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POETIC LICENCE

Douglas Adams, the brilliantly funny writer of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, once came up with a set of rules to describe our reactions to technologies:

1. Anything that is in the world when you're born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works.
2. Anything that's invented between when you're 15 and 35 is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it.
3. Anything invented after you're 35 is against the natural order of things.

I use this opening, not to be light hearted or dismissive, but rather to establish our ambiguous relationship to technology-based art practices. As "media" and "new media" take on ever expanding meanings and roles within our conceptions of self, artists increasingly transform and weave old and new practices, create new forms and hybridities, transcend, and embrace, our understanding of "technology."[1]

Vital to the General Public Welfare, a six-installation exhibition by Montreal-based artist and cultural theorist Jason Edward Lewis, asks us to consider language and technology in new (and old) ways.

The title of the exhibition comes from documents filed in a 1964 Louisiana court case seeking to ascertain an adopted child's racial classification. The judge claimed that the proper identification of the child's race was "vital to the general public welfare;" in other words, the state, and by extension society, was dependent on the determination of racial classification and the assignment of rights based on it. I think we all know what that's called.

By reviving this archaic (to us) form of language regarding racial taxonomies and perceived "purity conventions" of the time, Jason Edward Lewis reflects on how manifestations of language inform our cultural and social processes. Currently Associate Professor of Computation Arts at Concordia University, Lewis is a well-known scholar and researcher in and of new media. His installation works, utilizing interactive touch screens, responsive voice activated technologies and constructions of poetic interventions, "engages the traditional concerns of the poet – love, loss, belonging, exile, and celebration – and operates at the large and the small scales that make up a life as it unfolds, day by day."[2]

Buzz Aldrin Doesn't Know Any Better, touchscreen with Buzz iPad and iPhone app. Touchscreen interactives. (2008 - 2011) image credit: Brian Li.
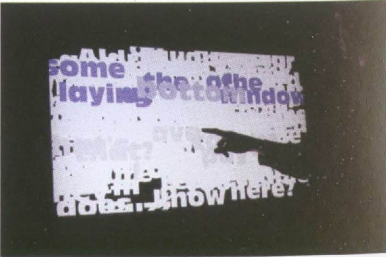
Buzz Aldrin Doesn't Know Any Better, touchscreen middle panel of *Things You've Said Before But We Never Heard* triptych (detail). Touchscreen interactive. (2008 - 2011) image credit: Brian Li.

His is a mediated language centred on tactility, movement interactivity and the free flow of information in a cyber-oriented dialectic. In *Vital to the General Public Welfare*, Lewis investigates the idea of language as formalized construction of "concreteness" and then flips it on its ear, facilitating a fluid, user generated cultural and linguistic/aesthetic experience: Twitter-like interchanges, playing poetically and aesthetically across a tactile screen defining meaning and substance.

By combining large-scale prints along with the interactive touch screens, Lewis also adds to the cognitive disequilibrium,[3] textualizing a fine art medium (the culmination of manipulated text into image) and mounting it in juxtaposition and conversation with the interactive works.

As Marshall McLuhan famously wrote, "in a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a matter of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message."[4] For Jason Edward Lewis, the message is also the medium.

In each of the six works, Lewis locates the viewer as protagonist in evolving semi-narratives contingent on a contiguous relationship between thought, word, movement and reflex. Responsivity and responsiveness are key elements of Lewis's conceptual works. By giving form to voice, and image to word, Lewis interrogates the perceived finite-ness of oral and written histories, positing new ways of seeing...and saying. In this way Lewis disrupts our relationship to the written and spoken word. While nothing new for

The Great Migration I. Touchscreen interactive component of diptych. (2008 - 2011) image credit: J E Lewis.

any 14 year old with an iPad, for those of us who graduated high school English prior to the advent of the "touch-screen," this is new and under-explored territory (I'm just learning how to use my iPad). Reflecting on his work, Lewis states, "such a conscious, close, attenuated exchange between form and structure provides the perfect arena in which to engage larger questions of how software-based work, with its dynamic, interactive, and data-processing functionalities, can be a site for staging minor transcendent miracles."[5]

You've Got No Choice About the Terminology is an interactive touch poem and mounted textimage print. The phrase "you've got no choice about the terminology" comes from an article Lewis read in the *New York Times* describing an old-school ice cream parlour manager who insisted that things be called by their proper names. Lewis explains, "coming from a household in which ice-cream was taken very seriously indeed, and often struggling with what terminology to use to describe my ethnicity (Cherokee, Hawaiian, Samoan, raised in northern California rural mountain redneck culture), and my profession (artist? poet? software developer? educator? designer?), and recognizing both the danger and seduction of neat categorizations, the line inspired a series of text playing with categories, definitions and the idea that, though we might have some choice about our terminology, we have no choice about our ontology."[6] We know the dangers of easy categorization and class distinctions. Lewis forces us to ask difficult questions about the roles tradition, heritage, community and hegemony play in a contemporary context. "How do we describe ourselves?", he seems to ask through his own search for self in the intersections and disjunctures of his own complex identity. Exclusion and inclusion...buzzwords we hear almost daily in the media, and common to us all. We've all had that playground feeling, desire to belong, fear that we do not, and realization that sometimes, it's not who we are that matters, but "what we are."

Lewis's love of language and its incongruities is evident in *Smooth Second Bastard*, a triptych including an interactive touchscreen and two printed textimages. The title comes from a woodworking tool called a "smooth second bastard"
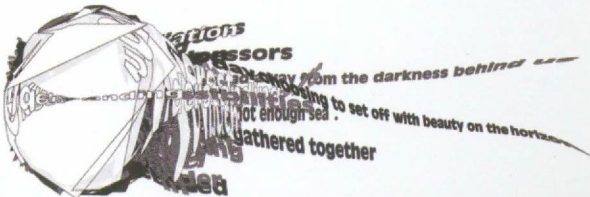
The Great Migration II. Print component of diptych. (2008 - 2011) image credit: J E Lewis.

(referring to its size and level of coarseness) that Lewis noticed at a hardware store. His corresponding poem, at once playful and inquisitive, becomes a denunciation of all things territorial, all things based on an illusory entitlement.
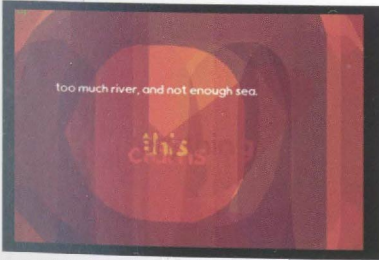
By activating the words (through touch), the viewers (it has a multiple touch capacity) animate and populate the screen with words and colour, creating complex and rich interplays of thought and feeling.

Of course, the term "bastard" has its own pejorative connotations and Lewis seems to be exploring ideas of culture and hybridity in this context. For him, the rhetorical difference between being asked "Where ya from?" and "Are you from around here?" is a nuanced contemplation on the role of exclusionary language and the politics of xenophobia. Another poignant metaphor in this case might be the oft repeated "some of my best friends are..." appellations used to disguise a hidden message of "us and them."

The Great Migration is a touchscreen plus printed textimage diptych. "Both texts are about the same event—leaving home, setting out to an unknown destination on (what at least feels like) a one-way trip."[7] Lewis, whose family moved "place" on several occasions, presents ideas of departure, movement, leading and following.

As well, its allusion to the movement of sperm up the fallopian tubes asks us to consider migration as a metaphor for birth and belonging, the hopefulness of successful fertilization to our innate desire for finding one's place in the universe.

Things You've Said Before But We Never Heard is a touchscreen plus two printed textimage triptych. It consists of three poems working together to form an interlocking conversation about the "sense-making of crazy talk and kid talk, the difficulty of bringing dreams into reality, and the meanings of different colours." Each work is based on a

Smooth Second Bastard. Touchscreen interactive. (2011) image credit: J E Lewis

conversation and personal reflection. Two of the poems (*An Abrupt Hardening of Awareness* and *Buzz Aldrin Doesn't Know Any Better*) come from random conversations Lewis had with "street people" whose views intrigued him, and one with his young son Elijah about "what the Sun was." Drawing these disparate reflections together he creates aesthetic and textual mind maps that become meditations on the construction of the insider/outsider paradigm played out in text, image and colour, each vibrant, dynamic, but challenging our conceptions of the "real" in explaining the world around us.

What They Speak When They Speak To Me is an interactive poem about mistaken identity and the confusion – amusing and alarming – that happens when people believe you are somebody you are not. "The text was written on reflecting on my notes from extensive travelling I did in my twenties, where I found myself in Guatemala, on Java, in the Punjab, in the Turkish section of Berlin being mistaken for an inhabitant of that locale. Taxi drivers, market vendors, policemen, etc. would speak to me in the local dialect and then become confused – at best – or angry – at worst – when I couldn't respond in kind."[8] Here Lewis has created an interactive poem laden with mystery. They are his words, but by tracing one's finger over the screen, the viewer creates their own multiplicity of text, image and meaning. As we try to find coherent narratives within these fleeting and ephemeral snippets, the letters dissipate and return to the ethereal assemblage.

I Know What You're Thinking is a "stream of consciousness" poetry generator that trolls and reanimates the "bored and restless texts"[9] residing on the artist's hard drive. The program reimagines found text within its expansive memory, mining it for mundane correspondence, critical thought, half remembered ruminations and ill advised posts to social media. All meld into a roiling "livestream" of the artist's past and present, dredging up portions of old emails, term papers and electronic ephemera presenting them as poetic detritus.

Each stream has its own particular appearance, and varies in size and on-screen duration, creating a motion collage of different layers of semi-transparent text. The result is a disconcertingly intimate and schizophrenically lyrical look into the machine, and the user behind (or in front of) it.

Show Me a Map of the Sun, one of the print panels in the *Things You've Said Before But We Never Heard* triptych. (2010) image credit: J E Lewis

We keep everything these days. Well, at least our computers do. *I Know What You're Thinking* exposes the poignancy and the dull, the sublime and the unsophisticated, the language of our day-to-day existence. Technology, indeed, as narrator and arbiter of the message. One can only be very happy it's not their own hard drive's secrets on display.

Jason Edward Lewis is an artist who resides in the interplay of culture and language. He uses the mutability of written language to consider our own reactions to "the other," rejecting narrow narratives of "identity politics" that for him are "not a natural way to look at the world."[10] In each of these works, he examines notions of the insider/outsider, "the othered" and the ways in which hierarchies and taxonomies are created and maintained.

For Jason Edward Lewis, "any taxonomy hides as much as it illuminates."[11]

His is a nuanced, and thought-provoking intervention, in collaboration with the viewer, residing in a poetic and personal investigation of self and society. He works in the intersections and disjunctures of language...the poetic, the concrete and the ethereal. The viewer, the collaborator in this exchange, animates and becomes part of the experiential character of the work, inextricably linking themselves to the formulation of ideas within it.

– Steven Loft

[1] From Merriam-Webster dictionary, Technology is the making, usage and knowledge of tools, techniques, crafts, systems or methods of organization in order to solve a problem or serve some purpose.
[2] From Jason Lewis's artist statement.
[3] Coined by Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, it refers to a condition, or feeling of discrepancy between something new and something already known.
[4] From *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan, 1964.
[5] From Jason Lewis's artist statement.
[6] From Jason Lewis's project description.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] From the author's interview with Jason Lewis.
[11] Ibid.

About the Exhibition

"*Vital to the General Public Welfare* is a solo exhibition of six works revolving around themes of language, authenticity and contingency. This exhibition consists of a series of text-centred interactive touch works integrated with large-scale prints, with the addition of one wall-sized non-interactive projection display.

"The title of the show comes from documents filed in a 1964 Louisiana court case seeking to ascertain an adopted child's racial classification. The judge claimed that the proper identification of the child's race was 'vital to the general public welfare'; in other words, whichever way the child was classified, a wrong classification would endanger the purity of the White race. The now-hyberbolic seeming claim struck me as a powerful metaphor for any conversations we have not only about racial classification but also about any number of other issues that some group or another feels is central to their definition of a well-functioning society.

"All of the works in the show engage the question of how we talk to one another, how we locate ourselves in wider cultural geographies, how we authenticate ourselves against our own expectations and that of others, and how matters that are once seen as so vital—so essential—can later be regarded as contingent."

– Jason Edward Lewis

Download P.o.E.M.M Apps by Jason Edward Lewis

Speak, *Migration*, and *Know* are P.o.E.M.M. (Poetry for Excitable [Mobile] Media) apps based on works in the exhibition and made for the iPad, iPhone and iPod Touch. Visit the App Store or the iTunes Store to download them.

Bastard, is a special iPad-only P.o.E.M.M. app, issued in a limited edition of five. The limited editions will be available for purchase as part of the exhibition. Please contact the Edward Day Gallery for more information. www.edwarddaygallery.com

The four P.o.E.M.M. apps are part of a planned decalogy of mobile versions of large-scale touchworks. The fifth and next P.o.E.M.M., *Choice*, based on *You've Got No Choice About the Terminology*, another work in the exhibition, will be published in December, 2011. Please go to www.poemm.net to learn more about this project.

For more information about the artist, visit www.obxlabs.net or email him at j@jasonlewis.org.

Artist Biography

Jason Edward Lewis

Jason Edward Lewis (Cherokee/Hawaiian/Samoan) is a digital media artist and software designer. He founded the *Obx Laboratory for Experimental Media*, where he directs research/creation projects devising new means of creating and reading digital texts, developing systems for creative use of mobile technology, designing alternative interfaces for live performance and using virtual environments to assist Aboriginal communities in preserving, interpreting and communicating cultural histories. He is based in Montreal.

Writer Biography

Steven Loft (Mohawk) is a curator, writer and media artist. He is a member of imagineNATIVE's Programming Team and Board of Directors and is currently the Visiting Trudeau Fellow at Ryerson University.

front: *An Abrupt Hardening of Awareness*, one of the print panels in the *Things You've Said Before But We Never Heard* triptych. (2010)

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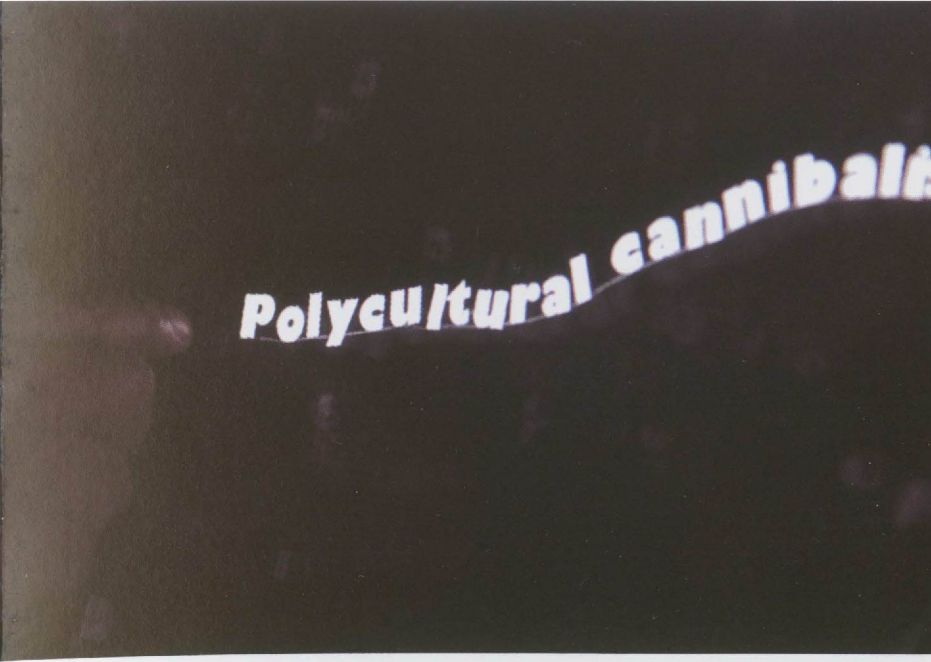
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Jason Edward Lewis
VITAL TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC WELFARE
October 6 - 23, 2011

Polycultural cannibali

What They Speak When They Speak to Me, detail. (2008 - 2011)

Presented by the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival

Opening Reception on Thursday, October 6, 2011 6:00-8:00 p.m.

Artist Talk with Steven Loft and Reception on Thursday, October 20, 2011 7:30-9:30 p.m.

Edward Day Gallery, 952 Queen Street West, Suite 200

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