

Noise

Daniel Webby

I recently rediscovered Layla Rudneva-Mackay's 2007 digital recording *Education Stories*. The file was listed in a folder imaginatively labelled "Audio," sandwiched between a James Joyce reading (singing?) from 'Finnegans Wake' and a MIDI sequence rendition of Megadeth's 'Black Curtains.' Originally Rudneva-Mackay's recording could be accessed via an embedded link in issue six of online magazine Natural Selection, however the link is no longer active, despite the promises of the "click to listen" icon that remains.

If you were to listen to the work, you would hear a flat simulated voice recount instances of torment within various educational settings, each underpinned by a pedagogical insistence on the primacy of written language. The piece ends with a repeating statement that moves the consideration from the personal to the general. The unusual algorithmic emphasis and intonation gives the writing a mantra-like quality, simultaneously intimate and disembodied:

"Do I want to try and show my dissatisfaction with text and language? My feelings of its incompleteness? Shall I write the same texts three times over and each time changing the piece of writing slightly? What will this do to me? What will it do to you? Will I be able to show you anything? Do I structure this text? I mean to structure words. In structuring I am aiming for something. What do I mean by something? What is the sense I am aiming for?

Do I want to try and show my dissatisfaction with text and language? My feelings of its incompleteness? I am writing the same texts three times over and each time changing the piece of writing slightly. What will this do to me? What will it do to you? Will I be able to show you anything? How do I structure this text? What it means to structure words? In structuring I am aiming for an overall feeling. What do I mean by this? What is the feeling I am aiming for?

Do I want to try and show my dissatisfaction with text and language? I have written the texts three times over and each time changing the piece of writing slightly. What will this do to me? What will it do to you? Will I be able to show you my feelings of its incompleteness?"¹

Rudneva-Mackay's evocation alludes to incompleteness as both limitation and material in the imagined encounter with a listener. Similarly James Wylie's *Grab All You Can*, makes use of this paradoxical formula. In Wylie's quasi-report document a deluge of dislocated information is presented such, that for all the transparency, something quite opaque emerges. By way of appropriated and manipulated communication and imagery, Wylie seems to be seeking to implicate a certain kind of institutional semiosis. And through the interaction of embedded valuing logics, absent institutional bodies do indeed begin to emerge, as moiré pattern in overlapping corporate and political dream-lives.

To provide some context for the work, it is worth considering the Letterist strategy of *détournement*, literally translated as "diversion" but more accurately understood in English as "derailment". Developed by Letterist International in the 1950's, *détournement* was considered a tool for cultural subversion through the use of appropriated and re-contextualised media outputs. From the 1956 essay 'A User's Guide to *Détournement*' Guy Debord and Gil Wolman write on the differences between parody and *détournement*:

¹ Rudneva-Mackay, Layla. "Education Stories," in Natural Selection, Issue 6, 2007: 6.1. Web.

"...such humor is the result of contradictions within a condition whose existence is taken for granted. Since the world of literature seems to us almost as distant as the Stone Age, such contradictions don't make us laugh. It is thus necessary to envisage a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of detoured elements, far from aiming to arouse indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity."²

Debord and Wolman's Marxist influenced ideas emerged against the backdrop of a rapidly modernising postwar Europe and in the formulation of their strategies it is clear to see that social reality itself was considered a material. While *Grab All You Can*, employs similar techniques, the overall strategy is far less certain. Wylie's document is comprised of three key textural elements: a list of qualities sought by BHP Billiton in one week of situations vacant listings; an account of the events preceding the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy; and emails solicited from New Zealand politicians which seem to be responding to an omitted question regarding the state of contemporary art in New Zealand. Considering the selections further requires some diligent Wikipedia research.

BHP Billiton is the world's largest mining, oil and gas company. With a headquarters in Melbourne, the publicly listed company operates in 25 countries and employs approximately 41,000 people. According to Wikipedia it had a total stock valuation (market capitalisation) of NZ\$77.6 billion as at December 2011. Their corporate tag-line is "resourcing the future."

The Lehman Brothers bankruptcy is the largest in U.S. History and has been cited as a major factor of the late 2000's global financial downturn (collapse?). The text selected by Wylie describes the numerous issues surrounding financial reporting leading up to the bankruptcy. Sub-prime mortgages, loans made to high-risk clients i.e. those likely unable to afford repayments, repackaged and on-sold, are often referred to as a major contributing factor for both the bankruptcy and its global impact. The total debt accrued by Lehman Brothers at the time of the bankruptcy is reported at NZ\$936 billion (approx. 6.5 times the 2011 NZ GDP).

The selection of political correspondence comes from politicians within both the current and former opposition and ruling parties. The tone of the correspondence moves in various recombinations of casual, formal, engaged and dismissive. While specific responses suggest a level of sincere consideration (see response from Jim Anderton page 13) on occasion there is also a reassuring directness with which ambivalence is expressed. For example, from Labour MP Trevor Mallard; "James, I have no feelings or expertise in the area at all."

The listed qualities sought by BHP Billiton have been alphabetised and stack up in disorientating single-spaced columns. An obsessive compulsion to define overlapping ideals, a sans-serif font adds to the impenetrability of these vertical text shafts. In totality the list is the definitive employee of the week. Some qualities are familiar and specific; "ability to work well with others," "bachelor degree in relevant science or engineering discipline required." Many of the qualities are familiar but ambiguous; "results driven," "courage to lead change," "vision." Others still are both unfamiliar and ambiguous; "fly in/ fly out experience." Buzzwords abound; "action orientated," "best practice," "continuous improvement".

²Debord, Guy, and Gil J Wolman. "A User's Guide to Détournement", in *Situationist International Anthology*; Revised and Expanded Edition, ed. Ken Knabb, 2006. Web.

The Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy report sits more comfortably across the pages. Double-spaced and employing a relaxed but authoritative serif font, the text is graphically beguiling – that is, until the content begins to be unpacked. The specialist, taxonomic language of the report reinforces the definitive position being presented – an economic autopsy intended for only the most specifically interested of audiences. By contrast, the Lehman report imbues the Billiton-listed qualities with a peculiar humanism – a suggestion (again, by contrast) that within the highly determined, calculated milieu of large corporate institutions there is still a space for intangibles, or at the very least intangibles marked, "Can do attitude". Scanning the pages from the Lehman report, through repetition and assonance, words do leap out – "risk appetite," "fiduciary duty of care," "fiduciary duty of candour" – but largely grapple is the most appropriate descriptor of engagement with the text. This difficulty brings about the obvious questions, *do* and *should* I care?

As counterpoint, the political correspondence scattered throughout Wylie's document demonstrates the idiosyncrasies of political institutions. Far from being impenetrable and monolithic, the communication largely gives example of a direct and open candour. These individuals are elected to be concerned and in the détourned context Wylie has created, the specific questioning being posed seems irrelevant. Rather, it is a sense of the person being engaged which comes to the fore and whether specifically, as individuals, they present a satisfactory proxy for my concerns or lack thereof?

The imagery placed behind, alongside, and across the text further adds to the visual complexity. At times the images have been aligned with the layout of the appropriated text, suggesting an oblique complicity with the content. There are moments where linear marks and forms sit as obscure watermarks embedded in the fabric of the .pdf, text running blithely across. Just what these forms and marks relate to is unclear – strange fruit indeed. Block-like architectural forms also feature, alongside and within colour gradient landscapes with perfectly horizontal horizons. The solidity of the forms on occasion are undermined by one or more walls lacking depth. Virtual paper castles? Wylie also makes use of the viral logic of cute furry animals – on several pages a pair of Labrador puppies stare off-camera and past the reader, on another, a ceramic kitten looks up from the page imploring adoration.

Wylie's imagery seems to be attempting to synthesise the colliding and collapsing textual landscapes. Hand drawn elements interact chaotically with the appropriated Lehman report, circling and underlining part-phrases and single words as though a parody of the act of close reading. The constructed elements also describe a formalised integration of the logics of the texts. Structures more façade than dwelling, schematic landscapes intersected with objects which recede into the distance along diminishing lines of perspective, and always the big blue sky up above. The colour palette for the constructed elements seems intentionally restrained: lemon yellow, powder blue, asparagus green, thistle purple, gun metal grey.

Interspersed throughout the document are links to external sources, a technique that brings to mind the *dérive*, another Letterist technique. Through the use of these links, Wylie's document acts as a platform for exploration outward and into the psycho-geography of the World Wide Web. Reinforcing this comparison, the first set of links are identified by way of a global map – these links provide access to: the Lehman Brothers report in its original context; an online publication titled 'A Concise Lexicon Of / For the Digital Commons;' a Google image search using the term "public;" a photograph of a whale shark alongside a diver; quotes on friendship; the 1946 George Orwell essay 'Politics and the English Language;' and the 1908 Agricultural and Pastoral Societies Act.

There are further links dispersed throughout the remainder of the document not marked other than with the change of mouse pointer from arrow to hand. Seeking out these links is not unlike a form of digital divination. Click around and by way of these hidden conduits you may fall into an essay describing life within Hong Kong's infamous walled city. Originally a Chinese military fort built in the mid-nineteenth century, before being demolished in 1994 the city had a population of some 30000 people within a 0.03km² area (one person per square metre). The essay details the energy and vitality of the city while also describing the resourcefulness required when living within such a densely populated and largely unregulated environment.

You may also fall through into an audience with virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier playing a many tubed metallic wind instrument and then elaborating on the development of avatars in computer science. There's also a link to the Cat Steven's song, Trouble.

My favourite link is to an essay from artist Chris Collins. Comprised of image, video, screen shot and text, Collins presents a speculative social history of the founders of an online pyramid scheme and the DIY graphic design that enticed him into the investigation. From the essay;

"Luzy and Ron met online. Despite a significant age difference, and thousands of miles between them, they fell fast and deeply in love. They made plans to be together, a plan to bring Luzy from Vietnam to California. They decided to go into business together. The internet seemed like such a magical place to them. After all, through it they'd accomplished the impossible and found each other. Because of this belief, they were seduced by the promises of GDI. Ron would handle the numbers and the technical aspects, and Luzy would create the graphics. They set up shop at tyepilot.com, and began attempting to sell .WS domain names. The images Luzy created, the hope.jpgs, not only served as promotion for their business but as love letters to Ron..."³

I came across links to at least two Liam Gillick essays, 'Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three' and 'For a functional utopia.' From the later, there is a great Adorno quote:

"The utopian impulse in thinking is all the stronger the less it objectifies itself as utopia – a further form of regression – whereby it sabotages its own realisation. Open thinking points beyond itself. For its part, such thinking takes a position as a figuration of praxis, which is more closely related to a praxis truly involved in change than in a position of mere obedience for the sake of praxis. Beyond all specialised and particular content, thinking is actually and above all the force of resistance..."⁴

The links further destabilise the document, showing it to be iterative and porous (in contrast to discrete and impermeable.) While there is an inherent directional quality to the experience with the title page clearly articulating a point of entry and the last page providing a concluding (appropriated) statement, the pathway between the two is not one of linear development and or progression. The document has been constructed around the logic of the hyper-link, or, using the language of 'A Concise Lexicon Of / For the Digital Commons,' the contemporary experience that is bouncing from node to node in search of kernels.

³ Collins, Chris. "IMG MGMT: A Letter to Ron Tye", in Art Fag City, May 2011. Web

⁴ Adorno, Theodor W. "Resignation", in Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords, trans. Henry W. Pickford, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998. Print.

"KERNEL: The core of a work or an idea. The central rescension, of a narrative, a code, a set of signs or any other structure that invites modification, extrapolation and interpretation, by its very presence. Here, the term core must not be confused with 'origin' or with any other attributions of originality, which mean little within an open access system. It is almost impossible to determine the origins of a code, because the deeper we go into the constitutive elements of a code, the more it branches out to a series of nodes within and outside a given system of signs. It is more meaningful to talk of the 'custody,' rather than the 'origin' of any system of signs."5

It is hard to say whether there is a particular position that Wylie holds within the nebulous territories that are being mapped. The choices, while deliberate, do not make for simple correlations and bring about a sense of endless regression. Alongside this, the parts are incommensurate with the whole to which Wylie seems to allude; whereas individual instances suggest communication, from the totality there is only noise. It is this comparison which seems to me most viable for considering the work. Whereas communication can be compared to signal transmission and reception, noise can be likened to interference across this hypothetical line. While the "signals" which emanate from institutional structures invariably seek to reinforce the valuing systems from which their production arises, these signals also carry a significant level of "noise." There is the noise which arises in presenting an overdetermined outcome - feedback for want of a better word; there is the noise of competing rationalisations arising from conflicting or conflicted ideologies; there is the noise that arises from imbalanced power relationships between individuals and institutions. Noise in this context, that is, considered in relation to the originating signal, can be seen to be a disruptive quantity. Wylie's document however, goes further. In overlaying signals such that the inherent noise of each becomes amplified, a generative field becomes apparent. As with incompleteness, noise can be recognised as a source material.

"It is useless to dream of a development of economics such that politics would no longer be necessary; it is useless to dream of a development of politics such that economics would no longer need to play out. There are only different ways of organising and dividing up passionate interests. In the intertwining of desires and beliefs, everything has to be the object of an artificial organisation. We cannot leave it in anyone's hands. (While) ...there may be a "life plan," a "common plan of conduct;" only one thing is certain: they will be immanent, contingent, and orchestrated, not transcendent."6

5 RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE, "A Concise Lexicon Of / For the Digital Commons", in Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue, Sarai Reader 03: Shaping Technologies, ed. Monica Narula et al., 2003. Web.

6 Latour, Bruno and Antonin Lépinay, "The Science of Passionate Interests: An introduction to Gabriel Tarde's economic anthropology", 2009: 70-71. Print.

