Please Give Norbert Weiner

(And Other Curious Developments in the Work of **Janet Zweig**)

BY PATRICIA C. PHILLIPS

HERB LOTZ

Some Naughty Schnauzers

Impersonator, 2002. Flip sign, computer, sentence-generating program, and electronics, 10 x 113 x 120 in. 2 views of installation at Santa Fe Community College.

HERB LOTZ

I'll wager that no one reading this essay knows (or perhaps wants to know) the author of the ridiculous sentence in its title. Since the publication of Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" 40 years ago, many readers have acquired a seasoned skepticism about the authority and dependability of the authorial voice.[1] Although Barthes suggests that the emergence of the reader comes at the expense of the author, authors (and artists) did not die. Instead, the author exists, in culture and in the perspectives of diverse readers, as a negotiable and indeterminate figure rather than the sole agent of significance. It is generally accepted now that meaning develops in—or actively occupies—the transactional space between the mind of an author and the minds of a text's different readers. This epistemological exchange also changes over time. If meaning is accepted as variable, spatialized, and temporalized, then the author has never ceased to exist.

***The Medium*, 2002. Steel, electronics, live-feed video, image-altering computer program, and lights, 84 x 60 x 16 in.**

In Janet Zweig's *Impersonator* (2002), installed in the Instructional Technology Center of Santa Fe Community College, the author may not be dead, but she is unequivocally missing in action. Who is the impersonator, who is she dramatizing, and what is her relationship to an author? Where does the artist enter and exit in this discursive, possibly disturbing scenario? There is a phantom author of texts, potentially multiple, unidentified impersonators, and someone who may have defaulted on the commonly accepted role of the artist as creator and maker. As Hannah Arendt speculates about webs of relationships and enacted stories, "The manifestation of who the speaker and doer unexchangeably is, though it is plainly visible, retains a curious intangibility…"[2]

Whenever someone enters the main doorway of the Instructional Technology Center, an interactive computer instantly creates a new text on an overhead mechanical "flip-disk" sign. The computer's text-generating program uses syntactical structures and templates of words to assemble grammatically and structurally "correct," random sentences that range from the preposterous to the commensurable, including the title of this essay. "I refuse to be alive in spite of your patience. Welcome aboard the transient virus of marriage. Under the dunes, the Luddite and his nut were hidden": every entrance into the space triggers an errant thought, which will never be repeated. Using software created by Jonathan Meyer (who has collaborated on a number of projects), Zweig programmed the grammatical conventions and lexicon: But who is the author of these random, interactive passages? Is it the artists, the computer's vast combinatory capacity, students and faculty, or other members of the public? Just who is doing the acting and thinking here?

Although distinctive, *Impersonator* represents Zweig's curiously challenging public art. It asks questions about public life, public space, participation, performativity, and the tensions of *I* and *We* that thinking subjects in public space—and public artists—must constantly sustain and negotiate.[3] Zweig has been working in the area of public art for just over a decade and has explored and produced a prolific range of projects, ideas, and innovations. Her early work as a book artist (as well as more recent interests in artificial intelligence and emerging technologies) informs the theoretical trajectories of her public art projects. A deep, abiding attraction to words, language, reading, and interpretation guides her work, which relies on the metaphor of the book as a site where interactivity and intimacy, the somatic and cerebral, are variously but simultaneously engaged.

Language, narrative, reading, and other linguistic and oral traditions—and the changing conditions and theoretical concepts of this discursive intellectual arena—are dynamically coupled with other interests in publicity and sociality in contemporary public art and public life. Zweig's projects encourage and embolden observation, attentiveness, and a consensual, if unarticulated and non-aggressive, voyeurism where people are looking at something, looking at each other, and looking at something and at each other together. In this fruitful alchemy of orchestrated and unregulated, individual and mutual experiences, Zweig, like many other artists today (especially those involved in public art), attempts to sort out the intersecting, overlapping, and relocating trajectories of audience, spectatorship, collaboration, and participation.[4]

If the "death of the author" has become a common intellectual staple, the more recent theorization of the "mediated subject" is another widely accepted, sometimes lamented, phenomenon. Zweig cites Marshall McLuhan's book *The Medium is the Massage* (1967) as an influential text that first prompted and changed her interests. The University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication, located in Murphy Hall, served as a remarkably productive site and provocation for Zweig to examine and enact the media's tenacious and rapacious capacity to "work us over completely."[5] Sited in an active thoroughfare of the academic building, *The Medium* (2002) is set in a small alcove with two seats facing each other for easy, presumably unimpeded conversation. Yet there is a wrinkle. The intimate space is

***Small Kindnesses, Weather Permitting*, 2004. Steel and electronics, dimensions variable. 35 interactive video and audio kiosks installed at Minneapolis light-rail stations.**

divided in half by two back-to-back LCD video monitors. Two cameras, focused on the seating areas, project images of the participants onto the opposing monitors. Rather than facing each other directly, each person only sees the other's face on the screen. They figuratively and graphically talk to each other through a mediated environment that unpredictably changes from color to black and white, from negative to fading images.

Does this mediated encounter enhance or diminish perception, consciousness, and intimacy? How does the process empower or disenfranchise its participants, as conversation or dialogue becomes multiplied and refracted from two faces and voices to an expanded sphere of transforming—and transformative—images? And what is the role played by those who watch the two participants negotiate this insistent and intrusive instrumentation? Do the mediated conditions change the nature of conversation for the participants and for those who listen or distractedly overhear? Within this thicket of questions, *The Medium* unambiguously represents a volatilization of the public sphere.

Unlike *Impersonator*, where content is randomly triggered by the arrival of someone in the space, many of Zweig's earliest, as well as more recent, public art projects directly elicit and incorporate the ideas of the public to create spontaneous representation and serial anthologies of particular communities. For instance, in the lobby of Walton High School in the Bronx, Zweig installed *Your Voices* (1994–97). Twelve bronze boxes are mounted on two marble walls salvaged from the original high school. Like mailboxes, they have slots for delivery and operable locks for collection of the deposited materials. The boxes are identical in form, but each one has a different identification, including Wishes, Suggestions, Fears, Dreams, Complaints, Secrets, Fantasies, Worries, Obsessions, Problems, Ideas, and Opinions. Students place notes recording their interests, preoccupations, anxieties, and general thoughts, guided by the labels. Periodically the boxes are opened and the contents collected for publication in the school's student activities newsletter. The individual, self-determined, yet generally unrelated thoughts of multiple participants compose a provisional narrative of the school community at a particular moment.

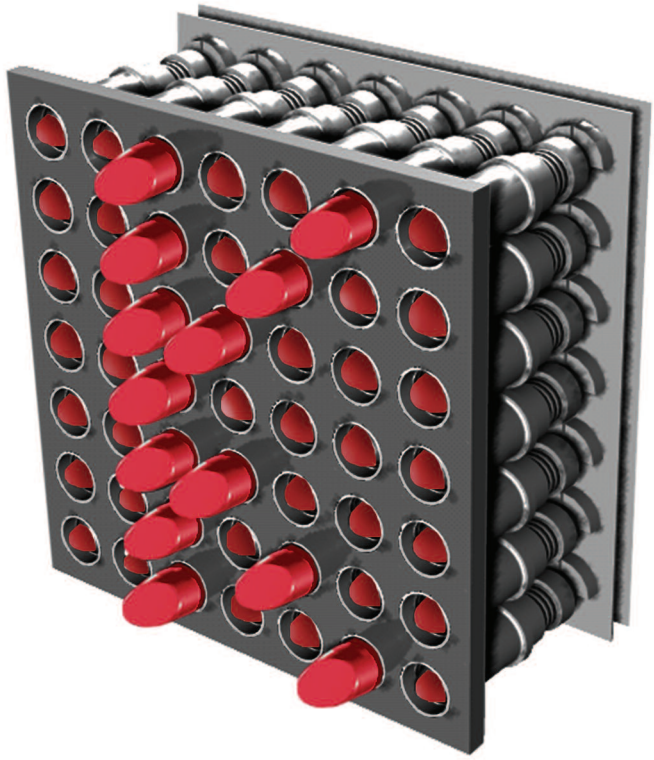
Completed seven years later for the Hiawatha Light Rail Line in Minneapolis, *Small Kindnesses, Weather Permitting* (2004) involved a number of fabricators and collaborators as well as 100 members of the public. Thirty-five small, interactive kiosks are installed in 11 stations. To create the series, Zweig developed 11 kiosk designs, with seven audio and four video designs, in editions of three or four. Each kiosk has a mechanical "game" feature, including a revolving snow-globe, windshield wiper, pinball game, doorbell, and "thanks a million" machine; waiting travelers use a hand crank, button, or lever to activate a unit's audio and/or video component.

To collect and create the audio and video features, Zweig held an open competition, inviting Minnesota musicians, storytellers, filmmakers, and video artists to address the themes of weather and courtesy—stereotypical characteristics of life in Minnesota chronicled in the musings of Garrison Keillor on his *Prairie Home Companion*, as well as in city branding initiatives. The evolving collection of almost 200 audio and video clips is delivered to the different units, all poised and prepped for random activation by curious or impatient passengers. In this dynamic, discursive realm of public interactivity, questions multiply exponentially. Any

suggestion of mandated, or even expected, participation is highly suspect and undeniably problematic, but encouraged, endorsed, or simply potential conditions for self-determined interactivity raise queries about ethical scope and aesthetic dimensions. Is *Small Kindnesses, Weather Permitting* conceptually compelling—and complete—when more and more people activate the kiosks? What if no one chooses to participate? Does the potential interactivity of individuals operating independently in public space—and the unpredictability of their random initiatives or abstinences—produce a conceptually resolved, if only marginally interactive, project? Accepting ideas of control, autonomy, and ethics incumbent in artist-generated, situationally sanctioned, and audience-activated interactivity, what is enough—or too much—for public art to do?

For all of her interests and forays into digital media and new technologies, Zweig's work still exists emphatically and viscerally in the physical world. From the tactile interactivity of manipulating books and close reading, Zweig brings a smart, sensitive, and witty sensibility to the materiality of her work. Two projects, in particular, have a distinctive, sentient quality. In an eccentric proposal for the Engineering School at the University of Central Florida at Orlando, developed with engineer Franklin Perry, Zweig has created another sentence-generating program. In this work, the randomly inspired passages will be "written" by motor and magnet-driven lipstick tubes. The improbable circumstances of a modified, speciously interactive commercial cosmetic display in an engineering building prompts a crazy quilt of questions regarding language, meaning, gender, and expertise.

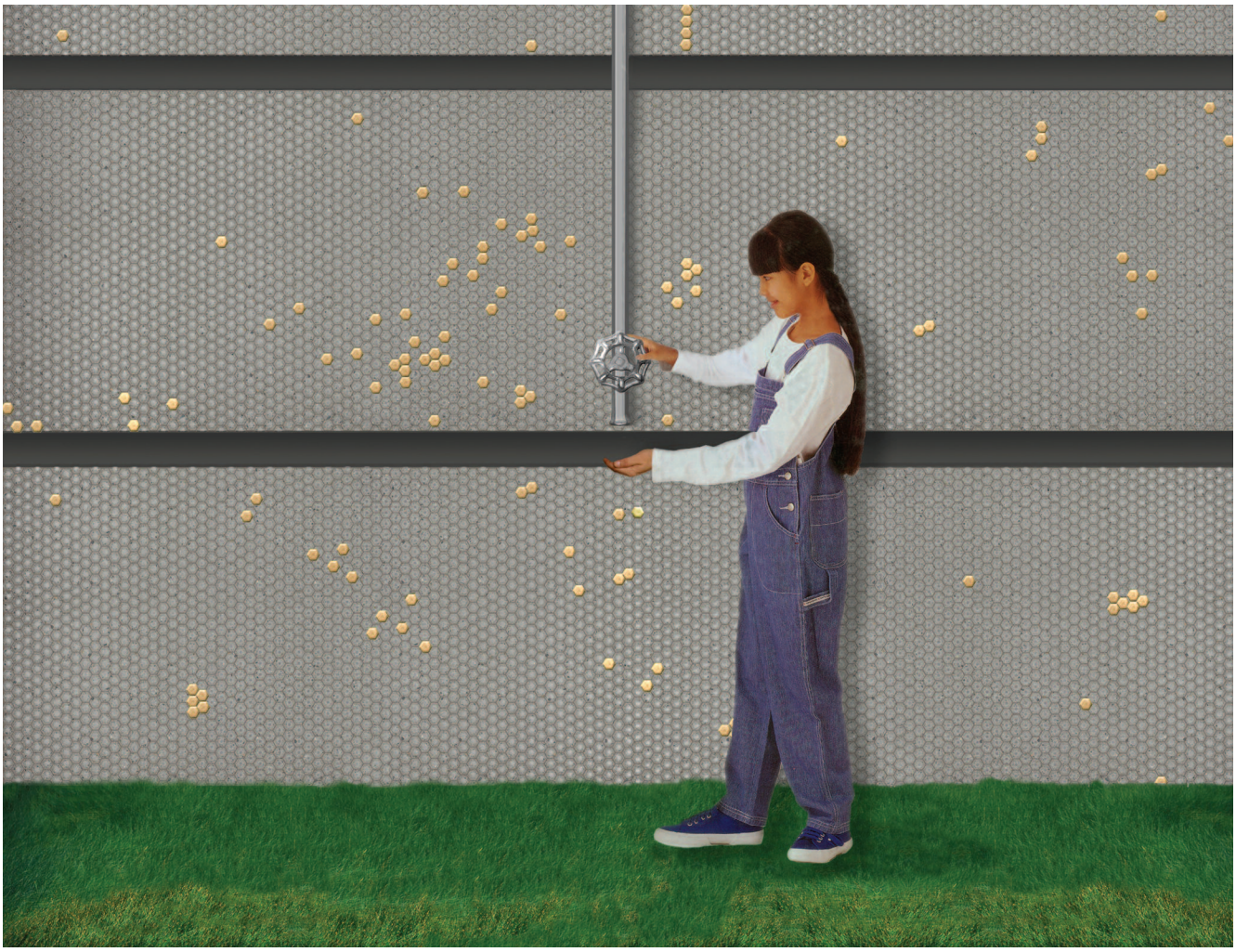
If You Lived Here You'd Be Home (2007) deploys an ambitious, yet sensitive selection and application of materials in two large, constructed signs installed on both sides of an overpass at the St. Louis Light Rail's Maplewood-Manchester station. Like many small towns in the United States, Maplewood has experienced demographic shifts and economic pressures, the challenging push-and-pull of a desire for new economic development coupled with deep



***Lipstick Enigma*, 2008. Lipstick tubes, aluminum, motors, and computer program, rendering of one letter from a proposed mechanical text sign.**

affection for the community's historical character and housing stock. Using detritus from the demolition of two old Maplewood houses, Zweig assembled two "MAPLEWOOD" signs evoking the textures and colors, ruins and memories of razed homes. On the south side of the overpass, the sign is written forward (left to right); on the north side, the town name runs backward (right to left). The dyslexic moment is "corrected" only when motorists read the reversed sign through their rear-view mirrors. For everyone else, the sign maintains its rogue counter-legibility. Inspired by McLuhan's comment, "We drive into the future using only our rear-view mirror," the project uses time, motion, and blunt mediation to represent interdependent, if possibly irreconcilable, ideas of clinging to the past while seizing the future.[6] This may be Zweig's most poetic and touching project, as the ruins of the past are lovingly reconstituted in a moniker for the future.

Zweig enthusiastically embraces the vagaries, vulnerabilities, and inconclusive results of interactivity in a proposal for the Primary Clarifiers Building of the Bridgewater Treatment System near Seattle. *Limited Edition* consists of a densely gridded wall, small golden tiles, and the behaviors and decisions of unknown members of the public. A faucet is placed at the edge of a large expanse of wall patterned with a one-inch grid. As visitors turn the nozzle, a single golden tile is released. They may choose to take the diminutive, shimmering object home or alternatively contribute to the creation of a golden wall by placing the tile somewhere in the grid. In an active deliberation of the *I* and *We* of public engagement, visitors to the sustainable facility may take and possess, like the ubiquitous souvenir, a token of their visit or engage in a small act to build a shared public space. In addition to deploying Freudian references to human waste, value, and gold, Zweig has developed a fascinating calculus, based on a limited edition of 150,000 tiles, 30,000 anticipated annual visitors to the site, individual decisions of these members of the public, and the recycling of tiles placed in the grid, to determine possible life spans of *Limited Edition*. If not incal-



***Limited Edition*, (2011). Aluminum grid, faucet, and 150,000 gold ceramic tiles, 350 x 12 ft. Project rendering of work in progress.**

culable, the project's denouement, determined by the actions of thousands of individuals, remains a data-producing, open-ended experiment in public life.

Striking intellectuality, balanced with intense curiosity, connects all of Zweig's public artworks. Each project presents a new opportunity to study and hypothesize conditions of public life and space through public art. The work's instrumentality does not manifest in terms of effectiveness or outcome. Although Zweig does not make misleading or unsupportable claims of what the work will do or produce, there is a qualified acknowledgement that it functions, if unaccountably, as an intermediary, witness, and advocate for contemporary civility. The different conditions of interactivity are neither simply formal tropes nor gratuitously entertaining distractions. Whether actively engaged or bypassed, the interactivity encourages critical attentiveness to the individual actions, behaviors, values, thoughts, and transactions that are the lineaments of public meaning. Zweig's process begins with questions and doubts that stimulate speculative public art that expresses, examines, and often documents the pattern of shifting individual actions, roles, and responsibilities in public space. In all of these works, Arendt's insistent appeal for thinking and seeing participation in the world remains resonant, if not urgent. Zweig's independent public art practice is a deeply thought, open-minded, and open-ended response to this significant summons.[7]

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Notes

1 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image—Music—Text* (New York: Hill & Wang/London: Fontana, 1977), p. 142–48.

2 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 181.

3 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964).

4 Claire Bishop, editor, *Participation* (London: Whitechapel/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

5 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).

6 Ibid.

7 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, op. cit.