

An Interview with William Poundstone

by Brian Kim Stefans

I first came upon William Poundstone's work when Kenneth Goldsmith posted a link to his massive Shockwave work, "New Digital Emblems," to the Ubuweb listserv. This piece seemed to go against the grain of much internet art and poetry at the time in several ways. For one, it also was not an HTML work, but entirely contained within the Shockwave file, making it inaccessible to web spiders and text algorithms – it has a "gated community" effect to those of us that like to pillage other web sites for texts for our own works. It was all very carefully "written," not adherent to random or algorithmic processes, and the imagery and text all had a cypher-like quality, rather than being strictly oriented toward surface effects.

The site also foregoes the "gesamtkunstwerk" – Wagnerian "total art" — feel of web art sites that celebrates digital technology with beautiful, but often mystifying, interfaces, imagery that suggests a career in the graphic arts, and heavy sound elements, often of a light industrial, techno feel. I love these kinds of sites, of course, but Poundstone's site, despite its use of a large range of web technologies, was startling for avoiding any of the trappings of techno-culture, while at the same time suggesting a deeper historical tradition for the "interface" – indeed, suggesting the heroic emblem, with its iconic image, motto, and explanatory text, as being a pre-digital analog.

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What is most striking, though, once you reach the main interface – a great spiral bedecked with largish circular icons and emanating from a conch shell in the middle — is the easy dexterity with which Poundstone negotiates several different aesthetic traditions: poetic and imagistic traditions dating back to the Renaissance, modernist/postmodern photography, collage and literature (Surrealism and Oulipo, most obviously), not to mention the developing traditions of web art itself which he seemed instinctively to know how to exploit to create an unmistakably “literary” site that, nonetheless, would not have been done justice in a book. There is a simplicity and grace to how he uses sounds and imagery – the fades, the loops – which is countered by a quirky, ironic use of sound effects – dings, whistles, digital harp sounds – fonts in loud colors, text and navigation, not to mention the mischievous subversions of common imagistic codes in the emblems themselves.

I won't bother to describe further exactly what happens inside the “New Digital Emblems,” or even to explain what a heroic emblem is, since you are obviously free to go there yourself, which not only saves me some time but saves you some reading. I would also suggest a visit to Poundstone's shorter Shockwave pieces found at the Ubuweb site.

Thomas Swiss asked me if I wanted to interview someone for the relaunch of the Iowa Review poetry site, and my first thought was to interview Poundstone. After breaking the ice with a few preliminary emails, but before I had a chance to assemble any questions, he sent me a personal introduction that I thought would make a good introduction to the interview, and so it appears, somewhat revised, below.

* * *

Here's a little background on my somewhat unusual career. Basically I'm a visual artist who writes books as "day job." Most of my art is digitally composed photographs or lightbox transparencies. I use a Tachihara 4 by 5 view camera (it's still a lot more flexible and higher-res than digital). Though nearly all of my art is photographically derived, it often doesn't look "photographic." And of course a lot of it combines text with image. I suppose this most immediately alludes to the 1960s-vintage L.A. art tradition of same (I live in Los Angeles). This one, from a series of lightbox transparencies called "Landscape Views," sort of turns the Ruscha Hollywood sign around.

Some of my stuff is closer to old-school concrete poetry. "Untitled Anagram Poem" is from a series commemorating outsider writers I admire. In this case, the text is an anagram of "Francis McElroy."

"Androgyne with a Gun" is from a group of androgyne portraits. As a gay man, I've always been interested in the treatment of gender in photography. For each of these portraits, I shot a male and a female model in identical poses derived from pornography, advertising, or the George Platt Lynes school of arty photography. The lighting and camera placement had to be identical, too, and then the male and female images were morphed.

I've used similar techniques with still-lives. "Red Pepper" plays on the cliché of the eroticized still-life (I made it after reading Alexander Nemerov's book on Raphaëlle Peale.) I was wondering how much I could make a bell pepper look like a human back and still look like a "straight" photograph. In this image, the shape of the pepper is almost entirely from a human model, with the pepper's color and texture mapped onto it.

In general, I try to keep current in the sorts of software being used in film effects, advertising, TV graphics, and other popular media: tools that normally aren't associated with "high" art, yet which are already a part of the popular visual lexicon. These seem like a rich field simply because they haven't been explored quite so much. For much the same reason, I've followed web art and literature closely since its inception. (I also like the luminance of the computer screen, more like a lightbox than the printed page or color photograph.) My first web project (c. 1996?) was a very simple interactive text – html with no pictures! You were presented with a sentence drawn from supermarket tabloids. Clicking on a word led to another sentence having to do with the chosen word, and so on. It was a "multiple-choice narrative" except that instead of having explicit choices, you clicked on whatever word most appealed to you. The result was interesting, or so I thought at the time, for being in a middle ground between making sense and not making sense. But that piece is no longer up, and I think I've lost it through successive hard disk crashes and changes of ISPs.

The two pieces you mentioned ("New Digital Emblems" and the series at Ubu.com) are the only real web projects I've got up now. Anticipating your questions, let me give a little background on them. The UbuWeb pieces are inspired by Al Hanson's Fluxus-era collages. Hanson did these amazing collages using, for instance, the wrappers from Hershey's chocolate bars. Hanson would cut up the wrapper so that you don't see the complete word, just fragments like "HER" and "SHE" and "HEY." As I recall, one of these collages formed the silhouette of a shapely woman — a really silly idea, like a graphic from a James Bond movie title, that also tied into de Kooning-esque gynecophobia. But mainly, it was a masterpiece of economy of means.

One of the nice things about our digital zeitgeist is that you can rip

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off someone's pre-digital idea and, by the time you've translated it to an .swf, it doesn't seem like such a rip-off. (Or maybe that's what Delacroix meant when he said that you have to be able to recognize when a predecessor hasn't gone far enough.) I figured that (a) PhotoShop would make it so much easier to do the cutting and pasting Hanson did with scissors and paste and (b) instead of a still collage, you could have an animation. The introduction of the time dimension seemed to enhance the poem-nature of the results. They are more poems and less pictures than Hanson's collages.

From the textual side of things, this is close to an anagram poem. It's technically what the Oulipo call a "beautiful in-law." This is where you compose a text under the arbitrary constraint that you can use only the letters existing in another, given text. In other words, if working with the "Mr Goodbar" label, I can use only letters that appear in that label — I don't invent letterforms — but, unlike an anagram, I don't have to use all the given letters, and I can use letters more often than they appear the label. As with all these Oulipian exercises, the point is to try to say something even as you're being throttled by this essentially pointless restriction.

Visually, I think the results work best when you can't quite recognize the product whose typography is used. There is then this nagging, subliminal familiarity — Freud's sense of the "uncanny." There is a museum of typography on American consumer product labels, and we never see it because we've learned to tune it out. I say "museum" because it's not all contemporary. There are labels and logos that have been unchanged in decades, preserving echoes of fifties biomorphism, constructivism, and everything else.

The "New Digital Emblems" site of course attests to my interest in emblems. Like much that I admire, emblems are really on the margins of art and literary history. Pre the dot.com bust, so much that

was written about the web struck me as wrong-headed. People imputed what I can only call “magic” to web’s feature set. Low-cost-per-million multimedia interactivity was going to change the world. I knew that people had said similar things about the emblem, and had offered, in outline, many of the same reasons for it. So the emblem, often literally magical, became a caricature of the web.

As your Arras site link aptly describes it, “New Digital Emblems” is “quasi-didactic.” It has relatively a lot of text (I think I computed 15,000 words total?), and big chunks of text are normally outre for web art or web anything. This emulates/parodies the commentary, often lengthy (and often in verse) that accompanied the old emblem books. The emblem anticipated our culture of criticism, the idea that a poem or novel or film is valued by how much can be written about it. Emblems helped shape the idea that a work of art can’t just be something, it’s got to be this mystery that resists any definitive explanation. These values are still defining web art and literature. The ideal is so often a site that is different every time you visit and which can never be fully experienced. All of which is fine, assuming that the site really is an endless cornucopia of good and original content. Which is unlikely. So often, sites are only being coy — withholding content and dispensing it to those who run a maze of links and clicks. This “I know something you don’t” smugness is equally behind the emblem books.

As far as I can tell, the audience for my books is largely disjoint from my art. Most of them are on science with a philosophic slant of one kind or another. A couple were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize: *Labyrinths of Reason*, which is on the implications of paradoxes for the philosophy of science, and *The Recursive Universe*, about the use of computer simulations as a tool for understanding the nature of physical law. I also do occasional book reviews and magazine pieces.

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Another piece you might want to look at is “White Poem” [www.williampoundstone.net/White_Poem.html]. The poem text is a so-called travesty, that is, a computer-generated text that obeys the statistics of a given input text. The idea was conceived by Claude Shannon way back in mainframe days, and Shannon’s work was influential with the Cage-Rauschenberg crowd. I’m working on a series of these travesty poems currently. My modus operandi is to pick a specific theme — in this case, whiteness, as in Emily Dickinson’s lace-white Indian Pipe — and then assemble a large and diverse assortment of quotes bearing on that theme. (I keep a “commonplace book” so it’s easy to search for every incidental mention of “white.”) These quotes are input into the travesty program. The program outputs a kind of marvelous rant on the chosen theme, from which I pick the phrases I want to use in the poem.

The Interview

I’ve been interested in the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay for some time, not only in terms of his relationship to concrete poetry and the curious “non-secular” nature of his aesthetics, which I read partly as a response to globalization, but also in his work with Scottish dialect poetry and, of course, his work with the emblem. In your introduction above, you didn’t mention Finlay, nor any other poets beyond the Oulipo writers and Emily Dickinson. Do you feel any affinity with any particular visual or non-visual poet or poetry? Outside of Ruscha, are there other visual artists working with language whom you think particularly relevant to your work?

Finlay has been a big influence on me, for pretty much the same reasons. I suppose I’m as mystified (alarmed?) as anyone at Finlay’s “non-secular” philosophy/politics/aesthetics (or maybe, as mystified

and alarmed as Finlay intends me to be). What bothers certain people about Finlay is something I actually find interesting: the way his work purports to be propaganda for a cause that is so well known to the audience “that it needs no introduction.” Many of Finlay’s pieces are “Nike ads.” They do not say much, as if confident that they do not need to say much. As Tom Lubbock said, Finlay acts like he’s commenting on this pre-existing discourse that doesn’t exist.

I think this is interesting because it cuts to the central paradox of visual poetry, the incommensurability of the visual and the intellectual. To me concrete poetry succeeds because of a certain disjunction between image and text. I think that is why so many of the early landmark works used typography from advertising and packaging. Pignatari’s Coca-Cola poem was able to invoke one set of cultural expectations with the typography and play them against the entirely different meanings of its text. Finlay achieves a comparable effect in an even more novel way, by attaching these wholly outre messages to an aestheticizing style. In a way, Finlay’s art is about the purposeful misreading of art.

Come to think of it, the element of faux propaganda also exists in the work of another artist/poet I admire, Piotr Szyhalski [www.mcad.edu/home/faculty/szyhalski/Piotr]. Szyhalski plays with the Polish and Soviet bloc poster tradition. Like Finlay’s, Szyhalski’s work addresses issues of power (and revolution and even weaponry.) It doesn’t seem to bother people as much Finlay’s work, though, maybe because Szyhalski is a bit more clearly distanced from his messages.

I read lots of non-visual poetry, but I don’t see it as having a perceptible “influence” on what I do, save maybe in the loosest sense. I’m vastly more influenced by looking at the work of other Web artists: Like most of us, I guess, I see a cool effect and wonder what

I could do with it. I suppose that sounds terrible to be so concerned with medium-specific gimmicks, but really, all art is about medium-specific gimmicks. We're still where cinema was in Lumiere's day, trying to work out the gimmick set.

Among non-Web people normally categorized as visual poets as opposed to visual artists (the distinction being mainly one of "marketing") I would especially mention Tom Phillips and Gabriel Pomerand. Among non-Web visual artists who use text, I would cite practically all the Los Angeles school of text art, from Baldessari to Alexis Smith, Raymond Pettibon, and Larry Johnson. I am not sure why the way artists use text in Los Angeles seems different from elsewhere — for obviously this is an utterly disparate bunch — but it does seem different in aim from what, oh, Jenny Holzer or Douglas Kosuth do with text.

Going back further, I like most of the great Russian and German innovators of typography. I especially like Wyndham Lewis.

Thinking in particular about your "Androgyne with a Gun," do you think there is something peculiar to digital technology that calls for the "morphing" together of identity structures once considered whole and inviolable, on the one hand, or simply bogus chimeras on the other? That is, if one were to understand certain elements of post-modernism as suggesting that the "self" is really a congeries of socially determined fragments, and that one's sense of identity was a romantic and doomed attempt to make them cohere for the sake of "identity," do you think that the internet and digital representation has suggested the necessity for something else entirely — a "cyborg" identity, perhaps? I'm not phrasing this very well — perhaps it's not an element of your work. How do you find your images working in a social realm — is there an oppositional element there?

One thing that I think is intrinsically digital is the idea of the continuum. With the androgynes, for instance, the morphing program can generate any numerically specified mixture of genders whatsoever, say 46% female and 54% male. That would be a challenge to do in an oil painting or a non-digital photograph. The effect of “Androgyne with a Gun” hinges at least partly on the idea that, whether gay or straight, male or female, there’s no cultural autopilot response to cheesecake images of androgynes. Culture is a useful fiction that supplies absolutes. With its “slippery” way of denying categories, digital art often stands in opposition to culture (“Arithmetic is the enemy of culture,” one of my emblems reads.)

I think it is legitimate to read much digital art, and especially, the whole Web/cyberpunk culture, as an illustration of postmodern identity theories (“On the Web, no one knows you’re a dog.”) It’s worth noting that as “treatment” under British law proscribing homosexuality, computer pioneer Alan Turing was forced to take female hormones. In the famous 1950 paper describing the “Turing test” (the cornerstone of the field of A.I.), Turing starts by describing an “imitation game” in which people, communicating only by keyboard, attempt to disguise their gender — a “game” that is being played in today’s chat rooms all the time. Identity issues have been tied up with the digital realm from its inception.

All this said, I don’t mean to oversell the novelty of digital technology, either. Susan Sontag complained that practically all modern photography rehashes surrealism. That is equally (partly) true of digital art. It uses a technology that is especially well suited to the surrealists’/Oulipians’ old tricks — the chimera, the “irrational” juxtaposition. I would also tend to position my androgyne images within the culture of drag. There is a long tradition of defying gender roles through whatever “technologies” are available.

*One of the questions that seems to be bugging people about digital technology is whether there is anything that can suggest a “break” with pre-digital art practices. Lev Manovich’s book *The Language of New Media*, for instance, suggests that digital filmmaking is closer to painting than photography, or even more to animation than film-making — not so much a break as a confluence and fuller realization of recognizable techniques. Your use of the word “continuum” suggests that there is a “break” with the time-honored practice of collage aesthetics, and, in your intro paragraphs above, you write that you can “rip-off” someone’s pre-digital ideas and follow-through on their implications without being derivative. What’s your sense of how this period in art-making can be characterized by the rise of affordable digital creation machines for artists? Do you think that there is a way that all art-making of the next decades or so will be affected by these technologies, whether the artist uses them or not?*

There is a real break with the pre-digital past. Your mention of collage is pertinent: A lot of people could see PhotoShop only in terms of collage. They had the reaction, “Well, it’s too bad Hannah Hoch didn’t have this in the twenties, but what are ‘serious’ artists going to do with it today?” And as far as I can tell, pre-digital photocollages have been almost totally irrelevant to digital art. The genius of photocollage was how both its technical strengths and weaknesses played into the artistic conversation of the time (just by doing what was easy with scissors and paste, you got instant “cubism” or instant “dada.”) Digital art also follows the line of least resistance. We tend to make the most of the transformations that are easy to do with current tools. But its strengths are very different from what went before. In collage the question you keep asking yourself is always “what?” — what do I combine with this? In digital art, the most common questions are almost always of the form “how much?” You are dragging a slider on a continuum and trying to decide what is optimal. It’s a different way of working and thinking.

I think digital art will affect all art-making, if it hasn't already. By that I just mean that there is this critical mass of artists working digitally, and their work ultimately influences everyone. Maybe this is easiest to see in photography. Just as the use of color changed the way we see black and white, digitally edited photographs are changing the way we view non-digital. Even if your reaction is to throw up your hands and say you want no part of digital photography, that in itself becomes a statement. And if you see yourself as a creative photographer, you will find other ways to be creative. So by "influence" I don't mean that all art will look more like digital art (assuming it's got a "look".) Some art will strive to look less like digital. The way a new technology influences late- and non-adopters is a complicated thing, part Ludditism and part Stockholm syndrome. I think, though, that all art will be different than it would have been, had digital art not existed.

New Digital Emblems seems, to me, to have a fairly "transparent" interface, i.e. one that doesn't really try to escape the use of "icon" as we are familiar with it on the desktop, and yet it seems innovative to me in that you are suggesting that this interface has roots that go back to the pre-Renaissance heroic emblem — you write that the Emblems "parody" the web interface in this way. What's your sense of the development of the idea of the "interface"? Do you think there is room for innovation here — as in what the Rhizome folks pursue with their spirals and galaxies and other Java applets — or is it not important to you? Do you have any desire to create more interactive pieces, or will your focus remain on visual pieces like the jpgs you sent me and the shorts on ubu? Any interfaces out there that strike you as having promise?

I like Rhizome's experimental "interfaces," especially Starry Night. For a while the big deal with artistic sites was to re-present the con-

tent of other sites, and then that kind of got old. I think the reason is that if you just want to see “random” places on the Web, Netscape and Microsoft’s linear browsers already make it easy to do that. As I see it, the Rhizome interfaces take almost the opposite approach. They really are intended to help you find stuff you want to find (whereas most web “art” tries to get you lost, one way or another!) The information density of Starry Night is high, as is true of a good map or chart. X, Y, and brightness are all significant, and you can read the text without losing the big picture. The downside is that the interface still isn’t adequate to the complexity of what’s being mapped. I think it’s at the level where almost everyone who sees it is impressed but no one actually uses it the way it’s intended, as a way of reading Rhizome texts. It will probably take something like a 3-D interface and really high resolution to make the idea practical.

I don’t really consider New Digital Emblems to be “interactive.” I mean, I know that some people will say that it is because you can click on things and make something happen. But that is only the baseline “interactivity” of a table of contents. All the content is already there; you just decide how much of it you want to look at and in what order. I conceived the site’s “transparent” interface in opposition to the more usual (opaque?) type, where links or buttons or hot spots are hidden and the user must do a random walk in search of content. The opacity of these interfaces tends to enhance the illusion of interactivity — or at any rate, the sense that something really cool is going on. It is this pose of mystification that I think is parallel to historic emblems.

While New Digital Emblems is not itself interactive, it does take interactivity as a subject matter. It seems to me that the only meaningful interactivity is that where the user’s actions produce original content. By “original content” I mean something that the site designer could not have fully anticipated. And of course the content has to

be interesting. So you need an art- or literature-generating algorithm, and that is a tall order. You can nonetheless get legitimate interactivity using the networked game concept. An example is Masaki Fujihata's *Light on the Net* [link to be provided], where users manipulate a bank of light bulbs in a Tokyo office building. While the basic idea of remote-controlling something over the Web has now been done to death, and at varying levels of quality, I would cite *Light on the Net* as a real watershed.

While I don't think that anything I've done so far qualifies as interactive, I am toying with several ideas for such. Some of the Oulipian concepts are easily programmable and could be enhanced in a networked context. One is the "Morpholo," a type of modular artwork conceived by Theiri Foulc c. 1983. Despite the name, it doesn't have anything to do with what we'd now call a "morph." It is more like the concept of a "travesty" applied to the visual realm, a way of generating all-over pictures that are poised between visual sense and nonsense. There are many degrees of freedom in a Morpholo picture. I think it would be worthwhile to do a collaborative version where users change the site's picture at will. With this genre of work, the trick is to find a way that every person can leave a real trace without obliterating everyone else's trace. On some rollercoasters, there's a point where everyone sticks their wad of chewing gum on this growing mountain of chewing gum — it becomes a collaborative sculpture, appalling and yet fascinating, and often truly "sculptural." That has always struck me as a useful paradigm for collaborative web pieces. The shape of that chewing mountain is emergent — no one plans it. I'm hoping that a Morpholo web piece might have a similar emergent quality.

I'd say the most exciting thing in interfaces are the "ubiquitous" digital works for PDAs that are starting to come out. Being able to beam a digital work to someone creates an entirely different social context

for digital art. As with any art form, changing the social context changes practically everything. The “digital divide” is real: There are a lot of people in our society who are not on the Web for economic reasons. So right now, digital art is like Victorian photography, where you had to be landed gentry to afford a camera. At some point, someone is going to invent the digital spray can, a way of transmitting digital art so cheap and portable that every inner-city kid will have one. It will be interesting to see what they do with it, and how it affects the whole spectrum of “high” and “low” digital art. We’re not there with this generation of PDAs, but it’s moving in that direction.

I’m interested in a distinction you made earlier, between language usage by west coast and east coast artists. There does appear to be a difference in temperament between the way writers on each coast write poetry, but here you are extending this to visual artists choice of language. Would you care to elaborate on that distinction? Also, many of the writers you mention in the Emblems are from the margins of literary activity, and many of the artists are either “outsider” artists or borderline “outsider”? Do you think the web has made a shift in our understanding of the cultural center and margins? In our understandings of how art operates within, and as an expression of, the local?

I’m not sure I’ve ever tried to articulate that west coast/east coast difference — nor am I sure that it has much to do with the differences in poetry between the coasts. But let me see if I can say something halfway sensible about it.

The gimmick with any text-based art (including most concrete poetry) is semantic paradox. The semantic content of the text is in conflict with the way the text looks or the way it is presented to the viewer in a picture or poem. This isn’t a pipe, but it is, but it really

isn't.

It seems to me that what's different about the use of text by (many) Los Angeles artists is an additional distancing of the artist from the implied "speaker" of the text. Baldessari's sign paintings from the 1960s are all basically trying to "talk" the viewer into accepting them as great paintings. I don't think that's Baldessari talking to us; it's a deadpan invented persona that evokes, maybe, this bullheaded American attitude that you can talk your way into or out of anything. Or you have the early Nauman neon pieces that voice uncool messages like THE TRUE ARTIST HELPS THE WORLD BY REVEALING MYSTIC TRUTHS — I can imagine Margaret Keane saying that, maybe. So a lot of L.A. text art has this crypto-literary "game" underlying it, of inventing these unseen personae. It's been a fruitful idea; people are still playing with it today.

Another element you find in L.A. art is the "big, dumb word." This is mainly Ruscha's discovery, I guess, that if you take a meaningless word and make it monumental, it becomes interesting. It creates *jamais vu* — the opposite of *dèjà vu* [fix this in the html to read properly, with accents] *vu* — where you look at something familiar and realize it's strange.

The emblem site invokes a lot of "outsiders" because they're a major interest of mine, both the visual art kind (who are getting a lot of attention) and outsider writers (who generally aren't.) I wouldn't relate that specifically to the Web. The Web is better at erasing geography than the outsider/insider type of dichotomy. (Incidentally: Where are the "outsider" web artists? I have to think that if Henry Darger was alive and under 35, the Vivian Girls and the weather diary would have been conceived for the Web. Of all the self-indulgent web journals choking servers, I've yet to see anything remotely comparable. It's all "vernacular," nothing "outsider.")

With your interest in Oulipian writing techniques — many of which require the most severe form of writerly ambition to execute — have you written any works that you'd like to see published in, say, a magazine or book?

I haven't used Oulipian techniques to write novels that don't use the letter e, if that's what you mean. I guess that strikes me as pertaining to a different period of literary history (a period for which I've great affection.) What I take away from the Oulipo is the idea of literature as conceptual art and the idea that algorithms can be a tool for exploring the limits of literature or art. While I wouldn't set down to do the exact sort of thing that Perec or Queneau did, I think a lot about their examples in doing what I do.

*As a writer who has been nominated for the Pulitzer, it must have crossed your mind that the *New Digital Emblems*, which is among other things a great piece of scholarship and synthetic critical thinking, would not be recognized soon in literary culture, both commercial and academic, or even in art culture, where I'm sure writing that links Darger's *Vivian Girls*, Thomas Cole's *The Titan's Goblet* and a 16th century emblem by Alciato (to take one example) would be considered innovative, even provocative. What sort of feedback or reaction have you gotten about the site? Are you getting a lot of hits, and is it being accepted — by writers, by net artists — as a work of "art" even if much of it is an essay? Does it concern you that you could never sell the *Emblems*, and does their immateriality affect their role in culture? Lastly, how do you think this material would have worked as a book?*

I wish I had a general solution to the marketability problem. Economically, digital art is about where video art was thirty years ago. This time around, there aren't nearly so many people willing to

take the stance that selling through the gallery system doesn't matter.

In my own case, I sell non-web artworks through the gallery system, so it's possible to rationalize the web pieces as a "loss leader" that might publicize my work generally. As to "limited edition" off-the-Web pieces, I think the most interesting ones are moving in the direction of installations, as video did. Dedicated hardware is an encouragement to rethink the interface and move it beyond staring at a small screen and rolling a mouse. But this gets into significant engineering and cost issues. The artist, who writes the code, also has to be a hardware hacker. Who says the Renaissance person is dead?

I'm pleased that the Guggenheim has recently bought two web pieces by John Simon Jr. and Mark Napier — not so much because one or two museums are buying web art but because there are a hundred private collectors who will do whatever one or two museums do. It's difficult to say what the interest level will be in ten years. Right now, web art is the flavor of the month. It's not even entirely clear to me that web art is destined to be in museum collections in a big way. For historic reasons, the Museum of Modern Art collects cinema, but practically no other art museum does.

I've gotten feedback on the emblems site mainly from the web art community (I don't recall anyone particularly raising the "essay" vs. "art" issue) but also from emblem specialists and people with a particular interest in the Oulipo or artists I mention. I got a letter (not e-mail) from Marcel Benabou of the Oulipo, which was unexpected and quite nice. In the past year, the site's gotten about 10,000 clients (distinct users who viewed at least one page), and the content has also been reposted on Beehive. I don't know enough about these things to qualify that as "a lot of hits" or not. It is at any rate in the ballpark of a print publication's audience. One thing that's interest-

ing is that the hits have steadily risen since site has been up. Somehow people are finding what must be a rather search-engine-unfriendly site.

Since I also do “regular” books, I wasn’t trying to force New Digital Emblems into that mold. I don’t see it as easily translatable to book or article form. The formal conceit was to re-invent the 17th-century emblem book. I don’t think that today’s emblem book would be a book at all. The emblem book was a proto-cyberpunk reaction to Guttenberg. It was “multi-media” (having woodcut or engraved pictures with text was still a big deal) and ubiquitous (it was in that first flood of books cheap enough for everyone to afford.) The Web has clearly supplanted the book as “ubiquitous multimedia.” In reinventing emblems, it seemed natural to use digital imagery, animation, sound, and links, which are difficult or impossible in a book.