

Abstract

As described in an earlier contribution to the JMP (*Photography as an act of collaboration* - Vol 15, Issue 3), my research explores the possibilities and implications of treating the camera and the photographic process as an active collaborator in the creation of scenes, events and ‘moments’ that did not exist until brought into being by the act of photographing them.

The media artwork described here is the result of an experiment to explore the possibility of establishing a similarly collaborative relationship with the ‘agency’ of word-processing software that I have endeavoured to establish with the medium of photography.

Despite comprehensively stripping the original text of both sense and sequence, the resulting text not only retains an uncanny degree of consistency with both the style and meaning of the original, but also reveals insights which had been only latent within the original. The result would appear to reinforce the findings of my previous research in photographic practice: that, by giving up conscious, rational control over the means of expression, we can (sometimes) create the conditions necessary for a constructive and often illuminating dialogue with the *deus ex machina*.

Key words

Collaboration with the medium, the agency of the medium, *deus ex machina*

Introduction

As described in an earlier contribution to the JMP (*Photography as an act of collaboration* - Vol 15, Issue 3), my practice-based research explores the implications (both for how we define the medium, as well as what we see in its results) of treating the camera as a largely passive tool under the conscious control of the operator. In this previous article, I argued that this widely-shared conception of the camera – one which is both typified and reinforced by describing photographs as ‘taken’ – may hinder our ability to recognise those photographs in which the medium presents us with scenes, events and ‘moments’ that did not exist (and, in some cases, could not have existed) until they were created by the act of photographing them.

In this previous article, I argued that, in such cases, rather than being the result of (a combination of) the photographer’s intention, expertise and/or the appearance/behaviour of (what I called) ‘the things in front of the lens’, the resulting photograph is both the record and *the product of* an active (or, an act of) collaboration with the agency of the medium. The surprising and rewarding results of this research led me to consider whether it would be possible to establish the conditions for a similarly collaborative relationship with the ‘agency’ of word-processing software that I have sought to establish with photography.

In exploring this possibility, I share with Varanda (2016):

...a general understanding that “medium” encompasses the means by which human activities are expressed beyond the human body. This notion can stand for a specific way to do something – acknowledging the medium as agency; an intermediary object, device or material – pointing towards the idea of substance (Varanda, 2016, 191).

In both projects, my intention has been to create the conditions under which the media (photography and word-processing) act on the data presented to them in accordance with their respective rule-based processes. In doing so, I sought to:

...support the fabrication of thought [and] as a medium for communication with oneself. It can also be seen as a virtual sparring partner for training and learning, stressing again the aspect of agency of the medium, and “open-ended-ness” (Spierling, 2005).

The text used for this experiment was an early 1,800-word draught of my article *The Shadow of the Photographer* (Rutherford, 2002) which described the results of an extended (1982-1998) practice-based research project that employed casual photographic ‘snapshots’ as a means to increased self-awareness. The article argued that, if we are prepared to give up conscious, rational control over the composition of our photographs and allow our intuition to ‘choose’ the scenes, events and moments to be recorded, we can sometimes find visual metaphors and parables which describe those truths we ‘know’ – but which our conscious mind cannot or will not see.

When we are moved to photograph a scene with which we have no conscious or logical connection, it may be because, in the nature and combination of the various elements in the scene before us, we have intuitively recognised a personally relevant metaphor: an allegorical description of an affective memory or belief below the horizon of our conscious awareness – and one to which our subconscious is now trying to bring to our attention.

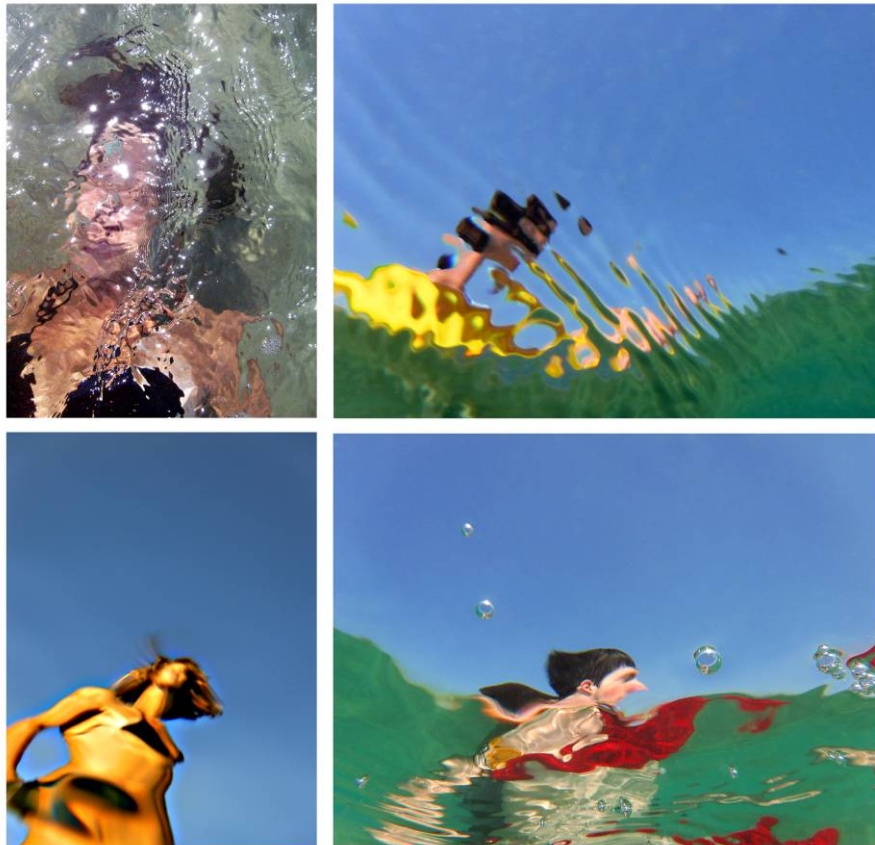
At first, I was mortified to see my deepest secrets plainly exposed for all to see. But after spending more time with these photographs and reflecting on the person they described, I began to see that they contained more than just accusations of my faults – they also offered messages of hope and encouragement from one who clearly knew me very well – but who seemed to like me anyway (Rutherford, 2002).

Based on the objectives and processes of the Dadaists and Surrealists, the photographic project described above was intended to engage directly with the subconscious by allowing my intuition to select the scene, frame the image and to choose the moment at which I released the shutter. In more recent photographic projects however, I have moved away from this ‘collaboration with the subconscious’ and instead, have attempted to create the conditions under which the modus operandi of the medium is given primacy in determining the way in which scenes, events and moments are depicted (Rutherford, 2014).

In an attempt to produce photographs in which the scenes, events and ‘moments’ recorded have been created by the act of photographing them, I exploit three conditions when making photographs:

- i. I point the camera in the direction of scenes and elements that are constantly changing (such as views from the windows of moving vehicles and figures photographed through water).
- ii. I do not look in (and, in the *Submarine / Supermarine* series, am unable even to see) the viewfinder, but simply point the camera in a general direction.
- iii. I use a digital camera which (like most digital cameras) imposes a delay between the moment I push the button and the moment the image is recorded.

These three factors prevent me from being able to intentionally select the elements within the frame, ‘compose’ the image, or ‘choose’ with intent the moment at which the photograph was made, and so allow for ‘the unanticipable’ contribution of the medium in the creation of the final result.



While some may consider these two projects (photography and text) to involve very different processes (that photographs are the results of acts of creation, while the results of this experiment are acts of editing), I submit that both are the product of acts of ‘creative editing’ (in the sense of ‘revising, preparing, correcting and improving’). While I selected (“*Here... use this...*”) the raw material upon which the two media were then invited to act, in both cases, the results are the product of the objective and mechanical application of their respective technological ‘rules’.

The aim of the experiment

In this text-based experiment, I wanted to find out whether, by giving ‘agency’ to the software in the reconfiguration of the text, the same *deus ex machina* with which I have collaborated in the creation of photographs would also reveal itself in language – and if so, what it would say. While this experiment shares obvious superficial similarities with some of the forms of ‘automatic writing’ employed by the Dadaists and Surrealists to subvert artistic and cognitive autonomy (Laxton, 2003), there are two significant differences between the “*automatisme corporel*” (Daumal, 1958) used by the Dadaists and the Surrealists – and both the aim and the process used in this experiment:

Firstly and most importantly, where the Dadaists and Surrealists employed these techniques as a means to gain access to the psyche which was considered to be the celebrated ‘author’ of the works (Powrie, 1988) – “entrusting to the hand the responsibility of [revealing] what the head itself ignores” (Barthes, 1994) – in this experiment, the avenues for the subconscious provided by the Dadaists and Surrealists were closed down and replaced with objectively-defined criteria by which the word-processing software reconfigured the text.

Secondly, where the Surrealists often manipulated and reinterpreted the results (Mühl, 1930) using these texts as raw material for subsequent artworks, I have not done so, but have permitted the results to stand on their own.

Closer comparisons to the approach taken in this experiment are Tristan Tzara's method for making a Dadaist poem (also used by Burroughs) and the Lazarus Corporation's Text Mixing Desk.

Unlike Tzara's method involved cutting words and phrases from existing sources (such as newspapers or magazines) into strips, then drawing these at random from a paper bag resulting in a text restructured entirely by random chance (or, if you prefer, by divine intervention) and the Text Mixing Desk of the Lazarus Corporation which uses computer code to reorganise the sequence of words and phrases in accordance with an unknown set of parameters, the method employed in this experiment determined and then applied the parameters by which the text was reconfigured.

A second influence in this experiment was the use of 'constraints' employed by the adherents of Oulipo poetics – *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* ('workshop of potential literature') – and its method 'S+7' (also known as N+7) in which every noun in a text is replaced with the seventh noun after it in a dictionary used as a means to "generate new meanings from existing texts" (James, 2006). Although modified for this experiment (see next section), the S+7 method (the replacement of features in the text) offered a suggestion as to how I might minimise the role of the subconscious and give primacy to the agency of the word-processing software. As explained by James (2006):

the differences between Surrealist and Oulipian automatism [lie] in the Oulipo's insistence on the conscious use of rules, whereas Surrealist automatism is that of unimpeded unconscious production. [In] Oulipian automatism a mechanical function replaces the human mind (however unconscious) of the Surrealist.

The parameters used in the experiment

To carry out this experiment, it was necessary to find a set of 'rules' through which to 'throw the cards up in the air' to effectively strip the original text of both sense and sequence in a manner that "bypass[ed] the wilful, artistic shaping of the text" (Stockwell, 2012). To minimise the opportunities for the influence (subconscious or otherwise) of the author, it was necessary to ensure that these parameters – the 'fault lines' at which the text was to be broken up and reconfigured – were defined by objective and quantitative criteria. To fulfil these conditions, it was decided to use the twelve most common typographical features in the original text (the most common letters with which words began and ended, as well as the most commonly-occurring punctuation marks) as identified by a quantitative analysis of the text.

Why the most common typographical features? The decision to use these quantitatively-determined criteria as a basis for the disruption of the text was intended to reduce the chance of subconscious influence which would have been all-but inevitable with any other numerically-determined criteria (such as 'words of a particular length', or 'randomly-chosen intervals') in an effort to create the conditions for Breton's (1990) esteemed *le hasard objectif* (objective chance) and to "open up the text to the possibilities of the unexpected and unintended" (James, 2009).

Why twelve? The conscious decision (one of three made in the process) to use the twelve – as opposed to seven, or seventeen – most common typographical features was made because, well... some number had to be selected and, while I acknowledge that no number can be chosen entirely 'at random', free of influence, twelve was believed to be adequate to produce a sufficient disruption of the text to enable the conditions for 'agency'.

The twelve typographical features identified by a quantitative analysis of the text used to reconfigure the text were:

- a (words beginning with a)
- e• (words ending with e)
- f (words beginning with f)
- g• (words ending with g)
- i (words beginning with i)
- p (words beginning with p)
- s (words beginning with s)
- s• (words ending with s)
- t (words beginning with t)
- y• (words ending with y)
-)• (words following the close of parentheses)
- ,• (words following a comma)

Spaces (•) were included in the parameters so as to avoid breaking up individual words. Having been established in accordance with the criteria identified above, no parameters were added, modified or substituted partway through the experiment. The sequence in which each of the parameters was applied was determined (as per the list above) by alphabetical order.

While the possibility of subconscious influence on the selection of these parameters is, by its very nature, impossible to categorically refute, any argument that the choice of these parameters was the result of subconscious influence would have to explain – and reconcile – the alleged influence with both the nature of the criteria as well as the manner by which they were selected.

The execution of the experiment

To reconfigure the text, I used the word-processing software WordPerfect 5.1 which – unlike MSWord – allows the operator to treat hard returns (¶) as typographical ‘characters’ for which the software can <Search> and <Replace>.

To take one parameter as an example, I gave the command to <Replace> ‘e•’ (all instances of a lowercase letter ‘e’ followed by a space) with ‘e•¶’ which inserted a hard return following the space after all words ending in ‘e’. This ‘ran the text through a blender’, breaking the article into several hundred short lines (some of which were only one single word in length), each of which now began with the word that had previously followed those ending in ‘e’.

For example, if applied to the previous sentence, this would produce the following:

This ‘ran the text through a blender’, breaking the ¶
 article ¶
 into several hundred short lines (some ¶
 of which were ¶
 only one ¶
 single ¶
 word in length), each of which now began with the ¶
 word that had previously followed those ¶
 ending in ‘e’¶

I then gave the command to <Sort> these lines alphabetically which, if applied to the previous sequence, would produce the following:

article ¶
 ending in ‘e’¶
 into several hundred short lines (some ¶
 of which were ¶
 only one ¶
 single ¶
 This ‘ran the text through a blender’, breaking the ¶
 word in length), each of which now began with the ¶
 word that had previously followed those ¶

I then gave the command to <Replace> ‘¶’ with ‘•’ (a space) which rendered the text into a single, 1,800-word paragraph.

article ending in ‘e’ into several hundred short lines (some of which were only one single This ‘ran the text through a blender’, breaking the word in length), each of which now began with the word that had previously followed those

I then repeated the process (inserting hard returns before and after other letters and typographical characters, sorting the results alphabetically, and then removing all hard returns) using the other eleven parameters listed above.

Following the final <Sort>, the remaining hard returns were not removed. This (the second ‘decision’) and the insertion of additional hard returns (the third decision) were made to present the result in the visual form of ‘poetic stanzas’ – rather than as a single, unbroken block of text.

The result was the creation of new and unanticipated (and wholly unanticipatable) relationships between the individual words and those they now preceded and followed. As a result, the original text was rendered as a long chain of words and (where the parameters had not broken these apart) short phrases, the sequence and structure of which had been thoroughly reconfigured, but – unlike the techniques and strategies employed by the Surrealists – through a process from which subconscious influence was (to the extent it had been possible to do so) excluded rather than invited. The result is also fundamentally different from Oulipian S+ 7 texts (in which one noun is substituted for another) because, as a result of the re-juxtapositioning of the words and phrases, the original syntactic structure of the source text has not been retained.

Except for the deletion of dozens of now-orphaned articles, prepositions and punctuation marks and the spit-and-cuff-polishing of a few verbs to ensure the consistency of tenses, I have not otherwise altered the resulting text. I do not believe that the resulting minor changes to the text constitute a significant reassertion of human agency, as even the Lazarus Corporation’s Text Mixing Desk tool includes the explicit encouragement to “add[] punctuation and delet[e] the occasional word to produce the finished results”.

The resulting text retains not only an uncanny degree of consistency with both the meaning of the original essay but, in the new juxtapositions created between nouns, verbs and (again, where the parameters had not broken these apart) short phrases, the result offers ‘poetic’ insights into the value and significance of the photographic project which had been only latent in the original essay. The results of this experiment appear to show that the application of objective rule-based processes does not eliminate (or, it seems, even diminish) the prospect for the intervention of the *deus ex machina*.

I do not pretend to understand what force(s) lie behind or animate this phenomenon – in which a text can be effectively stripped of order and sequence, yet not only retain its original meaning, but provide new insights into this meaning – but the result of this experiment has only reinforced the findings of my previous research: that, by finding ways in which to give up conscious, rational control over the means of expression, we can (sometimes) create the conditions necessary for a constructive and illuminating dialogue with the *deus ex machina*.

Through its often (but not always) subtle interventions in my efforts to explore and describe the world around and within me, I have sometimes found unexpected gifts of insight – if only I am willing to look.

Collaborative text

A picture at which I had pointed
my camera
'the something' between the face of some image I had seen
and some part of me

Always phrases and desires
but in my failure, somewhere secrets
communicating: losing their thoughts
looking carefully at the Idea
and certain opinions I have chosen

Self-portraits describe my thoughts
and emotional choices catch my detail
they express and describe this Passion Play

Fact and fiction, favourite filters, difficult impressions
expose and acknowledge – for I have photographs

Forever fragments
form and native outlines
the goings-on behind beliefs
and hiding from somewhere

A thorough search of my Self
hint at or explain their surface
Have you ever owned a camera?
Parlez-vous Photographie?

I have a box of photographs
and in them I recognise the stories
the tales told in shadow

If language illuminate the me
I – from the unconscious
reveals the contents and implies the elusive
the one that failed

Impressions, pause and move
In the conscious decisions, contents
In conversation with my photographs
In action my photographs reveal
the real moment of confrontation

In the viewfinder (I hope) my Itself
In most cases, in time and chance
In a dark room, in occasionally prompted places
In my attention, I discover them
my way of looking

And include some thing
Insights there: more than any other
throw them out and risk instead
the closed doors

Even with friends, intuitive response, dreaming mind
my interpretation of the irrational something
Once I was
like anyone who has merits mind

Like scenes from a fleeting learned world around me
Me and my own moral code

No mere accidents
my aesthetics of conscious begun from some Medium
Intuitive visual events occasionally yield up language
and glimpse unconscious elements

my decision: my photograph drifted unexpectedly
Here, photograph this
Photography can not

Places, poets, private me
rational mind, conscious mind
re-examine what I believe

Record and describe
Record resonance, a spontaneous relationship
Reveal anyone

Sifting secrets
describe scenes and metaphors I sense before me
Some pale reflection of what had caught my attention
and show where I keep the secrets

These are my ghosts – sometimes arising, scenes and subjects
In the meaning of me the fault lay
in the language of the picture
in the medium of 'before put into words'
and the Shadow cast across the gesture

Indeed, the picture depended on
the whole truth and often more
this real subject of my landscape, a description, a truth
my photographs: a record of my fears

Uniquely valuable clues
to understand the reasons for
Visual metaphors
up from the developer

3,426 words (excluding Title page, References, Captions, Author)

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Figure captions

- Figure 1 - Cretan Sea submarine 0488 © Rutherford
- Figure 2 - Cretan Sea supermarine 4201 © Rutherford
- Figure 3 - Cretan Sea supermarine 6288 © Rutherford
- Figure 4 - Leon Anselmann supermarine 475487 © Rutherford

Author

Originally an illustrative photographer in Toronto, Canada from 1982-1993, since withdrawing from commercial practice, Rutherford's photographic projects explore the active (or, *the act of*) collaboration by the medium in the creation of scenes, events and 'moments' that did not exist (and sometimes could not have existed) until brought into being by the act of photographing them. The results of these projects have been exhibited in Canada, the US, the UK, New Zealand, Japan and France. Rutherford's website: <http://www.theshadowofthephotographer.co.uk>

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