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The Collectivoli Gardens

Tom La Farge, Wendy Walker

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Davis Schneiderman's project *Blank* (2011) must not be interpreted as merely a book of 20 chapter titles and 180 textless pages, but ultimately as 1) Schneiderman's interpretation of literary blankness, in concert with 2) Susan White's 20 "blank" artworks of clear skies shown through burned holes in paper, in concert with 3) Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky's remix of three of Johann Sebastian Bach's "Goldberg Variations," and 4) his essay on arriving on the island of Vanuatu during an earthquake, in concert with 5) all of the foregoing encased in plaster that once broken cannot be unbroken. That's a mashup. A fire-breathing chimera. A single idea that the reader, in order to fully bear witness, must ponder at length and in depth and with personal and cultural issues broiling at this planet-moment here.

Art critic Jed Perl once lamented the sorry state of the arts, wherein viewers look at a painting for, at most, three minutes during an exhibition opening party (emphasis on "party") hosted by a gallery whose acquisition tastes are now defined by clients seeking immediate gratification rather than lengthy contemplation. By contrast, a successful publishing mashup insists that the *successful* reader-viewer-listener-thinker is one willing and able to pull out of

the drive-thru mentality by which we're seemingly and increasingly doomed, and actually reflect upon whatever new (life) forms result from collision. Interesting case in counterpoint: the long debate generated by Christopher Higgs's insightful exploration of Schneiderman's *Blank* on HTMLGIANT, wherein most of the commenters had neither read nor viewed nor heard the collided parts of the project and therefore could have in no way accurately contemplated or interpreted it and its multiple ramifications, attests to our current proclivity to talk out of our asses rather than our heads. I'm guilty, too, sometimes reading an article only halfway before forming conclusions and opinions as if I'd read the whole. Lazy, corrupt, fundamentally detrimental behavior.

And so, via the Appian Way lined with burning corpses, we come to my third point: literature as entertainment. I don't negate the entertainment value of literature. Nor do I presume that all can be entertained by the same literary manifestations. My aesthetic tastes have grown to lean toward asymmetry; I *enjoy* cognitive disequilibrium. Therefore, for the sake of entertainment, I can no longer get past the first few pages of a mainstream novel, nor can I or my poetry editor, Sam Witt, get much

pleasure from a poem of Billy Collins simplicity. What entertains us is what intellectually challenges, forcing us to carry the "problem" around for days, months, years—overlay it onto people, landscapes, and cultural events to see how it maps the world.

At Jaded Ibis, we choose text for one underlying complexity or others, then complicate by adding artworks created while upholding their own complex aesthetic integrity. Make no mistake: we effect collisions because the fantastic life they spawn entertains us. Yet, underlying our selfish pleasure remains a benevolent Johnny Appleseed sowing the planet with new cultural and, we hope, sociopolitical possibilities.

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The Collectivoli Gardens

Tom La Farge and Wendy Walker

Founded in 2009 by Tom La Farge and Wendy Walker, the Writhing Society is a salon dedicated to writing with constraints: arbitrary, invented rules that displace writing out of the habitual discourse of the marketplace or academy. Many constraints were invented or codified by the French group Oulipo, many others invented by the writhers themselves.

The Society meets weekly around a table at Proteus Gowanus in Brooklyn. The salon is open to anyone with an interest in constrained writing; the ambience is kept informal and friendly with wine and conversation. No vetting, election, or experience is required. One of the five leaders will propose a constraint; then an email lets writhers know what to expect and what to bring (postcards, unorthodox musical scoring are recent examples). One part of the two-hour session is normally devoted to collaborative work, and writing is passed around for successive writhers to add to. "Collectivoli Gardens" was assembled from bits by individuals, using portmanteau words conflated from two words that share a syllable. Rarely, an email pass-around occurs; one such exercise built a collective nine-line sestina.

The Writhing Society reveres Oulipo but also the surrealists and situationists. It draws inspiration from William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, J.G. Ballard, Bernadette Mayer, and Paul Metcalf, to name but a few. Meeting often with a shifting group, it practices a variety of experiments. At each session, every writer reads work aloud, and listeners help supply the "sense" that the writer may not know the writing has made. Writhers are encouraged to view the meetings as chances to try out constraints they may want to extend on their own.

The Collectivoli Gardens

The écritourbus pulled up in the divinesparkinglot, and the group of nine awryters got down and put on their offbaseballcaps, for it was sunny and hot. "Welcome to the Collectivoli Gardens," said a man with deformat charm. "I'm Raymond, and I'll be your weirdocent. Please take out your queneautebooks and follow me."

They filed past an open area: "The Wordplayground," announced Raymond. It was not at all what they had expected. There was not a slide or a swing set in sight. Instead there were a number of bizarre looking contraptions. Curious, they went in. There were word ladders, rat centos, critical fictions, erasures and excisions, perverbs and perverses, and not a few exquisite corpses. Sam took notes about two young nouns, a lemon and a monster, that he met there, flushed and sweaty, behind some bushes, interlocked in an act of *lemonster*. "Better not tell your parents about this," Sam told them. "They're Proper Nouns."

Take out your queneautebooks and follow me.

Shortly thereafter Raymond pointed out a large formless mass of architectoplasm and in it somewhere a door with a golden arm above it. A barker stood there; Carrie got his words down in her queneautebook:

"No matter that you're unemployed, S&P has lowered your country's credit rating, and even a staycation is looking impossible because you don't have a home to stay in—there are still unlimited inventures to be had for the making: interior adventures invented in the far reaches of one's imagination and traveled in style, baby, anywhere you wanna go—yeah, you heard me right. Go for a ride? The Hall of Inventure is open for business. You're welcome."

Behind another door, a large and well-preserved example of New World archaeologorrhea was on display in a climate-controlled vitrine of polarized glass. At first glance the sample seemed a pyramid of decomposed refuse, but upon closer examination revealed itself as a minutely brilliant amalgam of uncontrolled but precisely ordered speech, and Wendy began taking feverish notes: "The tiny glinting pieces one can just see without a lens are fractured utterances from heretical dialects of the pre-eminent literary languages. Here and there a crystal in one refracts the color of an unrelated utterance, casting doubt upon the current belief in the lack of a common

stemma. Blasphemies in one extinct language show themselves to be, in biological evolution, homophonically identical to computer-generated prophecies of orthodox religion. In short, this excremental time capsule of ancient gossip and scholasticism is a treasure trove of narrative objects."

Raymond led them past a menagerie of unusual creatures. *Flamingolems* were ranging the tropical marshes where the Jewish pirates hide between voyages. At the sight of Erik, the *penguineapig* took off its societal tux to squeal and flap its flightless wings at its own rut, dissecting and evaluating the words from the past, the tried and easy, the words of the wise and workaday, nibbling and regurgitating, to reemerge from the dreamy deep-sea. Maria noted *pandalmatians* eating shoots and leaves and dreaming of emoticonflagrations, and a *boaconstrictorangutan* that looked at her, hungry and orange. A *mosquitoad*, an *elephant eater*, and a *buffalocust*, all with skin ailments, followed a fishy man into the infirmary. "That's Roubaud," said Raymond. "He's our floundermatologist."

Some men were playing a game on fine, hard-packed gravel, tossing out lies, gibberish, and nonsense with the objective of knocking out the other players' rubbish and replacing it with their own. "What's *that*?" asked Jamie. "They're playing bocceballderdash," Raymond explained. She wrote it down and also noted a pit-shaped dead end where possible future scenarios were being constructed—an oraculdesac.

Erik heard a lexiconundrum and ran to find it. A woman was playing it with descending and ascending strokes alternating to the tune of consonant bowls. Its music fed quandaries to the pulse of letters, yielding words for the stories that wouldn't have been told, and Erik heard the resonance in dissonant scales, felt the felicititillation of life's membrane, and tasted the alphabet's true beat.

Near a rude hut sat two despondent, malnourished children playing with twigs. One was a girl and the other a basket, woven from twigs, worms, lines of verse, bits of circuitry, according to an

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algorithm that yielded a close simulacrum of the girl. “Where are your parents?” Tom asked the girl. “Oh, them. They’ve gone to read F. Scott Fitzgerald and Stephanie Meyer. We’re homomorphans now,” and she embraced her basketwork double with erotic fervor.

In the cemetery of plagiarists-by-anticipation, a wheeled wagon was digging in the soil with a scoop at the end of a powerful mechanical arm. Its unpremeditated jerking threw up old coins, long-buried toys, and skulls packed with worms that sang as they were flung up into the air. “That’s the flashbackhoe,” said Raymond, in response to Tom’s quizzical look.

A man walked between a bank of filing cabinets and a hill of 4” x 6” cards, each covered with writing in the neat round hand once taught in every French school. As he lifted each card, he laughed aloud and squealed in delight: *Ah c’est beau! Oh quelle jouissance! Ça c’est l’écriture!* before carrying it to a filing cabinet. Tom knew him at once: he was the francofiling clerk.

Meanwhile a wild-haired man had seized Angelo’s elbow and was shouting, in a deep voice at odds with his slender physique, “Get this down in your queneautebook, awryter! I, a self-outed

proud transtextual, thanks to massive injections of testosterone, have decided that what we do here at Collectivoli Gardens is no less than textual perversion, hot, steamy, occasionally satisfying, inter- and intra-cranial textual acts betwixt and between mutually consenting practitioners of mindfully zany, mad crazy, lofty, literate and literary play of newly minted untowords. Want me to repeat that?” But Angelo, who had studied daylatedollarshorthand, had gotten it all down.

After completing their day at Collectivoli Gardens, the grammarathoners gathered round a colossal ten-foot-tall steel tome that Louis had spotted. “It’s an edictionary, Raymond explained. It’s a dictionary in which, instead of definitions, you’ll find strict instructions for writing.”

“How does it work,” inquired Louis.

“You start by taking hold of this attached book-mark, the automatongue. Can I have a volunteer to demonstrate?”

“I’ll try,” Louis said, and, with the help of several others, he pried open the massive cover and took hold of the silvery appendage.

“Now,” Raymond went on, “you sit in this seat here and tease the formulawyer’s head with

this mathematickle,” whereat he handed Louis a protractor with a feather at the end and pointed to the nearby operator of the book (who, truth be told, looked more like a carney than an attorney, though he was wearing briefs).

“Here goes nothing,” cried Lou and tickled the formulawyer into action. The edictionary, heretofore impressive in its icy dispassion, of a sudden began writhing uncontrollably, pages flapping furiously from the heat generated by the lawyer’s ticklish skull. The automatongue undulated like a possessed roller coaster, tossing the scribe hither and thither. Dizzy and ecstatic, Louis cried out, “But when do I start writing?”

“You already have,” smiled Raymond, “You’re riding the story into existence, right here, right now, and this, my final word of guidance, shall serve as your effortless conclusion.”

Nine writers contributed to this piece: Louis Bury, Carrie Cooperider, M. Sam Goodman, Tom La Farge, Jamie McPartland, Angelo Pastormerlo, Erik Schurink, Maria Schurr, and Wendy Walker.

Controversy and the Collaborative Literary Blog

James Tadd Adcox

“On August 5th, Jimmy Chen, one of the regular contributors to HTMLGIANT.com, published “Internet persona afflictions” on the site. The post consisted of a Venn diagram, created by Chen, grouping primarily small-press authors into categories including “Esoteric,” “Academic,” “Douche,” and “Menstrual.” It was a controversial post. Several commenters, including author Kate Zambreno (whom Chen had placed in the “Menstrual” circle), and Chen’s fellow HTMLGIANT contributor Roxane Gay accused the post of being misogynistic. One anonymous commenter wrote,

This is stupid and you’re being a bully idiot. If you don’t understand why, you need to do some serious introspection, esp. re: the menstrual stuff (oh my god! I’m calling you out on being misogynist! Someone call me a bitch, quick!) The bully idiocy of this will remain true even though a million people will jump on me for saying it and for being anonymous (don’t feel up to being mocked on the internet. Oh my god, someone call me a coward, quick!) The bully idiocy will remain true past all that and most of us who don’t regularly tickle HTMLGIANT’s balls will all continue to know it.

HTMLGIANT is a collaborative literary blog, one of the largest and most active on the Internet. There are a host of others, including Big Other, We Who Are About to Die, Plumb, and (though it’s been infrequently active recently) Trick with a Knife. Whereas a post at these other collaborative blogs might garner five or ten or (much more rarely) fifty or more comments, it’s rare that HTMLGIANT goes a week without at least one post receiving a hundred or more. Unique visitors average around 65,000 a month. A sort of community has grown up around HTMLGIANT. Commenters’ screen names and personalities become familiar even when one doesn’t know the person said names are attached to.

The posts most likely to generate over one hundred comments are, of course, the controversial ones.

Roxane Gay, one of the contributors to HTMLGIANT (and one of the commenters who wrote to say that she found the “Internet persona afflictions” post sexist), identifies several such controversial posts, including a previous Jimmy Chen post on Zelda Fitzgerald, as “significant moments in the evolution of the site...posts that generated a lot of contentious discussion about matters of difference and reflected some of the site’s growing pains.”

The controversial posts can often lead to quite aggressive arguments in the comments, which in turn can make some people less willing to comment. According to HTMLGIANT contributor Mike Kitchell, “The ‘comment culture’ at Giant is really weird, because I feel like there’s a huge readership (that stats attest to), but very few regular commenters any more. To be honest I feel like a lot of the more troll-y/assholeish commenters scare some people away.”

Part of the value of HTMLGIANT lies in this anarchy.

Referring on her blog to the Zelda Fitzgerald post, Kate Zambreno has said, “I now am uneasy going over to HTML Giant, or at least commenting there, because I feel sometimes things get sweaty boy locker room in there, that when I am witness to it I have to play some hard-nosed feminist ideologue that I am not. That’s no fun.”

Nonetheless, all of the site contributors I spoke with identified various controversial posts as the primary moments of significance in the site’s past, although Jimmy Chen argues that the response to such posts has resulted in “a kind of boring and ultimately condescending responsibility to be socially more aware.”

What is the value of a space like HTMLGIANT? Literary authors have traditionally worked in “schools” or other restricted economies before (hopefully) becoming established in the wider culture. Such groups are by their nature somewhat cliquish, with correspondence between members being either in person, through letters, or in small-

circulation journals—restricted, but also more or less invisible spaces. Unlike these restricted but invisible spaces, HTMLGIANT is public. And, if it’s less restricted, in the sense that anyone can add to the comments section of a post, its visibility makes the ways in which it is still a restricted space—only certain people can publish blog posts; certain authors, even among commenters, are better known/more

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