

INTRODUCTION
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In 1959, Brion Gysin claimed that writing was 50 years behind painting. Indeed, in today's digital environment, this still seems to be the case. Why is it that the Internet, a medium so suited for creation, publication, and distribution of innovative poetry seems to be so far behind the curve? Witness the recent high profile digital shows at the Whitney, Walker and SF Moma and it's obvious that the art world — a world long stuck in objectness — is rapidly embracing the ephemeral nature of the web. Artworks on the web are so prevalent that even a new name — Net Art — has been coined to describe the phenomenon. Museums around the world are starting new departments dedicated to the collecting, presenting, and preserving of digital works (SF Moma has hired a team of dedicated curators to its new department called "E Space").

Innovative writing on the web is a different story. Lacking any real kind of broad-based, centralized institutional support, poets and publishers are left to fend for themselves, often operating on a very small budgets. Unlike the museum world, coding and designing are not done by teams of highly paid professional contractors, often limiting the possibility of exploring the outer reaches of technology. Take, for example, The Electronic Poetry Center at the University of Buffalo, perhaps the major resource for innovative online poetry. It is sadly staffed by only one part-time faculty member and a couple of work-study students. Such conditions have led poet Christian Bök to claim that any poet working in the 21st century will have to be conversant in the computer language PERL.

In spite of all its hurdles, though, by and large the innovative writing world does seem to be embracing the online environment. Two tendencies appear to be emerging: one is a replication of static text onto the medium of the web, an online poetry that attempts to replicate the experience of reading a book where the mission is focused on radical forms of distribution; the other approach — the one what we're focused on here — is poetry that engages directly with technology to provide either a new type of online reading experience or one that interacts with technology in a way that influences the text itself once it's back on the static page.

The best sites today merge both tendencies. Canada's Coach House Books is a stellar example. The complete textual contents of their recent back catalog are available for free and, in addition, each book has been innovatively adapted for the web so as to compliment or enhance the paper version. Steve McCaffery's long out-of-print *Carnival*, for example, is available in its entirety in printer-ready high-resolution scans. A newer title, Dan Farrell's book, *The Inkblot Record*, has been transformed into a medium-specific Shockwave file which transforms the book's static text into a swirl of dissolving and moving chunks of language, providing a completely new reading experience for the online viewer. Coach House goes even further by acknowledging the web economy and makes it possible for the viewer to "tip" the author for services rendered. They also make it easy to buy their books online, complete with a secure-server payment system. Have their sales suffered as a result? Nope. In fact the web versions have

led people to want to own the paper versions. It's a savvy win-win situation, with nothing lost and everything to gain.

Let's face it: we all love paper books. But the good news is that — as evidenced by the success of the Coach House site — the physical world and the online world co-exist, with one enhancing the other. And what better place to wrangle with these utopian ideas than in the gift economy that is innovative poetry?

Perhaps this is why Rob Fitterman asked me to edit this issue of *Object*. After a decade-long run, *Object* had pretty much ceased publication due to a lack of funds and a lack of distribution. Rob had been rethinking these issues when I told him that I was headed to the E-Poetry conference at the University of Buffalo this past Spring. Rob had, in essence, commissioned me to bring back a harvest of new ideas from the conference.

The pages that follow are the fruits of my mission: a blueprint, perhaps, for innovative literature to thrive on the web. In all of these forward-looking essays, words refuse to remain confined to the page, instead manifesting themselves in ways that are reminiscent of Futurist and Dadaist ideas from the early 20th century. This new poetry knows no bounds: sounds, sights, machines, performances, MUSHs and MOOs are all equally valid manifestations of new innovative writing on the web. Intermediary by nature, poetry finally begins to fulfill its potential as something more than merely static words on a page.

The harvest is rich: Russ Rickey and Derek Beaulieu give a breezy critical overview, laying out some reasons poetry has thus far stumbled on the online environment; Christian Bök examines the implications and end game of computer-generated writing; Neil Hennessy discovers a web-based writing machine that outperforms Language Poetry; Katherine Parrish delves into the worlds of MOOs to explore randomly disjunctive text-generation and identity ciphers; Martin Spinelli looks at digital editing and how it wrestles with issues of non-linearity to influence the media's presentation of audio works; Darren Wershler-Henry and Bill Kennedy unveil a homemade web-based writing machine; Brian Kim Stefans conflates a list of clichés with a digital journal; and I explore the influence of the 1960s Brazilian concrete poetry Noigandres Group on today's online environment.

Finally, the astute reader will note that this online-based issue of *Object* is written on paper, xeroxed and distributed hand-to-hand in a time-tested way. It is my hope that it will reach those regular readers of such journals who might otherwise shy away from conferences on electronic poetry or currently lack swift Internet access; indeed, they will most certainly recognize many ideas bestowed from the last century that they are already familiar with and support: it is a small leap from Jackson Mac Low's chance-operative writing to Wershler-Henry and Kennedy's *Apostrophe*.

(And, for those who are onboard, this issue in its entirety is available online on UbuWeb [ubu.com].)