

Loa and Behold: Voice Ghosts in the New Technoculture

Jools Gilson-Ellis

[collected in Gilson-Ellis, Jools. *Digital Creativity: A Reader*. Colin Beardon. & L. Malmborg (eds.) (Lisse, NL: Swets & Zeitlinger. 2002): 229-240. Reprinted from *Digital Creativity*. 2001, 12 (2): 77 – 88]

Abstract:

This article suggests that the use of femininity and voice in digital art practice has a powerful potential to conjure provocative spaces in the new technoculture. Using a range of theoretical writers including Margaret Morse, Nell Tenhaaf, Simon Penny, Brenda Laurel and Sue-Ellen Case, the article traces contemporary thought on femininity, technology and voice. Gilson-Ellis uses her own choreographic / poetic practice as examples in these discussions. Through an adaptation of Sue-Ellen Case's proposal of the voodoo veve and the loa, the article suggests that the *voice* in relation to writing and new technologies has a radical potential to open up alternative kinds of spaces in digital art practice.

Loa and Behold: Voice Ghosts in the New Technoculture

Telephone call from RTE (Radio Telefis Éireann – Irish National Television)

RTE: We're doing a millenium special, and we heard that you work with dance and technology.

Do you have something that you're working on at the moment?

JGE: Yes, we've just finished making *The Secret Project*.

RTE: Right. And is it about the future, you know, space?

JGE: Well, no. It uses poetic text and choreography to explore the idea of the secret.

It's quite tender.

RTE: Right.

TM

This article attempts the unlikely wrestle between femininity and the promises of the new technoculture. It takes as its focus the meanderings of orality and textuality. It sees promise in the fallen moment between listening and looking; in the ravishing drench of *voice*.

One of the main theoretical and practical innovations of my doctoral thesis is the proposal of the 'os-text'. The os-text describes practices in which the same individual is the writer and the speaker of a text. Incorporating the meanings of orality, oscillation and kissing (osculation), this term describes a shimmering relation of text to orality. The *os-text* is a text which is neither written nor spoken, neither is it *both* written and spoken. This is a text which survives in oscillation not *between* but *because* of the mouth and the text. Its place is on the side of the feminine. It has no secure place in the oral or in the written, but flies instead in the face of both. This is a text which refuses stillness. A text marked by the grain of the voice. A text written in the mouths of writers. In this article I focus on locating such a practice in relation to contemporary thought and art practice on new technologies and the feminine. I use my own practice as material example in the weaving of this argument.

TM

Margaret Morse in her essay 'What do Cyborgs Eat' (1994) examines contemporary negotiations of the machine / human relation.¹ Morse follows the thread of a contemporary desire to be done with the 'meat' of corporeality in the thrall of immersive technologies. Morse's analysis of 'oral logic' examines the structural

dynamics of this relation between humanity and technology. She links the zeitgeist passion for immersion in a digital sea to the psychoanalytic category of the oral phase. The combination of a feminised space of submersion and a rejection of the corporeal (also a feminised cultural space) suggests trouble indeed for a feminist politics of performance technology. Dangers abound in attempting to wrestle with these categories, since arguing either for the body as an especial feminine space, or for the logics of engulfment reify existing gendered tropes. The refusal / rejection of the body in cyberculture wreaks of rejection of aspects of the feminine, whilst at the same time the logic of submersion is a fantasy of feminine engulfment.²

Nell Tenhaaf negotiates similar ground in her essay 'Mysteries of the Bioapparatus' (1996) when she draws parallels between femininity's relationship to the corporeal and new technologies:

The familiar feminine condition of being too close to and too distant from the body, constrained by its material reality yet psychically open to penetration, could be said to characterise the experience of being in cyberspace.

(Tenhaaf 1996: 52)

For Tenhaaf, femininity's symbolic gymnastics are also those of cyberspace. She goes on to suggest that cyberspace "implies a feminisation of the symbolic order and of subjectivity" (Tenhaaf 1996: 52). If this is the case, then what has such a feminisation got to do with femininity itself?

Sadie Plant picks up this troubled relationship of femininity and technology in her book *Zeros and Ones* (1997). Plant undermines the traditional dramaturgy of femininity and technological change. Instead of seeing women as victims of technology or its symbolic other, she details their historical intimacy. She argues that they have tended machines for generations, the operators of looms, typewriters, computers and switchboards. The suggestion that the rhythms of femininities worked out over centuries are the rhythms of the new technoculture, also implies that testosterone-laden strength and singular knowledge is a fast waning commodity in the dissipative, associative, fragmentary, hypertextual structures of cyberculture.³

In these scenarios femininity is figured symbolically as the realm of the rejected and the desired, as well as materially lacking at the traditional centres of new technologies - not directors of companies or managers, but typists and telephonists, in which their prevailing peripherality over decades and centuries ironically trains them comprehensively for the new cyberculture. Such positionality is characterised by plurality, by an ability to be literally and symbolically in two places at once.

Sue-Ellen Case has a sense of this positionality when she brings in a discussion of voodoo practice and the vever into her analysis of spatial relations (Case 1996: 51 - 6). Conceptions of femininity within the new technoculture are contradictory in relation to space, (just as they are in relation to the corporeal⁴); the feminine comprises *virtual space itself* and *what must be disavowed* in order to accede to such a realm. The analogy between voodoo and virtual systems is that both access other kinds of space. Case proposes such an analogy as counter to what she sees as the retrograde logic of Euclidean space.

Case summarises Euclid in relation to the 'point' in her discussion of bodies, technology and space; the *point* "performs its Euclidean distribution of space across the body and through the body into surrounding space" (Case 1996: 50). It does so by creating what Allucquère Rosanne Stone perceives as "relentlessly monistic articulations of physical and virtual space that law and science favour" (Stone 1995: 42, cited by Case 1995: 50). This singular negotiation of literal and virtual worlds functions only for a body configured as masculine. The feminine operates obliquely to such a paradigm, since it clearly exceeds the singular Euclidean point of negotiation between virtual and corporeal worlds. In Case's argument, it is precisely this oblique relation to space that suggests femininity might be re-thought progressively in these realms.

Case is not the first to engage Afro-centric practices in relation to new technologies.⁵ She contextualises her gesture within what Mark Dery terms 'Afrofuturism' (Dery 1993). Case is drawn to the voodoo vever because it practices a "complex signification of space" (Case 1996: 52) which pre-dates eurocentric scientific rational conceptions. The vever is "a figure drawn to chart the particular course through space that the need of the moment would employ to evoke the appropriate spirit" (Case 1996: 54). Case reads such figures as sophisticated contingent spatial negotiations

that challenge the kinds of space organised by current software. The vever accesses these windows of space (the loas⁶) through the dancing body. These veverers are;

. . . figures for the communal dance to work with, producing "possession" by the loa - a term that signifies the way the body opens as a window into the virtual space. The practice of "dancing space" plants flesh at the root of spatial relations.

(Case 1996: 55)

Case suggests that the voodoo vever resists both the seductions of immersion (no bodily boundaries) and the easy dismissal of the 'meat' of corporeality (entirely bodily bound) through the multiple dancing body. The vever in Case's argument, is a cipher for spatial relations in the new technoculture. The configuration of the body and virtual space as integrated plural motifs, suggests a way of thinking about space and technology able to engage progressively with femininity. Case proposes the voodoo vever as a *talisman* "to be held in the techno-imaginary to ward off the piercing Euclidean point" (Case 1996: 56). Case's 'talisman' is intended to operate for queer (lesbian) cultures as a mobilising image; a provocation for a more complex, body-acknowledged engagement with the new technoculture.⁷ But I want to do a different thing. I want to propose the voodoo vever as more than just an amulet for the techno-*imaginary*; I want it as *practical* spur in the actual doing of plural dancing as it grazes and produces provocative space. Like the best arguments, I want to forge a practice which resists the easy difference between material and symbolic realms. I want to extend the talisman for dancing bodies into one for dancing *uttering* bodies (she cries and shouts as she dances, she whispers, gasps, stuns you with her composure,⁸ gnawing narrative she swings away from you). I want to propose utterance and movement as a single thing that sweat-sound provocative space into being in one gesture. I want to cry out that the voice operates in such a context as the 'loa' itself. It does this by weaving a connection between the antitheses of *flesh* (Gibson's 'meat') and the bathing pleasure of *voice*. In a subversive conjuring trick, the voice as *loa* asserts the possibility of a progressive space for femininity in the new technoculture.

I would like fables of the unbounded body to abound in cyberspace
Nell Tenhaaf *Mysteries of the Bioapparatus* (Tenhaaf 1996: 68)

We⁹ whisk such tales into being; corporeal and temporal boundaries shimmer in our breath. *This* is enchantment. *Here*, between seeing and hearing slips a curving navigational wisdom. *Listen*. If we see this body before us, what could unbind its boundaries? (*voice*, in playful engagement with new technologies). If we *hear* this body before us, what could unbind its univocality? (games with time and space wrought with *BIG EYES*). She speaks in blood and tongue, weaving gesture and breath and utterance into a single thing. Winding time along veins, she plays with present speech and the speech of another time. And in this flurried turn the body opens as a window into virtual space, through the loa of *voice*.

Loa and behold.
I'm forging fables. Believe me.

™

Derry derry ding dason, My name is John Cheston
We wedon, we woden, we wedon, we woden
Bim boom, bim boom, bim boom, bim boom¹⁰

What has a woman's voice got to do with the tending of machines? 'Derry derry ding dason' is a round sung in twelve parts. Its sound mimics the rhythm of the moving loom around which it was composed and performed as a work song. Here is a nineteenth century *loa* – a communal singing and moving (weaving) in relation to new technologies. Its interlocking rhythm in twelve movements conjures the heft and pulse of interlacing threads, and the interlacing women who wrought cloth and song from community; met the space of work with an invigorated feminine space of embodied voice.

This musicality of the interaction of woman and machine arose again in the training of secretaries where women were taught to type in rhythmic patterns, "Words per minute, beats per minute, the clatter of the typist's strokes, the striking of the keys, thump of carriage return marked by the ringing of a bell at the end of every line" (Plant 1997: 118-9). And then the rhythms of the switchboard operator; constant greeting and plugging in, listening to conversations and chatting between calls - the electronic negotiation of speaking voices. She has always been accused of talking too

much, of being a nag, of going on. She has his voice in her ear dictating letters, translating utterance to the pressing of keys. Dictaphone. Her skills are unimportant, apparently. Supportive, but not at the hub. She doesn't speak into his ear, and send his fingers flurrying over lettered buttons. Henry Sayre in his analysis of Laurie Anderson's *United States* (Sayre 1989) suggests something of the typist's lack of agency when he says of her work ". . . the peculiar lack of an organizing consciousness, of an inner essence, in her narratives . . . is the most destabilizing element in her work" (Sayre 1989: 148). Such nomadic text-telling is structurally similar to the texts of the typing pool, produced by women moved around an organisation to listen to telling in order to produce text.

I want to suggest that such *moving telling* (this is meaning on the move) is a characteristic of art practice which engages with technology and the feminine through the use of the voice as *loa*. Such shifting embodied utterance provokes the production of different kinds of space. The *writing* of texts in relation to the pang of telling is a characteristic of these voices. Such a pang is often *os-textual* (the writer is also the one who utters the text in performance); the drench of voice is capable of different poetics in the breath of writing. This winding of voice/writing/body nudges odd geographies out of the new technoculture, resisting and redoubling its symbolic logic.

Case's discussion of the operations of the voodoo vever focuses not on performance in particular, but on the new technoculture in general. This article's focus is *technology and performance*; this could include the use of technology in *live* performance, in installation spaces, or digital platforms such as CD-ROM. It is my proposal that whatever the different formats for performance, the operations of femininity in relation to the space of new technologies are progressively engaged through the model of the voodoo vever, and specifically *the voice as loa*. Within live performance, the *os-text* is able to operate in an oscillatory economy between writing and the voicing of that writing. In performances, or media which involve recorded written / voices, the same oscillatory prowess is not able to operate in the same way. But in progressive play with new technologies, other kinds of oscillation might be negotiated between writing, the byte and the tongue.

Case's argument emphasises the communal nature of the dancing figures operating through the cipher of the vever. Since my analysis is focused on *performance*, the

nature of plurality is different. In such contexts, multiplicity might operate through the many 'users' of installations composed from intelligent environments, or through the 'driving' of CD-ROM art works. Within live performance, plurality is often engaged within the dynamics of the practice itself, both in terms of multiple performing bodies, and through the weaving operations of femininity, technology and voice. Such 'community' also operates across the dynamic of audience and performers. Case's 'case' operates compellingly in such contexts; this is a plurality which grazes voices and flesh to trouble conceptions of space as well as femininity in the new technoculture.

™

What is particular about the operations of voice in performance in relation to technology? Frances Dyson in her essay on sound and cyberculture 'When is the Ear Pierced?' (Dyson 1996) suggests that radio produced intimate voices through the use of microphones at close proximity. Such voices "gave the listening experience a particular authenticity" (Dyson 1996: 78). Dyson goes on to analyse the difference between such live uses of microphones, and the operations of *recorded* sound:

Recorded sound cannot claim the so-called authenticity of direct, live transmission, since the recording is tied to neither the here nor the now of the sonic event but rather to a system of representation guided by technology.

(Dyson 1996: 87)

I want to use Dyson's comments to analyse the operations of recorded and live voice in our dance theatre production *The Secret Project*. Sections of *The Secret Project* intonate space through the textures of live voice (amplified through a headset microphone) and recorded voice (sampled and triggered by motion). Such a spatial intonation resists the distinction between live and recorded media; the voice speaking live before you, and the voice sampled and triggered by motion, is the *same* voice. Because the live voice is amplified, it sounds qualitatively the same as the recorded voice. Both 'tongues of text' operate together through a choreographic practice of moving / speaking. In this practice it isn't always clear when I utter text, and when I trigger a pre-recorded sample. The apprehension of such a process is troubled by the knowledge that there are too many voices for this one performer to be articulating

them all 'live'. Yet they 'fit' with her body – pulses of movement are accompanied by flurries of text. Such a practice fables the unbound body into being through the *loa* of voice. It disturbs the distinction between live and recorded media by asserting the presentness of utterance in mouth and flesh, as well as preserving a sense of another temporal operation within the sound world.

When we were at an early stage of research for *The Secret Project*, we developed our use of the motion-sensing software 'BigEye' using *colour* as a trigger. This meant that we told the camera to 'see' the movement of a particular colour. The colour we chose needed to contrast strongly to other colours in the visual field. This involved us in experiments with brightly coloured gloves, scarlet lipstick and orange vests. On the computer screen, we drew boxes for our trigger to 'hit'. We played with various operations of trigger – text relation. I moved from performance space to the computer screen and back again checking 'where' the triggers were. My choreography was beleaguered by these attempts to 'hit' triggers. Sampled texts blurred their voices into awkward space. This failure is a failure which Case traces in her discussion of Euclidean space. Our triggers, like the Euclidean point, were only able to articulate a monistic relationship to space. Voices were either triggered or not triggered; boundaries of screenic boxes entered or not entered. Such spatial and performic negotiations are unable to veer provocative space because they cannot engage with the *grain* of utterance and physicality. When we shifted to using *motion* as a trigger, we began to develop a practice which could engage in the internal ache of movement and utterance; a practice which could operate like the voodoo veer and allow the body to open into different kinds of space; a practice where she could use both her tongues to engage the voice as *loa*.

one tongue for tasting
and another for speaking
there's no fork here
just two
I know you'd like a tale of natural and synthetic
or a tale of splitting and engorging
but I've only something more confusing
there are two tongues here
one for tasting
and one for speaking
it's true there are tiny
thread wires
spun throughout
and speaking has a greater range
and tasting too
but I could not tell you which was first
which she was made with
which she made herself
the design is creative
and intelligent
each will move up or down and lie still
If the other is on high
but there are other times
when silicon muscle webs
work on oral opera
she has two tongues
and sometimes uses both
to her advantage
somehow her widened
taste buds shot with pixels
improve her speaking tongue
and the two articulate their differences
with skilled co-ordination
to see her speaking with her mouth full
is a fine thing –
(little iridescences here and there
light the half-light in murmurs)

TM

As discussed earlier, Case proposes the voodoo vever as a 'map' for sophisticated contingent spatial negotiations that challenge the kinds of space organised by current software. My own argument extends Case's point to assert *voice* as the *loa* in these

relations (i.e. voice as 'cipher' for the way the body opens as a window onto virtual space). As we shift here from the realm of live performance to that of recorded performance, and from stage space to cyberspace, my thesis of the voice as loa operates directly in a context of digitally organised space. Such spaces often struggle to meet the grain of *voice*. The proposal of the body and virtual space as 'integrated plural motifs' falters when such visual space stumbles at plurality itself. If the voice operates as a loa in these contexts to produce different kinds of space, they do so in a way that reinforces the particular failures of visual over vocal worlds. Her textual tongue, woven through these spaces, weaves a connection between flesh and utterance. Her lick makes space for the feminine, but what 'she' tastes is often no space at all.

fluidly then
(look down)
I moisten the space
between your
small fingers
and that
plate of buttons
south of you

corpuscle
to pixel

Simon Penny in an essay called 'Virtual Reality as the Completion of the Enlightenment Project' (Penny 1994) argues that the *space* of virtual reality largely lags behind the imagination of its attendant cultural thrall. This essay was written in 1994; six years ago (I write this in 2000). In the world of new technologies *six years* is equivalent to many decades prior to the digital revolution. Nonetheless, Penny's essay remains relevant in many aspects. Penny's thesis is that the revolutionary rhetoric around the advent of virtual reality largely conceals traditional conceptions of *space* and identity.¹¹

Penny makes the same point as Case in relation to the limitations of the kinds of space organised by current software. Even more interestingly, his argument uses an example of *dancing bodies* as a way to imagine a contrary conception of space:

But what if VR had developed in a culture with a different attitude to the body? Take for example, this discussion of Indian dance: "The sense of space was wholly different . . . no long runs or soaring leaps or efforts to transform the stage into a boundless arena, a kind of metaphysical everywhere . . . but content with the realm of the body, comfortable with dimension and gravity, all ease, all centred." The teacher of this dance technique described the attitude to the body thus: "no sense of elevation or extension . . . body self-contained . . . inwardness, inwardness . . . In Hinduism, there is no beyond."

(Penny 1994: 239 [Wetzsteon 1992])

It is compelling that Penny and Case independently express their sense of the limitations of digital space, through a proposal of the transgressive possibilities of non-Western dance forms (Case through the African cultural practice of voodoo, Penny through Indian dance).¹² Whilst Case uses the voodoo veve to propose a mobilising image for engagement with new technologies, Penny leaves his own question ("what if VR had developed in a culture with a different attitude to the body?") largely unanswered beyond his provocative example of the Indian dancer.

Earlier in the same essay, Penny describes digital space in a context of classical mechanics:

On a technical level, the grid (and polygonal construction within the grid) radically limits the possibility of constructing organic, amorphous forms. It privileges clean, crystalline, coherent, independent forms. . . this space is the space of classical mechanics (which) resolve the messy, complex, and overlapping world into clean, self-contained mathematical objects, like the polygonal bodies floating in virtual space.

(Penny 1994: 233)

Let's compare this description with a footnote from Brenda Laurel's book *Computers as Theatre* (1993).

Using computers to store recipes is one of the oldest jokes in the personal computer business - in the early days, that's what all marketing executives

thought women would do with them. The obvious drawback is that cookie dough, pasta sauce, and other goo-based substances will get all over the keys when you try to retrieve a recipe file. A speech interface is the obvious solution, but it would seem that the marketing executives haven't thought of that one yet.

(Laurel 1993: 174)

Penny and Laurel's descriptions seem to me to sum up much about the contemporary wranglings of femininity and technology. If femininity is caricatured as approaching the terminal covered in 'goo-based substances' how might 'she' engage in 'polygonal construction within the grid'? Indeed.

Jeanne Randolph in her essay 'A City for Bachelors' (Randolph 1996) analyses the virtual reality project *Archaeology of a Mother Tongue* by Toni Dove and Michael Mckenzie (1993). This is a piece made in the early years of VR, and certainly the dissonance described here is partly consequent to this, but I would argue that the points made here to do with the contrast in visual and sound worlds are too frequent an observation to be only the result of an emergent technology.

throughout the piece there is a contradiction between the purity of the image world and the organic disintegration expressed in the aural world . .

(Randolph 1996: 223)

. . . in the visual field, the skeleton of the virtual city remains fleshless and unredeemed, a dreamlike condensation in an aural envelope of voices.

(Randolph 1996: 225)

I want to suggest a connection between Penny's crystalline spaces, Laurel's joke about a 'speech interface' and these comments on Dove and Mckenzie's VR project. Whilst it is clear that Randolph's description of the "purity of the image" accords directly with Penny's "crystalline spaces," what is less clear is how Missy cooking disaster might connect with "an aural envelope of voices." It seems to me that the messy dynamics of cookie dough and pasta sauce on keyboards is an unwitting depiction of a fable of the unbound body (slipping from literal to symbolic realms). Its drowning of technology with the dynamic of 'goo' has everything to do with the

operations of *voice* as loa. Laurel suggests (for different reasons) a 'speech interface' in this context of viscous disaster. This makes every kind of symbolic sense – since voice, like cookie dough, gets 'all over the keys.'

™

. . . cyberspace beyond its business uses, can invoke a parallel and sometimes a transcendent or spiritual world that revives the dead or the spirits of things in the limbo of the possible.

(Morse 1996: 206)

One of the characteristics of emerging technologies is the elimination of duration and the collapse of time into real time.¹³ I want to end this chapter by asking what such digital prowess might weave with us, out of the box again, and into spaces which an audience can inhabit directly. Can such cartographies, as Margaret Morse suggests, 'revive the spirits of things'?

At the article's end, I want to tell you a ghost story.

In the middle of our dance theatre production *The Secret Project*, there is a story called 'Snow Ghosts' (see audio CD). This is a story about falling. In writing this text, I was interested in the moment of *slipping* as a provocative place for femininity. I wrote this narrative in the first few days of arriving in the Canadian Rockies. Its turns are redolent of the place of writing – snow, pine, valleys, coffee in diners. In the curve of such geography I wanted to conjure a magical space for the sideways energies of language and the feminine. This is 'Snow Ghosts.' When Richard¹⁴ arrived, and we began to work in the studio, one of the first things we did was record this story. This was Easter 1998. The recording session was one of those odd times when we 'got it' in one take.

Eighteen months later we are back in Banff¹⁵ on our final production residency for *The Secret Project*. Richard and I know that we will use 'snow ghosts' in the piece, but we are not sure exactly how. I thought I would perform the piece live. But Richard has a strange suggestion; that we should simply play the recording. I am hesitant – the story is seven minutes long; I worry that we'll lose our audience. Richard persuades

me. He writes a musical score that opens and closes the work and erupts in the middle. I suggest darkness, and tiny glimpses of falling caught in the light at brief moments. We try it. It's a risk - making our audience sit in the dark for seven minutes listening to a story. But we go with it.

(Sit in the dark and listen to 'snow ghosts' now.
If there's no darkness, you could make some under your closed eyelids)

In the performance of *The Secret Project*, this story forged a fable of unbound bodies in a context of multi-tongued dancing women. It allowed our audience the pleasures of cyberspace in literal space, by being engulfed in the darkness by sound. We make a space for the femininity of *hearing* in a context of the seeing / hearing of our moving bodies and technology. The "source beyond the field of inscription" (Dyson 1996: 87) of recording, is for me, a memory of my first few days in Canada, of a text that fell out of me like a tripped-up thing. (And I *hear* this in the taste of the particular recording). For the audience, amplified voice has been woven in the textures of live and recorded tenors throughout the piece, so that time here is both *undone* and *reinforced* of the charge of presentness. Whether this voice is 'beyond the field of inscription' or not, is secondary to the communal listening in the dark that attends its apprehension. I bathe you in my vowels. What kind of haunting is this?

In *The Domain Matrix*, Sue-Ellen Case quotes Verena Andermatt Conley on the space of narrative in a context of new technologies;

By way of feminists such as H  l  ne Cixous, through geographers, philosophers and culture critics, time and again we hear the need for becoming in cultural contexts of resingularisation through storytelling, narrative or poetry. Through voice, storytelling brings the body, or one's story into History. . . it reopens onto space in time, away from technological reduction into grids . . .

(Conley 1993: 88, cited by Case 1996: 108)

'Snow Ghosts' attempts a strange spell. It tries to conjure utterance as a "limbo of the possible" (Morse 1996: 206). It uses text as a cipher to produce 'other spaces' through the loa of voice. Its storytelling "brings the body . . . into History . . . it reopens onto space in time, away from technological reduction into grids . . ."

TM

Alongside the performance of *The Secret Project* there is an installation version of the work. This is composed of a series of apparently empty boxes, which contain adapted motion-sensing systems, similar to the ones used in the dance theatre production. 'Users' are invited to explore the interior of these boxes with their hands. As they do so, they trigger little sound worlds – a box of gasps, fragments of a story, poetry. These are empty boxes which contain textual ghosts; ghosts you can find if you touch them, weaving words from air. Such spaces revive the 'spirits of things' through text, voice and touch. We bring ghosts to your fingertips by connecting their gesture to the pang of utterance. These are spaces that unsettle the difference between listening and moving; spaces which trouble voices out of 'empty' space. Spaces made strange through voice, femininities and new technologies – the loa of voice.

TM

The provocative possibilities of voice / writing (the os-text) woven in relation to new (and old) technologies suggests a transgressive potential and actuality in contemporary digital art practice. This is often exemplified as a desire for content, for emotion, for stories and spaces that compel us to different spaces and original practice. These ghosts speak out loud. Listen.

I'm forging fables. Believe me.

Bibliography

- Birringer, Johannes. *Media & Performance: Along the Border*. (London & Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 1998)
- Case, Sue-Ellen. *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 1996)
- Conley, Verena Andermatt. 'Eco Subjects.' *Rethinking Technologies*. ed. Verena Andermatt Conley on behalf of the Miami Theory Collective. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1993): 77 - 91
- Dery, Mark. 'Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose.' *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture, South Atlantic Quarterly* 92: 4 (Fall 1993): 735 - 778
- Dyson, Frances. 'When is the Ear Pierced? The Clashes of Sound, Technology, and Cyberculture.' *Immersed in Technology: Art & Virtual Environments*. ed. Mary Anne Moser. (Cambridge: MIT Press. 1996): 73 - 101
- Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. (New York: Ace Books. 1984)
- _____. *Count Zero*. (New York: Ace Books. 1986)
- Laurel, Brenda. *Computers as Theatre*. (Reading Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley. 1993)
- Morse, Margaret. 'What do Cyborgs Eat? Oral Logic in an Information Society.' *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*. eds. Gretchen Bender & Timothy Druckrey. (Seattle: Bay Press. 1994): 157 - 89
- Moser, Mary Anne. ed. *Immersed in Technology: Art & Virtual Environments*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 1996)
- Penny, Simon. 'Virtual Reality as the Completion of the Enlightenment Project.' *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*. eds. Gretchen Bender & Timothy Druckrey. (Seattle: Bay Press. 1994): 231 - 48
- Plant, Sadie. *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*. (London: Fourth Estate. 1997)
- Randolph, Jeanne. 'A City for Bachelors.' *Immersed in Technology: Art & Virtual Environments*. ed. Mary Anne Moser. (Cambridge: MIT Press. 1996): 151 - 78
- Sayre, Henry M. *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 1989)
- Stone, Allucquère Rosanne. *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. (Cambridge: MIT Press. 1995)
- Tenhaaf, Nell. 'Technology and the Feminine.' *Parallelogram* 18, no. 3 (1992)
- _____. 'Mysteries of the Bioapparatus.' *Immersed in Technology: Art & Virtual Environments*. ed. Mary Anne Moser. (Cambridge: MIT Press. 1996): 51 - 71
- Wetzsteon, Ross. 'The Cosmic Dance.' *Village Voice*. 11 Feb (1992)

¹ Johannes Birringer introduced me to this essay during our performance project 'Lively Bodies - Lively Machines' at Chichester in 1996. See Birringer 1998: 105 – 44, for an analysis of this project.

² William Gibson 's description of the body as 'meat' (1984) and the heralding of VR (virtual reality) as the loss of the body, is accompanied by the characterisation of cyberspace as a "female realm of pure body" (Morse 1994: 163). Morse suggests that "cyberspace is a largely male domain where gender constructs under critique in other spheres of contemporary society return with a vengeance" (Morse 1994: 168).

³ This is the same point as Tenhaaf makes in her earlier article (Tenhaaf 1996: 52). The difference between the two arguments is that Plant focuses on material historical processes and Tenhaaf on symbolic. This is a difference between women and femininity. The fact that the two accord in their conclusions, seems to me to make both more compelling.

⁴ This is because space and the body in these relations are both characterised as feminine.

⁵ Case borrows the terms 'voudou vever' and 'loa' from African cultural practices with an acknowledgement of the colonial dynamic of such a gesture. She does so with the aim of 'queering' the discourse around 'performing lesbian at the end of print culture' (Case 1996: 51 - 6). Whether such borrowing is legitimate is a complex question. Using non-Western tropes to progress thinking around Western technoculture, could be said to be a revolutionary gesture, it could also be said to reinforce the dynamics of colonialism. I would argue that prohibiting areas of thinking / practice from discourse is more disturbing than making intelligent contextual use of such material.

⁶ William Gibson uses the voodoo term 'loa' in *Count Zero* (Gibson 1986). Stone summarises Gibson's use of the term usefully; ". . . certain emergent phenomena in the Net – sentient beings which are unwarrantable to human or machine agency – are in fact loas. This raises the question of whether the loas invaded the net, or originated there, or manifested as a consequence of distributed human expectation. (Stone 1995: 188). Case extends this fictional use of the term in her proposal of the voodoo vever as a 'talisman' for engaging with the space of new technologies.

⁷ Case's connection between the operations of the voodoo vever and queer culture seems to me to be the weakest part of what is a compelling argument. It isn't clear to me how the operations of 'queer' are specifically configured in relation to a plural, fleshly *dancing*.

⁸ "The stunning composure of *Hand Fall* . . . the work of Jools Gilson-Ellis. . . For something so intimate to become so declamatory on stage takes the dancer into a new relationship with her body and her audience, and for this vision alone *Solo Independents* would have to be welcomed." 7th March 1998, Mary Leland, *The Irish Times*. Review of *Hand Fall*, solo choreography.

⁹ *half/angel*, a performance production company founded in 1995, based in Ireland & England, directed by Jools Gilson-Ellis and Richard Povall. www.halfangel.org.uk

¹⁰ This song was taught to me by a group of women in Totnes, Devon who were part of a choir called *Global Harmony*. These women told me that 'Derry Derry Ding Dason' originated in nineteenth century weaving mills tended by women. This round is sung in twelve parts and mimics the rhythms of loom and shuttle. My citation for this song, like my learning of it, is a *heard* thing; understood through the sharing of rhythms and stories. I place it here as example in content and transmission.

¹¹ Penny quotes Nell Tenhaaf on this:

"The philosophy of technology . . . has been articulated from a masculinist perspective in terms that metaphorise and marginalise the feminine. In real social discourse, this claiming of technology has been reinforced by, and has probably encouraged, a male monopoly on technical expertise, diminishing or excluding the historical contributions of women to technological developments." She goes on to assert that this invisibility of the feminine calls for "a radical reconstitution of technology," but we must ask ourselves whether the architecture of the machine and the premises of software engineering themselves are not so encumbered with old philosophical ideas that any such "reconstitution" would amount only to surface decoration."

(Penny 1994: 238, [Tenhaaf 1992])

¹² Case does not mention Penny's essay in *The Domain Matrix* (which predates it) (Case 1996).

¹³ See Mary Anne Moser's introduction to *Immersed in Technology: Art & Virtual Environments* (Moser 1996).

¹⁴ Richard Povall – co-artistic director with myself of *half/angel*, our performance production company.

¹⁵ This is the *Banff Centre for the Arts, Department of Media & Visual Arts*, who were co-producers of *The Secret Project*. We did a series of pre-production residencies at Banff during 1998 / 9 before our final production residency in August / September 1999. The work premiered at The Eric Harvey Theatre in early October 1999.