“From Byte to Inscription:” An Interview with John Cayley by Brian Kim Stefans

John Cayley's work goes against the grain of much recent "digital poetry" in that he has resisted the temptation to transfer his attention from Mac-centered freestanding applications to the internet. This has made him appear to be, accurately or not, the standard-bearer of an "old guard," those whose involvement with hypertext and programmable literatures started (as did Cayley's) in the late seventies, using machines with less RAM than your standard floppy disk.

Cayley has also maintained a distinct interest in Asian literatures, most particularly Chinese, even as his programming and multimedial techniques have grown more sophisticated. Though he is clearly concerned with the graphemic "atom" as a unit of meaning and with poststructural approaches to text, the range of metaphors and the particulars of the Chinese sensibility suggest to the viewer of Cayley's work that he does not consider technology the grand leveler of cultural practices that renders differences of geography, history, and language entirely moot. Cayley's particular ambivalence about using Western programming languages to recreate Chinese ideograms on the screen demonstrates an awareness of how the Roman alphabet and Boolean logic which knows no shades between 0 and 1, on and off—are involved in a sub-textual, perhaps colonialist, conspiracy.

The following interview barely scratches the surface of the range of Cayley's work, focusing on his most recent projects and on the distinctive cultural strands that influence his practice. Suffice it to say, Cayley has exploited the "programmaton"—the poetic object that is both literary language and the language of code— in diverse ways that include classic hypertext experiences, non-interactive poems created in real-time, and more elaborate poem-objects such as "riverIsland," which involves 360 degree QuickTime photography, audio, lyric poetry and randomly generated intertexts. Like much of Cayley's work—his digital art, his theory and polemics—"riverIsland" has proven to be a focal point for much discussion and debate among digital poetry aficionados, most recently at a conference on digital poetry held in 2002 at the University of Iowa.

Cayley won the ELO's first annual award in digital poetry in 2001 (http://www.eliterature.org/Awards2001/index.shtml). Most recently, he published a lengthy commentary in the *Electronic Book Review* called "The Code is not the Text (Unless it is the

Text)". His website, which is somewhat out of date but where many of his papers and online projects can be found, is shadoof.net.

As Cayley's example proves, the parameters of the exploration into electronic literature are not determined by the functionality of new software or hardware as they enter the market but are guided by artistic vision—he's a true "kid of the book machine," in McCaffery and nichol's phrase—and by a sense of the possible that often pre-exists what a machine is actually capable of doing. The integrity of Cayley's vision is demonstrated not just by the coherent development of his work, but by his never over-reaching into technology for the sake of exploiting some trick, some use of sound, color or code that is meant simply to seduce. This confidence in pulling back, in stripping the "programmaton" to what is most necessary, has given his work a quietness that belies the wide-eyed futurism conspicuous in much "digital poetry," but also allows him to preserve some aspects of the elemental (stone, water, air) aesthetics of Asian art in a decidedly non-elemental medium.

Brian Stefans: Prior to engaging in digital poetry, you were heavily invested in Asian poetry and poetics—you make your living with your Asian bookstore in London, I believe—and continue to work with artists such as Xu Bing. When I've read descriptions of your work it often centers around the elements of digital textuality but rarely does it try to deal with the relationship to Asian poetry. I could speculate and suggest that there is a quiet attentiveness to issues of time and a passive reception to experience that departs from the Western agonistic subjectivity that seems a component of both reading and writing lyric poetry in European (Romantic) traditions.

How do you see your projects relating to Asian aesthetics? Do you think it's necessary for a reader of your work—as one might suggest with Cage's work—to understand some of the principles of Asian philosophies such as Buddhism?

John Cayley: I'm university trained in what was once called 'Chinese language and civilization.' This could be seen as the equivalent of taking a three-year degree in 'European language (sic) and civilization' within the domain of the other major 'center of polity' on the planet. Think of what that might signify—how we would feel, as 'Europeans' (with 'American' subsumed in the term), if our culture were studied in that way. I did some post-graduate work in classical Chinese literature, worked as a Chinese section reference librarian in the British Library, and now run a

bookshop specializing in East Asian art. I remain on the margins of the academic study of Chinese culture. I still engage with and publish in the field from time to time, with the Chinese writing system and Chinese calligraphy as an art of writing having become my chief academic interests. During all this time I maintained a serious interest in classical Chinese poetry and poetics which complemented my reading and writing in English. I translated early Chinese poetry and continue to do so from time to time.

Chinese investments have informed my practice of writing in programmable media from my first essays and experiments. In 'wine flying' —first programmed in Basic on a 6502 computer in the late 1970s—the animation of a translation from a classical quatrain aimed, in part, to exemplify and instantiate certain principles of Chinese poetics, which are less accessible to print-published translation.[1] Specifically, for example, 'wine flying' animates strategies of readings associated with parallelism, writing in 'parallel' lines which share the same or similar syntax while providing semantic variation, contrast, and correspondence (familiar to readers of English poetry in the Psalms). This figure invites non- or multi-linear reading, which can be animated in time, embodying and performing poetics which are interiorized in other cultures and media.

Later, in my writing for programmable media, I became more interested in procedural text modulation and generation. Like others before me—Emmett Williams, Jackson Mac Low, Cage—I found myself using the 'smaller' atomic structures of language in order to derive algorithms for programming text. Chiefly, I have been using letters. Without ever losing sight of my Chinese investments, this necessarily led me away from Chinese poetics for reasons I have gradually begun to understand and theorize. There is a radical disjuncture between the western, Roman, alphabetic system of inscription and the Chinese, character-based system.[2] The atomic structure of written language and, I would argue, language-as-such differs in the two centers of 'language and civilization.' (I lean heavily and happily on Derrida in taking this view.) These differences are translated to digital media because linguistic structure itself—not simply linguistic 'data'—is transcribed by the entire historical process of digitization, taken to include the design of computing systems and data structures, not merely the actual transcription of cultural objects into bits and bytes. Basically, our programmatological systems reflect their derivation from an alphabetic system of linguistic inscription. Thus, I can easily use existing programming systems to manipulate western language in ways which correspond to encoded

structures which are approximately 'faithful' to the language. It is easy to refer to letters as constituent of words, for instance. By contrast, it would be difficult, using existing systems in a straightforward way, to refer to the constituents of Chinese characters. Inevitably, in the first instance, while developing ideas and programs for text manipulation, I have taken advantage of the encoded structures of western language. I remain sharply aware that I am complicit with a privileged symbolic structure in doing so, recognizing that digitization could have been very different, commensurate with characters rather than letters. A recognition of this problematic underlies my most recent finished piece, 'riverIsland,' which might otherwise be read as some sort of transcultural pastoral/lyric poetic exercise.

While it is true that whatever aesthetic my work may represent is strongly influenced by the Chinese culture-inflected tendencies you identify—including 'quiet attentiveness to issues of time and a passive reception to experience' —I nonetheless consider it to emerge as strongly from what I think of as an engaged formalism, a formalism which addresses other, less usual matters of language—both potential form and form deriving, in my case, from Chinese poetics, from my understanding of the materiality of the Chinese language. In so far as my work produces an aesthetic response, I don't expect this to be the result of some prior engagement by the reader with Chinese thought or poetry. I would hope, however, that my own concerns might be somehow apparent in the work (they seem to be from your reading at least) and that readers would be encouraged to appreciate the problems I am trying to address and perhaps go on to undertake their own explorations of the 'language and civilization' of the 'other Greek.'[3]

BS: I notice in Loss Glazier's Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries, that on at least two occasions he cites a reading that you've both given in the context of a digital literature conference as exemplifying an "innovative" position that is generally underrepresented in both conferences and the critical industry on digital literature. These differences usually hinge on the use of narrative in digital literature—Glazier even notes an assumption that digital literature is usually theorized as if it were always going to be prose—and on the presence of a lyrical "I."

I have several divergent questions based on these issues, one of which is: what do you feel your role has been in the circuit of conferences on digital literature (I understand that you attend many of them, and are not afraid to take direct issue with theorists such as N. Katherine Hayles and Florian Cramer [see The Code is Not a Text on the EBR]) and do you think your ideas have been

appreciated and responded to adequately? Do you agree with Glazier that there is something inherently inhospitable to the lyrical "I" and to narrative in digital poetries? In terms of how this literature is getting beyond the conferences, how have you seen the public acceptance of digital literature change over the course of the many years you've been involved in it?

JC: It's interesting to reflect on what seemed to be going on when I began to attend conferences devoted to 'hypertext' and, later, 'digital literature' in late 1990s. I'd been making literary experiments with text using personal computers since the late 1970s. So had many others, as an adjunct to many distinct varieties of textual practice. Sadly, they seem to have shared remarkably little intercommunication. Why would bp nichol necessarily want to tell the OuLiPo what he was doing with his Apple II? It was only after the World Wide Web, as it were, 'went public' in 1994 that it was suddenly possible to conceive of a community of practice and a more general audience for writing in networked and programmable media, for writing that was made for and delivered by these media. This is not to say that much such writing actually existed. The idea that 'new' textual media might be generalized and shared had only just emerged. There were a small number of practitioners, a small number of systems for composing text in digital media and a growing realization that at some indeterminate point in the future an indeterminate quantity of text and textual practice would migrate to the new 'writing space' of networked programmatons. In the English-speaking world the literary faction of this emergent field was dominated by a group of writers and theorists who were chiefly invested in prose fiction and post structuralism, and in a variety of hypertext that was slightly more configurable than link-node html. In common with the designers of the Web, however, they were relatively uninterested in programming the matter of language within the node or, indeed, within the link. Jim Rosenberg was a notable exception in this community. He bridged an even larger gap. The hypertext conferences have a strong technical constituency to which Jim, as programmer and systems person, fervently subscribed. Meanwhile his work explicitly addressed precisely those issues of what happens inside the node and inside the link. He was crucial in inviting me and others like me—Glazier and Funkhouser in the first memorable instance, along with French practitioners, Balpe and Bootz—into the literary stream of the hypertext conferences. Once more, a small number of poets were asking to have their rhetorical concerns addressed in a context dominated by the persuasive requirements of paraphrasable fiction and restructured instruction manuals, all over-

egged with theory and tech. Perhaps not so different from the average university department of English?

Then the Scandinavians, already a significant presence at the hypertext conferences, hit the scene and made their own. The conference I have been attending most regularly is DAC, Digital Arts and Culture, established by Espen Aarseth and colleagues out of Bergen in Norway and, latterly, a transatlantic event. As is now well-known, Aarseth's book on cybertext established a reference 'textonomy,' a taxonomy of textuality, in the context of but independent of so-called new media. The DAC approach to what was considered as literary art was catholic and nuanced especially in terms of form, in terms of delivery and compositional mediation. There was more of a sense that the approach was empirical, prepared to receive and examine what was actually being produced and offered as textual art inclusively: from hypertext fiction to html poetry, to literary performance in MOO-space, or virtual-visceral computer games for SoHo. By contrast, the hypertext conference appeared as an attempt to realize a dream or instantiate some (paradoxically and anti-poetically Platonic) idea of a node-linked literary utopia of prose.

Your questions are pertinent in all this. I have indeed seen myself as assuming a position and a role in these communities, basically as a representative of poetics in the less metaphorical sense, poetics as engaged by practitioner-performers rather than as used by theorists of prose applying a genre-alien, problematic-but-perceived-as-powerful methodology to their analyses. I was less clear of this position and role at first since my re-engagement with so-called experimental, so-called innovative poetic writing—with which I feel allied—coincided with my joining the digital literature communities. I found I had a parallel contribution to offer in the discussions emerging amongst self-identified poets over new media and concerning writing that is explicitly mediated, procedurally, programmatologically. Anyway, to return to my role in the digital literature community, within the existing critical and theoretical discussion, I help to bring to bear a poetic practitioner's awareness of and sensitivity to the grainy, atomic materiality of language—the language within the node and certain language-embodied transition effects that may constitute the link. Thankfully, questions revolving around materiality have very much come to the fore, especially in recent debates, exposing and throwing into relief many earlier critical and theoretical inadequacies and excesses.

As a writer who is also, to a certain extent, a programmer, I am currently attempting to make a specific contribution to our understanding of the relationship between text and code, especially where the literary object has become a coded object, a text containing code which 'runs' and forces us to confront signifiers which, because they are themselves programmed, can only perform their meaning-creation in operations that are unambiguously time-based and optionally transactive with their readers. I believe that, despite what might be seen as a slow burn, these contributions—concerning linguistic materiality and coding—are being appreciated in the digital literature debates and will continue to be so.

I find it difficult to see that any form of mediation is in itself complicit with a particular ideology or practice. New media can be and is applied to the construction of narrative and texts which cite and center on a lyric 'I.' I agree with Glazier that the predominance of these tropes tends to prevent or undermine the emergence of far other potentialities arising from, in particular, explicitly poetic writing, poetic writing that has developed from those strands of modernism which have not been reabsorbed into the paraphrasable, banal, domestic, de-politicized lyric, so often (merely) decorated with traditional (new-for-old) formalism. I do also agree that the quantity and quality of mediation made available to writers by programmable machines requires them to address the implications of what they find themselves doing and how, as makers, they find themselves making. Narrative and the lyric 'I' have already experienced the challenges of modern history and critical thought, and have, in my opinion, been forced to acknowledge that their persistent predominance is a function of constructed authority and privilege rather than some essential ideal humanity. Now they face the challenge of a range of mediation, the mechanics of which is (currently) open to its makers: either because these inner workings are as-yet little understood and rarely applied to literary objects or, more importantly, because they require new rhetorics and new aesthetics, emergent from these processes of mediation themselves.

As for reception beyond the conferences, this is hard for me to gauge. As a hard-bitten poet with other-work to keep me in the garret to which I have become accustomed, I have never expected large audiences for my work. It does not appear that even the kind of hypertextualized prose fiction that can be easily translated to the Web (big virtual numbers) has achieved any kind of popular acceptance. There are no truly famous or celebrity hypertext authors. Mark Amerika and

Shelley Jackson have, I guess, what are called cult followings. The best-known patron of electronic literature, Robert Coover, is probably better known than the best known author, Michael Joyce. But perhaps your question isn't about some potential entry into popular culture. There is still the problem of 'platform', the fact any such work depends upon a particular regime of hardware and software in a world where the stability and accessibility of a platform is dependent upon private commercial criteria which have little or no regard for art, aesthetics or politics, and a fundamentally venal regard for media in the broadcast or distributable-for-payment sense. I, for one, persist in making work which may soon become impossible to disseminate because of the demise of a particular platform. That said, when I have been able to get my work seen, especially in the quasi-performative space of a gallery installation or in actual performance (where I can see and hear how my readers react), I have found that they are appreciative and open to the kind of literary objects in new media that I have made.

BS: From Espen Aarseth one learns of the term "ergodic," which I will loosely paraphrase as a literature that requires more than trivial effort—say, turning the page—to read. Your piece riverIsland—which, unlike earlier hypercard works of yours, has longish periods between each static "poem" of intermingling letters, and employs a fairly complex interface involving interactive Quicktime movies—seems your furthest venture into the "ergodic." The poem suggests a relationship not just between exploring an island and exploring an interface, but between the "blur" of Quicktime photography and programmed letter salads and the blur of the rushing atoms of water—digital self-creation being likened to natural, but elusive physical processes. One can suggest, reductively, that the overarching theme seems to be the line attributed to Heraclitus: you can't step into the same river twice.

With the increase in the use of photographic images and programmatic elements in "poems," how do you see metaphor operating in a work like this—is metaphor itself under fire? Also, how do you see the relationship of the scrambled texts between the poems to the poems which one hears in your soundtrack being read—themselves? What sort of reading strategy do you believe a person will employ to read these sections as they unfold through time, and is the morphing from one poem to another intended to spawn particular types of clusters— i.e. are some of the arbitrarily created letter-clusters supposed to relate to other languages, like Gaelic, or to avant-gardist type works? Lastly, there seems to be an issue of the included text files and the

instructions for the interface—do you think this detracts from the special quality of art that partly impresses you by its very inscrutability?

JC: It's interesting that you mention 'atoms' in your question and also something an invitation to me. Lately I have been much concerned with thinking about and trying to theorize the characteristics of what I conceive as 'atoms of signification' in textual or, as I sometimes call it, literal art. I take an atom of signification to be any entity—here a linguistic entity—which can be considered to be irreducible—impossible to otherwise recast or, when addressing the matter of language, to paraphrase, for example. In the realm of writing, both authors and readers will generally agree that letters are atoms in this sense. Many of my pieces (and those of other programmatological authors) proceed by programming atomic identities at the level of letters as such. However, it is clear to me that atoms of signification may emerge as complex entities—automata—at any arbitrary point of linguistic structure: letters, phrases, lines, ideograms (in the Poundian sense),whole passages, or works. One way of defining a poem may be to say that it is a linguistic construct of arbitrary size, complexity or length which is irreducible: it cannot be paraphrased; it is itself an atom of signification.

How does this relate to the questions you are asking? Most recently, along with other critics and theorists I have been articulating a dissatisfaction with even a poststructuralist understanding of the materiality of language—of writing in particular—when addressing textual art in networked and programmable media. It is increasingly clear to me that the intervention of programming at the scene of writing—which is played out in runtime operations during the performances of reading—makes it impossible to ignore or bracket the intrinsic temporality of atoms of signification in textual art. This is not really a new perspective. An elaborated notion of, for example, 'performance writing' has circulated in circles associated with innovative poetics. Still, I believe, the instantiations of explicitly programmed writing in appropriate media makes certain characteristics of this practice easier to appreciate.

What are the atoms of signification in a work like riverIsland? You ask about its textually morphing transitions from one natural-language verse or version to another. Heraclitus' famous remark is a truism, applicable to any experience in any media, and requiring no reinforcement from a work of mine. The point here is that, in at least one interpretative mode, riverIsland's

atoms of signification encompass the so-called nodal texts along with the potential transitions: the inputs, the operations, their outputs and the actual duration of the transition. The textual sign is more like a cinematic loop or clip, except that its frames may also be generated on the fly—as they are in this case—according to rules and constraints. Actually, given this kind of perspective, a reader can and probably does return to any or all of riverIsland's identical-in-this-sense passages (with the implicit temporality of 'passage' providing us with a useful term, albeit metaphorically inflected). I do not think that this return is, qualitatively, all that different from the many returns which take place when we reread or recall passages that are published and performed in the more persistent material substrates of print culture. What cannot be, as I say, ignored, bracketed or even poststructurally deferred is the fact that the programming—necessarily concealed but manifestly operative and ultimately itself interpretable— produces a sign that has time and change built into it, that incorporates, instantiates and participates in the culture of human time. The signifier itself is programmed and as such has both operations and durations.

Thus, the point is not to say that particular frames of some transitional textual loop manifest phonetic or semantic relationships with natural languages (although the design of the algorithm encourages them to do so) because of the letter salad clustering. The reading strategy for this kind of work must be able to embrace the experience and interpretation of the elements and transitions as a durational whole.

I'm not sure how or whether you see your question about metaphor as relating to issues concerning complexity of interface and the introduction of multimedia elements. It seems clear that imagery introduced in a textual or literary context can be metaphorically directive or even restrictive. However, for example, the degree to which graphic material is abstract (and so resistant to metaphor) is arbitrary. riverIsland combines/interleaves imagistic, metaphoric and abstract registers in both its literal and graphic elements. It's hard to say which media directs the other, although I still think of myself as working in literal art. riverIsland is relatively construable in terms of traditional lyric and translation, but it also engages a number of experiments in linguistic abstraction and deconstruction. There is also to be considered the western misappropriation of Chinese imagism—to which the originals of riverIsland subscribe—which is

not, generally speaking, metaphoric or symbolic. It is not reliant on a notion of transcendence, but more a naturalistic representation of an immanent idealism.

As for complexity of interface, to give a brief answer, I think this is a function of its engagement with the programming of the signifier, as outlined sketchily above. It's not that the interface is complex, it's just that it is unfamiliar; there is no accepted set of ways to modulate language that might have led to the design of a consistent and familiar interface, an interface which writers generally would be prepared to use. Any number of operations may be programmed and applied to the material of language. In a sense the operations associated with print publication and reading are simply one such, historically and culturally significant application, although its operations are not traditionally designed by those artists we call authors or writers. Writers have always been concerned with the publication, the paratextual programming, of their work; some deeply so: artist-poet printers and bookmakers come to mind, along with the poetic traditional developing from Mallarmé. Naturally some writers have gone on to explore the more radical control over textual representation that new media allow (as well as trying to realize theoretically the implications of these innovations). The problem is that there is no predetermined shape to the machines and instruments of textual representation in new media. No one yet knows what form a culturally preferred textual 'projector', for example, will take. At a very early stage of the game I tried to write a fairly generalized poetic text animator (which I imagined would 'score the spelt air'). This was long overtaken by technology, but still no such off-the-shelf software exists. Even 'microserf' startups don't write software for poets. Instead we have Flash, cunningly (mis)directed to make letters dream, as you have superbly demonstrated.

My point is that we are currently writers trying to build relatively simple textual instruments that are intuitive and, hopefully, both affective and significant when they are played. I mean played as musical instruments or sequencers or mixers are played. This is ergodic indeed, but still distinguishable from (hard) work or from the type of play in games which is rewarded by winning, by other forms of 'success' or simply by 'playability'.

The instructions for riverIsland do get in the way of pleasures derived from artistic inscrutability but the alternative would be either to make the piece run itself (which it could do as an installation for example) or to wait until a 'projector' which could encompass its methods and operations was generally understood and available in the culture. When will that happen? In the

meantime many of us will continue to apply operations to texts and continue to build machines and instruments that readers will have to learn to operate and play, and that will sometimes require some introduction and explanation.

BS: What digital poetry are you looking at now? Also, do you see the period now as being one of fulfillment of the promises of digital poetry, or as one that is foundational for a later period, when, perhaps, more poets are also programmers? Are there digital artists outside the field of "digital poetry" that interest you?

JC: When I manage to read, I confess I don't immediately distinguish digital from other poetry or writing; nor do I make a point of seeking out the former over the latter. The next thing I'd like to find time to read is Lydia Davis' (is it really that Lydia Davis?) translations of Proust. For the past few years I have not been using the Web a great deal. This is partly a function of still being a dial-up, narrow-pipe user, while the perceived and actual requirement for much web-based work is broad-to-bloated. (This is despite my involvement in a collaborative broadband multimedia project: www.z360.com/what) I hardly feel able to point to specific or specifically digital writers. As a critic of writing in networked and programmable media I'd tend to encourage a reading of work that does one of two things.

Firstly, work that—formally, by instantiating the emergent characteristics of a practice—addresses the kind of issues raised above concerning textuality generally and programmed writing as such. Although I hope it's clear that I'm not recommending formalism for it's own sake. In this context, Phillipe Bootz and the writers associated with aLire are important for historicizing writing in programmable media, opening it to practice in Europe, in languages other than English, and in ways that are not in any sense reducible to so-called hypertext. Jim Rosenberg's forms and theories have also been very important to me; insisting on technical and theoretical relations with hypertext but extending and denying it in practice. Programmer-poets Judd Morrisey and Lori Tally will continue to make good work, richly programmatological as well as poetic per se. Loss Pequeño Glazier is a long-time source of poetic pleasure and reference for me, committed both to programming, and to making with language and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. Through Glazier's work I often find myself linking back to the schools of poetry in America from which I continue to learn or attempt to learn. I hope Bruce Andrews

becomes more of an electronic poet in senses he prefers. Joan Retallack seems to have no need of silicon to achieve effects far beyond most of what I hope and desire. You and Kenneth Goldsmith keep me more than interested in work made on and for new media, and your links to language art are clear. In the UK there are far fewer writers in networked and programmable media with whom I'd care to hang. cris cheek and recent collaborator Kirsten Lavers are important exceptions. Then there are a number of writers moving into the field, or who may cease resisting or being resisted by it: Elizabeth James, Caroline Bergvall, Peter Manson.

Secondly (I guess I have got round to a secondly), I look to work that establishes something that may be what Bruce Andrews calls 'social informalism' in poetic practice. Andrews points to a poetics that is socially engaged and moves beyond formalism to real human (inter)action through artistic language use and making. On the net and in new media this—potentially and in a number of demonstrable instances—translates to the spawning of radical, marginal, evanescent, provisional text art communities and collaborations that come together in software virtuality. Maria Damon, critic but also collaborator with mEIKAL aND, has begun to identify examples and characteristics of this poetic practice and a number of such soft, edgy groupings. Working in and with MOOs, I believe that Katherine Parrish has already made significant contribution and will go on to do more. I enjoy the expansiveness of mEIKAL aND's projects and collaborations: poetry as this radical communal interaction.

Much work outside the field of 'digital poetry' also interests me, although I suppose it may be more productive to briefly cite a few practitioners whose work overlaps and engages with the making of text art—Jodi, Camille Utterback, Michael Atavar, Giselle Bieguelman, and David Rokeby, whose 'Giver of Names' and, more recently, 'n-Cha(n)t' are perhaps the most affective trails of language (=poetry) that I have experienced in this context.

I'm not sure I see the current period as 'foundational', as you put it, certainly not in terms of some future for poet(ic) programming. It may well prove harder for writers to program in the future, if the software companies continue to hide the 'inner workings' from us, leaving us with media fetishes, stuck in the thick surface of GUI goo, wallowing from one dying, outmoded environment to the next utopian, hardware-gobbling upgrade, endlessly buying superstructure for our subscriptions to globally capitalized networked broadcasting as we go. Sometimes the world of text on the Internet seems utterly foobar. I used to love the rhizomatic academy of the

listservs; now my in box fills with unsolicited spam, at a ratio of about thirty slime-junk invitations to one properly addressed missive keyed by an entity I know or love. As the pipes broaden—culturally as well as commercially—I no longer expect that ratio to improve.

It's profoundly infuriating, but, on the other hand, I enjoy this time when there are few enough practitioners and theorists of programmatological poetic form that conferences and festivals can bring a large proportion of them together at one time, and do so such that the aesthetics, politics and social engagements of the various participants may be utterly disparate. Whatever it is that brings these people together spans wide chasms of critical difference and potential antagonism. This also allows unexpected alliances and opportunities to learn. In my own case, once an eastward-looking, neo-imagist, lonely-in-the-bamboo lyricist-translator; I now, for example, contemplate literally signing over my unconscious to a free-wheeling assemblage of hacker-poets in the myour darkness of a MOO. But generally, in these gatherings, what some of us are looking for is a resonance between emergent form and practice—cultural and social practice. The wager we make is that because the delivery or performance media are, technically, open to us, in that they are fully programmable, we will be able to explore and reconfigure our compositional media as never before. And if the world of letters can be reconfigured—even through the rigours of programming—then its underlying structures and characteristics were always already different from what had been passed down to us, re-revealing latent rhetorics: software ways to make it new.

[1] 'wine flying' and other pieces, which, to date, only run on Macintosh computers, can be downloaded from:http://homepage.mac.com/shadoof.

[2] Cayley, John. "Digital Wen: On the Digitization of Letter- and Character-Based Systems of Inscription." Reading East Asian Writing. Eds. Michel Hockx and Ivo Smits. London: Curzon Press, 2002 (forthcoming).

[3] Arthur Cooper's term. He is the excellent translator of Li Po and Tu Fu for Penguin.