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PERFORMATIVITY AND THE WEB

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PERFORMATIVITY AND THE WEB

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Introduction

I'd like to begin this essay by posing an apparently simple question, yet one that becomes complex when we come to definitions : what is performativity?¹

Broadly speaking, we can define performativity as that which stems from the act of doing, as the establishing of the conditions of a situation, through action. This conception draws on John Austin's analytical philosophy and, to my mind, is an exact description of the world of the Web, given the emphasis placed on the context of utterances, and their transformative value.²

Thus, performativity involves a perspective that is inscribed within a pragmatic conception of relationships with art works, a conception that addresses the effects and affects that these works engender in terms of their relationship with individuals. In this optic, we can see that hypermedia art clearly invokes performative dimensions, in its proposal of a series of pragmatic instructions to the Web user, relating to what to do and how it should be done. This sets in place and underlines– through reiteration and repetition – states of doing, and states of being.

LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE invited six artists from Quebec and Canada to explore this problematic over a year-long period, that ran from May 2007 to June 2008. Their works unfolded on various levels, proposing strategies of representation and modes of reception that will be explored in this text in terms of the performativity of identity, interactivity, community and narrative. These broad categorizations are expressions of points of view relating to a polymorphous phenomenon that will always, in part, escape definition. They are complementary lenses through which to observe the dynamic context of creation on the Web. Ultimately, they are ways of thinking that convey a logic of addition, rather than exclusion, and so they are able to cohabit in a context of accumulating ideas.

<-> I would like to thank Marianne Cloutier and Eric Lacombe for their assistance with the description and indexing of the websites that feature in this publication. Working on the corpus of hypermedia art is a time-intensive undertaking. Their expertise has been invaluable in my preparation of this publication.

2 See John Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*. In this series of lectures, Austin sets himself the task of describing the performative dimension of language. Significantly, he draws a distinction between a classic statement, constative utterances (which are either true or false) and performative utterances, which enable the establishing of the conditions of a situation by virtue of the speech act itself.

Readers are undoubtedly aware of the considerable range of issues associated with Web art :

The art of communication, as determined by the openness of the network and the ability to contribute to its content. Direct forms of interactivity lie at the heart of this communicative capacity, with the opportunity for the viewer to activate a broad range of features. Only rarely does a work consist of closed and autonomous sequencing. The essence of the networked art work is its capacity to create an aesthetic link with the viewer, based on exchange and retroactive effects. The majority of Web art forms require high levels of participation on the part of the viewer, as is the case with all interactive art works. The viewer interacts to the extent that he/she contributes to the unfolding content of the work, for example by triggering events that become integrated within the content of the art work. Interactivity may take the form of a direct one-to-one dialogue, or a polyphonous exchange, involving cross-over conversations in the context of a forum. This dialogue and polyphonous exchange may, in turn, enable the direct and long-term modification of a site, or be fictional, occurring through the navigation of a database.

In fostering the dissemination of poetic speech that draws on the visual, verbal and sonorous, the hypermedia art work is inscribed within an epistolary tradition, where *epistellein* refers to the act of circulating or sending something to someone. The notion of writing itself is broadened, as will be discussed below, to encompass narrative strategies borrowed from modes of visual and oral communication. This practice has a two-fold connection with means of communication : in terms of the tools – to varying degrees technological – that convey speech in hypermedia art works; as well as the ideologies relating to its production and dissemination, which determine the discourses involved. Clearly, the history of network-based art did not begin with new technologies and the onset of telecommunications, or the advent of hypermedia art forms. The practices of Mail Art and Phone Art in the 1960s are amongst the antecedents of this form of activity. That said, in today's context the Internet clearly emerges as the new symbol of networked media art, through its impressive exploration of the narrative potential of instantaneity (on a temporal level) and proximity (on a spatial level).

The art of heterogenous and polymorphous writing. Web creation draws on many different languages, which are no longer viewed as closed disciplines, but rather as porous categories. Static and moving images, as well as sound and text, coexist as art

works play with the blurred boundaries between major traditions in art, literature, videography, photography, cinema and sound work. These variable poetic forms have a double nature, being at once a chronicle (when a story is told), and a material (forms of image and sound). Above all, these forms should be approached and embraced in a global and multidisciplinary perspective, rather than examining them for signs of the influence of video art, performance, the novel or film.³

The art of quotation. Hypermedia art constantly resonates with cultural history. Far from being defined in terms of a rupture with tradition, this field of practice interprets and reinvents forms, themes and genres that have fascinated artists throughout history, including: portraits, sketchbooks, landscape, everyday life, political manifestos, documents and archives...the list is infinite. Appropriation, interpretation, quotation, *re-mediation*, remake, adaptation, these are all strategies of representation that drive creativity and which, often, promote the opening up of a synchronic perspective within culture.⁴

Lastly, and most importantly, these characteristics combine to foreground hypermedia art as an art of action, which, as I mentioned earlier, establishes the conditions of a situation through the creation of a symbolic universe, involving performative action that possesses a profound transformative value. Each established situation is unique, being determined by the subjective experience and trajectory of the viewer. Each time the work is activated, the trajectory is transformed and, in line with the principles of openness and indeterminacy, there is always an element of newness at stake, alongside the instructions and protocols with which the viewer engages, in order to maximize the handling and « playability » of the work.

3 In the sense of a return to, or a resurgence of, archaic forms that can be categorized in terms of their use of certain materials and techniques.

4 In alluding to remediation, I am using a term from a work by Bolter and Grusin, entitled *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, 1999, which I list in the bibliography. Remediation refers to a second-order level of mediation, involving the reprisal or remaking of a prior instance of mediation.

I. The performativity of identity. Constructing a history

Those who are familiar with the development of media art are aware that the question of identity is an indissociable aspect of this history. Forms of narrative identity and images of doubling also abound in hypermedia art. Emblematic figures of Web art, such as the icons *Mouchette* and *David Still*, created by Martine Neddham, sit alongside the autofictions of Nadine Norman and Jillian Macdonald, two artists who explore the relationship between performance and the Web.

By employing a range of strategies for self-representation, creators do not merely manipulate images, or their image, they explore the multiple and dynamic modalities of imagery, which they fix in resonant moments.

The arrival on the market of a range of accessible and mobile technologies has brought about conditions in which to explore the complex nature of subjectivity and identity, through new frameworks. Self-discovery, the ability to gauge oneself in the world by means of the Web, the use of video cameras and even photographic cameras, all of this has played a role, and plays an ongoing role, in artistic exploration. Forms of representation conveyed by media art – including self-portraiture, the construction of fictional alter-egos, mythography – instigate particular relationships with the viewer, thanks to the descriptive power of imagery that is often realistic, accentuating the effect of verisimilitude. These relationships propel the viewer into a consideration of his or her own existential subjecthood and status as a cultural subject.

A significant proportion of hypermedia art production is inscribed within this tendency. Many works openly exploit new forms of narrative identity, employing a range of representational strategies and images of doubling. The Web favors the dissemination of illusions of all kinds : multiple or troubled personalities ; the trafficking of the body ; as well as intimate journals in which fiction and reality intersect.

In an epoch characterized by the tragic subject, by a contemporary subject who is concerned about the loss of reference points, torn between with multiple forms of self analysis, the Web offers a context in which, now more than ever, identities are variable and dynamic :

the identities of the subject, but also those of media platforms and genres.⁵ We are witnessing the reign of mythography, involving visual or literary forms of text that form fantastical projections of the subject, enabling him/her to multiply and extend identities. Such propositions are often subversive and, in the case of the most daring work, they propose a critical redefinition of modes of certainty.⁶ The practice of mythography offers a perfect illustration of the performative potential of individual and collective identities.

The abundance of forms of artistic production that employ biographic material is part of the narcissist temptation that emerges in a range of forms of « hyper-subjectivity » and the « ostentatious I ». This perspective remains current, and has been since the publication in the 1970s of Rosalind Krauss's *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism* (1976). Narcissism is not inferred as being a solely negative phenomenon, as a form of deviance or pathology of the self. On the contrary, it is indispensable to the individual's construction of his/her identity, as well as the maintenance of a positive self-image. In the usage I am making of the term here, narcissism more precisely carries with it the idea of an act of showing, undertaken for the self or the other, in connection with the well-known dyadic relationship between intimacy/extimacy discussed extensively in psychoanalysis.⁷

5 I am alluding to discussion of the depression and fatigue of the postmodern subject, notably : in the work of Ehrenberg, see Ehrenberg, *La fatigue d'être soi : dépression et société*, 1998, Paris [The Fatigue of Being oneself : Depression and Society]; Odile Jacob, on the subject of postmodern depression; Stoloff's *Interpréter le narcissisme*, 2000, Paris; and Dunon, on the question of tragic identity. In previous writing (Lalonde 2004), I proposed that the question of « narcissistic conflict » is one of the most interesting subjects to have emerged from the revision of psychoanalytical perspectives. The term refers to tensions and rivalries between the ego and the forms of representation that the ego creates for itself, and is a concept that is equally as interesting as Freud's notion of the « Oedipus complex ». In a society that was regulated by a rigid morality, it was relevant to address the question of psychic conflict in terms of the repression of desire, and the tension between the Id and the Superego. However, the considerable transformations that took place in the course of the last century, with regard to the reference points through which we understand the notion of identity, have had an inevitable impact. Given that images of the self evolve in a social context influenced by models and conventions, this context inevitably influences the evolution of these images. Is it not conceivable that the loss of frames of reference through which to grasp identity has emerged as the seat of a host of new preoccupations, as demonstrated by media practices, and the temptation of narcissism?

6 See Mythographies web : fabrications d'identités. Archée, 2003.

7 Notably, see Serge Tisseron *L'intimité surexposée*, 2001.

Thus hypermedia fiction offers a matrix for identity, in the form of a pragmatic context that contributes to the shaping of fantastical identities, which unfold according to the principle of identification through projection, in which the viewer draws a distinction between elements to which he/she adheres and those from which he/she wishes to dissociate himself/herself. This is the perspective that I wish to emphasize here.

Variable identities : plethora and caricature.

Nadine Norman's work is criss-crossed with the question of variable identities. As masquerades of the feminine, the artist's creations explore the modes of caricature, exaggeration, the accumulation of stereotypes, and the most pronounced beliefs, rooted in an ideology of the feminine. The character of the artist herself, the performer Nadine Norman, constructs her identity from conventions bound in ideas of the feminine and the domestic. She exposes herself as a parody, as a female-category, and not as an individual woman. The diverse range of characters that she has created – I am thinking, notably, of the plethora of labels for women that she explored in *Je suis disponible. Et vous ?* (2002) – construct genre-based identities, based on superficial and artificial markers of identity, such as the intimate objects of everyday life, including accessories and clothing. The circulation of these forms of artifice, at the heart of the work, forms the basis of the rhetoric of her caricatures : the femme-fatale, the woman-child, the mother, the domestic-woman.

The work *Metamētis* explores a similar terrain, centering this time on the metamorphosis of the figure of Metis, who in Greek mythology is a goddess who takes on numerous identities in order to trick Zeus. The work is open to networked forms of participation, in which visitors are invited to play with the principle of variable identity by proposing new identities to be momentarily enacted by Norma/Metis. Metis is the mythic figure par excellence of changing identity.

« I want to change, » announces the artist, in a voice-over, beginning the game, « I have had enough of always talking about the same old salads, even if I do like telling stories... » We deduce that it is Nadine who is addressing us, a contemporary Metis, speaking of her boredom with routine and her lassitude faced with a personality that is fixed and which she seems fate-bound to endure. In contrast, Norma invokes open access to variable identities, to play, and to multiple forms of self. Her works are ludic and entertaining. Norman's characters present themselves as « women without qualities. » I am, of course, alluding here to Musil's *Homme sans qualité*, of which

Ehrenberg writes, in which he depicts a character who is open to the unknown, and who gradually frees himself of all imposed identity.⁸ In an approach that evokes the work of post-human artists, who transform their bodies in order to free themselves from biological destiny, Norman's mythographies produce characters who have no qualities of immanence and whose identities are completely variable, at the mercy of whatever mood the day brings. Our tragic subject, afflicted with a « chronic identity problem » (Ehrenberg, 1998, 205) amuses herself/himself with the masquerades that Nadine proposes and with which he/she is able to partially identify, or else look on in detachment and enjoy the show.

In both *Je suis disponible. Et vous ?* and *Metamētis* the character's body is a show body, an organized system of conventions, to be constructed by the viewer, and thus it becomes a metaphor for the process of identity; a bodily surface on which variable identities can provisionally find a place. The caricature imposes a distance, amusing the audience, whilst the absurd side of her nature (she shakes up her life in a salad-spinner) casts a new light on the immense and unfathomable concept of the self.

Norman does not stop there. Instead, she asks participants to contribute proposals for new identities, which she incarnates on demand. This is the paradigm of the « call-girl, » in *Je suis disponible. Et vous ?* Nadine Norman will be everything that you want her to be.

The idea of network, dialogue, and the collaboration of the Web user constitute important features of this work, along with the performativity of interactivity, which I will look at in greater length in the following Chapter. The images created in response to the different profiles presented in the work act as a sociological mirror to the community that participates in the work. The theme of changing identity is, moreover, presented as an abstract notion rather than a simple question of self-portrait.

8 Ehrenberg comes to this conclusion in his work on the history of depression. In this work, he explains the frequency of diagnoses of depression in recent decades, stating that : « the individual who frees himself/herself from morality, who invents himself/herself, who leans towards the superhuman (acting according to one's own nature, to surpass oneself, to be more) is part of our world. Instead of possessing forces of self-mastery, he/she is fragile, lacking, tired by his sovereignty and complains about it. He/she is not happy in his/her knowledge, and full of Nietzschean laughter. Depression is the most egalitarian form of melancholy, the illness par excellence of democratic Man. » (Ehrenberg, 1998. 236)

As a form of dynamic identity, Norman reactivates the myth of Metis by means of « tools, » ordinary objects from contemporary everyday life : scissors, a mirror, a flashlight, a small plastic broom, a sieve, a magic wand, a piece of rope and a magnifying glass. The objects dance on the screen. Clicking on each of these tools triggers an animated sequence, in which we see the artist pictured outside, in the snow. She performs a series of movements in which she frames the chosen object : She unfolds and skips with the rope ; cuts through the snow with the scissors ; flicks her flashlight on and off. We hear her voice : « Now you have an idea of my many talents. » It's the turn of the Web user to participate : 1 « give me a new object so that I can discover new abilities » ; 2 « What happens if I change my place or space, I'd like to get away to just escape from my everyday environment » ; 3 « Suggest a way that I can improve my well-being » ; « Propose a new activity, a new form of work or leisure. I really need to keep busy, otherwise I may do stupid things » ; 5 « Can you bring me what's missing ? I am sure you have really good ideas that I can't even imagine. And who knows, thanks to you I could even attain perfection. »

Confronted with Nadine's assertive tone of voice, the Web user sends his/her message in a bottle, cast out into the network of all networks, with an uncertain outcome.

Nadine's Metis is far from the original myth, far from the divine character of the goddess. The character of *Métamétis* is one of extraordinary banality, who amuses herself with insecurities about her identity. What does Nadine Norman's work tell us about the performative nature of identity ? Given that Metis possesses no coherent identity, the Web user is able to partially appropriate the attributes that appeal to him/her, whether they resemble or strongly diverge from the user. Given that the characters that Nadine Norman incarnates are strongly heterogenous, although all of them are incarnated through the biographical figure of the artist, the viewer is fully aware of the constructed and fake nature of these narratives of identity.

At the same time, the user grasps the fact that an understanding of the self is, in essence, always an interpretation of the self , a complex play between sameness and variation, between identity as sameness and identity as ipseity, as proposed by Ricoeur, an interpretation that is encouraged through narrative (Ricoeur, 1996, 138). Between the illusory permanence of the self (the stable self) and the variability of ipseity (the dynamic self), the narrative identity of the character is constructed through storytelling, through the stories chosen by the viewer. In a hypermedia universe, all forms of identity are narrative and we see that this variability – which in *Metamétis* is pushed to its limits – is heavily contaminated by cultural conventions.

The automaton who escapes depressive fatigue

The work of Jillian Macdonald follows the same logic up to a point, in that she employs a popular character that is all the more caricatured, that of the zombie, reinterpreting this figure in an original manner.

During her residency at LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE, entitled *Zombies in Condoland*, Macdonald set up a website that was essentially a showcase. The public was invited to participate in a series of outdoor performances for the 2008 Nuit Blanche event in Toronto, by dressing up as zombies. The artist created a video from footage taken during the performances.

In an interview, Macdonald explained that her site also offers access to the blog that she created on the theme of zombies.⁹ The site also outlines how to create a costume for the performances, and what to do during the works. Here, Macdonald is giving pragmatic instructions, of what to do and how it should be done, which forms the basis of all rituals. The project also has a strong cinematographic component, with the artist acting as director and the participants playing the role of actors in what, to all intents and purposes, is a parody of a horror film. The website's homepage features a colour animation that stretches the boundaries of good taste, wherein we see a collection of dubious zombie characters, knives in hand, attacking the gentrification of areas of Toronto – symbolized by the building of luxury condos – in a form of ballet that is more parodic than metaphoric. I recall that the website invites performative interventions in the city. Both the performance and the website are devoted to the denunciation of the almost-anarchic construction of luxury accommodation for the nouveau riche. Here, caricature is premised on a social critique.

The artist explains that in popular culture the figure of the zombie is associated with ordinary people, who lack a personality of their own, and who follow to the letter the protocols of a uniformizing ritual, acting as automatons or robots. Is it not the case that nowadays we are all zombies, conditioned by the familiar routine of work, home and sleep ? Don't we all act the same, without giving it too much thought, as we lose ourselves in daily life, and go along with the frenetic desire of the masses to consume, for which we pay the price of in-difference ?

Once again, the artist's work is characterized by a leitmotif, that of the zombie, which

9 The interview is available on LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE'S website.

has appeared in other projects by Macdonald, namely *Field of the Dead and Undead* ou *Apocalypse Zombie*, both of which were made in 2009. The zombie is an interesting figure, a character from the world of horror films who is essentially devoid of all individuality and sensuality, and who enacts the narrative of suspense in the horror movie, as a threat to the human race, and a reminder of mortality. The zombie is a form of void or, as Antoine Compagnon might say, a « topoi koinoi, » that is a form of stereotype that results from a succession of citations, and which is derived from a long history of attempting to conjure death, in order to dissolve teleological anxieties through a ludic approach.¹⁰ The artist is interested in the boundaries between terror and horror, and in the variety of elements that make up these films : danger, pursuit, disguise and...humour !

The 9-minute, two-screen video installation *Zombie loop* (2006), depicts the confrontation between a female character that incarnates both a zombie and a potential victim. The viewer follows the character's movement on two screens, becoming the conduit through which the character shifts from being the victim to the executioner, moving from the world of the living to that of the dead. The viewer occupies a transitory space that offers a humoristic take on the in-between, the waiting that is part of the inevitable journey towards our own end.

In *The Screaming* (2007), Macdonald inserts a cameo role picturing her screaming – her lungs almost at bursting point – in extracts from canonical horror movies, in a radical deconstruction of the image of frenzy, that reveals the caricatured nature of the works.¹¹ Once again, the works function as parodies, eliminating all dramatic tension to focus on a comic reading, much more reassuring.

10 Notably, Antoine Compagnon discusses this in his book on quotation, entitled *La seconde main ou le travail de citation*, 1979, Paris, Seuil.

11 The movies used by Macdonald include Lucio Fulci's « Zombi 2 » (1979) and « Van Helsing » (2004) by Stephen Sommers. The screaming scene also recalls Phillip Kaufman's 1978 remake of « Invasion of the Body Snatchers » (1978), in which the « clones » or « pods » that have been attacked by an extraterrestrial plant form react to feelings of being threatened by emitting a high-pitched scream. The scream serves to repel attackers and to signal to the other clones that humans are present and as such it is a form of attack itself, rather than defence. In « The Screaming, » the scream serves a completely different purpose, in its creation of a form of distancing associated with parody.



Far from being an anodine figure, the character of the zombie perfectly symbolizes automatic behaviours that, through repetition, become devoid of meaning ; programmed action, with no individuality. In an amusing twist, Macdonald stages a form of identity-less performativity, in which the subject is freed from all insecurity about identity, his inability to act and his individual destiny, all of which are the very conditions that give rise to Ehrenberg's « depressive fatigue. »

« A society based on individual initiative and psychic liberation leads to the obligation of always deciding, and this encourages practices that focus on modifying the self, which simultaneously create problems with the structuring of the self that did not feature in societies based on discipline. » (Ehrenberg, 1996, 240).

In everyday life, the weight of uncertainty may be too difficult to handle. The invention of identities can help keep us intact, in part, and enable us to exorcise the burden. Both the figure of Metis and the character of the zombie have this redemptive function, acting as powerful antidotes to the morosity of everyday life.

II. Existence through group action. Performativity and interactivity

The integration of the viewer in the work of art is, without a doubt, one of the great ambitions of contemporary art, not to mention an obsession of current forms of artistic practice.

Although all art works can be said to be interactive in the sense that they involve the participation of the viewer, who is necessarily a part of the world that they represent, technology has often been a key vehicle for interactivity, a point that is exemplified by Web art.¹²

Hypermedia art involves multiple modes of interactivity, from navigation within a close repertory to sophisticated formulas for infinite forms of contribution. Art work explore the tension between the individual's relationship with the screen, which lies at the heart of the Web, and the user's desire to share and be part of a form of virtual collectivity. I am intentionally employing the term collectivity, as distinct from that of community. A collectivity shares a space – in this case that of the Web – without necessarily having an prior links or common characteristics, whilst a community shares interests, thoughts, codes, reference points, and ultimately a lifestyle.

These modes of interactivity also involve the viewer's public, social and emotional experiences, and because interaction necessarily depends on these three aspects, it must be considered as being beyond a simple confrontation between the human and the machine. As I indicated at the beginning of this text, interactivity takes a range of forms, being either dialogic (an exchange between two voices) or polyphonic (an exchange between multiple voices). In turn, dialogic and polyphonic interactivity may be direct, and bring about the work's transformation, or else fictional, occurring through the navigation of a closed database.

Thus, the hypermedia art work is rarely a finished product or autonomous object. It commonly seeks out the dynamic conditions of exchange – and here the dominant model remains that of communication – by means of seductively engaging and

¹² I am thinking of interfaces, of the video image of the viewer integrated into installations, and of the range of technical features that the viewer may activate. Technology is intrinsically linked to the notion of interactivity, such that in a more precise definition of the term it could be described as the relationship between the creator and the machine.

maintaining forms of contact, that are intrinsically linked to an emancipation of views of the object. Forms of interlacing and interlinking are in play, in which the artist, viewer and media may at times appear to be interchangeable elements. Web experiences do not take place outside of our pragmatic and cognitive experiences of life. The links made – and I make a point of stressing this – always refer us back to our fundamental relationship with the world, in terms of a dialogue that we continually reconstruct by means of language-based activities.

Interactivity is essentially pragmatic and performative by nature. It employs dialogue to construct community. Networks are open to contribution, and this is a reality that facilitates the group that shares a tribune, as well as a code, a status and, at times, an ideal. There are numerous examples of this, both in the worlds of art and everyday life, because the Internet also enables the individual to see beyond himself/herself, and to establish contact with the outside world. Community and ritual are indissociable aspects of the way that groups form collective identities. I will return to this subject further on in the text.



Jeanne Landry Belleau's *Chrysalide humaine* offers an eloquent illustration of the contributory openness of the Web. This work explores the foundations of participatory experience on the Web and exists only by means of the user's involvement, in the form of the testimony that he/she chooses to leave behind them. The website is a tribune, offering a space for reflection on what the artist considers to be the humanist values that are shared by the collectivity. The work invites participation, through forms of writing and the sharing of ideas, writing that represents multiple voices, in a polyphonic structure, involving a form of choral organization of the collectivity.

The artist clearly states, « The words that you share will be the material with which I work, » the words that weave the human chrysalis.

She goes to explain that the *Chrysalide humaine* « is the conceptual envelope around which I wish to develop a range of points of view. The work is time-based...When we write, we are never far from the act of weaving . »

Landry Belleau's project seeks to create a shared space through a collective writing practice. Composite writing is a form of exchange; constellations of works structure a journey through the database that results from the collection of diverse testimonies. The work involves forms of visual, figurative and geographic writing; it involves a plural writing practice. Images of this collective speech take precedence over individual speech, as the impact of the words presented on the site is felt primarily in the echos that they produce in the contributions of the Web users that follow. It is less a question of testifying to one's own reality without expecting a response, and more a matter of adding one's voice to a form of collective speech.

In interview, Landry-Belleau stresses the importance of leaving the work open to viewer collaboration, which forms the basis of all interactivity. According to the artist, Web 2.0 symbolizes this openness. Thus, she creates a zone for potential dialogue, premised on group ownership. The collectivity becomes a community by means of its enactment of the work and the unfolding of a collaborative form of writing. According to Landry-Belleau, the Web is not a « cold machine, » it is an interface behind which we see subjectivity in action, « dialoguing » with the group to which it seeks to belong. The one is never conceived without the other.

Euphoria and dysphoria in the network.

Chrysalide humaine encourages the acts of gifting and sharing. The humanist conventions that Landry-Belleau sets in place function on two levels, being both the vehicle for the work and a pretext for sharing love, liberty, commitment and respect. A multitude of testimonies are archived in a constantly evolving site. They feature reassuring values, that promote human qualities, in response to a dysphoric view of the network, that fears that screen culture and post-humansim will dissolve the last remnants of our humanity into the algorithms of the machine. Put simply, the work responds to the fear that screen culture inhibits rather than promoting contact.

Perhaps paradoxically, the work remains a prisoner of its database structure, with all the advantages and disadvantages that that implies. A major advantage is the element of surprise, the random navigation that each visit implies, each time creating a new

pathway. For the Web user, the feeling of discovery is part of the appeal, along with the ludic aspect of the gathering of words, which becomes a kind of hunt.

Risk is nonetheless involved, the risk that is intrinsic to all interactivity, that the Web user grows weary of the labyrinthian journey and the fact that no narrative compensation is offered. The user may well wonder, « Just what story is someone trying to tell me ?, » and be left wanting more.

I think that web-based works will seek to get around this lassitude by holding up a social mirror, as a strategy of retaining attention, as well as by seeking to gain recognition for their universalizing characteristics. The echo of worried voices, the chorus of descriptions of what and who we are, all this should be listened to, because the collective expression consists of subjects, subjects who are reassured by belonging to a group, which gradually transforms itself into a community by the act of shared writing. I will come back to this topic in the following Chapter.

Far from suggesting that this strategy for keeping the user's attention involves a form of vanity or sterile narcissism, I would insist that the goal is that of contact, the sustaining of dialogue and the sharing of practices, which involves a minimum level of acceptance on the part of participants. The strategy involves the pact of interactivity, a condition that is essential to the unfolding of the work.

We might ask question the effectiveness of such a strategy : is it idealistic, or utopian ? To counter the dysphoria of a post-humanity that has become anti-humanist, there is a raising of euphoric voices, the eulogists of an idealized view of community.

Vincent Mosco sounded the alarm on the mythification of techniques and technology, a mythification which in terms of innovations on the Web can be seen in the outcomes of modern ideals such as the democratization of information and education, and the emergence of a « new sense » of community.¹³ The Internet becomes a new myth as much by what it reveals as by what it hides. We can only acknowledge Mosco's lucidity, and be mindful of his lesson of caution about the « newness » of the web. It is easy to see how technological innovations, similar to any elements that change in our environment, transform our experience of the world, and by extension, transform our identity and subjectivity.

13 Mosco analyses shifts in the notions of the sublime, and the perception of « natural wonders, » towards the « wonders » of the digital work. See Mosco, V. *The Digital Sublime. Myth, Power and Cyberspace*.

However, do they also transform group behaviour, and if so how ? What does this new sense of community look like ? Is it not a little early to be talking about a radical transformation of the overall ways in which we interact?

To answer these questions, I would go back to the work itself, and contextualize the minimum zone of tension that is required, between the poles of subjectivity and collectivity, for a work to be « playable » . At its core, Web art exploits this polarity of being « alone...but with others, » of existence for oneself and by oneself, whilst always to an extent belonging to a collectivity. The self has no value except in relation to the other, in the measuring of individuality in relation to the group to which one belongs.¹⁴ The work speaks to the extent that it finds a means of getting the Web user to participate, to stay with a journey that can seem disorienting.

And so we see the balancing game involved in creating successful interactivity, the combining of : freedoms with necessary constraints ; surprise and openness with the safety of a marked out pathways ; the autonomy of the self with a belonging to a collective ; the proper noun and the collective noun.

In her blog [IDhumanisme](#) (2009), Landry Belleau proposes an extension of the blog's contents by means of reflection around, and a form of open correspondance based on, a « series of icons that frame humanism as I envisage it at this time . » Once again, the work becomes performative through writing, specifically figurative writing. Her blog is an ultra-modern form of open letter that is based on a synthesis of the sociological material woven by *Chrysalide humaine*.¹⁵ Favorite themes, including sharing, peace, collective memory, openness of the spirit, and so on, are explored visually through illustrations that act as capsules of culture. The highly schematised drawings become symbolic forms, miniature maps that creating breathing space amidst the expanse of messages that emphasize contact numbers rather than content; they offer simple means for reengaging with the complexity of the network.

To return for a moment to this Chapter's central question: what comes into play in the performativity of interactivity?

14 Other interrelated and highly popular Web phenomena, such as Facebook, are part of this tendency.

15 In previous writing, I have examined at length how letter writing is a form of interactivity. See « Art réseau et modalités épistolaires », *Protée*, vol 30, n. 1, 2002.

The first goal is to establish contact by means of a visual, verbal or sound-based proposition. A form of dialogue or polyphony comes into play, by means of heterogeneous forms of writing, and through a space for exchange, sharing and contribution.

The goal of contact is added to by a desire for transformation. The attention is no longer on admiring the mastery or refinement of a completed, delivered work of art. It lies in observing a world in transformation, whilst participating in this transformation. Interactivity is performative because it intervenes in the world and above all because of the Web user's participation in this intervention. A dual form of cognitive satisfaction is at stake, that of « doing in the world » and « being the main actor in this process of doing. »

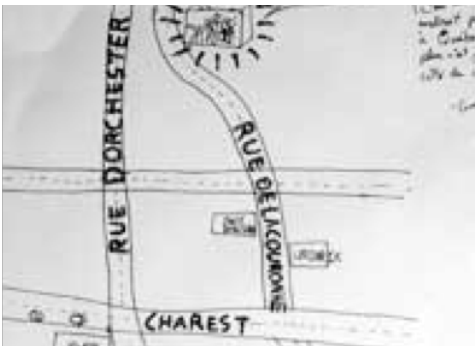
An ideal of « doing together », which is an ideal of community, adds to the satisfaction of performativity. Pragmatic experience enters the equation to the extent that it is shared in and through discourse, and in terms of the collective identity that results from this sharing.

The performativity of interactivity takes these three poles into account : the desire for contact; the need for transformation; and the ideal of community. The list is open-ended. An analysis of Web creativity would reveal other elements, given that the scope for the critique of hypermedia is immense and exciting. In the following Chapter, I will explore some of the issues at stake in the constituting of community.

III. Community and shared speech

An exploration of the performativity of interactivity has led us to the key concept of community. Community is constituted through conventions, and elements of a variety of types are shared. Communities share an identity, as distinct from a collectivity, which primarily shares a space. Communities are also based on rituals, on actions that maintain, by means of reiteration, the cohesion of the group, whilst reinforcing the feeling of belonging to « the community. »

Rituals involve pragmatic sets of instructions, that give clear indications as to what to do and how it should be done. As we saw in the the previous Chapter, the open quality of interactive works involves a number of different protocols. These protocols can easily be compared to mini rituals, that a well-informed and seasoned Web user will know how to navigate. For the purposes of this discussion, the performativity of rituals can be said to involve the exploration of forms and combinations that are put at the disposal of the viewer, forms and combinations that play on the tension between the private and the public, and their relationship with spectacle.



In *Trait d'union* Linda Duvall seeks out reference points for a « laboratory » group, which she defines as the artistic community of Quebec City. The artist creates a platform for participants of all backgrounds, levels of expertise, and age ranges. Her residency at LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE took the form of an inquiry that sought to observe those involved in this cultural microcosm, in order to determine shared interests and reference points, as well as the diversity of viewpoints that are represented. The collecting, processing and uploading of testimonies from selected participants enabled her to reconstruct a portrait of the community.

Trait d'union functioned on two levels : as a cultural portrait of Quebec City ; and as a tribune for contributors from a range of backgrounds.

The site unfolds through shared speech – the words of those whom Duvall chose to foreground – and the artist's own process of inquiry in the work, with each voice measuring its individual identity in terms of the group to which it belongs.

The work involves a play on the tensions between shared conventions and singular thought, between common and specific experiences.

The artist made use of the methods of visual anthropology, and devised a questionnaire as well as conducting numerous interviews with, as I indicated above, around twenty figures selected by Duvall, ranging from artists, theoreticians and art critics, to curators and representatives of the world of culture. The material collected by Duvall reconstructed a fairly coherent portrait of a community, in which consensus emerges through polyphony, and cohesion is favoured over heterogeneity.

The work takes the form of a video notebook, in which extracts of interviews appear in short sequences grouped under different thematic headings, for example : Six Weeks of Immersion with a Purple Floor , Château Frontenac, Who participated?, One word , Who is the leader ? , Finding favorite locations, Next Art Star?, Book Club, Irritation, boring art, Underrated Quebec artists, Roles of participants, and so on.

The format is in not coincidental, rather the imagery evokes the formal conventions of documentary, including the use of close-ups for interviews, and limited editing in sections that situate a context or present a landscape. The images are there to illustrate speech, and to add credibility to it. The transparency of the media technique employed accentuates the « live effect » and the « real-life effect » of the sequences chosen by the artist. The website's aesthetics evoke information-based sites , featuring : clickable windows, thematic headings and a tabular webpage layout.

The apparent neutrality of this formal approach does not, however, mask the artist's editorial line. Additions in the form of short, incisive comments guide the presentation of the notebook, and offer a meta-discourse on the sociological content of the work, in other words, the participants' speech. For example under the heading « Who is the leader ? », which focuses on Robert Lepage, a real-life demiurge figure in this « community », a community constituted through shared speech, Duvall's comments are particularly incisive, and illustrate her astonishment by way of an insinuation that this choice can be questioned.

Why not name Claude Bélanger or Richard Martel, other names which are subsequently proposed.

Whilst Landry-Belleau's project is built on the collection of written testimonies, Duvall's work unfolds through the act of speech, the repeated speech that confirms belonging to a community. This belonging is not based on simply adhering to a common discourse, on the contrary, it is played out through zones of tension between the expression of forms of individuality and sharing, between the strength of the « I » voice in a « we » that is equally strong.

Orality plays a major role in this project and merits a few further comments. As we have seen, the question of speech is a central one, and it is by means of shared speech that community is « woven », to use a metaphor employed by Landry-Belleau. Taking a broader view, we see the contribution of orality to the history of media arts. The parameters of media arts extend beyond those of image-based art, and include art that focuses on space, time and speech, the latter often being incarnated by performance, including that of the artist, as well as in confessional modes in which either the artist or another figure tells a story to camera. The format of *Trait d'union* adopts the characteristics of a classic confessional mode, which features as prominently in hypermedia as it does in the history of media art, involving : close-ups of the face; speaking directly to the camera; moments of first-person speech; a unity in the space and time of what is shown; and the use of biographical material.

However, the orality in question here involves more the sound of the voice that is recounting, it involves maintaining the presence of the subject at the heart of the work, through the presentation of the face, which serves as a reminder of individuality. This presence could be viewed as the function of orality, in term of the very act of communication of which it becomes an indelible trace, the sign of the subject's contribution. Community exists by means of the act of communication that both reveals and foregrounds its existence.

A consideration of orality does not stop there. If the basis for Duvall's inquiry appears at first to be relatively predicible, the situation becomes significantly more complex given that the artist has very little understanding of the French language. A degree of difficulty enters the equation. The basic code shared by the community, verbal language, is rendered opaque by Duvall's lack of knowledge, which adds unease to her expression, and causes her to stumble over words, adding a « rhetorical » difficulty to the project. This offers an interesting and far from banal perspective, in an eloquent

form of reversal, whereby rather than creating links, verbal language acts as a barrier. In playing with the language barrier, the artist draws attention to her own role and clearly positions herself as a constituent of the community that she is intent on describing. The person conducting the inquiry is neither invisible, nor inaudible. We repeatedly hear her painstaking attempts to communicate in French, and by extension, we realize the extent of the work involved in creating an « image » of this community. *Trait d'union* serves as a real lesson on the make-up of cultural conventions, in the form of an ongoing inquiry rather than a finished result, an inquiry that is socio-anthropological, and which constitutes a phenomenon rather than observing it from the outside.

The performative aspect of the project is accentuated by the artist's role in the work, and her creation of the impression that she understood more than was actually the case, by memorizing the questions that she posed to interviewers beforehand. Duvall's hesitant use of spoken French introduces an aspect of dissonance to her discourse, which at times alters the viewer's focus of attention. The content of the responses that she receives are erased, faced with our awareness of the person conducting the inquiry. The collecting of data and the results of the inquiry are of limited importance to the project, which focuses more on demonstrating varying levels of fluidity and opacity in the performative nature of communication. It is in this sense that the differences that Duvall features in the work demonstrate the performative act of language.

John Austin's theories on the philosophy of language relating to performative speech offer a lens through which to consider this aspect of *Trait d'union*.¹⁶ Austin differentiates between classic statements, utterances based on observations (which are either true or false), and performative utterances, which enable the establishing of the conditions of a situation to be put in place through speech. This feature of Austin's definition enables performativity to escape the measure of truth, and places emphasis on the role and importance of a statement's context.

To give a more concrete example of this, I would like to recall a potent memory from my adolescence. In 1976, when Queen Elizabeth II came to Montreal to open the Olympic Games, she used a simple speech formula, stating : « I now declare the 21st Olympic Games open. » This statement is highly performative according to Austin's criteria, to the extent that it emphasizes context rather than content. In fact, if the Queen's declaration is performative in any sense, it is in relation to context.

A transformation takes place in the reality to which she is referring ; there is a before and an after. Her sentence constructs a new situation : the Montreal Olympic Games have begun. The issue at stake is not the truth of what she is stating, but rather the context in which she makes her statement. It is not the content of her speech that interests us, it is the fact that the person speaking is Queen Elizabeth II, in Montreal, in July 1976. Any other speaker, in any other context, using such an ostentatious and ceremonial tone of voice as that used in the royal declaration would transform nothing of the reality at hand because no other speaker represents the power of the State. As Austin reiterates, where performative utterances are concerned it is not truth that counts but the power of this speech to transform a situation.¹⁷

In response, it could be said that all utterance has a performative dimension when its context is taken into consideration. This is self-evident. The categories are porous, an utterance may be characteristic of a statement (for example, an assertion) and still have a performative impact. This can often be seen in the case of the Web, where there are rarely any « purely declarative » forms, given that hypermedia writing cannot be examined separately from the interactivity that it implies and, to state the obvious, especially not in isolation from the ritual protocols involved, which determine the trajectory to be followed. No matter how declarative utterances are, on the Web something else is always at stake in addition to what is said. Utterances demonstrate how to do things, and act as links, always leading to something else.

Mirroring a turnaround in the inquiry

In *Trait d'union*, Duvall's painstaking use of spoken French has a reflexive dimension in the way that it places an emphasis on the context in which utterances are made. As the viewer listens to her attempting, with difficulty, to repeat her questions, she/he becomes aware of the protocols of the artist's inquiry. The artist is « at work, » and « in her work, » with her status as a writer underlined by the act of repetition.

LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE's website also features two videos in which Duvall explains her creative approach and the reflexive process involved in her residency. This information is invaluable in order to grasp the issues at stake in the work.

The first video presents the artist's account of the challenge of using French to conduct the interviews. According to Duvall, her lack of control of the code of language transformed the interviews into a kind of performance in which – as I stated above

– the artist plays a key role, memorizing the questions and creating the impression that she understands a conversation that in fact escapes her.

In an allegory of a form of partial deafness, the observing subject is not able to pick up on the nuances of the speech of the observed subjects, and must look elsewhere for signs through which to reconstruct the image of the group. The result is amusing, as the artist is hostage to the immersive context, by a « repeated doing », and by the reiteration of the performative act, and so her linguistic abilities gradually evolve, breaking the language barrier in place at the project's outset.

It was necessary for Duvall to create a precise framework and set of protocols for her inquiry, by determining what it was that she sought to understand of a microcosm that is sociologically representative of the cultural sphere of Quebec City. The protocols that she employed reveal a side issue to the project, which is the complexity of the speech act itself. The inquiry confronted external data about a community with internal data, based on a participatory form of observation.

Despite everything, the viewer also becomes hostage to the polyphonic nature of narrative in the work. Any browser who follows the work through to its end, clicking on all the windows offered, listening to the play between individual and collective speech, discovers a highly interesting portrait. It would be an oversight not to mention here the somewhat laborious nature of the listening that is involved, laborious in the sense that labour, work, is involved. The work's structure is anti-spectacular in the way that it tests the viewer's receptivity, and in this sense it is inscribed in a broader tradition of pioneering video narrative. The viewer is required to persevere, and to negotiate a stripped-back and monotonous structure in order to arrive at a « reading » of the work.¹⁸

The story involves multiple figures, including Duvall herself, in her role as conductor of the inquiry and through her experience in the field, an experience that she takes literally in « Six Weeks of Immersion with a Purple Floor. » Following this, we discover the participants, through their responses to a range of questions. Gradually, the collectivity's story unfolds, creating different points of view on the cultural scene of Quebec. At times, personal issues come up in sections that reveal aspects of people's personality, their preference for certain places in the city, a book or a piece of writing that has affected them. Although the great majority of responses are intellectual and detached in nature, at times we see emotions in play, as in Benham Geramiyan's

remark on solitude which, for a moment, shatters the coolness of the work's video and web-based structure. From Muriel Dupuis Larose's luminous blue perspective to Mathieu Doyon's frank smile, the range of « characters » that we see are alive, their faces also speak to us, offering up slices of life and above all a part of themselves.

Linda Duvall's artistic practice centers on an interest in how communities are formed, allegorical representations of networked forms of communication, from Saskatoon to Quebec City, as well as looking at the make-up, transformation and breakdown of messages. She delegates her speech to the microcosm that she foregrounds. The work unfolds by means of the creation of commonality between different testimonies, each based on a desire to recount.

Online accounts, narratives of the everyday, Web mythographies, 'Facebooking', the desire to tell one's story, these are all omnipresent features of hypermedia work. Each of the stories told can be seen as a form of vehicle, which is conducive to the expression of the issues at stake in the question of individual and collective identities, as well as a form of « mini narrative », as defined by Denis Jeffrey :

« Coming back to the question of mini narratives. When a person recounts something, they are recounting the moments that they have lived intensely, that have troubled, overwhelmed, worried, exalted, fascinated and weakened them. The person is expressing how she/he has ritualized an ordeal, a troubling event, something unforeseen, meeting a stranger, some unease, or suffering. The person brings into play his/her own subjecthood, narrative and speech, on the condition that we want to understand this speech. By his/her act of storytelling, a person gives birth to their own truth, which becomes a myth. This very real myth forms the basis of the person's identity, through which his/her life develops. »¹⁹

A person is born through speech, a community is created through shared speech. As a performative act, communication transforms individual and collective reality, despite the apparent banality of the statements that feature in Duvall's form of artistic inquiry. Is this a long way off from what Jeffrey describes in terms of mini narratives? In my opinion, it is not. The work demonstrates the same line of thinking, that of the desire to find a name, to defy anonymity, and to create a moment to conjure up the omnipresent anxiety around death, a subject on which Jillian MacDonald's work offered a refreshing parody.

It is a question of speech that demonstrates existence – that of the individual or the group –speech that, in part, is freed from the obligation to be truthful because, as Jeffrey points out, « the mini narratives of the postmodern subject are not required to truthful, they are not ‘scientific’ narratives. However; it is important that it is recognized as becoming the truth for the subject. »²⁰ The subject is free to unfold his/her narrative.

In the conclusion of this essay, I will seek to offer a complementary vision of narrative and myth in relation to the notion of ritual. These elements are closely related where the make-up of communities through the practice of collective speech is concerned. In order to grasp the complexities of this phenomenon, it is necessary to look a little closer at what is at stake in the desire to recount.

20 Denis Jeffrey (1998), p. 143.

IV. The desire to recount

Multiple voices circulate in the hypermedia universe, those of : the artist; the writer, the journalist, the commentator, the citizen. In the setting of the Web, which looks to ideals of accessibility and a certain freedom, these subjects express themselves, they recount mini narratives, which are moving, they move us. This shared speech affects us and creates effects that ensure, as we have seen, the maintenance of our indispensable and evolving relationship with objects. Whilst each speech act is distinct, and the speech belongs to individuals whose reality and experience is widely contrasting, all of the voices are motivated by a common desire, to speak of their situation. All of participants share the common desire to tell their story, as outlined in Chapter One.

The act of bearing witness is a recurrent narrative mode in forms of hypermedia, unfolding through the sharing (in a collective tribune) of experiences of the world (individual speech). This comes about through an exercising of memory, which cannot be thought of outside of the triad that I suggested forms the basis of the performativity of interactivity, involving : a desire for contact; an interest in transformation; and an ideal of community. The act of bearing witness seeks to inscribe traces in history, on a small and a large scale. As in the case of mini narratives, the act of bearing witness is less an account of the truth than an account of a reality, of an experience. Its value lies in what is revealed about the individualities that are expressed, in terms of similarities as well as dissonance.

Michelle Teran's work, *A20 Recall*, immediately presents itself as a form of evocation, or memory. The work takes the form of a cartographic model of collective memory, which centers on an event that marks the recent history of Quebec City : the staging of the Summit of the Americas in 2001. This Summit – which also went under the name *A20* – captures the imagination most notably in terms of its paradoxical nature. Whilst focusing on a discussion of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the event marked a highly visible extension of security measures in the city, limiting the freedom of movement for citizens and residents alike. Teran's work perfectly set the stage of this paradox, bringing both a poetic and a political message to Web users.



« In a way, the demonstrators restricted the freedom of Quebec City residents. It was very difficult experience. I personally was prevented many times from going to work. For example, at certain times, it was preferable to show up in the morning to go to work at 5pm. Powerful people were in town. They were not concerned by citizens outside the city walls, but they were worried about those living within them. People living inside the city walls were seen as the enemy. The enemies of power. There was often a perception that people living here, in the area around the parliamentary hill, were somehow suspect in nature... »

« Everything that makes up a society was in play for me. Everybody was playing his role. People were staging their protest. The leaders were the leaders, protecting themselves. Things became so clear. And because of that everybody was stirred into action. Power is always there, but at that special time, it was really present. Very visible and clear. »

The heterogeneity of the narratives is striking for the reader and viewer. The accounts reveal a marked divergence of opinions : some retain a memory of fear in the face of police and military authorities, others describe the unique ambiance as having been almost festive in nature, due to the presences of crowds. An equally striking contrast can be seen in the video and photographic images, which show both the banality of everyday life and features of security measures, calm scenes and charged crowds.

This heterogeneity does not impact on the coherence of the work's principal narrative – a narrative of memory – as the viewer rapidly comes to realize that the diversity of viewpoints presents a more complete and credible form of history.



History, and especially history where violence is involved, is always a matter of complexity and polarity. Histories of violence never produce consensus, rather voices show extreme contrasts – whether it be the voice of a victim or an abuser – whilst the emotional and iconic impact conveyed by these contrasts accentuates the diversity of outlooks.

« I was living inside the security perimeter. I first found out about the fence when I received a notification. I had to get a pass. I still have it. When I went to get my pass they asked me all sorts of questions. I told the police officer that I was against this. It was awful to hold a population hostage just because of a few losers who make bad decisions in the world. When they put the fence up I couldn't believe it. Concrete walls and fences, and imagining how much that cost. I just saw that and thought it was going to be worse than if there was no fence. If there had been no fence, it would have been easier. Just putting the fence up is an invitation to take it down. Which happened in the end. This neighbourhood is full of people. People live here full-time. 5,000 bombs descended on us. It was crazy. Old people, kids, babies. A lot of people left town because of that. They didn't give us any help. They didn't tell us what to do. What not to do. They washed their hands of it in the end, saying it was not their fault. Just don't live in the city... »

These accounts function on micro and macro levels. They describe everyday vexations, seek to communicate messages of social and political resistance, and signal disagreement with leaders' decisions. Some residents criticize events by deploring the pointless expense involved in holding the Summit in the city, whilst others choose to recount the almost-apocalyptic ambiance in the city at the time, seen through clouds of tear gas, almost resembling a ghost town.

Michelle Teran's Web project focuses on trace, and foregrounds the diverse residual effects of such an event. It involves traces in terms of speech, as people recount their experiences of the event, but also took as a memorial form, in the tracing of physical interventions that have long since disappeared. Teran also becomes a conductor of an inquiry, in her restaging of the security perimeter, by means of collecting speech, the mini narratives of witnesses, and her presentation of images depicting sites at the center of unfolding events. The range of data produced by the inquiry is re-broadcast via the Internet site, which openly announces its goal of recollecting the event through the act of mapping a collective memory.

The project poses the following question : what are the residual effects of erecting such a barrier, long after its physical traces have been removed?

The image of the wall is a powerful one. Whilst walls protect, they also divide and imprison, and serve as a symbol of enclosure and domination. The Berlin Wall, and the « security barrier » erected by Isarel in the West Bank, offer striking examples of the concept of a « wall of shame, » icons of the domination of populations by political and economic powers. When one falls, another is erected. America is far being exempt from this phenomenon, one has only to think of the frontier between the U.S.A. and Mexico. As a marked feature of our contemporary imagination, the wall of shame has featured as the subject of much media coverage and numerous artistic projects.

Michelle Teran chose to explore this subject within the context of a city that still features fortifications and ramparts. In so doing, she added a contemporary layer to the layers of history, brought the question of division to life, and the inevitable confrontation between that which is inside the walls and that which lies outside, as metaphors for inclusion and exclusion. Thus, recent history offers a means of recontextualizing a more distant past, which otherwise endures only in romantic remains.



The wall becomes an image for the recurrence of history, the constraints of frontiers, the limitations placed on populations, all of which reminds us that the utopia of freedom of movement remains precisely that, a utopia, in life as on the Web.

Trace and Archives in the narrative of memory

A20 Recall explores the representation of an event in recent contemporary history by means of classic strategies based on narrative memory.

The accounts and diverse range of visual, photographic and videographic traces are the subject of a collection that presents itself as an archive.

Without wishing to simplify things, I would say that the archive's power to recollect is based on the truth that we attribute to it, at least in terms of plausibility.



Despite the fact that many hypermedia art works take pleasure in playing with the uncertainty around the boundaries between document and fiction, blurring the line between « traces » of narrative truth and fictional representations of the external world, the archive presents itself as a repertory of truth and depends on a certain protocol in the way that it is approached, to which the viewer must adhere if the narrative of memory is to unfold in its full potential

This protocol is based on: the viewer adhering to the contents of the narrative; recognizing that the archive's contents trace past events; and an unquestioning belief in the truth of the photographic image.

It is well known that an important cultural and social function of the photograph lies in its value as a document, a fact that is widely exploited on the Web. The understanding that the photograph is an immediate document of reality stems from the indexical nature of the medium, in other words the direct link that it maintains with the reality to which it refers, in which the representative power of the images conditions their reception, as discussed by Barthes in his concept of « that-has-been ». ²² It would be naive to believe that this reading of photography has disappeared in the digital age.

As we have seen, many web-based works maintain this paradoxical relationship between, on one hand, the transparency of the image, created by apparent direct access to it, and on the other hand, its hoax or false nature, as amply demonstrated by strategies of representation used in the hypermedia universe.

In my opinion, Teran's work does not so much explore the indeterminacy between fiction and the document, rather it plays with the notion of the authenticity of accounts and photographs. ²³ *A20 Recall* is inscribed within the broader view of the Web as a new site for the depositing of collective cultural archives, archives that are premised on sharing. ²⁴ Teran's site presents what remains of the Summit of the Americas, and shows what remains to be seen in serving as an interface for these remains.

22 I am referring here to Roland Barthes' famous text *Camera Lucide : Reflections on Photography* (La Chambre claire, Note sur la photographie, Paris, Seuil, 1980.)

23 For a discussion of the concept of indeterminacy in contemporary art see the anthology *L'indécidable, écartés et déplacements dans l'art actuel*, edited by Thérèse Saint-Gelais, Montreal, Editions Esse, 2008.

24 The Youtube site is the popular platform for this approach.

The dynamic structure of the site enables the viewer to « rummage in the archives » to reconstruct his own representation of history, fueled by his/her own curiosity, and desire to see and know, all of which guarantees the link between the individual and the site. The truth value of the archive becomes the principal architectural structure in the world that is represented, within which the artist explores the plausibility of diverse traces and, by extension, their political and polemic significance, as well as their historical value.

The *A20 Recall* website makes history above all because it recounts history, in opening access to discourses, images, memories and the diverse traces that are connected with events. As is the case with any history, it does not offer direct access to the historical facts, rather it offers up the memory of these facts.

Its primary material is that of testimony, based on the desire to recount, to recount one's own story, to make history to become history.

« The danger is not that of dying : death is a certainty for all individuals and communities. The danger is that of not having lived, to have missed out, of dying without the slightest idea what made us and what we made of it, of dying without telling one's story. »²⁵

This extract from Thierry Hentsch's exceptionally beautiful book is high revelatory. In this work, he outlines, in a limpid style, the primary motor for our desire for representation through narrative, which in art is expressed in the desire to transform the world, based on the the three modes of historical time : the past, the present and the future.

Narratives construct and reconstruct lives, recount individualities, describe real events as much as fantasy realities. These realities enable us to understand the world as oneself, in the recounting of our experiences, and the world beyond us, by the projection of the universe of others, and all this ultimately to grasp our presence and to give it meaning.

25 Thierry Hentsch, *Raconter et mourir. Aux sources narratives de l'imaginaire occidental*, p. 39 (Truth or death : the quest for immortality in the western narrative tradition).

In conclusion, performativity and rituals

Let us take a look back at our journey through performativity, which navigated a year of creation in the framework of LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE's residency program, and look at the question of ritual. The interpreting of works of art is never neutral, given that the historian or the art critic's discourse orients the reception of the work that he/she chooses to present.

The challenge of seeking to understand contemporary art, and more specifically Web art, by means of an overview and mapping exercise, is a considerable one. Clearly, from the beginning, hypermedia artists have made huge contributions to virtual space, offering creation principally focusing on experience. This creation is dynamic and heterogenous, and employs a collage and grafting aesthetic in its combination of image, text and sound, all the while blurring boundaries.

The current tendency in macro history is to organize by means of the classification of categories. The short history of hypermedia art has not escaped this tendency. Since the late 1990s onwards, numerous authors have proposed a series of general typologies, which offered the first means through which to organize materials relating to works of art that are conceived to be presented in a network, and whose growth is exponential.²⁶ However, these works often employ several representational strategies and therefore present a considerable challenge to modes of classification and identification.

Having observed the limits of a categorizing approach to hypermedia art, I have for a number of years been putting forward small-scale hermeneutic models that seek to explain significant issues connected with this area of creation, including : modes of letter writing; mythographies and the invention of identities; digital social life; interactive rituals; and practices that focus on Web activism and forms of political and cultural resistance. As this work has demonstrated, these models remain current. The list is not exhaustive, and issues are added according to developments in this ongoing cycle of this creation.

26 Three pioneering works serve as examples: Bokchnin, N. Shulgin, A. Introduction to net.art. 1998, <http://www.easylife.org/netart/>, Bureau, A. Pour une typologie de la création sur Internet. 1998, <http://www.olats.org/OLATS/livres/etudes/index.shtm> and Wilson, S. Information arts. 2002. Cambridge, MIT Press, 945 p.

If I had to make one final effort at synthesizing the field to highlight ONE intrinsic quality of Web production, I would highlight the notion of performativity that I raised at the outset of this text. This saw me analyse performativity in light of a range of its features : its pragmatic dimension; the making of the work, and making with the work, by means of its openness to contributions; individual making and making as a group; and the role of transformation, or making in the world.

We have also seen that the great majority of hypermedia art works offer a series of pragmatic instructions to the browser, in terms of what he/she should do and how it should be done. The browser's actions will establish and underline stages of doing and states of being, by means of repetition and reiteration. We were reminded that however declarative the hypermedia art work is, it always does something more, in addition to saying something. It shows how to do something, acting as a link that leads elsewhere. The notion of ritual is closely related to all these characteristics of performativity.

In my opinion, the work of Martine Segalen is highly constructive in attempting a definition of ritual, in terms of its relationship with the contemporary imaginary, in her outlining of a secular vision of ritual that centers on its social dimensions.²⁷ Her work establishes a head-on view of the subject, with no hint of a nostalgic or colonialist outlook. Instead, she studies realities that confront us in our everyday life.

The author defines ritual as an ensemble of formal, expressive and symbolic acts. This is, in my opinion, a fairly comprehensive definition that covers the three principal features of ritual in terms of the issues that are being addressed here : pragmatic sets of instructions that are linked to the « playability » of the work (what to do and how it should be done); the possibility of participating in a collective event (adding one's voice to the voice of a group); and finally the creation of a symbolic universe that has a transformative value, which I defined in terms of the performativity of narrativity.

Segalen insists that ritual takes the form of a spatio-temporal configuration that unfolds by means of a series of behavioural systems, specific languages and objects that are particular to a group. Ritual unfolds in a specific space and time, but also a complex one, given that it brings together individual and collective experience, as well as requiring a shared code. It is defined by its transcendent dimension, and the common meaning that it takes on for the group.²⁸

27 I am referring to her work *Rites et rituels contemporains*, 1998, Paris, Nathan, 128 p.

28 Transcendance in the sense of aiming beyond the simple act of doing.

Ritual is, I repeat, linked to a series of pragmatic instructions, and actions that are repeated both individually and collectively. Rituals are variable, they may be profane or sacred, secular or everyday. They bring about specific behaviours that characterize certain members of the same culture, and are a means of social regulation that encourages communication. Rituals consist of symbolic actions and acts of representation, and are ultimately a variable form of ceremony, as Rodrigo Diaz Cruz suggests, that serve to encourage the unity and cohesion of a group.²⁹

Studies of ritual quickly established the stabilizing quality that they possess, which enables the organization of that which is in movement and consequently offers a means of « reassurance in the face of anxiety.»³⁰ Thus, ritual shares the logic of mini narratives in terms of organizing experiences amidst the organic chaos and the cycle of life. Ritual also enables individuals to form bonds with a group and defines a precise place for each within the group, and a form of finality in a sense of shared actions. Whilst the notion of the mini narrative emphasizes the individual, the concept of ritual concerns the group. Ritual enables the conjuring of the depressive fatigue or teleological worries that always lie in wait for the tragic subject. Its significance is both cathartic and expressive.

Web art is not presented as a ritual, rather it is an invitation to become a ritual. It offers a pure form of potentiality given that it unfolds in space and time in a way that does not depend on a fixed framework, prior to its own existence. The act of making together is random, variable and unpredictable. Nevertheless, this doing together does take place, because the work consists, we recall, of the sum of the iterations from the collectivity of Web users, actions which are organized by the artist at the outset of the work and then repeated by viewers. These actions are, to varying extents, open and involve the handling of interfaces and wanderings in and through the work.³¹ They are also, above all, actions that involve the Web user's contribution, notably by means of the inscribing of « speech » and « testimonies ». Mini narratives are born from this speech, mini narratives that in turn enable the construction of mythographies.

29 Rodrigo Diaz Cruz, « L'exploration de la distance : idolâtries, superstitions, résistances rituelles » in *Les formes de reconnaissance de l'autre en question*, 2004, Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, Ben Naoum, Ahmed dir.pub, 589 p.

30 Jean Maisonneuve, *Les rituels*, 1988, Paris, PUF, 125 p., p. 13

31 Works may differ widely, from instruction-based works that depend on relatively ordered sequences, to completely open menus that have no requirements, other than exploration.

This is how I conceive of the intertwining concepts of performativity, ritual, narrative and myth, as a sequence that is only linear to the extent that a theoretical explanation demands such a structure. These concepts do not represent a hierarchical list, they offer a dynamic perspective, like an organic spiral, that evolves and surprises.

In the image of life, as in the image of the Web.

Interpreting fragments

Patrice Duhamel died prematurely in the Autumn of 2008. He had developed a website project for LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE, based on self-fiction, that employed a navigational interface subject to perpetual change, forcing an ambivalence in the website's reading, in relation to the staging of fiction and the document. Texts, images and sounds were to have been the object of a form of constant rewriting, in such a way as to cast doubt on the live or delayed nature of the events. What follows is the presentation of this unfinished work, approached from the perspective of the fragment.

The interpretation of fragments in an integral part of the work involved in analysing hypermedia art works, given that, as we have seen, these works never take the form of a definitive or completed work. Given the emphasis on processes that are open and contributive, Web art works involve trajectories that in critical terms can be conveyed in terms of the narrative of journey, a narrative structured around snatches of conversation, and the collecting of fragments that are used to construct an ensemble that is often heterogenous, and always coherent. The hypermedia fragment can be understood in terms of a zone in which two disciplinary fields meet, those of literature and media arts. The fragment can be seen as passageway into the work, a literary passageway, or else as a section of a recording, in other words a preserved trace of the promise of a whole that takes the shape of the completed work. We recall that, whilst the work is reconstructed through the Web user's experience, the completed work is not only constituted by this journey, it is also shaped by the prior structure of the work and the modalities created by the artist.

Patrice Duhamel's project was to have unfolded on the basis of the principles of transformation and rewriting. The dynamic and nomadic nature of the content aimed to challenge received ideas about the conventions of media platforms, the relationship between the live and the delayed, between a present appearing as a synchronic illusion and a past already become history, due to its mediation as an object through the use of image, sound and text. The artist was planning a challenging work inscribed within the thematic of self-fiction, based on the tension between perennial identity and variable identities.

If this is an outline of the project plan, what remains of the work today?

Traces and fragments. Duhamel left very few images and sequences of the work behind him, prior to his death. The fragmented material that remains leaves few clues as to the overall nature of the project. Fragments undoubtedly offer indications, however these are indications of something that never came to pass, given that the work had barely begun. As the historian of an unfinished work, my quest is a paradoxical one, that of trying to reconstruct a projected work that was interrupted by the artist's sudden disappearance. The role that I play is a delicate one, because discussing emerging art works always has its risks. For example, there is a risk that major art practices will not be picked up on. Or else, there is a risk of reading too much into the newness of tools, in thinking that they will bring about radically different models of creative practice. There are inherent risks in a synchronic outlook, to respond to Daniel Arasse, who rightly points out that the discourse of art history is based on an anachronic relationship with art works.³²

As a historian of hypermedia, I have to continually adapt the theoretical models that I employ, looking beyond barriers between disciplines, adopting an attitude of openness faced with the unforeseen. I explore history on a small scale, close to the subject, adopting an intimate perspective, looking at micro history, in the knowledge that grand narratives of history are never far away, as an essential reference point on which, moreover, creators themselves draw.

Writing the history of an unfinished work is a paradoxical quest given that I am not certain how to interpret what I see. Duhamel's images do not constitute details, moments in a complete work, that I can use as a means of moving from the particular to the general. I cannot play on the relationship between the detail and the whole because the whole remains only a promise. Instead, I will approach these images as small indications that evoke the artist's imaginary and his concerns. I have chosen the most eloquent fragments and set aside those which seemed peripheral. I choose and I evaluate, and I am well aware that I may make mistakes.

A sequence of five photograms captured my attention. The sequence shows an image in five stages, depicting a young blond woman who is smiling fully at her companion, who we see from behind. A friend, husband, brother, we surmise that the image belongs to another time, perhaps to that of the artist's childhood. Mother, aunty, neighbor, the woman reminds me of my own childhood. Each of the five stages of the photogram has been modified, with scratches, rips, traces of paint, all traces of an exploratory work, in the modification of material. This is the most narrative of all the

sequences, the most likely to be the beginning of a story that I like to have told to me. The filmic imaginary. The title 35 mm is eloquent, and I see in it a preoccupation for the passage of time, an era that we seek to reconstruct, combined with a form of work with the image that relates to time, and the acts of cutting, wear, and tear: temps, coupure, usure, déchirure.



35 mm 01à 05, Patrice Duhamel

35 mm is evocative of mediation, deferral, cinematographic time and material, knotting an ambivalence around the document – are these family archives, given that the artist stated that he was inspired by forms of personal journal? – and the fictional form, an extract of a film, the origins of which I could or should have traced.

Another captivating fragment consists of an image of an office that appears online, and which displays the title of the project. As the homepage of the website and the first interface encountered by the Web user, the fragment presents a double site : the physical site of writing, the workshop of the small, solitary room that is indispensable to creative work; and the influence of the Web, which traverses geography, unfolding in the infinite, the ungraspable. Viewing this image caused me to reflect on the title of the work, which proved revelatory. The title conjures a sense of a supplement, a surcharge, a surplus and perhaps even too much, signalling that which we can never accomplish. A work of excess also has a religious meaning, giving the work an optional and additional Christian sense. Was Duhamel aware of this mystic dimension, or was he thinking more on philosophical lines, in the lineage of Marion, in his description of the appearance and saturation of phenomena?³³ Or perhaps he chose the word for its semantic and phonetic qualities?

33 Jean-Luc Marion, *De surcroît*, Paris, PUF, 2001, 208 p.

All my questions remained unanswered and my hypotheses invalid. I accept this because I accept the pact that Duhamel envisaged for his project, that of : questioning perception and the understanding of events, introducing a breach into the continuity of the real, to bring the expected and the unexpected together under the same roof. In the end, this journey through an unfinished work is more a staging of my own subjectivity, it offers a methodological mirror, because it brings me back to my mode of working, to the question of how I conduct my quest with regard to hypermedia creation. It brings me back to the challenges of establishing a vision and a reading, of organizing and understanding. Ultimately, the exercise reminds me that micro histories must also mourn the death of truth as an ideal.

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Biographies

Nadine Norman was born in Toronto in 1964, and lives and works in Montreal and Paris. In the last ten years she has created numerous multimedia projects that explore narrative identities, notably those related to the representation of the feminine. Her work explores notions of identity and the desire to communicate, and takes the form of a hybrid artistic practice that includes interactivity, intermediation, performance, photography, video installation and Web art. Her works have been presented in numerous solo and group exhibitions, both in Quebec and abroad. Norman's projects propose a questioning of the social and cultural conventions, by means of her parodic representations of a diverse phenomena, including the sex industry, prostitution and wife-swapping, in works including *Darlings* 1997, *DIY Woman*, 1999, *Call Girl*, 2000 and *Je suis disponible*, 2001.

The Canadian artist **Jillian McDonald** is currently based in New York. She is the curator and co-director of Pace Digital Gallery at the university of the same name, where she teaches art. Born in Winnipeg, the artist has exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions in Canada and the U.S.A., as well as in France and Germany. She has participated in numerous festivals and international events, including the Montreal Biennial, Isea 2004 in Tallinn, the Festival of Electronic Art in Argentina, BananaRAM in Italy and FILE in Sao Paulo. Her video and Web art is both performative and relational, and is aimed at a broad public that is not necessarily familiar with contemporary art. She presents her work in a range of contexts that encourage a critical reinterpretation of the everyday. Her works are constructed from iconography from mass media and fantasy, and invoke participatory forms of narrativity. Her recent work includes *Undead in the Night*, 2009, *Vamp it Up*, 2008, and *Horror Make-up* 2006.

Jeanne Landry-Belleau lives and works in Quebec City. An active participant in the artistic milieu, she holds a Bachelor's degree in visual art from Laval University, where she is currently studying for a Masters degree in visual art. In 2007, in the context of a graduate exhibition, LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE awarded her a prize for excellence for her research in Web art, also receiving the prize of the Centre des arts et des fibres du Québec, awarded by Diagonale, for her work *La naissance de Vénus dans un code barre*, 2007. She has published texts and Web chronicles, notably in *Revue DPI* and *Studio XX*.

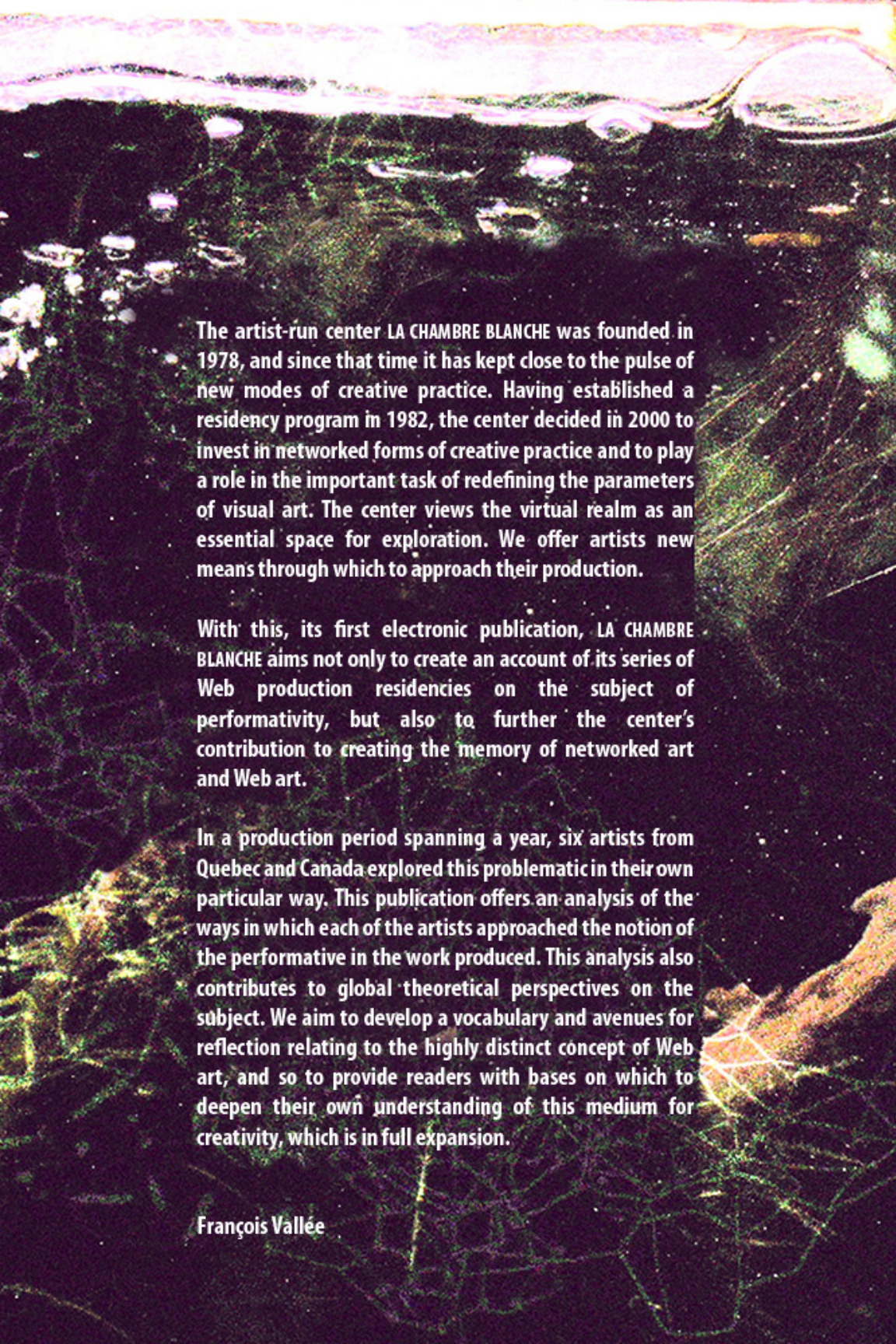
Linda Duvall lives and works in Saskatoon and Toronto. Her work has featured in numerous exhibitions in Canada and abroad, including in Barcelona, Wespport (Ireland) and Guatemala. She is interested in complex conditions relating to ethics, and particularly situations arising from scientific discoveries in areas including genetics, as well as the issues at stake in the forming of communities and allegorical representations of networked communication. Her practice spans installation, performance, video projections and multi-channel audio work, as well as appropriating the mechanisms of commercial technology. Her works encourage public participation, and her recent exhibitions include : *She Can't Begin*, Red Head Gallery, Toronto, in 2007; *Enough White Lies to Ice a Wedding Cake* McIntosh Gallery; and *Tea and Gossip*, Art Gallery of Calgary in 2006.

The new media artist **Michelle Teran** divides her time between Canada and Europe. Her work explores interaction between social and technological networks in urban environments. She creates performances, installations and online works that touch on communication, surveillance, psychogeography, intimacy, social rituals and play, and involved collaboration and the participation of the public. She has presented her work in numerous exhibitions and events throughout North American, Europe, Australia and Japan. Her website Ubermatic displays recent developments in her research and creative practice. <http://www.ubermatic.org/>

The Montreal artist **Patrice Duhamel** was born in Contrecoeur in 1970, and died prematurely in 2008. Following his university studies in visual arts, he focused his interests in video art, as well as drawing and photography. His work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions both in Quebec and overseas. Duhamel's video works have been presented in numerous festivals in Quebec, France, Belgium and Portugal. He maintained a writing practice in tandem with his artistic work, publishing articles and communiqués (*Parachute*, *ESSE*, *ETC*, Galerie Clark, Centre des arts actuels Skol, B-312, etc.). He was curator of the exhibition *l'exposition Erwin Wurm Désespéré/ Desperate*, shown at the Galerie UQAM in 2008, and was president of the management committee of Vidéographe. His body of work includes *La vie concrète* (1998), *Un Abécédaire* (1999) and *I don't know what I want but I know how to get it* (2001).

Joanne Lalonde is lecturer in art history and Vice Dean of Research and Creation in the Faculty of Arts at the Université du Québec à Montreal. Her research focuses on network-based art and media art practices. Since 2001, she has published over twenty texts on the subject of hypermedia arts. She is a member of : Laboratoire Nt2 (new technologies and new textualities); Figura, a research centre focusing on text and the imaginary; and UQAM's research team on the contemporary imaginary (Éric Lint). She is a specialist in Canadian video art, is also interested in representations of gender and the depiction of sexual hybrids in contemporary art, modalities of interactivity in contemporary art, as well as research methodologies in emerging forms of artistic practice.





The artist-run center LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE was founded in 1978, and since that time it has kept close to the pulse of new modes of creative practice. Having established a residency program in 1982, the center decided in 2000 to invest in networked forms of creative practice and to play a role in the important task of redefining the parameters of visual art. The center views the virtual realm as an essential space for exploration. We offer artists new means through which to approach their production.

With this, its first electronic publication, LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE aims not only to create an account of its series of Web production residencies on the subject of performativity, but also to further the center's contribution to creating the memory of networked art and Web art.

In a production period spanning a year, six artists from Quebec and Canada explored this problematic in their own particular way. This publication offers an analysis of the ways in which each of the artists approached the notion of the performative in the work produced. This analysis also contributes to global theoretical perspectives on the subject. We aim to develop a vocabulary and avenues for reflection relating to the highly distinct concept of Web art, and so to provide readers with bases on which to deepen their own understanding of this medium for creativity, which is in full expansion.

François Vallée