

Anna Carr interviews Jennifer Kathleen Phillips

Anna Carr : How would you define digital poetics? In your experience, how widely known is the term "digital poetics" and what do you think is the common concept behind it?

J. K. Phillips: Apart from on the internet and in the universities, the words do not seem to be commonly used in Australia. Digital poems however are talked about and poetics is a well known concept to those who are used to theorizing about poems.

The term 'digital poetics' has been used to talk about texts and or imagery that has some connection with digital media. In the past the word "poetics" has referred to theorizing about poetry but the word is now also being used to label branches of the poet tree and to theorize about visual aspects of a subject such as digital media. Is 'theorizing about digitally created or presented communications' too loose a definition to encompass how the words are currently used?

There are a range of definitions about what constitutes a digital poem that include the idea that the works need to be presented digitally. I would not go this far, as I have created poems digitally and presented them as an image on paper. I would suggest that a digital poem is one that has used digital technology in some part of the creation and/or presentation of it. The digital aspect of the poem needs to bring more to the poem than if it was created or presented using analog systems.

A broad definition is needed in a relatively new and changing genre but it does make it difficult to show the boundaries of poetic forms such as between those created using a typewriter and those created using a computer. Both could look very similar. A textured poem can be created by writing on the sand but it can become a digital poem when it is digitally photographed and digitally presented in some form. The boundaries between what is defined as digital poetry and what is not are blurred. Exceptions can be found to the definitions we make. We call a piece of art 'art' because someone has said that it is. Perhaps it is the same for digital poetry; a digital poem is a "digital poem" because someone has labelled it as one.

Anna Carr : Would you briefly describe your involvement and/or experiences in/with digital poetics? How and when did you first become involved in/with digital poetics? When, where and how were you creating, blending, or presenting?

J. K. Phillips: My formal involvement with digital poetics began with poetics and grew with the availability of digital technologies. Had the technologies been available to me when I was a child, I would have used them.

My father gave movie and slide talks about flying which I watched from time to time as a child. This along with the nursery rhymes my mother read to me could be considered the embryonic stage. As a child I created animations with text and drawings using two wooden pegs, a scroll of paper and a box. I used these in some of the little concerts my sister and I put on, where we played our musical instruments and sang, used puppets to perform our plays and recited poems.

At the age of 12 I was introduced to poetry as a writing form at school and created my first poem, which was subsequently published. Thinking about poetry and what constitutes a poem began then. I studied poetry at secondary school analysing the content and form of well known poets such as Judith Wright who was my favourite. I had by that stage noticed the effects of style, rhythm and words in communicating and was building a concept of what I thought contributed to the effectiveness of a poem. I thought that in the best poems the style and form did not noticeably dictate the choice of words. By the time I left school my poems and images were flowing in and out of the prose I was writing and I had developed a poetic philosophy.

In 1973 Dr. Guy Jansen, who was then the director of music education for schools in New Zealand, spoke to me about publishing a book on the philosophy, influences and direction of my arts. He invited me to the upcoming Canterbury Arts workshop, a creative event for some of the potentially most gifted secondary school students in the South Island. It opened my eyes to the possibilities of holding similar multimedia events. A few "Poyema" art workshops were subsequently organized for some of the recognized New Zealand Christian artists in various fields and I was invited as a visual artist. This also contributed to my desire to present using more than one media.

As part of the Palmerston North Teachers College English Studies in 1973, I did a ten week poetry course. The word “poetics” was never used but we used the language of poetics to analyse poems, critically compare them and study sound effects. We created anthologies, looked at poetry in other subject areas, shared poems and prepared poetry lessons for children. I created large cards to share poems visually. I can be viewed teaching with one of the cards here:

<http://citwings.com/phillips/pics/teach4.jpg>

In 1974 after three years art study at Teachers College I produced a book containing some of my philosophies and gave a multimedia presentation using available [analog](#) systems. The multimedia presentation included sound effects, poetry, prose, music and images. I used slides and played a tape. The slides included an animated dance sequence created by rapidly displaying a sequence of photos I had taken of a dancer. The tape contained music, sounds, words and sentences. If I had had the digital technologies we have now, this would have been a digital presentation. In the book, “With Whom In Mind” each of the chapters was presented in images or text depending on who the chapter had in mind, eg. The chapter called “With Children In Mind” was visually presented. The chapter called “With Teachers In Mind” was presented using questions. The chapter called “With Creativity In Mind” contained a textured poem playing with the word “create”. It can be viewed at: http://www.geocities.com/visualpoetry_au/textured_poem_create.html The chapter called “With Another View In Mind” contained a stencil cut of an image of a butterfly and some of my own philosophy of art, my poetics of art. In this book I said that because there was a range of theories of art, education and creativity, the implication was that they were really religious issues and I went on to explain. Today we use the term “values” to say some of what I said then. In the arts my religious view of the nature of human beings meant that the acceptance of a body of work was not dependent so much on comparison and group acceptance but on whether the artist was honest to himself and whether his body of work honestly reflected his world view. I said that “integration of the vehicle with the world view is therefore important in enhancing the view and producing art that is ‘good’. My theory of poetry as an art form was developing.

Most of my involvement with poetics in the following years was done in classrooms and then at home with my children.

My husband Peter was an accountant and was using a computer at work long before we bought one for a home based printing business we started. I learnt to access it using DOS with his help. I used the computer to prepare the poems, songs and images for my second book of poems, which was published in 1992. It contained some of my first digital concrete poems and some of my poetics in poetry form.

Do you think that ‘good’ poetry rhymes?

‘Good’ poetry speaks.

It may be just a word

but it opens doors

sometimes like a snail moving

a seed growing

sometimes like a volcano erupting

a machete slashing.

It clothes the unseen

makes visible hidden things

and publishes that which is silent.

Rhyme is a style

like the fashion of clothes

sometimes ‘In’

and sometimes ‘Out’.

I have clothed some of the ideas in rhymes

especially for those of you who think

rhymes are ‘In’.

Whether its ‘In’ or ‘Out’

may you find the snippets of truth

in this clothing store

and share their treasure.

The internet opened the door for me to express myself digitally in a variety of ways. I created collaborative writings online and spoke in poetry in chat rooms. In 2000 I taught myself HTML by looking at websites that used it and created my first website, where I began to publish more poems. I began using different software to produce a range of digital effects and in 2001 began teaching in the area of Information Technology, which included subjects such as Digital Editing, HTML, JavaScript, ActionScript, Animation and a range of computing applications. I also spoke to an English class about poetry using my own digital poems as examples. I created my first digital animated poem in 2002 using Macromedia Flash. In 2004 I completed a Diploma of Information Technology (Multimedia Integration) to reflect some of the skills I had accumulated and then did a certificate in Screen so that I could teach and use 3D modelling software as well. In 2005 I held my first solo digital art exhibition. In 2006 I created a digital slide show using words and some of the photographs and digital art I had created to celebrate Australia Day. I have had many unrealised digital poetic ideas that I now have the skills to create, but have not made the time to realise them! Much of my time has been spent creating digital art, teaching others and recovering from car accidents. My first published article on poetics was published online in 2006. More information can be accessed at: http://citwings.com/poetry_bio.html

Anna Carr: Do you know of any misconceptions about digital poetics?

J. K. Phillips: If you do a Google search using the words “the poetics of” you will see that the word ‘poetics’ has been used with many other subject areas from “The poetics of DNA” to the “The poetics of space”. It is used in a similar way to that of the word “meta” so I don’t think the term ‘digital poetics’ has such a rigid definition that it can be misconceived. When people hear the term for the first time they may think, as I did, of poems that have been created or exhibited digitally. They may think about the field of digital poetry but not about theorizing about digital poems. For some it may be a misconception to use the term to talk about anything digital and to others it may be a misconception to talk about poems that can be displayed on paper or have not been created using digital technologies since the introduction of what we call the ‘first generation computers’.

Anna Carr: In your experience, how has mainstream society responded to digital poetics?

J. K. Phillips: Possibly much better than people viewed “poetical” in Shakespeare’s day as implied in “Twelfth Night”, where Viola uses the word as a negative description. I think most of what we might call digital poetics is done subconsciously by mainstream society in response to what is seen on the internet. Some people I know say that they are not interested in poetry but will then happily theorize about it and will also forward on via email the digital poems that they have critically assessed as worthwhile. This digital poetics is done in a quick moment often without any accompanying language based self talk! Informal comments of appreciation or dislike may be the extent of the response. I think poems presented digitally have a great potential to change attitudes and the internet has opened the door to the growth of enjoyment and employment in the field of poetry and digital poetics. It seems to me that the present mainstream society has responded much more favourably to digital poetry and the resulting poetics compared to poetry and poetics printed on paper. It could be that an increase in poetic literacy is becoming one of the by products of our growing digital literacy because we often come face to face with it without seeking it out. I am pleased to see that Universities around the world are growing the field of digital poetics. Poetic words have the power and now with the internet, a greater opportunity to greatly enrich everyone’s life.

Anna Carr: In your experience, is any particular geographic region particularly involved in or familiar with digital poetics?

J. K. Phillips: I was interested to read Ruth Padel’s statement that in 2000 Britain was in the middle of a large-scale renaissance in poetry being published although she stated that not all the poets were from Britain (Padel, Ruth.2000. 52 ways of looking at a poem or how reading modern poetry can

change your life. London). If more poetry was being published then more informal poetics would be taking place. I am not sure how much of this publishing was of a digital nature. Some countries are more familiar and involved than others and I think it is largely due to the access they have to digital technologies and the political climate. In some countries food, water and/or safety are such weighty matters that digital poetics is not a priority. It is not even on the “to do” list and in some geographical areas it would be as rare as the computer.

Involvement in and familiarity with digital poetics is more likely to be greater in poetry groups, online communities, in schools, universities and other educational institutions. I haven't done any formal research into this but I did do a title search of the Australian National Library Catalogue and nothing came up for “Digital Poetics” where as 210 book titles came up using the search word ‘poetics’ and 164 displayed for ‘digital’. ‘Digital poetry’ produced one book title. Similar results were obtained by checking the New Zealand National Library. The Library of Congress displayed three books with digital poetics in the title. The British Library displayed 13 books and 10 articles with ‘poetics’ or ‘digital’ in the titles. This information suggests to me that ‘digital poetics’ is far from being a ‘house hold’ concept in these English speaking countries.

Anna Carr: Would you consider digital poetics to be a growing genre? How, when, or why?

J. K. Phillips: Digital poetry is a relatively new genre and so digital poetics is in its infancy. It will grow along with the range of digital technologies because people like to communicate in a variety of ways. As the world populations explode so to will the number of communications and poetry and poetics are one of the communication subsets. Even if populations decline, it will still grow because we can safely store more of our communications. Digital technologies have made it easier to publish a great variety of communications. The internet has made published material more accessible to a wider audience. It has opened the door for opportunities for us to be influenced by others from all over the world very quickly. It has provided a growing number of communities with opportunities for collaboration. The increase in knowledge including knowledge in the field of poetry and digital poetry is one of the consequences. According to the Google Job Trend Calculator American jobs in the area of digital poetics have increased by 85% since May 2007, so this indicates growth in the genre (Digital Poetics Trends | SimplyHired. <http://www.simplyhired.com/a/jobtrends/trend/q-Digital+Poetics>. Accessed 2.1.2009). Google lists five jobs adverts for professors needed in American Universities, which suggests to me that it will continue to grow (Digital poetics jobs | SimplyHired. <http://www.simplyhired.com/a/jobs/list/q-Digital+Poetics>. Accessed 2.1.2009). Of course cataclysmic events such as those predicted in the bible, could devastate our technological world, new technologies could change so quickly making old technologies difficult to access and world dictators could arise and limit what we call “free speech” and so prove me wrong!

Anna Carr: Who might you consider to be a digital poet?

J. K. Phillips: To be called a digital poet the poet needs to have a reasonable body of poetry that has or can be labelled ‘digital poetry’. I would suggest that they have used digital technology in some part of the creation and or presentation of it and that the digital aspect of these poems brings more to the poem than if they had created or presented them using analog systems.

Anna Carr: What direction would you like to see digital poetics take in the future?

J. K. Phillips: I would like to see the field of poetry valued in our schools along with all the arts and technologies. I would like parents, schools and governments to give it equal status with Maths, English and Science. Instead of trying to produce similar multitalented end products I would like to see a broader range of subjects offered so individual students leave school knowing that they all have something of value to give to the world.