

the muse apprentice guild

--the new canon of the 21st century

INTERVIEW WITH HELEN THORINGTON
BY AUGUST HIGHLAND

August Highland:

1. Please introduce the readers of the MAG to turbulence.org
3. Explain to us what motivated you to found turbulence.
4. Tell us what you did before organizing turbulence. Many readers may not be familiar with the enormous contribution you made to public radio.

Helen Thorington:

turbulence.org launched in 1996, its purpose to commission and exhibit art created especially for the networked media by emerging and established artists. . To date turbulence has commissioned, exhibited and archived over 60 original works, and hosted a number of multilocation performance events. Its commissions have helped launch careers, and significantly increased the visibility of its artists. In 2002, in response to what we felt was the "New Yorkishness" of the site - most of our funders stipulated that funds be spent on New York artists -- three new categories were added to the Turbulence site: "Artists' Studios," "Spotlight," and "Guest Curators", thus opening turbulence to artists worldwide, and furthering its role as a vital and evolving resource for quality new media projects. Half a million users from every continent visit Turbulence annually.

For me founding turbulence was a simple step from one communications medium to another. I had been working as an independent producer in American public radio for 15 years. I began as an artist, creating short poetic and narrative works for the medium. Radio in America is not a medium in which artists have played a large or consistent role. Among other things, access simply is not easy and while we all hoped that the advent of non-commercial, listener sponsored FM radio would open the medium to the possibilities of art on the airwaves, access remained difficult. Following a year or so of frustrating dealings with the public system, I founded the NEW AMERICAN RADIO series - a place where established and emerging artists from diverse ethnic backgrounds and with widely varying interests could participate in the radio production process and create new kinds of work for the medium's large audience and unique "virtual" space. Access to the large audience was of particular interest to artists at that time.

Launched as a 13-part pilot edition in 1987, and enlarged in 1989 to a national weekly series, NEW AMERICAN RADIO survived on the public airwaves until 1998.

But not easily. The "bottom-line" fixation set in almost as soon as New American Radio launched; and eventually eroded the implications of public radio's mission " to provide programming not feasible in a commercial system". Subjected to focus groups (the handmaiden of the bottom line), works that are now viewed with considerable respect were adjudged non-radio material. Almost immediately we saw a falling off of the number of public stations willing to air our series.

Combined with the moral opposition to federally funded arts lead by Senator Jesse Helms and later, Newt Gingrich, and the near elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts, the environment for creative work grew more and more unfavorable. By 1996 there was simply too little money available to produce a weekly series of radio art and too few stations willing to air it. While the series continued into 1998 - by which time we had commissioned over 300 original works, many of which can be accessed today on the "somewhere.org" website -- it was clearly time to move on. I decided to see how we might fare on the Internet. I began raising money and with the help of several artists more savvy than I about Internet technology, notably composer Harris Skibell, created the turbulence web site and launched our first 5 commissioned works.

Turbulence had its first resounding success with an article by Andrew Leonard in "Wired Magazine" on Marianne Petit 's "The Grimm Tale". Still a model for use of the animated gif and a prime example of what Leonard, in 1996, called the Web's emerging "stop-jerk aesthetic", "The Grimm Tale or The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was" attracted 56,000 visitors to the site in one week. We were off and running.

About my own Work:

I entered the field with North Country in 1996. A story originally created for print, and later for radio and CD-ROM, North Country had elements that made it appropriate for the new medium. It opened with a newspaper account of the discovery of the bones of an unidentified skeleton -thus introducing an end as a beginning and a story that couldn't be told -- a story with a no-body, a story without a story. And it jumped around a lot, associating from one subject/scene to another.

Connections were/are in fact the life blood of North Country -- patterns, rhythms, shifts, reflections -- and over time the themes they deal with: beginnings/ends, continuity/discontinuity; fiction/fact. North Country is not a story about some one but about ideas playfully treated.

Twice in the web telling, however, the work fixes on the skull of the unidentified woman and asks the question: WHO IS SHE? (Or, do you, the reader, know who this was and if so what her story is?) A form is provided for the user's reply. CGI scripting transfers the reply to a storage bin on turbulence's server; it is then returned to a special page in North Country where others can access it.

It was through the use of this simple programming (CGI scripting) that I first became involved as a writer with the "public imagination"; it was the start of my understanding of what the network might mean: connections with others that could be profoundly and unexpectedly creative; the potential for digression and

development in almost any direction; and the idea of a work that might continue for years and be larger, much larger, than the expression of a single artist or artist/programmer.

A yearning for interactivity and what I thought of as the epic possibilities of narrative in this medium began to shape my thinking. Imagine "Who Is She?" as an entry point for new narratives. Imagine programming that would make it possible for people responding to continue developing their stories at will. Imagine programming that would make North Country and all of its responses (developing narratives) available to you. Imagine that you, with the click of your mouse, could link a new page to any word or section of any narrative that interested you, and without interfering with anyone else's story, begin your own. Imagine that everyone else visiting the Turbulence site could do the same. Imagine this "work" five years hence...

While this was not the direction I took, I remained open to the idea that the role of the writer and the nature of writing were changing and would continue to change in the new media. The works that followed North Country were: "Solitaire" (1998), a narrative/card game with Marianne Petit and John Neilson, and "Adrift" (1997-2001), an evolving, collaborative, online, distributed performance event with Jesse Gilbert, Marek Walczak and others. Both were for me explorations of those changes. Some of the things that changed in my writing are listed below. All derive, I believe, from my understanding that on the Internet writing is only one of many ways available to the storyteller.

My texts grew shorter.

I developed a deliberate imprecision or suggestiveness (a lack of definitiveness) in their content, leading (or so I hoped) to their ability to relate to or combine with sound, image and/or other texts and become meaningful in multiple ways to the imaginations of multiple users.

As computing power grew in the latter part of the last century, the texts I wrote were incorporated into VRML (3-D) environments and took on characteristics (color, shape, for instance) and behaviors (motion) within those environments.

AH: Please describe your professional career as a writer.

HT: My creative activities have always focused on narrative. Over the years I have written short stories for print --written, composed and produced dramatic and sound-narrative works for radio -- and written and composed for the World Wide Web and for multi-location performance events on the Internet.

Each change has been a discovery and a challenge: how to write for this medium or, perhaps better, how to write for the people who use this medium.

I moved from writing pages of text to be read - to writing scripts for radio to be heard - to using words, phrases, sentences, and now and again a short paragraph as one among the many possible signifying practices that can be used on the Internet: words that move, dissolve, are temporary, that disappear within transforming 2 and 3-dimensional environments - kinetic text that functions

simultaneously as image. Words for sensory multi-tasking: we do not "read" these texts as we read a printed page.

AH: Why is it important for poets and writers to become conversant with new media work?

How do you characterize the relationship between new media and literature? How do they fuse? How are they separate? How can their cross-fertilization advance both genres and create new directions for both genres?

HT: There are probably a lot of answers to the question: why is it important for poets and writers to become conversant with new media work.

The first thing that comes to my mind are the words of net artist and theorist Andy Deck who called early net art "the unfinished insufficient precursors of what one may expect tomorrow." Deck wrote that in the later 1990s. We are a little farther down the road now, but not all that far. Still, if one keeps an eye on new media work, one can see that something is developing that is already having an impact on our notion of literature, the writer and the audience.

I would hope that poets and writers would want to know about it, even if they don't opt for that direction.

Literature (the literature some of us learned and loved as students. I did my graduate work in English Literature) is no longer a dominant genre/discipline in the way that it once was. I don't know what's being taught now, but I do know that just as print removed the art of rhetoric from a central place in academic education, so the computer/Internet (and other changes taking place in our society today) are impacting the role or place of the traditional disciplines central to my education. And they are having an impact on me. Remembering how I once identified with George Elliot's Dorothea, I recently tried to re-read Middlemarch and couldn't. I simply couldn't deal with the long sentences, interminable clauses, and all the attention to minutiae.

And this is not just me saying this. Michael Dirda - a champion of literature - wrote in the introduction to his recent, *An Open Book: Coming of Age in the Heartland* "Mine, it now seems may be the last generation to value the traditional bound book as the engine of education, culture and personal advancement."

In a way we have to stare a lot of what David Weinberger calls "default thinking", ideas we've accepted as common sense and never challenged, straight in the eye today and recognize that they're no longer adequate as explanations, or descriptions of our world - the notion, for instance, that space is a container so wonderfully contradicted by the places we create on the Internet, which do not fill space or take space away from anyone. And then there's the idea, that literature - I'd go so far as to say "art" -- as a separate category of creative activity is guaranteed to be as significant tomorrow as it was yesterday and with us forever. Is literature's appeal really as great as it was in the 50s?

Literature began its journey onto the human stage with the advent of writing and reading; its position and the role of the writer were strengthened by the printing press, the spread of literacy, and the growth of a reading audience.

For those of you reading this interview who have not read "The Poem as Kinetic and Visual Object: Servovalve's "Nurb" by Carrie Noland" (<http://www.turbulence.org/curators/Paris/nolandenglish.htm>), I urge you to take on at least its opening paragraphs on the subject of reading. "Reading," Noland says, "is a type of training that not only produces a reader, but also produces a text. In other words, the letters on the page that are confronted by the illiterate or barely literate child are not the same letters on the page that are confronted by the literate child. The previous letters were lines and shapes as well as letters. They were houses and trees and snakes before they were H's and T's and S's. They were drawings before they were the particles of words, icons before they were signs, because that is how the eye looked at them. The moving, erratic, busy, intuitive eye, the curious and hungry eye, did not yet know what it was looking at, did not yet know how to look at what it was looking at. The physical eye had not yet become a trained, acculturated eye, and the text was not a static set of letters but instead a moving, animated, self-transforming screen for the imagination.

Well those capabilities (the kinetic and visual properties of marks on the page) lost or suppressed in our "progress" toward literacy, are back. The eye has been reawakened. And with it a separate discipline (writing) that depends on a mastery of reading to be understood and appreciated by its audience begins to be absorbed into another kind of visual world, it becomes a part of a picture, a moving image; it may or may not be legible. Or as Noland, quoting Stephanie Strickland, writes: "... alphabetic text, superimposed on alphabetic text or on image, does not reliably yield legible text. ... one flickers between seeing the viewable and reading the legible."

The writer nourished on the literary achievements of the past and wishing to be read and appreciated for similar skills will not have much interest in writing the unreadable.

But what a challenge! To convey your story-- in part -- with letters, words and phrases that are seen but not read.

Crazy, huh?

My most recent exploration of this kind was for the 2001 performance/installation of *Adrift*, a work that establishes a relationship between virtual and real geographies by mixing photographs, 3-D imagery, text, and sound in a constantly transforming spectacle. Looking back I can see that while the text probably added to the audience's sense of a journey by boat across a harbor, there were parts of it - my favorite, of course -- that could only be understood if read.

They included the playful use of computer language (JavaScript) as if it were a human (the English) language. The following is an example from the beginning of the voyage:

```
function openWin( ) {  
  aWindow=window.open(URL, "thewindow",
```

```
"width=350,height=400, alwaysRaised=yes");  
}
```

The air smells of salt and oil and creosote

It's unlikely in the continuously transforming VRML (3-D) environment, where texts move and disappear, sometimes very quickly, that members of the audience, assuming they even recognized the "function openWin" etc. as programming, would be able to read the piece of JavaScript from beginning to end and make the necessary connection to the smell of the air.

Which brings me to another point: the new languages. Programming languages are not human languages. They do not grow out of the unconscious. The rules of human language are always abstracted from usage. The rules of computer languages are stated first and used thereafter. They grow directly out of consciousness. They are rules of behavior that describe processes - from running a payroll to the behavior of a bot that seems to converse with you, or a scene that transforms in front of your eyes. They are brought to life by the procedural power of the computer; it's the computer that does the reading. It's the computer, not your imagination that makes things visible for you.

Does what it makes visible engage your imagination as literature does? Does it honor the emotions as literature does? Does it shed light on who we are inside?

Writing and reading - the act of making and appreciating literature - are solitary activities and have a unique relationship to interiority. A person settled in with a good book is settled in to his or her own private world, immersed in his/her own consciousness.

The Internet seems to be leading us elsewhere - to be giving us the opportunity to learn a lot about our world, to interact with it at a distance, to act out rather than imagine, to do and see things, such as the shape of song, that we never thought about or only imagined. It's different. It's changing us. Look back in another twenty years, another forty years if you have that much time. It will all be a lot clearer

AH: As you pore over submissions to turbulence what criteria are you using to select the works that you spotlight?

HT: Our emphases have changed over the years. In '96, for instance, we made a big thing of looking for work created specifically for the World Wide Web using web technologies. At that time we were making an important distinction, one we don't really have to make today, between web works and works transferred from older formats to the web to take advantage of its large audience.

Then for a while, in response to the large number of fixed web works by individual artists, we put emphasis on interactive works - works that offer the user an opportunity to do something, or that can be changed by their users -- and works that make use of the network and network technologies. We still look for this.

New ideas, aesthetics, technical innovation. Has this been done before? Turbulence is supposed to be for innovative work - work that explores the creative possibilities of the net. We aren't focused on any one discipline. We like to see what's going on out there and support and encourage experimentation in whatever direction

someone wants to take it. Unlike some other sites, our commissioning focus is not on the acknowledged artist so much as on the emerging and mid-career artist, the one who hasn't gotten into the museums and galleries yet.

AH: To a reader or writer who is unacquainted with new media, what kinds of things would you tell that person to help the person become more receptive or prepared for understanding new media work?

HT: I think in a way I've answered this question. You can't judge new media by the criteria used to evaluate the traditional disciplines. I think I'd just keep on trying to articulate, for myself as well as them, how it differs and where it seems to be going. I'm most interested in doing this by going back and learning how other technologies - like writing and print and radio - have engaged and changed us.

AH: Have you come across a common misperception that people tend to have about new media work? If so, can you talk about this a little?

Your career has spanned literature, radio and performance, and new media. What is the common thread running through your evolution? How does this evolution reflect who you are as a creative individual? Do you view the different stages in your career as major changes or closely interdependent developments in your process and growth as an artist and human being?

HT: Narrative has been the focal point of most of my creative work; and a willingness to explore the possibilities in each medium. I think a certain amount of silliness has accompanied me throughout my life - and seriousness. For me they seem to go hand in hand and just because they are there to comment on one another, to offer their different perspectives, they open a way forward (or perhaps it's backward or around and around). If you take something very seriously and then it begins to seem silly to you, you're free to be playful with it and not treat it as unchangeable.

I've never experienced the so-called stages in my career as anything but closely interdependent developments. I got into sound because I wrote a children's play that begged to be a musical and the women who were willing to create the music for it didn't want to write it down. I learned taping techniques to accommodate them. I learned them in a studio full of synthesizers where hands-on was encouraged. I rented a synthesizer and took it home where I began creating sound backgrounds for my writing. I was living in the country at the time; NPR was the source of our news and culture. One of my friends suggested I send my newly created sound work to NPR. I did and my career in radio began, but also, shortly thereafter, when I returned to New York City, my career composing for dance and installation and the new music scene. New American Radio followed because my particular kind of sound work seemed to me at the time, made for radio and because I was interested in opening the field for other artists. As the possibilities in public radio waned, I moved on to turbulence.

AH: What's the most important thing you have learned about the meaning of artistic production/expression?

HT: That it's fun and hard work and enormously gratifying, with or without money and recognition.

m.a.g.