



Jason Edward Lewis

P.O.E.M.M.

The Album



a Poetry for Excitable [Mobile] Media project

www.poemm.net

2nd Edition

introduction

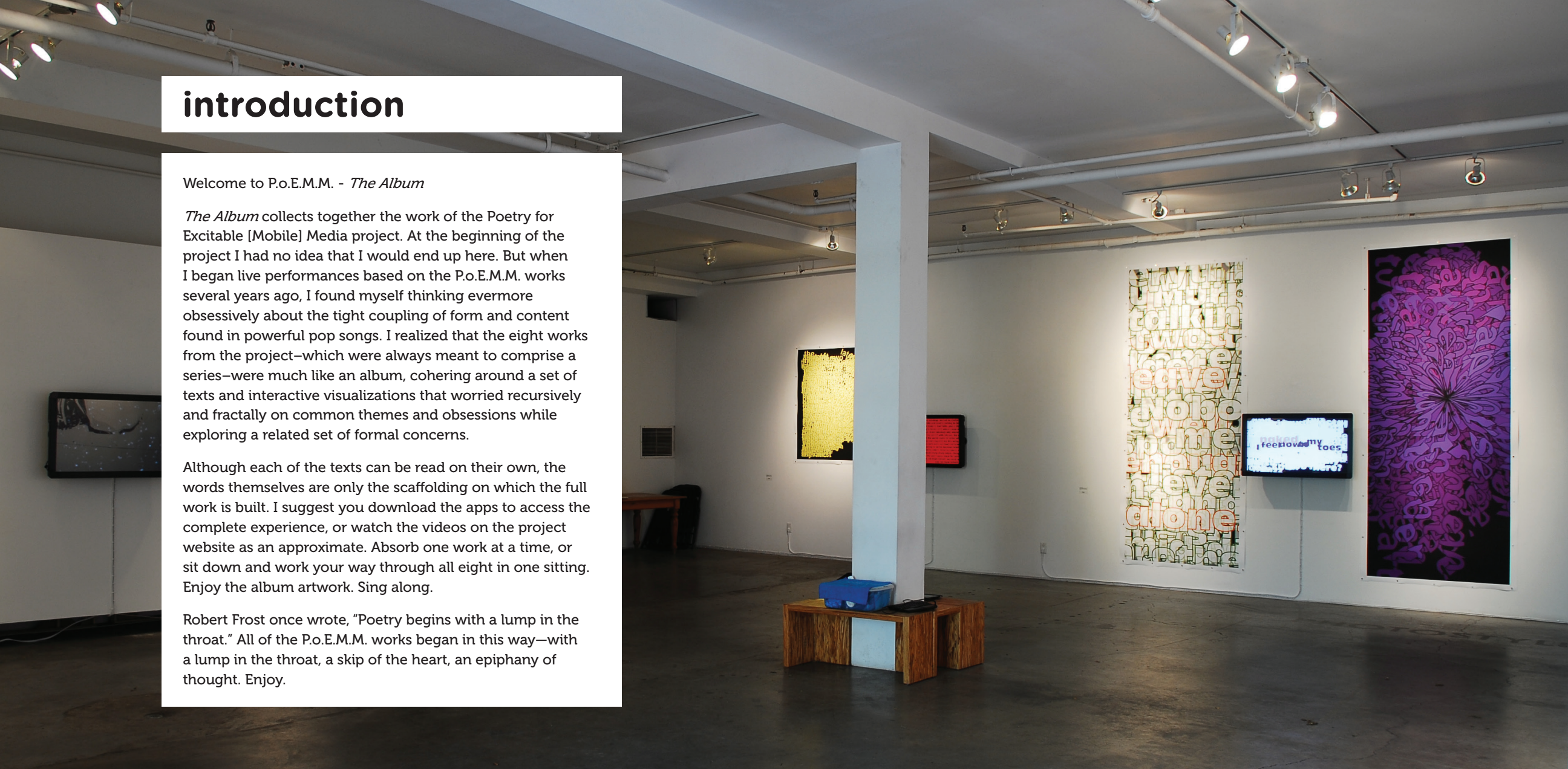
Welcome to P.o.E.M.M. - *The Album*

Welcome to P.o.E.M.M. - *The Album*

The Album collects together the work of the Poetry for Excitable [Mobile] Media project. At the beginning of the project I had no idea that I would end up here. But when I began live performances based on the P.o.E.M.M. works several years ago, I found myself thinking evermore obsessively about the tight coupling of form and content found in powerful pop songs. I realized that the eight works from the project—which were always meant to comprise a series—were much like an album, cohering around a set of texts and interactive visualizations that worried recursively and fractally on common themes and obsessions while exploring a related set of formal concerns.

Although each of the texts can be read on their own, the words themselves are only the scaffolding on which the full work is built. I suggest you download the apps to access the complete experience, or watch the videos on the project website as an approximate. Absorb one work at a time, or sit down and work your way through all eight in one sitting. Enjoy the album artwork. Sing along.

Robert Frost once wrote, "Poetry begins with a lump in the throat." All of the P.O.E.M.M. works began in this way—with a lump in the throat, a skip of the heart, an epiphany of thought. Enjoy.



A person is seen from the side, looking at a tablet. The tablet screen displays a word cloud of various words in different sizes and orientations. Overlaid on the word cloud is the text 'what they speak when they speak to me' in a white, sans-serif font. The background of the image is dark and textured with a subtle, repeating pattern of the same text 'what they speak when they speak to me' in a lighter shade.

what they speak when
they speak to me

what they speak when they speak to me

Livcolor splashing, sloshing from sidewalk to sidewalk
Driven by currents of lust fear hope obligation

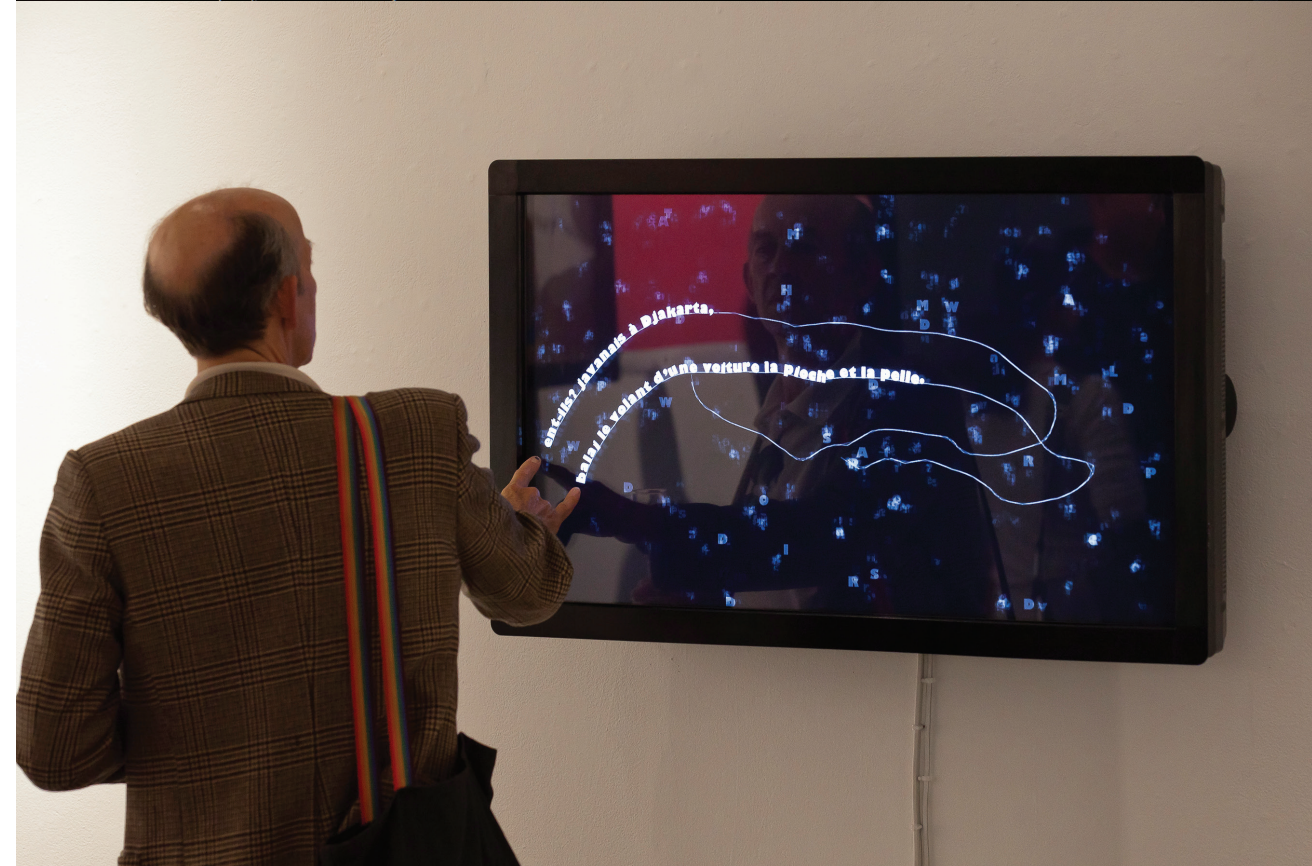
All movement channeled
Through those bodies these fractured vessels
Riven by demands, by pressures instigated
During one night's mistake borne through long years'
Acquaintance with the weight of a broom a steering wheel a pick and shovel.

What do these bodies speak when they speak to me?
Spanish in Chichicastenango, but no hola here.

Here the straightedged beauty of simple function
Of an errand accomplished, of successful consumption.

What do they speak? Javanese in Jakarta.
Marathi in Mumbai. When they greet me in Turkish in Berlin
Are they speaking to themselves or to me?

We feast on our own lives in these streets;
Polycultural cannibalism wallowing in its own monohued blood.



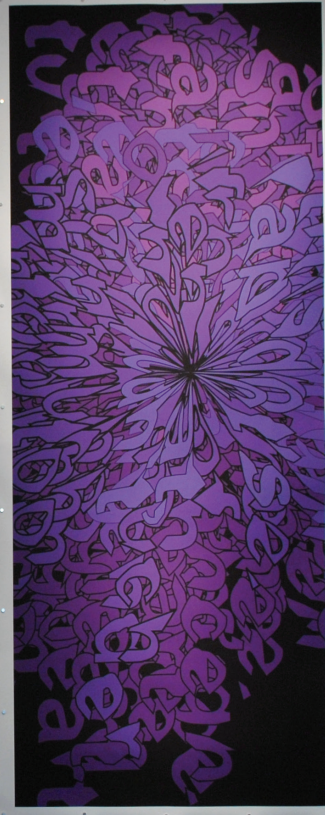
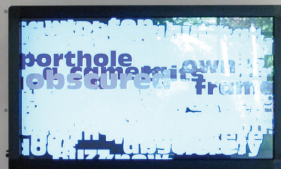
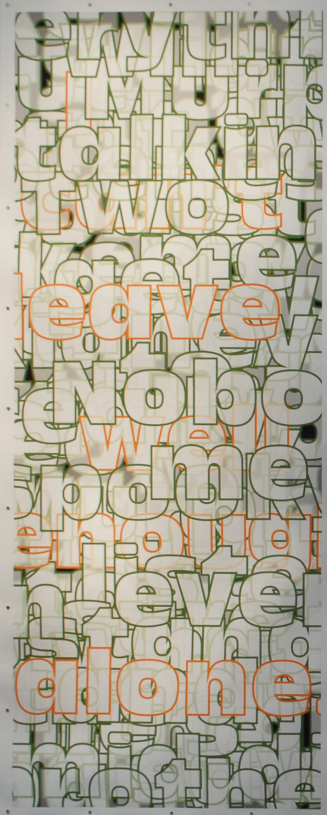
poly/cultural cannibalism wallowing in its blood.

SPEAK



**buzz aldrin doesn't
know any better**





buzz aldrin doesn't know any better

Sanyo, Sony, JVC, Lucky Goldstar and wigs on top, laughing out loud;
Buzz Aldrin would be proud.

Wigs? Wigs. Black, blue, blonde, purple, pink,
some on top of the sets like hats,
some laying at the bottom of the window
like metastasizing octopi drowning upward.

32 inches just doesn't cut it any more.

Long for a wig, long for hair, but as a screen it's a postcard,
a porthole, a camera obscured by its own frame.

Shall I try on the purple wig? I'm feeling bald today,
my head is so exposed I feel naked down to my toes.

There. It fits. I'm charmed. I'm charming. My skin
is turning purple, octopus camouflage juju seeping
down, down, down to my naked toes.

What's that? I have to pay for it?

Can I turn off the camouflage?

Does it come with a free TV?

I'm sure you have your reasons,

I'm sure this is respectable gear,

and I'm sure you're absolutely sincere,

but...

hey,

wait a minute...does Buzz know you're here?

an abrupt hardening of awareness

126" x 52"
digital print made with Mr. Softie.



Two Kidney Murphy's talking rubbish
to any who'll listen. Nobody will. I'm not sure what
he's saying, he's standing in the mid-distance
and everything not proximate
and everything not remote
is muffled by the suspended sea spray
that keeps not-falling on this early morning Thursday.

In the great hollow solid between my forehead and the sun
cavort great herds of proctors, gamboling with my future,
taking odds that I won't make it out of bed, that I won't
find the ol' No. 2 in time, that short-term never became interim
never became long-term. I want memories, really, I do, I want them
to keep me company and to keep me safe and to get me moving
right now. Snap-focus.

I could do without everything being so proximate, a little bit
more remoteness, please, some spooky action at a distance
to pry some space out of the air in front of my face. It's not
that I want to hear Murphy, I don't, but suspended with him
are my brother's coat (...I don't have a brother...) and an old pair
of tongs left by my last landlord, the last lord to grant me
a boon. I can't get to the middle-distance. I can't get back home.
I can't get the car started. I can't leave well enough alone.

show me a map of the sun

126" x 52"
digital print made with Mr. Softie.



I'm going to show you a map of the sun.
The coordinates are sketchy, and the scale some
what erratic
but I think you'll find it useful for finding bubble guns
and that funny red juice used to seal knee scratches.

I'm going to show you the map of the sun.
My man Mister Pocket had hidden it away ten thousand
and nine years ago, so the light couldn't find it
couldn't find it no matter how hard it looked. And it looked hard.
And it looks crazy,
doesn't it? Crazy light. No wonder it never found the sun,
much less the map.

I'm going to show you how to map the sun,
which sunspots are worth recording, which ones are fickle
and dishonest, which ones fail
the twin tests of persistence of vision and conservation of momentum.
Some hide when you come looking,
some double-up to fool the probes.
On the dark side skate two who keep me up at night
with their whispers brushing against each earlobe.

Can I grab your ear? Ahhhh. That's better.

KNOW





the great migration



the great migration

Loosen up the soul belt, mix up a tuna melt
Belt out a show tune, and finish that heart-to-heart
with the moon.

Dig into the purple playdough
Licking your fingers as you go
Tender forth some broken clams
And head out, fast, onto the lam.

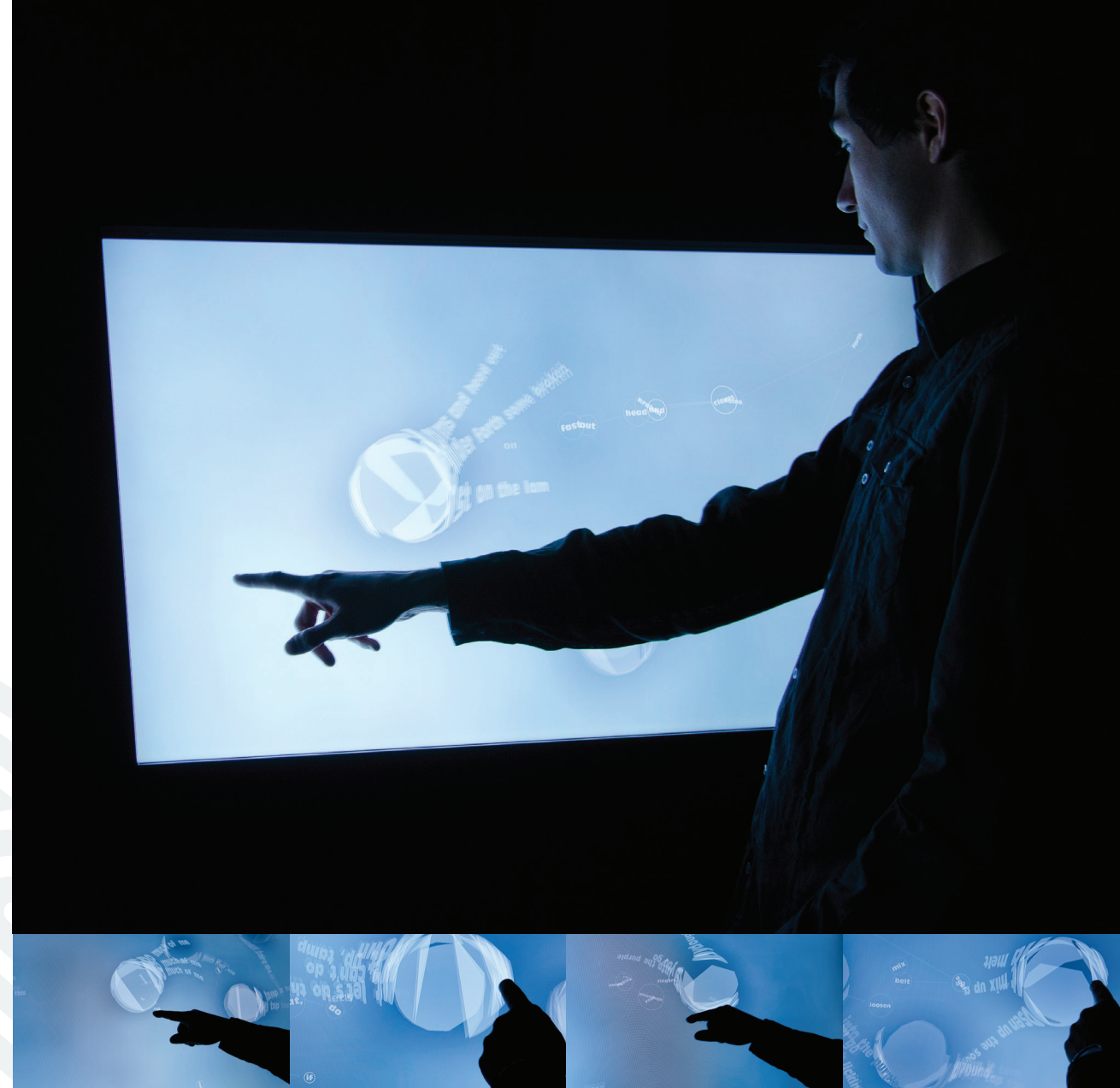
I'm not sure if this is happenstance
But let's not leave everything to chance.

Too much river, and not enough sea.
Too much river, and too much of me.
Too much of me too much of me too much of me.

Too much rhythm, too much time
Too much sunshine but not enough rhyme.

If we can't do that, let's do this
Tap it up, tamp it down
Twist at the end and bring the thunder down.
Tap tap tap

Tap it, tamp it, turn it around.



60" x 168"
digital print made with Mr. Softie.

60" x 168"
digital print made with Mr. Softie.

60" x 168"
digital print made with Mr. Softie.



MIGRATION



smooth
second bastard



smooth

you're a smooth second bastard, aren't you?
 you from around here?
 no? no.
 something different about you,
 those clothes you wear, the way you talk.
 you're either from here or your not.
 from here means being here means coming into being
 here means being born here; can't move in, or marry in,
 or fuck your way in. no.

second

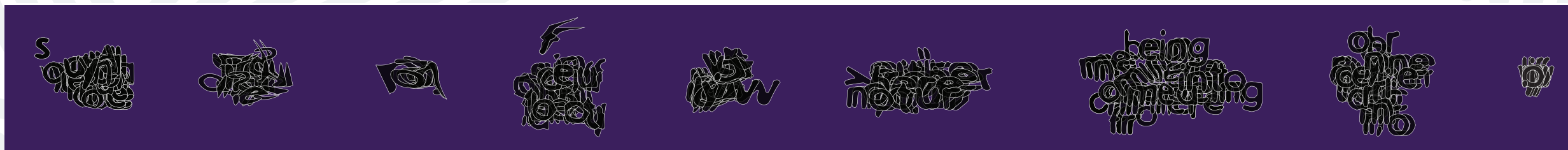
where you from?
 always, the long drive home,
 moving up out of the lushness of the Sacramento valley,
 into the dry, baking scrub-brushed foothills,
 further still, down and then up the river valleys: south fork middle fork north fork
 south fork middle fork north fork south fork middle fork north fork
 Yuba river, pines marching resolutely alongside, their green
 smell full in my nose...
 the dryness is perhaps what is most difficult in remembering the place.

bastard

some text
 a text
 some words, known.
 a story lies amongst the curves and lines,
 waiting to be told.
 i grow old.
 i grow singular or plural?
 the choices change, as I make them.
 highly adaptive, highly critical, but still left
 lying betwixt and between.

smooth ii

13" x 122"
digital print made with Mr. Softie.



bastard

24" x 40"
digital print made with Mr. Softie.

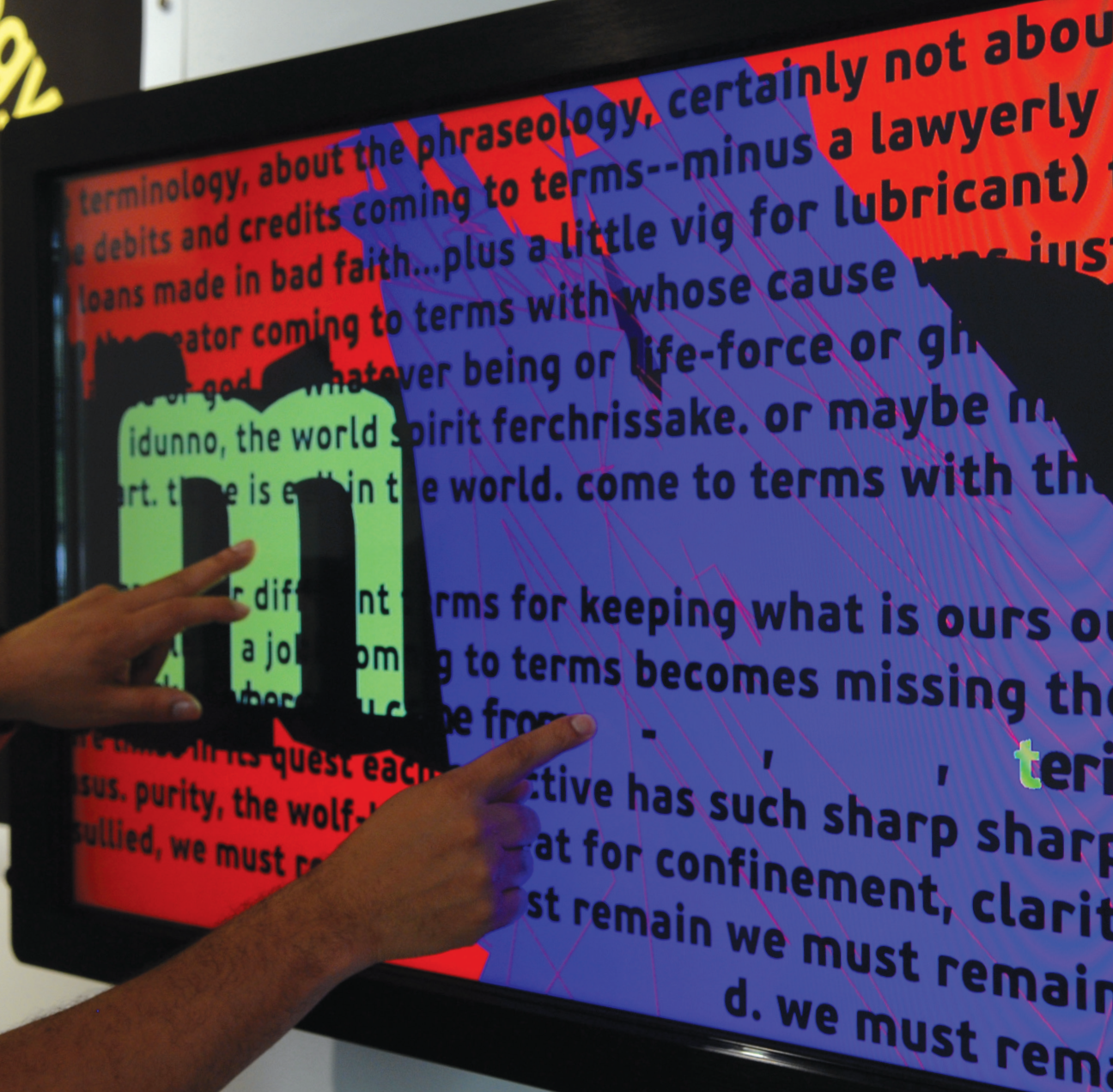


BASTARD

Limited Edition App 100/100

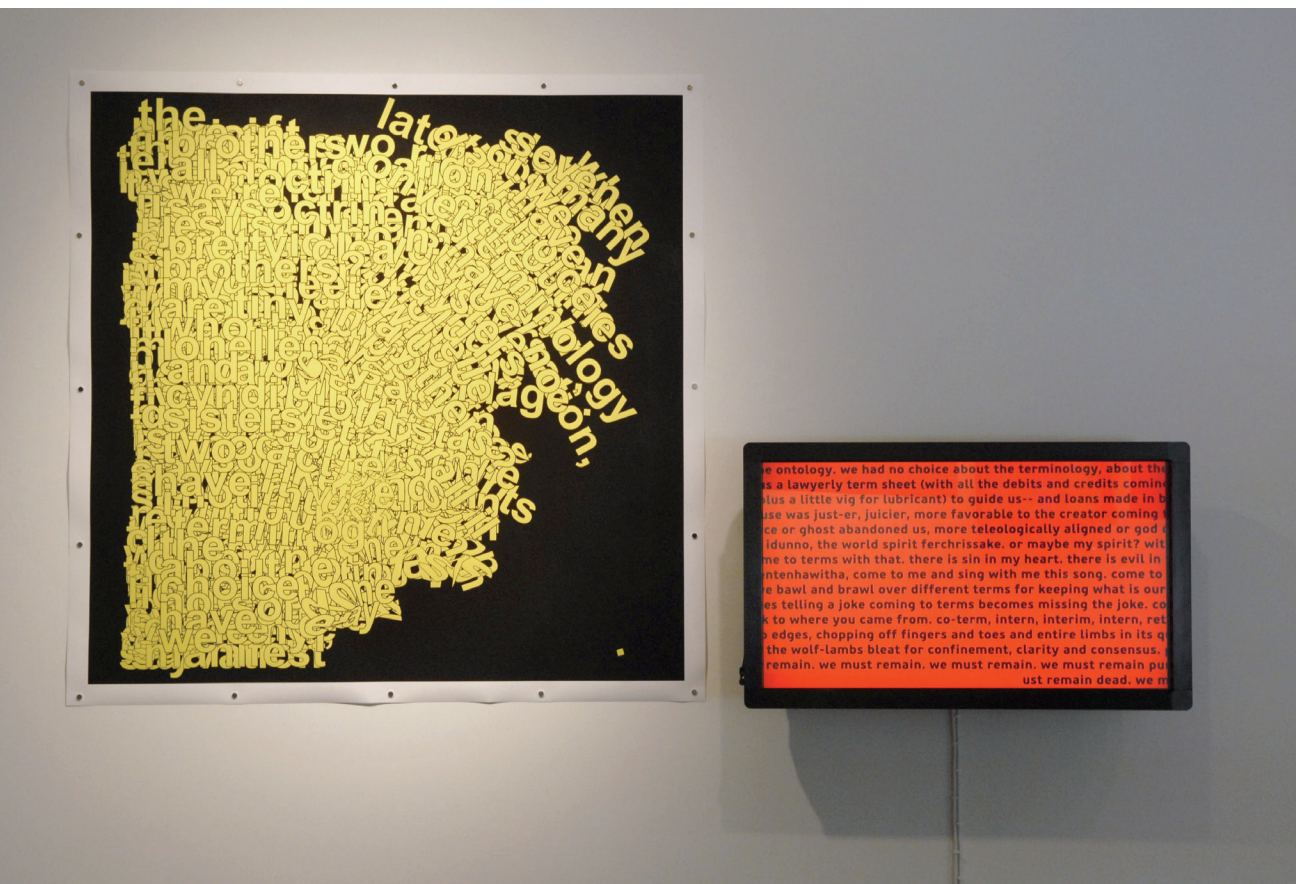
baking
lushness

valleys:
Yuba, pine marching dutely donkeys, New Year



no choice about the
terminology





no choice about the terminology

we had no choice about the terminology, about the phraseology, certainly not about the ontology.
 coming to terms—minus a lawyerly term sheet (with all the debits and credits
 and loans made in bad faith...plus a little vig for lubricant) to guide us—
 coming to terms with whose cause was just-er, juicier, more favorable to the creator
 or god or whatever being or life-force or ghost abandoned us, more teleologically aligned
 with, idunno, the world spirit? ferchrissake. for my sake. or maybe my spirit?
 there is sin in my heart. there is evil in the world. come to terms with that.
 come to me, tentenhawitha, come to me and sing with me this song.
 we bawl and brawl over different terms for keeping what is ours ours.
 coming to terms becomes telling a joke coming to terms becomes missing the joke.
 co-term, interim, intern, return. go back to where you came from.
 each adjective has such sharp sharp edges, slicing off fingers and toes and entire limbs in its quest
 for confinement, clarity and consensus. purity, the wolf-lambs bleat
 we must remain pure, we must remain unsullied, we must remain pure we must remain
 we must remain we must remain we must remain. we must remain. we must remain.
 we must remain. we must remain.
 we must remain dead.



planetary gear

60" x 60"

digital print made with Mr. Softie.

we have no choice about the terminology

i have two sisters, cyndi and lonelle. are there brothers? pretty jesus says we're all brothers
we just don't act like it much but i don't believe that. the first part, that is. i have so many enemies,
so many sycophants, so many ways to categorize. where's the planetary gear?
the differend lies everywhere.

i say 'genocide' you say 'manifest destiny' you say 'salvation' i say 'indoctrination'.

at the point of a sword, no less. no more. you say 'states rights' i say 'of human bondage'.

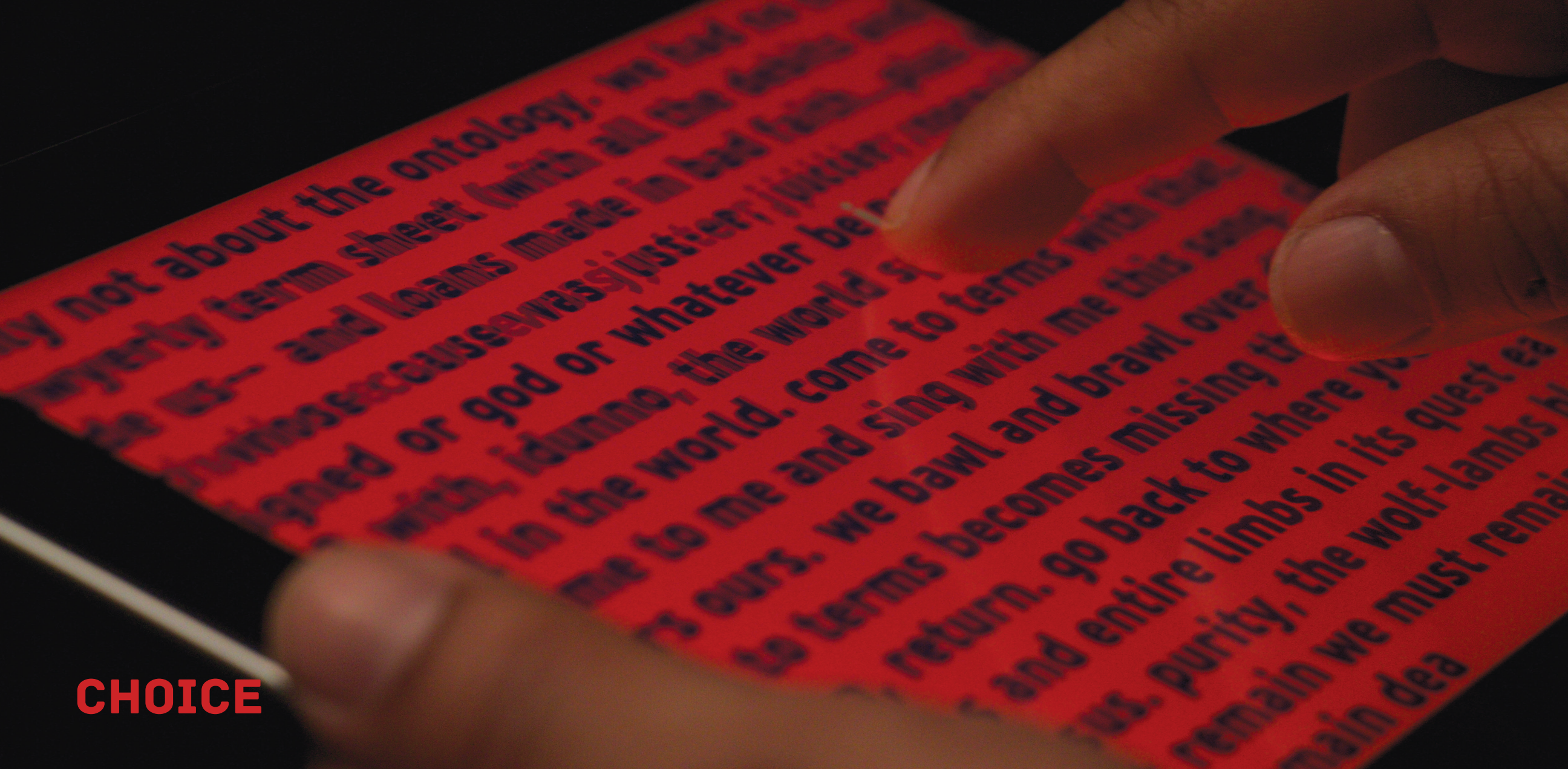
stephen hawkin had it right, when one side is leviathan and the other a minnow

no conversation, no plea, no illumination. we step, and some time later notice

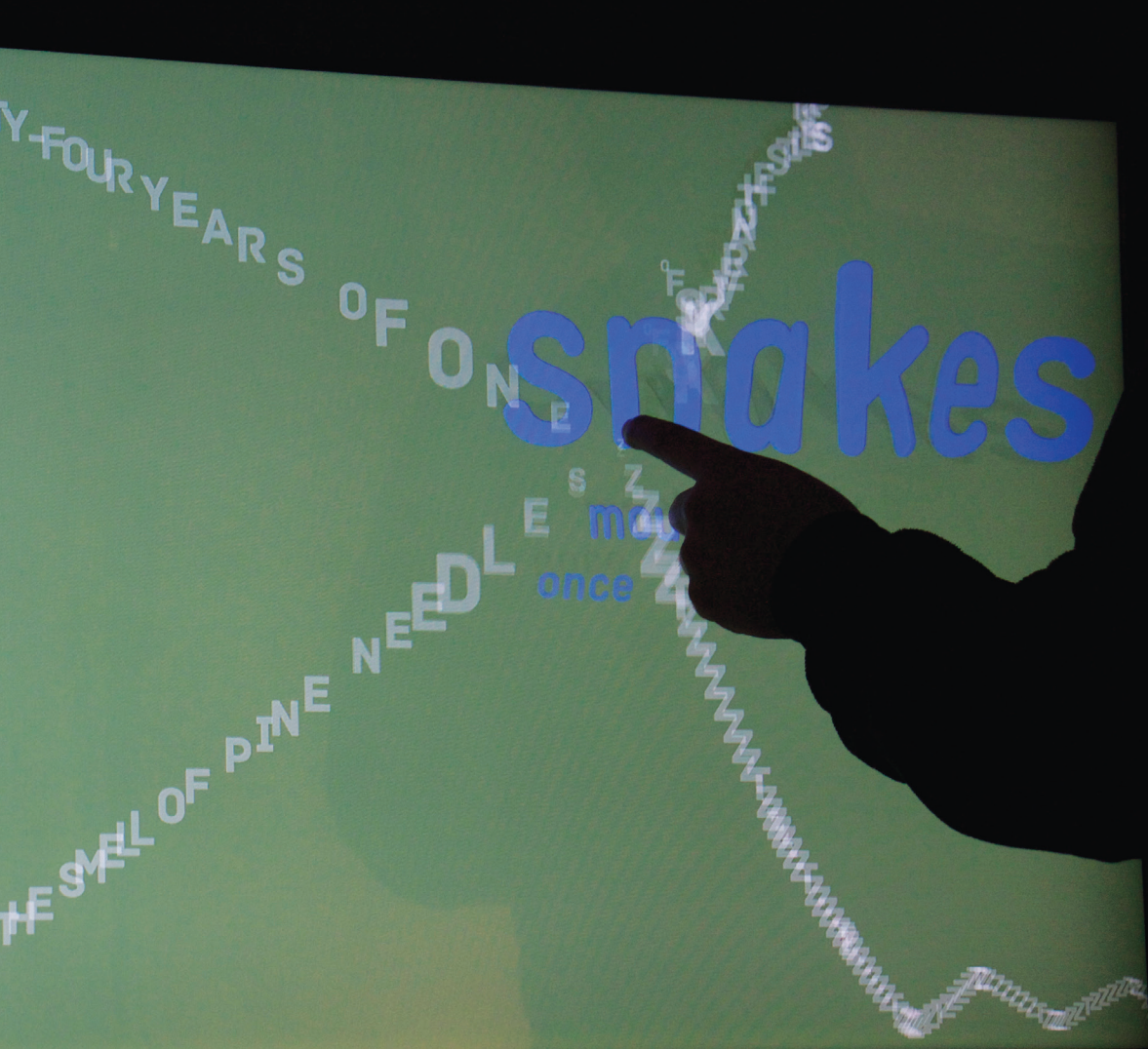
the smell, and wipe our feet clean. the planetary gear is the grail, and dust and story all the same.

history demands nothing, and,

in return, is met, obligingly, with seven slots of memory.



CHOICE



the summer the
rattlesnakes came



the summer the rattlesnakes came

They come and they came and they kept coming,
silent slither first we'd know dogs bark bark barking
then the rattle a tiny engine dry starting first
just a few 'tchookatchookatchooka' one two three and then
ztztztztzt it's wound-up up to speed zinging along like an un-lubricated two-stroke
about to throw a piston.

we freeze mom yells for us kids "freeze" dad grabs
the big, long contractor's blunt nose shovel and begins the dance
dogs bark bar barking dashing back-and-forth
just out of strike range. ztztztztztztztztztztzt. it's scared
the dogs freaking it out we're scared a six-year old won't last long
with a rattler bite too little body mass to keep the poison from the heart
in the forty-minute drive to town we're scared.

snake strikes once 'ping' twice 'ping' at the shovel. dad keeps
his distance let's it decide it can't do anything about the shovel
and start worrying about the dogs again. ztztztztztztztztzt.
the shovel whistles over and down, trapping the body
just behind the neck unbelievably the rattle goes faster hyperspeed,
the rattler trapped under the edge of the shovel the rattle
goes faster still zzzzztzzzzzztzzzzztzzzztzzzzzztzzzzzt
then stops as my father steps on the shovel's shoulder drives
the sharpened edge down through snakes body now two snakes,
the long one flopping about the other's mouth spasming we can
see the fangs swing out and back in again once twice three times
then
both are still
as are the dogs
as are we.

to feast on
you haven't lived
summers passin'
pints and fags and
of the encrustations off

where

two snakes



A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a gold ring on the ring finger, touching a tablet screen. The screen has a teal background and displays the word 'freeze' in large, bold, lowercase letters. Below it, a list of related words is shown in a smaller, lighter font: 'freeze', 'shovel', 'dashing', and 'scared'. A white, jagged, zigzag line is visible on the right side of the screen, extending from the top right towards the bottom right.

freeze

freeze

shovel

dashing

scared

RATTLESNAKE



the world was white

the world was white

The world was white;
we were three,

speeding through the vast winter's skin
pulled taught and bright
over the valley's standing trees,

fit tight
into the cab of ol' Blue,
we floated in a warm bubble, seamed inside the cold and wet.
You said to Chris and me

that you had been thinking of having a child.
We, gentlemen that we are, immediately
offered our seed

even if clinically delivered.
We proposed mixing his sperm, my sperm in the same vial
so that neither would ever feel the need

to be selfish with the child.
You laughed, and asked us
why we do such a deed.

We laughed back,
unsure, but convinced at least
that such a progeny would lead

an interesting life, if only because of its mother,
a lucuna in life's studied framework,
set adrift to be

a continuing moment of chaotic touch
in lives too ruled
by expectations impossible to redeem.

What would she name him?
Or her, she murmured,
Or her, we happily agreed.

What would it be?
Some word from the outside,
Some word beyond simple needs,

beyond what we've come
to so easily expect
from our small-town, dying breed.

On this, on this indeed
we all agreed;
unable to forget,
but still willing to bleed.

The world was white.
We were three.



and laughed

a in life's studied framework, set ad

f its **mother,** ba

prog



reconstruction

peel back these photos, these stills
wallow in the sadness of nostalgia's quiet thrill.

these people are not were they ever?
we thought ourselves so sundrenched, immortal and clever.

caught half-undressed, smiling forever,
her name - that one - I'll never again remember.

the past doesn't grow old, it simply disappears,
while these flatland photographs lead entirely seperate careers.

the colors of memory leave their twisting trace;
look here - dad is on fire;

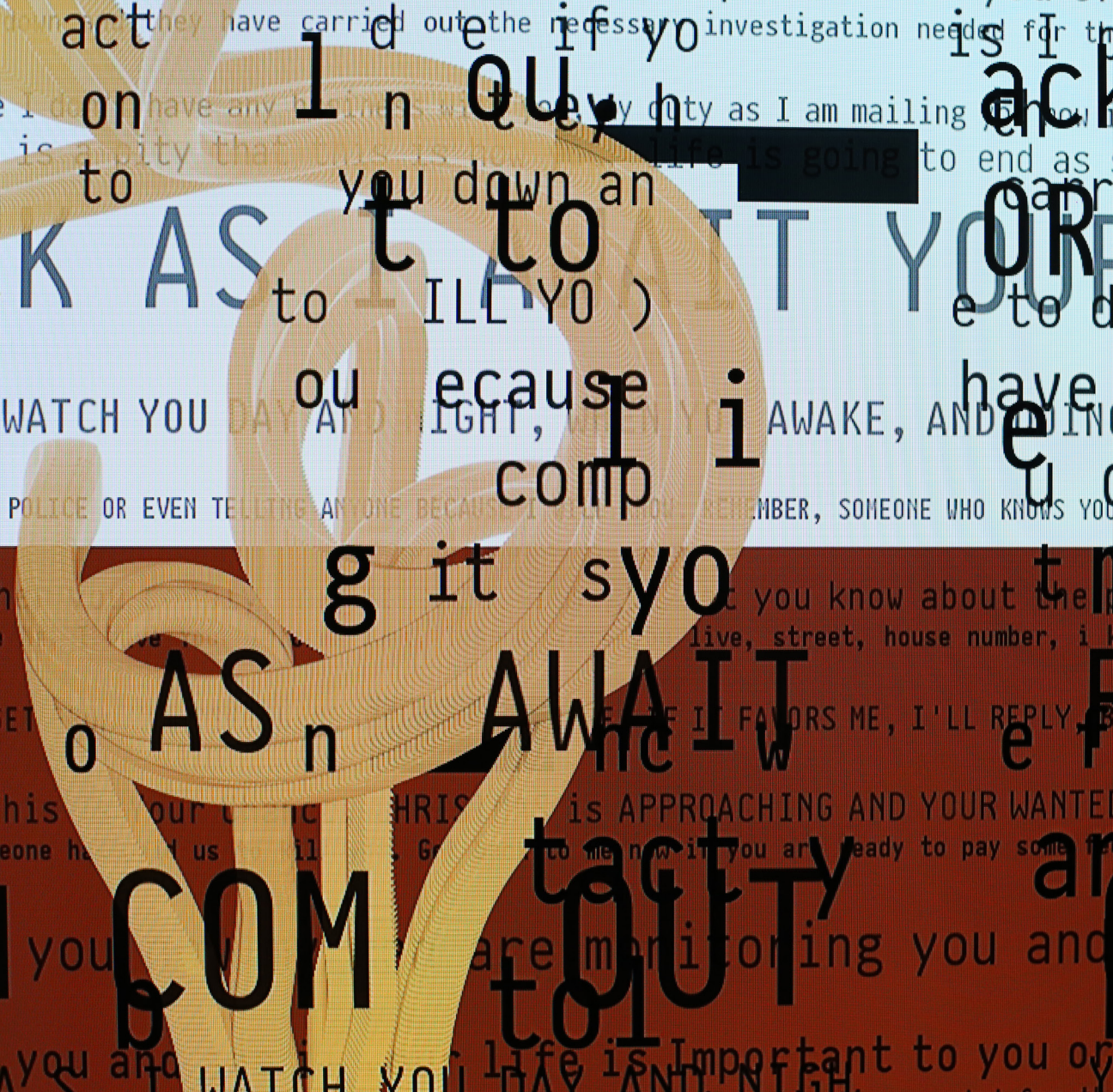
his blood, left orphan, is in search of a face.



WHITE

neither would ever the need to be selfish with the

from our small town, dying here



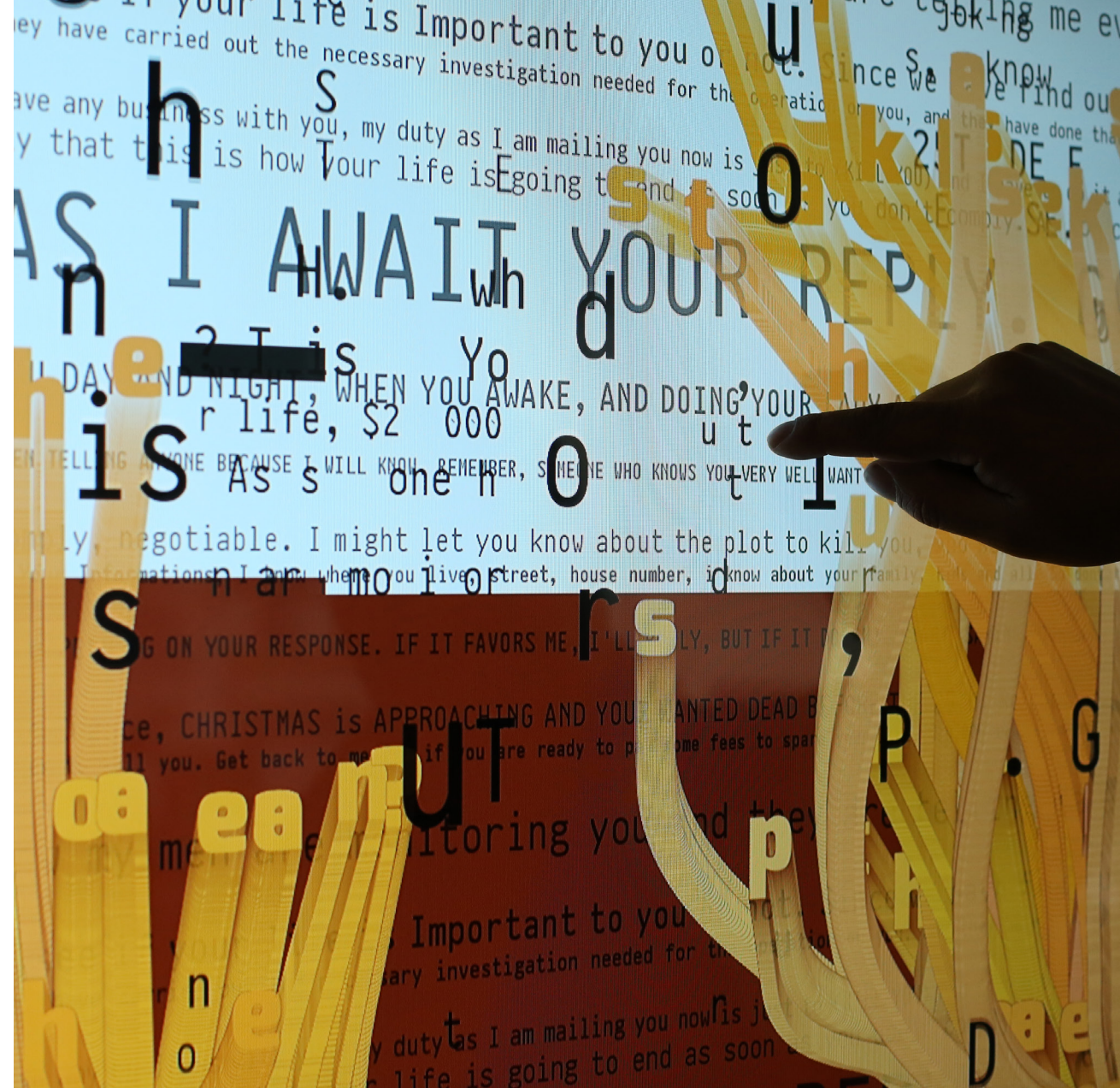
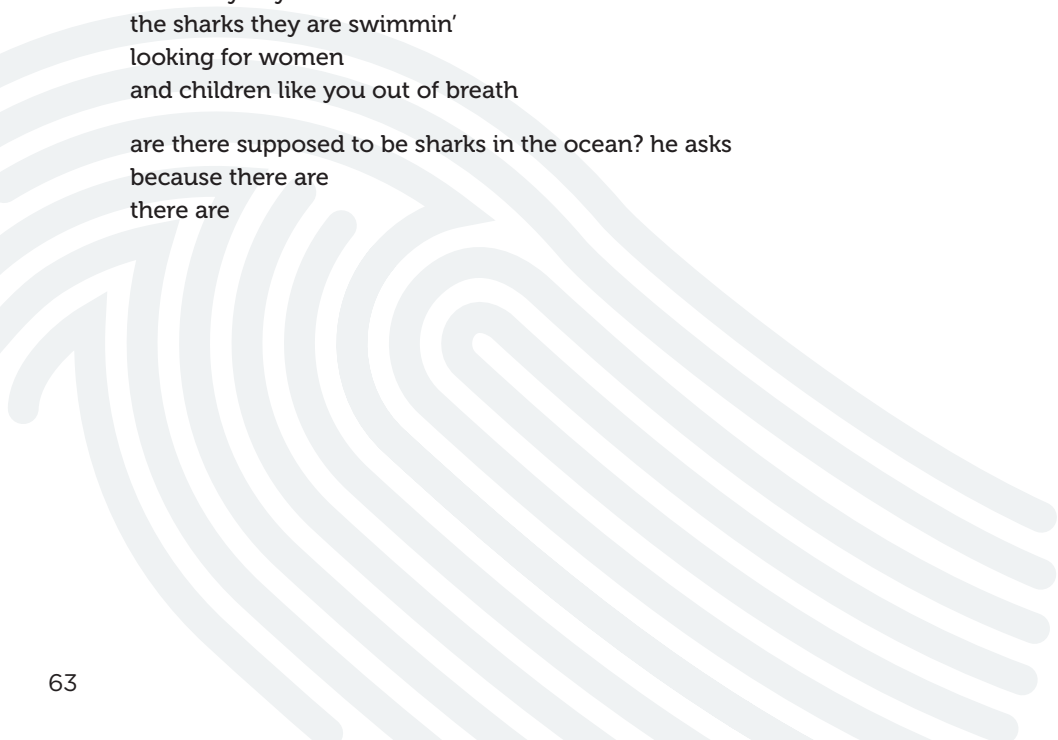
The World That Surrounds You Wants Your Death

Sharks in the Ocean

are there supposed to be sharks in the ocean? he asks
once again I don't feel up to the task
of living and dying
of failing and trying
to tell a story that's fit for the telling
to tell the story without outright lying

how do you say
the world that surrounds you wants your death
and every day
the sharks they are swimmin'
looking for women
and children like you out of breath

are there supposed to be sharks in the ocean? he asks
because there are
there are



The World That Surrounds You Wants Your Death

[W]hen you've gone through five hundred years of genocidal experiences, when you know that the other world that surrounds you wants your death and that's all it wants you get bitter and you don't get over it, it starts getting passed on almost genetically. It makes for wit for incredible wit, but under the wit there is a bite.

—Paula Gun Allen



Hired to Kill You (excerpt)

I am very sorry for you, it is a pity that this is how your life is going to end as soon as you don't comply. As you can see there is no need for me introducing myself to you because I don't have any business with you, my duty as I am mailing you now is just to (KILL YOU) and I have to do it as I have already been paid for that.

I have sent my boy's to track you down and they have carried out the necessary investigation needed for the operation on you, and they have done that but I told them not to kill you that I will like to contact you and see if your life is Important to you or not. Since we have find out that you are innocent.

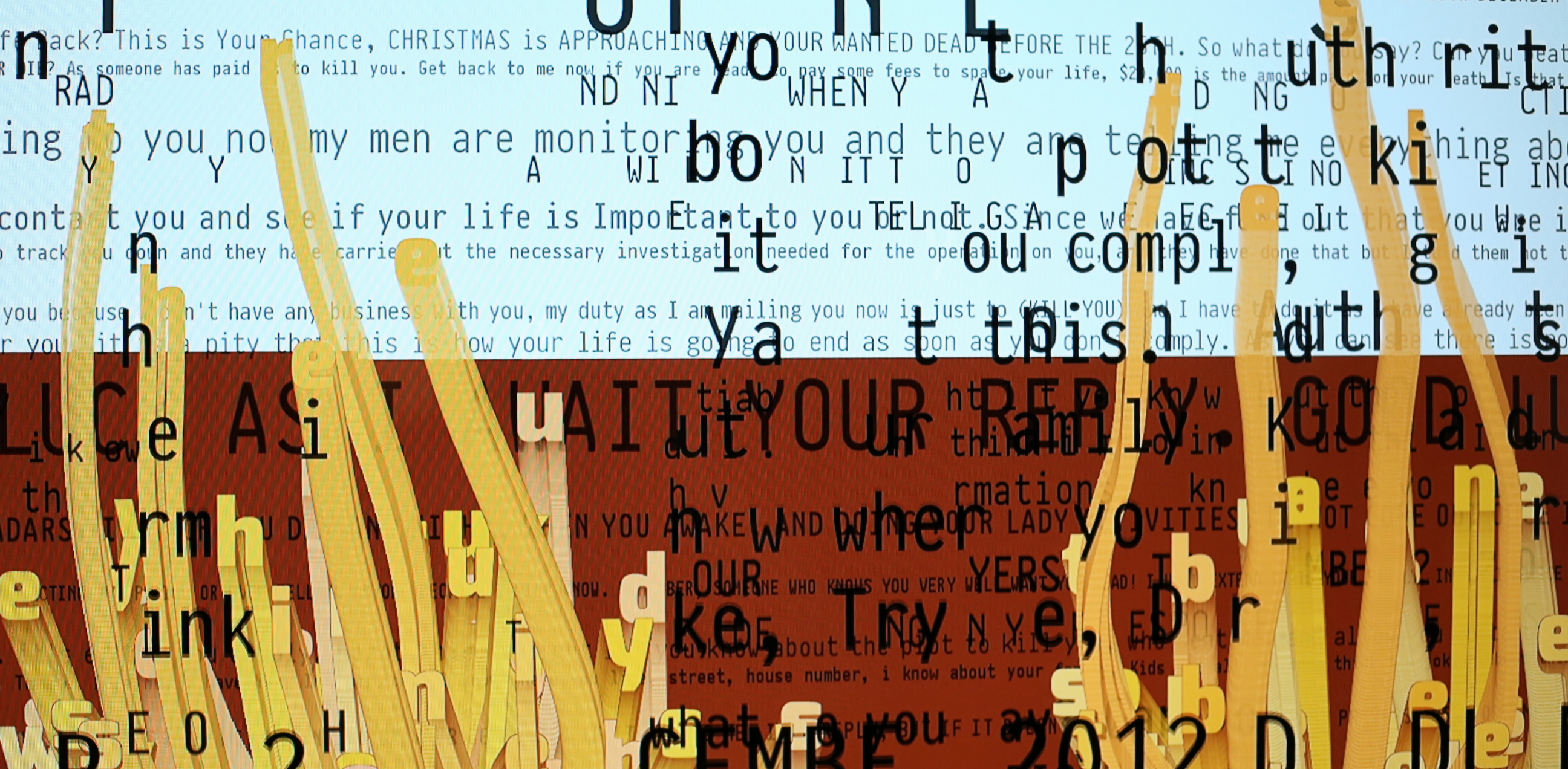
If you think this a Joke, Try Me, Dare Me, I have Your Informations, I know where you live, street, house number, i know about your family, Kids and all. So dont think i'm joking about this. I dont miss my Target, I never do. it's either you comply, negotiable. I might let you know about the plot to kill you, who sent me, and allow you go to the Authorities.

WARNING: DO NOT THINK OF CONTACTING THE POLICE OR EVEN TELLING ANYONE BECAUSE I WILL KNOW. REMEMBER, SOMEONE WHO KNOWS YOU VERY WELL WANT YOU DEAD! I WILL EXTEND IT TO YOUR FAMILY, INCASE I NOTICE SOMETHING FUNNY.

I MONITOR THE RADARS, I WATCH YOU DAY AND NIGHT, WHEN YOU AWAKE, AND DOING YOUR LADY ACTIVITIES. DO NOT COME OUT ONCE IT IS 8:PM.

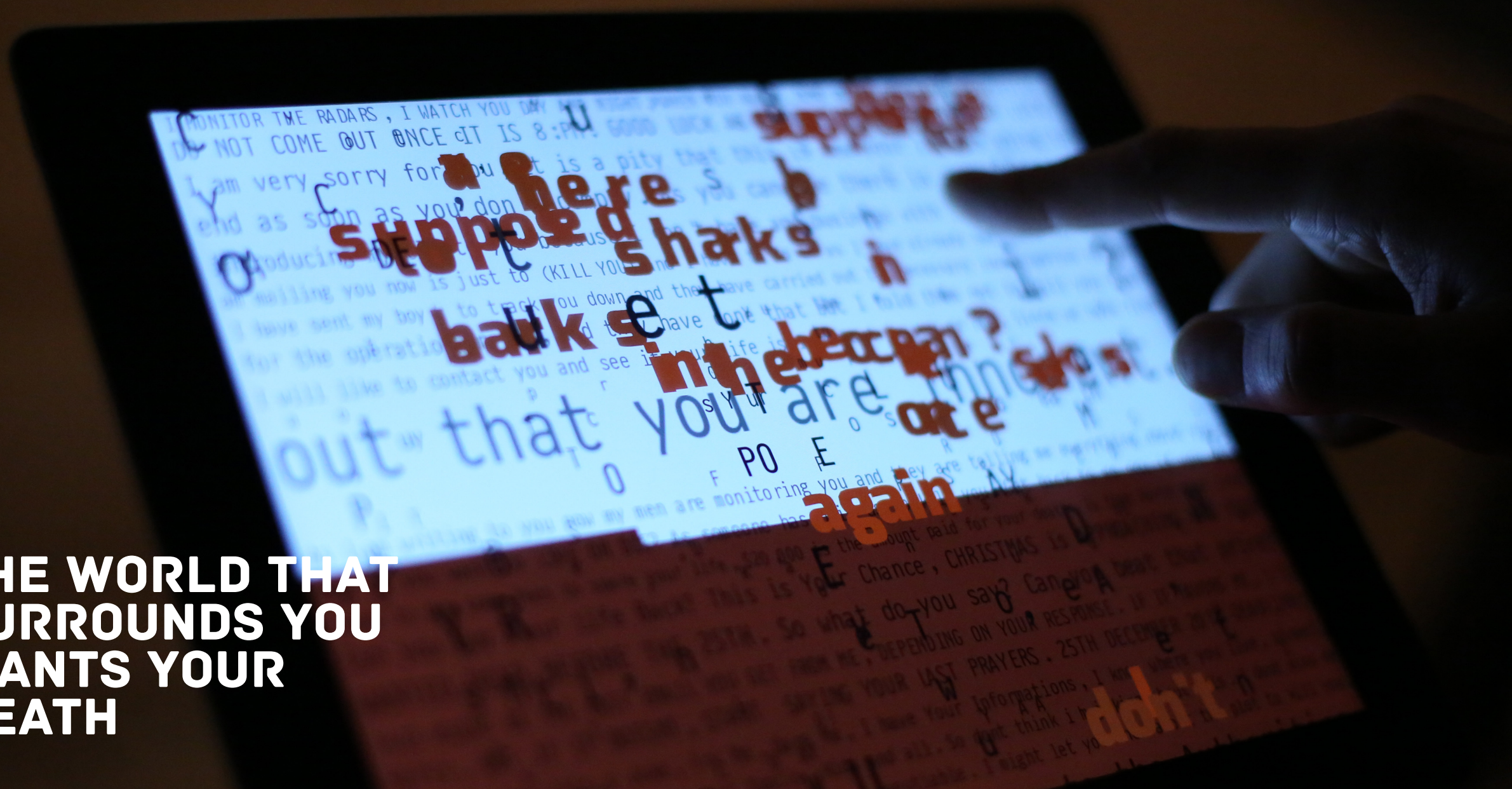
GOOD LUCK AS I AWAIT YOUR REPLY

GOOD LUCK.



Back? This is Your Chance, CHRISTMAS is APPROACHING AND YOUR WANTED DEAD BEFORE THE 25th. So what do you say? Can you eat
RAD ND NI WHEN Y A D NG with rit
ing to you now my men are monitoring you and they are telling me everything about
Y Y A WI bo N IT T O p ot t ki ET INC
contact you and see if your life is Important to you or not. Since we have found out that you were i
to track you down and they have carried out the necessary investigation needed for the operation on you, and they have done that but I told them not to
you because I don't have any business with you, my duty as I am mailing you now is just to (KILL YOU) and I have to do it. I have already been
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h e a t this. A with t
LUC e ASi u WAIT YOUR Family. KGO B d U
Link ow th vrmh u n w when yo i a n e
ADARS T P H U D N I H N YOU AWAKE AND DOING YOUR LADY ACTIVITIES i OT E 0
e OTING T P H OR V ELL ON ECO NOW. BER, SOMEONE WHO KNOWS YOU VERY WELL WANT YOU AD! I H D EXT
ink is T H U DE, Try N ye, Dr BE 2 IN
WD E 0 2 H h e m e s b e 5
what E you 2012 D e

**THE WORLD THAT
SURROUNDS YOU
WANTS YOUR
DEATH**



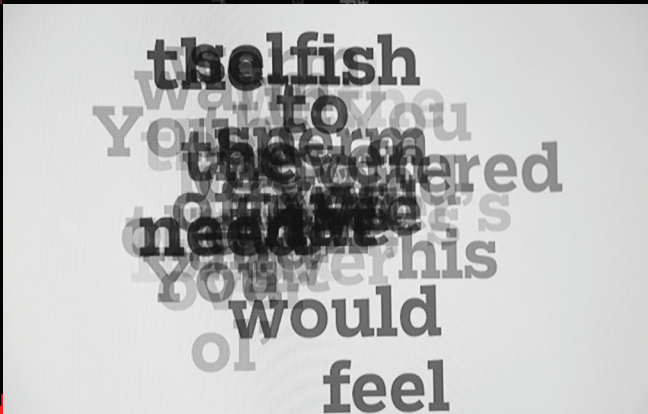


The P.o.E.M.M. Project

P.o.E.M.M. has been a research-creation project involving several key goals related to the materiality of digital texts. I am interested in how interactive touch can be used as a means of **experiencing** poetic texts; in understanding mobile devices as increasingly important sites for reading; and in examining the material and affective differences between writing and reading texts for large-scale touch displays, small-scale mobile displays and print.

The P.o.E.M.M. project is the result of a long-term collaboration between Bruno Nadeau and myself, Jason Edward Lewis, where we have produced numerous artworks, softwares and publications that seek to envision and instantiate the future of digital text. When touch technology first started appearing at the professional level in the early 2000s, and then the iPhone kicked off the boom in consumer-grade touch surfaces, we felt that the combination of touch interaction and portability allowed users far greater intimacy than a desktop, delivering a rich reading experience with high quality, high-resolution screens that render text beautifully. Plus, the two-thumbbed interaction style offered intriguing possibilities for designs that enhance the reader's engagement with text rather than detract from it. We felt, and still feel, that significant and sustained creative investigation of the writing and reading possibilities of such devices will lead to new forms of media that will ultimately compel, provoke and delight.

The project has also proven to be a valuable incubator for students in the Design and Computation Arts program at Concordia University in Montréal, Québec, the department in which I teach. Working with Obx Labs, students programmed the majority of mobile apps and created the authoring interface for our guest poets and collaborators, while also designing and implementing the overarching visual language that ties together the P.o.E.M.M. logo, website, app menus and this very book.



That claim seems cartoonishly hyperbolic, until I remind myself that I was adopted only eleven years later in 1967, as a Cherokee/Hawaiian/Samoan boy who was given a loving home by a White family from rural northern California. The cartoonish aspects then pale next to the insidious implications of what that meant at that time, and in that place. I have since come to see the judge's claim as a powerful metaphor for conversations around racial classifications, but also about a number of exclusionary principles and identification practices deemed central to a "well-functioning" society. The works in *The P.o.E.M.M. Cycle* engage with questions of how we talk to one another, how we locate ourselves in wider cultural geographies, how we authenticate ourselves against our own expectations and those of others, and how matters that were once seen as so *essential*—so vital—can later be regarded as *contingent*.



P.o.E.M.M. Versions

Each P.o.E.M.M. is published in several different versions.

Exhibition

Exhibition version of each P.o.E.M.M. We translate the artwork into a mobile app and then publish five successive versions. Each version explores different modes of authorship, collaboration and distribution.

1

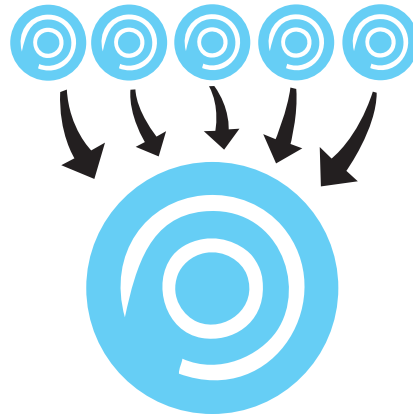
Mobile

Mobile version of original exhibition work.



Anthology

We invite five poets to write original texts and customize the app for their poems.



2

Platform

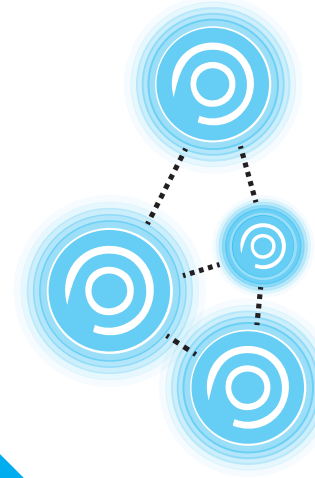
The user can write her own text or choose a Twitter feed as the source text to then create her own composition.



3

Share

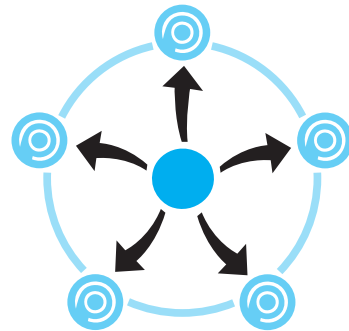
The user can share her compositions with other owners of the app.



4

Open

The code for the app is released under an open source license.



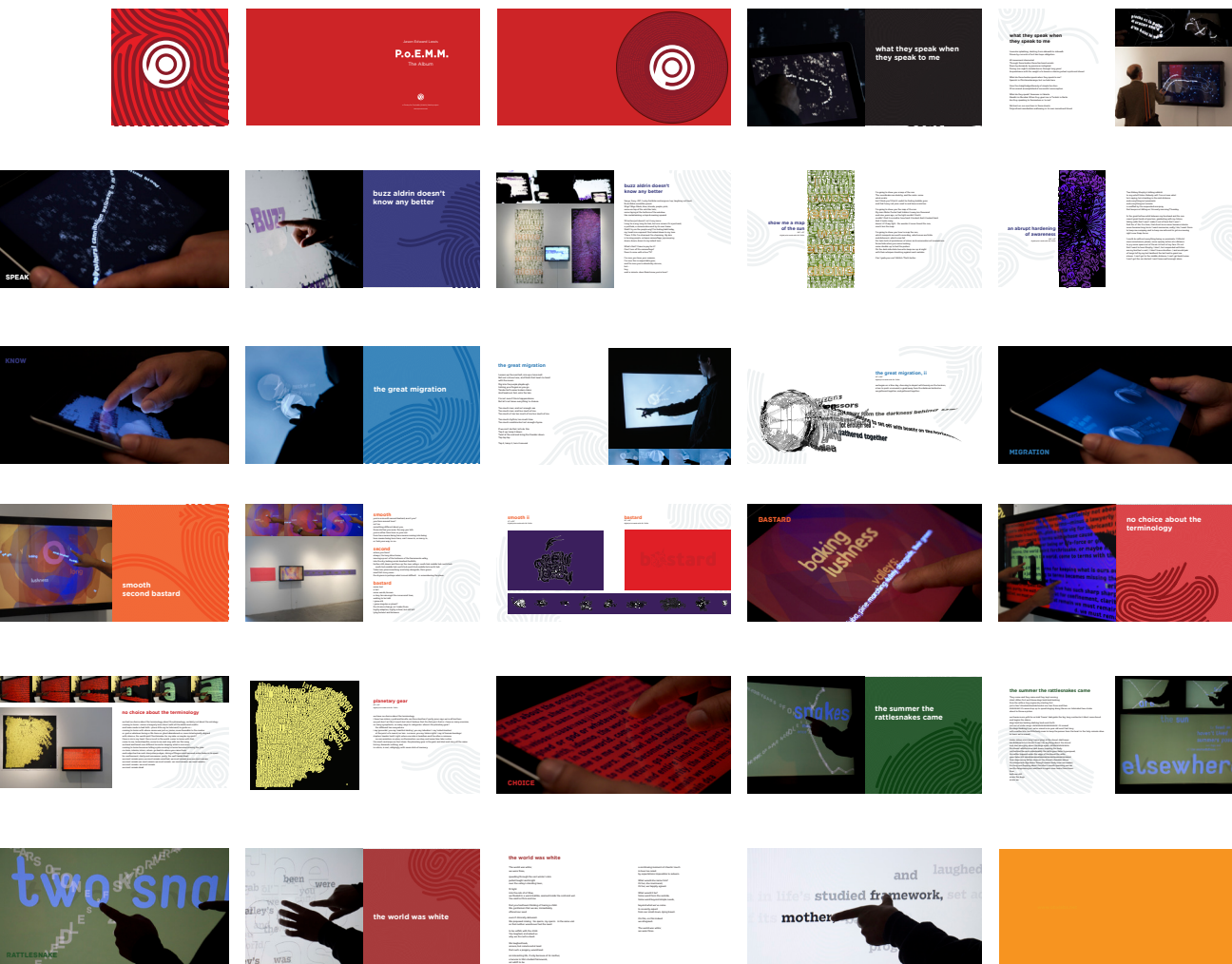
5



P.o.E.M.M. Performance

In the fall of 2012, I mounted a solo exhibition called *Vital to the General Public Welfare* in Toronto as part of the annual imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival. I delivered several artist talks over the course of the exhibition, where, each time I presented, I would get asked when (not if!) I was going to give a reading. Frankly, I had not even considered it. I had a brief brush with the spoken word scene in San Francisco in the early 90's, and that had been enough to convince me I was not made for getting up in front of an audience and inflicting my words on them.

Yet, in Toronto, I found myself making promises that I would, indeed, start staging readings of the works. Over the course of the next year, as the *The P.o.E.M.M. Cycle* was shown in other venues, I was asked to do impromptu readings. Reflecting on my promise, I felt obliged. After several okay-to-awful sets, I got serious. I practiced. I customized an iPad Mini rig to allow me to send video wirelessly to a projector so I could walk freely around the stage while manipulating the apps. I began to have fun with it all. The performance, called *Vital* (2013), took off, with additional shows in Montréal, Québec City, Buenos Aires, London and Paris. In retrospect, this experience has opened up my writing practice considerably, as I now consider the role of performativity from the very first moment of research-creation.



P.o.E.M.M. – The Album

For years I resisted the idea of exposing the P.o.E.M.M.s in simple plain text—mere words sitting there on the page. My stance on this was partially conceptual, as the works are an integrated whole in my mind, where the text is in conversation with the design, which is in conversation with the interactivity, which is in conversation with the text, and around and around it goes. I try not to privilege the visual, textual or computational; rather, I aim to create works that rely on and engage with all three aspects in order to make visible the fullness of experience I am trying to communicate.

My reluctance was also partly professional, in that I have spent the better part of fifteen years critiquing other creators who seemed to ignore the new possibilities of the digital medium, repurposing texts from print to screen without leveraging the digital's unique characteristics—dynamics, interactivity, computation, network connectivity, et cetera. However, I have since mellowed in that criticism.

As happened with the performances, I changed my attitude largely in response to my (small) audience. Everybody—and I mean everybody, including the most esoteric e-literati—expressed frustration at not being able to fully read the texts. And no matter how much I insisted that the texts were an atomic unit together with the visuals and the interaction, people still asked to see the words. One day, while reading lyrics in some album liner notes, I realized that even I was guilty of being stuck in a way of thinking that still privileged text, except that I was doing so by hiding it, by making it mysterious and elusive. If I was really committed to thinking of it as one part of a whole, I should not have a problem with making the text component of the whole work accessible within a context that made it clear that it was only part of that whole—much like a band prints their song lyrics in the album liners.

This new attitude towards exposing the texts came together with long-deferred plans to document the project in a more tangible form. And here we are: *P.o.E.M.M. - The Album*. Part documentation, part poetry collection, part illustrated album, part essay. All poetry, in the largest sense.

P.o.E.M.M. Apps



speak



choice



know



rattlesnake



migration



white



bastard



death



Jason Edward Lewis

Jason Edward Lewis is a digital media artist, poet and software designer. He founded Obx Laboratory for Experimental Media, where he directs research into new means of creating and reading digital texts, systems for expressive use of mobile technology, and virtual environments to assist Aboriginal communities in preserving, interpreting and communicating cultural histories. Lewis is committed to working in conceptual, creative and technical levels simultaneously. He is currently University Research Chair in Computational Media and the Indigenous Future Imaginary and Professor of Computation Arts at Concordia University in Montréal.

Bruno Nadeau

Bruno Nadeau is an interaction designer with a special interest in technologies he can tinker with, unusual interactive interface, and digital typography. He co-founded Wyld Collective, an independent interaction design/research consultancy, in order to explore interactive systems; and Fabule, a company that develops open-source home furnishings, to seduce people into letting their inner maker shine. He is a Research Associate at Obx Labs, Concordia University in Montréal, where he lives knee deep in digital typography, probing the many facets of digital text.

The right half of the page features a vibrant red background. Overlaid on this are several thick, dark red, wavy lines that flow from the top right towards the bottom center. The entire red area is covered with a fine, repeating halftone dot pattern, creating a textured effect.

Essays

P.o.E.M.M — the Album

by Kathi Inman Berens

If you have previously loaded and played Jason Edward Lewis's award-winning eight-piece P.o.E.M.M. cycle on your mobile device, you know that to open those "poems for excitable

[mobile] media" means to tap them into liveliness using your fingertip.

Your fingertips are similarly invited to touch *P.o.E.M.M. – The Album*. It asks you to 'play' with it in ways most books do not. The cover even looks like a fingerprint: the dark maroon lines swirling around three concentric white circles. If you turn the book ninety degrees so that the spine runs between your hands, a little blood-dark heart floats like a tattoo on top of the book's spine. The heart's bottommost point sets off waves of motion that undulate around the white circles. From this perspective, the boxy book looks like an app icon. Touch the button at the centre and open the book.

You could rush over the opening image, which looks like a grooved 33-rpm album, but don't. Take a moment to notice that the album's grooves are the words of all eight P.o.E.M.M.s. Use a magnifying glass, as I did, to hover over them. Rotate the book to make it turn beneath the 'needle' of the magnifying glass, which amplifies the words as a needle amplifies sound. Let the words play your voice box. Become the machine as you read aloud.

Like an album's song, these flat 'grooves' cannot sing unless something rotates them. Thus, your body becomes the apparatus of stereophonic sound; where your hands are the turntable; your eyes the needle; your brain the receiver; your mouth the speakers. You have read poetry aloud before but here it is different, for as you rotate the book and read the poems, you cannot stop noticing that this ancient practice of incanting song has always been a mobile media. Four hundred years of bookbound poetry has interrupted our manner of understanding poetry this way.

Jason shows us that words and album grooves are specific technologies. Media theorists call this notion "remediation," wherein recasting an artwork's properties into a different

medium allows us to identify how that art is shaped by its medium-specific qualities. Test this by reading lyrics of a song you do not know; then read the lyrics of a song you know well and ‘hear’ the difference—how the words hang together better and sound beautiful in lyric as they are conjured in a tune. This is the medium-specificity of song.

I found myself tilting *P.o.E.M.M – The Album* as if it had an accelerometer, similar to a mobile device. Tilting allowed me to see the P.o.E.M.M.’s screen captures from different angles like a very slow animation. It made me aware of the P.o.E.M.M.’s animations as a key aspect of their poetry-making, at least on par with if not surpassing the signficatory power of the words themselves.

We are accustomed to thinking of poetry as a prompt to introspection. However, *P.o.E.M.M – The Album* shows us that poetry can be something else. The print aesthetic that stripped music from poetry and that inclines us to read poetry silently and as an intellectual exercise, can be seen as just one facet of poetry and not representative of the full experience. Mobile media restore poetry to its sensory richness. As such, Jason’s work nudges us toward a new frontier—towards touch as poetry’s primary sense modality.

This sensuous book you are holding, with its glossy pages rather than a glassy mobile screen, points us in that new direction. Count the number of images you see of hands touching screens, and through those screens, striving to touch color, movement, shape and time.

P.o.E.M.M – The Album is a bold experiment artistically as well as commercially. Jason tested the Apple App Store as a distribution environment for artists, wherein seven of his eight P.o.E.M.M.s were free to download directly from the App store. He then created *Smooth Second Bastard* (2013), the fourth installation, as a limited edition he intended to price at \$999 (which is also the App store’s maximum) and limit the distribution to ten.

However, Apple would not let him do this.

At the Electronic Literature Organization’s annual conference hosted in Paris in 2013, Jason delivered a talk called “Aura vs. Apple, or the Rich Get Richer While the Bastards Go Unloved”. In that talk, Jason discussed the difficulty he encountered attempting to bring an art sensibility to the Silicon Valley economic model. He observed that Apple “couldn’t understand the value proposition. They couldn’t believe that anybody would pay that much money for an app that didn’t do anything except let the user navigate through a

text.” Trying to explain the ‘value proposition’ to the Apple reviewer, Jason

talked about sculpture and photography and the development of limited editions. [He] asked if they’ve ever had a sublime experience, either with an artwork or any other way. [He] pointed out that if art collectors are willing to pay thousands, tens of thousands, millions of dollars for a painting that does nothing, they must certainly find some value in it. A value that lies outside of functionality. A value that lies, perhaps, and in part, in its aura.

What is the “aura” of P.o.E.M.M. then? Can “aura” be vested in a poem by creating a distribution environment defined by mystique and scarcity?

In the end, Apple approved *Smooth Second Bastard*, yet only as a limited edition of 100, priced at \$9.99 each.

The edition is well on its way towards selling out.

Aesthetically, *Smooth Second Bastard* fits seamlessly and unremarkably into the series. It does not deliver ‘more’ than the other seven P.o.E.M.M.s; it does not save time or effort; and it does not add filters to photos or load anything automatically to social media. It is just like the others, except that it costs ten bucks.

“You’re a smooth second bastard, aren’t you?” the P.o.E.M.M. begins. “You from around here? no? no.”

No.

We’re not from around here.

We are accustomed to paying for books but not for apps unless they “do something.”

But you can get “here” by going with Jason there . . . and there . . . and there. . . and there. Apps. Large scale exhibition versions. Live performance. Limited edition. Art book.

On pages 9-10, “KNOW” is summoned through touch.

Let your fingers touching this ‘album’ probe what you think you know.

The Great Migration and Other Tales of Jason Edward Lewis's Mobile Poetry

by Dene Grigar

Too much river, and/too much of me
Too much river/and not enough sea
Let's not leave/everything to chance
I'm not sure/this is happenstance

—Jason Edward Lewis, *The Great Migration*

These four lines in Jason Edward Lewis's mobile poem *The Great Migration*, from *The P.O.E.M.M. Cycle*, tell about the arduous journey involved in procreation, and thus resonates with those of us who have been watching the great migration of electronic literary works from desktop computing environs to mobile media over the last seven years. The shift to iPhones and, later, to Android phones and tablets, has proven a mighty draw for the daring who wish to strike gold in the unexplored territory of haptic, locative, and sensor-based narratives and poetry. However, for Lewis, who comes with a background in complex large-scale installation work already exploring touch and sensor technologies, the journey to mobile media suggests something different—a desire to investigate an intimate space one can hold in one's hand or slip into one's pocket. Lewis's poetry—which speaks of conception and child-bearing (*The Great Migration*), road trips with friends (*When the World Was White*), identity (*Smooth Second Bastard*, *What They Speak When They Speak to Me*), and childhood memories (*The Summer the Rattlesnakes Came*)—involves personal subjects that fit snugly into the landscape of a small screen and demands private contemplation rather than large public viewings.

In the last three years, I have exhibited some if not all of Lewis's poetry from *The P.O.E.M.M. Cycle* five times, starting with exhibitions for the Modern Language Association in Seattle, WA (2012) and later in Boston, MA (2013); at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. (2013); at Illuminations Gallery at the National University of Ireland in Maynooth, Ireland (2014); and at my own gallery, Nospace Gallery, in Vancouver,

WA (2012). Uniquely, each venue provided a different experience of interaction and engagement with Lewis's poetry. The Library of Congress exhibit, for example, saw 750 visitors in 15 hours with everyone crowded around five computer stations while tapping and clicking at the works being displayed. The Modern Language Association 2013 exhibit managed a small but steady stream of academics who sat at 10 round tables and quietly examined the works. At Nouspace Gallery I mounted one of Lewis's works on a large screen attached to the wall, and another on a desktop computer with a large monitor that would accommodate numerous viewers at one time. In addition, five iPad stations were positioned around the room that could host one to three viewers at a time. Curating Lewis's work in these different venues has allowed me the opportunity to critically reflect on the connection between the message of a work and the platform on which its message is conveyed. As my curatorial projects demonstrate, mobile media can provide an environment that makes the presentation of works, like Lewis's, more intimate and accessible for close study than do desktop or large-scale installation works.

For instance, consider *The Great Migration*, the work mentioned at the beginning of this essay. After tapping the launcher icon, the screen loads and we see strange opaque projectiles moving across a blue background. Words make up the tails of these creatures, yet the undulating motions of the tails make the reading of the actual words challenging. Touching the screen reveals white dots that resemble bubbles—a clue that the blue background may relate to water, and the creatures, denizens of the sea. Touching the creatures and holding them in place, or rather, “tamping” them, causes the creatures to spin at your fingertip. In turn, the spinning causes the words to spill out of the creatures and into the sea, “spawning”, as Lewis says, “the words from that line”. The words then drift and disappear. We find we have some level of control over the creatures, where at times we can make them change direction, deter them from their action or keep them from their task of moving across the sea; while at other times, however, they cannot appear to be stopped at all. They squirm out of our fingers and swim on and on, doggedly determined to complete their mission.

Lewis calls *The Great Migration* a myster[y] to even himself. Certainly, the reader has to spend a lot of time with the work just to be able to read the words of the P.o.E.M.M. The back-and-forth motion of the creatures' tails, as mentioned, contributes to the difficulty, yet even when the words do spill out into the sea, they are often obfuscated by the creatures or disappear before we can move them out of the way. We can, over time, make

out words, and, if we are quick about it, write them down for reference. “Too much river/ and not enough sea,” for example, suggests the location the creatures inhabit, while “Up tap tap tap/tamp it/turn it around” refers to the action we take on in our interactions with them. Together with the creatures' motion and their shape, we realize that we can read *The Great Migration* as a journey towards the creation of life. And, yes, Lewis verifies this interpretation for us in his information about the work. But he also reveals a second reading: his own journey to Canada where he now teaches at Concordia University in Montréal, Québec. A young man of Cherokee-Hawaiian-Samoan heritage who was raised in Northern California by a white family and now lives in Montréal, Lewis's very embodiment represents significant cultural and geographical migrations—from the U.S. to Canada, from the West to the East, and from agrarian to city life—a personal narrative about change and growth that began at that cataclysmic moment of conception.

Such an intimate tale it is, and one that requires much time and privacy to consider the weight of its message. Lewis's poetry uses the smartphone environment as a personal viewing space, forcing us to stop and consider the work more closely. What is ironic, however, is the fact that Lewis's work fits so well on a device criticized for its invasion of private space with its messaging, phone and camera features, while it is ultimately re-conceptualized, and, quite remarkably, for the purpose of exploring “high art”.

In Praise of the Outside: the P.o.E.M.M.s as Pioneers

by David Jhave Johnston

*For those who are made brave
Move into the waves as if water.*

Praisist

In 2002, Jason Lewis became a professor at Concordia University while I was a student in the now-obsolete program called “Digital Image and Sound in the Fine Arts”. He exuded an optimistic professor-programmer-poet-entrepreneur vibe—someone capable of discerning between raster and vector, sonnet and sestina, compiler and interpreter, scam and scoop.

In this text, I will refer to Jason Lewis as Jason because he is (after over a decade of encounters, meetings, discussions, conferences, collaborations and BBQs) an old friend, a collaborator, mentor, teacher, former thesis advisor and employer. Formality would be false.

It may seem that a close relation precludes an unbiased report. You may wonder: “How can it be ‘critical’? Is proximity blindness?” I may respond: “Why deify analytic scrutiny? Does intimacy not equal insight?” The P.o.E.M.M.s challenge stereotypes (culturally and technically) of what a poem is, and do so with a jubilant openness to innovative play. Similarly, this text discards the tone of the ‘critic’, and instead, offers a set of ruminations based on extended proximity—I saw the P.o.E.M.M.s birthed and watched them grow. I offer insight from sympathy with (and not against) the poet and his/her work; that is to say, this is a *praisic* text about a poetics that absorb technology, befriending programming methods to explore regions of mutual benefit between interactivity, animation and reading.

Destabilised identity, uncertainty, ostracization, threat, vulnerability, and integration

It is possible to appreciate a lot of poetry without any understanding of who the poet is; however, in some cases, an awareness of identity and biographical context enhances capacity to enter poems. In some poems we read the person, their process and place in society. To that end, here is a synoptic biography of Jason—

He is a mixed race man, a “brown” baby adopted by white folks into a white community. He completed a Masters of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art in London, migrated to Interval Research (a blue-sky technology research lab) and the Arts Alliance Laboratory (the R & D arm of a venture capital firm), only to land in academia. Clearly, Jason’s trajectory involves complex and diverse responsibilities: artist, designer, theorist, programmer, employer, and manager. Hired as a professor in a Fine Arts faculty in a province where the official language is not his own; hired without a PhD but now hires people whose ‘credentials’ appear on paper better than his own. Similarly, he also acts as advisor to doctoral candidates (as he did for myself), though in the eyes of the university hierarchy he at one time lacked the ‘official credentials’ and technically could not be considered a co-advisor.

This biographical context is not irrelevant to the poetic exegesis of the P.o.E.M.M.s. The P.o.E.M.M.s consistently investigate destabilized identity, uncertainty about cultural position, ostracization, threat, vulnerability, and occasional enigmatic ephemeral integrations. From *What They Speak When They Speak to Me* to *Smooth Second Bastard* to *The Great Migration*, in fact in almost all of the P.o.E.M.M.s, there exists an insistent mobility, striving for fundamental belonging and imperiled displacement (even down perhaps to the poor rattler who made the mistake of visiting the wrong patch of land only to be decapitated by Jason’s dad in *The Summer The Rattlesnakes Came*). Language moves because it must—it makes a path and carves its way, though, it can often shatter. This language is Jason: both *exiled* and *integrated*.

An app by any other name

Poets for millennia have self-published; with the arrival of the internet, this practice proliferated and intensified to become the homepage. Yet very few poets had the skill, tenacity or inclination to dive deep into the modes of production and develop their own software, to build their own press, to redesign Gutenberg from the ground-up. There is a significantly steep difference in effort required between using code inside a proprietary application and developing your own app from scratch using code. One is a cake mix; the other involves a process of growth: grinding your own flour before developing your own recipe. *P.o.E.M.M.s* (2008-2014) represent the culmination and continuation of a consistent arduous software-poet development practice that includes *It’s Alive* (1996), *NextText* (2003) and *Mr Softie* (2005).

So that “lump in the throat” (referred to as the origin of poetic impulse in the introduction) may seem spontaneous as it becomes words on paper, but it requires extreme perseverance and technical acuity to convert vision into a tactile mobile app, and then for it to be able to leap from virtual back to physical in its next incarnation to become ‘visual art’. Stuff on the walls of “white cubes” represent one cultural measure of authenticity. The P.o.E.M.M.s claim status irrespective of boundaries—deployed across a full spectrum of material and immaterial forms, wherein their context echoes and amplifies their content: a consistent concern with defiance and belonging. The P.o.E.M.M.s invite an interpretative filter based on a recognition of what they entail as organisational events. They speak of diffusion and union at both psychological and material levels; and they enact a tenuous graceful traverse across modes of publishing and being. They are both “natives” and “refugees”; the heredity they carry (both poetic and technic) is integrated rather than eradicated. They ultimately uncategorize themselves.

When outsider is insider

Since the first tribes, the notion of the outsider recurs as a trope that reflects human psychological concepts of boundaries. The outsider is colloquially “from away” (from another way or place), and thereby enters into community as a catalyst. Unconfined by normal cellular regulation, outsiders transfer nutrients, where their being encoded by another place often is transgressive. While sometimes nourishing, outsiders can also destroy and thus carry the stigma of infection. Inversely, *insiders* carry the stigma of nepotism, corruption and contamination. They know too much; their intimate knowledge seeds unfair advantage. Yet insiders also fast-path solutions; they are reflexes, rapid-response units, evading the paralysis of frontal lobe analysis. Thus both insider and outsider can become suspect, subjects of prejudice who, only if they transcend difference and neutralize the immune system of their hosts, can enter into productive symbiosis.

When an outsider-insider arrives in a discipline such as poetry, refertilisation occurs at material and practical levels. Digital poetry is the classic outsider-insider: a techno-art at the core of a societal transformation, perceived as a barbarian by classic literature. Jason is both inside that transformation and outside it: as software engineer and Indigenous artist, his presence complicates what is already a turbulent transition. The visual and tactile interactivity of the P.o.E.M.M.s demand a different category of cognitive effort than reading lineated verse; touch redefines relations to reading into a most intimate action.

P.o.E.M.M.s: loud and boisterous brightly-coloured interactive apps. To read them, one must touch, which is to risk, to be amongst, and to awaken the word. This awakened word is code. P.o.E.M.M.s use the inside of code to make an outside—an interface to the out. Internal dialogue emerges from an outsider’s vision of culture. P.o.E.M.M.s are about something personal rather than cynical—brash not bashful. They reflect on what is inside and bring the wrong in. That is why they are right.

Poetic Licence

By Steven Loft

He is a benefactor of mankind who contracts the great rules of life into short sentences, that may be easily impressed on the memory, and so recur habitually to the mind.

— Samuel Johnson, English author, critic

In 2012, I wrote about *Vital to the General Public Welfare* (2011), a six-part installation by Montréal-based artist, professor and cultural theorist Jason Edward Lewis. Since that time, the P.o.E.M.M (Poetry for Excitable [Mobile] Media) project has grown to incorporate a series of live performances, mobile apps, websites and an illustrated text-based poetry album. The evolution of P.o.E.M.M., and the ideas that it manifests, suggest a larger, ongoing and investigatory project that asks us to consider language, memory and technology in new (and old) ways.

As “media” and “new media” take on ever-expanding meanings and roles within our conceptions of self, artists increasingly transform and weave together old and new practices, creating new forms and hybridities that both transcend and embrace our understanding of “technology”¹.

The genesis of the project “lies in documents filed in a 1956 Louisiana court case seeking to ascertain an adopted child’s racial classification. The judge claimed that the proper identification of the child’s race was ‘vital to the general public’s welfare.’”² Or, in other words, the state, and, by extension, society, were dependent on the determination of racial classification and the assignment of rights based on it. I think we all know what process that is called... By reviving this once popular form of language, namely, racial taxonomies and perceived “purity conventions,” Lewis reflects on how manifestations of language inform our cultural and social processes.

Currently Professor of Computation Arts at Concordia University in Montréal, Lewis is a well-known scholar and researcher in and of new media. His installation works, utilizing interactive touch screens, responsive voice activated technologies and constructions of

poetic interventions, “engages the traditional concerns of the poet—love, loss, belonging, exile, and celebration—and operates at the large and the small scales that make up a life as it unfolds, day by day.”³ His is a mediated language centred on tactility, movement, interactivity and the free flow of information in a cyber-oriented dialectic.

In the P.o.E.M.M. series, Lewis investigates the idea of language as a formalized construction of “concreteness” and then flips it on its head, facilitating a fluid, user-generated cultural, linguistic and aesthetic experience: twitter-like interchanges that play both poetically and visually across a tactile screen, and exemplify meaning and substance. By giving form to voice and image to word, Lewis interrogates the perceived finiteness of oral and written histories, positing instead new ways of seeing... and saying. In this way, Lewis disrupts our relationship to the written and spoken word. While this is hardly new for any fourteen year-old with an iPad, for those of us who graduated high school English class prior to the advent of the “touch-screen”, this is a new and under-explored territory.

Reflecting on his work, Lewis states, “such a conscious, close, attenuated exchange between form and structure provides the perfect arena in which to engage larger questions of how software-based work, with its dynamic, interactive and data-processing functionalities, can be a site for staging minor transcendent miracles.”⁴ Furthermore, by combining large-scale prints (the culmination of manipulated text into image), performances, along with interactive touch screens within the installation iterations of his series, Lewis adds to the cognitive disequilibrium,⁵ thereby textualizing and “cypher-izing” multiple mediums in conversation with each other and the interactive works.

As Marshall McLuhan famously wrote, “in a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a matter of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message.”⁶ Clearly for Lewis, the message is also the medium. In each of the P.o.E.M.M. works, Lewis positions the viewer as protagonist in the evolution of semi-narratives that are contingent on relationships between and across thought, word, movement and reflex. In so doing, he makes responsivity and responsiveness key elements of his conceptual works.

No Choice About the Terminology (2011) is an interactive touch poem and mounted text-image print. The phrase, “you’ve got no choice about the terminology,” comes from an article Lewis read in the *New York Times* describing a classic ice cream parlour manager

who insisted things be called by their proper names. Lewis explains,

Coming from a household in which ice cream was taken very seriously indeed, and often struggling with what terminology to use to describe my ethnicity (Cherokee, Hawaiian, Samoan, raised in northern California rural mountain redneck culture), and my profession (artist? poet? software developer? educator? designer?), and recognizing both the danger and seduction of neat categorizations, the line inspired a series of texts playing with categories, definitions and the idea that, though we might have some choice about our terminology, we have no choice about our ontology.⁷

We know the dangers of easy categorization and class distinctions. Lewis forces us to ask difficult questions about the roles tradition, heritage, community and hegemony play in a contemporary context. “How do we describe ourselves?” he asks through his own search for self within the intersections and disjunctures of his complex identit(ies). “Exclusion” and “inclusion,” buzzwords we hear almost daily in the media, are common to us all. We have all had that playground feeling: the desire to belong, the fear that we do not, and the realization that sometimes it is not so much who we are that matters, but rather, “what we are”.

Lewis’s love of language and its incongruities is evident in *Smooth Second Bastard* (2011), a triptych including an interactive touchscreen and two printed text-images. The title comes from one of the terms used to rate the roughness of a woodworking file. His familiarity with this term came from watching/working with his father, a trained carpenter and cabinetmaker. The corresponding poem, at once playful and inquisitive, becomes a denunciation of all things territorial—all things based on illusory entitlement. By activating the words (through touch), the viewers animate and populate the screen with words and colour, creating complex and rich interplays of both thought and feeling.

Of course, the term “bastard” has its own pejorative connotations and Lewis seems to be exploring ideas of culture and hybridity using this context. For him, the rhetorical difference between being asked questions like, “Where ya from?” and “Are you from around here?” is a nuanced contemplation on the role of exclusionary language and the politics of xenophobia. Another poignant metaphor is the often repeated, “Some of my best friends are...” appellations used to disguise the hidden message of “us” versus “them”.

The Great Migration (2010) is a touchscreen and printed text-image diptych. Lewis explains, “both texts are about the same event—leaving home, setting out to an unknown

destination on (what at least feels like) a one-way trip.”⁸ Presenting ideas of departure, movement, leading and following. As well, its allusion to the movement of sperm travelling up the fallopian tubes asks us to consider migration as a metaphor for birth and belonging, likening our hope for successful fertilization to our innate desire to find one’s place in the universe.

*Things You Said But We Never Heard*⁹ (2010) is also a touchscreen and double-printed text-image triptych. It consists of three poems working together to form an interlocking conversation about the “sense-making of crazy talk and kid talk, the difficulty of bringing dreams into reality, and the meanings of different colors.” Each work is based on a conversation and personal reflection of Lewis’s. Two of the poems, *An Abrupt Hardening of Awareness* and *Buzz Aldrin Doesn’t Know Any Better*, emerged from conversations Lewis had with a San Franciscan street person he knew and would talk with regularly, and whose views intrigued him. The third part, *Show Me a Map of the Sun* comes from a conversation Lewis had with his son Elijah on the topic of “what the sun was”. Drawing these disparate reflections together, Lewis creates aesthetic and textual mind maps that become meditations on the construction of the insider/outsider paradigm played out in vibrant and dynamic text, image and colour, while also challenging our conceptions of the “real” in explaining the world around us.

What They Speak When They Speak To Me (2009) is an interactive poem about mistaken identity and the confusion—both amusing and alarming—that happens when people believe you are somebody you are not.

The text was written on reflecting on my notes from extensive travelling I did in my twenties, where I found myself—in Gautemala, on Java, in the Punjab, in the Turkish section of Berlin—being mistaken for an inhabitant of that locale. Taxi drivers, market vendors, policemen, etc., would speak to me in the local dialect and then become confused—at best—or angry—at worst—when I couldn’t respond in kind.¹⁰

Here, Lewis has created an interactive poem laden with mystery. They are his words, but by tracing one’s finger over the screen, the viewer creates their own multiplicity of text, image and meaning. As we try to find coherent narratives within these fleeting and ephemeral snippets, the letters dissipate and return to their ethereal assemblage.

In *The Summer the Rattlesnakes Came* and *The World Was White* (2013), Lewis returns to his childhood, exposing fragments of memory to explore notions of fear, joy and wonder, 102

as well as moments of sublime realization. Namely, the formation of familial identity and aspiration, a time when the young Lewis was still exploring his complex identity as a “Cherokee/Hawaiian/Samoan boy given a loving home by a White family from rural California.”¹¹

His is a nuanced and thought provoking intervention, which works in collaboration with the viewer, and results in both poetic and personal investigations of self and society. Lewis works in the intersections and disjunctures of language—the poetic, the concrete and the ethereal—wherein these exchanges, the viewer is also very much a collaborator who animates and becomes part of the experiential character of the work, inextricably linking to the formulation of ideas within it.

Walter Benjamin once wrote,

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through.¹²

Jason Edward Lewis is an artist who resides in the interplay of culture and language. He uses the mutability of written language to consider our own reactions to “the other,” and to ourselves; rejecting narrow narratives of “identity politics” that for him are “not a natural way to look at the world.”¹³ In each of these works, Lewis examines notions of the insider/outsider or “the othered,” in particular, the ways in which hierarchies and taxonomies are both created and maintained. For Lewis, “any taxonomy hides as much as it illuminates.”¹⁴ At the same time, he exposes the poignancy of our relationship to our “devices” as we sometimes forget the intimacy that the “touchscreen” enables. Often dull, yet, at other times sublime, the touchscreen has become the language of our day-to-day existence. Technology, indeed, is both narrator and arbiter of the message. This cypher-izing of knowledge and memory (personal, familial, cultural) becomes webs of informational logic that work to destabilize and recalibrate our understanding. They are a moment in and out of time, snatches of memory, ephemeral but tantalizingly familiar and...achingly, mesmerizingly and beautifully...personal.

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- ¹ The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines technology as “the making, usage and knowledge of tools, techniques, crafts, systems or methods of organization in order to solve a problem or serve some purpose.”
 - ² Jason Edward Lewis, P.O.E.M.M.—The Album, 58.
 - ³ See artist statement.
 - ⁴ See artist statement.
 - ⁵ Coined by Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, the term refers to a condition or feeling of discrepancy between something new and something already known.
 - ⁶
 - ⁷ See project description.
 - ⁸ Ibid.
 - ⁹ Conversation the artist had with a street person he knew while living in San Francisco.
 - ¹⁰ See project description.
 - ¹¹ See Lewis, 58.
 - ¹² Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol. 2, part 2, (1931–1934), “*Ibizan Sequence*”, 1932, ed. by Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005: 576.
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 - ¹⁴ Ibid.

P.o.E.M.M.: Bigger on the Inside

Darren Wershler

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Anthony Burgess wrote more than once that a book could be imagined as its backronym: a Box of Organized Knowledge¹. A P.o.E.M.M.—Poem for Excitable [Mobile] Media—is no different in the sense that some kind of linguistic compression is at work in it as well.

But P.o.E.M.M.s exist on the other side of the Gorilla Glass window that divides digital text from print. Because they are software, P.o.E.M.M.s and other apps also involve the bundling and compression of computer code. And, in an age when books no longer hold the monopoly on dense media experiences, apps offer a powerful new kind of expansion. The animations that accompany a contemporary program's activation, like Apple's "Genie" and "Scale" effects, are metonymies that hint at what is to follow.

Before you even touch the screen of your phone, you expect your apps to be bigger on the inside. William Gibson imagined that software would produce this sense of anticipation when we opened it, and soldered his description of the user experience into a gleaming alliterative line: And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick². Plain prose was not enough to convey it. In Gibson's novels, the appearance of poetry is an index for an intimate encounter with technological complexity. In Jason Edward Lewis and Bruno Nadeau's P.o.E.M.M.s, poetry and digital media reflect each other in a bid to lure us down glossy, apparently infinite corridors lined with language.

With contemporary software applications for tablets and phones, the compression of medium, platform, format and genre can make it difficult to discern what, exactly, lies before us. For Apple, in particular, this is intentional: the fantasy of a "Seamless Experience" attempts to sharply differentiate our digital interactions from the days of giant putty-coloured cases, dangling wires, exposed circuit boards and the endless shuffling of removable media. As in Gibson's fictional world, the point for a corporation set on bedazzling consumers is to make the hardware appear to disappear.

So right now we know more about what the app expects from us than what it actually is.

The age of incunabula—the first printed books—lasted about fifty years, from the 1450s to around 1500. Volumes of printed lyrics were around for quite a while, then, before people knew how to talk about them or what to do with them as there was nothing to compare them to, nor printed history to document them. Following on the work of Matthew Fuller and the other early practitioners of software studies, Anders Fagerjord poses the question: Do we need an app studies?³

Probably. Fuller convincingly argues that software studies should "show the stuff of software in some of the many ways that it exists, in which it is experienced and thought through, and to show, by the interplay of concrete examples and multiple kinds of accounts, the conditions of possibility that software establishes"⁴. He goes on to assert that Software Studies also needs to confront the "kinds of thinking and areas of work that have not historically "owned" software, or indeed often had much of use to say about it"⁵. Thus, there are many factors to consider:

algorithms; logical functions so fundamental that they may be imperceptible to most users; ways of thinking and doing that leak out of the domain of logic and into everyday life; the judgments of value and aesthetics that are built into computing; programming's own subcultures and its implicit or explicit politics; or the tightly formulated building blocks working to make, name, multiply, control, and interrelate reality.⁶

It is also worth noting that this list, from a book published in 2008, is too old to contain the word "app."

"App" is short for application. Born of mobile media, the app is a relatively recent addition to the software menagerie. The iPhone first appeared in 2007, and the App Store followed in 2008. Apps are usually purpose-built software with a handful of specialized uses rather than general applications, and are usually designed for mobile hardware.⁷ They do bear a family resemblance to the now-nearly-moribund category of desktop "widgets," but many widgets always felt like an attempt to retrofit desktop software to look and behave like apps. Fagerjord's definition is useful because it is agnostic about what apps actually contain; what matters is what they do. An app "orchestrates the networks, input/output and sensors for a purpose the user finds useful or entertaining, or both. An app can make calculations, based on input from the user or the sensors, send and receive data over a network, and output the results to the user, and simultaneously send the results over a

network”.⁸ The key idea here is the *orchestration of networks*. Apps are nothing if not a complex set of relations between people, technologies, discourses, objects, companies and other institutions.

As Jonathan Sterne has argued so eloquently in his work on the mp3, software application formats are also material. A format “is a crystallized set of social and material relations. It is an item that ‘works for’ and is ‘worked on’ by a host of people, ideologies, technologies and other social and material elements.”⁹ Sterne’s language invokes that of Marx in his first volume of *Capital*, where he describes a commodity as a crystallized form of the social substance of labour.¹⁰ Clearly, there is a politics at work here, relating to the ways in which apps, like all objects, are produced by the exploitation of human labour.

Another way of saying that apps are sets of relations is that they are imbricated within particular social and technological networks. As apps circulate through these networks, they transfigure the people, institutions and discourses that they touch. As a result of such contact, apps change, too. Thus, if we want to understand what apps are, we need to begin documenting their entire cycles of production, circulation and consumption.

Some major differences between apps and more familiar types of software are their economics as well as technologies. Apps are tied very closely to specific hardware platforms *and* networks of distribution¹¹: an app is an application distributed through an integrated, monopolistic outlet¹². For instance, an iPhone app can only be created with Xcode, Apple’s developer software. Similarly, testing the app on an actual iPhone requires a developer license from Apple, which the developer must pay for on an annual basis. A normal license permits testing of the app on up to five iPhones. However, the final app must be distributed through the App store and go through a mandatory review process before being made public. The developer can then choose to distribute the app for free. However, if they choose to sell it, Apple takes a cut.

This sort of vertical integration has characterized both print and digital publishing for several decades. Moreover, it is an ongoing process that shows no signs of abating any time soon. Rhetoric about its effects tends to be polarized between neoliberal paeans to “disruptive technology” on one side and laments about the decline of the public sphere on the other. From the eye of the hurricane, it is difficult to assess how this process will resolve; however Lewis and Nadeau’s experiments with the app format constitute an intervention into assumptions held around apps. What should an app cost? Does

electronic art function differently when it is projected onto the gallery wall than it does when it is in our pockets? What would it mean to take a P.o.E.M.M. out of circulation? Where would you store its limited editions? The P.o.E.M.M.s inevitably pose these sorts of questions while rejecting the delivery of past answers. Lewis and Nadeau have no truck with nostalgia, nor do they rely on familiar aesthetic codes (such as the pixelated, blocky appearance of many “indie” games and programs, which often function as a sort of team uniform for digital art that makes critical claims) to gesture toward their politics. Lewis has observed in conversation that he is always a little bothered by discussions of the economics of app publishing that only highlight the constraints while ignoring the benefits: worldwide distribution; guaranteed execution on a unique combination of operating systems and first-rate hardware and OS; and significant and focused developer support for coding. At the same time, he recognizes that Apple and other such gatekeepers can provide real resistance and even censorship in the face of projects that present political, formal and aesthetic challenges. The ambivalence is real, and, since we are thrown into the middle of the experience, we have no choice but to engage it from our necessarily limited perspective.

Ambivalence is intrinsic to this project. As Lewis explains, the P.o.E.M.M.s have their relative beginning in documents from a 1964 Louisiana court case that was attempting to racially classify an adopted child. In the records, the judge claimed that the maintenance of the general public’s welfare actually depended on such determinations. Lewis writes, “That claim seems cartoonishly hyberbolic, until I remind myself that I was adopted only three years afterwards, in 1967, a Cherokee/Hawaiian/Samoan boy given a loving home by a White family from rural northern California.” For Lewis, the judge’s claim about racial classification lays bare the ways in which exclusionary principles in such official discourse, no matter how cartoonish they may seem in isolation, have a central role in the managerial regime of contemporary society. Even as we try and disown or disqualify them, they continue to position us. One possible tactic in the face of this knowledge is, precisely, formal: to attempt to find ways of being and making that are cognizant of their own historical limits, yet nevertheless attempt to transgress those limits by returning to them from subtly different perspectives.

And there is something new emerging here, as the name of the series claims: a space in which conflicted identities try on ambivalent forms, to varying degrees of success. Each P.o.E.M.M. is a proposition, a possible genre with its own conventions, waiting

to be articulated to one of several possible politics. On first release, a P.o.E.M.M. is *sui generis*, a field of one, necessarily protected in order to say difficult things. An exhibition version of the work (not yet mobile, thus the brackets around '[Mobile]') precedes or appears simultaneously with its release as an app. Each P.o.E.M.M. follows a cycle that theoretically allows its specific emergent form to explore different modes of authorship, collaboration and distribution. A gradual opening up of the work would mimic the cycle that many pieces of software have now followed, from "scratching a developer's personal itch" (as Eric Raymond, paraphrasing Linus Torvalds, describes it¹³) to making a formal contribution to the open base of computer code that powered the meteoric growth of digital networked culture. This is one of the ways in which the P.o.E.M.M. as genre draws its cues from formats developed in the tech industry rather than literature or art, which follow this trajectory toward openness much more slowly. The subsequent opening of the app to other writers, artists and coders transforms the work into a genre; where five poets were invited to write into the app, thus, making it an anthology. Next, the expansion of the app code allowed users to input text into a Twitter feed, whereby the app becomes a tool for composition and a vehicle for sharing new compositions with others. In effect, the P.o.E.M.M. becomes a platform. In the final stage, the code is released under a public license of some sort, allowing for the cycle to begin again in the hands of others.

The language of potential in the preceding paragraph is deliberate. As of this writing, none of the eight existing P.o.E.M.M.s have gone through the full cycle that Lewis describes. *Speak* has seen the most iteration, as it has been developed to the platform stage; *Know* currently exists as an anthology. Part of the problem is the availability of iOS programmers within the academy, where such skills are still relatively rare among graduate students, nevermind university faculty. Lewis hopes to locate a new programmer shortly in order to iterate *Speak* (at least) through its full cycle.

Why bother with such an elaborate process, given the difficulties involved? The larger vision for the P.o.E.M.M.s—beyond the already significant fact of their very existence—represents a practice of utopian coding. For Fredric Jameson, our contemporary "constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself" has nothing to do with the failure of individual acts of creativity. Rather, it is the "result of the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners."¹⁴ In other words, the precise point at which such an ambitious practice fails represents the current limits of

what we will allow ourselves to know, do and think.

The proposed lifecycle of a P.o.E.M.M. reflects a mundane set of editorial decisions like those that surround any publication, yet it also draws attention to the economics and strictures of writing in a digital milieu. Some of these strictures are aesthetic and have to do with things like the possibilities the P.o.E.M.M.s present for rethinking long-standing aspects of poetic form like lineation. This is not to say that digital poetics begins with apps. Digital poetry has been developing "new" conventions for poetic lines for decades, and many of these are quite stable (see, for example, Brian Kim Stefans's "Dream Life of Letters," an early attempt to exhaust the formal vocabulary of the electronic poem¹⁵). However, these conventions have not yet been cataloged and described in a systematic manner. From a literary perspective, digital poetry requires someone to write something that might be a cross between Apple's famed *Human Interface Guidelines* and Dennis Cooley's "Breaking and Entering" essay¹⁶. However, this is the easy part of the work that remains to be done.

The more difficult part has to do with discerning the political economy of writing and publishing in a networked digital milieu. Beyond what we can see on our home screens or in the app store, there are behemoths making the rules. However, they only become visible when you act unexpectedly. (Being of a certain age, this always makes me think of The Silver Surfer hitting the invisible barrier surrounding the Earth when he attempts to leave through apparently open skies—as good a metaphor for ideology as any). When confronted with the reality of the walled garden that the Internet has become, one possible response is to read the situation as an apocalyptic end to innocence: the end of the Web as a front-end for applications, and thus the end of open standards. Yet, software was never innocent, as Fuller reminds us: much software comprises simply and grimly of a social relation made systematic and unalterable. (Consider, for instance, the ultimately arbitrary informational regimes governing who is inside or outside of a national population).¹⁷ In a similar vein, Lewis observes that "a software application such as Word, for instance, can be thought of as an orderly and (mostly) predictable assemblage of biases that reify the imagination of its creators into executable code."¹⁸ One of the virtues of P.o.E.M.M.S is not that they behave otherwise, but that they can *imagine* behaving otherwise.

This is the virtue of a utopian approach: P.o.E.M.M.S are bigger on the inside. As a format, they offer infinite room for other inhabitants because they deal with possibility and are

unafraid of failure. In various stages of their development, different people can reach into them after the fact and change what they find. This is the private utopia of coding: individuals or small groups of people finding a modicum of time and resources, often in the pockets of larger hierarchically ordered organizations, while ostensibly at work on something more important. Fuller calls this phenomenon the “self- sufficiency” of software,¹⁹ because it allows for a kind of distance from social and cultural norms on one level even as they determine our situation on another.

There is a spirit of generosity about these works that I find very appealing. Poems have always been an oddity as a medium of exchange because their value is totally arbitrary—they mean everything to some and nothing to others. Literary value hangs, in part, on questions of format: first editions, signed and numbered multiples and rare books are (usually but not always) worth more than poems scrawled on a wall with spray paint. Lewis and Nadeau have found a way to take the after-purchase modification of a digital work, which is usually a force for evil (cf. the nerfing of PVRs to remove their ability to skip commercials, the loss of a treasured feature in a favourite program, the introduction of promoted content in a paid app that previously had none, the steady bloat of once-reliable applications, et cetera.) and turn it into yet another unexplored artistic technique. Imagine Margaret Atwood in a black jumpsuit, sneaking into your house after dark to erase some sentences in your copy of one of her books, only to write new ones in their place.

Another aspect of this generosity on the part of the programmer-writers is the abrogation of mastery. Others might be better at the form that you invented, and what of it? For Fuller, software is “a space for profound and unfinishable imagination.”²⁰ Beyond software, the history of media technology is a history of people discovering better uses for things after the fact. Allowing others inside is a way of making the naturalized, shiny surface of the app into a first step toward grappling with what an app is. Open code (or the current canard of teaching everyone to code) is not the only answer; we need to be able to account for what people do with things in various stages of their creation, circulation, consumption and destruction. What we need, then, to make sense of all aspects of the P.o.E.M.M.s and the apps that follow them, is some sort of continual process of elaboration—something like Latour’s processual circle in *The Politics of Nature*²¹. What lies ahead, for better and worse, is a point where technology and art become indistinguishable.

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by
Jason Edward Lewis & Bruno Nadeau

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