

## CALL AND RESPONSE: TOWARDS A DIGITAL DRAMATURGY

BARBARA BRIDGER & J. R. CARPENTER, 2013

BARBARA BRIDGER

In the early 1990s I sent some performance scripts to Claire MacDonald, who was then director of Theatre at Dartington College of Arts. She encouraged me to become a visiting lecturer and I found myself in an environment where there was great emphasis on physical theatre and movement practices. At first glance this seemed to be at the expense of performed text, but I was so impressed by the devised and improvised, collaborative work pioneered at the institution that I immediately began to try and find a 'writing' role.

I was supported by a growing interest in new approaches to text, not only within Theatre, but also within the wider institution. In 1992 John Hall and others began the discussion which led to the establishment of Performance Writing as an independent set of practices at Dartington. When Ric Allsopp added Scripted Media to Performance Writing in 2004, I became part of this new initiative. Establishing a set of investigations into writing *for* performance in the context of writing *as* performance proved challenging. However, my previous attempts to develop dramaturgical approaches appropriate to devised and improvised theatre practice supported my thinking and gradually I became convinced that performance writing's investigation into the way language operates and communicates could support the interrogative processes of devised, collaborative practice.

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J. R. CARPENTER

In the autumn of 2009 I was Digital Writer in Residence in the Performance Writing Area at Dartington College of Art. During that time I taught a module on Narrative Mapping and Digital Literature, and generally immersed myself in the corpus, pedagogy, methodology, and sensibility of Performance Writing. Since the early 1990s I had been engaged in a hybrid art, writing, research and performance practice spanning physical, digital, locative and durational modes of creation and dissemination. Visual Art, New Media Art, Performance, Literature, Electronic Literature - no one of these fields offers a discursive framework suited to the sorts of multi-modal texts I seem to be forever making and unmaking and remaking again. My arrival at Dartington, in its last year of operation, felt like a home-coming of sorts. Through Performance Writing I begin to think toward an articulation of concerns which had long lain mute at the heart of my practice – the indivisibility of text from context, the iterative nature of my process, and my tendency to test text by moving it through a continuum of forms.

BARBARA

Heidi Gilpin raises the difficulty of interpreting movement performances containing ‘so many differing vocabularies [...] and disciplinary perspectives, none of which play a hierarchical, central role.’ She suggests that the solution might lie in an examination of our ‘relation to textuality’, even while she is aware of the irony of proposing strategies for ‘reading’ a multi-layered ‘text’ comprised of non-linguistic elements (1997, p.85). Another dance practitioner, Valerie Preston-Dunlop also expresses concern about how movement can be read and writes of the plural grammars and multiple codes of cross genre practice.

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PRESTON-DUNLOP

With unstable codes  
in an emerging avant garde piece, perhaps,  
there can be mis-communication.  
"I've never seen that before, what did you make of it?"  
With aesthetic codes  
there can be mystery.  
"It was beautiful but what did it mean?"  
With behaviour codes  
there can be narrative.  
"I could see they were nervous of something."  
And there can be a mixture of codes,  
some known ways of doing things with some newly forming  
not-quite-there ones,  
with some surprises.  
And that is how it often is in innovative dance. (1998, 10)

BARBARA

Preston-Dunlop ends by asking if she has found a voice of her own: her own grammar. This is a question that could also be asked of performance writing and dramaturgy. For instance, there are various terms used to describe the way improvised theatre sources a range of disparate texts, divorces them from their original context and reassembles them, so that they appear to belong together. Some of these terms originate in visual art practice, for example 'montage' and 'collage', but another, 'assemblage', is also employed in performance writing practices, where the term acknowledges the intertextual nature of all writing.

JR

Strategies of appropriation, quotation, and détournement have long been part of my practice. As often as I use and re-use 'found' images and texts, I pillage my own work for source material. This applies to

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source code too of course. Everything I know about HTML I learned from viewing the page source of other web sites, from copying and pasting. In visual art terms, this may be easily understood as a collage practice. Influenced by my time at Dartington, I began to think critically about the complex relationship between a source code composed of a number of texts and the assemblage of text, image, and/or other interaction that this text produces on a computer screen. I came to think of the active interchange between these two texts in terms of performance. Over the course of 2010 I appropriated the source code of a number of text generators written by Nick Montfort, with the express intent of using both the source codes and the texts they generated as scripts for live performance.

#### BERGVALL

What do we mean by Performance Writing? ...the textual does not only throw up the question of the literary, it also urgently prompts an interrogation of the impact the use of writing applies on visual, sonic or movement arts. And vice-versa. It is also paramount that the impact of this cross-fertilisation does not remain fixated at a formal level, but that it acutely and insistently, one might say intravenously makes a point of examining the personal motivations and urgencies for work.... (1996)

#### BARBARA

When discussing *In Bed*, a text written for Cathy Turner's *Writing Space*, Clare MacDonald adds to Bergvall's argument, suggesting 'a counter pedagogy' that 'might begin instead with writing as a mode of enquiry, drawing on the history of artists' engagements with language as graphic, sonic and visual material; with words as things; with writing as mark making and with scripts and scores as machines for making performance'. In this way MacDonald expands the notion of what writing might be, moving it

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towards art practice, and thereby allowing artists' writing and language experiments to exercise some influence on both 'literary and performance form' (2010, p.92).

JR

Perhaps the truest test of a methodology is to apply it to a new set of questions/practices. From the outset, Performance Writing recognized that one of the areas of its investigation would be the impact of the digital on the creation and display of writing.

BERGVALL

...the performance of writing would be this observation which seeks to locate expressedly the context and means for writing, both internal and external to language, whether these be activated for and through a stage, for and through a site, a time-frame, a performer's body, the body of a voice or the body of a page. (1996)

JR

The democratic, inclusive and above all extensible nature of Performance Writing methodology allows us, sixteen years later, to détourne Bergvall's statement with a digital literary in mind which barely existed at the time of her writing:

...the performance of digital texts both internal and external to code languages may be activated for and through a computer, a network, a browser, a hand-held device, a < body > tag, a performer's body, the body of a voice or the body of a page.

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BARBARA

And perhaps Performance Writing's insistence on the *active* participation of language in the formation of meaning can contribute to the development of a dramaturgical practice capable of moving beyond traditional engagement with research, documentation and scripting and into a more integrated, generative role? I was asking this question and I was looking for something.... for some link... for a practice that spoke differently to these elements and this meant that I was more than ready for a particular conversation with JR Carpenter. It took place in the depths of Devon, on a rainy winter's night with the debris of Dartington College of Arts lapping at our feet.

JR

No it didn't. We met by chance on the platform at Tones train station and sat together on a train journey from Totnes to London. It was November 2011, to be precise.

BARBARA

But I remember there was a fireplace.

JR

That came later. That was at the pub.

BARBARA

In any case, JR was describing a project she was working on called *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* – a computer-generated dialogue, written in a programming language called JavaScript which, she said, generated a script for a poli-vocal performance. Listening to her description, I realized two things: one - that she was interpreting the word ‘script’ in a way that I had not considered before, and two - that my ‘expanded’ definition of dramaturgy might also encompass digital textual practices. I began to attempt a dramaturgical response.

JR

*TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* is a computer-generated dialogue, a literary narrative of generations of transatlantic migration performed in the form of a conversation, an encoded discourse propagating across, beyond, and through long-distance communications networks. One JavaScript file sits in one directory on one server attached to a vast network of hubs, routers, switches, and submarine cables through which this one file may be accessed many times from many places by many devices. The mission of this JavaScript is to generate another sort of script. The call “function produce\_stories()” produces a response in the browser, a dialogue to be read aloud in three voices: Call, Response, and Interference; or: *Strophe*, *Antistrophe*, and *Chorus*; or Here, There, and Somewhere in Between. Yet a reader can never quite reach the end of this *TRANS.MISSION*. Mid-way through a new iteration is generated. The sentence structures stay the same, but all their variables change.

BARBARA

Let's see if I've understood: *TRAINS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* is a JavaScript file which performs the act of calling. As we generally associate calling with voice, this implies that the JavaScript file is not only a 'voice', but it is also capable of conducting a dialogue, of both calling for and responding with 'a new iteration'.

JR

There are a number of layers of dialogue happening here. Within the JavaScript file there are strings of variables, which look like this: `var w=['why', 'where', 'how'];` and a set of functions which 'call' these variable strings. In `function story()`, for example, `call=choose(w)+'?'`; calls upon the above string, and returns (replies) one of three possible results: Why? Where? How?

There is also a dialogue going on between the JavaScript file and the web browser. The browser 'calls' the JavaScript file through a series of internet protocols. The JavaScript file responds to the browser's call with instructions. It tells the browser `onload='produce_stories()'`. The browser then proceeds to read the script. It could be said that the browser performs the script by transforming or translating the text of the JavaScript file into the text we see on the screen.

BARBARA

You describe this JavaScript as having a 'mission.' Does this suggest that this is a text with a subtext?



JR

A mission may be defined as an operational task designed to carry out the goals of a specific program. A computer program, for instance. In order for this JavaScript file to perform its operational task it must be intelligible to a wide range of communication protocols, to a web browser, and to a computer operating system, all of which are intrinsically texts. What are the goals of these programs? One of the principal tenants of Performance Writing is that context is everything, yet the intelligibility of this text is intertwined with a vast sea of texts human eyes will never see.

BARBARA

As these 'behind the scenes/behind the screens' texts carry out their operational tasks, how does this modify, or result in the content we see/read on screen?

JR

The computer doesn't actually generate anything. I wrote all the words in all the sentences that appear on screen. I used words, terms, and phrases which cropped up in my reading on a wide range of topics pertaining to transatlantic migrations and communications networks, including words common to shipping, navigation, travel, telegraphy, wireless, cartography, and telepathy. Other words and phrases are pure fancy. For example, here is the source code the odd-ball sentence 'Who can interpret the bay in wind like this?':

```
'Who can '+choose(know)+' the '+choose(water)+' in  
'+choose(weather)+' like this?'
```

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There are three variables in the sentence: (know), (water), (weather). The list of (know) variables is: ['believe', 'categorize', 'claim', 'identify', 'imagine', 'interpret', 'intuit', 'know', 'own', 'pinpoint', 'locate', 'quantify', 'recognize', 'remember', 'suspect', 'understand']. The list of (water) variables is: ['water', 'surf', 'ocean', 'sea', 'channel', 'bay', 'Atlantic', 'North Atlantic', 'harbour']. And the list of (weather) variables is: ['breezes', 'fog', 'gales', 'glare', 'gusts', 'hail', 'mist', 'rain', 'shadows', 'showers', 'sun', 'thunderstorms', 'wind']. Each new iteration draws upon these same variables.

BARBARA

The arrival of each new iteration is always a disruption, a re-versioning, an immigrant bringing new blood to the dialogue.

JR

Who can imagine the sea in shadows like this?

BARBARA

But it's an intelligent interruption, in that the variables have all been written by you, and they are transformed into coherence en route to the screen by the sentence structures which contain them. Yes,

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I think I understand and yet, why is it that my immediate response is to accuse – who? or what? – of 'cheating'? Is it the overriding imposition of coherence? Gilpin says that none of her differing vocabularies and disciplinary perspectives has a hierarchical, central role. I must try and unpick my reasons for this rush to accuse code language of a lack of morality.

JR

This question echoes the one posed earlier by Preston-Dunlop:

'I've never seen that before, what did you make of it?'

Text generators are the oldest form of digital literature, yet there has been anxiety about computer-generated text for as long as computational processes have existed.

SIMANOWSKI

'The internal problem of this genre of digital literature is its poetics of technology, which replaces a language juggler with a crafter of code.' (2011, 91)

JR

*TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* thwarts Simanowski's argument on two fronts. Firstly, technically, the source code was not entirely crafted by me. Less a craft than a crude life raft, my code is a hack of a narrative generator called *The Two*, created by Nick Montfort in 2008.

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BARBARA

Pillaging again, but I note the use of 'hack' rather than 'steal' or 'appropriate'. Hack has chopping, slicing implications. It suggests a clean break?

JR

In *A Hacker Manifesto*, McKenzie Wark argues, '[t]o hack is always to produce the odd difference in the production of information... by transforming in some way the very process of production.' (2004, 222) *A Hacker Manifesto* is a Performance Writing Manifesto if ever there was one. Something of the uncanny twinning of characters at work in Montfort's *The Two* underpinned my process production; my hack transforms Montfort's source code into a code medium, sending and receiving dialogue on and through media haunted by generations of past usage.

Secondly, rather than internalizing, TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE] externalises a poetics of technology. Codes, their creators, the modes through which they operate, propagate, and communicate, and the confusion they instigate are one of the main topics of the dialogue TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE] generates.

SIMANOWSKI

'because absurdity, weirdness, and illogicality are the default modes of text generators, mastery is only proven by overcoming such characteristics.' (91)

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JR

This generator aims not to overcome but rather to embrace such characteristics. *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* generates cacophony, liminality, atemporality and asynchronous exchanges of mixed messages pertaining to miscommunications and network failures. Absurdity, weirdness, and illogicality are, after all, the default modes of long-distance communication, migration, displacement and difference.

BARBARA

Could *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* be described as a layered exploration of the relationship between narrative and a journey that can only take place digitally, somewhere 'placed yet non-placed', 'somewhere 'beyond'?

JR

Thank you, I will steal that. In this instance I would call that non-place the network. The network is not a place per se, but rather, a placeholder – an articulation of a space between places. The variables travel through networks intact as narrative units. The narrative resonates in the space between places separated by time, distance, and ocean, yet inextricably linked by generations of immigration. The digital network serves as narrative structure for stories of place and displacement resonating between sites, beyond nations. *Strophe* and *Antistrophe* call and respond between here and there with *Chorus* running interference, confusing and confounding boundaries between physical and digital, code and narrative, past and future, home and away.

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BARBARA

'Haunted media' seems a significant concept in the context of your work. Could you expand on your usage?

Can you expand on your use of the phrase, 'The code performing the text'?

Can you give your gloss on the terms 'remediation' and 'locative'?

Can you give your gloss on the term 'iterative'?

What is generative about the process of performing these 'texts'?

JR

So many questions Barbara.

BARBARA

*TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* generates questions.

JR

So it does.

Begin Transmission.

How?

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With a question.

What emerges from a question?

Spring mist on the ocean. Distant coastlines, to lure us.

#### DERRIDA

'Is not the writing of the question, by its decision, by its resolution, the beginning of repose and response?' (1978, 76)

#### JR

The questions posed by Barbara during the composition of *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* inflected the creation of my next piece, *There he was, gone*. From the outset, I endeavored to write 'for performance in the context of writing as performance,' a poli-vocal performance script *and* a stand-alone web-based piece. In the web iteration, a short computer-generated narrative dialogue is situated within an assemblage of pictorial cartographic elements. This 'page' is occasionally interrupted by two lines of horizontally scrolling poetic text, both 'borrowed' from a text I wrote for an iPhone/iPad app called *Know* (Lewis, 2012). A quick look at the source code reveals that some of the variables written for *TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]*, such as the above cited (weather) and (water) strings, have also been re-used in *There he was, gone*.

BARBARA

Ah yes, stealing from yourself as well as from others.

JR

For the live performance iteration of *There he was, gone*. I created a print script for four voices and projection version of the work – a subset of the web-based piece containing the pictorial and cartographic elements, but none of the text.

*There he was, gone*. was first performed at Performance Writing Weekend at Arnolfini, Bristol, May 2012, by JR Carpenter, Barbara Bridger, David Prater, and Christine Wilks.

BARBARA

I had seen and responded to *There he was, gone*. at various stages in its development, but now I ‘took up’ one of the voices. This is more accurate than saying I performed it, because my lack of traditional ownership of my dialogue was underlined both by the performance mode and by the way the script operated. Two of the performers read from printed scripts. JR and I made no attempt to disguise the fact that we were reading our words from computer screens. The text ‘bounced’ around us in a loosely pre-ordained pattern, it also shifted as we read. These changes were disconcerting to say the least. They forced a certain approach to the reading and vocalization of the words. The usual pre-reading prior to a moment of enunciation was not possible. I could not read ahead and then relax because I knew in

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advance what my next line would be. As a result, reading and speaking became more closely fused into one simultaneous operation.

JR

How did this embodied engagement with a digital dramaturgy differ from your past experience scripting for devised theatre?

BARBARA

I have deliberately tried to write scripts that encourage modification rather than interpretation: scripts that act as a prompt to the performer's own thoughts and ideas, or incorporate risk, or can be exchanged, or shared, or repeated differently, etc, etc. Now here I was experiencing a script that danced through all these possibilities.

I have also witnessed performers speaking words that they are simultaneously hearing through headphones. I'm thinking now of *Wishes for a Better Future* by Blind Ditch (2003). But in that instance, the performers had heard the text before. It remained stable. Mine didn't. Modifications to *There he was, gone*. occurred even as I opened my mouth to speak.

In some panic, I intuitively looked for something to encourage the close attention needed to avoid faltering. I was aware that the other participants were experiencing equal difficulties and I didn't want to add to their confusion. I observed that my lines were 'opening lines' in that they indicated when

a new 'stanza' of the piece was beginning. This allowed me to create some kind of rhythmic return, some form of insistence, some sense that I consciously initiated, rather than responded. Gertrude Stein came to mind.

STEIN

'Writing may be made between the ear and the eye and the ear and the eye the eye will be well and the ear will be well.' (1975, 277)

JR

Earlier you wrote of Preston-Dunlop, 'Has she found a voice of her own: her own grammar.' Do you think these works find their own grammar?

BARBARA

This text may be the best answer. We co-wrote it, engaging in a dialogue about two dialogues.

*TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]* and *There he was, gone.* asked questions and prompted them. Many of those questions struggled for articulation because the works in question evolved as we wrote.

Sometimes I modified my questions and sometimes JR corrected them. In both cases we were trying to ensure that the question 'allowed' the answer (often another question). Some questions still remain and haunt. I still don't know if, during our performance of *There he was, gone.*, we were performing the code? Were we JR?

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JR

Perhaps we were just mediums...

BARBARA

Code mediums, sending and receiving dialogue on and through media haunted by generations of past usage.

JR

Hey, you stole that!

BARBARA

A definition of dramaturgy? Of Performance Writing?

JR

There is no end to this iterative process. Perhaps we can close this chapter with one of an infinite number of possible endings proposed by TRANS.MISSION [A.DIALOGUE]:

Is the network functioning?

Some of us believe it's working.

Please try again.

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