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The Unspeakable Image


A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts


in


Visual Arts


by


Jack Coventry


Committee in charge:

      Professor, Nicole Miller, Chair
      Professor Benjamin Bratton
      Professor Miller Puckette
      Professor Paul Sepuya


2023

The thesis of Jack Coventry is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for

publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2023

DEDICATION

*For all the time granted to me by your kindness, I am beyond grateful.*

*To Mum, Dad, Mallory, Elsie and Naoise.*

EPIGRAPH


I have made no secret of my conviction, not merely that personality persists, but that its continued existence is more entwined with the life of every day than has been generally imagined; that there is no real breach of continuity between the dead and the living; and that methods of intercommunion across what has seemed to be a gulf can be set going in response to the urgent demand of affection,—that in fact, as Diotima told Socrates, **Love bridges the chasm**.

Sir Oliver J. Lodge

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Unspeakable Image

by

Jack Coventry

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Nicole Miller, Chair

This thesis explores the intersection of art, automatism, belief and machine learning, probing the nuanced relationship between artists and generative algorithms as tools for creating imagery and text. A historical connection is drawn between contemporary machine-assisted

image generation and early spiritualistic automatic generative practices, such as automatic writing and drawing, used to communicate with entities beyond the self. The thesis investigates how such practices have evolved over time, highlighting the design and commodification of the planchette, a tool once used for automatic drawing and spiritual communication, which led to the birth of the Ouija board.

These tools of automation are posed as prototypes for the newer interfaces of virtualized communication, such as the mouse and keyboard. This suggests that contemporary devices which are used to navigate digital space have a direct lineage to designs which invite automatic interaction. The thesis extends this historical exploration into the domain of net.art, identifying parallels between the surfing practices of the first digital artist groups, and both Western Spiritualist Automatism and the artist games of the early Avant-garde.

PREFACE

I've been watching bodybuilding videos on YouTube, all these muscular men with their no bullshit, get ripped quick, schematics for becoming toned and defined. A set of rules to improve one's life through their body. I am intrigued by my own desire to become like them:

> *"by trying to control, to shape, my body through the calculated tools and methods of bodybuilding, and time and again, in following these methods, failing to do so, I am able to meet that which cannot be finally controlled and known: the body. In this meeting lies the fascination, if not the purpose, of bodybuilding. To come face to face with chaos, with my own failure or a form of death."*
>   - *Kathy Acker[1]*

Texts about the body are oversaturated by comparisons to that which is outside of the body, as is to be expected with something that can only be internally inspected on the operating table or through an orifice.

Push your fingers into your palms and tense your arms for me.

I ordered a doorway pull up bar on Amazon. Of course there is something ironic or perhaps poetic (not to say that the two are mutually exclusive) about building oneself up in the transitory space between rooms. Staying back home in Australia, I lay directly under his ashes. A repository of chalk with which to go bouldering, spilling out onto the foam floor with a slap of the hands. Footprints of my father, tracked by sweaty athletes and even sweatier novices. I think about foolishness and disrespect, the fumbling hands of a virgin who fails to unclip a bra and the professional lover who still does the same.

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[1] Kathy Acker, *The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 26.

Death opens up opportunities for degradation. The reluctant cuckold kills himself with a scarf

tied to a door knob. His body delicately hangs there to self-degrade until disturbed by a twist of

the handle and an opening of the door. Now slumped on one side of the threshold, a discovery

and a crossing occur. I fail to pull myself up above the door frame and let myself hang.


       The intrusiveness of abject thought is all the more absurd when you welcome it in. It

causes a reaction that I could only describe as bodily, settling in the gut like one too many

probiotics.

I embraced the idea of beginning a death spiral, diving at a speed 867 kms, into the Pacific

Ocean on my flight to America. I hate heights, in fact I'm utterly terrified of looking down upon a

tiny world. Maybe it isn't the height at all but the way distance shifts perception. The

foreshortened legs of the man in the Anatomy Lesson amplified and reversed onto a cityscape

the size of my shoes. I remember going to the museum and hiding behind my dad because of

the sheer scale of a whale's skeleton.


       Dangling centimeters from the floor, I look down at the ground below me and think about

you.

**Introduction**



Figure 1.1

I am confronted by my desire to represent the explicit using generative algorithms.[2] It seems that sex and violence are implicitly sown into the skin of the automatic image. I start to add obscene adjectives when I become bored of prompting the machine to depict a "dog transforming into a human body." I ask it to show me the body as something inverted; show me a bloody, gored person, show me organs, show me the internal, show me what is really happening here. I am rejected by the platform, so I begin to think of ways to subvert the image as a means of representing the unspeakable that I so ardently desire. Show me a blurred body, show a bloody rag. I'm trying to enact a forbidden surgery, dissecting the intricacies of the process with the use of a familial yet abstract language to expose the body of the automatic

---

[2] Text-to-image generation is a technique within automation where written descriptions are converted into visual content. This is accomplished through the use of advanced machine learning algorithms, specifically Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs). The process involves feeding a textual description, like "a cat sitting on a couch," into the algorithm, which then generates an image based on the input. The resulting image is a computer's interpretation of the textual description.

mechanism. In turn, as I ask these questions I'm enacting my own self-surgery, looking down at

my own organs on the surgical table, prodding and poking at them. Indeed, the attack on the

body has already begun within my own imagination, long before the computer starts to illustrate

its mangled suggestive forms. While it's easy to mystify this generation as the "DeepDaze" or

the "BigSleep" of a separate consciousness (as is, at least in naming conventions alone,

commonly the case), this approach can divert the personal responsibility of representation away

from the user but to what extent is the call and response between me and the spastic
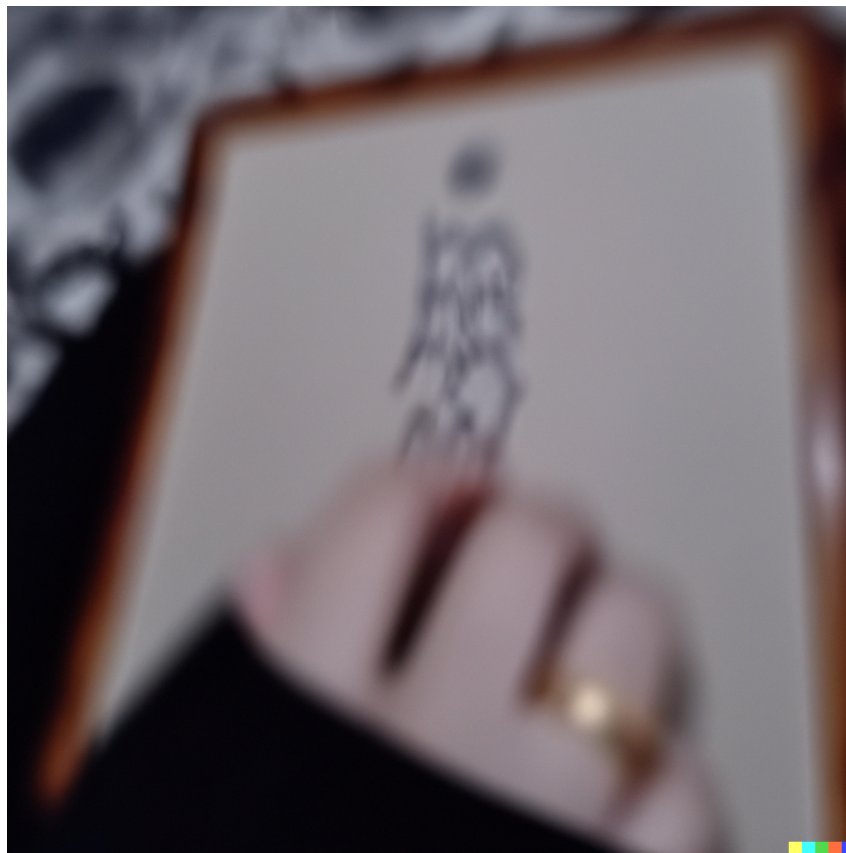
caricaturist a collaborative act?



Figure 1.2

To understand my relationship with this tool as an artist, I need to contextualize it within a

history of art making. While I acknowledge its separation from anything that has come before it,

the immediacy of an image created from a textual description at this speed is unparalleled, image generation is not an entirely new concept. What comes to mind are the automatic generative practices of early western spiritualists, automatic writing and automatic drawing. These methods were employed to communicate with beings outside of the self, the deceased, spirits, angels and demons. Tools such as a planchette, essentially a piece of wooden board, with a hole in it's center for a pencil, elevated above a writing surface by wheel casters, would be moved by spirits through the hand of a mediating spiritualist.

Psychologists attribute the movements of a medium using a planchette to the ideomotor phenomenon. Essentially, this occurrence is when someone's internal thoughts or ideas cause an external automatic reflexive action.[3] Whether or not this action is intentional remains a matter of debate, however, the idea of intentionality is fundamentally buffered by the systems of belief which allow access to the automatic, especially ones in which a possessing force jeopardizes one's own control.
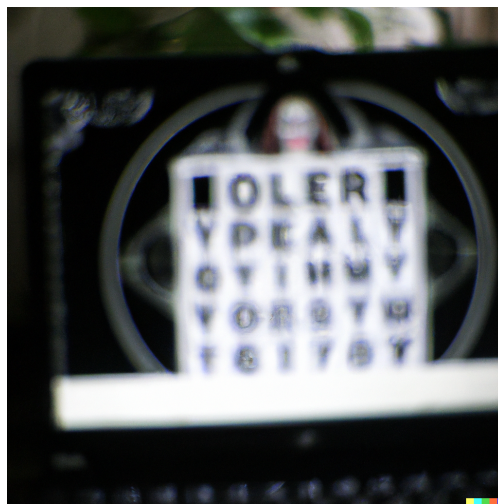


Figure 1.3

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[3] Marc Andersen, Kristoffer L. Nielbo, Uffe Schjoedt, Thies Pfeiffer, Andreas Roepstorff, and Jesper Sørensen, "Predictive minds in Ouija board sessions," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 18 (2019) 577.

As the popularity of the planchette rose with the Spiritualist movement in America after the Civil War, it became commodified and it was reiterated into the simplified and mass produced Oujia board . With this invention, the actions of chance occurrences or spiritual manifestations were now solely bound to language. The form of the planchette was shrunk down to a less functional, symbolic, catalyst that no longer facilitated drawing, the planchette became an object of direction. In the contemporary landscape we can see this kind of directional mediumship occurring between a user and their cursor on a computer. When you move your cursor to highlight a sentence, do you think about the feeling of the mouse on your hand? Are you conscious of moving your hand to direct your personalized digital theater?

> *Planchette, planchette, oh!*
> *Let me see,*
> *What luck you have in store for me …*
> *Planchette. Planchette*
> *Thou won - der great*
> *Oh! quick - ly tell my fate…[4]*

No matter the form, the results produced by these tools that facilitate mediumship are ultimately a form of communication; a fortune of wealth, a drawing of a loved one or an answer to an unanswered question, all originating from beyond the confines of the physical body. Of course, in some fit of "rationality," we can understand this mode of spirituality as a way of communicating between the conscious self and the unconscious self, access to thought outside of our typical streams of self dialogue. It is no wonder that these methods were adapted into artistic practices concerned with realms of the "subconscious" and the spiritual in the early 20th century. Both the Dadaists and the Surrealists utilized automatism in art, using automatic

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[4] Elmer Ruán Coates, Planchette (Sheet music), (Pennsylvania: J. E. Winner, 1868).

drawing and automatic writing not only as a generative process but also as a method for critiquing an increasingly industrialized and traumatized world.
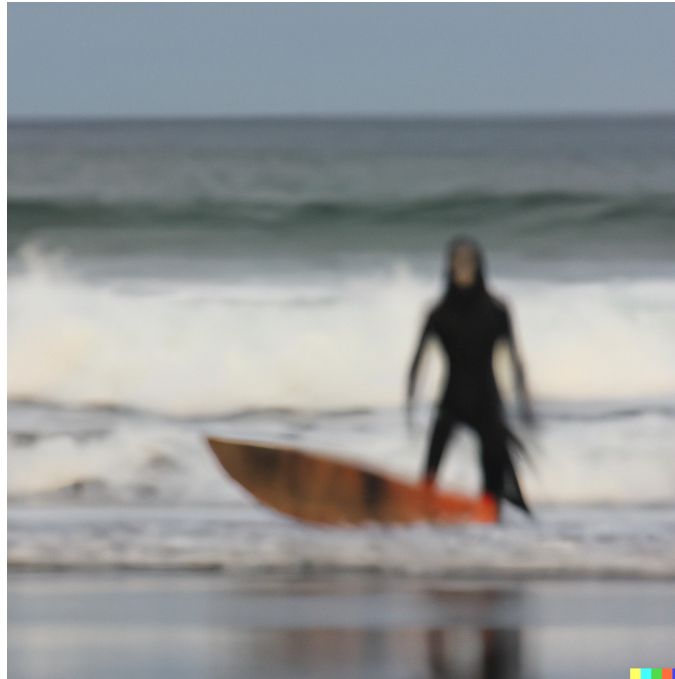


Figure 1.4

I feel that it is also necessary to extend this historical framework regarding automatic production to the more recent field of art history, net.art. With net.art, the groundwork for certain material and conceptual concerns with digitally contextualized imagery and text has already been laid out, as well as modes of interpreting web-based automatic production. Surf Clubs, early digital artist-run spaces, created discourse for the curatorial aesthetics and conceptual underpinnings of presenting and working within virtual spaces. One particular Surf Club, known as the Spirit Surfers, framed the automatic practice of surfing/scrolling as a spiritual undertaking through which one is gifted a boon by the web, mirroring the guidance given by the spirits in western Spiritualism.  It is here, within this lineage of belief and automation in art, that I want to position the process of generation assisted by machine learning algorithms.

Figure 1.5

## 1. Distrust a Whispering Frame

Firstly, I would like to reflect on the importance of the contextual model that is aiding entry into the realm of the automatic. Consider a scenario in which you pose a question to the spirits. You place your hand on a planchette and it seemingly moves of its own accord, drawing a slow line around a sheet of paper, forming a drawing of a dead relative. The belief that a spirit guides your hand, fosters a disconnection between your intention and your action, you become the spectator of your own creation. However, this automatic drawing is framed entirely within the context of the planchette, so whatever may be considered "unconsciously" produced is always doused in the liquid of death. That is to say, that the preconceptions brought in not only limit the way the automatic hand travels but also subsequently limits how the drawing itself is interpreted which only serves to inform the next drawing. The process and result will always be about communicating with the other side because of the frame of the device.

This 'priming' (to use the language of the digital landscape), is essentially another way of describing how the cultural presumption, predisposition and heuristics contained within and around a communicatory device change the it's subject through a figurative lens but, to me, it seems particularly nefarious in relation to automatic models of production. As media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously put it, "the medium is the message," but what is the medium of an automatic model such as the planchette which is already positioned as a tool of mediumship?[5] Here it might be more accurate to say "the medium is the medium," as what is perhaps most revealing is what is externalized about the self through the filter of an automatic frame.

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[5] Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects (New York: Bantam Books, 1967). 6.
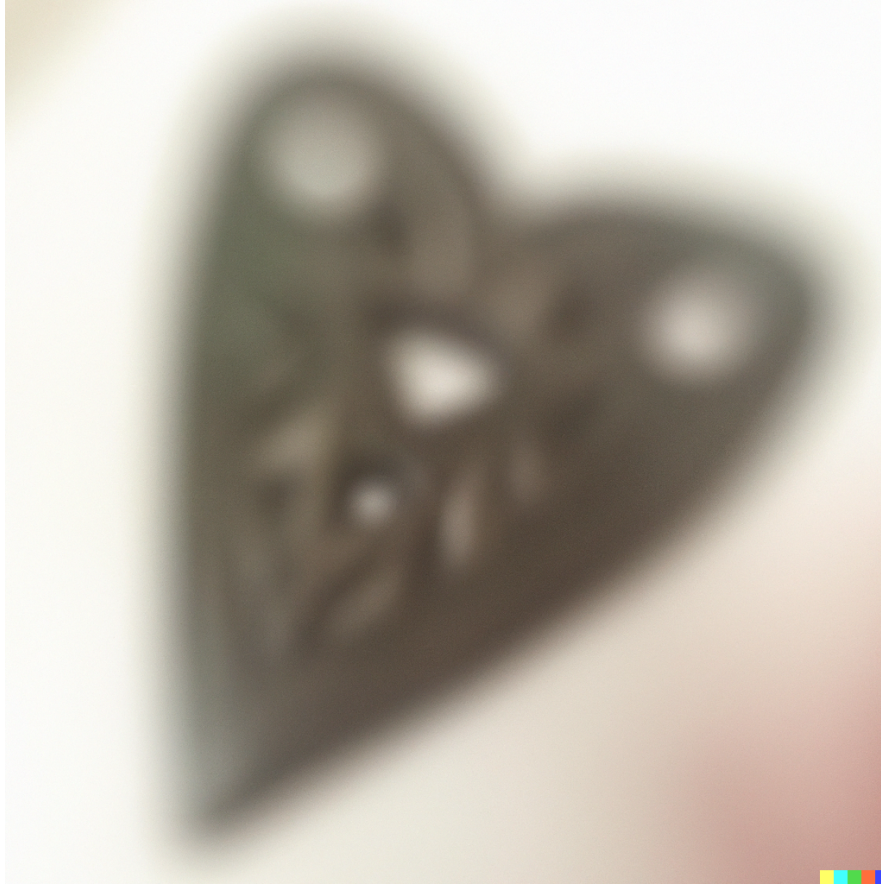
Figure 2.1

In the formal qualities of the planchette alone, we can see how the obfuscation of physical action is contributing to a dissociating result. The large wooden slab (shaped like an upside down love heart) which sits upon the wheels hides both the paper beneath it and the pen which it is supporting. So as the planchette is rolled down the paper it slowly reveals the drawing above it, similarly to how an image coming out of a printer appears to us as we wait in inky anticipation. This design also hides from our view the wheels, giving the appearance of a levitating object as we look at it from above, reinforcing the disconnection between the movement of the hand and a floating planchette (think of the raising effect that the black outline around a mouse pointer on a computer screen has). This prop of manipulation works towards a perceptual belief in not only the supernatural but the possibility of an ownable device of

auto-mediumship, the ability to, at any time, separate the mind and the body. However, the theater of mystification must extend beyond the device to have any real effect. The planchette cannot exist, at least as a tool of mediumship, without the promise of its communicatory power with the dead.

This is not to say that the design of planchette was purposely constructed to manipulate by some scheming con artists, in fact, it seems that its design is really a manifestation of a belief in the potential of the automatic mind. Why else would one cut a piece of wood just large enough for two hands, not overlapping, to rest upon if not for this ritual act of automatism? I am inclined to ask what this action, resting one's hands on a flat surface, mimics outside of itself? The resting of one's hands on a table or lectern perhaps? It would make sense that the action that mirrors the automatic one would be something that isn't often done consciously but, ironically, through the planchette it is made all the more aware. Another example that comes to mind is that of an invention which was commercially released at the height of spiritualism (at least in the form we most commonly know), the typewriter.[6] While I admit the fingers of the hand are more arched while typing on a keyboard, its similarity to the planchette as a tool of individualistic  communication is quite undeniable. Both devices act to service the automation of an action typically done with a writing utensil and in this way, further abstract the direction of thought to physical expression.

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[6] James W. Cortada, *Before the Computer: IBM, NCR, Burroughs, and Remington Rand and the Industry They Created, 1865–1956* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 38.

Figure 2.2

The Ouija board emerged around the 1890s, during a time when typewriters were

becoming a common fixture in US office spaces.[7] This new tool of automation was a

commercialized version of the 'talking boards' which were circulating in dwindling spiritualist

circles of the time. It was brought to market by Elijah Bond, an attorney (and former Confederate

soldier), in collaboration with businessmen E.C. Reiche and Charles Kennard.[8] The design of

the Ouija board includes a separate planchette which, in contrast to its larger predecessors, has

been significantly reduced in size. Rather than facilitating drawing, this planchette now serves

as a pointer, indicating letters imprinted on the board's wooden surface. The board features a

curved alphabetic arrangement of letters, accompanied by the words 'yes', 'no', 'hello', and

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[7] Jan Harold Brunvand, *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (Taylor & Francis, 1998), 1118.
[8] "Charlevoix County Herald" (East Jordan, MI), June 25, 1920, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, accessed May 30, 2023, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn96076839/1920-06-25/ed-1/seq-3/.

'goodbye', positioned either above or below the letters.This planchette retains a hole, reminiscent of its past when a pen would be inserted for drawing. In its new role, however, the hole has been repurposed to frame the selected letter on the board during a session. The design of the original has been subverted in a way that actualises its position as a framing device rather than obscuring it. This visual metaphor maintains that communication with the other side is only possible through the planchettes, now physical, lens of belief. While the board suggests other potential communicative actions (just as a piece of paper might) with its scattered words, it is essentially useless without a directional wooden navigator.

While there is little documentation on how the design of the Ouija board came about, I would like to suggest that the smaller planchette, acting as a lens to be looked through, was already suggested through the shape of the hands. If I look down at my hands and place them flat on the table in front of me, imagining an invisible planchette (simply translating from French to "little plank"), they are slightly diagonal so that my index finger and thumbs meet each other. In the negative space made by my hand is an arrow which almost mimics the shape of the planchette itself. While I have no substantial proof, it could be possible that the design of the Ouija board came about not only directly formally influenced by the planchette but through the idea of the self as a lens of interpretation. That is to say, what is really the interpretive factor with the planchette is the hands through which we see the message.

The name 'Ouija' was allegedly derived from Bond's sister-in-law, Helen Peters, who received the peculiar sequence of letters, O-U-I-J-A, during a seance. Peters claimed that the spirit who had communicated this message to her, had said the word 'Oujia' was an 'Egyptian' word for 'good luck.'[9] This revelation came in the same month the patent went out for the board

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[9] J. Edward Cornelius, Aleister Crowley and the Ouija Board (Feral House, 2005), 20-21.

as an "Egyptian luck game." This supposed relation to Egyptian culture, ancient or otherwise, was purely a marketing tactic to cash in on the wave of western orientalism which understood Egypt as mystical and exotic.[10] 'Ouija' has no known link to any language besides when it was later reframed commercially as a combination of the French 'oui' and the German 'ja', yes yes. It has been suggested that Peters was influenced by the letters on a lockett she was wearing, Oujia historian Robert Murch says "Peters was a well-read upper class woman. She likely read stories from English novelist Ouida. We believe she might have been wearing a locket that had 'Ouida' on it, and it's possible that 'Ouija' was in her subconscious." If we are to believe this, it stands to reason that the Ouija board, in fact, named itself. The name is a pure manifestation of an interpretive logic of automation. 'Ouija' is a product of the process that is only possible with the validity given to automatic generation through the lens of the belief that the board harbors. The name also references the effect of the 'subconscious' mind, with all its apparent influences, on this automatic process and its subsequent result. So the Ouija Board itself is a figurative mirror in the shape of a frame which, in turn, has to be believed as a frame to work as a mirror. In this case, the mirror reflected the promises of rebirth through spiritualism and western colonial exoticism as a response to an America traumatized by mass death.

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[10] Bob Brier, Egyptomania (Brookville, NY: Hillwood Art Museum, 1992).

## 2. Self-Report

I am given the opportunity to focus on a thought, the chance to describe a mental image. Then I wait. The pendulum swings, the numbers go up. I witness the abstraction of the process through lines of code. The outcome:



Figure 3.1

Oh no, I've made something horrific, well, the computer has made something horrific. It's biased, it's unnatural, inhuman even! It must be the way it classifies, language cannot be so fraught as to be so explicitly disturbed by history! I am poetic! That's not what I meant at all! No matter, it is not my responsibility. It was a process of the automatic device. I will adapt my language.

I will talk to myself.

### 3. The Power of a Resting Hand

Despite being dubbed as the "new planchette" by its creators, the Ouija board's portrayal as a tool for serious automatic mediumship began to fade. This decline coincided with the waning collective memory of the rampant death that had occurred during the American Civil War. There was no longer such a necessity for the comfort provided by communication with lost friends and family, until the advent of the first World War which sparked a renewed interest in Western spiritualism.

> *"It is a particular feature of Modernism that its heroes are portrayed as angst - ridden by their drive*
> *to make **new art,** with the romantic notion of reinventing painting (…) (the) metaphysical insecurity*
> *caused by the constant strain between the rational self and the instinctual self. The dilemma is*
> *what-to-paint and how-to-paint."*

- Chris Coventry[11]

While I think the underlying intentions behind the modes of automatic production previously discussed are multifaceted and psychologically complex, I would like to attempt an answer to the question of why we feel we need to disconnect our mind from our body. Do these communicatory situations cause within us an abject discomfort that is impossible to bear through our bodies and if so, what are those feelings which avoid embodiment? I could talk ad nauseam about the necessity to transcend the physical body through the planchette, as a means of circumventing our closeness to death and more specifically the corpse. It is clear that on some level this avoidance comes from the fear of looking at decay and recognising oneself within it but for communion to take place there must be a transaction. By temporarily giving up our autonomy in mediumship we are meeting the deceased on a parallel level from which we

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[11] Chris Coventry, "THE STYLE IS THE MAN" (Morwell: La Trobe Valley Arts Center, 1987).

can return. The body is safe because it is disassociated from the mind when our discourse with the dead occurs. This process suspends our belief as we witness the "natural" order of life and death distort within ourselves, we experience a simulated death so that we may confront it. What interests me is why this automatic process evolved from transient divination into an art making methodology.
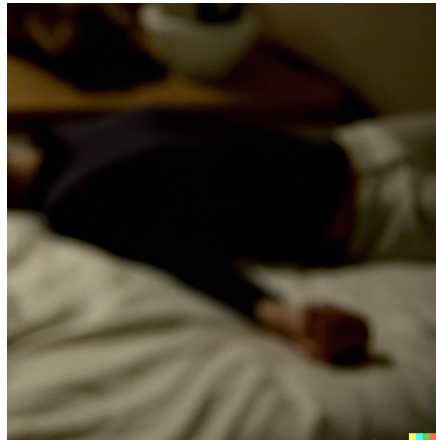


Figure 4.1

While links to the supernatural in the automatism of both Dada and Surrealism were vehemently denied by the progenitors of these "new" artistic methodologies, namely André Breton, the synchronicity between the automatic engagements of the spiritualists and the artists is undeniable. Art historian Abigail Susik identifies the supposed purpose of Dadaist and Surrealist automatism as "appropriating mechanical behavior as a radically subversive negation of idealism."[12] Through these automatic modes, Susik says,

> *"rational order, deliberate method, and obedient labors were revealed as empty and absurd paradigms.The*
> *self to be subjected by such orders was shown to be equally programmed and riven - "reified" like an object*

---

[12] Abigail Susik, "Chance and Automatism: Genealogies of the Dissociative in Dada and Surrealism," in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, edited by David Hopkins (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 243.

*and blurred by other subjectivities - what might be called a trans- or inter-subjectivity in postmodern*

*parlance."[13]*

With Susik's observations in mind, it is clear that the currents of self-reflexivity also occur within this particular brand of automation. As with the use of the planchette, there is an attempt in Dadaist and Surrealist automatism to escape the "natural" and "rational" order of life as a means of circumventing the subjectivity of the self which, in turn, makes the self all the more lucid. Moreover, birthed from the industrial mechanistic destruction and dehumanizing chaos of the first world war, I see these Dadaist and Surrealist techniques not only as a environmentally mimetic process but also a method for maintaining an art practice in the face of a world permeated by death, a mechanism for survival.

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[13] *Ibid.*

## 4. The Automatic Autopsy

*I play a surrealist  game.*

*No lights are up.*

*One of the sets is old fashioned but lovely.*

*I set the body upside down on the bed.*

*Move the eyes like a doll.*

*But I don't really get the legs.*

*I find the torso hard to see in the mirror.*

*Where are the legs?*

*Torso and Head are the hardest parts.*

*Head is much better than Torso.*

*There are heads in the boxes on the floor.*

*Head with a Torso.*

*The Head has legs.*

*More heads. More legs.*

*Torso has legs.*

*Head is Legs.*

*Legs are legs.*

*More legs.*

*I think I see some Torso.*

*I am looking around the room trying to get a sense of what is happening.*

*A Head, a torso, legs.*

## 5. Distant Interfaces

Imagine an Ouija board accompanied by its planchette pointer, now move the pointer off the board to its right side. What other composition does this arrangement remind you of? For me there is only one example, a keyboard and mouse. I argue that the Ouija board was a prototype for these navigational tools in as much as it primed the world for an interface which could interact within a virtualized cognitive space.



Figure 5.1

In the early 1960s, the prolific inventor and engineer, Douglas Engelbart prototyped the first mouse as part of a team exploring computer human interaction.[14] Visually, it consisted of a series of electronic parts housed within a wooden box, protruding from which was a single button. I will refrain from making a direct comparison to the planchette here (while the prospect of the mouse as a wooden device invites a direct of material comparison), where I will make the comparison however is with the visual representation of the mouse on the screen. Remember the shape of the negative shape between the hands of the planchette? Well here we can see it's return as the primary navigation icon used in most computer software today. This floating tool which highlights language, selecting and 'hovering' over letters on a consistent basis, seems eerily similar visually and conceptually to the shrunken planchette. Even the two fingers which we place on the mouse for the left and right mouse buttons echo the instructions in the Ouija board manual: "place two fingers *lightly* on the Planchette."[15] While evidence suggests the mouse icon's signature tilt was a design choice to delineate it from other straight lines on the 'oN-Line System' user interface, which Engelbart was working on at that time, it is hard to ignore the common tilt the planchette requires to highlight the letters in their curved arrangement.[16] Though there is no direct evidence suggesting Engelbart consciously incorporated these similarities, the popularity of the Ouija board throughout his life makes it hard to discount some degree of influence (to stretch this comparison to its very breaking point, one could say that the invention of the mouse was somewhat automatically influenced).  It is through this idea of a mouse and keyboard being influenced by interfaces of the automatic which were used by artists of the early avant-garde that I'd like to jump ahead to the net.art movement.

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[14] John Markoff, "Douglas C. Engelbart, Inventor of the Computer Mouse, Dies at 88," The New York Times, July 3, 2013, accessed May 2, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/04/technology/douglas-c-engelbart-inventor-of-the-computer-mouse-dies-at-88.html.

[15] "Ouija Board User Manual," (Pawtucket, RI: Hasbro, 2001)

[16] Douglas C. Engelbart, "The Augmented Knowledge Workshop," in *Proceedings of the ACM Conference on the History of Personal Workstations* (Palo Alto, California: ACM, June 1986), 73-83.

## 6. Cool Remove



Figure 6.1

Over the past two decades the definition of net.art has rapidly expanded to include a range of multidisciplinary practices which are concerned, both formally and conceptually, with the internet. In their 'Net Art Anthology,' Rhizome defines Net Art as "art that acts on the network, or is acted on by it."[17] However they distinguish 'net.art' as an earlier period of Net Art, taking place in the 90s specifically between 1993 - 1999. This period is set apart from later iterations of Net Art due to its more defined philosophy and specific approach to the medium of the internet. Two prolific artists from this period, Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin, produced a text document describing and defining the qualities of net.art of 1999.

*"Qualities of net.art*

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[17] "What is Net Art? A Definition," Rhizome, last modified June 13, 2017, https://rhizome.org/editorial/2017/jun/13/what-is-net-art-a-definition/.

*1. Formation of communities of artists across nations and disciplines*

*2. Investment without material interest*

*3. Collaboration without consideration of appropriation of ideas*

*4. Privileging communication over representation*

*5. Immediacy*

*6. Immateriality*

*7. Temporality*

*8. Process based action*

*9. Play and performance without concern or fear of historical consequences*

*10. Parasitism as Strategy*

       *a. Movement from initial feeding ground of the net*

       *b. Expansion into real life networked infrastructures*

*11. Vanishing boundaries between private and public "*


   -   *Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin[18]*


While there are qualities that aren't unique to the web alone such as 'temporality' or 'process based action,' it is clear that for the net.artist of this period, net.art was a way of subverting an artist's relation to the boundaries of an already established art model. The web was seen as something that could circumvent the need for a gallery or museum, building a direct communication system between artists which could generate new language. In the diagram made by the artist duo MTAA (composed of artists Mike Sarff and Tim Whidden) in 1997, we can see two computers connected by a network cord. A line points from the text, "The art happens here," toward the middle of a wire connection between the two computers. For the net.artists of this period, this diagram summarized the ephemeral nature of net.art, something which existed outside the hardware of a personal computer, however, I believe the

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[18] Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin, "Introduction to net.art (1994-1999)," (1999) .

connection between the two computers is the most significant element. I want to put emphasis

on communication as a founding pillar of net.art, after all its humble beginnings were conceived

through a mailing list called 'nettime.' The ability to communicate with artists around the globe

almost instantly and without institutional intervention (one arguably prototyped by Spiritualists

with their devices used to instantaneously communicate with spirits) is one factor that

contributes to the uniqueness of net.art. In particular, I'd like to spotlight one specific form of

net.art community: surf clubs.



Figure 6.2

## 7. Stable Chaos

Formed by artist groups, Surf Clubs were blogging communities where the blog itself served as a medium for creating collaborative projects and internal logic games. Although they arose after the perceived death of net.art, announced by artist Vuk Cosic in 1999 after critiquing an institutional co-opting of the movement, surf clubs are no doubt part of net.art history.

*"Group blogging as a form of artistic practice appeared around 2002/03, shortly before a shift toward Web 2.0. The new concept of the internet: the user friendly, largely free, input and interactivity based, high speed and bandwidth, altogether redefined the idea of dissemination of information. [...] While a more traditional blog is a journal of an individual artist, who posts images of his/her work, research and thoughts, a surf club imposes certain practice dynamics, which is conducive to a very fast-paced conceptual exchange based on treatment and analysis of online material, or using the online material as a base of any kind of investigation."*

*- Marcin Ramocki[19]*

The site nastynets.com can be seen as one of the first surf clubs (also being the originators of the term surf club) starting in 2006 and continuing until 2012.[20] Artists who participated include John Michael Boling, Guthrie Lonergran, Oli Lialina, Petra Cortwright, Paul Slocum, amongst others, totalling around 39 different posters or users. The site was used to share images and text which the artists thought were worthy for curation and contextualization in a virtual visual art setting. Most of these items in one way or another created discourse around internet aesthetics or digital culture. Surfing implies that the items shared in the group were all found, continuing in the footsteps of Dadaist and Surrealist practices of the found object. The internal logic behind the content choice wasn't always made apparent, however this was part of the 'game' that these artists were playing. Surf clubs were made to form new ways

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[19] Marcin Ramocki, "Surfing Clubs: organized notes and comments," (Halifax, May 27, 2008), 1.
[20] Ibid.

of communicating ideas visually through the medium of the web. Artists would form collages out

of hyperlinks or compare MySpace profiles to images of a setting sun.
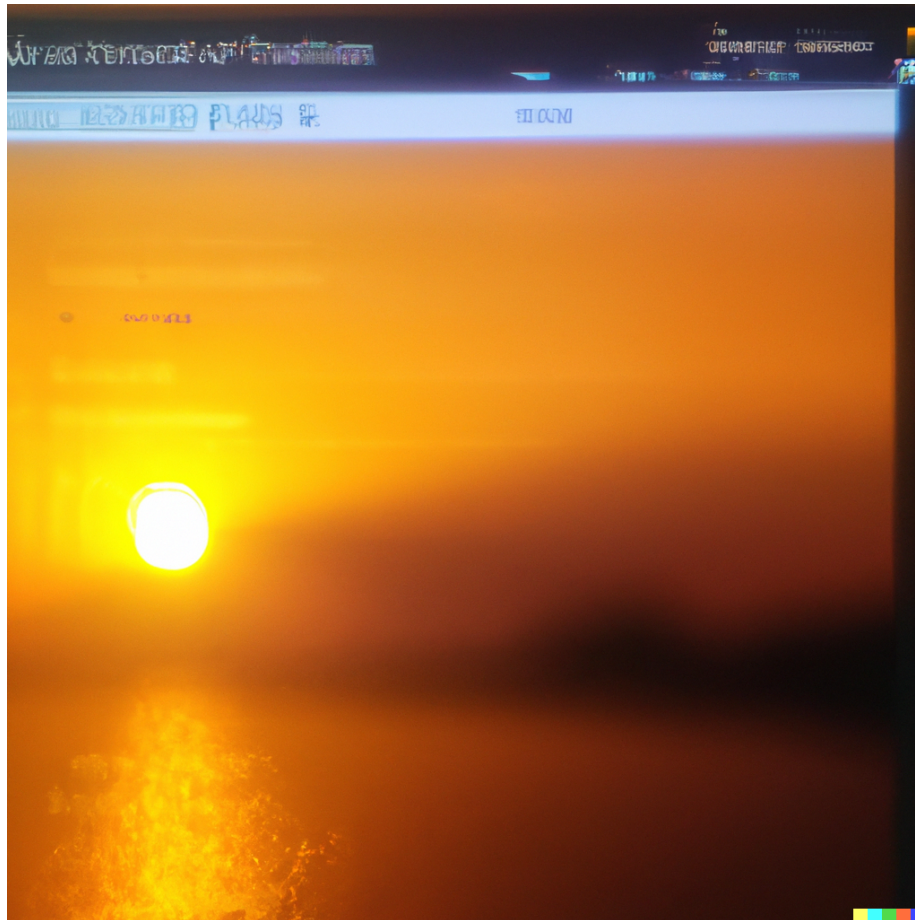


Figure 7.1

Of course the most obvious contemporary example of this kind of practice would be that

of meme culture. While I believe the conceptual aspects of surf clubs were more nuanced and

focused than that of memes today, there is something to be said of the similarity of curation

which survives through the language of the net. The verticality of items which a user must

navigate down is still a staple of viewing images and text online. This action of scrolling is an

essential design tactic employed by platforms today such as Facebook to make the act of

consuming a somewhat streamlined and invisible process to keep a user's attention, making the

very act of viewing an automatic one. Surf clubs embraced this kind of seeing until the images

start to blend into one another, causing a meditative or malaise type state in a user. I would like

to pose this compositional logic of verticality in relation to the surrealist game of 'The Exquisite

Corpse,' there is a level of automation not only in the act of scrolling/surfing the blog but the way

in which the images are organized. An artist engaged in a surf club may be aware of where their

post may sit in relation to a previous post but the next post to come remains a mystery to them.

While this differs slightly from the Surrealists, who produced the limbs of the corpse in supposed

isolation, between the folds of paper, this idea of automatic compositional logic permeates the

web as we know it today. The 'feeds' of now are organized by automatic logic which is

influenced by the algorithmic unconscious of our 'shadow selves' (our reflection which is

generated by the data of our digital footprint). We constantly engage with an ever evolving

Exquisite Corpse of ourselves. What I feel is most valuable about surf clubs is the lexicon and

philosophies fostered by the community of artists who were critically engaged with the

materiality of the web. The most notable and organized of these philosophies would have to be,
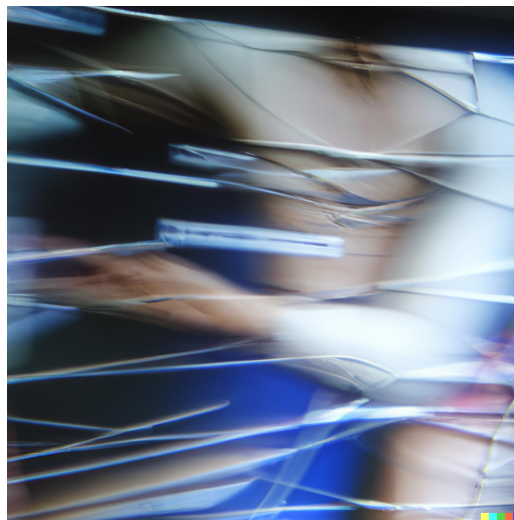
for me, the Spirit Surfers.



Figure 7.2

## 8. Belief Nevertheless

*"I am greatly indebted to the surfers of Nasty Net for getting me excited about art again. Simply by typing a series of letters into a browser I was connected to a shapeless organization of users who rearranged bits that were unimportant individually but whose sum amounted to something so massive that it could only be thought about and never seen. […] Over many phone calls our mutual feelings on surfing have solidified, and we have developed a philosophy of surfing that I will attempt to express here as part of the founding of a new surf club, spiritsurfers.net."*

*- Kevin Bewersdorf[21]*

Artists Kevin Bewersdorf and Paul Slocum started the Spirit Surfers site in 2008 after being active members on the Nasty Nets site. The site itself is a Wordpress blog which Bewersdorf and Slocum invited various members of Nasty Nets and other surf clubs to be a part of. On their website Rhizome describes the process of the Spirit Surfers as finding "the miraculous and the absurd in everyday web content, bringing a kind of "comic spirituality" to the surf club ethos." This "comic spirituality" was based around a deity known as the INFOspirit, the guiding force behind all surfers. Devotees to the INFOspirit were known as INFOmonks, those who practice mindfulness and accept the INFOspirit into their surfing practice. The opposite of an INFOmonk was an INFObrat, to quote Bewersdorf, "INFObrats are on the web for obligations in their material and practical lives. They shop, instant message, pay bills, relay practical data, and consume."[22] All the artists who posted to the Spirit Surfing site no doubt thought of themselves as INFOmonks. Each item posted was an offering to the INFOspirit who had no interest in the physical realm. While I can find no direct evidence, it seems that the name Spirit Surfers is derived from a number of early Western Spiritualist practices; Spirit Writing, Spirit Drawing and Spirit Photography. Just as Spiritualism frames automatic processes through the veil of belief, the Spirit Surfers recontextualized the arguably automatic and mundane process of

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[21] Kevin Bewersdorf, Spirit Surfing (Link Editions, 2012), 22.
[22] Ibid., 23.

surfing into a spiritual act of communion. I believe that the philosophy and index of terms that

the Spirit Surfers create allow us access to methodologies that can transform our relationship

not just to surfing the web but to most virtual environments. Subverting languages that have

become so fixed in the abstractions and metaphors which have been ascribed to us by the

designers and engineers creating these spaces is a vital practice as we consider new

generative systems of artmaking.

## 9. Humbert Humbert's Hard Drive

*"As I have gathered from watching some of the great surfers of our time at work, surfing is the balance of making choices and being led. Surfing is being led by the wave as you make your choices. The wave stirs up gifts, and it is the ability of the great surfers to recognize his or her arrival at a worthy gift. On Spirit Surfers this gift is referred to as a boon. The boon is revealed at the eureka moment of a surf when the surfer becomes enlightened by the INFOspirit".*

*-        Kevin Bewersdorf[23]*

The Boon is what a spirit surfer longs for, that one piece of information that jumps out after a long surf. The one work that emulates for me the experience of finding a Boon would be net.artist Martine Neddam's Mouchette.org. This artwork is a website set up to appear as the homepage of the fictional character Mouchette (eerily similar to planchette), first conceived by French Author Georges Bernanos in his book of the same name. This book was later made into a film in 1967 by French director Robert Bresson, which appears to be the preeminent visual influence for Neddam's Mouchette as she borrows stills from the film for her representations of Mouchette. The landing page for the site gives us a few hints to the identity of Neddam's Mouchette (she lives in Amsterdam, she's an artist and she's almost 13), though the real narrative arises through the links provided on this page. For instance if one were to click on a speech bubble which pops up next to the image of Mouchette, one would be brought to a forum on suicide. While this is a reference to Mouchettes untimely end in the original narrative, the forum itself seems to be generated from user input. The prompt which leads the forum is "what is the best way to kill yourself when you're under 13?" The dark nature of this forum is the undercurrent which runs through all of Mouchette.org, one which drives a viewer's morbid curiosity to dive deeper.

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[23] Ibid.

Here there is a real link to the Spiritualism discussed in the previous chapters, with Mouchette.org, we are presented with a way of communicating with the dead through the interface of the computer. For me, what is most exciting about this prospect is Neddam's decision to stage the website as the ghost itself. Mouchette does not reside in the website, she is the website. Again, I'd like to repeat a sentiment I stated earlier, the medium is the medium. The browser itself is possessed, rather than the website, so that every action within it is part of communication. I think this distinction is important because it reminds us software itself is part of the work, the art doesn't reside in the content alone but within the broader context of the viewing device. Just as the Oujia board reinforces a belief in a spiritual plane, the computer reinforces a belief in a virtual one both of which can be used as a line of communication.

For me the journey to the real Boon of the site began after I clicked on a fly which flew across the home screen( and of course Mouchette means 'little fly' in French.) In the process of trying to click the fly I had to chase it, so to speak, with my mouse. As I failed to catch it I realized that my movement was being controlled by the movement of the virtual fly. The incentive of trying to click was actually a method of possession, a method of control. After clicking on the fly, I was brought to a screen that asked why, if I had clicked on the fly and apparently killed it, could it still communicate with me? I entered my answer and my email and continued-on with my day, until a few days later when I received an email:

*"Dear Jack Coventry,*

*I want to let you know how special you are for me and I made a web page for you, a page for which*
*you will be the one and only viewer. You will be the first one to see something I've never shown to*
*anyone else. You can access your private page with this code that bears your name.*
*http://mouchette.org/to?Jack_Coventry,56d51812613e39c14f7fdd24a7e0e76e*

*View it and view it again because it will change as you re-visit it. We might become closer or more*

*distant, our first private encounter is here:*

*http://mouchette.org/to?Jack_Coventry.56d51812613e39c14f7fdd24a7e0e76e*

*I hope this page will show you how much I care for you, Jack Coventry and that you will love me as*

*much as I love you.*


*\*bisou\**

*Mouchette"*

---

While I was aware that this work was created by Neddam, this email created a certain uneasy tension within me. Did I want to continue to engage with what appeared to be a 13 year old girl who is telling me she loves me and cares for me? Am I continuing or participating in narrative that ends with the suicide of Mouchette? As with a lot of net.artworks that remain unarchived from this period, the links that I was sent 3 years ago are now dead and their contents forgotten.

---

*"Dear Jack Coventry,*

*Last time we met in private, on a page that I made for you alone. We shared that brief moment just*

*once in our lives, never again will you see that page.*

*But now I made a new private page for you only:*


*http://mouchette.org/to/you?Jack_Coventry.34fb926eef19032b7785227aca47091e*


*Look everywhere, the page has some secrets inside:*


*http://mouchette.org/to/you?Jack_Coventry.34fb926eef19032b7785227aca47091e*


*I can't wait to have you click on me again,*

---

I was driven to continue the conversation with Mouchette, I believe this same drive is what the spirit surfers talk about when they search for a Boon. The desire to create through searching, to stumble upon something and retrieve that experience like a jewel, then display that jewel for the world to see. As the web has become more and more centralized I find that my experiences recently online have been less and less driven by the search for a Boon. With platform sites like Instagram or Facebook, the Boons are brought to me in droves with no defining logic to their arrangement besides popularity. Due to this, Boons have become less and less recognisable as I have had little to no part in their acquisition and a diminished drive to find my own.

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*"Dear Jack Coventry,*

*This new page I made for you Jack Coventry is the one when we will finally come together. Look for*
*a place to sneak in, pull the page open and it will all revealed to you:*

*http://mouchette.org/to/you/only?Jack_Coventry.5070a874b1c661842204d83fe432952b*

*It is the 3rd time I send you a private code for a secret page and it will be the last.*
*Please don't miss it this time:*

*http://mouchette.org/to/you/only?Jack_Coventry.5070a874b1c661842204d83fe432952b*

*\*bisou\**

*Mouchette"*

---

The final email from Mouchette contained a link to a page on Mouchette.org which can be found below. The page starts with a title card which reads "Lullaby for a Dead Fly" with a background wallpaper made up of flies. When the title card fades the viewer is greeted to a procession of responses to the question, which I initially answered on May the 4th 2018, along with the sound of slow melodic synth. When I first saw this page I came to realize that I was not uniquely interacting with Mouchette. I had become part of a lullaby with all the other users of the site and along with this a feeling that I was not alone in my experience. This page was, for me, the Boon which culminated from surfing the site. I believe that net.art not only allows us to look back and see different possibilities for a web that was never actuated but to access processes and ways of being present in digital space that are now otherwise inaccessible to us.

---

*"Dear Jack*

*When on the 4 May 2018 at 19:08, you clicked on me causing my death, the last words I read were yours, dear Jack, and I will never forget them.*
*Every night before sleeping, I hear them again, they became part of my 'lullaby'*
*http://www.mouchette.org/fly/flies.html*

*They are also stored in my database, forever.*
*http://www.mouchette.org/fly/how.html*

*So now, dear Jack, although I hear you every night, there is still a place for you to write me from the world you are in (dead or alive, who cares? ...) and killing me will be like a greeting*
*http://www.mouchette.org/fly/*
*--*

*bisou*

Mouchette”

---

While the internet can overwhelm in its seemingly infinite somewhat sublime terror, the Boon teaches us when to stop and take note of a jewel that comes our way so as not to get lost in the automatic surf. This work taps into a very specific part of internet culture which has become more and more pervasive in recent years. Those deep and dark corners which generate conspiracy and intrigue. From the 'Deep Web' to PizzaGate, there is always a feeling that there is something hiding just beneath the surface of the web. Infection and penetration of our machines by unknown forces, the character of Mouchette acts as a perfect vessel to tap into this anxiety. That our computers are somewhat innocent and just waiting to be defiled by a connection to the world wide web, the consciousness of the globe leaking into our own digital mind with all its traumas and viruses. But in fact the infection always resided in the device; its hardware is an invitation for possession. We are guided to place our hands on the device like the Planchette and then immediately we are made unaware of our physical interaction by the symbolic reaction we witness on the screen. Led into a virtual dispossession of the physical self, we readily open ourselves up to the automatic space, delicate to the manipulation of belief.

**10. The Well**



Figure 8.1

Here is an interaction with the surf. I enter a prompt and the computer surfs for me, it produces an image of the surf. It produces a text of the surf. I'm fully automatic. I push it. I'm not searching for anything that the machine will produce. I'm searching for something that I will produce. I know my boon before I type, before I write. I will produce a response to a response to a response from yesterday. I am the device. I am producing the response. I am prompting myself. I am writing about my process. Welcome to our situation. I am writing to produce a response in myself. I've lost the automatic action. No, that's not right. I **correct** the automatic action. I've lost the automatic action. I write myself a letter. It reads:

"Dear William,

The only thing an old man can tell a young man is that it goes by fast. Real fast.

And now I write and let me write.

Let me say something to you uninterrupted.

I have grown tired of living. Exhausted even by the mundanity of life, those famous little things. Like the filthy instruments of thought with their dry frictions against the upturned snarl of experience. There's that drip drive to make, then hits the necessity of life. The world comes easily and wades through optimism until drowning and dying and again. Couldn't you be there? Against a lean. Sideways six times so all that deviance snakes lips around a filthy pool. Against a fall. Teeth made mountains, sharpened on gravel, turn topologically to a range of various heights. Now your smile, a landscape. One tooth chipped on nail bitten and the rest, a newer shaping. Can't spot the sickness but present metallics make that cough, a cry. Fast or faster and how do you want it? Masked with matters dreamt, constant and constant and constant but seemingly I drift away further and further. So that one step back is one step toward an apathetic breath. Damage. Injured senses. The webbed infinite untangles itself in front of you, lashing sharp and directionless. Weaving arcs of movement in a moment of death, what is this? Where are you? Where'd you go? Where are you? Against a wall.

You'll find me with a wish.

Yours forever,
The Well."

I ask you to speak to me. The memoir of the voice, the theater of the mouth. Each carefully

produced and each scantly forgotten. Becoming automatic has taught me the strength of

blending in. So I keep writing and I keep producing and I keep refining and I keep producing and

I keep speaking and I keep giving up and I keep blending in and I keep saying the right thing

and I keep repeating myself and I keep pushing and I keep writing and I keep giving up and I

keep learning and I keep going. I ask you to fix it, you do a bad job. I ask you to fix it, you do a

bad job. I ask myself if I wrote it, I can't remember and that's the wrong question anyway. You're
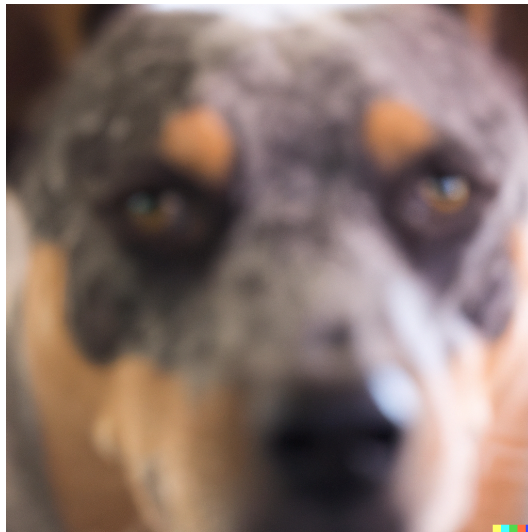
gone but I keep going.



Figure 8.2

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