

*Interview with John Cayley, Utrecht,  
Netherlands, 04/05/99*

JC = John Cayley, ME = Markku Eskelinen

Preface,

in lieu of a paratextual normalization

It is, firstly, pleasure which I would like to recall and bring to the fore, the pleasure that it gave me to receive and read Markku Eskelinen's transcription of our interview, or rather, our deliberately frustrated conversation in Utrecht. I have always taken great pleasure in exchanges with Markku, who I consider to be the most acute and challenging critic-practitioner of writing in networked and programmable media. It is a dreadful honour, in an older and more salutary sense of 'dreadful,' to be taken seriously by Markku. The transcription was sent to me with the expected, necessary and (particularly to me) quite proper request that I look it over and 'feel free to change, alter, or remove everything that needs such a treatment.' I have transcribed one or two interviews myself, and I know how difficult this supposedly mechanical and actually very demanding procedure can be, stylistically and intellectually. The last such transcription I made was basically a rewrite: I cleaned up and construed with the over-zealousness of a Microsoft grammar-checker and the reputation-paranoia of a tenure-seeking academic. But there is no need for a rewrite in the case of this conversation with Markku. Nonetheless, I was just about to start marking up for punctuation and minor variations from the received, normalized discursive style of a native English speaker when I paused and asked myself, 'Why?' The text as it stands has already been subjected to numerous and

various translingually inflected procedures of transcription and (re)inscription. It may well have been worked over – to an extent which is determinable only by consulting the recording (itself a transcription) – by my respected interlocutor. It reads well. It gives me pleasure. I'm content with what I construe of its sense and tenor and tone. Why should I now work, perhaps unnecessarily or even misguidedly, to further conceal the transcriptional and procedural nature of this text? Particularly when the whole thrust of my work as a literal artist is designed to make the programmatological dimension of writing both more accessible and more affective? I accept this transcription in its current and anticipated state, a state which, paratextually – because it has not been finally normalized by an authoritative hand – invites its readers at least to consider whether I was right to leave it as it was, and perhaps also invites them to reconsider other transcriptional procedures which are marked by the text's condition. Surely, this is a good thing. In this case, I was convinced that it enhances and recalls certain pleasures of the text which might otherwise be lost or passed over, unremarked. No one talks like a book. No one, with the possible exception of Ted Nelson, talks like a hypertext. But people do talk and write in other quadrants of textonomy.

ME: What are the traditions your work continues most directly? What is your relation e.g. to Jackson MacLow, Fluxus or the OuLiPo?

JC: Well, I don't think I come directly from any postmodernist, in the sense of after the modernism, tradition although I've been influenced by a number of those you mentioned. But I definitely come out from the tradition of poetic practice and translation. If there were any clear antecedents in tradition then those would be it. The study of poetics via the study of Chinese poetics in particular through the trajectory of Ezra Pound and his appropriations of it. That would be it.

ME: This leads nicely to the next question. How can we justify our Western way of conceptualising the consequences and possibilities of technologies and digital technologies in particular?

JC: That I think about a lot. If you can imagine, the engagement into Chinese poetics has been like the deconstruction of your own. The West, broadly speaking, defines the use of the current networked programmable media, and if we look at the letter, which is one of my current obsessions, these

technologies are defined by the letter and reading the letter as a fundamental unit of inscription. In Chinese tradition of poetics and all that comes with it letters are differently structured in relation to inscription which indicates that different types of procedures should be followed, especially if you are doing anything combinatorial or processually based. One can't play with letters in Chinese the way one can play with them in the West on the level of transliteration and poetic practice. If you look at the ways that textuality is encoded in the technologies of networked programmable media, then you'll see that the way of digitalisation is now established worldwide and it is considered to be appropriate, the right way to do it. Whereas if you had started with Chinese you'd have done it in a very different way. The current Chinese characters are encoded in a way that they can be processed through the regime of technology that is not appropriate for them and if you'd want to build in the ways that are semantically and literally appropriate then you'd have to build them into software.

ME: Do you know if there exists any software that would and could cross that gap to both directions, making it easy to play with English the way it's easy to do in Chinese and vice versa?

JC: No, I don't. Actually I haven't done much with Chinese apart from getting closer to recognizing what the difference is, what's going on, why is there that disjunction. But I'm very much saying for instance that the sorts of things I've been doing, trying to program texts, would be very hard to do in Chinese because the software doesn't make it easy. There's no stage in encoding between inscribable and inscribed letters you can intervene and work and produce meaning. Whereas in the Western spectrum from bits to words you can intervene at the point of a letter and do a lot with it because the system is designed for it. An example would be that a Chinese character is roughly of the size of a word and it's hard to take apart, and if you were going to take it apart you wouldn't do it on a basis of phonetic distinctions, and people would argue how to do it.

ME: How would you do it?

JC: Well, if we start talking about how to take it apart then we would get into really big discussion about the nature of the characters and to what degree they are logographic. We are getting at the whole business of what Derrida calls the hallucination of the Chinese script meaning what we think it is and how we think it works. It would be very hard to take a character

apart in a way that many people including those who use it would agree upon. Whereas in Western languages everyone agrees as letters are shared manipulatable symbols. The systems of inscription are organized the way people agree upon.

ME: What do you think about generating meaning?

JC: Again it comes back to my current obsession with transliteration. It does relate to what we have been saying about the Chinese script. Transliteration, a transposition via letters, seems to me to be a more interesting way to approach the problems of translation. What I mean by that is that if you want to translate anything then why not go on the basis of agreed identities, what are agreed to be identities. An A is an A in many tables of language when looked at as pure form, so you can see there are identities that correspond between languages. That's relatively unproblematic when you're dealing with letters but you can have a lot of fun. In trying to translate or transliterate the semantic component, you traditionally get into a hidden and concealed process where the agreements about the identities are not ever made explicit, except by the translator who looks things up in dictionaries and then maybe an academic critic from the other side checks whether those identities were right. I can imagine types of semantic translation that would make that obvious and I can imagine that been done in a process based algorithmic way. It would be a bit like machine translation but machine translation that don't necessarily intend to produce a true result but only to set up a translation process and produce a result. That's where it does relate to Chinese because you could imagine the sort of character for word and word for character translation that is sometimes done where you set up provisionally agreed identities and then do mapping back and forth between them.

ME: If we think computers as metamedia capable of translating anything into something else, words into pictures, pictures to sound and so on using the same or almost the same algorithms. How can you resist the temptation of Gesamtdatenwerk and keep your practices inside the republic of letters only?

JC: I don't think you do resist it but I think there seem to be some strange disparities in this. The example I always use is that the text has always been a paradigm for digital media – and the strange fact is that in music

or visual arts where you can produce algorithms that are affective as well as effective, you can write a filter that will do something that people agree is fuzziness. That's a purely algorithmic thing but there's still the question why is it that language resists that and do we agree it does. It's clearly related to the problem of how to make semantic agreements that would be broadly functional. That also means that to produce an affective algorithm would be difficult for exactly the same reason.

ME: The direction into which I'm trying move here is also related to identities. As we agreed it's easy to agree that an A is an A, it's more difficult with semantic agreements and affective algorithms, and now you're moving your work into MOO-spaces where people play with identities that are even harder to establish in the midst of social interaction and the fully functional performative powers of language. So are you consciously and constantly moving into positions where it's getting more and more difficult to agree upon identities?

JC: Well, not consciously.

ME: One thing I'm getting at is to ask what's the relation between your MOOworks and *Indra's Net*?

JC: They are not directly related except that I can see the MOO is the place where the algorithmic, programmable, combinatorial approach to text can be implemented in an environment where there are other textual practitioners and their work to be afflicted by it. The danger would be the way you originally got into this, the same danger that is imminent throughout the whole Net, that if it is through the audiovisual then these practitioners can become instantly seduced by the possibilities to manipulate sound and imagery in relation to their work rather than staying focused on text and textual identities. Talking now it just comes out that there does seem to be a relationship between text and textual manipulation and the creating of identity by the means of textual representation. I can imagine e.g. that there's a description that is a part of some person's identity in a MOO space and a text generator or text manipulator that takes that text and then alters it. In that case it would get an affective and effective result that a person whose identity has been so manipulated would find of interest or moving or challenging or difficult or whatever and over time agreements might build up about the nature of those text manipulators. In the same way a textual

bot can be an identity blur that would easily affect gender.

ME: Have you given up the plan to build phonetic and morphemic holograms you mentioned in "Beyond Codexspace"?

JC: No, I'm still interested in them. I think that the simple literal text morphing I'm doing is related to that sort of work. When I go in a MOO I still want to make programmable objects inside the MOO.

ME: Have you any interest in transferring *Indra's Net* into MOO where the pieces of it would cease to be Mac Objects to the relief of many?

JC: Definitely. I'm convinced that after a while I'll be able to translate the algorithms of *Indra's Net* to MOO-space. Most of them are not so complex after all so it should not be too difficult to do, and it would be a more interesting way of presenting because it's a good medium, it's not platform specific and it's accessible through the Internet.

ME: Do you know if there exist any translation programs between artificial and natural language. Let's say you select a source the manipulation of which might produce legible code and then let that code run the system for a while, and have its impact.

JC: I'm interested in that. Actually there are two things I'm interested in. Firstly, I've already done quasi-automatic or quasi-arbitrary alteration of code so that it reads as natural language, well not natural language, but artificial type of affective language. And one thing I would very much like to do is to put another layer on top of the programming language so that the semantics of the programming language would at the point of reading it be completely other. It can be done as a series of replacements where all the reserved words of the language are changed into other words and by rewriting the procedures that would be generated by assembling the reserved words. Then you would have a complete programmable textual environment that would only refer to itself and you would be able to write coherent code in it. It would do something but it would only do it in its own terms. That could be done in a MOO. In a way MOOs are already like that, if you're in a MOO and either writing code or giving command lines that would configure the MOO, those command lines are already quite affective because it's an object oriented programming language. You can do things like 'change parent' so if you have an object called fish and you

say change parent of fish to bird then you already have (...) that can be very silly, but still you could imagine someone carefully making a whole vocabulary of objects for the purpose of using the key words of the MOO so that the person was imagining textual performance, was performing a series of operations on these objects with the intention of producing a work and the work was the performance of those operations. The record of that work would be the script. I think that is potentially very interesting.

ME: How far would you then be from artificial life applications with emerging codes and all that, parts of a MOO getting more independent and partly producing their own code?

JC: I think we have to be really careful here. I'm not talking about making AI or AL in any sense although I think ... All I'm imagining I'm doing is rewriting the code or changing the surface of the code such that it becomes more engaging as a literary object for me or for other people who choose to use that working code. What it actually did was probably very simple like, say, instead of writing a plus b in that formula you put a love b, and when you write a plus b the result of the operation is c and it always will be but it will be read by a human as something else. That doesn't seem to me to be artificial life although if it became very large and elaborate then it could certainly be an artificial environment or it would more likely be something like an artificial language that would be reusable or recyclable. The interesting thing about doing it would be that in programming languages there are certain types of reserved words that you can't mock around with because if you do then nothing works. In social structures and registers of normal languages there are also reserved words describing f.ex. emotional and sexual relationships. Mapping those sorts of words onto the reserved words of a programming language would produce a whole lot of statements. There would be legal statements in this self-referential world, in the self-coherent world of a programming language that would have completely different affect on human reader.

ME: Are you in a process of actually building such systems?

JC: That's something I'd like to do but I think it would be a pretty long term.

ME: What's the main difficulty in it?

JC: Well, because you'd only want to do it if it could be done properly. There is a rather wide range of reserved words in operation in any programming language and you should do a fairly complete job of mapping it before letting it loose. You wouldn't want to do what I just said a plus b is c.

ME: Sorry for this inconvenient silence but I have to study my notes for a while.

JC: The thing about interviews is you'd always feel like you have to keep going because it's live, and you can't actually pause because there will be a record of that pause.

ME: And because I'm doing this in English I'm not taking normal eye contact with you, as I must constantly check if this list of questions makes any sense.

JC: Yes, and I'm not having a conversation with you, I'm just answering your questions.

ME: That's true. It's a little like we were in a MOO. Speaking of which, let's talk a little about your project called *Myour Darkness*? There you promise to include other people's contributions as a part of your work, take them under your name, without ever reading or viewing them. As we know from speech act theory or Derrida's readings of it a promise can be a threat and vice versa. And this promise of yours has already caused some interesting reactions. Was it a part of the original plan to let participants' unconsciousness affect each other that way?

JC: Yes, definitely. I don't have a problem with that because it is an experiment. I never thought there would be no feedback. I imagined both that there would be a great deal of influences in some cases and extremely little in others.

ME: Were you surprised at all by those reactions?

JC: So far not surprised and so far not overtly troubled. But so far most of the challenge has been on a level of people saying is this worthwhile or interesting idea and challenging whether it is. And that constitutes to me a pretty straightforward response. It's unclear to me at the moment, whether it will take off, how it will go, and how much the participants will actually



be addressing *Myour darkness* or just struggling with a new media because there will be both unfortunately. But what I would like to do is precisely some sort of representation of those possibilities, you know, that the initial structure actually sets up communicative channels of mutual influence that travel through the non-obvious routes that are not explicit.

ME: This brings us to questions concerning the relations of your work or works to the traditions of performance and conceptual art.

JC: This is for me a slightly unexpected way of doing precisely that. Well, it's not entirely unexpected if and when you're interested in writing in networked and programmable media and you are in touch with the people who have been theorizing it. Then it more or less follows that if you have any interest in the nature of textuality, you'll end up looking for collaborative textual environments where there's real co-creation of the textual environment, and at the moment that means MOOs. So having determined to go down that road you don't have to leave anything behind. That's because it is also inclusive in its terms like in Espen Aarseth's map of cybertextuality the features of the MOO include all of the other features of the textuality he's trying to identify (...) Then the question is, it just occurred to me, that the digitised self-representation clearly and obviously leaves out this unrepresentable component but pretends to do otherwise. It pretends to make an accurate representation of identity and interaction where it clearly doesn't. It seems to me that the most direct and obvious criticism of what I'm establishing here, apart from its naiveté, is the fact that any art engages with the unrepresentable. I mean when an artist is challenged to say what does that mean, the classic artist response is if I had been able to explain it by other means then I would have. Which at best leaves it in the realm of the unrepresentable where it still has affect that it communicates in some way.

ME: So, do you think it's irritating to some people, audiences or theorists or both, that they have to be reminded of this impossibility of full presence in new media too? That be it telepresence or the supposed interactivity or whatever, you are still caught in the metaphysics of presence if you're dreaming about the full representation.

JC: I don't know, to be honest I feel it absolutely astounding at the moment that in the text that I've read about *Life on the Screen* this aspect doesn't seem to come into it. While I admit I'm not very well read in psychoana-

lytic critical thought, Žižek and his analysis of cyberspace clearly have a direct bearing on a sort of thing I'm fooling around with. But on the other hand, even there I haven't found this questioning of self-representation. The approach to that is normally still overall positive. To make a self-representation or a series of them in cyberspace is something that brings a new aspect of the problem into play and might lead to reconfigurations of the underlying or overarching analysis, not that I'd have a big problem with that. So that's my take on that at the moment.

ME: How would you define ephemeral writing that has been the central topic of this conference?

JC: To be honest, I wouldn't because in thinking about and working towards this conference I've thought about it to a certain extent and I can't come up with the definition. I think that various glosses of that subject that we've been hearing during this conference have had much more to do with the procedure or the methods of recording the text. In theory I think that inscription is not ephemeral and ... I think I think that if ephemerality is located anywhere it's located in the unrepresentable. The only thing I can imagine passing away without my knowing whether or not it has left a trace is the unrepresentable. I think I just said something quite complex but I mean it. Whereas anything I inscribe leaves a trace, which might survive for an interminable length of time. Therefore in this sense anything I subscribe will have some sort of life and some sort of persistent history. Whereas there are clearly things and aspects of what I'm that I don't know and have no way of knowing whether they'll leave a trace or not – and those I think are ephemeral.

ME: How far are we here from Derrida's archives and his other quasitranscendental concepts like the trace, dissemination or ashes?

JC: I don't have a problem with that. To some of that I would say that these arguments about the ephemerality are arguments about the nature of the archive, and about the nature of how we both create and destroy it. It's just an argument of the value of some type of archive building and archive destruction. But the point I'm trying to say otherwise is this aspect of not knowing, necessarily not knowing whether I've made a trace or not, and then such an object would be ephemeral. Certainly to me it would be.

ME: It might be just the right time to move into easier questions. Do you

sense any tension between the American hypertext community and the slightly more European cybertext community?

JC: I know what you mean and I think that there has been a tension and that it was right for there to be a tension but I think in fact, historically, the situation is changing. I think basically that a lot of hypertext practitioners and theorists are aware that if they're going to engage with this type of textuality more broadly they can't avoid the other parts of Espen Aarseth's quadrant. Recently for instance I met Jay David Bolter and he seemed to me to be very receptive of a more inclusive notion of writing in networked and programmable media.

ME: That's good to know, as there's not a word about cybertextuality in *Remediation*. Another curious thing is that whenever Bolter and Grusin approach some truly interesting works of art in Kassel or Linz, they seem to have shut their devices down, perhaps not to endanger their basic concepts and thesis in that already influential book. That's why I'm asking you what's the relation of your cybertextual work to *Ars Electronica*?

JC: I still feel myself to be very much on the fringes of that sort of world, which is already determined by visual and fine art and by performance art to a certain extent. But in this sort of context in the UK you'll have a more or less unique small grouping of people who describe themselves as poets or practitioners of poetry who are engaged with performance and with visual arts and there are inroads being made from the traditional literary world into these other public spaces.

ME: Have you traced any algorithmic and procedural similarities?

JC: To be honest I don't know. I think the answer has to be mainly no for programmatic and algorithmic approaches. Because as far as I'm aware nothing of that nature has been done. The work is mostly taking the medium as a tool and applying an aesthetic that already exists to it. It's installation art or performance art by other means, which is totally legitimate and there are very interesting things that have been done through the fact of the media and the reach of the media like we heard with David Garcia. That has had an overall influence in the sense of that I think it's an excellent way of doing art.

ME: What about Arnold Dreyblatt's *The Great Archive* with its writing and

glass plates and your plans that are a bit similar. Is it just a coincidence?

JC: It seems to me to be like a visual coincidence or a visual pun. For me the idea of doing a three-dimensional installation would emerge out of the structures of the little literary machines or literary objects that I rather made or imagine being made. Although if I made them, I would strongly desire to make them in the context of an overall aesthetic that is related to the contemporary visual arts aesthetic. In fact the OuLiPo is a similar sort of influence for me in terms of inscription and reading.

ME: Speaking of which what is the relation of your procedural works to those of the OuLiPo and the like?

JC: I don't want to say a great deal about it. There's an obvious influence but not direct, I've never corresponded with them or anything.

ME: How do you situate your work into their tradition or traditionalism of procedural writing?

JC: The thing I always say about the OuLiPo is that at least traditionally it has been about constraint and process and as it were the overcoming of constraints and process so that despite them you nonetheless produce work that has a literary aesthetic and value and all that goes with that. I would see myself in opposition to that, in admiration with the procedures and explorations but with no particular desire to come out on top, which I think is clearly there in the OuLiPo.

ME: Is that all you want to say about this subject?

JC: Yes, that's all I want to say because I feel I don't have enough direct interaction yet with the things in France and other parts of Europe that came out of the OuLiPo although I will invite some of those people into the MOO. Quite frankly I hope the situation would be otherwise. Somehow the OuLiPo does seem to be a closed shop of largely male writers who are practicing a peculiar form of hegemony in a particular area of literary operation.

ME: Another secret society of men.

JC: No, it's a closed ... yeah ... no, forget it. I'm sure there's a Groucho Marx pun waiting to happen.

ME: There ought to be a punch line but there isn't. What is your relation to postmodernism then? Would you fiercely resist if you were labelled as a postmodernist poet?

JC: I would be quite happy to be a postmodernist poet.

ME: Why's that?

JC: Why not. Say, in so far as postmodernist meant post-structuralist then absolutely. In some ways even so far as it means that modernism was some sort of thing to be superseded I would also be quite happy with that. But if it means that problems that were addressed by modernism have been superseded or dealt with, I would much prefer to be seen as a modernist or someone who is engaging with modernism. But who cares.

ME: I don't. I was asking this only because Brian McHale whom we recently interviewed hesitated for a second when asked if he thinks John Cayley and Eduardo Kac are postmodernist poets. What do you think about the future of MOOs in relation to emerging technologies like Bluetooth?

JC: I'm not sure if I want to talk about this because I think that it's like speculating about what technology would actually appear and work. The other thing that has happened in my relation to the MOO is the degree to which I'm pretty much immediately frustrated by solving purely technological and administrative problems with a product and a software, that is very low tech even by today's standards.

ME: Let's skip that then. How do you select your sources or given texts?

JC: In so far as I do that I do it by the usual methods. As a matter of practice, because a lot of what I do is about the procedure, I can go quite a long way in building and working on the procedure and then usually content arrives. Quite often there are a lot of things that are ready and literally find a way to interrelate and join together.

ME: How many *Speaking Clocks* are there? Here at the conference you showed the one that uses the work of Kenny Goldsmith.

JC: There's quite a few *Speaking Clocks*, but not many of them are installed anymore. *The Speaking Clock* can now take any text and quickly use it,

any text, well, except that it has to be on Macintosh. The thing I want to do with *The Speaking Clock* is to install it in a public place with a feed, say news feed from Reuters's and then you would have *The Speaking Clock* with current affairs, which would or could be a nice experience.

ME: Are you working on that now or in the near future?

JC: No, that's just an idea I like to have but I'm not a full time project or fund seeking artist in real life, and I'm not sure that I want to be.

ME: Have you ever wanted to be?

JC: Sometimes I feel I should want to but I don't think I do. No.

ME: How do you see the future of your projects?

JC: I don't know. The MOO project is big enough.

ME: Are there any projects you are engaged with now?

JC: Yes, I'm working on text movies and I have one commission that I'm seriously excited about I think. I'm quite interested in three-dimensional textual environments and I now got a commission to do an arrangement of object movies that would be like navigable textual environment. Also I'm going to collaborate on it so that it won't be what I would usually do. It should be a nicely rounded coherent whole that would hopefully have some disruptions so that this little world would have escape routes in it or places where its coherence breaks down and has to be recovered.