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Better than Bali: Travels on the WWW

Hosted by Jennifer Ley, *Riding the Meridian*, Volume 1, Issue 1, ISSN: 1525-3228 ©1999 Jennifer Ley, jley@heelstone.com

An online roundtable with Robert Kendall, Ian Irvine, Sue Thomas, Alaric Sumner, Christy Sheffield Sanford. Questions provided by email.

Christy Sheffield Sanford was the first trAce Virtual Writer-in-Residence and an Alden B. Dow Creativity Fellow in 1999. The previous year, her piece "NoPink" was awarded The Well's prize for the Best Hyperlinked Work on the Web. Her online projects have been praised by Frederick Barthelme in *Atlantic Monthly Online*, George Landow in Hypertext 2.0 and N. Katherine Hayles in *ArtForum*. Her web work has been published by *Light and Dust*, *Enterzone*, *Ylem*, *Salt Hill*, *New River*, *frAme*, *Perihelion* and many other ezines and project sites. In 1999, her web projects appeared in the Amour-Horreur Show at Galerie La Centrale, Montréal and the Aix Art Contemporaine Web en Provence Exhibit. She has won nine grants including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and two NEA-Rockefeller sponsored grants for New Forms. She is the author of seven books including *The H's: The Spasms of a Requiem*, *The Italian Smoking Piece*, *Sur les Pointes: the Ballerina and the Sea Anemone* and *Only the Nude Can Redeem the Landscape*. Her book, *Library of Congress*, is forthcoming from Bloody Twin Press. She is currently working with Reiner Strasser on a commissioned web work for Nottingham Now.

1. How much has the technology made available through computer software and the Internet influenced the work you create? Please give one specific example.

Christy Sheffield Sanford: Great set of questions, Jennifer. Thanks for asking me to take part in this roundtable. Short answer: totally. Long answer: in late 1995, when I first came onto the Web, I sensed that web conventions would be an important area for me. The innovations that were flowing for the web browsers were astounding: tables, frames, forms and then the little bits of Java Scripting that made popouts and rollovers possible. (I imagine myself as Jackie Joyner-Kersey jumping over the hurdles.) I felt and still do that these are psychologically important to the creator and viewer. With each individual work, I focused on a new convention. That isn't all I was doing but was one significant variable. *Moving Toward the Light*, among other things, was a series of meditations on light and the solstice. It also dealt with rollovers!

Since late 1998, I've been experimenting with dynamic html. I started by downloading scripts from the DHTML Zone and from Dynamic Drive, and gradually learning how to control and make them unique. Compared to the Java Applets-text and image effects that I'd been working with -- the dhtml Java Scripts were a lot more digestible to my Mac friends and had a shorter loading time for both systems.

Finally, I downloaded a one-month free trial of Dreamweaver, an editor that codes page divisions and does some Java Scripting. At Christmas I received my own copy. I don't mean to wax lyrical about any specific product, it's the thinking that's behind dynamic html that I think is liberating. Some people seem concerned with the idea of a matrix, which is fundamental to dhtml, they feel you're going somewhere you shouldn't, into another dimension. I have the opposite sense. Much of literature and art have become surface attractions. Dynamic html allows infinite penetration. Whereas much of early hypertext was concerned with navigation and linking page-to-page to a new address, a new URL, I think now, hypertext can enjoy more depth, more interactivity and a sense of unfolding.

2. Who/what would you say were your influences when you first turned to the computer/Internet to generate and disseminate your work?

Christy Sheffield Sanford: Circa: late 1995. I could see how much easier joining image and text would be -- something I was already doing in the small press world. "Red Mona" was my first piece online. Bradley Spatz, a computer science engineer, developed a random script for that project. I can't say any one artist or writer influenced my style or form on the Web. I was a mature artist by the time I arrived. On the other hand, I much admired Mark Napier and Levi Ascher's "Chicken Wire Mother" at *Enterzone* and Terry Spatero's "Angels." Mark and I once discussed how overwhelmed we were by the luminosity of pixels on the computer screen. Janan Platt was/is doing interesting experiments with sound, text and image. Right away, I had a preference for those who regarded the Web as a medium.

Something that kept me going, more support than influence, was meeting Karl Young and Marjorie Luesebrink. No one knows more about visual poetry than Karl. He has been a publisher and poet forever. We'd have spirited debates, but more importantly I always felt he had some things to teach me. Not just about the history of visual poetry but a way of understanding. Now, Karl has published quite a bit of my work online at *Light and Dust*. But we had many, many discussions-maybe for a year-before that opportunity arose.

Margie Luesebrink I picked up on the Web with a challenging remark. I read an article on hypertext that she had written and wrote her saying why not include me next time. (I imagine myself as Loretta Lynn selling records from the back of a flatbed truck.). It turned out that Margie was working on her own creative work, and we were able to

discuss and support each other. We also like to present at academic conferences so we've had the chance to meet and work together in that arena, too.

3. Does the Internet fulfill your needs (as the most practical way to distribute your work) or do you use it because it is a new and exciting medium to explore, whatever its limits, or for a combination of reasons?

Christy Sheffield Sanford: I use it as a way to explore and develop new work. I have the pioneer sense and exhilaration that I'm one of those defining web specific work. (I imagine myself as Gertrude Stein writing the play "Listen to Me:"

- Curtain.
-
- It is very easy not to be very lively in the morning as the earth is all completely covered by people.
-
- Curtain.)
-

This is the revolution and I feel at home here. I didn't come on the Web for ease of distribution; that has been a pleasant byproduct. I was successful in the small press world if that means number of publications and grants. But responsiveness was always delayed by the post; many people even if they loved your work wouldn't write you. Many editors who took my work over and over hardly spoke to me. Some notable exceptions: Gloria Vando Hickok, Barbara Hamby and Stephen Paul Martin. Joel Weinstein was a great and caring penpal for a number of years. Brian Richards who published a couple of my books invited me to his family home and arranged readings.

The response on the Web has been terrific. Linking is exponential. I receive letters not just from writers and artists but from people in all walks of life. Many more people have responded to me online than ever did in print. The Web stimulates searching and people enjoy that as an adventure. It's my responsibility not to disappoint that instinct. I try to put the work out and to get linked.

4. Do you use the Internet because you can distribute your work without interference from publishers? Is it a blessing or a curse that your work is available to readers without charge?

Christy Sheffield Sanford: For me, in terms of publishing, the print to web experience is seamless. Almost every web piece I finish, I submit somewhere: to a gallery showing, ezine or competition. I've always felt it keeps me honest to keep submitting. And I like to send to those I've never met or who don't know me or my work.

My trAce virtual writer-in-residence position was obtained that way as was my recent Dow Fellowship. The literary and art world, maybe as all professions, has a tendency to get chummy and suddenly you don't know whether they love you or your work. If your work goes over the transom and is accepted you know it's your work. Okay, could be the judges are biased in favor of your particular theme. Still, I think my argument holds. So I keep sending my work out to total strangers. And I share my work with those who've taken it in the past. I try to have enough work to satisfy both camps: those who want to continue supporting the work and those who are new and want to recognize it. (I imagine myself picking the flowers from my garden and giving each panel member a bloom: peach hibiscus for Sue, pink rose for Jennifer, pine cone lily for Rob, hot pink gerber daisy for Alaric and a blue hydrangea for Ian.)

As a poet/fiction writer/genre fusionist, I made little money. With experimental literature the public often has the illusion one day you may be well paid so you are seldom questioned about it. I won a \$20,000 NEA one year, but what happened the previous 10 years? Not much financially! With the Web, there is this acute realization that there is no money, and so I am chronically asked and looked at like poor thing are you out of your mind to be doing this. Actually more opportunities have opened to me on the Web than in print. I can almost make a living. But the lack of a salable commodity is an interesting issue.

5. Before using a computer/the Internet to create/disseminate your work, what were you doing?

Christy Sheffield Sanford: Before the computer and the Internet, I was sending out work to literary magazines and competitions. My print acceptances around that time were *Central Park*, *Chain*, *Fiction International*, *To* and *Membrane*. I was working for six months as a Visiting Writer at the University of Toledo. My colleague and friend Joel Lipman had encouraged me to apply. He shares with me a strong impetus to join art and writing. One day Joel came into my office and gave me a stack of French Flash Cards. I've always been a francophile. (I imagine myself as Suzanne Valadon painting in the nude.) Throughout my tenure at U.T., I was cutting out images and overlaying text on the Flash Cards to make a nonlinear story about a woman who has stepped out of a DeMaupassant short story, "Two Little Soldiers." I envisioned this as a work for the Web, as it was the only way I could see it being published. I also wanted to explore how it could be not just a gallery-type project but a web project. I had French sound files and a random cgi script created and the text itself is very hypertextual. By that, I mean on the cards themselves, there are multiple meanings, associations and lines of connection. "Red Mona" was eventually accepted for the Montreal Maid in Cyberspace XX exhibition. That was a long time ago. The mountain has been steep.

6. Do you miss the tactile quality of your previous work, the feel of a pen, paper under your fingers, use of paint, canvas, brush? Or do you still make

work for other media? If so, how has your use of the Internet/computer software affected your other work?

Christy Sheffield Sanford: I don't miss the tactile quality because I feel the Web is very tactile and textural. Isn't that funny? I agree with Sue on that. It's so visually exciting. In a sense it's like film or video, you have the experience of caressing something with your gaze. I feel it can be very intimate.

I'm thinking about Alaric's response. I see the Web as offering many chances for performance-based work. The page can and often does perform itself. But you're right, I've created some live performance art pieces, and there is a unique energy and responsiveness that can't be duplicated on the Web. Documented but not realized. Fortunately, as the late Juan Downey said, any medium that is satisfying isn't going to disappear.

I hope there will be more cross fertilization. I like very much the work of Peter Greenaway because I think he brought into film influences from other disciplines such as painting and the book. It's inevitable that various art forms will affect each other.

7. What software/html programming/javascript/etc. tools do you most enjoy using right now? Why?

Christy Sheffield Sanford: I've already spoken of Dreamweaver, but I can say a few more words. With this editor as with some others, you can switch back and forth between html and dhtml. A wysiwyg allows you to see the layout develop. You can automatically code page divisions and layers. And you can with a few clicks create a show-hide Java Script without knowing how to code or program. This means, you can have a hot link that will open a layer or several layers at once. There can be overlapping or a total cover up of what has been. In addition, there is the opportunity to create timelines, making words or images fly through the air or behave in choreographed ways. What I think is most significant about all this is that it causes a temporal and spatial consciousness. It creates a geometrization of the interface. I think dhtml will have a very positive factor in the evolution of hypertext.

The other program I've been experimenting with is Flash. This is a vector graphics program that allows you to make small file-sized movies, which come up quickly. They are interactive in that you can zoom. I have some examples in "Jill Swimming", a work that was in the Aix-en-Provence Art Contemporaine Exhibit.

8. Does the Internet give you a diverse audience which was unavailable to you before its inception? Or do you worry that your readership is now largely limited to those who can afford computer equipment or have access to it through institutions?

Christy Sheffield Sanford: Yes, the audience has greatly increased. Literary magazine subscribers are a fairly select group. In terms of democracy, I think the Web allows much more access. For experimental artists, the audience is seldom large on any account. I do think people in the U.S. have been privileged to have inexpensive servers. I hope for cheaper access around the world. Yes, I realize some people are not able to buy a computer, some people are not able to buy a magazine. I know quite a few poor artists and they have all managed to set up computers. Most now think it a necessity for networking and for trying to find work.

I recently learned the U.N. Human Development Report 1999 shows that outside the OECD, only fractions of 1% of the population have Internet access. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development accounts for 19% of the world's people and has expanded from Europe and North America to include Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Mexico, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Korea.

9. It is unclear to what extent electronic archives of internet work will be preserved for posterity. Does the thought of your work being lost alarm you or have you started to work with the potential ephemerality of the medium?

Christy Sheffield Sanford: Yes, of course, as a woman I worry about my history being lost. I've seen so many examples of that. Much more progress can be made if people don't have to keep reinventing the wheel. Civilization profits by the experiences and products of those who have gone before. Exclusionary tactics exist cradle to grave. My latest experience had to do with a woman. Control issues are genderless.

When my mother moved into a highrise for seniors, she gave me my father's paintings. He died when I was nine. He was prominent in Atlanta, had won many prizes and had a large body of work. He had sold quite a few paintings when he was alive, but many of his art works are now in a bin in my hallway. Have you ever tried to place several hundred works? They're good, too. But this legacy is quite a responsibility.

I hope my work is preserved, I think it's groundbreaking and has the power to inspire others. Even when it's dated, the ideas behind the work are important and show a way of thinking. I have a CD burner and I intend to make a few archival copies. I've had several publishers approach me about a retrospective CD of my work so I'm hopeful it won't all disappear.

I applaud those who have documented performance art events. I've greatly profited from seeing images from Carolee Schneemann's performances. Pina Bausch, too. These weren't dead to me, Alaric. They offered quite vital inspiration.

One issue of archiving is quite amazing. You can keep changing the work! I suppose technically the work is not really archived if that is the case.

10. What do you think the future holds for the Internet writing/art community? How do you plan to affect this community?

Christy Sheffield Sanford: I am optimistic. I think hypertext will develop into a satisfying form. In my latest web essay, Rob, I have a page or two devoted to the question of what is satisfying-in past literature and in current Hypertext efforts and, in general, what forms are satisfying. Those questions haven't been addressed for quite some time because the whole issue of aesthetics has been taboo. Satisfaction is inescapably in that philosophical area. I feel you're on the right track there. I think there will be more depth in literature and art due to the penetrable matrix idea. Sue, I hope there will be more wonderful communities like trAce. You're a model, a role model. Ian, you mentioned spatialisation. I've used the phrase spatial-temporal and sometimes spatio-temporal. I think we're in agreement on the importance of that whole area for the Web. It's a new dawn but right now it's my bedtime. (I imagine myself as Saint Theresa flying across the night sky dropping rose petals all over the world. A great poet, Sainte-Therese de Lisieux.)

Examples of Christy Sheffield Sanford's Online Work:

Enterzone,
"Moving Toward the Light"

"Red Mona"

"Jill Swimming"

Light and Dust

New River

Recommended Sites:

The DHTML Zone

Dynamic Drive

Links have been deactivated as they no longer apply.