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KATE ARMSTRONG INTERVIEW

Submitted by Greg J. Smith on Thu, 2008-02-28 22:34



[Kate Armstrong & Michael Tippett / [Grafik Dynamo](#) / 2004-2005]

[Kate Armstrong](#) is a Vancouver-based artist and theorist with a panache for new media powered permutational storytelling. Her work questions the nature of narrative in light of computation, social media and contemporary urban space. She has exhibited widely and is currently en route to Turkey for the March 8th launch of PATH, a bookwork generated by "an anonymous individual living in the city of Montreal between 2005-2007" at the Akbank Art Centre in Istanbul. Above and beyond her creative practice, she is the author of *Crisis and Repetition: Essays on Art and Culture*, sits on the board at [The Western Front](#) artist-run centre and is a lecturer at Simon Fraser University's [School of Interactive Arts + Technology](#).

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Greg J. Smith: An obvious starting point in any line of questioning about your work would be the primacy of text. The vast majority of your projects could be described as machines for making fiction and you've explored storytelling through [found documents](#), [the blogosphere](#) and [social media](#), and even as a geo-locative phenomena. This list of work more closely resembles a bibliography than any conventional understanding of the word portfolio. Could you talk about your relationship with storytelling and why it is a driving force in your work?

Kate Armstrong: I love your comment about the notion of machines for making fiction. It's so apt that it draws me away from the word "storytelling". I love stories, but there is always something in the concept of a story that to me indicates a kind of finish, and what I like to do is to play with alternatives to that. I like it when ideas are in play, and when writing is tight and elegant, and when there is something active that is taking place in terms of how the writing is compiled. This active element can be anything - mechanical, computational, physical, algorithmic, activity on the part of the reader.

I don't know about other people, but sometimes when I read, I want to read something repetitive, associative, or based on pattern. I think automated process has something to tell us about how to be contemplative in the face of the world. Things come to us in every format auditory, social, sensory, textual and the result is a relentless field of information out of which come various patterns. This to me is very algorithmic and mechanical and interesting.

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Of course the world is also very romantic and strange, and these experiences and ideas come from this field of information as well. So right there is a connection, between strangeness and algorithm. A major part of how I experience the world is by allowing text to sort of wash over me, and to let my brain make associations, and those associations are great when they are strange.

Enjoying pattern driven experience as a reader is not how everyone approaches a text, but it seems to me that that pattern is a story. That pattern allows your mind to go somewhere. Structured openness is attractive. You want a world that can give you interesting constraints and then leave you alone. I think it's ok for things to not make sense, as long as they still mean something. This whole thing started with writing.

Your process resonates with that of [Italo Calvino](#) (i.e. The Tarot deck as a narrative matrix in [The Castle of Crossed Destinies](#)). Is Calvino, or any of the [Oulipo](#) authors an influence on your recombinatory fiction?

The connection with Calvino has got to be about specificity. The more specific something is, the more magical the details. This is true of everything. I really love that about Calvino.

I heart Oulipo. I just like constraints in fiction so much. That project with the e, where the author didn't use an e in the whole book (*La Disparitions* by [Georges Perec](#)) – this to me is pure genius, so simple, and the whole thing goes forward.

I love how with Oulipo there is the layer of conceptual, systemic, algorithmic process, like when you think of an equation that produces a poem. But I also really like the style and subject matter of the “examples” that you see these writers using to illustrate these functions. Of course they are not examples, they are the fiction itself. But that is two layers, and I come across people who like the algorithm but not the content – though rarely vice versa – but I like both. I love the algorithmic process and mechanization and the way that is purely conceptual. I also like how the material that is deployed in these equations is cool and also a bit goofy, and how you really can read it like nonsense at points and yet still appreciate it. I return to these texts over and over. There are patterns and pleasures intertwined. I get this same feeling sometimes from logic textbooks, examples in phenomenology, outdated behavioral experiments, and [twitter](#).

When I studied logic in school I got such low marks that people were shocked. But I'd been really interested in the subject because any time you want to talk about an example or set an example, you have to bring in outside elements. To illustrate difference, you talk about chalk and you talk about cheese. I just loved that, from a literary standpoint. Because you have to think of these variables as referring to any construct or pattern in human history and culture, and what is story if it isn't that? Logic was nicely out of sync with elements that were external to it. You'd have a logical principle, plus the chalk, plus the cheese. Wow, not only the principle, but these insane substances and all that they are, all they can mean? It almost comes to a proof of a new logical principle. Think of it in contrast to mathematics, where the system works with numbers, a material that the system itself can seamlessly integrate and handle.

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The connection to Calvino isn't just about process, but content as you both exhibit an interest in urban space. In your *Pattern Language* project you harnessed wireless access points distributed across Montreal as a means to "activate" narrative fragments in an evolving storyline. The fact that you've utilized the city makes this project as much about cartography as narrative. Could you talk about the role of the city in this work and your current PATH project?

It was a great process in Montreal. There were a series of locations in the city that were participating nodes in a community wireless project run by an organization called [le Sans Fil](#). I chose 10 sites, cafes like Café Utopik and galleries like Zeke's Gallery, and there was also the Atwater Library. These became physical nodes in the Pattern Language project, so that a person logging in at these sites would activate the project and be tagged with a piece of this text I'd written, then the fragments would accumulate. I love that these particular sites were where these points of access were taking place, because they are vibrant sites that are really used by people, and they are also quite often social sites, where life is really happening. For me though it is as conceptually interesting to drive a narrative through any congress with physical space. That was really the driving force. That a narrative would emerge from the patterns of behaviour of a person in the physical world.

I did this project not long after [PING](#) (2003), which was also about narrative and physical space. With [PING](#), the idea was to explore the operation of a network protocol in the space of the city. You would call into the system on a mobile telephone and be guided to observe your surroundings and respond to the system using numerical prompts. That was one of my first experiments with integrating some kind of textual structure with an experience of cityspace. The text would come to you on the telephone so that you would be listening to it as you walk in the city.

PATH builds on Pattern Language in the sense that it is a new manifestation and concept for information that had been literally generated by the Pattern Language system. With *Pattern Language*, I wrote a text and attached it to this function on a community wifi system so that the text would accumulate when people logged in. With *PATH* I take the information that has accumulated to a singular individual over a period of time and I publish it in a 12 volume bookwork (pictured above). The texts are fascinating actually. You really can get a sense of movement and pattern even though it is utterly false. It is being

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exhibited in Istanbul in a show that is curated by [Basak Senova](#) and the concept of the show has to do with the unrepresentable, the gap, her word is "unrecorded". There is so much information here – 12 distinct 600 page volumes – and the pattern is completely real, completely mappable to real behaviour and real space, and yet it tells you nothing about the person. Nothing. Because it is a layer of fiction that has been attached to this person. So I like that of course, because it involves movement, fiction, the unrepresentable, and maps.



Given the discussion about the city as narrative space, your public art proposals *Lux* (pictured above) and *Shelter Cloud* are an interesting sidebar to your "text in the city" work. Both of these architectural and sculptural works use light as a medium to engage and inform the viewer. Is public, interactive art just another means of creating stories in the city or is there any other desire/driving force informing these works?

Lux and *Shelter Cloud* are project proposals that emerged from a really amazing collaboration with a design and architecture firm called bnode. It was essentially me, [Marc Baumgartner](#), and Innes Yates working on these. In a good collaboration, ideas are allowed to go where they want to go. I feel transcendently edified by the process I experienced when working with those guys on these ideas. I would say that the uniting principle for all of us – who each have really different ideas, approaches, and practices – had to do with thinking of interactivity in public space, and what that could be, how that could be held as a foundation from which all of these other constraints and concepts could emerge. This juncture of interactivity and public space is interesting because the focus for me is equally on the action and the place, and text didn't ultimately end up as a component in these projects. It could have, it just never seemed right for these. But my other projects that do have to do with cityspace and text also seem to me to relate to interactivity, to activity and action and space, and so that is where I would put the intersection with my own projects and these collaborative works: in the idea that "something happens". It isn't about story, it is about situation, process, experience: designing a public installation that has a useful and engaging output that remains useful and engaging over time. You know how they say that editing is the key to writing: it is kind of like that, but for situations. Situations and data streams.



[Sporting by Les Hutchins / generated in *Why Some Dolls are Bad*]

[Grafik Dynamo](#) & [Why Some Dolls are Bad](#) have mined social media for content with the latter being released as a Facebook application [see the related Serial Consign post [Facebook Fiction](#)]. Could you talk a little about your decision to work within the Facebook platform?

Let me start by saying that at the beginning I thought Facebook was as stupid as everyone else, and I still think it is stupid, but I also immediately noticed how it, more than other social applications, got deep into my world pretty fast. It was fascinating to see my social circles map into this system, and to be able to apprehend new things about existing relationships using these emergent tools. The way this tool suddenly appeared in culture and was uptaken by a critical mass, I just thought, this is a phenomenon. There was the obvious invitation of an open development platform that got me thinking how it would be interesting to explore it as a medium. The whole idea of an “app” seems so non-art to me, I thought it would be funny.

The culture of these other applications in Facebook – [Vampires](#) and so on – are so fatuous but so widespread. I wanted to see if I could make something fatuous and widespread that had some kind of literary element. It is a different audience sometimes in Facebook – I wondered if I could make a piece of dynamic writing that would capture the interest of groups of people who wouldn’t otherwise read experimental fiction or view web based new media art.

Also, I love the idea of a [widget](#). To me the widget signals total possibility. Something that can be tiny yet all powerful, totally open to determination in terms of function, and contain within it its own, superpowered distribution. That just cracks me up.

It’s flawed, of course. Making *Why Some Dolls Are Bad* for the Facebook platform has limited the audience on some level, because (mercifully) there are huge tracts of people who are not on Facebook, and they can’t see it. To others, it becomes lost in the chatter of apps.

What kind of a response did the piece get from the Facebook users that installed the application? Was the user base the tech-art crowd, or did you get any Vampires users onboard with the project?

It’s weird because on Facebook you can’t get any information about people who aren’t your friends. I could see which of my friends had added the application, and there is a number attached to how many people overall had added it, but I could never really see who it was who had added it unless they were part of my network. So from where I am sitting it seems abnormally stacked toward tech-art people, but that is just because those are the ones I am friends with and can therefore understand as individuals. But one of the

features of the project is that as a reader/participant in *Why Some Dolls Are Bad*, you can put together your own chapters, and reorganize the pages that you capture into little packets or books. So I was able to see what people would put together, and also who they were, when they published these. There are some great people who participated this way and I love what they've come up with in terms of combination and the concepts for titles etc. – it is very evocative of perspective and interests to see how people title these sequences. Anyway, there is still a vast majority of the users who are represented to me just by number, and I don't know who they are. I like to think they are people who don't usually read experimental fiction, but who can get with the idea that there is something otherworldly about a creepy-ass doll, or the basic structure of a [Dries van Noten](#) pump.

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