

Jessica Pressman

ELECTRONIC ARTS

Charting the Shifting Seas of Electronic Literature's Past and Present

<http://www.drunkenboat.com/db10/05ele/charting.html> Page 3 sur 10 Drunken Boat | 10 | Spring 2009
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The next issue of *Drunken Boat* (8) contains a work that could be considered the opposite of Johnston's multimodal love poems to the human and natural world. Andres Manniste's "Cacophonie" retreats from sensorial immersion to focus on the technical languages that comprise and enable digital literature. Although "Cacophonie" is not technically a piece of codework, it evokes contemporary discourse about that literary genre and the theoretical implications codework presents regarding the relationship between human and machine code.³ As its name suggests, "Cacophonie" displays multiple semiotic registers layered in a kind of palimpsest. A family photograph is rendered in ASCII script and then run through a code check so that the bodies of father, mother, and child appear in the form of pixels and text. This image is then sprinkled with intertextual references (including Wittgenstein and T.S. Eliot) that invite decoding at the level of critical interpretation. The layering of code and words also supports a narrative text of layered fears—nuclear war, sidewinders, religion—supplemented by layers of sound files, primarily voices and bombs. As the reader clicks through the screens, these layers blur and merge; the colors deepen in density as the relationship between code and text, image and words, philosophy and programming becomes intertwined. The work has visible ties to the genre of ASCII art, which has obvious connections to pre-computer poetic experiments such as concrete poetry, and it pursues this interest in combining multiple codes of computer and human communication to illustrate the tension between harmony and cacophony at the level of semiotics. "Cacophonie" also illustrates electronic literature to be a hybrid of past and present movements in art, literature, and computing—an interdisciplinary movement that exposes as it explores intersections between fields and technical forms.



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