[Re: #004]

CURATING AMBIGUITY
The Electronic Literature Collection, Volume One

AN E-MAIL CONVERSATION WITH SCOTT RETTBERG | In autumn 2006 the Electronic Literature Organization (1) released the Electronic Literature Collection Volume One (2), including selected works in New Media forms such as Hypertext Fiction, Kinetic Poetry, generative and combinatory forms, Network Writing, Codework, 3D, and Narrative Animations.

One of the main common characteristics of all Web-based literary products is that they often can be read (or viewed, listened, played with, used) in multifaceted ways. Accordingly the curation of Electronic Literature is challenged by ambiguity and heterogeneity on different levels. As broadly termed by the Electronic Literature Organization itself, „Electronic Literature" describes a form of cultural and artistic production on the Internet with important literary aspects that takes advantage of the contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer. Similar to what is not yet consistently defined as Digital Art, Netart, net.art, Internet Art, New Media Art, etc. the production of literary works on the Internet or by other digital means ranges from terms like Computer Literature, New Media Poetry to Codework and Hyperfiction, mixing up genres with subgenres and single descriptions. In this context the methods of classical literature studies are frequently transferred to a networked and online surrounding without creating innovative categories.

Florian Cramer (3), a Germany based literature scientist and co-founder of the curatorial platform runme.org - say it with software art!, outlines in a very general way that the Internet is based upon a code which acts on the logic of the alphabet and therefore is finally based upon text. The Internet, for the author, is literature in its original meaning, a system of letters whose poetry can only be found by the reader. Despite this very

#004 MEHRDEUTIGKEIT KURATIEREN
The Electronic Literature Collection, Volume One

EIN E-MAIL GESPRÄCH MIT SCOTT RETTBERG | Im Herbst 2006 hat die Electronic Literature Organization (1) den ersten Band der Electronic Literature Collection (2) veröffentlicht. Die Anthologie umfasst literarisch-künstlerische Arbeiten in Form Neuer Medien wie Hypertext Fiction, Kinetic Poetry, generative und kombinatorische Netzliteratur, Network Writing, Codework, 3D, und Narrative Animations.

Eines der zentralen Charakteristika von Web-basierter Literatur ist, dass sie häufig auf mehrere Arten gelesen (gesehen, gehört, gespielt, benutzt) werden kann. Dem Kuratieren von Literatur im Internet stehen Mehrdeutigkeit und Heterogenität auf mehreren Ebenen gegenüber. Die Electronic Literature Organization selbst definiert den Begriff „Elektronische Literatur" sehr weit als eine Form kultureller und künstlerischer Produktion im Internet, die literarische Aspekte aufgreift und sich dabei entweder eines Einzelrechners oder eines Computernetzwerkes bedient. Ähnlich wie die Bezeichnungen Digital Art, Netart, net.art, Internet Art, New Media Art, etc., die bisher noch nicht einheitlich definiert wurden, reicht die Bandbreite der Beschreibungen literarischer Arbeiten im Internet oder in sontiger digitaler Form von Computer Literature, New Media Poerty bis hin zu Codework und Hyperfiction. Dabei werden häufig Genres mit Subgenres und Einzelbeschreibungen vermischt und die Methodik der klassischen Literaturwissenschaft auf eine vernetze Online-Umgebung transferiert, ohne jedoch neue Kategorien zu schaffen.

Florian Cramer, ein in Deutschland ansässiger Literaturwissenschafter und Mitbegründer der kuratorischen Plattform runme.org - say it with software art!, skizziert das Internet als System, das auf einem alphanumerischen Code basiert und in der Folge reines Textmedium ist: „Liest man das ganze Internet als Literatur, das heißt als Buchstabenwesen, so richtet sich die Frage seiner Poetizität, nach Dichtung im Netz, zuerst an den Leser. Ihm obliegt es, den Textfluß zu verdichten." (3) Trotz dieses sehr generellen Standpunktes differenziert der Autor das Vorkommen von Literatur im Internet in unterschiedliche Produktions- und Verbreitungsebenen: Das Netz kann einerseits ausschließlich als Distributionsmedium für

general point of view Cramer also describes various levels of production and dissemination of literary texts: on the one hand the Internet can purely work as a medium of distribution for literature, on the other hand it operates as a platform for collaborative writing or as a literary database. Not until text needs a software interface, is generated automatically or randomly programmed by rules, it is genuine Computer-Literature. Furthermore he locates literature on the Web to be understood on various levels: poems, written in programming languages like for example Perl are readable in three ways. At first as a poem in a natural language, then as a sequence of machine commands and finally -- once executed -- as a poem in natural language again. (4)

The Electronic Literature Collection Volume One represents an anthology of sixty works, curated by N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg and Stephanie Strickland. It has been published both, on the Web and on CD-ROM, and is licensed under a Creative Commons License with the aim to be freely accessible for individuals and organizations. For the contextualisation and as a didactical element of mediation each work is framed with a brief editorial and author's description. Furthermore all products are tagged with descriptive keywords ranging from the well known user-interface paradigm Hypertext and technological backgrounds like Flash and HTML/DHTML up to more historical literature-basics like Memoir, Combinatorial or Parody/Satire.
Some of the works like „Study Poetry" (2006) by Marko Niemi, a playful word toy that enables the readers to play poker with words instead of cards were especially created for the Collection. Only few of the collected works are dating back to the earlier years of the Internet like for example „my body - a Wunderkammer" (1997) by Shelley Jackson. This autobiographical Hypertext takes as its central focus the relationship between human identity and the body's constituent organs. It uses the HTML hypertext form to revitalize the Memoir genre focusing on one of the prominent themes in the digital realm: body and identity. Most of the works give a broad overview over the past six years of literary production on the Internet. „Star Wars, one letter at a time" (2005) by Brian Kim Stefans for example is the retelling of a classical story bringing each character in the cast steadily before the eyes of the viewer and therefore blurring the reader's expectations from a text. „Frequently Asked Questions about ‚Hypertext'" (2004) by Richard Holeton parodies a form of academic discourse that sometimes takes itself too seriously. It springs from a poem composed of anagrams of the word „hypertext" and plays with the high seriousness that surrounded much early hypertext criticism. The „Oulipoems" (2004) by Millie Niss and Martha Deed is a playful series of pieces which combine some concepts of combinatorial literature, as developed by the Oulipo in France in the 1960ies. By transferring this art historical background to the actual situation in the USA the authors create a suspense between Electronic Literature and its predecessors in experimental literature.

herkömmliche Literatur dienen, andererseits funktioniert es zum Teil als Plattform für gemeinschaftliches Schreiben sowie als Literaturdatenbank. Erst wenn der Text eine Software-Benutzeroberfläche benötigt oder von programmierten Regeln automatisch erzeugt wird, „entsteht, optional in Verbindung mit den ersten drei Funktionen, genuine Computerliteratur." (3) Überdies behauptet der Autor anhand des Beispiels von Perl Poems, dass Literatur im Internet auf mehreren Ebenen geortet werden kann und in diesem konkreten Fall sogar dreifach lesbar ist: „Erstens als Gedicht in natürlicher Sprache, zweitens als Sequenz von Maschinenbefehlen, und drittens, sobald es ausgeführt wird, als neues Gedicht in natürlicher Sprache." (4)

Die Electronic Literature Collection Volume One ist eine Anthologie von sechzig Werken, kuratiert von N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg und Stephanie Strickland. Die Sammlung wurde sowohl im Web als auch auf CD-ROM unter einer Creative Commons Lizenz veröffentlicht, mit dem Ziel für Einzelpersonen und Organisationen frei zugänglich zu sein. Zur Kontextualisierung der Arbeiten und als didaktisches Element der Kunstvermittlung wurde jedes Werk mit Kurzbeschreibungen seitens der Kuratoren und der jeweiligen Künstler versehen. Überdies ist jede Produktion in Schlüsselwörter eingebettet, die von der bekannten Kategorie Hypertext und technischen Hintergrundinfos wie Flash and HTML/DHTML bis hin zu literarisch-historischen Kategorien wie das Memoir-Genre, Kombinatorik oder Parodie und Satire reichen.

Einige der Werke, darunter das Wordtoy „Study Poetry" (2006) von Marko Niemi, bei dem der User Poker mit Wörtern statt Karten spielt, wurden eigens für die Sammlung entworfen. Nur wenige der zusammengetragenen Arbeiten reichen aber bis zu den Anfängen des literarischen Schaffen im Internet zurück. „My body - a Wunderkammer" (1997) von Shelley Jackson etwa ist ein Hypertext mit autobiographischen Zügen, der die Beziehung zwischen dem menschlichen Körper und seinen Organen zum Thema hat. HTML Hyptertext wird hier benutzt, um das Memoir-Genre zu revitalisieren und sich dem prominenten Thema Körper und Identität digital zu nähern. Die meisten Arbeiten geben einen breiten Überblick über die Produktion literarischer Werke im Internet der vergangenen sechs Jahre. In „Star Wars, one letter at a time" (2005) von Brian Kim Stefans wird eine klassische Geschichte

The following interview was done by Franz Thalmair (FT) for CONT3XT.NET.

FT: The ELC1 is an eclectic anthology of sixty works, including many different forms such as Hypertext Fiction, Kinetic Poetry, Network Writing, Codework, Narrative Animations. What is the main focus of the Collection and by which criteria did you select the works: genre, textuality, technology, a historical basis, ...?

SCOTT RETTBERG (SR): I can say that our basic criterion for selecting works was „literary quality," which probably meant different things to each of us. We also agreed that there would need to be consensus that a work should be included. We were choosing from a limited universe of work. While we did encourage some people to submit, we were working with a pool of submissions. The other criterion was that we would need to be able to present the work on both the web and on CD-ROM. In composing the Collection, we were also thinking about trying to represent multiple modalities of electronic writing, and to achieve a balance among several different identifiable types of electronic writing, to give the reader a sense of the breadth of the field.

FT: The article „Acid-Free Bits. Recommendations for Long-Lasting Electronic Literature" (5), published in 2004 by the ELO, is a „plea for writers to work proactively in archiving their own creations, and to bear these issues in mind even in the act of composition." Do you think that preservation is already an integrative part of the creative process and not exclusively the task of the curator?

SR: Yes, I do, to the extent that people creating electronic literature can take certain steps, or work in certain ways, such as using valid XHTML if their work is in that format, and documenting their process, and making sure that their files are backed up and distributed to multiple others. On the other hand, some writers and artists have a sort of performance-oriented aesthetic, and don't particularly care if their work lasts beyond a certain time frame. I do however think that more and more electronic writers are conscious of the many preservation issues involved in digital media artifacts, and are taking a more active role in seeing to it that their works last. Curators may or may not rescue works of electronic literature in the future. I think authors can and should do all that they can to prevent the obsolescence of their work.

Of course, preservation is an important aspect of the ELC1 as a project. At the very least, we know that there will be a couple thousand copies of all of the bits of all of the works on the ELC1 widely distributed and archived. While having many copies of a digital artifact does not assure that it will remain readable as technologies and platforms change, it does

neu erzählt indem jeder Buchstabe des Textes zwar linear, aber einzeln auf dem Bildschirm erscheint und somit die herkömmlichen Erwartungen des Lesers an einen geschriebenen Text verschwimmen. „Frequently Asked Questions about ‚Hypertext'" (2004) von Richard Holeton ist eine Parodie auf den akademischen Diskurs, der sich zum Teil selbst zu ernst nimmt. Das Gedicht, das sich aus Anagrammen des Wortes „Hypertext" zusammensetzt, spielt mit dem hohen Grad an Seriosität, der die ersten Formen von Hyptertext-Kritik auszeichnete. Die „Oulipoems" (2004) von Millie Niss und Martha Deed rekurriert auf die Vorgänger Elektronischer Literatur in Form kombinatorischer Gedichte, wie sie von der Oulipo im Frankreich der 1960er entwicklet wurde. Indem hier ein kunsthistorischer Hintergrund auf die aktuelle Situation in den USA übertragen wird schaffen die Autoren einen Spannungsbogen zwischen dem aktuellen künstlerischen Schaffen im Internet und seinen Vorgängern in der Experimentalliteratur.

Das vorliegende Interview mit Scott Rettberg wurde von Franz Thalmair für CONT3XT.NET geführt. Im Mittelpunkt des Gesprächs steht das Kuratierens Elektronischer Literatur. Weiters wird auf die erforderlichen Maßnahmen zur Konservierung netzbasierter Kunstformen eingegangen und es kommen die nötigen Schritte zur benutzerfreundlichen Kontextualisierung und die unterschiedlichen Darstellungsformen von E-Literatur zur Sprache. Auf die Frage nach einer adäquaten Präsentation von digitalen Kunstwerken antwortet Scott Rettberg: „The more context, the more documentation available to the reader, the better."

Über Scott Rettberg:
Scott Rettberg wurde 1970 in Chicago geboren und ist Hypertext-Autor und Theoretiker. Er arbeitete als Assistenz-Professor für New Media Studies am Richard Stockton College von New Jersey und ist nun außerordentlicher Professor für Humanistic Informatics an der Universität Bergen in Norwegen. Als Mitbegründer und erster Geschäftsführer der Electronic Literature Organization hat der Autor selbst mehrere experimentelle literarische Werke verfasst. Seine Website: http://retts. net

mean that those future archivists will most likely be able to access the files as they exist now.

FT: Each single composition is presented with an additional author's description. Did you select the works in a networked process with them: did the authors participate in the process of filtering and presenting? Or do all works derive from the ELO's directory (6), the descriptive guide to over 2300 e-literature-compositions?

SR: The authors chose to submit works, and with each work submitted, we asked them to provide a short description. This was a separate process from that involved in the ELO directory. The editors then provided an additional editorial description for each work, and we assigned each work a set of appropriate keywords. We hope that this project will in a way serve as a pilot for a new approach to classifying works within the Electronic Literature Directory as well. The field has changed substantially since the Directory was launched, and we'd like to see it shift to a somewhat less hierarchical, more emergent system of classification, using keywords or tags, as well.

FT: One of the principles of the ELO is to promote a non-proprietary setting for e-literature that facilitates cross-referencing, mixing, and institutional networking. The Collection is licensed under Creative Commons on the Internet and additionally provided by DVD. Who do you want to read/use the collection and how do you want it to be read/used?

SR: Essentially, we want everyone who might be interested to be exposed to this work. In designing the project and in releasing it under a Creative Commons license, we are encouraging people to share and redistribute it for noncommercial purposes. While I would say that the target audience is very broad -- „readers" -- we were thinking in particular of how the project might be utilized in classrooms, and perhaps included in library collections. That's part of the reason why it is released on CD-ROM in a case appropriate for library marking and distribution, in addition to its web incarnation. Our hope is that people will enjoy experiencing the works individually, and will study them in classrooms around the world, and will also perhaps be inspired to create and share new work of their own.

FT: According to Trebor Scholz, on the Internet „curators become meta-artists. They set up contexts for artists who provide contexts." (7) Which different contexts are necessary for E-Literature-works to be presented in an appropriate way: the original space, a curator's and/or artist's statement, the source code or technological background, ...?

SR: That's tough to answer in a general way, as each work, and each presentation of each

work, is different. For instance, there are at least two types of Electronic Literature that are not included in the collection -- installations and network-based works that integrate real-time data. Many works of Electronic Literature are also presented as a kind of live performance as well -- for instance I've seen Talan Memmott present Lexia to Perplexia using only a chalkboard. So it's difficult to say what is and what is not appropriate. Most works of Electronic Literature don't have the same type of life as works of print literature do, in one or a series of fixed editions. Rather they typically are revised over a longer period of time, and presented in a variety of contexts. Something like the ELC1 is more of a snapshot of a moment in time in the life of the field and in the lives of the individual works included.

I think the types of documentation you mention above are all important tools for readers. The more context, the more documentation available to the reader, the better. In the case of the ELC, with each work we include a short editorial introduction, a short statement by the author, technical notes, and a descriptive keyword index. While one can imagine more comprehensive critical editions of individual works of electronic literature, for an anthology of electronic literature, I think that's a pretty good basic set of context-establishing tools.

FT: Do you think that E-Literature can be shown in a classical art-institution like a museum, a gallery or even a library? Or is it rather a form of cultural artefact, exclusively produced on and for the Web?

SR: Yes, I do. In fact I have seen Electronic Literature successfully presented in all of those forums. While the Web is the main venue for the majority of Electronic Literature, I think that it is important to see it exhibited in the kinds of venues in which we have been taught to appreciate other forms of art and literature as well. These works are the products of a dialogue not only with other forms of digital artifacts, but with historical art and literature as well. I think many of the pieces in the ELC1, for instance, owe clear debts to 20th century movements such as dada, surrealism, and post-modernism. It makes sense to see them in the same contexts as other kinds of art and literature.

FT: Are you already working on Electronic Literature Collection Volume Two? If so: when will it be published and what will be the difference to Volume One?

SR: Right now we're working on getting funding together to produce and distribute #2. The editorial board will rotate with each iteration of the ELC, so I personally won't be involved in editing it. We hope to produce the ELC on a biennial basis, so I anticipate that the next one will emerge in 2008. I anticipate the call for works will go out sometime in the second half of next year, along with the announcement of the second editorial board. I'd encourage people who think the project is worthwhile to join the ELO and make a contribution in support of it.

FT: Which of the sixty works is your favorite one and why?

SR: I'm fond of a great deal of them, and couldn't pick a favorite. I value different works for different reasons, but haven't regretted the time I've spent with any of them. The Collection as a whole is an awesome tool for me as an educator, as it includes several works that I have taught in the past, and has exposed me to many that I will teach in the future. It's a kind of semester-in-a-box for those of us who teach Electronic Literature.

FT: Thank you very much for the interview!

About Scott Rettberg:
Scott Rettberg is a hypertext author and theorist, born 1970 in Chicago. He worked an assistant professor of New Media Studies at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and is now working as an associate professor of Humanistic Informatics at the University of Bergen, Norway. He writes, and writes about New Media and Electronic Literature. As the co-founder and first executive director of the Electronic Literature Organisation the author has published various experimental literary works. His website: http://retts.net

(1) http://eliterature.org
(2) http://collection.eliterature.org/1
(3) http://cramer.plaintext.cc:70/essays/literatur_im_internet/literatur_im_internet.html#1
(4) http://cramer.plaintext.cc:70/essays/ascii_art_rekursion_programmiersprachen-lyrik/ascii_art_rekursion_programmiersprachen-lyrik.html
(5) http://eliterature.org/pad/afb.html
(6) http://directory.eliterature.org/
(7) http://mailman.thing.net/pipermail/idc/2006-April/000330.html