

State of the (E)Art: or, What's Wrong with Internet Poetry?
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*they took the credit for your second symphony
rewritten by machine on new technology
and now I understand the problems you can see...*
— The Buggles

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.
—Arthur C Clarke

Trying to make a statement on anything regarding the Internet is like trying to catch a train—when the train is roaring by at sixty miles per hour. Regardless of the recent doom and gloom surrounding its business interests, the state of the Internet as a medium for expression, both commercial and private, remains strong. That expression includes poetry, and poetry abounds on the Net. As any quick search on your favorite search engine would prove, the amount of sites devoted to poetry is staggering. A few keystrokes typing in ‘poetry’ on Google’s¹ results in over six million pages dedicated to poetry. However, sheer volume has never necessarily equaled ‘good’ or ‘thoughtful’ or even the banal ‘interesting.’ Look at network television. Though those of us who write and publish poetry make take some solace in the fact that poetry seems to be engaged by those who are populating the Internet with content, we argue that there also has to be a critical eye cast by those who claim to be engaged in the many faceted (and almost as much ‘named’) world of e-poetry.² An abundance of poetry may be online, but what does that really mean?

Relatively early on in the progress of the Internet moving from a significantly scientific academic community and militaristic into a predominately more public sphere,³ a number of critics recognized the potential of such a space for poetry. In his essay “WARNING — POETRY AREA: Publics Under Construction,” Charles Bernstein writes:

I don’t believe that technology creates improvement, but rather that we need to use the new technologies in order to preserve the limited cultural spaces we have created through alternative, nonprofit literary presses and magazines. This is a particularly important time for poetry on the net because the formats and institutions we are now establishing can provide models and precedents for small-scale, poetry-intensive activities.

(http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/Warning_html.HTM)

Before we move into explaining why we believe Bernstein’s statement to be important, it should be noted that he originally presented the above words at a conference in 1995. This was the same year that Netscape 1.0 was released and the graphical interface that most equate as ‘the’ Internet was first launched. Though a mere six years ago, the technology surrounding how this space is constructed has burgeoned. We agree with Bernstein that

a space needs to be staked out on the Internet for poetry—and it looks at first that his call has mostly been heeded. Poetry does have a number of spaces on the Internet.

Fine—let’s all go home. We’re done here, right? Not so fast. We need to consider how those spaces are constructed.

The first site that an online search will reveal is Poetry.com (<http://www.poetry.com>) which offers “3.1 million poets online,” “\$58000 dollars worth of prizes” and the “100 greatest love poems ever written” — all with a decidedly confessional slant. A largely American site, poetry.com has registered the word “poetry” and is centred mostly around promoting their own vanity press anthology print publications. Offering tips on revision and rhyming, Poetry.com is dedicated to a romantic, traditional lyric voice. The vast majority of online poetry is the Net equivalent of self-published. The vast majority of online poetry — like Poetry.com — present cliché, contrite poetry without a considered sense of purpose or poetic (or at least without a good editor). Poetry.com may have “3.1 million poets online” but all text is presented as black text on a white background (echoing the printed page) with little consideration of the available online media in the presentation of the work. As Bob Cobbing has said “The world has quite enough poetry already... the only excuse for being a poet today is to add to the quality of poetry, to add a quality that was not there before” (22).

On the inverse, *ubuweb*s perhaps over-representative of a specific, however different, style of poetic. *Ubuweb*s is a great source of computational, concrete, visual and sound poetry, but *ubu* also acts as an example of an over-representation of the computational and visual that makes up the majority of innovative computer or online poetry. This is, by no means, the fault of the designers, or for that matter the contributors, to *ubuweb*. We applaud *ubuweb* for taking on the medium, but are left to wonder where are the other innovative poetries? We continue to find scant examples of poetry that takes the same advantage of the online resources that those working in the visual poetics that *ubu* represents. Over our discussions, we were left to wonder why?

Though we by no means can offer all answers, we can point towards a few possibilities of answering this question, and also suggest poetry, and thereby a poetics, that points towards the opportunity that we see in that the online, media offers poets both within the visual and the textual that makes up poetry.

First, we have to remember that this still a very new technology—really about six or seven years old, in terms of a public medium. Further, the newer applications that allow for interesting possibilities for performance of a poetry that isn’t necessarily completely based upon the visual are not even that old—two or three years. It would be analogous to complaining to Gutenberg about only printing the bible in the first few years of his printing press—technology always meets society in terms of produc-

tion. Internet technology easily loans itself to those already interested in particular aspects of creation and publication: cheap, efficient distribution of book-like poetics; in some cases, publication without the nasty problem of having to go through an editor, and those who have exploited this situation to make money; and those who are already involved in some aspect with the technology, 'geek poetry' does lend itself to those more interested in the visual (i.e. graphic design), and the computational (i.e. programming and mathematics). Perhaps in the frenzied growth of the Internet as a medium of possibility for poetry, it is not surprising that these forms would come to dominate what is now considered e-poetry. However, these last two (the graphic and visual) do point towards the possibilities that the Internet holds for various forms of innovative poetry.

What we are calling for is an appraisal of the Internet by poets working in innovative text-based ("open verse") forms. Sound and visual poetry has found a form and home on the Internet that can not only document historical work, but also nurtures work that uses the technology of the Net to push the poetics of their form. The same is possible for other innovative and text-based poetics. The Internet as a form allows for experimentation of the idea of composition by field where "the page determines the length of the line" (Ginsberg. 18). The primacy of the page as both a compositional unit and a printed or presentational unit can be challenged with online poetry: "we should not be bullied by the cultural preference for 'the book' as a certifying object. unless approached carefully [. . .] the book has a tendency to homogenize our work." (Nichol, 277) The malleability of the Internet site allows for a rejection of dependence on a page-based typewriter-notated poetic of "spatial convention." bpNichol and Frank Davey in their 1982 article "The Prosody of Open Verse" call for "an agreed-upon typographic signal that would indicate the presence or absence of a stanza-break at the page juncture" (Nichol and Davey. 9) thus relieving the problem of "the 'enjambéd' page break that occurs where the page cannot contain the sheer number of lines in a poem" (Nichol and Davey. 9). Some of these technical problems of page-based textual poetry are addressed with Internet poetry—it is by no means a problem-free media, but there are some interesting possibilities for proprioceptive verse.

Our only call to action, as the following examples tend to show, is that more innovative poets take part in collaborations. It's perhaps a mental leap to give your text up to be 'published' in conjunction with someone for the Internet; though; we do not understand how this is any more mysterious than giving it up to be printed in a book. Further, it still seems even more impossible for some to imagine working with an expert in Internet display technology to form a work exclusively for the Internet. However, treating the Net as a performance space, and showing how performances can be captured, displayed—even formed—offer potential often missed.

Kenny Goldsmith's *Fidgets* is an example of some of the possibilities of online poetry, as it utilizes the media in a more integrated, and impor-

tant way.⁵ The text does also exist in a printed form (Coach House, 2000). The experimental nature of the poetics, both in print and online, works with and against traditional poetics in a contemporary manner. *Fidget* actively engages “the long poem” as a form—as well as so-called life-writing, the body politic, and the gestural and found poem forms; a reclamation of “the small gesture” (Nichol, 13). The online version turns *Fidget* into a performance of the poem; this is not the only possible performance, but a performance. It is not a straight ahead recorded performance, but a malleable performance: one where the reader/viewer can be involved in the appearance (and possibilities) of the performance itself.

We need to make a distinction between online distribution, online publication, and online translation from e-poetry, and online poetry, or electronic poetry. However, we define the poetry, not poetics. There is no such thing as online-, cyber-, or e-*poetics*. The sentiments Charles Bernstein writes in “State of the Art” we believe should also be applied to online poetry:

There is of course no state of American poetry, but states, moods, agitations, dissipations, renunciations, depressions, acquiescences, elations, angers, ecstasies; no music to our verse, but vastly incompatible musics; no single sentiment, but clashes of sentience: the magnificent cacophony of different bodies, making different sounds. (1)

So is online poetry any different? Though we hark back to our introduction and how difficult it is to put a finger on a medium that continues to develop so quickly, we will try to clarify our definitions of e-poetry. It may seem simplistic, but we must first state that we feel that online or e-poetry should be limited to those works that are written for, read on, and distributed through electronic means. By creating and discussing these distinctions, we do not seek to define and limit what ‘is’ or ‘is not’ e-poetry (as Bernstein’s quote can be manipulated) but rather to allow for a “terminology of discussion” and we recognize that these can be rather arbitrary distinctions:

e-distribution: sites such as *ubu.com* before its crash and subsequent editorial shift (to texts which used online technology) made available in a “democratic” form texts which would not otherwise have wide distribution (i.e. early recordings of James Joyce). E-distribution does make “text” (sound recordings / poetry / criticism) available but with little interpretation in the way that these texts are presented. However, e-distribution does use available technology to expand publishing possibilities.

e-publishing: a straight translation of a pre-existing printed text

to an online form, with no manipulation of that text. For instance, the bare-bones *Project Gutenberg* (<http://promo.net/pg/>) or Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (<http://www.bartleby.com/140/index.html>) or even the *ubu* publication of Susan Bee and Charles Bernstein's *Log Rhythms* are good examples. (http://www.ubu.com/feature/contemp/feature_bb.html)

e-translation: publishing which re-interprets a printed book into an online form. Examples include Coach House Books' recent online publication of the Dan Farrell's *Inkblot Record* (http://www.chbooks.com/online/inkblot_record/index.html) and Christian Bok's *Eunoia* (http://www.ubu.com/feature/contemp/feature_bok.html), Both were transferred and interpreted for the internet by Brian Kim Stefans. E-translation exists when the publication reinterprets the text in a way that is both responsible to and complimentary of the original form.

e-poetry: poetry written exclusively for the net with the programming and compositional tools being considered or actively questioned and challenged as part of the reading and viewing. Many instances of this form exist; some of our favorites include: Stefans' *The Dream Life of Letters* (http://www.ubu.com/feature/contemp/feature_stefans.html), Thomas Swiss' *Genius*⁶ (<http://www.poemsthatgo.com/gallery/summer2001/genius/genius.html>)

The definitions of these categories blur depending on the subject text and the way that they are treated as publication, distribution/translation, and poetry. This very much could be considered in terms of the virtual chicken and its virtual offspring, but the differences should be considered. This does not mean that an online poem cannot be reworked to appear in print, in the same manner that a print poem could be reworked to appear in electronic forms, however, we feel that this is a translation process and that work can be, just as any translation can be no matter what the language, poorly translated for the online medium. A particular pet peeve is works that actually use elements of hypertext in the print form that are then translated 'online' into white screens with black text. We see a definite relation between online translation and e-poetry. Both can be done poorly, or well, but both keep the medium that they are appearing on/in/through/as, in mind.

trans transmission

As we come to our conclusion, we still see the Internet as a particularly useful place for poetry. The *ubuweb* site, among many others, serves as a useful and exciting place of discovery of new poetics, and as an archive of visual and sound texts; however, the primary resourcefulness of the *ubulistserv* is the community that both forms in and around the space created by such technology. The *ubulistserv* aids the matrix of philosophy and poetry discussed over continents. Call it e-distribution of thought, or e-philosophy, the real sense of connection that is formed by the active (whether as readers or writers, or both) on the listserv remains to us, a valuable and heretofore unconceivable notion of community. The Internet is an almost unimaginably useful tool in defeating the hurdles that space and time do to destroy such associations.

What is also interesting is that this is likely the oldest use for the technology that now forms what we have come to call the Internet. This is not six years old, but decades old. Discussion groups and email may have become more sophisticated and the possible audiences larger, but discussion around and the sharing of poetry and thought remain a vital and alive aspect of what we call online poetry. Even with today's relatively easy (compared to only generations ago) ease and speed of travel, that we, living in and taking part in a smaller poetry community, and an even smaller community interested in online poetry community, thankfully can take part in a larger context because of the Internet. Perhaps it takes the isolation of the Canadian west to truly appreciate this to its fullest—perhaps that's why one of the first active online poetry communities came out of Canada in the form of *Swift Current*.⁷ Though long since gone and replaced by other online communities, *Swift Current's* model remains sound. Crossing distances through phone and cable lines, mailing lists and bulletin boards remain where most online poetry and discussion on poetry takes place.

abort; retry; fail; ignore

Though this message is now archaic in terms of the Internet today, we still vividly remember that the option we both chose, repetitively at times, was retry. Retry, retry, retry—and we think it's the best message to come away with. Though this paper, we tried to explore what is wrong with Internet poetry. However, rather than being negative, we think the best thing to do is retry, and not abort, fail, or ignore. That being said, we think those of us working in the medium also have to remember the over-representation of contrite and cliché poetry that does little to improve the state of e-poetry—we cannot ignore the 'ugly' side of online publishing and believe that all forms of e-poetry are necessarily progress. Though it is easy to get wrapped up in the inventive uses of the medium that we find in our tightly knit community, we must consider that those instances are current-

ly a remarkably small portion of what poetry on the Internet represents. We highly value the communities that the Internet allows for but also remember that we have to step outside those communities in order to get a more complete view of the medium. There are pockets of innovative poetry taking advantage of the possibilities the Internet offers. We look forward to seeing more while also remembering that the vast amount of poetry available needs consideration and explanation to those who are coming to poetry online for the first time.

Object

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Endnotes:

¹ *Google Internet Search Engine* (<http://google.com>)

² Before we progress, we should explain that this paper is a collaboration between derek and myself, russ, who just happens to be the one at the keyboard at the moment. This paper has been a result of our many conversations regarding publishing, writing and the Internet, and was originally presented in a more performance-based form at SUNY Buffalo for the E-Poetry Conference, April 2001.

³ We readily recognize that by no means should the Internet be considered a fully public medium. Often overlooked in the race to recognize the Internet as bold new medium is that a substantial proportion of the population has significant barriers in access. This being said, we also argue that ignoring the Internet because of these barriers is not in itself an answer to that problem.

⁴ *Ubuweb* (<http://www.ubu.com>) is a large electronic resource. The site itself is a storehouse of contemporary and concrete poetry, and essays on such poetry. Further, a listserv exists for those interested in the site. When we state '*ubuweb*' or '*ubu*' we refer to the whole oeuvre of what makes up the Ubuweb.

⁵ *Fidget* (<http://www.chbooks.com/online/fidget/index.html>). We use Goldsmith's work with a sense of irony, and to prove our point that *Ubuweb* is important, as he is the main force behind the *Ubuweb* site.

⁶ *Genius*. By Thomas Swiss, Design by Skye Giordano.
<http://www.poemsthatgo.com/gallery/summer2001/genius/genius.html>

⁷ *Swift Current* was founded by Frank Davey and Fred Wah in 1984 as a literary journal "based" at the University of Toronto. for more information see Davey & Wah's *The Swift Current Anthology* (Coach House Press, 1986)