

Jody Zellen

Without a trace

http://turbulence.org/Works/without_a_trace/

With her concentration focusing on urban culture, webdesigner/artist Jody Zellen's works often incorporate materials repurposed/processed from mass-media news outlets.ⁱ Zellen initially developed a remarkable manual technique that involves tracing over the newspaper, transforming both images and headlines/text into elementary but revealing line drawings, which she juxtaposed in automatic static arrangements and in Flash animations. She describes her “quirky and purposely imprecise” hand-drawing style as “a distilled interpretation of the news” (Trace). Along the way, she began to use computer software to automate the tracing process. “By selecting specific photoshop filters”, she writes, “I can make a news image look like a black and white line drawing. The computer's drawing uses an algorithm, whereas my drawings are based on subjectivity” (http://turbulence.org/Works/without_a_trace/about.html). While the drawings done by Zellen are probably more imprecise, the drawings done by the computer are also raw and abstract. In most, a discernable image is present, but the context and activity reflected is sometimes far from clear; the traced lines essentially portray delicate outlines of figures and words. Combined with an interest in using the Internet as a “sculptural space”, she fragmentarily embeds figurative copies of these drawings of pictures and newspaper articles, into several her works (E-poetry).ⁱⁱ

Without a Trace (2008-09), commissioned by turbulence.org, uses the *New York Times* as one of its sources.ⁱⁱⁱ Randomly juxtaposed are a live RSS text feed and an image taken from the daily paper (processed into a line drawing rendered by computer). These elements are accompanied by “balloons” taken from “Real Life Adventures” comic strip panels (stripped of

text), a text excerpted from a comic, and a trace drawing made by Zellen.^{iv} As seen below in Fig. 46, the balloon and trace drawings are aligned in a column at left. To its right, in a wider column, a larger (machine drawn) image is at the top, the newsfeed is sandwiched between it and the three line (comic) passage at the bottom. In 2009, the combination of elements changed once per day, resulting in what Zellen calls a “calendar of juxtapositions”, the days of which look similar but are not identical (E-Poetry). While *Without a Trace* was being actively archived on the WWW (2009), viewing the work involved no more than visiting the site and clicking the “Daily Image enter” button.^v Output for a viewer is drawn automatically, presents itself as a static projection on the screen, and is viewed or read without further action required. Beyond accessing the interface, *Without a Trace* is a non-interactive work and no sounds are included. Viewers have three choices: to see the “random version”, “daily image”, or “archives”. Choosing “daily image” when the piece was “live” produced that day’s output, which was static (formed as described above and appearing the same even when the screen was refreshed; viewers had to return to the main interface in order to proceed). The “random version” currently archived issues the same essential template, but when the browser is refreshed, the appearance of every visual component changes, with the exception of the headline.^{vi}

The language aspect on this digital poem is variable. As seen in Fig. 46, text is intrinsically included via the headline newsfeed (appearing in a grey box in the middle on right), and in the text from the comic situated below it. Often, but not always, words appear in the drawings produced by Zellen, which appear at lower left. Automated drawings (upper right) sometimes feature incidental text, and the emptied comic strip balloons (upper left) never contain text—although certainly invite viewer to consider the absence of text as part of the projected dialog and imaginatively consider filling it.

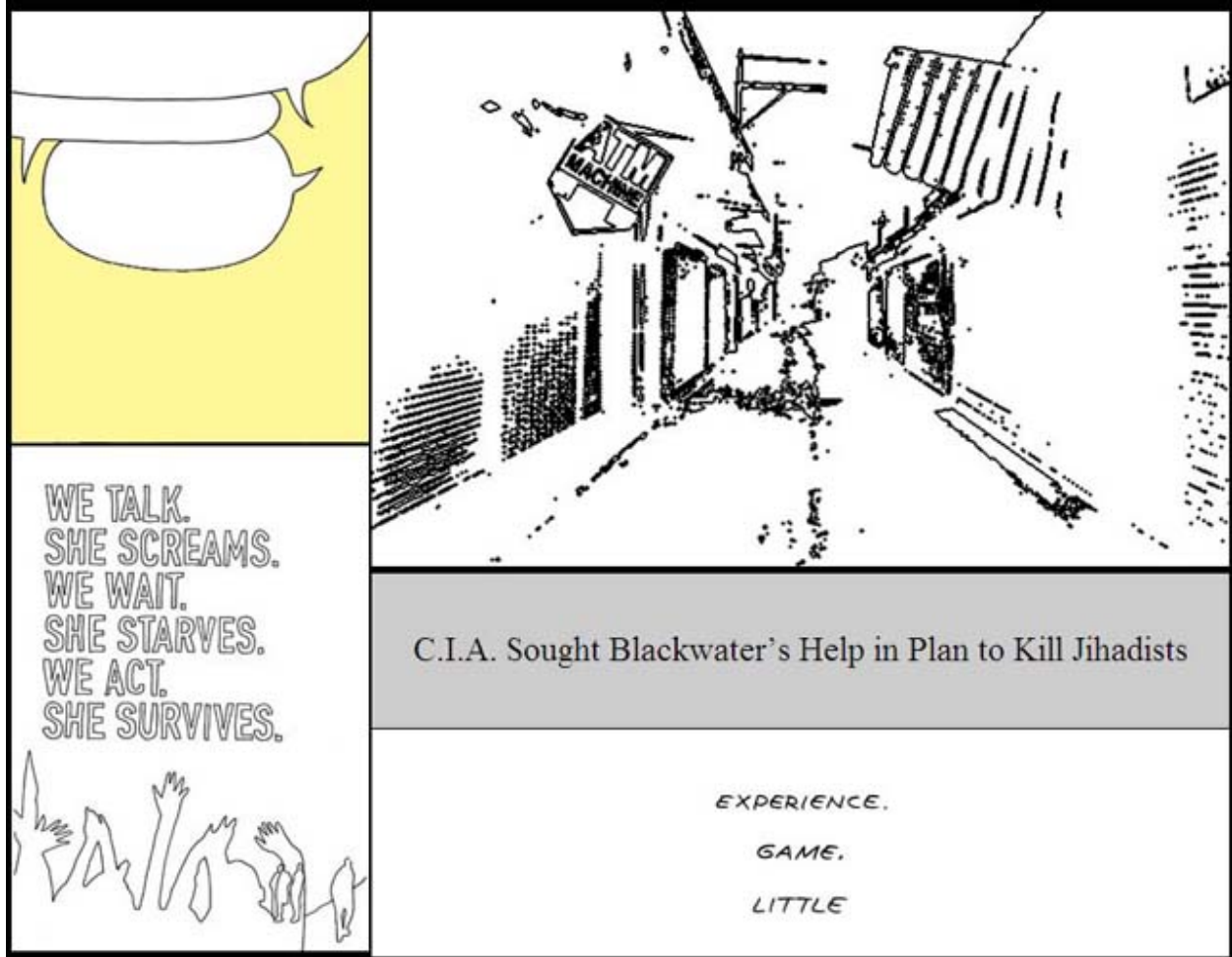


Fig. 46. Jody Zellen. Screenshot from *Without a Trace*. 19 August 2009.

In this example, created on August 19, 2009, the headline for the day, “C.I.A. Sought Blackwater’s Help in Plan to Kill Jihadists”, invokes a current event involving the “War on Terror” in the Middle East. Headlines that appear are always taken from front page news stories, so the focus of this textual component always concerns major global or national economic or political issues. To illustrate typical contexts presented, the archived headlines for the week August 15-21 2009—the sequence of which Fig. 46 is part of—are: “Retailers See Back-to-School Sales Slowing”; “Competing Ads on Health Care Plan Swamp the Airwaves”; “More Troops Are Sought for Iraq’s Restive North”; “Frailty Lingers in Housing and Producer Price

Reports”; “Turnout Seen as Uneven in Afganistan as Polls Close”; and, “Fed Chairman Says American Economy Is Poised to Grow” (Trace).^{vii} No matter what method of comprehension a viewer decides is best, significant political and/or cultural issues are going to be omnipresent as a result of this particular design (authorial) condition (decision). Sometimes the accompanying texts are weighted toward the graphical, creating a circumstance under which the viewer’s receptive tasks relies on interpreting visually connections brought forth by *Without a Trace*’s sometimes contrasting arrangements. Incidentally, as in Tisselli’s *Dada newsfeed*, or—looking further back, to the written poetry of Allen Ginsberg circa *The Fall of America*—the litany of headlines reads as a poem might, guided by significant news of the day. Linearly reading lines above, the first line sets a stage for a series of observations, mostly involving various types of unrest, which here happen to lead to a positive determination at the end of the week (i.e., “Economy is Poised to Grow”).

As previously indicated, headlines are not the only texts seen in an encounter with *Without a Trace*, and these other “voices” and ghost voices and images—which are part of every sampling—become a type of virtual oracle, or medium that uses its disconnected (though purposeful) attributes as a response to the fragmentary conditions experienced by inhabitants of contemporary culture. If only fractionally, random aspects of global culture—as filtered through the news and other media—are traced, and can be re-traced in the archive configured into the site. Doing so, the reader—over time—cannot only track a course of (then) current events, but can gauge the successes and failures of cultural initiatives and predicaments (such as the war on terror, or the economy), and also see and interpret what Zellen’s “oracle” had to say on any given day.

Zellen's work advances poetically by installing three short lines of text, in hand-written font, beneath the headline.^{viii} This text beneath the headline in Fig. 46, excerpted from a comic, "Experience./Game./Little", appears as always in three cryptic lines. One way to read the words themselves would be to derive them as saying the experience of a game, or experiencing a game—any sort of game—is something small (particularly in comparison to issues involving the sources of turmoil found in the headline, or in Zellen's drawing). While the two texts areas introduced thus far in this example are inherently separate—as are any others that appear—*Without a Trace*, as a poem, brings them together. Viewers find some way, despite any apparent discrepancies between them, to make unifying connections, and then proceed to attempt to integrate any other available information (textual or graphical) into a conceptual model (the interconnectedness) they have begun to build. In the same sequence referenced above (August 2009), the following sequences of words appear: "government/change/officials."; "sadly./choose/left,"; "depends./made/face"; "speak/this/talking"; "experience./game./ little"; "this/kill/finish"; and, "will/sentences./sea." (Trace).^{ix} These snippets, excerpts from comics, in spite of their quirky punctuation, can be seen—especially cumulatively—as poems containing messages readers can apply to the surrounding combination of images and perhaps connect thematically to the headline.

Zellen's drawing in the configuration above happens to include six lines of text (more than usual), which is clearly appropriated from a human needs campaign (illustrating cause and effect relations, encouraging people with resources to help those who do not). The illustration also appears to contain a solitary figure walking away alone (at right), and several hands raised in the air. Reconciling the human needs text above with the "game" aspect as considered above is not difficult. A concern for *polis* is clear in this circumstance: introducing the domain of

human suffering puts any sort of game, or gaming, into its proper context—which could be categorized as folly, or non-essential activity. In addition to these characteristics, in this example three different shaped comic balloons appear, and the automated drawing from the *New York Times* appears to be a desolate alley, but coincidentally happens to capture clearly text from a sign for an ATM Machine.^x Text surrounding the headlines, when and where it exists, does not always immediately connect to cultural or political concerns, so the charge of, and challenge for, the viewer is to fuse textual elements. Chance appearance of the ATM sign only serves to solidify the role capital plays across all walks of life, and provides a certain slant for unifying a reading of the materials. Zellen’s empty comic balloons, as always, can be perceived as a visualization representing things that could be said about the combination of these variables—in this instance representing a dialog about the issues at hand to be completed by the viewer, or perhaps indicating that no matter what is said, responses cannot be found to express conditions portrayed by the textual events rendered.

Of her work *All the news thats fit to print*—which exclusively uses image and headline feeds from the *New York Times*—Zellen writes, “The new juxtapositions become wrong, sad, funny, inexplicable, and often to the point” (News). While viewers could have difficulty bridging incongruent materials projected by *Without a Trace*, such is not exactly the case in its presentation, however. Its unique graphical qualities aside, the fact that the resources inscribed in the work include and go beyond the newspaper, while not necessarily broadening its focus, allows for expressive variation and capacity within the “wrong, sad, funny” self-impression of output described by Zellen above. Information taken (and reduced) from the comic arts particularly avail artistic qualities in this work, as more influences and considerations for participation comprise the equation. *Without a Trace* is minimalist, slow, and abstractly

pictographic, maintaining focus by virtue of its connection to a news source but not relying on that source entirely to incite a viewer's reaction or convey meaning. Although viewers could generate multiple different samples by using the "random version" section of the piece, only one sample of output was produced per day, and the site was not always kept up-to-date.

The notion of "trace" or "tracing" plays an important role in this work. Zellen (and her computer) trace over images (to make new images) and trace across the (transitory) news headlines to acquire content. "In this project," writes Zellen, "I have attempted to take...disappearing elements and bring them together for the time they are viewed on the webpage. However, like all WWW content these juxtapositions will disappear when the browser is closed. Only to live in memory--both ours and that of the computer—challenging the title and the notion; without a trace" (Trace). *Without a Trace* is a contemplative poem that gradually progressed during a year's time; while changing daily, it contained no kinetic properties. In her comments on the piece, Zellen writes that its construction, "takes as its point of departure the idea of a daily ritual;" every morning she manually made an image of the site and upload it to the project. Thus, despite the computer's intervention on several levels, a human aspect and scheme to the work is at its core. As news is fluid during a given day, the headlines and news images are always shifting. Combining the contents of them, creating new juxtapositions using initially detached stories while at the same time introducing new variables, Zellen proves is an act capable of broadening and delivering interconnected awareness in ways that singular representations cannot.

ⁱ Zellen's ongoing work, *Urban Fragments* (2009-10) is an up-to-date representation of her exploration in this area. See, <http://urbanfragments.net>.

ⁱⁱ In addition to using the automated technique in *Without a Trace*, Zellen uses it as a component in her 2010 works *The Lines of War* (http://www.urbanfragments.net/war_grids/) and *the lines of life* (<http://www.urbanfragments.net/drawnwar/>), as well as in 2007's *Empty thoughts for real life*

(<http://www.jodyzellen.com/comic/index.html>) and *Seen Read + Drawn*

(http://www.jodyzellen.com/drawings_ani.html) and other titles.

ⁱⁱⁱ Zellen also uses the *New York Times* as a point of departure in her 2006 work *all the News that's Fir to Print*, which she describes as follows: "Headlines and images from July 2005-July 2006 have been collected and are presented a constantly changing random sequence of image and text. The new juxtapositions become wrong, sad, funny, inexplicable, and often to the point. The headlines and images are presented with a scan of the front page of the paper in order to reference the original print context and its inevitable digital fragmentation"; see, <http://www.allthenewsthatsfittoprint.net/>.

^{iv} In response to a question I posed to her about the activity involved with such an integrated composition, Zellen writes she, "created an archive that contained 365 images of each type (traced drawings and altered comic). The code was written in such a way that these are only used once and they are randomly called upon. The RSS feed is always changing as is the news image that the computer 'traces'" (Email).

^v The same effect, minus the newsfeeds being up-to-date, can be seen by clicking the "Random Version" button on the project's archive page; see, http://turbulence.org/Works/without_a_trace/.

^{vi} Under the random version link viewers can refresh the page repeatedly to collage and re-collage a different set of archived elements. In the active version of *Without a Trace*, only the headline was live; in the presently archived version, the headline text ("Economy Grew at Rate of 2.4% in Quarter") is the only element that does not (will not) change when the page is refreshed.

^{vii} See http://turbulence.org/Works/without_a_trace/screenshots.php?month=08 for the archives for this period.

^{viii} In a 2009 email, Zellen explains her process in this section of *Without a Trace* as follows: "I copied out the words from the original comic and saved them in an archive. There are about 150 words that are randomly chosen to fill the 3 lines of words" (Email).

^{ix} The following lines, which perhaps better reflect the way a fixed set of lines are slotted into Zellen's construction, are taken from the slides archived on the *Without a Trace* website: "blow/will/found"; "forget it./got/knowing"; "look at/the/early"; "only/look at/sign"; "whatever/my/look at"; "sadly./choose/left," and, "being/something/left," (Trace).

^x The archived screenshot, in addition to the Jihadist headline, includes the texts: "Whatever/My/Look At" (from comic); "A big industry, a bigger responsibility" (Zellen); no text appears in the image (a cityscape). In both examples, two empty comic balloons are present.