Mady Schutzman and Heather Raikes offer works that operate at the interstices of textual performance and scholarship. These exhibits explore various possibilities of cyberspace and hypertext for scholarly communication.

The following speculations arose from my interaction with these exhibits. These thoughts are offered not as a means of making sense of these works, but rather as a manifestation of the performative effects these works inspired. This rejoinder is a meditation not so much on the works themselves as on some of the questions about communication, technology, and subjectivity these works raise. This rejoinder represents my thinking on the matter, but problematizes both "thinking" and "mine."

::[language is a virus from outer space]::
::[you can't surf the same wave twice]::
::[what does it all mean?]::
::[do you (have to) believe in magic?]::

::[notes]::
::[references]::

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Inspiration

--from the Latin word for soul, meaning breath. Like the other Latin word for soul, or the Greek word, or the Chinese, or the Sanskrit, or the Hebrew, the ancient term "spirit" reflects the ancient truth that the soul has physical and material existence as a flow of air through the human body. This flow sustains human life, and it is the physical manifestation of the human connection to the rest of the earth. Pythagoras saw the life-breath as a god imprisoned in a human body; this perspective greatly influenced the Platonic theory of the soul as the guiding force of human action that still animates both monotheistic traditions and the various fields of inquiry which investigate human behavior. But the Pythagoreans were far too rigid in their opposition of human to divine, and the Socratics distilled a concept of human personality that completely effaced the connection between the human and the physical world - the breath. The breath, is, of course, not only the human connection to life and the earth; it is also the human connection among humans. Speech is most fundamentally the exchange of breath between human beings.
"Language," William S. Burroughs reminded us, "is a virus from outer space." Performance artist Laurie Anderson adds, "That's why I'd rather hear your name than see your face." This metaphor captures beautifully both the power and the danger presented by the task of communicating the "flux of wholeness," as Heather Raikes describes the rheomode. Raikes' use of the rheomode suggests that technology might be seen not just as a channel for communication and performance, but more radically as the environment in which subjects serve as conduits for experience.

A virus operates autonomously, without human intervention. It attaches itself to a host and feeds off of it, growing and spreading from host to host. Language infects us; its power derives not from its straightforward ability to communicate or persuade but rather from this infectious nature, this power of bits of language to graft itself onto other bits of language, spreading and reproducing, using human beings as hosts. The notion of the meme -- coined in 1976 by Richard Dawkins to illustrate the field of memetics -- crystallizes this view of the communication process. Georges Bataille similarly argued that communication was best understood from the perspective of contagion. In Bataille any human being is no more than a conduit for communicative process, a channel for ideas which pass through him/her. "If, as it appears to me, a book is communication, then the author is only a link among many readings."* The author is simply a node on a network, through which ideas pass.

At stake in such a conception is a radical reworking of the notion of the subject in communicative experience. Bataille writes:

> a man is only a particle inserted in unstable and entangled wholes. These wholes are composed in personal life in the form of multiple possibilities, starting with a knowledge that is crossed like a threshold - and the existence of the particle can in no way be isolated from this composition.... This extreme instability of connections alone permits one to introduce, as a puerile but convenient illusion, a representation of isolated existence turning in on itself. ("The Labyrinth," 174).

Subjectivity is an illusion, one that allows us to operate comfortably in this plane of existence, but which nonetheless masks true reality, in which there is no division between subject and object: "There is no longer subject-object, but a yawning gap between the one and the other and, in the gap, the subject, the object are dissolved; there is passage, communication, but not from one to the other: the one and the other have lost their separate existence" ("The Torment," 89).
Raikes' concept of the "rheomode," which comes from a Greek word which means flux or flow and was associated with the philosophers who followed Heraclitus, borrows physicist David Bohm's word for a new language that communicates on a fundamentally different order of space and time. One well-known fragment of Heraclitus, "you can't step in the same river twice,"* has been held to suggest that the universe is constantly in flux and change. Bohm felt that traditional language did not capture the constant motion of the world or the fundamental interconnectedness of all things.

Bohm argued that there was another plane of physical reality in which the separation between subject and object appears as the Cartesian oversimplification that it actually is. The rheomode was meant to be a dynamic and interconnected language that shattered Cartesian duality and opened the world to its chaos and its unity, without contradiction.* Bohm's "new order," like Burroughs' "outer space," is another plane of existence alongside the one with which we are familiar - it appears foreign only because we have grown accustomed to this oversimplified and inverted Cartesian reality. A new language appropriate to the new order must intervene to disturb the comfort of our simplistic illusions.

Such language could only appear as something from another world, making its appearance in ordinary language as an irruption, shattering, if only momentarily, the illusion of distance between subject and object and between signifier and signified. Such language would operate as a trickster or joker, polyvocal, not emanating from any particular subject but operating through the interactions between subjects. Mady Schutzman shows that jokes change the way we think by interrupting established patterns, breaking expected connections and forging new ones. The trickster, who violates taboos and crosses boundaries, intensifies our awareness of the vulnerability (and thus mutability) of the institutions we create.*

::*[intro]: *[virus]: *[surf]: *[meaning]: *[magic]: *[notes]: *[references]:*
Such language would not make meaning in our traditional understanding of the term; its force is disruptive of meaning, it simply does not signify. It belongs in the category that Félix Guattari named "a-signifying semiotics," semiotics that don't make meaning. Bohm felt that the order of reality on which such communication made sense was prior to the order of meaning; Guattari similarly places the force of a-signifying semiotics in a place prior to the connection between signifier and signified. He writes:

This position of the subject changes radically when a-signifying semiotics come to the forefront. The world of mental representation … or 'reference' … then no longer functions to centre and over-encode semiotics. Signs are involved in things prior to representation. Signs and things engage one another independently of the subjective control that agents of individual utterance claim to have over them. A collective agency of utterance is then in a position to deprive the spoken word of its function as imaginary support to the cosmos. It replaces it with a collective voice that combines machinic elements of all kinds.... The illusion of specific utterance by a human subject vanishes, and can be seen as having been merely a side-effect of the statements produced and manipulated by political and economic systems.*

The world of a-signifying semiotics is not a separate world of non-meaning that occasionally disturbs the world of meaning; from Guattari's perspective, it is quite simply the basis for our world of meaning, and its operations precede that of meaning both chronologically and ontologically. Of course, a-signifying semiotics have always been studied by psychologists as important moments in analysis, interrupting conscious explanations of reality with bursts of unconscious energy and flow. Jokes and dreams, for example, were pregnant with psychological significance precisely because they operated through forces that transcend signification. But it was always the psychoanalyst's job to return to the comfortable world of meaning and signification, containing the threat posed by such irruptions.
Freud, of course, began the project of psychoanalysis with the study of hypnosis, a kind of interaction between subjects that has been dismissed by many as a parlour game of manipulation. Freud would later distance himself from hypnosis as the origin of psychoanalysis; he argued that hypnosis was tyrannical and did not lend itself to scientific explanation. Freud moved from suggestion to free association, attempting to "free" the patient from the tyranny of suggestion. Freud examined hypnosis as a form of communication that operates prior to the formation of meaning.

Hypnosis has been discussed as a kind of magic, an art of illusion. Some ancient Greeks felt language in general functioned this way, that even the everyday use of language was a kind of magical incantation that produced results by acting directly on the world, leading the soul, inducing trance and movement, shaping reality. Verbal inspiration was seen by the Greeks as a kind of divine possession rather than as the conscious product of self-aware human genius. It's useful to recall that the Greeks did not hold "magic" in contempt, or denigrate "belief" as superstition. And why should they? Schutzman points out that "This economy of 'faith' which we are so quick to devalue is really very much the same as the economy of evidence, which we are so quick to valorize."

Chris Chesher has coined the phrase "invocational media" to describe computer technology. The computer functions as a kind of magical device; the human user does not "talk to the computer" but rather issues commands which change the nature of reality. While all technology is to a certain extent invocatory, computers invoke "programmed sequences of instructions, where the results of one invocation become inputs for others. They are open not only to inputs from outside through peripherals, but to distant events through networks and to records from the past on databases. This combination of components exponentially expands the range of invocations that become articulable." The "associative indexing" available through the technology of hypertext allows us to navigate vast amounts of data with such strings of invocation. "There is no fundamental difference," Chesher continues, "between a poet invoking the Muses for inspiration, and me invoking a search engine for material to use in this talk."

The challenge to scholarship offered by works such as the exhibits before us is the challenge of the magic of language in the ancient world. These works don't just operate at the level of meaning and signification (although of course they do that); they also operate at a level that is prior. All communication, of course, operates on this level, but not all communication attempts to interrupt the level of signification with this appeal to the multiple and interconnected nature of subjectivity. "[H]umanity is not constituted of isolated beings, but made up of communications among them; we are never given, even to ourselves, except in a network of communications with others: we bathe in communication, we can be reduced to this incessant communication, whose absence we feel in the very depths of our solitude" (Bataille, 250-2). There are no subjects; there is only the network, and it is us.
Heraclitus
Actually, this quotation comes from Plato (Cratylus 402a); the fragment of Heraclitus that actually survives has been translated by Daniel W. Graham as "On those stepping into rivers staying the same different and different waters flow." Graham suggests that there is no theory of flux at all in Heraclitus, that in fact his point was simply that flux is that which makes the river a river, that Heraclitus pointed out that flow and change were inherent aspects of some things. Of course, the more common interpretation of Heraclitus holds that he meant that the universe was constantly in motion, that the world was interconnected and constantly changing.

Bataille
The quotation is taken from Volume VI of Bataille's complete works, La Somme athéologique II. Sur Nietzsche. Memorandum. Annexes. (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 408, translated by Michele H. Richman in Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1982), p. 130. Bataille employs this notion of communication in the context of his critique of Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of the subject as cogito: "The cogito, for Sartre, is the inviolable, atemporal, irreducible foundation.... For me, it exists only within a relation... it is a network of communications, existing within time. The atom refers to a wave: to language, words exchanged, books written and read. Sartre reduces a book to the intentions of an author, the author. If, as it appears to me, a book is communication, the author is only a link among many different readings." (Richman, 130).

Bohm
Will Keepin's explanation is instructive: "To put it crudely, one could say that nouns do not really exist, only verbs exist. A noun is just a 'slow' verb; that is, it refers to a process that is progressing so slowly so as to appear static. For example, the paper on which this text is printed appears to have a stable existence, but we know that it is, at all times including this very moment, changing and evolving towards dust. Hence paper would more accurately be called papering--to emphasize that it is always and inevitably a dynamic process undergoing perpetual change. Bohm experimented with restructuring language in this dynamic mode, which he called the rheomode, in an effort to more accurately reflect in language the true dynamic nature of reality."

Guattari
Guattari, "The Role of the Signifier in the Institution," Molecular Revolution (76). For Guattari the subject is transpersonal; the human being is an effect of language; the human subject is a conduit for language. "No longer does a person communicate with other persons: organs and functions take part in a machinic 'assembly' which puts together semiotic links and a great interweaving of material and social fluxes" ("The Micropolitics of Fascism," Molecular Revolution, 223).

Conquergood
Dwight Conquergood, "Poetics, Play, Process, and Power" (1989). Conquergood's notion of the trickster is a mythical character that finds expression in many cultures; Schutzman's Tarot Card Fool is one such expression.

Media Environments
Marshall McLuhan argued that technology extends the human sensory apparatus. What he asks us to do is to read media as sensory components of our environment. A television set, for example, is seen less as a communication device and more as a piece of furniture. In Counter-Blast he writes that "environment is process, not container" (13). A television is not a container for information any more than a rose garden is a container for roses. The rose garden, as part of the sensory environment, pleases the sense of sight, excites the sense of smell, and both delights and threatens the sense of touch. The television offers a barrage of imagery, sound, and idea to excite, enthral, admonish, thrill, and even terrify the senses. The disruption in the total sensory environment by the privileging of one or two senses produces an overall sensory experience. This overall experience--this sensory environment--is as spatiotemporally real as a rose garden, a beach, or any other environment.

Gorgias
The Greek word psychagogia, literally, leading of the soul, is used in Plato's Phaedrus to define a positive role for rhetoric (techne psychagogia tis dia logon, "the art of leading the soul by means of words"). In its original context this word described a ritual of raising souls from the dead.


