

REMEMBERING MY LIFE IN/OF WORDS
BY RICHARD KOSTELANETZ

One of the disadvantages of doing too many things, mostly with minimal financial support, is that you necessarily become sensitive to the enthusiasm of your collaborators. If a publisher of a new book of mine is enthusiastic, I tend to be enthusiastic as well. Conversely, if a collaborator is diffident, I am rarely motivated to transcend him or her, instead devoting my attention to other projects with more remuneration or, in lieu of that, those with more enthusiasm from the sponsor. This dependency upon others seems inevitable, given my professional situation; but those working without position or power don't need to be reminded about lacking leverage in motivating others.

The effects of this unfortunate disadvantage became apparent to me recently when the Media Lab at MIT invited me to participate in an exhibition about ID/entities that they were preparing in the summer of 2001. After a visit to the Lab itself, I realized that there wasn't much for me to do here other than supply prose texts. Whereas previous residencies in audio, video, and holography required my physical participation, this did not. Recent computer technology was beyond me, and no one was prepared to teach me. The fact that MIT didn't plan to pay me anything above reimbursements scarcely lit my fire. When I was asked in advance to reply to emails that would be sent from the exhibition's visitors at a terminal in the installation continuously to my home computer, my first thought was that ID/entities would become an unnecessary waste of precious computer time. (I also erred in referring to Hyun-Yeul Lee as my associate, or even as my technician, as was standards in previous residencies, needlessly dampening her enthusiasm; she was in every sense my collaborator. Only age and alphabetical convenience put my name first.)

When I went to Cambridge for the opening in October, I saw an electronic kinetic display among other similarly high-tech displays, this containing only words of mine. The whole high-tech show was so impressive that I first thought my own piece submerged within the Media Lab's ambitious designs. A piece by Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese, Van Eyck's Mirror, seemed on first viewing the wittiest and thus the strongest. No Boston friends came to the opening, because the Media Lab didn't want to accept my mailing list, to my discouragement. On the MIT announcement the artists' names appear in tiny print.

When Ms. Lee asked me to write something about our piece, first called Alternative Autobiographies, I began an explanatory text; but when I asked her for photographs and technical information necessary for a complete essay, nothing came. The draft begun by me languished in my computer for lack of necessary collaborative support. I began to feel that an unremunerative project not important to MIT need not be important to me. When ID/entities came to New York at the Kitchen at the end of November, I felt once again at the opening that the whole transcended any parts; so that whenever anyone complimented me on my piece as their favorite, I replied that the entire exhibition exceeded any of us. Since none of the participating artist' names appeared in the Kitchen's announcement for its show, tiny print falling into ether, I sensed that this second

sponsor's impression must have agreed with mine. When the Kitchen closed suddenly for an extended Christmas vacation, contrary to the continuous dates promised in the original announcement, leaving friends and at least one curator visiting New York during that time with nothing of mine to see, I felt that no one can beat guys who close their doors. The lack of not only visible advertisements but also reviews didn't help revive my interest either, as the ID/entities exhibition apparently fell between the categories of standard arts coverage. I even wrote a regular reviewer for a newspaper that had once published me. The reviewer replied that his domain was no longer "digital arts" but "ArtsOnline," which element was present only in my piece among those in the show. Ever less enthusiastic, I forget to tell friends about the show during the year-end parties and neglected to visit the Kitchen again until well after the New Year began.

Only when I finally returned to ID/entities during its last days did I realize that Ms. Lee's preparation was quite extraordinary: faithful to my purposes in nearly all respects, ambitious in using several projections, and rich in the use of my materials. Into an installation that resembled a writer's study with a desk, typewriter, and a wooden chair next to a simulated window on the left side and a fireplace on the right she cast several kinetic projections of words and only words. Above the fireplace was a rectangular protuberance that resembled a painting's surface. On it were projected at various diagonals key words drawn from my autobiographical texts. Looking like a video loop delivered from an overhead projector, this was actually a sequence of images stored on a computer hard disk.

Below it in the face of the fireplace was yet another projection with autobiographical prose passages, all of them horizontally arrayed, overlapping one another as the lines moved up and down the screen. In the larger window, perhaps two feet across by four high, was yet another projection of more words of mine, these arrayed vertically as well as horizontally, some of them drawn from my handwritten book *Portraits from Memory* (1975). On the top of the desk was a fourth kinetic verbal projection based upon the section "Likes/Dislikes" in another book, *Autobiographies* (1981). Onto the typewriter were large horizontal words projected to move upwards continuously, suggesting the charming illusion of words continuously emerging from my typewriter (as they used to do, until I got a computer). The sound effect of typewriter keys tapping contributed to this scene.

On the other side of the typewriter, where the desk met the side wall, was an inkwell and other tools on which yet more words were projected. (This was perhaps the subtlest touch, easily missed.) Moreover, my words in circles were projected down upon an adjacent circular horizontal platform, a few feet in diameter, a few inches off the floor. Given the speed at which the words were moving, they created the illusion that the platform might be spinning. I could see spectators thinking twice before setting their feet upon it. These images too came from a computer. Next to this platform was a waist-high stand with a computer terminal to which spectators were invited to send me messages, as they did (and to which I replied, mostly with witty one-liners, for which I have an evident taste, even at three in the morning). At MIT, this feature worked; in New York, it didn't, I regret to say. To all this kinetic presentation of my language was added a continuous soundtrack drawn mostly from my *New York City* (1984), an extended electro-acoustic composition of and about the sound of my hometown. (Over my objections Ms. Lee added some 1950s sentimental jazz that always sounded in appropriate to me.) Looking at the installation more closely, I realized it should have been titled *A Life in/of Words*.

At perhaps 25 feet by 15, 12 feet high, the installation was thus busy, abundant, enveloping, and awesome in ways that I like my art to be. It couldn't be assimilated quickly, not even by me (who authored all the words). In that respect of requiring time to be understood— more time than even I was able to give it at the two crowded openings—My Life in/of Words resembled an adjacent piece in ID/entities based upon Merce Cunningham's choreography for his hands. It also resembled my holograms which intentionally tried to transcend anything that could be perceived as quickly as most photograph are.

Only after the exhibition closed did I receive a copy of the only review, which apparently appeared only on the Internet, at Wired.com. Written by Noah Shachtman, whom I didn't meet, it identified ours as "the best looking of the installations." Thanks. "In the apartment's "fireplace" is an orange glow slowly swallowing entries from an autobiographical timeline in yellow and blue. To the left, on a desk, also all white, sits an ancient, black typewriter. A spotlight illuminates the machine, which holds a legal-sized leaf of paper. References to Eliot, Pound and Auden in 72-point type are projected on the page. Synopses of books and records scroll by the right of the typewriter. A garbled pile of projected words spills out of a mock inkwell on the left." So sharp he is in noticing that last detail, which I thought a crowning touch. Shachtman concludes, "Not even the PC positioned a yard to the left, with the invitation to e-mail Kostelanetz, can spoil the serenity of the scene." The artist/writer Barbara Pollock, whom I do know, drafted a review that concluded, "Author Richard Kostelanetz's *Alternative Autobiographies* is an evocative installation in which words, animated and projected, replace the writer. Using his New York apartment as a theatrical stage set, lines of text dance across the desk, jump in and out of the inkwell, and rumble across the window in traffic patterns. Poignantly, the author's words also spool out of Smith Corona typewriter, the clicking sounds of the keys a haunting reminder of a recent past now long-gone." However, this paragraph disappeared before her review appeared in print. Bad luck on this work, once again. My Life in/of Words also extended to new levels my decades-old interests in both new media for language and experimental autobiography. Taking too long to appreciate it fully, I regretted not recommending it more enthusiastically to friends, possible reviewers, and institutional collectors. Overcoming initial diffidence, I began to love My Life in/of Words so much that I wanted to take it home, but it was too large for any spaces available to me, while the computers weren't mine. I cried when it was torn down. What my friend Peter Andros did retrieve was parts of the setting (that could be rebuilt) along with the kinetic verbal images on digital bits, while Eric Solstein took some videotape of it to incorporate into a video portrait he is planning to do of me as a writer, all with the hope that My Life in/of Words will someday soon be reconstituted.