Outsourced Poetics

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The temptation to outsource commentary on a poetry collection, the contents of which have themselves been outsourced by the nominal author, Nick Thurston, is strong. Outsourcing is technically accurate: the poems were subcontracted to workers who were paid pennies for their creative labor through Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform (AMT). Each poem in *Of the Subcontract* is the work of a 'Turker' completing a Human Intelligence Tasks (HITS) on demand in a matter of minutes, even seconds, before moving on to the next task requiring human rather than machine intelligence, whether that be the transcription of a receipt or the writing of advertising copy. Thurston orchestrated a system for the production of this book, designing the procedures by which the expressive work would be done by other people, amateur writers temporarily employed for this specific purpose. He is thus author in the ordinary sense of origination—he has produced the idea that led to the presentation of the poems to a reading public—and author as legal, historical entity, the holder of copyright. For the introduction to the volume, McKenzie Wark himself subcontracted the work to a freelance writer in Lahore, a $75 textual gambit almost immediately apparent to anyone with a basic familiarity with Wark's writing, but only directly acknowledged in Darren Wershler's very fine concluding essay. The art historical context for such an exercise in conceptual writing is threefold: procedural or rule-based poetics; uncreative writing (Kenneth Goldsmith); and the turn toward what Claire Bishop has named "delegated performance" in contemporary art.

Outsourcing, subcontracting, or delegation in contemporary art practice differs from that of the Warhol factory era in the use of nonprofessionals to participate as themselves, in this particular instance to write in their own voice. However contrived the verse, the poems lay claim to authenticity and immediacy and seem to challenge academic suspicion of voice and persona as mere artistic constructions. In lines such as the following, for

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example, it is difficult not to register the primal scream of the precariat, however masked by the performative irony of doggerel verse.

> Am I blind, or maybe dumb?
> To see TWO cents has made me numb.

> Would you do work for this measly amount?
> Would you take it seriously, would it even count.

> This is insulting in so many ways.

It is precisely the doggerel in these lines from poem 0.04 in the collection, numbered as such because it was the wage in USD earned by the writer, who has produced one text at the hourly rate of $13.09 that makes the sincerity apparent. The intense frustration a writer is likely to feel about the particularities of circumstance (the devaluation of one's labor, the humiliations of socio-economic necessity) might seemingly be undercut by the cynicism of comic poetic form, but it is precisely the mechanical rhythmic production that communicates blunt, unadulterated anger: "I do not mind writing when the prices are right, / But two cents is insulting and not worth the fight." Even with the well-learned lessons about the falsity of lyric in mind, readers cannot but be cognizant of the actual people inhabiting the first person so as

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to earn pennies to sustain a life. In lines such as "I am worn out with dreams," "I just cant believe you are gone," "My lovely baby, my cute baby / You are so precious for me," one hears the voice of the writers, the 'Turkers,' rather than that of the coordinating author, who is present as curator or, more precisely given the platform, employer and data manager.

Of the Subcontract poses questions about the gift economy for the creative industries, wherein a culture of volunteerism disguises the exploitative aspect of unpaid internships and artists are asked to accept the notion of reputation as currency and regard working for free as "opportunity"—"no payment and a rejection are sure to come"—or reduced to busking through PayPal tip jars. So too the practice of subcontracting for a creative project such as this directly reflects and comments upon the precarious condition of labor in the 21st century, the exploitation of temporary workers, particularly the data processing-as- global piece work facilitated by AMT. Not only are the poems organized according to the cost of production, ranging from $0.01-1.00, but the metadata for each poem communicates the efficiency of each worker, one apparently crafting with care a handful of lines over the course of a day for an hourly rate of $0.02 and another churning out a five-stanza poem in seven seconds for an hourly rate of $277.71. The volume has been designed in other ways to resemble the AMT site: company icons have been redrawn and reformatted as illustrations for individual sections, the titles of which have been appropriated from AMT promotional materials ("artificial artificial intelligence"; "benefits of on demand, elastic staffing"; "data cleansing, normalization,

and duplication"). That readers are implicated in the very economies enacted and critiqued by the volume is clear from the mirrored cover: 'we' are hailed by our own reflections and reminded that we do not comfortably remain outside its circuits of exchange. Using 'Turkers' is "a trend, the latest craze," even within contemporary art practice, as is evinced by the comparable works enumerated in Wershler's essay. To this list we might add Guido Segni's The Middle Finger Response, which paid workers for 'selfies' in which the middle finger gesture functions as a kind of signature—also a kind of primal scream of the precariat, externally contracted but framed by the subjects who announce themselves as such by revealing their faces, bodies, and work spaces, the terminals to which they are of necessity bound. They have each earned $0.50 for the performative exercise, a miming of outrage and protest, the script for which cannot fully contain and conceal the vital signs of resignation, uncertainty, anger, and enjoyment. The equivalent to the middle finger response in *Of the Subcontract* comes in a poem entitled, "Work," for which a 'Turker' was paid $0.76:

> Writing is such a hard job
> Much rather words I would rob
> Those people on 'Turk
> They'll do all the work
> So my brain I do not have to prod.

Of the Subcontract also crystallizes a question at the heart of the practice of "machine writing," whether or not the fashioning of a set of rules by which a work comes into being entails computer programming. The question is this: what is the relation between those procedures, along with the infrastructure that has been designed to produce a certain output, and the output itself? Is the locus of the aesthetic the process, or is it the material and/or immaterial results? Critical convention holds that the evaluative weight rests with the planning and design that situates actual execution as secondary. From LaMonte Young's concise compositional score, "draw a straight line and follow it," to Jaromil's lethal poetic forkbomb, the thirteen characters that would almost immediately crash one's computer if entered into a Unix command line, the locus of critical attention has been instruction, system, mechanism—the means by which a work of art might emerge. Realization is almost afterthought: temporally distinct, but also conceptually secondary. Sol LeWitt's notion that "the idea becomes the machine that makes the art" is paradigmatic: the execution or realization of a work functions primarily as proof-of-concept, to make the idea itself manifest and test its parameters. Realization might also lessen the power of the idea, the potentiality of the virtual (what might be) overshadowing the mundanity of the actual. The forkbomb hyperbolically illustrates the point: execution is not just afterthought but anathema.

Bracketing the volume are two 18th century engravings, front and back views of the Mechanical Turk's cabinet, which was said to contain the mechanism of a chess-playing automaton but in fact contained a human small enough to fit in the space and perpetuate the hoax. These images, along with the visual quotations of the AMT platform, the partially explanatory foreword, and the afterword
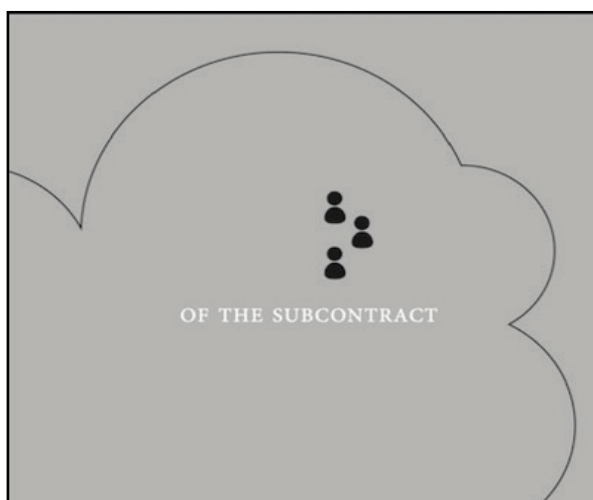
situating the volume in aesthetic and historical context, are available as explanatory information for the uninitiated, the book on the face of it seeming to show the audience not just the script but also the strings, a backstage or open cabinet view that ostensibly makes the reader privy to the means by which the illusory magic is generated. (It is not for nothing that the title of Wershler's essay should be a markup command: "Title of Essay in Plain Type.") In this respect the actual content of the poems is almost beside the point,

mere linguistic material that serves retroactively to emphasize the idea—the whole of the planning, decisions, and processes that govern its own realization. But for all of its foregrounding of this idea, *Of the Subcontract* holds to a degree of opacity with respect to its procedures, recognizing the actual labors of writing only in terms native to computational capitalism, as efficiency metrics, and withholding the individual signatures of the 'Turkers' whose poems have been included. It is unfortunate then that user names are in effect hidden

within the cabinet, the one piece of machinery that needs to be hidden in order to preserve the auratic spell of conceptual art. This tells us all we know and need to know about the nature of the social contract in the 21st century.

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Reading (Between) Machine

Jessica Pressman

BETWEEN

PAGE AND SCREEN

Amaranth Borsuk
and Brad Bouse
Siglio Press
44 pages; paper, $24.94
http://www.betweenpageand-
screen.com

For those who believe that the *avant la lettres* remain on the page, a recent work of multimedia literature can get you up-to-speed in playful and poetic ways. Amaranth Borusk and Brad Bouse's *Between Page and Screen* is an augmented -reality book of poetry: a codex filled with QR ("quick response") codes that trigger a networked Internet connection to produce concrete poetry between the space of the page and the screen. The work's title suggests its technopoetic and pedagogical pursuit. *Between Page and Screen* is about the in-between, and it provides a bridge between pages and screens, poetry and games. It crosses over and comments upon the connection between machine reading and machine writing, between augmented reality and avant-garde literature. It pulls highbrows, academics, and intellectuals into the digital sphere, where others have been reading for a while now. And it does so with rich, rigorous poetics that model the future of the literary by demonstrating how machine writing can be very, very good.

Every page of this finely made little letterpress-like book contains a QR graphic: a small black square comprised by a geometric pattern set against the stark white page. That's it, there's no text to read, just geometric shapes. The omnipresence of such images in our networked world—where they grace every commodity, from hammers to novels—has taught us that these data-imprints require a machine reader to translate them into content that can then be parsed by a human reader. When this little book is held up to a web-camera on the reader's computer, and that computer is connected to the Internet, specifically to the URL associated with the book, *then* a digital connection is made between the QR code and www.betweenpageandscreen.com. The result is a projection of three-dimensional concrete poetry that appears, as if by magic, and beckons to be seen and read. Upon unleashing this poetry, the reader is struck by the notion that she is not the only reader involved in the processural poetic of *Between Page and Screen*. The work exposes the book to be a reading machine that, rather than standing in opposition to digital technology, can be purposefully connected to the Internet and its networked reading practices.

Book-based QR-based literature is nothing new, and to share one example I'm going to shift from discussing American poetry to a lowbrow cousin that seems to occupy the opposite literary

register: the Playstation WonderBook version of *Harry Potter, Wonderbook: Book of Spells* (2012). To dip down a little more, let me quote Jeff Rubin, host of the online show jeffrubinjeffrubinshow. com on "College Humor," as he introduces the augmented-book. He describes *Wonderbook: Book of Spells* as representing "how the Playstation has improved books." This statement is said tongue-and-cheek, for, as one of the casual but astute co-hosts then responds, "Great, it's like a book you can't read without plugging yourself into a television…the perfect book!" The couch-critics (they actually are sitting on a couch) then debate the genre of this Wonderbook: is it a game, a book, a "window"? The same questions could be posed about *Between Page and Screen*. The book's publisher, Siglio Press, describes itself as "an independent press dedicated to publishing uncommon books and editions that live at the intersection of art & literature," and it claims to publish works that "defy categories and thoroughly engage a reader's intellect and imagination."

Books and digital codes, pages and screens, work together to co-produce cutting-edge literature.

If *Between Page and Screen* is the result of this quest, then this little independent publisher just might just have more in common with Playstation than we might think. So, what do we see by positioning Siglio and Playstation side-by-side and reading between the pages and screens of the wonder books they publish? Isn't it obvious? Both use QR codes to display the magic of reading, to invoke the potential spell a book can cast.

Between Page and Screen is very much about books and the wonder of this older medium. The work contains an epistolary correspondence between two entities: P and S. Does P stand for "Page" and S mean "Screen"? Yes, but that's not all. We are told on the last screen that P and S also stand-in for "post-script." "Post-script" implies text that comes after a primary text but also a temporal period that follows the end (in this case) of a certain form of textuality. So, P and S refer to media formats and also medial epochs. Ours has been called the post-print era, but *Between Page and Screen* suggests that the separation of page and screen into distinct medial categories and temporal eras just might be misguided. We are told in this book's post-script, "There is no post-script." *Between Page and Screen* suggests that books and digital codes, pages and screens, work together to co-produce cutting-edge literature.

What connects and lies between P and S? Answer: Q and R. QR codes enable the correspondence between P and S. They procure the machine writing that enables human reading; they are the book's actual content, the visual poetry laid out on its pages. *Between Page and Screen* promotes a focus on QR codes as programmatic codes, which call forth executable code through
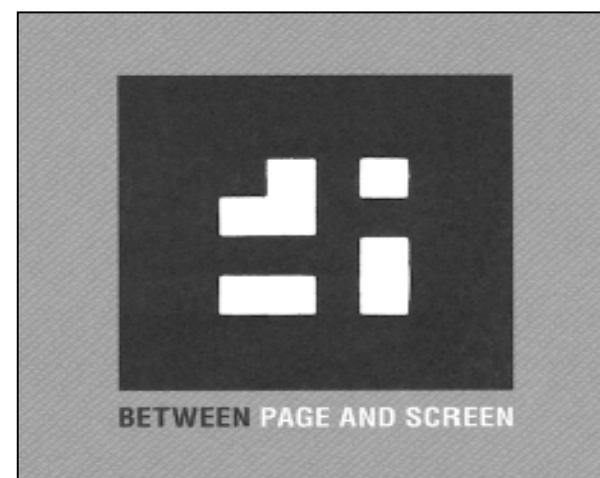
Detail from cover

an Internet connection, and also as "bibliographic codes" (Jerome McGann's term) that illuminate the programmatic protocols of the codexical reading machine. In an era of "convergence culture," wherein readers are producers and content streams across multiple media platforms, we need not be beholden to traditional categories and constraints for describing and isolating media or genres or historical trajectories. *Between Page and Screen* argues this point by producing a hybrid reading practice that is not just about using multiple media but also about bridging and blending them. The work invites us to read for connections between old and new media, between different types of machine writing.

The correspondence between P and S contains a meditation on an evolving relationship and on the evolution of a writing surface. The third page depicts a letter from S to P: "I take your point. I didn't mean to cut." The rhetoric of pointing and cutting comes from the history of books: the yard or pointer stick used to read the Torah scrolls; the cutting and scraping of calfskin to erase unwanted marks from early manuscripts. It is fitting that S (or screen) uses this language to address P (or page), for a reader who knows the medial history of the page would keenly feel the diction's double-edged meaning. *Between Page and Screen* rewards readers with knowledge of book history as well as those interested in etymology and philology. This work may use new technologies to present machine writing but it does so in ways that turn our attention back to more traditional modes of literariness: books, words, text, and, yes, media.

This is why *Between Page and Screen* is so important. Borsuk and Bouse introduce QR codes and machine writing in ways that expose and make poetic (and pleasurable) the kinds of technological augmentation already underway in our digital culture. The work educates as it pricks, pointing out our discomfort with machine writing but following it up with S's sheepish apology: "I didn't mean to cut."

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