This thesis is a multimodal approach to the production and consumption of text, seeking to present the materials as both products and processes of the act of "authorship." Grounded in the reading/writing dichotomy, these productions survive on a literacy practice that allows for a reading both of the space that we read and write in, as well as an active vocalization of the relationships between texts as they propagate themselves in the reading community. The text-based installation at the Hiestand Gallery of Miami University produces a reading of the space, which produces a movie of the writing, which produces a reading of the movie (the "thirddoc"). The sequence of writing titled "'hot text on text" is a coupling of image and text based on a late 19th century encyclopedia, further blurring the lines between origin and ownership. The sounds and flash work that accompany this thesis were peripheral voicings that captured and freed the bound texts distributed at the installation.
(RE)FRAMINGS: A MULTIMODAL INTERROGATION OF READING AS WRITING

A Thesis

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This DVD situates the brunt of creative work that I found myself producing during my time at Miami University, 2004-2006. I was able to procure some gallery space for a text-based installation during my final two months studying, and so used this opportunity to explore some of the parallels between reading and writing that I saw unfolding around me, my practice or another’s. While inhabiting the gallery space, I was also at work on a series of poems that were to be written through another text, that is, written quickly at one sitting while “reading” a typogravure or illustration from another source. It was through these two acts of writing that I came to question the physical acts of reading and writing, to use a multimodal approach in order to narrow the gap between them. It becomes increasingly important to offer a reader multiple reading paths, differing viewpoints, derivations from the original text. After creating a hypostasized site for this kind of variability, I find that the DVD presents an alternative sort of movement through the text, one which also offers an embodiment of the kinds of limitations and conventions of reading that are often overlooked with print materials.

The DVD opens with one of the photographs taken by Kelly Ortman during my first performance in the Hiestand Gallery. From this menu, the reader/user might navigate to any one of a number of chapters, the topmost of which leads to this very writing. For “hot text on text,” the source in question is an encyclopedic volume dating from 1896, a catalog of the major characters from Western romance, fiction and drama. The rest of the photographic documentation is available here as a slide show, as well as the flash movie that was projected on the wall during the installation. This constant cycling through of the mediated performance that is writing is a reflection of the hyperawareness that I’m seeking to promote within the confines of the written act.

Linda Russo, a recent participant in the post_moot mini-conference at Miami University, writes of the sonic communication of Hannah Wiener as a type of schizophonia, a split occurring between the sound as it’s broadcast and received and its source. The example she made use of during her presentation, a potted plant hiding a small speaker which would broadcast music (muzak), finds its analogue in Wiener’s readings of the clairvoyant voices that she has recorded. She is right in pointing to this kind of practice as a contemporary poetic condition, though I would argue that we can extend this kind of spatial split to our everyday environments as a way to generate semiotic readings of the places where we read and write. For the focus of this DVD I am examining the physical site of reading as an occasion for the generation of new writing. While the idea of “work” and “text” is nothing new to students of post-structuralist thought, my goal of creating a hypostasized spectacle of writing and reading, and

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1 More information can be found on post_moot at www.plantarchy.com
subsequently blurring the lines between the two, is very much achieved as evident by the short movie titled “awfriw.”

This movie is the culminating effort of my time spent in the gallery, documenting both the acts of writing that took place there, the two performative readings that took place as well as the commingling of the two in the manner of readers moving through the space. One of the activities I was able to record, a group of my students reading the same text aloud in the space, served as a direct link between the writing that I was doing (covering all seven windows with text, as well as furniture and the infrastructure of the gallery itself) and the use of the site for a reading space. These sounds can be heard playing during the menu frames of the DVD.

With schizophonia in mind, and with all sensory perceptions taken into account with the act of reading, I am able to ask questions of this reading space that might not normally be asked: what is the normative phonemic function of a set of stairs? The descending would connote a drop, either in pitch, tone, frequency or meter. How would the human voice be mediated by the stairs? How would written text find itself situated on such a surface material?

A brief excursus on the semiology of this space is necessary for me to establish the gallery as an ergodic text. In a sense, this act of writing on the object signs skips an important step in the semiotic layout of the room. Many of the signs in the room are actually controller signs, that is, able to change the properties of other signs but remaining unchanged in the process. The window that lets light fall onto the floor or stairs (or user), the door that opens onto the room and give the user access (or keeps them out), and certainly the stairs that allow the user to ascend or descend, into and out of the room. The stairs delineate the change in altitude, that promise of a perspectival zoom, I can either get away from the text and gain the higher ground in hopes of a different reading or immerse myself in the room (submerging as “diving”).

The performance reduced the sounds in the space to my voice, the looping sound files playing through the computer under the stairs, and any ambient noise happening in or around the gallery. This particular building also housed the metal shops of the Art Department, and many of the smiths keep late hours. Pounding hammers leak into the space, providing a sub-acoustic backbeat. We ask whether a sound could be expected to emanate from a particular architecture -- what do the windows sound like? -- and if the text that covers a public space should reflect the voice(s) moving through. To play with tempo is to play with temporality, and the compression that is necessary to speak through things proved to open up the space in ways that questioned the notion of intrusion and heteroglossia inherent to taking up one’s own space in a practiced place.

\(^{2}\) Espen Aarseth’s coinage, a neoteric term to designate the effort that is necessary on the part of the reader to effectively navigate a text. I use the term to foreground the physical construction of meaning that takes place in the “reading” of a cybertext (in Aarseth’s case) or a written space (my installation). My readers were not so much making choices as moving their bodies in and around the space of the writing.
When I first decided to inhabit the gallery space that would be devoted to this project, I was interested to see how the physicality of the structure would eventually come to inflect the work, both voiced and written. This distinction is sufficient to at least point to the major bifurcation that I am illustrating, that of reading a space as diametrically opposed to writing a space. My results lead me to believe that it is impossible to do one without the other.

These two ideas are in direct dialogue with one another, and yet I wonder if the communication is synchronous or asynchronous. Two things: when I sat my creative writing students down in the space and had one group reading aloud while the other wrote on plastic with markers, there was almost no intertextual play between the resultant written text and the text we were reading (Calvino’s *Difficult Loves*). I had thought that perhaps there would be some mention of the narrative, some leakage of character or plot, but as loud as the voicings were, the written voice, the evocalized word, was enough to drown them out. The subjectivity of the writer/reader in the space in this case was stronger than the textual drive, the resonance of what was being produced and digested.

When I write in this space, who is doing the reading? My partner Kelly was adamant following the performance that the focalized digestion was visual. That is, more eyes were on me than ears. My voice is projected into a large-volume space, high ceilings (17 ft) with plenty of background noise. In fact, an air conditioning vent situated directly above the stairwell beginning emits a 30-40 decibel hum. Peter Middleton’s description of these “grating, nonsemiotic aural intrusions” are the perfect place to pick up the thread of reification: “virtual space and material space jostle uneasily as the poems are read, and this unstable coexistence forms part of an allegorical counterpart to the dramatization of fundamental instability between writing and speech center stage of the reading” (Middleton 32). What if we assign a semiotic status to the background noise, what if it’s foregrounded by a writing through of the sound as opposed to writing around it? The walls can be written on, but my act of writing the windows brings into question the transparency of both the language we use to construct the act as well as the space we do it in. The window architecturally serves to delimit our vision of the surrounding world, to open up the space we find ourselves closed off in, and to hint at or remind of us of the dichotomy of inside-outside. Most importantly, the window is a light giver. The text is a meaning giver, and the conflation of the two leads to evocality, or an evoked text space. These kinds of imaginary functions serve to transform the space into a more readable space, though often with more complicated results.

Middleton’s ideas concerning the poetry reading or performance, how in doing so the space that this performance is taking place in is “temporarily liberated” from its usual function.

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3 The imaginary function is that which is seen by the reader as providing a greater degree of difficulty in gaining access to the space of reading, quite different than the prescribed functionality discussed further on in the paper. If we think of the stairs as a shelter, or a housing under which to read comfortably, this signification complicates legibility.
semitic duty (ditty?) are applicable. While I certainly don’t claim to have liberated this gallery space from its art-official designation replete with all the aesthetic expectations, it’s important to remember that the space is essentially a stairwell foyer. Every time a room like this is used to hypostasize the act of authoring a text, I think it’s safe to say its been liberated, in a sense, from the functional signification that rests like a burden on this and every public space in the university.

What of legibility? Enough has been said of the difficult in poetry, but one of the more interesting elements of this installation must be the use of handwriting as a medial ecology signpost. Moving in a laterally transgressive fashion from the digital soundscapes to the bedrock hum, from the scrawled marker under the stairs to the Flash animation projected onto the painted wall, the reader/writer is not telegraphing the obvious (d)evolutionary traces of media through this space. But the reader/writer is moving through a discrete series of signifiers, some with a function well-defined by the cultural and social forces at work around them and some with a constantly shifting (and sometimes empty) signified that is usually attributable to the author.

These functions will only be legible in light of this, a critical attempt to gird the creative effort. For example, I can be seen reading under the stairs, a site heavily burdened by the mythos of childhood fairytales, a place denoting magic and dread. It can then be noted that I emerge from this site, climb from it with the words themselves as hand and foot holds, only to ascend them with a dramatic finish. This ascension implies a descending, to return once again to the body of the inscriber, to reconvene with the writing that is being produced (the text of performance).

Transparency is at odds with the use of these shifting cultural signifiers. We need our texts – and our reading spaces – to be transparent in order for us to locate the meaning with as little energy expelled as possible. Opacity might be said to be just as necessary, in a dialectic sense, to arrive at a synthesis of the seen and unseen, the understood and the baffling. This is hyperbolic language, but I am speaking on the desire to cloak our selves with transparency, to insist on layers of meaning with are really nothing but gossamer dressings, ghost skins. One of the methods I use to expose this dialectical façade is the digital animation and accompanying sound pieces. The text on the wall is in a constant state of rewriting, just as every new media object “is not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions” (Manovich 36).

4 I am borrowing here from ideas promulgated by Barthes late in his career. In his preface to the Dialogues series, which were recorded for France-Culture and reproduced in La Quinzaine littéraire, March 1-15, 1974, he writes, “what is lost in transcription is quite simply the body – at least this exterior (contigent) body which, in a dialogue, flings towards another body, just as fragile (or frantic as itself).” I have tried to keep the scoria, the interpellants and exposures of thought that mark speech as speech in these written spaces. In doing so, I am allowing the reader a much greater curve of access to the genesis of the poem – he or she is watching the poem be writ.
assembled into numerous sequences under program control\textsuperscript{5}. Of course, the program control in this case is an amalgamation of the reader and the reader’s path as traveled through the space. So too does the DVD reify the

One last element of the installation I would like to point to is mobility. The popular late 20th century belief that the screen, in providing mastery over the visual layout of the world via a rectangular cut-out, in some way imprisons us is very much a part of the traditional art viewing, and I would like to extend this into the realm of the poetry reading. Just as the frame or screen establishes a relationship between the image and the viewer, the body of the reader does the same for the performance or event. Manovich, in a detailed account of the effect of computer-based representational models (virtual reality), asks the question, “what happens to this tradition with the arrival of a screen-less representational apparatus?” (109) The introduction of a bodyless author, a reification of writing that takes place regardless of whether the reader is present, can in a sense achieve this result: the viewer is allowed to move independently of the writer through the space, providing a reading experience that is completely free of constraint\textsuperscript{6}. One can move through the space and read only the necessary surfaces to ensure a physically safe passage (ie. to traverse the room without bumping into objects). To ensure a unique experience, all the spectator has to do is remain mobile.

What role does the media play in this space? The compression I alluded to earlier is made more apparent by the sound files that are filling this space in a schizophrenic way. The sound of my voice reading, accompanied by fractured rhythms and syncopated drum tracks, is issuing from a computer set up underneath the stairs. For this voice to emanate in this space at all, particularly when no one is present, establishes a sort of mobility of both the reading subject and the listening subject. The voice can be heard from any spot in the space, and there is no constraint on the reader as far as limited movement. By running my voice at a constant 40 beats per minute, the program I am using to record my reading, GarageBand, attempts to fill out or complete the algorithm with stretched sound measures.

Michel de Certeau writes of spatial stories, of a marking out of boundary in a narrative sense, borrowing from pre-existing fragments both oral and written to establish the articulation of a space. His writing is concerned with action (in the realm of the speech act), and the writing that was done in this gallery space was similarly committed to action. How can we reorganize a social cultural area to include the acts of reading and writing? One can start by inviting a reinterpretation of the deontic, the obligation to move through a room in a particular line. This becomes an obligation to read that space

\textsuperscript{5} I cite Lev Manovich’s \textit{The Language of New Media} (MIT Press, 2004) here again to emphasize the correlations between floating signifiers (words hovering on pieces of tape, words on transparent surfaces, the stairs and windows themselves) and the new media or digital media of the flash animation and mp3s.

\textsuperscript{6} This is not quite true. Constraints abound: duration of mobility, sight lines (in one case, the projected flash animation is barred by the stairwell, creating a frame of a different sort [prison bars]), linear vs non-linear writing practices, etc.
in the “proper” order, meeting obstacles and traversing them in order. He writes “there is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of frontiers” (123), the room taking on aspects of the page while also providing a strict set of constraints that are wholly extrinsic to writing on a two dimensional surface. One might also ask that a DVD be read through in a particular order, the user navigating the menu in a hierarchical fashion. And yet I think the very nature of this DVD invites a heterarchic reading, one that destabilizes any sort of hierarchical platform upon which to base a reading. Throughout this process, I’ve found that our physical acts and sites of reading and writing are infused in the new media manifestations of those same graphic drives.
Works Cited


