LITR 1010D

Midterm Documentation

***Closed Circuit***

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*Closed Circuit* utilizes a Makey Makey circuit board device to build a synthesized poem in real time through physical touch between participants. A group of five authors will have submitted previously completed works or created texts expressly for use in the performance. The texts will share two main attributes: first, a primary, if abstracted concern with the body—biologically, politically, aesthetically, historically, etc.—and second, a lineation which allows lines to both stand alone as coherent units and also read smoothly in arbitrary orderings (certain specific rules will apply to lines. For example, prepositions should occur exclusively at the beginnings of lines so no line will end with “and” and lead to another beginning with “and.” Works not written expressly for the piece will be edited with such strictures in mind). A Processing application will pull a randomly selected line from each author’s work as they are touched by the “driver” of the performance. Lines will be randomly enjambed and appear in sequence, forming a randomized, synthetic piece which is newly generated during each performance. At random intervals, a previously recorded random line of the author being touched will be played through the program. The general structure of the performance will have some similarities to a séance, and editing of vocal recordings will be cognizant of this parallel, careful not to be trite (overemphasizing reverb, echo, or vocal effects) but still build the aesthetic of *reaching somewhere* to be met with an ethereal, unexpected voice.

The performance necessitates each participant being connected to the Makey Makey by wire, and the Makey Makey being plugged in to a computer running the Processing program. Authors will be arrayed in a circle, seated in chairs. They will each be holding wires which will run to the Makey Makey and laptop offstage. The “driver” will be responsible for touching each author’s hands (or face, or legs. Any exposed, and therefore conductive part of their body) and building the poem over the course of the performance. The driver will thus have a free range of motion, their wire loose and movable (authors’ wires will be taped to the ground, and only lead to their chairs). Wires will be visible, but as understated as possible in the visual space of the piece. Chairs will be arranged in a tight circle, so the driver may touch multiple people in quick succession, and the Processing window building the poem will be projected behind the stage during the performance.

*Closed Circuit* is, at base, concerned with two main themes. The first is the question of a synthesized poem, and synthesized authorship. How do disparate voices relate to one another as lines come into contact? The poem will presumably fade in and out of strict sense and clear rhythm, with groups of lines blending tightly and others forming more fragmented sections. The problems brought about by different styles, content, and authors being arbitrarily brought together is a central focus of the piece. The loose prompt of “a poem concerned with the body” is meant to bring about a sort of friction, by grouping lines which are preoccupied with the politics of the body, the sensuality of the body, and the personality of the body, mediated through the literal bodies of authors of disparate age, gender, and race. In dealing with the body, this is, fundamentally, a political piece.

The first instance of reading has entirely different stakes than any subsequent reading, when the text will be static and “completed.” The piece creates a dichotomy between different instances of reading. During the performance, the audience has visual clues as to which author’s lines are being drawn into the piece, and how those lines will immediately be in dialogue with those that come previously. The random enjambment also means that while viewers wait to see new lines appear, they will know how far down the page to look, but not where along the x-axis to anticipate text appearing. As they wait to see the text, the driver and the author will be physically touching, similarly waiting for the program to produce something readable. These moments of anticipation are critical to the piece’s success. In these pauses, no one is sure of what the line will be, where exactly it will be positioned on the page, how it will relate to previous lines, or, because of the piece’s inherent random timing, if multiple lines will be pulled at once. When these moments stretch for longer than a matter of seconds, the absurdity and intimacy of a driver holding an author’s body to pull their text out will be the only thing which the audience can reckon with while waiting for the text to arrive.

Looking back over the text after the performance, this anticipation will be lost, as readers will sense where lines are enjambed before their eyes actually get to the line, and they’ll never have to wait for the text to appear—it will simply exist on the screen. Authorship, though, will become clouded, as there will be no indicator of where one voice ends and another begins (other than clues offered up by style and content, perhaps). This slippage will result in subsequent readings which are far more preoccupied with clues of authorship, voice, and friction between lines than random operations and the anticipation of waiting for lines to appear.

These questions of voice coincide with the second theme of the piece: an engagement with the physical—with the body. The piece grounds authors’ work within the confines of their physicality, staking out the grounds for performance at the level of hands, faces, legs, and arms. There is no script or protocol for how a driver interacts with authors. While the most intuitive contact may be touching hands, a driver could just as easily touch an author’s face, run their hands through their hair, or bury their own face in the author’s hands. How a driver approaches the body of an author, and navigates the authors’ comfort and potential anxieties regarding their body, is a furthering of the politics of the piece. In the course of the performance, the moments of contact will be affected by the driver’s body and the driver’s sense of the author’s bodies, and will conceivably run the spectrum between awkward and intimate, prolonged and abrupt. The physical interactions are flexible and radically changeable for each performance of *Closed Circuit*.

The timing of the Processing program is randomized—the driver won’t know how long to hold an author’s body before texts will appear. Therefore, authors are not simply substitutions for buttons on a keyboard, but rather the interaction itself, the act of touch, is an indefinite process for the coaxing out of language. The intimacy of reading someone’s work (particularly while the author is sitting in the room) is paired with the intimacy of physical touch, and a metaphor is built up as the piece is written: poetry, touch, and an electrical current are passing between two parties, through their bodies, and producing readable language. The piece is about interchange and intimacy. The question is not at what level of interchange meaning is inevitably transferred or received, but what meaning is acquired by the *method* of exchange, in this case physical touch. The driver acts in an almost surgical capacity, pulling lines of text out of authors and plastering them on a screen for an audience to witness. They also act in a quasi-spiritual role, like the leader of a séance, pulling text and voice from somewhere other, through the body. In grounding the piece at the level of the body, *Closed Circuit* thus engages with authorship a second time. After bringing authors voices together line by line, and blending the “authorship” of the piece when subsequent readings can’t place who wrote what, the piece maintains the value and intimacy of authorship. The performance recognizes the personal stakes at play in writing and the anxieties of separating the text from the self, creating the playful understanding that an author’s *corpus* is accessible only through their body.