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Rusty's Poem: Adventures in the Outlands of Lexical Furriness

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'Rusty's Poem' is a collaboration between the author of this essay and a non-human entity, whose identity will become clear in due course. It deals with ideas of authorship, textual expectations, the randomisation of source data and pattern recognition. I reappraise the idea of the death of the author in the age of the Internet, particularly with reference to the instability of personality that is a by-product of digital relationships, and propose a randomisation process that led to the creation of 'Rusty's Poem.'

Barthes' 1967 notion of the death of the author can be summarised that a text's meaning is ascribed to it not by the writer or creator of the text, but by the end-user, the reader. Since Barthes' essay's unveiling in the sixties, the world has moved forward in several ways that have indeed diminished or at least altered the way we think about authorship, particularly the human agency therein implied. Artificial intelligence, the Internet, text generating software and the increase in virtual reality uptake are now all implicated in what it means to not just be an author, but the instability of the notion of who on the Internet is actually human and 'who' might in fact be generated, for example, by advertising robots in order to lure the Internet user into signing up to certain services. An example of this was revealed in 2015 when a site that promised to bring attached men and women together discreetly to embark on illicit affairs, ashleymadison.com, was hacked and the information put on the net. Technology journalist Annalee Newitz wrote about the phenomenon:

What I have learned from examining the site's source is that Ashley Madison's army of fembots appears to have been a sophisticated, deliberate, and lucrative fraud. The code tells the story of a company trying to weave the illusion that women on the site are plentiful and eager. Whatever the total number of real, active female Ashley Madison users is,



the company was clearly on a desperate quest to design legions of fake women to interact with the men on the site.¹

In other words, the authors of the email correspondence were not in fact human at all, merely code programs designed to appear as such. The expectation of the site coders was that the (male) users would believe that they were being seduced by these desirable human women. This places the interpretation of the interaction firmly on the side of the reader (in this case, the online would-be Romeo).

Barthes' essay called for a new model of textual discussion that removes the creator of the work, that is, a person, from the text in order to stymie traditional critical readings. As he put it, '[Criticism...] allot[s] to itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is "explained" [.]'² Thus, onus on finding meaningful content without context is placed on the reader alone: authorial intent is no longer valid, as predicted by Wimsatt/Beardsley.

One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem—for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem.³

In the case of ashleymadison.com this theory has been taken out of the poetic context entirely and, in the hands of a new breed of coders, further into the realms of ideas of not just authorship but ideas of what constitutes human interaction. If a piece of code can be written that functions as a plausible facsimile or simulacra of a real-world human, then we are taking a further step away from the death of the author into a realm where we are unsure if there are humans

¹ Annalee Newitz, 'Ashley Madison Code Shows More Women, And More Bots,' *Gizmodo.com* (2015) <<http://gizmodo.com/ashley-madison-code-shows-more-women-and-more-bots-1727613924>> [accessed July 8, 2016].

² Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, in 'Three Essays,' standalone numbered items released in box form as part of *Aspen no. 5+6, The Minimalism issue* (New York: Roaring Press, Fall/Winter 1967).

³ William K. Wimsatt Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley, 'Intentional Fallacy', in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1946 rev. 1954), p. 4.



communicating at all. This is not a value judgement; indeed, there are intriguing possibilities being thrown up by the destabilisation of the relationship between author, reader, technology and other non-human intelligences.

Death of the Human

With intent and authorship unstable if not outright rejected by Barthes et al, what would removing the human element entirely from the process produce? Kenneth Goldsmith's 2011 work, *Uncreative Writing*, addresses this by contrasting the digital age's 'writing' with that of abstract visual arts and noting that:

Words very well might not only be written to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated, sometimes by humans, more often by machines, providing us with an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider what writing is and to define new roles for the author.⁴

Goldsmith goes on to present the computer code he sees on an airline flight - when his allotted seat-back TV screen's graphical interface crashes, revealing a jumble of letters and numbers - as a kind of poetry, saying outright that 'code also possesses literary value [...] the past hundred years of modernist and postmodernist writing has demonstrated the artistic value of similar seemingly arbitrary arrangements of letters,'⁵ albeit without any semantic content.

Ultimately, however, a human has written that computer code (and/or written the program that created that code, which was designed to create a graphical representation of an aeroplane's progress on its journey). Thus we can say there was authorial intent to ensure that it was decipherable as graphics on implementation. The code itself was designed for this purpose, and not as poetry. This is a distinction Goldsmith is seeking to blur.

⁴ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 15.

⁵ Goldsmith, p. 17.



It must be noted that Goldsmith's approach led to controversy when on 13 March, 2015 he performed a poem, 'The Body of Michael Brown', at the Interrupt 3 arts event at Brown University.⁶ The poem consisted of an edited excerpt from the St. Louis County Coroner's Office's autopsy report on the shooting of Brown by a police officer the previous year. The Huffington Post quoted Goldsmith as saying that he, '[A]ltered the text for poetic effect; I translated into plain English many obscure medical terms that would have stopped the flow of the text; I narrativised it in ways that made the text less didactic and more literary.'⁷ The appropriation of a real-life incident as creative work led to something of a backlash. *The Guardian* quoted P.E. Garcia of the online arts magazine Queen's Mob, one of several voices to point out the cultural, spatial and racial undercurrents to the performance:

For Kenneth Goldsmith to stand on stage, and not be aware that his body – his white male body, a body that is a symbol loaded with a history of oppression, of literal dominance and ownership of black bodies – is a part of the performance, then he has failed to notice something drastically important about the 'contextualization' of this work. If, as he says, we are to look at this as conceptual art – if we are to believe the audience is in charge of this interpretation – then Goldsmith should accept the context of his performance. He should accept the pain his audience felt. He should accept that we might look at him and only see another white man holding the corpse of a black child saying, 'Look at what I've made'."⁸

Goldsmith's response on social media was that once he had introduced the reading as a poem, rather than an autopsy report, it had been removed from all other contexts:

⁶ 'The Body of Michael Brown', performed by Kenneth Goldsmith (Interrupt 3, Brown University, 13 March 2015).

⁷ Ilya Szilak, 'The Body of Michael Brown – A Response to Kenneth Goldsmith', *The Huffington Post* (2015). <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ilya-szilak/the-body-of-michael-brown_b_6891114.html> [accessed 20 June 2016] (para. 3 of 7).

⁸ Alison Flood, 'US poet defends reading of Michael Brown autopsy report as a poem,' *The Guardian* (2015) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/17/michael-brown-autopsy-report-poem-kenneth-goldsmith>> [accessed June 2016] (para. 8 of 15).



I indeed stated at the beginning of my reading that this was a poem called ‘The Body of Michael Brown’; I never stated, ‘I am going to read the autopsy report of Michael Brown’. That said, I didn’t add or alter a single word or sentiment that did not preexist in the original text, for to do so would be to go against my nearly three decades’ practice of conceptual writing, one that states that a writer need not write any new texts but rather reframe those that already exist in the world to greater effect than any subjective interpretation could lend. Perhaps people feel uncomfortable with my uncreative writing, but for me, this is the writing that is able to tell the truth in the strongest and clearest way possible.⁹

Despite this post-backlash justification, it appeared to me that there was a need to further remove context from the process; authorial intent in this case came firmly up against potent issues from which the text, the performance and the poem could not hope to escape. Chiefly, Goldsmith is seeking to divorce the source text/the performance from the real world. From his own point of view, and on his own terms, he has indeed done so. However, the wide-ranging difference of interpretations to his work show that his attempt in forcing only one interpretation on the work – his own – has failed. This is problematical for a literary or poetic work. Goldsmith here is flipping the death of the author entirely on its head and can be said, by contrast, to be trying to impose the death of the audience. That is, he insists that his own interpretation is the only valid one and that context can be removed and the words used (and reworked) purely for his own ends. But this denies the audience a subjective response to the work, which destabilises one of the key tenets of art: that it can be a correspondence, a conversation, an action and a reaction between author, reader and cultural context. Removing any one of these conditions creates instability.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Cat

As Goldsmith’s efforts to decouple source material from its context are problematical, particularly in the above case, I looked to move away from human agency. To try and provide a collision with chance and remove as far as possible the idea that creativity can be only dependent on authorial intent or scripture could

⁹ Flood, para. 13 of 15.



provide a way to look at how a reader interacted with a text. The randomisation of the creative process – or as Goldsmith might have it, the uncreative process – scan be made to serve to reveal our existing structures of approaching a text from a viewpoint of social, rhythmical and even graphical poetic expectation. This is related to how we think about language. A poem will be interpreted as language because we think and read and speak with and within language. Goldsmith's view that poetry can be seen behind the screen, that is, the code behind the jpg, is problematical as this code also has its own lexicon and coding language. However, my contention is that work may be created from other sources and disrupt expected patterns to an extent nonetheless.

Therefore, as of 14 December 2014 I decided not to shoo my cat Rusty away from the computer but to allow him to pad across the keyboard whenever he felt like it; I wanted to see what would happen. We communicate a lot, but largely this is due to him purring if I stroke his fur in an acceptable manner, biting me if not, and leading me to his food bowl at surprisingly regular intervals. Theoretically, however, he would generate some output which could be utilised as a source text which has little to do with human agency. This would break the patterns of structure, in order to see what might be revealed about the reader, our relationship with poetry, expectations, patterning and prior contact with graphical/concrete poetry.

However, this process is itself flawed. The cat walks right to left, because that is the way the room is set up (he is going toward the window, usually). The body shape of the cat means his paws rest on certain keys more than others and there may be tactile feedback from certain parts of the laptop keyboard which are warmer than others due to the internal design of the laptop. As there are several keys missing it is possible that Rusty prefers to rest his feet in certain more comfortable places than others. The process is mostly (but not exclusively) contingent on Rusty walking across the laptop keyboard under the following conditions. The laptop is on. I am sitting in front of the laptop. I have a word processing or text program open at the time he walks across and/or settles, or else the address bar of an internet provider is active. I must be able to capture his work. The computer is set to use English as its language and responds according to the



Gregorian alphabet, plus a number of different punctuation marks (this is non-essential, but helpful – were the font set to Wingdings (a graphical font) there would be no recognisable lettering at all, but rather abstract visual art-esque possibilities may come into play). Providing all the above conditions are satisfied, the process was also contingent upon the work falling within the timeframe (just over a year) in which he was allowed to wander across the keyboard, where previously he had not. The exception to the above process was when Rusty's wanderings had managed to open a DOS window and he generated alphabet-based data as well as created the forum in which to do so. I found also that it was inevitable that I influenced the process in an editorial manner, post-generation of data by creating stanzas from the work (based on my own bias and expectations); arranging the text in linear order (the work was generated chronologically); deciding when the project started and ended (14 December, 2014 to 31 December, 2015); and deciding to present it in a journal.

Bearing in mind these conditions, generation of data is achieved, but whether it is in fact decontexted from questions of authorship and/or information generation (poetry) is debatable due to the necessary human involvement, and associated prior biases. The concept of a collaboration of sorts between a cat and a human is an interesting one which has been pondered by theorists. Donna Haraway has in some of her works explored relationships between humans, machines and animals. The dog-human paradigm is one of Haraway's areas of interest.

Dogs, in their historical complexity, matter here. Dogs are not an alibi for other themes; dogs are fleshly material-semiotic presences in the body of technoscience. Dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with. They are here to live with Partners in the crime of human evolution, they are in the garden from the get-go, wily as Coyote.¹⁰

Her work on the development of species together is in contrast to the concept of humans as exceptional. What reviewer Eileen Crist describes as, '[T]he

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Others* (Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press 2003), p. 6.



imperial exaltation of the human above the dance of Earthly life.’¹¹ Crist quotes Haraway’s position thus: ‘If we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism, then we know that becoming is always becoming *with*.’¹² Creativity in this context must also be prone to this intertwining of species development. Rusty Cat and I do communicate; the question raised here is that of awareness on his part. Was he deliberately going on his keyboard-walks once the precedent had been set? What was I communicating to him by stopping my work due to his interruption and my concentration on saving his contribution? The questions continue. Rusty was functioning as the code behind the picture, particularly given the capture conditions necessary for his input as delineated previously.

That Haraway is also noted for her work on cyborgs, robots, humans and post-humanism was an irony brought home to me by the realisation that my computer is playing much the same part in my relationship with it. That is to say, I am unaware of the codal context that my input is generating as I ‘write’ an essay. The words come up on screen, but their meaning to the programs, procedures, loops and routines running under the hood of the PC is negligible. At the same time, I retain an awareness that there are processes running that I do not understand. As Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin would have it, “The computer encourages us to mimic its workings.”¹³

Jacques Derrida drew attention to this duality in his address at a 1997 conference at Cerisy-la-Salle, saying:

I often ask myself, just to see, who I am-and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment. Whence this malaise?¹⁴

¹¹ Eileen Crist: ‘Cat’s cradle with Donna Haraway’, in *Social Studies of Science*, 40 (4), (August 2010), p. 641.

¹² Donna Haraway *When Species Meet* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 224.

¹³ Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), p. xviii.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, trans. David Robert Willis, ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’, in *Critical Enquiry*, 28 (2), (Winter, 2002), p. 370.



Animals wear no clothes so therefore cannot conceive of the concept. Derrida goes on to ponder the relationship between animals and humans, and indeed human-as-animal, and animal as reflection of the essence of animalistic humanity:

Wherever some autobiographical play is being enacted there has to be a psyche, a mirror that reflects me naked from head to toe. The same question then becomes whether I should show myself but in the process see myself naked (that is reflect my image in a mirror) when, concerning me, looking at me, is this living creature, this cat that can find itself caught in the same mirror? Is there animal narcissism? But cannot this cat also be, deep within her eyes, my primary mirror?¹⁵

Phenomenological musings arise in Derrida from this one incident of being gazed at naked by a cat, which may itself be considered as part of the same system. ‘Rusty’s Poem’, then, may be more accurately, but less satisfyingly, renamed ‘Joe’s Capturing of Rusty’s Footsteps in Order to Self-Reflect’. The human is entirely complicit in the process, regardless of any randomisation attempts. Thus the author is not dead, but has morphed into a collaborator and editor. It is interesting to note that Rusty is a cat, but that name could also relate to a computer, or a robot. By definition the word relates to the oxidation of iron or steel. This is a process by which the pure original formation has been affected by its interface with the outside world, specifically water and oxygen. Both, of course, essential for human survival.

Poetic Expectations

Because the work is presented in a poetic context, the reader has certain poetic expectations and patterns may seem to emerge from the work; there are several repetitions; the shape of the stanzas seem(ed) to suggest themselves (to the editor). Therefore, information is placed back into the piece by the reader (and the editor). This is in line with Stalker (1978), who studied reactions to two separate poems, one printed as prose and one as poetry. He asked 25 readers to divide them into lines and compared that to the actual original work:

¹⁵ Derrida, p. 418.



The results, while not discounting rhythm as a significant feature in defining the poetic line, suggest that lines are definable, as poets generally agree; that poets' 'energy' is the play between syntactic expectation and linear fulfilment; and that the reader takes part indirectly in poets' line end decisions.¹⁶

Kintgen (1986) puts this problem thus:

[W]e must continue to confront not merely the problems posed by identifying the mental structures readers use [to parse a text], but more importantly, the mysteries of how they “make use of these mental structures, how and why they make choices and behave as they do¹⁷” in constructing interpretations.¹⁸

'Rusty's Poem', then, as a semi-random piece of text, points at many of the intrinsic process we as readers use to approach a new text, albeit also holding within it the inherent weaknesses of its genesis as described above. A further investigation could consider implications for (written) language acquisition and a fuller paper could delve deeper into the necessarily brief comments herewith. There are also interesting questions raised as to the role of an editor / publisher / presenter of the text in a readable format. It can be read also as conceptual art. Joseph Kosuth's *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)*, for example, involved the artist cutting out the definition of 'theory' from a dictionary, fixing it to the wall and signing it. John J. Curley describes it thus:

This certificate serves as proof of ownership and as a source document for the text's later enlargement; it is not intended for exhibition, according to Kosuth. From this card, owning institutions are allowed to produce an unlimited number of photostat reproductions, but all must be four feet square with white text on a black ground. This bipartite approach situates

¹⁶ James C. Stalker, 'Reader Expectations and the Poetic Line', (paper presented at the Annual Interdisciplinary Conference on Linguistics 4th, Louisville, Kentucky, April 7-8, 1978). From abstract <<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED161054>> [accessed March 25, 2016].

¹⁷ Quote of Eugene Kintgen by Steven A. Stahl and David A. Hayes, 'Rules and Representations', in *Instructional Models in Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 93.

¹⁸ Eugene R Kintgen, 'Expectations and Processes in Reading Poetic Narratives', in *The Arts*, 4(1), (1986), p. 93.



the art object somewhere between what is exhibited and what is signed, and reflects Kosuth's attempt to challenge the singular uniqueness (and commodity status) associated with traditional art. The four-foot-square format is not an arbitrary choice, but one that allows for the reproduced definition to be considered in visual terms. At this size, words become something pictorial - blurry and almost painterly in their magnified fuzziness.¹⁹

Curley makes comparison with pop art, and in particular Andy Warhol's silk-screened artworks from found or appropriated newspaper images. In the same way that Warhol's repetitions of, say, an image of Elvis Presley, are presented over and over again in order to create a bigger artwork in which the original images are subsumed to a greater whole, the words have been reduced, or more accurately, induced, toward shape rather than content; the look of the poem is as important if not more so than any semantic meaning. We have zoomed out and found another kind of artistic context. The shape of the text on the page has also been created by Rusty and the editor, enabling the possibility of a conceptualist interpretation, and revealing another collaboration between the two.

The text created by Rusty, with the compiler-editor complicit, could also be viewed as a visual or concrete poem, or at least having the possibility of falling within that tradition. As R.P. Draper puts it:

In its simplest definition concrete poetry is the creation of verbal artefacts which exploit the possibilities, not only of sound, sense and rhythm - the traditional fields of poetry - but also of space, whether it be the flat, two-dimensional space of letters on the printed page, or the three-dimensional space of words in relief and sculptured ideograms.²⁰

Draper points out that this technique of graphically adding impact is 'a common device in journalism and advertising,' and that it has a long history in

¹⁹ John J. Curley, 'Fuzzy Language: Joseph Kosuth's "Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)"', in *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin, African Art At Yale* (2005), p. 125.

²⁰ R.P. Draper, 'Concrete Poetry', in *New Literary History Vol 2, No.2, Form and its Alternatives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 329.



poetry, from George Herbert's 'Easter Wings' to the mouse's tail poem from *Alice in Wonderland* and Apollinaire's collection of graphical poems, *Calligrammes*, which includes a poem in the form of the Eiffel Tower, amongst others. All very worthy of a quick Internet search (for the sake of space here), creating shapes respectively of a bird's wings, a mouse's tail and a book of various shaped poems related to their content. We can use an example of Edwin Morgan's 'Siesta of a Hungarian Snake' here:²¹

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In the case of 'Rusty's Poem', there are many possibilities to extract suitable concrete material in order to create, or re-create, visual/concrete excerpts. We must here then note that the text, or art, created is far from fixed. The work here presented is but one of seemingly-infinite re/interpretations of the source material: it could be presented alphabetically, reworked to find anagrammatical lexical consistencies, reworked to insert into programming instructions to modify other data, printed on a T-shirt and photographed, integrated with and placed against other extant and/or created works to inspire tangential creations, placed online for others to remix how they will, and countless other possibilities.

These do not have to be bound by any artistic, linguistic or critical definitions or boundaries; the concept would be the creator's own, but the interpretation would be partly or wholly the reader's; Rusty, as original generator, and the editor, as second-order gatekeeper of sorts, are involved in the process only by virtue of their implied presence. This can be as much or as little as is desired or designed on the part of whomever (or indeed whatever, in our computerised, internetted, connected, cyborgian world).

What we are discussing is an exercise in data creation; information derived from there is entirely bound to the interpretation and/or remixing by the reader-as-creator. Clearly the cat that is currently chasing a fly around the office is unaware of his involvement in the process, but without him the process would not have

²¹ Here sourced from <<https://theonidline.wordpress.com/2012/02/10/siesta-of-a-hungarian-snake/>> [accessed on 19 June 2016]. This is rendered in text, but the poem has been re-rendered countless times in many different shapes by a number of graphical artists over the years.



revealed our own propensity for searching for context and meaning in seemingly-random strings of letters and near-words. That we ascribe value to, or at least acknowledge the existence of, the structures we construct around text sources in a poetic sense, does not wholly deny the possibility that human agency can be somewhat absent from the creative process. As consumers of poetry and literature, this is a relationship and a phenomenon that we encounter in and as constant cultural flux. The essays by Barthes et al, built on by Goldsmith's somewhat self-destructive and risky notions, are useful signposts for us in revealing what those relationships, structures and cultural communications might be, in our connected, algorithmed, fake-profile social media world. I suspect we would do well to acknowledge the instability because to do so is to draw inspiration from it, and much as with Barthes, today's creative inspiration becomes tomorrow's mainstream notion, itself available for reappraisal, for re/de-contexting and, as a result, a revitalisation of itself.



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Rusty Shooman was born in Grand Cayman in 2012. His interests include dripping water taps, playing fetch and cross-specie artistic collusion.

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