A Poetics for Circulars

What happens, then, in the situation of the decline of the Master, when the subject himself is constantly bombarded with the request to give a sign of what he wants? The exact opposite of what one would expect: it is when there is no one there to tell you what you really want, when all the burden of the choice is on you, that the big Other dominates you completely, and the choice effectively disappears—is replaced by its mere semblance. One is again tempted to paraphrase here Lacan's well-known reversal of Dostoevsky ("If there is no God, nothing at all is permitted"): if no forced choice confines the field of free choice, the very freedom of choice disappears (Žižek 1997, 153).

One of the facets of hypertext literature that is often celebrated by its proponents concerns the issue of *choice* and the malleability of a narrative based on a user's *interaction* with a text. The idea is that the reader, rather than being "passive," takes on a "writerly" position—an allusion to Roland Barthes usually appears here—by determining where the thread of the text (usually figured as a narrative) will go.

It is arguable that a reader is truly given a choice in, say, a hypertext novel such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon* since "choices" have usually been preprogrammed by the writer. Outside of the parameters of an overdetermined narrative—by its nature, linear and noninteractive—the choices presented can have no more than trivial differences between them, and their results can be of no more

Exchange on Circulars (2003)

Brian Kim Stefans (BKS): I've come up with an awkward, unsettling title for this essay: "Circulars as Antipoem." I'm sure cries will be raised: So you are making a poem out of a war? The invasion was only interesting as content for an esoteric foray into some elitist, inaccessible cultural phenomenon called an "antipoem"? (There is, in fact, a lineage to the term "antipoem," but I don't think it's important for this essay.) This legitimate objection is to be expected, and I have no reply except the obvious: that a Web site is a cultural construct, shaped by its editors and contributors, and more specifically, Circulars had a "poetics" implicit in its multiauthoredness, its admixture of text and image, its being a product of a small branch of the international poetry community, and so forth. Of course, the title also suggests that this Web site has some relationship to a "poem," but perhaps as a non-site of poetry—as it is a non-site for war, even a non-site for activism itself, where real-world effects don't occur. But my point for now is that the fragmentary artifacts of a politicized investigation into culture—Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* for example—has an implicit poetics to it, but standing opposite to what we normally call a "poem." This suggests roles that poets can play in the world quite divorced from merely writing poetry (or even prose, though it was the idea that poets could contribute prose to the antiwar cause—as speech writers or journalists, perhaps—that initially inspired the site.

Darren Wershler-Henry (DWH): Hey Brian: what are you using to count words? MS Word

than trivial importance. If there is only a shade of difference between the two options—the difference between clicking the word "Harry" or "Jane" or choosing the left door over the right—then one is not engaged in an issue of *choice* so much as partaking in *chance:* the chance that one link will lead to a more entertaining, substantial, or (in game worlds) utile or informative lexia than the other.

Ethical choices—such as "Would I have put an ice pick through that man's head were he to have killed my daughter?" or "Should I read this atheistic literature even though I am a practicing Catholic?"—are among the more compelling choices one might make in one's life and have been a staple of fiction, drama, and philosophy for centuries. Since most of us don't have to make choices about murder, or even about corrupting a purportedly pristine spiritual geography, there is an appeal to the vicarious experience of having to *decide*. Art can be compelling purely for this reason.

On the other hand, Internet activism, which on the face of it might seem to be all about such choices, could equally be deemed, from some perspectives, trivial. One of the criticisms of online activism—which can include "political" blogs and links sites, advocacy and organizational sites, independent media sites, and so on—is that the Internet has nearly nothing to do with "real world" traditional political activism. It doesn't involve going outside into the world and confronting physical events that can easily spiral into danger but remains stuck in

says the previous paragraph has 254 words; BBEdit says 259 (me, I'm sticking to BBEdit). Poets—particularly poets interested in working with computers—should be all about such subtleties. Not that we should champion a mechanically aided will to pinpoint precision (a military fiction whose epitome is the imagery from the cameras in the noses of U.S. cruise missiles dropped on Iraq during the first Gulf War), but rather, the opposite—that is, we should be able to locate the cracks and seams in the spectacle . . . the instances where the rhetoric of military precision breaks down. As such, here's a complication for you: why "anti-poem" instead of simply "poetics"? Charles Bernstein's cribbing ("Poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means") of von Clausewitz's aphorism ("War is the continuation of politics by other means") never seemed as appropriate to me as it did during the period when Circulars was most active. The invocation of Smithson's site/non-site dialectic is also apposite, but only in the most cynical sense. Is the U.S. bombing of Iraq and Afghanistan the equivalent of a country-wide exercise in land art? In any event, the relationship is no longer dialectical but dialogic; the proliferation of weblogs ("war blogs") during the Iraq War created something more arborescent—a structure with one end anchored in the world of atoms, linked to a network of digital non-sites.

BKS: I hesitate to tease out the "non-site" analogy—the *site* itself is too variable: for me, I was thinking of Circulars as being the non-site of activism, not just a corollary to the sweat and presence of people "on the streets" but a vision of a possible culture in which these activ-

the white box of the monitor, indissolubly "virtual." Internet activism is seen as absenting from the equation specificities encoded on the body—such as racial, gender, and class identity—that form the dynamite that explodes any sort of social cohesion and often aggravates social inequalities. The Internet is figured as a "gopherspace," and Internet activism is categorized as a form of living room radicalism, requiring little physical or mental effort—in other words, a voyeurism.[7]

My sense is that a site such as Circulars makes a step in creating an ethics of "choice" in hypertext literature but also that it makes a gesture toward creating a poetics of online activism, giving it a cultural tone beyond the merely critical or utilitarian. It never hoped to replace classic forms of social activism so much as to augment them and perhaps suggest new themes and angles. Circulars provides the interpretative bed in which events (protests, arrests, speeches) and personalities can be viewed outside of, even in conflict with, the interpretive strategies of the mainstream media, which are becoming increasingly consolidated under umbrella organizations with singular political viewpoints.

Thus, the site can be conceptualized as somewhere between a "poem" and a "community," as a place of shared laughter and contempt that infects and populates the private space with the concerns of the world. In this way, the site might be seen as motivated by a nostalgia for the oppositional "counterculture" of the sixties—not just its paraphernalia and pop songs—as it once

ities (otherwise abandoned to television) can exist, not to mention reflect and nourish culturally. That is, are our language and tropes going to change because of the upsurge in activity occurring around us—in the form of poster art, détourned "fake" sites, maverick blogging? I admit that some of what we've linked to is nothing more than glorified bathroom humor, but nonetheless if the context creates the content for this type of work as a form of dissent, I think that should be discussed, even celebrated. I haven't read too much about this yet. Thinking of Circulars as the "non-site" of the bombing itself is both depressing and provocative: it's no secret that one of the phenomena of this war was not the unexpected visibility of CNN but Salam Pax's Dear Raed blog, written by a gay man from the heart of Baghdad (even now he is remaining anonymous because of his sexuality). I could see Circulars as a "poetics," but I prefer to think of it as an action *with* a poetics, my own tendency being to think of poetry as the war side of the von Clausewitz equation, simply because poetics seems closer to diplomacy than a poem.

DWH: The variability and heterogeneity of the site was, I think, partly due to the infrastructural and technological decisions that you made when putting the site together, because those decisions mesh well with the notion of coalition politics. (I'm thinking of Donna Haraway's formulation here.) The presence of a number of posting contributors with varied interests, the ability of readers to post comments, the existence of an RSS feed that allowed anyone running a wide variety of Web software packages to syndicate the headlines, a

saturated everyday thinking with a need to imagine other forms of government, including self-government, one informed by an erotics as well as an egalitarian ethos.

What follows is a short list of descriptive categories that relates Circulars both to traditional activist/artistic practices (e.g., Brecht's "epic theater" and its genesis in the information-saturated theater of Erwin Piscator) and to issues of "electronic literature," work that relies for many of its effects upon its presentation through a digital medium. The list is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. I don't necessarily hope to distinguish Circulars from other sites that might be informed by a "poetics" of political activism—several could be said to do that and a short essay such as this cannot double as a history. Though I believe all of the issues outlined below are embodied in the site, there will be no attempt, in this short space, to "prove" that Circulars does or did any of this—one can visit the site and find out.

Aggregation and Amplification

Regardless of one's opinion of the mainstream media, there can be no denying the trend of increased consolidation of major media organizations under umbrella groups such as the Turner Broadcasting System, Rupert Murdoch's empire, and, in radio, Clear Channel Communications. In the face of the semimonopolized state of the most successfully distributed forms of media in the United States and the proliferation of nefarious practices to gain marketable material

searchable archive, a regular email bulletin—these are crucial elements in any attempt to concentrate attention on the Web. Too seldom do writers—even those avowedly interested in collaboration and coalition politics—take the effect of the technologies that they're using into account, but they make an enormous difference to the final product. Compare Circulars to Ron Silliman's blog: on the one hand, you have a deliberately short-term project with an explicit focus that is built around a coalition of writers on a technological and political platform that assumes and enables dialogue and dissent from the outset; on the other hand, an obdurate monolith that presents no immediate and obvious means of response, organized around a proper name. Sure, the sites have different goals, but Silliman's site interests me because it seems to eschew all of the tools that would allow any writer to utilize the unique aspects of the Web as an environment for writing. And sadly, that's typical of many of the writers' blogs that exist.

BKS: I haven't been too bothered with those aspects of Silliman's blog for the mere fact that it would double his time having to respond to the comments, many of which could be vicious flames. I've deleted some of the comments on Circulars, in one case because the poster was making scandalous allegations (drugs, child molestation) about the head of an advertising agency, and another because the poster, in American fatwaesque fashion, deemed that I should have a rocket shoved up my ass. Of course, your point is well-taken—Silliman's blog could use some real-time play-by-play; I'm sure a diagnostic essay is forthcoming. I did set

(such as "embedded journalism" with its reality television overtones), there has been an increased reliance on, and desire for, alternative news sources, including overseas news services that are, in their native countries, relatively "mainstream."

But because, like homegrown butter, stories from fugitive or unknown presses don't have the stamp of officialdom, they only gain visibility and credibility by their reappearance on other Web sites that can contribute—via design, extensive readership, branding, and so forth—cultural capital. *Guardian UK* columnist Robert Fisk was probably one of the most read columnists by American antiwar advocates during the war, and yet, as far as I know, he has never had a regular column in an American publication. Reappearances on other sites, from ZNet to Common Dreams, gave him a visibility beyond that of other *Guardian* writers. A similar thing happened to the Dear Raed blogger, "Salam Pax," an Iraqi in Baghdad who was unofficial enough to have had his very existence questioned yet was read loyally by folks who discovered him through other Web sites (and who now writes a column for the *Guardian)*.

The effect of a story reappearing across the Web in different contexts and thereby being *read* differently can be linked to the medieval rhetorical effect of "amplification,"[8] in which a basic descriptive trope—"he is the wisest king," for example—is revisited and teased out to give a grandiose air to the matter at hand. Though hardly in fashion today—the method is best lampooned in scenes of

Circulars up with the intention of there being subsets of discussion on the site, separate groups of people who would engage with each other over some time—"committees" of sorts, with their own story threads. This happened for a brief period: there was a lot of heat generated by one of Senator Byrd's speeches against the war, and there was a discussion about Barrett Watten's "War = Language." I was prepared to develop new sections of the site if anyone so requested, though I confess to being dictatorial about the initial setup, basically because I know more about the Web than most poets, and I hate bureaucracy. I was hoping that some of the more frequent poet bloggers who were writing political material would send their more considered material for posting to Circulars, but most simply posted to their own blogs without telling me.

DWH: I'm not suggesting that blogs and news forums should be about the abrogation of editorial control—far from it. It's always necessary to do a certain amount of moderation and housecleaning, which, as you well know, takes assloads of time. During its peak, I was spending at least two or three hours a day working on Circulars, and I'm sure you put in even more time than that, even with the help of the other industrious people who were writing for the site. Which takes me back to the value of the coalition model: a decent weblog *needs* multiple authors to work even in the short term. The classic example of a successful weblog is Boing Boing (www.boingboing.net), a geek news site that evolved from a magazine and accompanying forum on the WELL (www.well.com) in the late eighties/early nineties. Mark

sycophantic bombast by attendees of the court in Monty Python skits—it has been used effectively by such writers as Thomas Carlyle, who mated it with Protestant fury in such hypertroping essays as "Signs of the Times," and T. S. Eliot, who used it in his liturgical poems. It also reappears in hip-hop lyrics, often in a comic form of macho bragging in which recurring invention around a single lyrical trope gives proof of social power.

The argument that a rhetorical effect that reduplicates a turn of thinking is associated with the reappearance of a story on different Web sites depends on an understanding of Internet reading as an activity closer to "browsing"—in which the story might not be read until the third or fourth time it has been chanced upon—than it is to, say, reading a newspaper, which is discarded as soon as it is read. In this way, the more superficial aspects of a story (its headline, its byline, and so forth) become part of the poetics of a site such as Circulars, which featured the names of the last one hundred stories in a sidebar.[9]

Centrifugal and Centripetal Motions

Circulars had the benefit of being a simple site to understand—the navigation was easy, most of what you needed to see was right on the home page, and its perspective was clearly antiwar—yet it housed materials created by people in any number of fields taking any number of angles (satirical, poetic, pacifistic, Marxist, conservative, and

Frauenfelder, the original editor, has worked with many excellent people over the years, but the current group (including Canadian science fiction writer/Electronic Frontier Foundation activist Cory Doctorow, writer/video director David Pescovitz, and media writer/conference manager Xeni Jardin) presents a combination of individual talent and a shared vision. There's nothing *wrong* with personal weblogs, but, like reality television, they get awfully thin over time. Even when the current search technologies adapt to spider the extra text that blogging has created, the problem of anemic content isn't going to go away unless we start doing more collective writing online. The problem is partly a need for education; most writers are still in the process of learning how to use the Web to their best advantage.

BKS: I'm not sure that it's necessary for a blog to be multiauthored; what it really needs is a mandate, and it's possible that, were the mandate simply to produce rich, incantatory prose—imagine the Marcel Proust blog—a highly disciplined approach could work. Steve Perry's Bushwarsblog, for example, succeeds quite well on this level (not the Proustian but the muckraker), as does Tom Mantrullo's Swiftian Commonplaces. Both of them have "political" agendas, but they are also well-written and thoughtful for what are in effect news publications without an editor. It helps that these two are journalists and conceptualize their blogs as a distinct form of news writing alternative to the mainstream—the individual voice is sharpened by an informed sense of the social arena in which it will resonate (in which the message will ultimately become dulled). Just today, Tom posted

so forth) on the impending crisis. Some materials were outright offensive to some readers—the most notorious case being the poster art from the whitehouse.org Web site—while others might have appeared saccharine, obscure, reactionary, petulant, dismissive, even irrelevant.

My sense is that the very simple blog structure created a centripetal motion—that is, users were easily drawn deeper into its form to scroll downward to reach new stories, click comments links, avoid what they did not care to read, and so forth.[10] At the same time, in a centrifugal motion, the site constantly pointed outside toward other sites and toward the lack of centrality of the reader in the political event. (See the following "non-site" entry.)

Complexity and simplicity formed a dialectic, and the engagement between the two drew the reader into a questioning of motives. One can become part of a virtual community simply by showing up, but one only becomes implicated by moving in deeper and making choices about reading. There is clearly plenty of material to dissuade a reader from further engagement were this material figured as the dominating, monolithic content of the site, but because Circulars was unspecialized, the *culture* of the site was porous: readers who wanted to avoid poems could read, say, a speech by Senator Byrd or view a gritty satirical "remix," as each is contextualized as part of a single cultural mix.

a link to the [New York] *Times* story on corporate blogging—yecch!—and has coined this aphorism, a détournement from Foucault though sounding somewhat Captain Kirkish to me, to describe his project: "To blog is to undertake to blog something different from what one blogged before." A version of "make it new" but with the formal precedent being the blog itself—a vow not to let individual "multiauthoring" become equal to corporate monoglut. Perhaps the model blog is that which responds to the formal issues of other blogs as if they were social issues (i.e., beyond one's "community"), hence transforming the *techne* of the writer into a handling of hypertextual craft.

DWH: It's all too easy to imagine the Marcel Proust blog—Christ, what a nightmare (shades of Monty Python: "Proust in his first post wrote about, wrote about . . ."). Endless streams of novelistic prose, no matter how incantatory, are *not* what I want to read online. William Gibson, for one, thinks there's something inimical about blogging to the process of novel writing. I think that the paragraph-as-post is the optimal unit of online composition—and that an optimal online style would be some sort of hybrid of prose poetry and healthy geek cynicism (imagine a Slashdot [slashdot.org] full of Jeff Derksens). But I think I see your point, that it's possible for one writer to produce the kind of dialogic multiplicity that could sustain a blog. There is, however, a large difference between "possible" and "likely." In my opinion, as less stratospheric talents than the geniuses of high modernism, we stand a better chance of generating strong content collectively. Another model

Non-Site of Community

The artist Robert Smithson was best known for his large-scale earthworks such as the *Spiral Jetty* and the photos, films, and essays he used to document them. Equally celebrated, if not as freakishly grandiose, are his artworks consisting entirely of collected items which he calls "non-sites," such as the totemic *Non-Site, Pine Barrens, New Jersey* (1968), a hexagonal grouping of earth and industrial materials gathered at a disused airfield. He described his gallery-bound non-sites as

the absence of the site. It is a contraction rather than an expansion of scale. One is confronted with a very ponderous, weighty absence. . . .

The making of the piece really involves collecting. The container is the limit that exists within the room after I return from the outer fringe. There is this dialectic between inner and outer, closed and open, center and peripheral. It just goes on constantly permuting itself into this endless doubling, so that you have the nonsite functioning as a mirror and site functioning as a reflection. (Smithson 1996, 193)

This description addresses what might be called the active negation of Circulars, which is manifold:

· The site is the negation of community. For better or worse, the site replaced physical communion with virtual, while drawing attention to the absence of the reader

that I find promising is the Haddock Directory (www.haddock.org)—a site I've been reading daily for at least four years. Haddock has recently moved to a two-column format: standard blog description-plus-link on the left (maintained by the site's owner and editor-in-chief, if you will) and entries from the Haddock community blogs, identified by author, on the right. It's a very neat example of the effective aggregation of data within a particular interest group. And it seems to follow Stein's dicta: "I write for myself and for strangers."

BKS: I'm still curious about the line "generating strong content." What do you mean by "content"? My guess is not "writing" as we know it, but some admixture of links, intro paragraphs, pictures, and HTML formatting, that creates a dynamic, engaging, and timely space on the screen. "Content" moves from "writing" to the shape one creates by selectively linking to other sites serving, but also provoking, a "particular interest group." (I wrote earlier today in a dispute over blogs: "Circulars was a short-term effort [or as short term as the war] that was a response to what I sensed was or would be [or hoped to be] a moment of crisis in terms of American self-identification." Who would have thought, ten years ago, that a group of weblinks and writing could contribute to a crisis in national identity?) Most writers would probably feel demeaned to be referred to as "content managers," as if all writing were a versioning of some other writing (put it back in your pants, Harold), but, frankly, we're admitting for a whole lot of plagiarism in this concept of "content." I think the blog-ring model on haddock.org is strong,

from these time- and place-based forms of interaction, whether in protest activity or war itself.

· It is also the negation of technological power and the omniscience of "electric eyes": the site as a *willing myopia,* a metaphorical corrupting of the exactitude of satellite photography, and the guiding systems of smart bombs. Implicit in this is a critique of voyeuristically "engaging" in war via observing the embedded journalist on television, for example.

· It is also a negation of the poem. Despite a "poetics," there was no single rhetoric for the site, no way to recuperate it into an "author," no way to domesticate its contents into a confirmation of a bourgeois subjectivity. It targeted the very space of the "poem" in society. Further, it troubled language and narrativity, but in a way that did not require idiosyncratic reading strategies promoted by, among others, Language poets or the novelists of the Nouveau Roman.

Via these negations, reliant on a process of collecting—a "recovery from the outer fringes" that "brings one back to the central point"—Circulars had the effect of creating traffic between an inside and outside, fringe and centrality. That is, one was reminded of the monitor's limits as one is of the gallery's bounds in a non-site. The aura of the postmodern simulacra was actively dispelled via the extreme rhetoric of some of its contributors, overwhelming the irreality presented by the embedded journalists. The emphatic anger of many of the contributors, often

since it lets writers tend their gardens, deriving whatever classic satisfactions one gets from writing, and yet contribute unwittingly to a larger collective. I agree that some "types" of writing just *work* better online—claustrophobic syntax, also non sequiturs, drive readers back to hunt for hearty prose (though writers such as Hitchens seem to be as uncompromisingly belle-lettristic on-screen as on paper).

DWH: I like to think of myself as a malcontent provider. As someone who works regularly with found text, copping to the "plagiarism" that's at the heart of all "original" writing doesn't worry me at all; in fact, I'm beginning to think it's a necessary strategic position for artists at this particular moment in history. As thinkers such as Siva Vaidhyanathan and Lawrence Lessig have been arguing strenuously for the past few years, the concept of intellectual property is a relatively recent, regressive invention that has nothing to do with the reasons that copyright was established two hundred years ago and that it actually reverses copyright's original function—that is, to provide a short-term monopoly solely to drive innovative thought, not to create perpetual profit. Artists in many disciplines are increasingly moving toward creative processes based on appropriation, sampling, bricolage, citation, and hyperlinking, but the multinationals and the entertainment industries are driving legislation in the exact opposite direction by arguing that ideas can and should be owned. Artists and writers who have a large investment in their own "originality" do us all a serious disservice by refusing to recognize and protect the public

operating from the fringes of standard modes of expressivity—via avant-garde poetry, truly tasteless satire, and détournement—created the "reality" of the situation more adequately than the photoshopped images on the cover of the *Los Angeles Times*. One was not permitted to be a "political voyeur"—ironically, it was a non-site that taunted one into taking a position.

domain . . . the very thing that makes ongoing artistic activity possible. So by all means, yes, don't just "write" (a verb that in many cases bears the superciliousness of the romantic), build (mal)content. Bring on the hyperlinks, intro paragraphs, pictures, PHP scripts, and HTML formatting, especially if they help to demonstrate the mutual indebtedness that all creativity entails. Use Your Allusion.

Challenging Censorship and Making Dissent Palpable

In a climate of threatened civil liberties via the Patriot Act and the looming of its successor, the Patriot Act II, Circulars encouraged association with sites, individuals, and cultural traditions that engaged in nonacceptable, even antisocial, expressivity in a bid to contest the bounds of legal speech and encourage a discourse around what is permissible in U.S. publishing. The site intended to "sound out" what appeared to be, at times, an echo chamber of opinion and cultural evasions and to suggest that the practice of dissent for its own sake is worth refining.[11]

As Noam Chomsky and other critics from the left have argued, the conspiracy of silence and lack of risk taking in a prosperous democracy is voluntary, not forced. One legacy of Ralph Nader's experiment with American politics in the 2000 election was the discovery to many that, for the first time in recent history, a sort of "truth" could be expressed from behind a televised podium that was not compromised by million-dollar funding and that a language could be used in politics that was direct, detailed, and effective and appealed to an auditor's civic sense. Rhetoric was not being rendered anemic by the conflicting desires of special-interest lobbyists, nor was it being laced with subliminal religious assurances. That a reliably unanimated public speaker could draw such excited crowds was an event that couldn't be ignored.

Circulars encouraged an investigation of these fringe forms of expression and content not merely in an attempt to dissolve adherence to official perspectives and pry open the floodgates of political desire but, additionally, to create new semantic horizons beyond safe, well-worn, politically correct agendas. The zone between these two, in which pragmatic proposals and irrationality were in close consort, was where I expected the average reader of Circulars to flourish.