves through a distributed collective of

programmers and system administrators. By contrast, the same thing cannot be said for computer hardware. Almost without exception, computer hardware is commodified and its production is industrial.

[...] Linux represents a form of collective agency in the process of constituting itself. This ongoing constitution is performative with respect to the efficacy of Linux as a technical object and with respect to the fabrication of Linux as a cultural entity. (MacKenzie 2005:73)

- 34 He goes on to argue that code writing constitutes a speech act in Austinian terms. This is something taken up by Scott Dexter et al. in an essay “On the Embodied Aesthetics of Code.”

The embodied foundations of programming share much with the embodied foundations of mathematics: ‘Our mathematics of calculation and the notation we do it in is chosen for bodily reasons [...] [but] the algorithm, being freed from meaning and understanding, can be implemented in a physical machine called a computer, a machine that can calculate everything perfectly without understanding anything at all’ (Lakoff & Núñez 2000: 86). That is, while an implementation of an algorithm may be perceived at some level as being simply rote calculation, its grounding in meaning arises from human embodiment. (Dexter et al. 2011: 8-9)

- 35 In other words, we would do well to remember that code writing, far from being some abstract, uncontextualised practice, is carried out by embodied creatures with human concerns and via extended human interactions.

Conclusion

- 36 Let’s return to the comment by Johanna Drucker at the head of this paper, where she bemoans the fact that some/many still cling to the notion that digital artworks are somehow “immaterial” or “mechanical.” The examples shown here are intended to counter that notion by emphasising the absolute centrality and necessity of the material body as a key component of the digital assemblage. Furthermore, these examples are not presented as outliers, but as representative of a wide range of digital textworks.
- 37 If there is a conclusion here, it is a simple one — that we have to view digital textwork not as an inert dehumanised object from which the subject has been erased, but as a performative, eventilised text. In that respect, in order to give a full account of the digital text we need to consider where and how the body is implicated in (in the sense of “folded into”) the process. In relation to the performance of digital text, I would like to make the strong claim that digital text always presupposes a type of body *somewhere* — even if it is just the body that initiates the performance by switching on the machine, choosing the program, clicking on the icon, swiping the screen, moving the mouse, etc. More to the point, this raises the question of what happens to the discourse around digital literature if the body is moved to a position of centrality in the performative assemblage that is digital text, especially as this is a move which in many ways runs counter to the history of literary critical thinking from modernism onwards.

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Of course, we can talk about the body here, but what always emerges from this sort of enquiry is that there is no such thing as *the* body. We are always presented with a multiplicity of bodies — the thinking body, the metaphorical body, the physical body, the coded body, the remote body, the implied body, the data body, the gendered body, etc. I could go on. So perhaps the first thing we need is a certain scepticism towards the notion of the body itself — we should always ask, whose body and what sort of body?

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NOTES

1. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patchwork_Girl_\(hypertext\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patchwork_Girl_(hypertext)).

ABSTRACTS

It is still the case that in many discussions about digital literature, the digital textwork is thought of as some sort of immaterial, disembodied, dematerialised object. In this paper, the author seeks to counter that view strongly by presenting a series of digital textworks which exemplify the performativity of form. They display the multiple ways in which the body (and by extension, subjectivity) is a necessary and vital element in the composition, distribution, reception and realisation of digital text. The question which arises from this is not so much is there a body present, but what are the myriad, embodied functions — technical and creative — which operate within the digital environment?

Aujourd'hui encore le texte numérique est présenté dans bien des débats sur la littérature électronique comme une sorte d'objet immatériel, désincarné, dématérialisé. Cet article entend montrer justement le contraire, en soulignant le caractère performatif des formes numériques au travers de l'étude de quatre œuvres numériques. Ces dernières révèlent les multiples manières dont le corps (et par extension la subjectivité) joue un rôle vital dans la composition, la distribution, la réception et la réalisation d'un texte numérique. La question ici n'est pas tant de savoir si un corps est présent mais de dégager les multiples formes d'incarnation, tant sur le plan technique que créatif, qui opèrent au sein du milieu numérique.

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Mots-clés: corps, incarnation, texte numérique, performance, performativité, matérialité numérique

Keywords: embodiment, body, digital text, performance, performativity, digital materiality

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Jerome Fletcher is an academic/writer/performer. He is Associate Professor of Performance Writing and the MFA co-ordinator at Falmouth University. His practice-led research focuses on the relationship between digital text and performativity. He has edited issues of *Performance Research Journal* on Digital Writing and the *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* on Performance Writing. His digital textwork, *Pentimento* was short-listed for the New Media Writing Prize 2012. As a page-based writer he has published seven books — three children's books with OUP, Scholastic and Corgi, 3 literary concept books with Dedalus and a translation of a French novella. His own work has been translated into eight languages. He has also made a number of artist's books and experimental texts. His performance works are collaborative and multimodal, comprising live voice, projection, digital text generation and sound. He has performed at the Barbican London, Kunsthalle Vienna, Kunsthau Bregenz, Leo Koenig Gallery New York, as well as in Naples, Moscow, Paris, Barcelona and Prague. His latest work, *The Fetch*, was performed at the Centre Pompidou Paris in September 2013 and at Cerisy La Salle in June 2016. Contact: [Jerome.Fletcher\[at\]falmouth.ac.uk](mailto:Jerome.Fletcher[at]falmouth.ac.uk)