Reasons to Hate Thomson and Craighead

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'Reasons to Hate Thomson and Craighead', in Steven Bode / Nina Ernst, eds., *Thomson and Craighead*, Film and Video Umbrella, London 2005.

[Please note that some of the links to Thomson and Craighead works or the works themselves no longer function, a common issue with online art.]

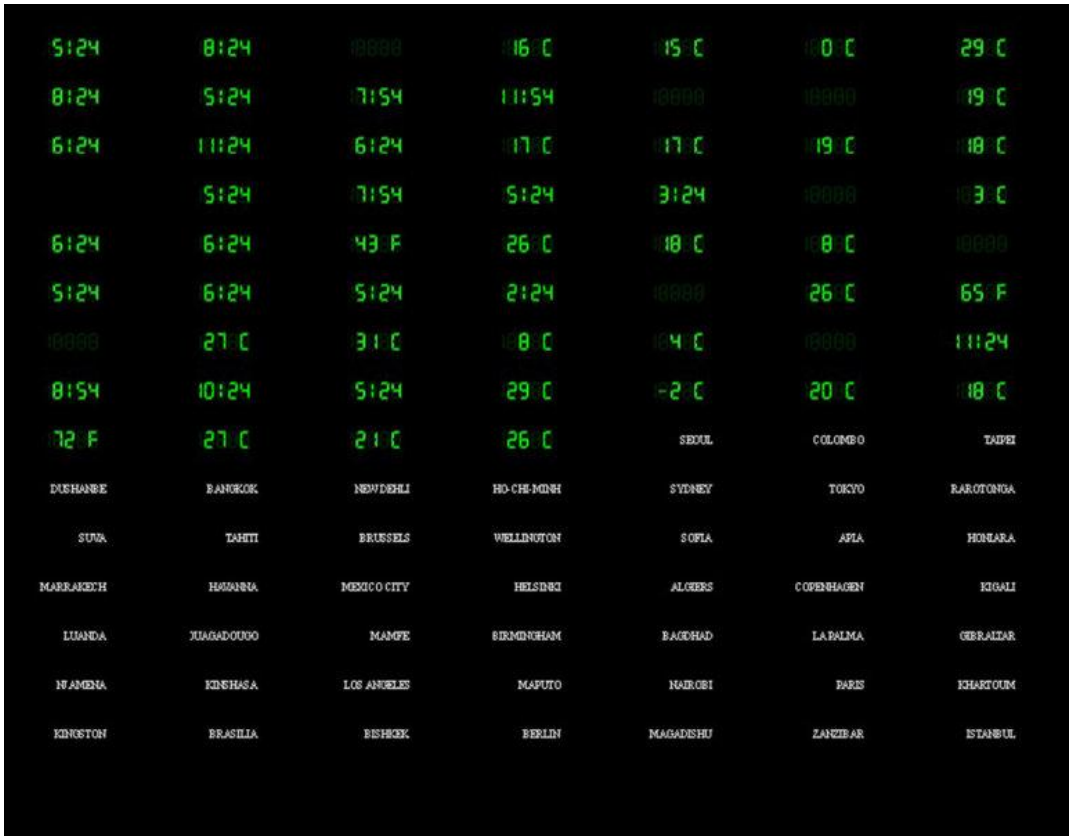
Head to the online work, *E-Poltergeist*, from Thomson and Craighead's website and you are greeted with the following warning:

> Save whatever you're doing and
> close all other running applications

It is worth paying attention since, once launched, *E-Poltergeist* invades the computer, opening dozens of browser windows (many of them advertising pop-ups), which multiply further if you try to shut them down. Faced with that proliferating field of data, you may well be uncertain about what to do. Some forms of interaction continue to work—hyperlinks operate, as does scrolling, so you can still browse the Web. You can even alter the fundamental appearance of the piece by tiling its windows. Yet the subject of this browsing—commerce and the difficulties of listening, or speaking and being heard and understood—is forced on the user, as is the ominous if kitsch soundtrack. The computer has become possessed by the mischievous spirit of the title, the user is put in the position of divining messages from the flow of information overload which pulses or flickers (depending on the speed of machine and connection), and the music provides a sense of narrative flow, glamorising the process of staring, clicking and typing, just as Hollywood treats hackers, straining to invest office tools with high drama. Are users on the edge of an Earth-shattering discovery here, as when Neo decides to follow the white rabbit? Of course not; they are surrounded by marketing detritus, of which the soundtrack is an integral part, and Thomson and Craighead's program, which can be halted only by restarting the computer, is a critical mutation of 'push' technology, and

more broadly of the ubiquitous effort to force promotional messages on the public, while investing them with the air of drama, significance and narrative force.

E-Poltergeist contains many of the components common to Thomson and Craighead's work. It uses found material; it sets the cloyingly sentimental ('Is nobody listening?') against the crassly commercial; it shifts very familiar material and scenarios into an absurd key. Yet it is remarkable that as makers of such mildly disconcerting but outwardly disarming, and even entertaining work, Thomson and Craighead have provoked among art professionals cosiderable controversy, and even occasionally outright opprobrium. So it is worth asking why this should be, and whether these reactions are symptoms of a deeper unease about digital art that draws on found material, and appears to generate itself.



Thomson & Craighead, *Weather Gauge*, 2003

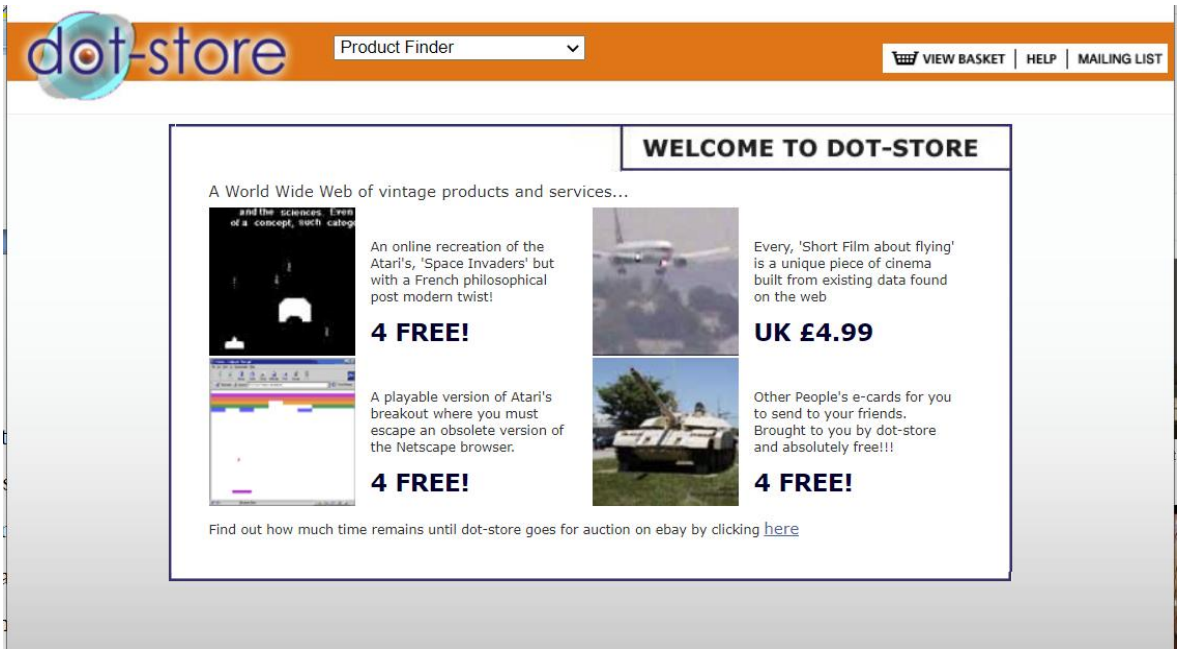
If there is something distinct about Thomson and Craighead, it is that they make such light play with their found material. Their tart combinations of elements of mass and popular culture make few concessions to the aesthete. Many artists who deal with such material transform it, say, from toy figurine to full-blown sculpture, or buff and tweak it

to flaunt its vulgarity in a fashion that is subtly aesthetic, and in substances that, like bronze, carry with them the freight of durability and esteemed quality. Thomson and Craighead spatchcock elements of pre-existing tat, and rub the noses of art-goers in the tawdry material that they have gone to the gallery to escape. Normally, the decorum of the gallery, and the type of behaviour expected of those present, would in viewers' minds tend to transform even this kitsch into high art. Yet the muzak that Thomson and Craighead often use annihilates detached observation, bearing the viewer from gallery to mall, and ensuring that kitsch remains just that. (It also serves to remind viewers that galleries are more like malls than they may care to imagine.)

More provocative, though, than the content and style of Thomson and Craighead's work is their exploration of alternative art economies. The art work is an unusual type of commodity, protected from the vulgar forces of commercialisation by its rarity or uniqueness, and sold to selected buyers through exclusive agents. The arrangement has long protected art's cultural freedom to distinguish itself from every element of the mass, to the satisfaction of an overlapping cultural and economic elite. This world is under pressure as the number of buyers for contemporary art grows with its increasing popularity, brought about largely by the marketisation of the museum, and because works are increasingly made in reproducible media. It is unclear why, other than for purely business reasons, artists' films should be available only in limited editions, protected even from students who would study them. The tension is most clearly felt in the online realm, which is fundamentally at odds with the art economy, despite efforts to section off areas of it for exclusive commercial purposes. Internet art, being immaterial, can be copied perfectly and distributed for very nearly no cost—and this against a world dependent upon shutting up rare or unique objects in museums and bank vaults. It is hard to control the display of online art or to claim ownership over it. Art sites that have attempted to shut people out or impose membership schemes have had their contents copied to freely available 'mirror' sites. Less dependent upon art institutions, professional curators and corporate sponsorship, a culture has emerged online in which the old borders between art and public, and art and other culture or even political activism have eroded, and in which there is much collaboration and conversation.

Thomson and Craighead have pushed on these contradictions in their efforts to sell cheap editions out of an online shop, and, in a related development, by exploiting the

auto-generative properties of digital media to create a potentially infinite series of unique works. Items sold or given away from their *Dot-Store* included old tapes of mobile phone conversations scanned using surveillance equipment and sold in sealed Walkmans, tea-towels displaying Google search results of emotive phrases ('Please Help Me', for example), tiny 3-D badges that flicker to display the Mac or PC wait logo, e-cards borrowed from the Net, harmonising mobile phone ring-tones, and a downloadable version of the old computer game, 'Breakout', in which users have to free themselves from an outdated browser to regain the comforts of contemporary computing. These goods, containing, behind the amusement they provoke, a partially submerged critical point, are displayed in an elaborately designed website that unites many of Thomson and Craighead's concerns over their career, particularly the connection between commercial and personal behaviour online. Its cool design, teetering on the cheesy with its metallic sheen, its pop-up windows advertising unlikely goods, its help page which unhelpfully contains appeals for help, parodies the model of online selling. Many of *Dot-Store*'s elements are lifted unaltered from the Web, and their display serves as a primer in online anthropology. Behind the parody, however, there is a genuine attempt to discover whether artists can viably sell their work online, and break with the protected and restricted art market. Thomson and Craighead operate here as a cottage industry, like most artists, but with the huge advantage of built-in means of wide availability and, for the downloadable elements at least, very cheap distribution.



Leaving the arena of contemporary merchandising, other works touch on the opportunities and dangers of automated art. The elements in *Weightless*, for example, were largely lifted from the Web, and if any one juxtaposition of animation, music and text would be as affecting as any other, why not let the machine make the selection? Simple versions of such automation have a fairly long history, but accessible programming tools and the vast database of material that is publicly and readily available on the Web have handed artists a new set of possibilities. Thomson and Craighead have recently launched a 'beacon' that captures text typed into search engines, forming an impromptu poetry, for online display and radio broadcast. *Beacon* uses only one found element; but it raises the question: how complex can such work become?

In *Short Films About Flying*, various online elements are assembled by the computer to form the said films: first, a video-feed from a camera at Logan Airport, Boston which is controlled remotely by Web-users who track aircraft, pigeons or suspicious persons as fancy takes them; second, intertitles of the kind found in silent movies, selected using a search engine that picks out particular series of words (such as 'he says...' and 'she says...'); and finally, a soundtrack randomly snatched from the online ether. The results are curious, eerie films in which the soundtrack sets a mood, the intertitles often seem to build the beginnings of a narrative and the pixellated video footage, banal though it is, holds out the promise or threat of some impending event. The viewer knows that each film is randomly or near-randomly generated, and questions their urge to find coherent meaning in the conventional association of video images, music and words.

The computer can go on manufacturing these little films without limit, and it is a simple matter to sell them as videotapes through a shop, or make them available free online. Can anyone, then, own a Thomson and Craighead 'original' if they choose to? Not quite, because the authorship of these films is uncertain: the artists set up the framework into which content is poured, and wrote the complex program that assembles the work's elements but they have no control over their precise combination and over the camera's movements.

Online art has typically divided itself into two complementary camps: that which dwells on the commercialisation of the Net, the conquest of its commons by corporations, and the willing participation of many in the online mall experience (to the extent, as

Thomson and Craighead point out, of incorporating links to bookstores from memorial pages to their loved ones); and that which seeks to combat the consuming culture with meaningful participation and dialogue. One, then, centred on the current online mall-dystopia; the other on using the technology to empower users in talk and action, and opening on the utopian possibility of an empowered, responsible, debating public—a real democracy.

Yet each division contains a fragment of its other. The dystopian exploration of and intensification in art works of commercial culture casts, as its implicit shadow, the ideal of a genuinely democratic culture; equally, the work which idealistically throws itself against the climate of commercial culture does so in full knowledge of that culture's vast extent and insidious character, and of the subsequent fragility of dialogue's prospects. In the first, technological means are used to highlight the uses made of technology by mass culture; in the second, technological means are used to open spaces against that social reality.

Works that generate themselves, though, do not fit comfortably within either camp. The artists who dwell on dialogue often produce work that is incomplete, or can never be completed, and over which they necessarily surrender control. Thomson and Craighead's auto-generative works marry the polish of the authored, dystopian work with the endless cycle of dialogue. In these works, there may be glimpsed the comfortable critique that much mass culture is manufactured as if by machine (that there is now a computer programme capable of grading the chance of songs to make the Top Ten, and which is hired out to record companies, should not be a cause of surprise). Their darker side turns on whether that critique can be extended to the art world—particularly when art works of all kinds seem to be more commonly novel juxtapositions of readymade objects or elements—or even to the human creative process as a whole.

Computer-generated works are one of the plainest indicators of the pressure that the digital revolution applies to the old forms of ownership, manufacture, pricing and passive consumption. Various threats congeal in this association of machine production and online commerce: there is the nightmare that haunted Greenberg, that kitsch and its vulgar mass audience would simply overwhelm high culture (art's only protection being to hold itself to its own exclusive and essential concerns); there is the linked concern that

the mechanical production of culture has the capacity to augment greatly the already strident and ubiquitous power of mass culture; and for the old art world, there is the threat that such products will be linked to a distribution system that can reach anyone online.

At this point, the art professional sees a world crumbling, visions of empty galleries, unique works owned by everyone, a stuttering and then failing of artspeak amid a mass proliferation of 'work' and comment, the autonomy of art ruptured, artists and dealers redundant, in short an economy broken and the sacred polluted with the profane. Naturally, representatives of the old order, more or less sharply aware of dark clouds gathering at their horizons, have good reason to hate Thomson and Craighead.