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EDITORIAL

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SMS (Social-Media-Speak) as/for/in creative practice



● Social Media is perhaps the most definitive and pervasive feature of the second stage of the World Wide Web – a phase known as Web 2.0. It is hard to pinpoint exactly when Web 2.0 began. Despite the term being coined in 2004 in the title of a conference organized by O'Reilly Media's Dale Dougherty, the term 'Web 2.0' was a retrospective designation of a tide change in web design and usage, occurring somewhere between the late-1990s and early-noughties. Concretizing the term's definition a year after Dougherty's conference, O'Reilly Media founder Tim O'Reilly characterized Web 2.0 as the stage at which the web allowed users to connect through interactive technology, namely, social media, blogs, web-based applications and wikis. The evolution of Web 2.0 was spurred on by the popularity of social media sites such as Facebook and Myspace. Paired with

increased and improved Internet access, thanks to broadband and wireless connectivity, Web 2.0 has transformed our relationship with the Internet and furthermore social media has transformed how we relate, interact and speak with each other when we are online. Today, waiting for a dial-up connection is unfathomable for many; we expect the Internet to be open all hours and instantly accessible – it is the lifeblood of what social media scholar Danah Boyd describes as ‘the always-on lifestyle’: a state of being constantly connected to the network across a range of applications through a collection of devices (2012: 71–76). We speak online all the time, and many of us are more likely to speak to someone URL (online) before we speak to someone IRL (‘in real life’) each day. For the creative practitioners and academics included in this issue, ‘social-media-speak’ (the ways we speak when we speak online) provides variously a site, source, strategy and subject with which to critically and creatively engage, and a means to conduct their own social lives.

This guest-edited issue, ‘SMS (Social-Media-Speak) as/for/in creative practice’, proposes social media as a recently established genre of discourse; in reference to Jean-François Lyotard’s schema ([1983] 1988) in which a genre of discourse supplies a set of possible phrases (which may be linguistic but are not limited to language and may be a silence, sign or any possible gesture or way of speaking) to attain certain ends. All phrases must, by definition, be linked from phrase to phrase, and the genre of discourse determines what linkages are, or are not, suitable. Therefore, we might consider social media as a burgeoning genre of discourse, with its constituent sites and applications as subgenres, identifiable by the previously unorthodox linkages made between phrases that would have been incompatible by the rules of other pre-existing genres of discourse. ‘SMS (Social-Media-Speak) as/for/in creative practice’, presents articles and artworks that *détourne*, decipher and breach modalities of and spaces for online (primarily text-based), interaction on social media platforms and websites. Through art criticism, curatorial, artistic and poetry practices, the featured contributions to this issue review and spill out into online spaces for speaking, situating a range of practitioner perspectives in relation to each other and to social media as an overarching genre of discourse.



Social media as genre of discourse

The advent of Web 2.0 did not simply instigate a verbatim transfer of existing genres of discourse into online spaces. The sense and type of phrase (relating to the ‘phrase regimen’ – the syntactic type of phrase¹) used for our online communications are multifarious; we might use social media as a safe virtual space for those in need of connection when talking face to face is too hard or impractical; a forum for family disputes (both privately in closed messaging groups and publicly ... 🙄 🙄);

1. Lyotard details the phrase regimen in the introductory chapter of *The Differend*, titled ‘Preface: Reading dossier’, setting out that ‘[a] phrase, even the most ordinary one, is constituted according to a set of rules (its regimen). There are a number of phrase regimens: reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing, ordering, etc.’ ([1983] 1988: xii).

2. Michel Feher brilliantly describes the neo-liberal condition in reference to social media in his lecture series 'The Age of Appreciation' (2013–15).

a soap box from which to espouse our views; a matchmaking service; a means to make new connections, maintain existing ones and rekindle old ones, etc. These uses for social media communication are guided by the stakes, or ends, of social media as a genre of discourse. To paraphrase Lyotard simply, the genre defines what is at stake (the ends) and the stakes determine the suitable linkings ([1983] 1988: 84). Lyotard describes the operations of a genre of discourse as exerting a 'seduction' that directs the linkings of phrases towards the ends that the genre pursues ([1983] 1988: 84); what is at stake in social media as a genre of discourse is a drive towards neo-liberal sociality and economics, and these stakes guide linkings between phrases online. Social media is quantitative, social and voracious; our connectivity and communication online is individualistic and seeks the accumulation of appreciation (in the form of likes, follows, comments and shares) from others to add value.² Those familiar with Facebook will be aware of the acceptance of linkages that would seem lurching and discordant in ordinary genres of discourse. On Facebook it is entirely suitable to switch from sharing a political campaign to sharing holiday snaps and baby photos; on Twitter, falling out with strangers over a news item to then tweeting a joke you have just heard; or on Instagram, sharing a photo of your cats to promoting your work: all examples of phrase linkings that would be unsuitable in other genres of discourse.

At the time of writing, social media giant Facebook is fourteen years old; Twitter is eleven years old; and Instagram turns eight in July this year – all positively ancient by social media standards. These platforms, like many Web 2.0 sites and applications, have discernible patterns of linkage between phrases, peculiar to their own corners of the Internet and in part predetermined by the constraints (which could be considered as 'rules') that each site and application imposes upon the discourse that it hosts. Phrases are therefore determined both by social media as genre of discourse, but also the technological curtailments that social media institutes. For this issue, Steven Zultanski considers how contemporary artists negotiate Web 2.0 in an exploration of the hidden programming that defines the parameters of social media, which shape (and silence) ways of speaking online.

The original single SMS (Short Message Service) limited each message to 160 characters, after which you would incur additional message charges irrespective of whether you had only exceeded the limit by one character. Character limitation is common across social media sites and applications; known for its pithy phrases, Twitter constrains its users to a character limit of 280. Against a Twitter backdrop of trolling and twitterstorms, Gavin Wade and Paul Conneally's annual #twenga project uses tweets for stanzas of the renga poetry form of extended haiku: inserting unexpected phrases onto Twitter and creating new idioms. In addition to providing a means of distribution for their poetry, social media also facilitates Wade and Conneally's collaboration with other poets contributing to the project. Using Twitter's private message feature, Wade and Conneally maintain ongoing, creative conversations with fellow poets Emma Bolland, Tina Francis, Patrick Goodall,

Yvette Greslé, Brenda Hickin, James Kennedy, Mathew Parkin, Alison Raybould, Sid Sidowski and Cathy Wade. Like #twenga, Mark Staniforth's 'Anti-sonnets' reinvent a traditional poetry form and exploits Web 2.0's user-generated content faculty to self-publish. Also welcoming the freedoms offered to her through Web 2.0 website self-publishing, and shaking off the grammatical, formal and aesthetic strictures of academic essay writing, Zarina Muhammad unpacks the uncomfortable position of the art critic crowded by objectivity and subjectivity.

The old SMS character limit prompted a surge of popular abbreviations in lieu of stock phrases, such as 'cba' for 'can't be arsed' and 'brb' for 'be right back': saving on the character count and increasing the speed efficiency of digital communication. Despite most phone contracts now including an unlimited text message allowance and WiFi instant messaging from smartphones, many abbreviations remain in use and are integral and recurrent identifiers of phrase regimens connected to various social media subgenres. Larry Walker-Tonks disputes the morality of the stakes tied up in the language, abbreviations and grammatical quirks of communication on popular dating apps Tinder and Grindr. His ongoing *GRUNDER* project critiques the highly sexualized language and threats of sexual violence that he has personally been subjected to. From the *GRUNDER* series, *Are you attracted to me* is composed of appropriated phrases which have been personally directed at Walker-Tonks on online dating apps. The recontextualization of such highly sexualised and objectifying language, which is used so casually in these apps, has a jarring effect when dislocated from its original context. When Walker-Tonks physically manifests the sentiment of these crude messages the result is grotesque; bulbous sculptures uttering these slurs to passers-by: the sculptures are like Dorian Grey's portrait, usually hidden behind a slick smartphone application. Considered in regards to Robert Fitterman's poet's essay, Walker-Tonks' approach is 'curatorial', presenting a 'zeitgeist' of the contemporary dating app experience through the sum of its collected language.



Fitterman's essay 'CHORUS: Collective subjectivity in quotational writing practice' intentionally disregards referencing while identifying three categories of 'quotational writing practices', all of which, Fitterman argues, serve to articulate contemporary collective subjectivities. Fitterman himself employs overlapping appropriative strategies as described in CHORUS, in his poem, 'This Window Makes Me Feel'. Similarly, my own work, also titled, 'Chorus', quotes the hashtagged language of so-called 'clean-eating' communities indigenous to photo-sharing social media platform Instagram, to express the ritualistic significance of hashtagged language attached to a collective identity particular to a moment in Web 2.0's history. Also working with hashtags and Instagram, Carol Sommer asserts her own subjectivity in relation to expressions of female

agency in the novels of Iris Murdoch, which Sommer quotes in memes and shares on Instagram. As explained in her essay for this issue, Sommer uses hashtags as a subversive system of classification that unpicks and disperses the content and subjectivity of the utterances and thoughts of Murdoch's characters, and Sommer's own, using hashtags to invade existing threads and expressions of subjectivity on Instagram.



Gabrielle Warren-Smith explores what is lost and what is gained when we speak online, in an exploration of human identity in the digital age. In terms of social-media-speak, the most obvious loss is of the non-verbal cues that we express whilst speaking face to face, which help the person[s] with whom we are communicating to understand our intended affect. Unsurprisingly, when these cues are reduced or absent, the capacity for misinterpretation is significantly increased (Riordan 2017: 549). Despite this, research demonstrates that the use of emojis along with other nonverbal cues (such as punctuation) allows us to interact with comparably effective levels of affect as face-to-face communication (Riordan 2017: 554–55). The block of emojis above details all the emojis in the 'recently used' section of my emoji keyboard. I will have used them to convey affect online, and they also reveal something of my personality, interests and preferences; in their use, these emojis will have assisted with the performance of emotion work – the efforts made when we perform various roles in our daily lives. With deft use of emojis, under the collaborative identity of The White Pube, Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad revitalize the entrenched exhibition review format with Web 2.0 self-aware subjectivity. The emoji summaries accompanying each of their reviews challenge the semantic satiation of the star-rating review system and instead, succinctly capture, 'a personal reaction, and a record of an encounter with an aesthetic experience' (The White Pube 2018). The sentiment of each review is expressed in three emojis that signify the affect and content of the exhibition with transparent subjectivity. The use of emojis allows us a sense of the character of the art critics themselves, which assists with our reading of the sometimes searing reviews that they accompany.

Finally to the chicken and the egg sandwiching the contents and providing a metaphoric adjective with which to frame this issue. Including Pandhal and Steans adage, and Morris's slapstick story (as shared on social media) in this issue, epitomizes the conundrum of attempting to define where our roles begin and end online. As Riordan notes at the end of her investigation of emojis as tools for emotion work, the omnipresence of the online social networks through which we interact makes the divides between the roles that we play more blurred. At any moment we may be required to perform a particular role, and accordingly this is reflected in the accepted (and sometimes bizarre) linkings made between phrases and their implicit stakes online. With this in mind, the order of the chicken and the egg was determined using a Facebook poll. Each article and artwork featured apprehends social media as a genre of discourse, providing reflections and insights from western creative practitioners whose own constant proximity to social media and participation in the 'always-on' lifestyle lends them a critical closeness to the social-media-speak that they engage with.



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