From Cityscape to Cyberspace:
Writing the City in Hypermedia

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Hypermedia – the juxtaposition of word, image and sound within the domain of the computer – presents us with a major opportunity to rethink the way we write and the way we think about writing. The influence of hypermedia in Australia can be seen in the group the Electronic Writing Ensemble, and the work of Linda Carroli, Josephine Wilson, Terri-Ann White, Jenny Weight and others. Between 1996 and 1999 I was involved in the creation of three hypermedia collaborations : *Wordstuffs: The City and the Body*, *Intertwingling* and *Walking The Faultlines*. My focus here is *Wordstuffs: The City and the Body* created by myself, musician Roger Dean, and sound and web designer Greg White, when we were amongst the winners of the Australian Film Commission 1998 Stuff-Art competition. This piece engages with the interface between subject and city, and is comprised of hypertext, animations, computer-generated sound, and a number of other hypermedia features. In the main I wrote the text, Roger Dean created the sound and animations, and Greg White designed a number of other features. But the whole venture was highly collaborative, and our roles crossed over.

In hypermedia it is possible to write the city in a unique way which emphasises the hybrid, the interactive, the discontinuous, the non-linear, and the intermedia. In *Wordstuffs* hypermedia enabled us to break down the idea of representing or producing a unified city or self. Instead we created a heterogeneous, interactive and multi-layered space which mediates between body and city, and also between cityscape and cyberspace, subject and cyborg.

A starting point for the project was my reading of an essay 'Bodies-Cities' by Elizabeth Grosz (103–110). Grosz posits three different models for the relationship between body and city. The first is a model whereby self and city are in a causal relationship, that is, subjects build cities which are the manifestations of human projects, desires and achievements. The second model is one of parallelism or isomorphism between the body and the city, so that the two are congruent with each other and mirror each other's characteristics. The third model, however, is the one which Grosz suggests is her preferred one. In that model both entities are broken down and realigned. Grosz suggests a model of the relations between bodies and cities that sees them 'not as megalithic total entities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub-or micro-groupings.' In this model the interrelations between body and city 'involve

a fundamentally disunified series of systems, a series of disparate flows, energies, events, or entities, bringing together or drawing apart their more or less temporary alignments' (Grosz, 108).

It is this third model which was the basis of my thinking about the piece, and it is quoted in full in the hypertext. In writing the text I too wanted to break down the idea of a monolithic city or body, and make new configurations and assemblages from the interface of the city and the body. By doing this I wanted to create a new kind of space : I thought of this space conceptually as a 'hyperscape', because it suggests a site in which hyperspace, cityscape and hypertext overlap.[1] A hyperscape is a site characterised by difference, discontinuity, instability and movement. In the hyperscape disjunctive times and places can be experienced simultaneously, and both subject and city are in a constant state of fluidity. The hyperscape is also a highly politicised space because it allows for the re-formation of the relationship between body and city.

When I started to work on *Wordstuffs* I realised that hypermedia was the perfect medium for the project. For a start, hypertext invites us to think in terms of what I call 'screenfuls' of writing: each screen presents a discrete opportunity for an idea, and these ideas do not necessarily have to cohere with each other, or follow each other in a fixed sequence. Furthermore, in hypertext it is possible to move between texts (or lexias as they are sometimes known) which are quite distant and disparate from each other by means of hyperlinks. Hypertext, then, provides us with a form of textuality which is much more spatial and topological than the written page, and is often referred to as labyrinthine. As a mode of writing it is highly metonymic, though often in the sense of generating new metonymic links rather than relying on more familiar ones, and it consequently provides an extreme continuity which offsets fragmentation. In particular, it is extremely synecdochal in emphasis, because the parts are always more than, and in a changing relationship to the whole. In fact there is no absolute 'whole'. In *Wordstuffs*, this meant that any part or aspect of the city could be linked to that of the body to form new associative complexes. These metonymic strings are triggered by the interactive reader or 'screener' (Rosello, 121). Screeners can take different pathways through the work, creating their own spaces, and they automatically create a different type of space each time they make a new choice of links.

To give some impression of this metonymic structure let us look at some possible initial routes through *Wordstuffs*. Every reader starts with the first text.

> Welcome to the city and the body hotline: arms and legs are flying
>   round us here at an enormous rate and so are cars and street
> lamps. At the moment we are not anticipating the end of the world
>   or the demise of reproductive organs. But who knows now that
> sound is only time warps? Schools are going half-speed and

> universities are closing. Elections will only be held on racial
> issues. Young women may die from stress unless we treat them
> for their age. Whatever happened to socio-economic solutions?
> Are we going to write poems until all heaven is let loose?

Within this text there are eight different choices as to how to proceed next. Activating the link 'city' produces a text which links place to the paradoxes of identity:

> **You hold up the map to the mirror.**
>
> > All the streets have new names that
> > you cannot recognise or read
>
> **You smash the mirror but you cannot erase the inversion.**

On the other hand if we activate the link 'poems' we obtain a poem about the relationship between time and space, the verbal and the non-verbal :

> Spawning offshore on far-off stars
> > caught between nets at the bottom of creeks
> > > unborn at the rim of the earth
>
> > the day spears the night till it dies reveals
> > a space where new sounds explode as time
> > > she strikes words on the sky in looping flames
> > the untouched paths of the untold

In this text the link 'offshore' leads to the following urban but surreal narrative:

> Someone you intensely dislike predicts the day on which you will die. You
> know that he cannot really know. You do not know whether he is
> serious or joking or both. But you approach the day with a certain
> fatalistic dread. Beforehand you say good-bye to everyone, friend
> or acquaintance, just in case. On the day itself you are careful
> when you cross roads. In the evening you return home, on
> an effortless high, believing you may survive, ready to pour
> yourself a drink, and find that your neighbour has committed suicide.

However, activating the link 'space' takes us to a satirical advertisement for city and body 'parts' :

> WANTED
>
> > a body without organs

> the page numbers for the encyclopedic city
> a body that makes music
> one second-hand <u>reproductive</u> system
> a mind without thought
> <u>a story line</u> that doesn't go anywhere
> a <u>map</u> without a mirror

Here there are again multiple choices, but the link 'reproductive' produces a reminder of historical taboos about the body, at the same time mimicking the form of a medieval public notice :

Sunday May 6th 1243

> Citizens!

> Wash your hands of menstrual blood!

> <u>Stand clear of unclean</u>
> <u>menopausal witches</u>

Here the link 'citizens' produces an aphoristic, linguistically playful text which inverts the discourse of disability.

> a <u>city</u> built only for the <u>disabled</u>

> are we <u>*crippled*</u>
> by
> abelism?

However, if we choose instead the link 'unclean' it produces a reminder of some of the racial prejudices which have historically surrounded the body:

> <u>Angles</u> on Jews in the Middle Ages?

> Christians thought the mind their
> dominion

> the body a filthy Jewish <u>domain</u>

These examples show how hypertext brings together aspects and parts of cities and bodies into constantly changing configurations, without unifying them into an organic whole. They also demonstrate that hypertext is highly intertextual and allows different genres to cross-over. Prose, fiction, poetry, criticism, non-fiction and theory can all intermingle, or 'intertwingle' (Snyder, 25). In *Wordstuffs* this

allowed me to interweave different ways of conceiving the city and the body in-
cluding the historical, the satirical, the surreal, the futuristic, and the theoretical. I
also worked in an intertextual way, using a multitude of theoretical texts – ranging
from Steve Pile's *The Body and The City* to Anthony Synott's *The Body Social: Sym-
bolism, Self and Society* – as triggers. The resultant hypertext, which consists of
about a hundred lexias, includes poems, theoretical quotations, aphorisms, adver-
tisements and mini-narratives: its basis is formal and cultural heterogeneity.

In addition, the capacity to create different frames within the computer screen
means that several different texts, and types of text, can appear at once within the
domain of the computer, creating the opportunity to build a multi-layered text in
which one set of texts complements or clashes with another. In *Wordstuffs* two
types of texts, programmed on a probabilistic basis which makes their sequence
unpredictable, appear alternately under the hypertext. One of these is a series of
six rotating very short poetic fragments including:

> writing the city
> by thinking as walking
>   hetero-homo-mobile-topias

and

> you spin a globe of the world in your hands
> deserts surge and cease between fingers

The other type of text is prose which is programmed to be 'mangled', that is to
undergo different types of fragmentation and transformation, suggesting the pres-
ence of signifiers which can never be fully captured or decoded. For example, a
text about medieval hospitals – which were often situated at the boundaries of
cities because of fears about leprosy – may emerge as follows:

> prominence of hospital
> itals were often situated at boundaries in cities.
> They regu
> ms from trave

A Java applet which Greg White adapted, and called the 'World Wired Web', can
also be activated to replace the hypertext. This combines words relating to both
body and city, and turns them into word-mobiles which can be pulled into differ-
ent shapes on the screen. In some ways this feature represents the most direct
inter-mingling, or 'inter-net mingling' of city and body.

One of the ideas behind the piece was to move nomadically between different
times and places: between Kuwait, Paris and Siberia, medieval, modern and fu-
turistic times. Yet these extreme journeys are also offset by the presence of recur-
ring or common concerns. For example, many lexias speak of the hidden, the

unspeakable, impenetrable, and marginalised within the city. They refer to the politically powerless, the racially oppressed and the disabled: for example, 'Are we crippled by abelism?' and 'You decide to paint your face black for the day. How dark will you find the city?'. Several texts refer ambivalently to consumerism and conformism, 'if you want to fit in, dye your hair purple.' The hypertext also interlinks instability of place, a splintered subjectivity, and a decentred language, sometimes through metaphors of maps, mirrors and inscription. Some lexias imply that the most important places may be those that do not physically exist, the place which is a 'no-place a non-made place a no-man a knot-place'. One asks 'Are you a post-tourist? Do you like to travel to places which only exist as myths?' Other texts negotiate the performative and unstable nature of sexual identity. One asks 'are the sexes opposite or apposite?', another posits the presence of nine genders within Siberian eskimo culture.

Many of the texts either historicise the city, or look forward to the future transformation of cityscape into cyberspace. In making the piece I was influenced, among other texts, by Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin's *Framing Medieval Bodies* which emphasises different types of marginalisation of the body in the Middle Ages. These include the fear and repugnance which women's bodies and bodily functions – such as menstruation, the menopause and miscarriage – created, and the stigmatisation of the Jew's body. Some of the texts refer to these fears, beliefs and prejudices:

> In medieval times women's bodies were thought to be the inverse of men's, while abortion was linked to magic and spells.
> The internal secrets of women's bodies held a particular fascination and danger, causing the development in the fourteenth century of a mirror which could be used internally, the vaginal speculum.

Such texts are juxtaposed with texts which refer to more contemporary bodies or spaces, including cyberspace. *Wordstuffs* is partly a celebration of cyberspace, but it is not unequivocally utopian about this space. One text suggests that the cyber-city is just as likely to marginalise powerless minorities as the contemporary city :

> Welcome to cyber-city tours – come with us and we will show you everything you don't want to see. The bowling club, the old age home and the cafe specially built for freaks. And here are some statistics that you can brew and spread as thick as myths. We are top of the world in polluted words and racism is reaching
> newly-painted heights.

The hyperscape, then, speaks of oppression in different guises, times and places. But it is also a potentially empowering space, because nothing – including the relationship between oppressor and oppressed – is fixed or irreversible.

So far I have mainly discussed the textual aspects of the piece, but *Wordstuffs* is also an intermedia work in which visually decorative hypertexts and animations are juxtaposed with music, extending the re-formation of the relationship of city and body into the visual and sonic domain. As I have suggested elsewhere, one of the most interesting aspects of intermedia work is the opportunity for 'semiotic exchange' : that is, juxtaposition of, and interchange between, different semiotic systems, so that each is modified and extended by the presence of the other, but is not subordinated to it (Smith 99). In hypermedia it is possible for this exchange to take place in a way which is constantly changing and discontinuous. In *Wordstuffs* the use of the sonic and the visual enabled us to address aspects of the city which are non-verbalisable, and to make a broader and more sensory 'hypermediascape'.

In hypermedia sound is often used in a subsidiary way and is frequently composed by people who are not first and foremost musicians. In contrast the music for *Wordstuffs*, created by composer-improvisor Roger Dean, was written using the sophisticated computer program MAX. It is a deconstructed version of the highly rhythmic techno music known as Drum and Bass, which can be culturally classified as an urban music associated with garage parties and clubbing. In *Wordstuffs* drum and bass becomes less rhythmically regular, more harmonically complex, mediating between popular music and its contemporary high art relations. There are a number of different soundtracks, and it is possible to interact with the music by playing it backwards, by controlling the volume, and by activating several tracks simultaneously, while at the same time scrolling through the hypertexts.[2] There is also a soundscape by Greg White which, when triggered, sometimes replaces the music. This focuses on more specific body and city noises, and is accompanied by related images and words. Both sound and text, then, move between abstraction and representation, and in a variable relationship to each other.

Mediation between the representational and the abstract is also characteristic of the visual-verbal aspect of the piece. We decided not to use a lot of photographs of the city and the body on the grounds that this would be rather obvious, we also wanted to minimise the image component in order to stress the idea of the word as image. However, the images do relate to the textual ideas about the city and the body, if somewhat obliquely and abstractly. For example, one animation suggests an abstracted cityscape from an aerial view, in another a child-like statuesque figure within a globe creates an ambiguous sense of place which is at once all-embracing and confining. The text animations were written in Shockwave Flash by Roger using my words. They visually enact the process of dislocation, repositioning, or reconfiguration that is central to the piece, by manoeuvres such as rotating words or phrases, moving letters round the screen until they form into words, turning words into abstract images, or making a bridge from one word – through verbal and visual transformations of it – to another, more distant from it. Again they interconnect ideas of space, language and gender so that in one anima-

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2. For more about the relationship between hypermedia and computer music see Smith and Dean, 1997.

tion the words 'a woman weaving herself on the web' rotate over the handwritten words 'female geography'. I also attempted, through the deliberate and heterogenous use of brightly coloured hypertext, to create an aesthetic of 'cyber-colour' which would be multiplicitous rather than selective, open rather than closed. It would thereby match the heterogeneity and fluidity of the texts, and evoke contrasting aspects of both body and city. As someone who has been involved in the creation and enunciation of multi-voiced performance texts, I found it stimulating to create a work in which the spoken is replaced by a visual performativity. The colours in these texts speak to me with different voices, an effect which is lost if the texts are read in black and white, without their hypertextual visual layout.

Overall, hypermedia allowed us to write the city in a way which created spaces rather than describing them, and which combined fragmentation and discontinuity with extreme interconnection. We created a hyperscape, a space which was neither body nor city, but arose out of the breakdown and reintegration of both. The hyperscape was also a hypermediascape, in which sound and images extended the verbal domain. This hypermediascape remains both a site and an *activity*, and each screener and screening contributes to its unceasing de-and re-construction.

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