

KRISTAN HORTON

ORACLE



BETA SET UP 1999

photograph composite

ENIGMA MACHINE

photograph

KEMPLEN'S TURK

illustration

ORACLE CUSTOM CASSETTE PLAYER 2001

photograph composite

ODYSSEY CASSETTE 2001

scan

ORACLE 2000

digital layout

PULMONIC CHART

illustration

ALEX JENNINGS

scanned photograph

PHONEBONE 2001

illustration

SPECTRAGRAM 2001

digital output

ORACLE DISPLAY FRAME 2003

hinged cabinet frame

CONCEPTUAL SCHEMATIC 1999

digital layout

TORONTO REFERENCE LIBRARY 2001

photograph composite

WIREFRAME 2002

3d simulation

TECHNICAL SCHEMATIC 1999

digital layout

ORACLE'S VERSION OF THE ODYSSEY 2001

cerlux bound book

ORACLE

The Odyssey

10/27/01

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Preface

by Kristan Horton

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refer: <i>Odyssey</i> booklet	

There are two statements to consider in this introduction.

1. *Oracle* is a machine that turns books-on-tape back into books.
2. This catalogue represents my artistic practice.

The first statement comprises the content of this catalogue. *Oracle* is a catalogued artwork, perhaps somewhere between a machine and an installation that I began work on in 1997. It performs as stated, transcribing Homer's The Odyssey as read by Alex Jennings, once per day, for as many days as it is performing. That process could create 30 new versions of The Odyssey in 30 days. The catalogue examines how this functions and to what end.

The second statement concerns the methodology I employ as an artist, that is to say in this work, to work directly on the surface of disseminating media, such as the catalogue. That is, in a sense, to work in reverse of 'make work, show work, review work, and catalogue work'. Instead I begin here, or rather, have chosen to deal exclusively with the late stage of artistic production understood as cataloguing.

This methodology surrounds a premise that knowledge of art often comes via media other than itself and as such assumes a role of intimacy with someone about something not actually perceived; the nature of a good report. A potential, I thought, to make this secondary site the primary site of my production. Since many of my own favorite works I have never chanced to visit, I have as much faith and question in their pleasure as I do here in my own.



Writing Down What Is Said

It could be said that we are witnesses to a technological revolution. To some this revolution is a liberating force, to others it is a threat to humanity, but to most of us it simply represents a series of bewildering changes to almost every aspect of our lives. The reaction from artists is equally varied. The artist Kristan Horton, for one, has thoroughly embraced the revolution, and has wasted no time in incorporating technological innovations into his art production. Nonetheless, Horton has not been intoxicated by it; which is to say, he has not succumbed to the allure of applying technology in art for its own sake. Instead, he has managed to remain aloof in this regard. As such he plays the traditional role of artist as outsider by exploiting the technology to help us see it anew. His *Oracle* project typifies this approach to art. Below I shall discuss some of the issues that this project raises concerning the nature of the relationship between speech and writing.

I

A physical description of *Oracle* is straightforward: the *Oracle* machine comprises a row of six-tape players each plugged into a relay switch, which in turn is connected to a computer. Once the first tape has finished the machine is programmed to cue the next tape-player to start while simultaneously switching to allow the computer to receive the audio signals from this next tape-player. This process continues until all six tapes have been played, at which point the machine loops back to the first tape to start the process over again. Installed on the computer is dictation software, that is, a program designed to interpret the spoken word - converting the audio signals into text. This

text is printed off, its pages to be eventually bound. In addition a monitor continually displays the interpreted text as the tape plays.

All six tape-players are used to play a nine-hour recording of a revised version of Homer's *Odyssey* read by Alex Jennings¹. The choice of this story is centrally relevant to the *Oracle* project. Homer lived in pre literate Greece, and so he was a storyteller in the oral tradition. Accordingly, his stories i.e., *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, were passed on to the later classical Greeks by word of mouth, only then to be preserved in written form. The advent of the alphabetic writing system in Greece in many ways was a revolution as profound in its consequences to everyday life as today's technological revolution. And like today's technology, writing was not favourably received by everybody. One of writing's most renowned opponents, ironically, was the philosopher Socrates². His argument against writing principally hinges on the claim that it lacks vitality. That is, he believed that writing petrifies the thoughts expressed in the speech it records. While writing can record or preserve the fleeting ideas which we both utter and think, it lacks the immediacy of speech which is the quintessential medium of thought³. Of course this belief betrays the primacy of speech which Socrates presupposed, in that he saw writing merely as an instrument for recording speech, rather than a medium in which vital communication can itself occur. This belief in the primacy of speech surely derives from the fact that we master language through speech - writing is an addendum.

Writing is essentially mechanical, and it is this fact which explains how it has become such an integral part of our technologies, in particular

01 **Beta set up**,
photograph composite,
1999, 22.5 x 1.6 cm.

02 Enigma machine,
photograph,
5 x 9.5 cm.



02

in how we interact with computers. Speech, by comparison, is unwieldy. To an extent we have compensated for this lack of immediacy in our writing based technologies by exploiting the exponential speed of electronic media. And this compensatory processing speed has led us to try to give to computers the power of speech which they so conspicuously lack, or more precisely in this case the power to recognize speech. It is these attempts which are the background to the *Oracle* project. From a certain viewpoint one can read Horton, through *Oracle*, to be mocking such attempts: The text produced from the tapes is almost wholly unintelligible. For example, we get “implicit to dissuade unsealed slide to go down to laugh in disguise...” and so on. The program used by *Oracle* i.e., IBM’s ViaVoice,

can be ‘tuned’ to produce a more accurate interpretation of the taped reading. But instead, by leaving the interpretation loose, Horton could be said to be highlighting the gap between the mediums of speech and writing. That is to say, he points to the essential difference between them which we attempt to overcome by sheer computer processing power. He remarks that such speech recognition programs represent an impulse to turn books-on-tape back into books which, he notes, is ridiculous from the technology industries’ perspective. Of course, dictation software in general, and ViaVoice in particular, is not intended for this particular purpose. But, that might be partly why he chooses to perform this task with it - to show the futility of this whole project. After all, it can be argued that the computer does not so much recognize speech, but rather converts it into a mechanical medium, namely writing which, as a machine, it can process. In other words, dictation software is really designed to mechanize speech.

As mentioned, the choice of Homer’s *Odyssey* is central to the *Oracle* project. For centuries, before it was eventually preserved in its written form, this story existed in virtue of being memorized by generations of storytellers i.e., bards. Moreover, the *Odyssey* is often referred to as an epic poem because it was recounted in rhyme in order to aid its tellers in their memorizing of it. Compared to ourselves, members of oral societies possess astonishing capacities to remember the spoken word, and rhyme is one of their primary aides-mémoire. Perhaps only with children’s rhymes recited in schoolyards does this oral tradition survive in our society. Notably, the word recognition program ViaVoice used by *Oracle* also

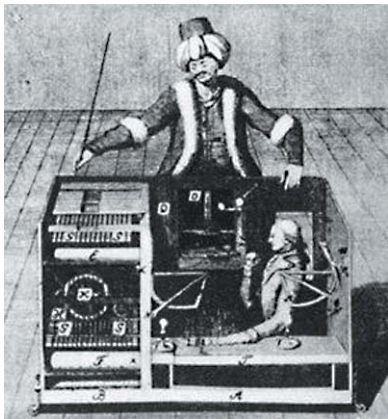
exploits rhyme, or more precisely sound patterns in speech, to help it interpret the spoken words. Thus, its interpretation is never entirely arbitrary, that is to say, it does not simply interpret each word individually - sound patterns at least give the program a foothold in interpreting each word in some sort of context. So, for instance, the words "there's a distant sound" might be interpreted by *Oracle* as "the airs a decent hound". In this sense *Oracle's* approach is eerily human, producing variations of the Odyssey in similar manner to how the ancient bards also produced variations of the story through the generations, echoing this oral tradition. Horton observes that this approach produces a reversal of the intended process of writing generally, which is to harden the ideas expressed in speech. What we in fact

get is a loosening of what is spoken, namely the Odyssey according to its preserved written form as read by Alex Jennings. The machine becomes poet - an interpretative creator of texts.

Yet, crucially *Oracle's* creativity lacks any semantic dimension. That is, while the computer converts human speech into writing, its dictation software is not at all concerned with the content of this writing. One might say that *Oracle* is blind to linguistic content in general. That is why its interpretation of the tape is often unintelligible - it interprets each spoken word without any regard for its meaning. For us writing down what is said involves being able both to mechanically write out the signs which represent the spoken words and to comprehend those words - *Oracle* can do the former, but not the latter. Given that poetry is essentially semantical in nature, that is, its vitality derives from its meaning, we see that *Oracle's* output merely resembles poetry.

II

So far I have suggested that *Oracle's* activities are a charade. That is, at first blush *Oracle* creatively interprets human speech, whereas in fact, its activities merely seem creative - underneath there is only an empty mechanical process. Yet, this reading of *Oracle* seems too harsh. Indeed, watching *Oracle's* monitor actively generating text suggests to the viewer that there is genuine thought occurring - one feels that, after all, something is going on inside that computer, however primitive and mechanical its processes might be in comparison to humans. Further,



03

Oracle possesses an autonomy, albeit limited, which is surely the defining feature of a conscious being. This autonomy is evidenced by the fact that its textual output is never the same - each time it returns to the same passage it offers up a new interpretation.

The suggestion that machines can be conscious, or even are so, is much debated. The English mathematician Alan Turing⁴ contended that if a machine can behave in a manner indistinguishable from conscious behaviour, then in effect that machine is conscious in this regard. In reply to this contention the American philosopher John Searle⁵ presents an argument to show that such outward resemblance to conscious behaviour is not evidence for genuine consciousness. Briefly, Searle imagines a man locked in a room. In the room the man has a book which lists a set of rules indicating how to reply to any string of Chinese characters using Chinese characters written out on individual cards. The man, or operator, speaks no Chinese and so relies entirely on the rule-book to reply to Chinese sentences passed through an opening into the room. Thus, the man offers intelligible replies to such sentences using the cards, which he posts back through the opening a while later. One might conclude that to the outsider the operator in the room understands Chinese. This claim is parallel to Turing's concerning conscious behaviour. However, Searle observes that this operator does not understand Chinese, and therefore the inference that he does from the evidence of his replies is invalid. Likewise, even if a machine like *Oracle* were not only able to accurately interpret speech, but could also manipulate words in a syntactically correct manner, call it super-*Oracle*, still this would not be

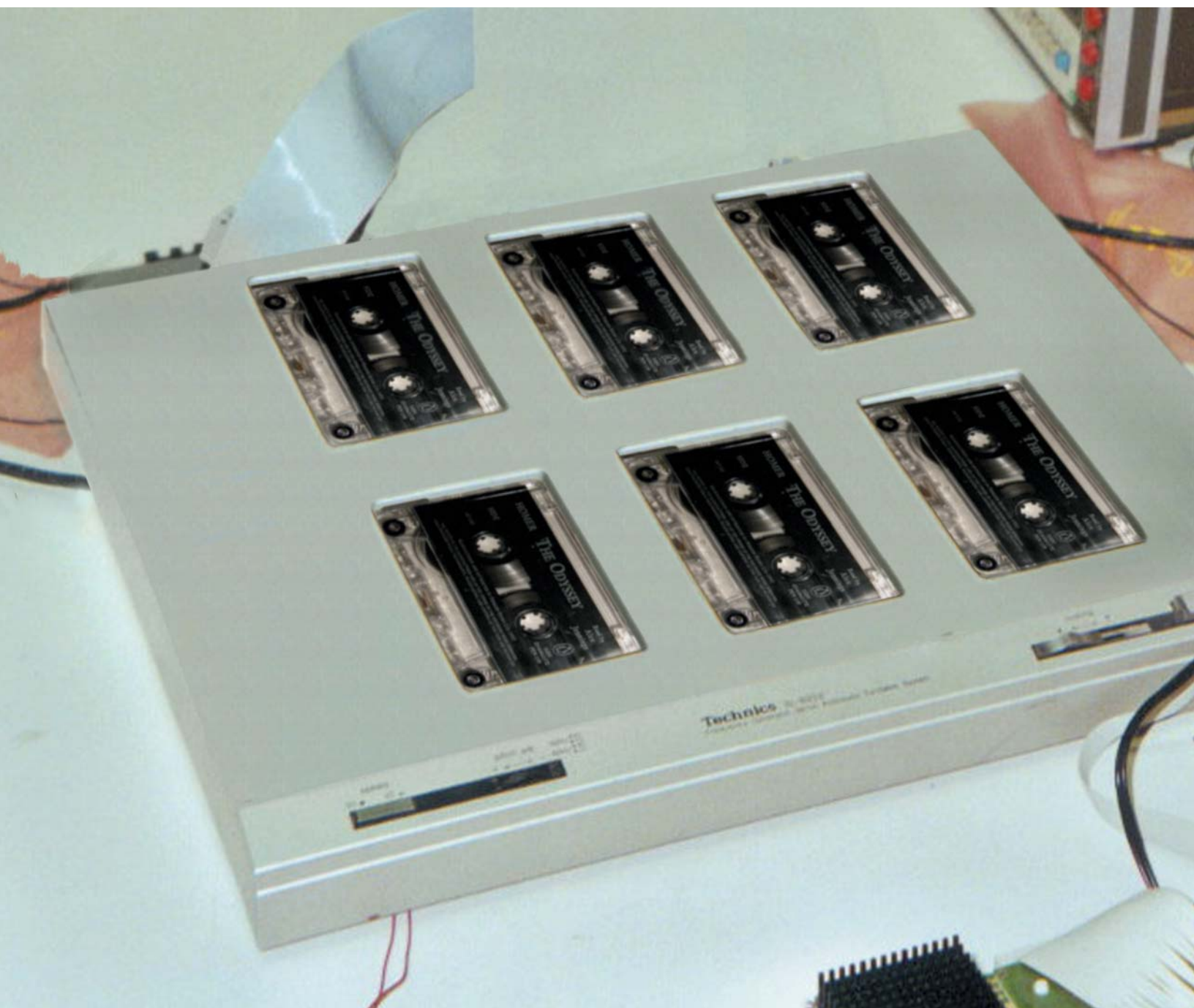
evidence that it is in any sense conscious. Super-*Oracle* would merely seem conscious.

However, Searle's Chinese room is not comparable to the kind of machine with which we are concerned i.e., a super-*Oracle*. The programs of a super-*Oracle* would perform the same function as the Chinese room's rule-book, but notably without an operator who can or cannot speak Chinese. Accordingly, for such a computer its apparent ability to understand Chinese cannot be refuted by pointing out that its operator cannot in fact understand a word of Chinese, since no operator is involved. Further, more generally it can be argued that the fact that Searle's operator cannot speak Chinese is wholly irrelevant, it is the 'room' which ostensibly understands Chinese. The fact that the operator cannot understand Chinese does not refute the claim that the room can. Still, we can sympathize with Searle's overall claim that understanding does not reduce to an ability to manipulate signs i.e., a mastery of syntax - even a super-*Oracle* cannot surely be said to understand the language it operates on.

There seems to be one crucial difference between *Oracle* and the Chinese room: there is no rigid connection between *Oracle's* input and output - as noted, each time *Oracle* "hears" the same passage it produces a new interpretation. In the case of the Chinese room, even though it is operated by an autonomous human, its output is determined by the rule-book, and accordingly it does not produce a new response each time to the same input. Perhaps, however, this rule-book could be written in such a way that the human operator does have a choice of words, and so the Chinese room's output would vary for the same input. Nonetheless, still its operator has

04 Oracle custom
cassette player.
photograph composite,
2001, 27 x 18.5 cm.

04



no relevant criterion by which to make a choice between words - he operates blindly. In *Oracle's* case, its interpretation i.e., output, is governed by how well it has been trained - the more thoroughly trained *Oracle* is the higher the probability that it always produces the same interpretation each time a passage is repeated to it. No training is involved in the production of the rule-book for the Chinese room; its rules are given, so to speak. And in this respect *Oracle* is more human. *Oracle's* training mimics how we learn to speak, and later write; namely by a constant process of trial and error. In this sense, *Oracle* is not purely a machine. It is important to understand what is meant by 'machine' in this respect. Here, by machine I mean any physical object which is designed to perform a specific task. In order to perform its task all of a machine's operations are predetermined. In this respect the Chinese room is essentially a machine because all of its input to output relations are predetermined, even if its rule-book is written so that its operator has a choice of words - still this choice is strictly predetermined. *Oracle*, by contrast, is less of a machine because its input to output relations are not entirely predetermined.

That aspect of *Oracle* which is not machine-like i.e., mechanical, is instead organic. Thus, *Oracle* is in part an organism. Of course, ordinarily an organism is defined as a living entity. However, as a physical object, I suggest that an organism differs from a machine in terms of how it is designed. As noted, a machine's operations are predetermined; by contrast, an organism's operations are determined in relation to its environment. Thus, for example, we say that a tree has an organic form, because its form has been determined by

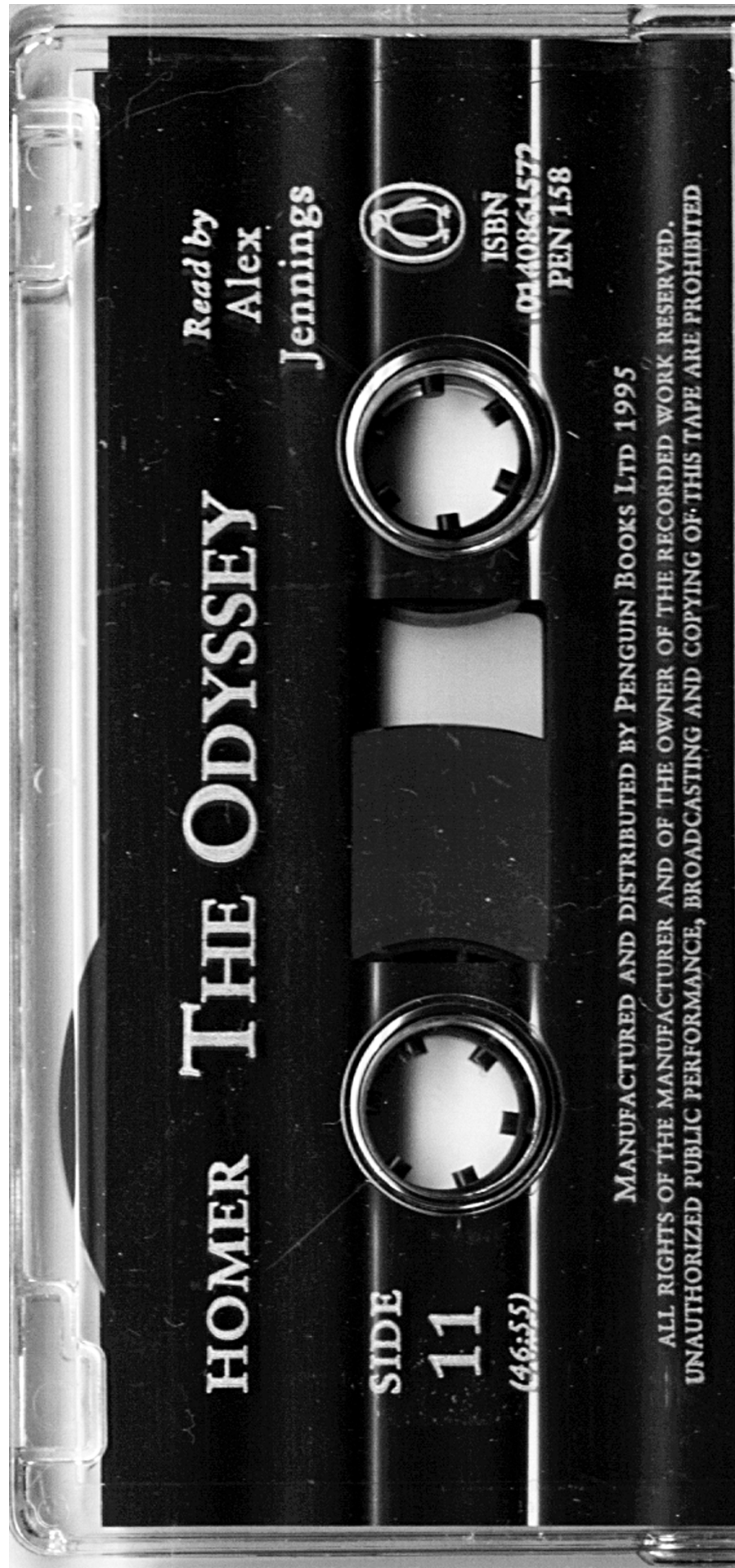
its environment - the prevalent direction of the wind, whether it stands on flat or inclined land etc. Likewise, an airplane has a mechanical or inorganic form because it is designed with a specific function in mind. Accordingly, we see now why speech is essentially organic while writing is not. Speech arose from our interaction with our environment, while writing was designed by us to perform a particular function, namely to record what is said. The fact that speech is constantly evolving is evidence of its organic nature - its design alters with changes in the environment, namely those new aspects of the environment we find need to communicate to others.

Thus, in order for a computer, such as the one used by *Oracle*, to master speech it must learn to recognize speech in an organic way, namely by allowing its operations to be partly determined by its interaction with the environment; which in this case is specifically the degree of correctness the computer achieves in its interpretation of the spoken word. By not training the computer to accurately or correctly interpret speech, Horton effectively emphasizes the organic nature of *Oracle's* design in this regard. It is this organic design, I suggest, which encourages us to ascribe creativity to *Oracle's* operations. In this sense, talk of whether machines such as *Oracle* are conscious or not does not help us to understand the crucial distinction between machines and organisms. Moreover, not all organisms are conscious, and indeed among the plethora of organisms presently existing, we surely ascribe to them varying degrees of consciousness. It is *Oracle* as an organism, rather than as a putative conscious being, which is relevant in explaining its creativity. Can we therefore admit a degree of poetic creativity to

Oracle? I stated that poetry per se is essentially semantical, and *Oracle's* programming is blind to the meaning of the speech it interprets. Nevertheless, while we might not be able to describe *Oracle's* output as poetry, inasmuch as rhyme is an aspect of poetry *Oracle* is indeed creative. And this creativity derives from *Oracle's* organic nature. **Hugh Alcock**

Notes

1. The Odyssey read by Alex Jennings (audio tapes), London: Penguin Books.
2. Socrates' views on writing are clearly laid out in Plato's dialogue Phaedrus (see especially 274-279).
3. Roughly, according to Socrates, speech, as the medium of thought, is the vehicle for the acquisition of knowledge i.e., the truth. Moreover, dialectical debate i.e., a reasoned inquiry through the discussion of specific concepts, can by itself provide knowledge. A famous example of such an inquiry features a discussion between Socrates and a boy slave of a young aristocrat named Meno. Without teaching the slave the concepts of geometry - which the slave has never learned - Socrates seems to succeed in demonstrating that still the slave can recognize for himself certain truths of geometry in virtue of his discussion with Socrates. (see Plato's dialogue Meno 81b-8)
4. Alan Matheson Turing is most famous for his achievement of working out the Enigma code machine used extensively by the Germans to send secret messages during world war II. His views on consciousness are found in his article 'Computing machinery and Intelligence', *Mind*, 1950.
5. See Searle's article 'Minds, Brains, and Programs', *The Nature of Mind*, David Rosenthal ed., pp. 509-519, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991. The Chinese room argument appears in other publications by Searle.







A Series of Wanderings

THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET (revised to 1993)

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ		
Trill	ʙ			r					ʀ		
Tap or Flap				ɾ		ɽ					
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ							
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ			
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ			

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a voiced consonant. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

06 **ORACLE**,
(previous page) digital output,
2000, scaling

07 **Pulmonic chart**,
illustration,
12.3 x 6.9 cm.

07

“**T**hus, as soon as Greece became full of sophists and philosophers, she no longer had any famous musicians or poets. In cultivating the art of convincing, that of arousing the emotions was lost. Plato himself, envious of Homer and Euripides, decried the one and was unable to imitate the other.” [Rousseau, The Essay on the Origin of Languages, 1781, pp.68-89]

Whatever changes occurred in the telling and re-telling of the story of Ulysses, were probably not remembered by the listeners in Ancient Greece. Or if they were, they probably weren’t considered important, or maybe they were awaited and welcomed. The experience of listening to Homer tell his wonderful tale over and over must have been a treat. It was immediate and I’m guessing very dramatic.

Later, the story, as remembered by the transcribers, was printed, bound and passed on over centuries. If Homer meant his work “Odyssey” to be sung or

spoken aloud, to be told over and over again from his memory, what did it mean when it was finally written down?

There was no longer a place for the subjective inconsistencies (or poetics) inherent in the remembering and delivering of the story. What remains in print is assumed to be “the original” and to be Homer’s. The impulse is to mourn the lost changeability and poetry of the spoken epic. Writing, in the literal sense, may be considered a death-like state (since the absence of the author is always implied), especially in our logocentric Western society. The epic journey is now silent. It then exists only in the mind of the reader. It is here, however, that Derridean thinking contradicts this more traditional favoring of the spoken work. Derrida insists upon the inherent fluidity and multiplicity (and poetry) of words, both spoken and written (although he focuses on text due to its status as underprivileged), through our comprehension and subjective response to the signifier. All words (signifiers) carry traces of other

signifiers and on and on and on. What is not said or written is also present in what is said or written simply because these words are heard or read.

The meaning of meaning [...] is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier [...] its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages in its own economy so that is always signifies again and differs. (Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p.25)

And so, we still have a poetic, changing story, whose poetry shifts from read to read.

Alex Jennings restores Homer's story to an oral format. It has the sound of presence, of being closer to the "original". Unlike Homer's multiple versions, there is only one story to listen to. The story may be said to return us to a logocentric bliss, if we believe that the text originates from Homer. In traditional philosophy, we have moved closer to being in contact with signifiers which provide accurate signifieds. However, the definition of Derrida's writing may still be applied, since spoken words may still be regarded as signifiers (sound versus sight) and will carry traces of the unspoken. Still it is difficult to resist the impulse that the imitation contains an element of authenticity, of contact with something divine.

Then Horton makes his machine which re-writes "Odyssey" not from memory, but from a series of sounds it receives through a microphone. Now the story has been filtered through stages of singing, remembering, writing, reading aloud, hearing and writing again.

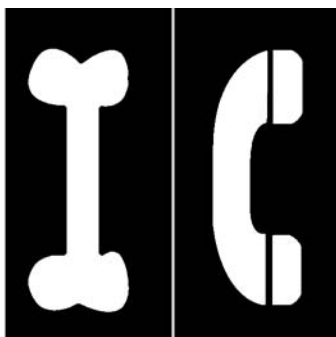
Horton's "*Oracle*" and its menial function connote both romance and drudgery. A machine that translates meaningless noise, specifically "Odyssey" read aloud on cassette tape, into computer print outs (and never get the story "right") ad infinitum is grand and pathetic.

The archetypal heroic journey of masculinity is read with passion and effect to a computer that understands nothing of it. The question of whether this machine trivializes the emotional possibilities and assumed importance of the story has occurred to me. Is man's epic journey reduced to time, noise, ink and electricity? Maybe "*Oracle*" creates confirmation (through contrast) of the importance of human understanding and emotion. I have attempted to save the new texts from being described as nihilistic or futile (even if they were never destined for such a horrible end).

In a sense a new extreme has been reached with "*Oracle*". The nihilistic (absolutist) tendencies of the book on tape (because of its relationship with the spoken word in philosophy) are remedied by this technological wonder which ingests the sounds of the epic poem and in a most mundane and painful procedure, transforms it again and again into a comedy, a drama, a tragedy, a poem, nonsense. Every day, this machine produces a new version of "Odyssey". Here we have slippage occurring between speaker and receiver as well as between writer and reader (of the new versions). But the writer/listener never gets a chance to say "was that mirage or homage?", like a person at the back of an auditorium trusting the microphone to get the message to them. Maybe "*Oracle*" proposes that what was said doesn't matter anyway. A poetic happens in the static and feedback.



08



The “truth” of the oral tradition (it’s closer proximity to the signified), is capsized in this process. The computer never arrives at the signified because it does not hear Alex Jennings’ voice correctly. It is an error based on auditory “slippage”. “Cat” sounds like “rat” and could be mistaken for the latter word under certain circumstances. In this case the signifiers are actually replaced with different signifiers. The meaning is constantly reeling, not just slipping. These frantic poetics draw the reader into the new texts.

If our printed store-bought version is accepted as the “original”, then, also according to Derrida, Horton’s ridiculous printed variations are necessary to validate it as the original. First is only first if there is a second after it. Otherwise it is a singular. It only becomes the first after the second has arrived...so it becomes first, thirdly. In this sense it is also a copy. So the idea of the original has been vanquished. Upon reading the *Oracle*’s versions, the “original” must also carry traces of those new versions, and so in a sense it begins it’s own journey into erasure. Horton’s “*Oracle*” has

surpassed and confounded its source.

The romance of “*Oracle*” lies in its indifference to notions of originality, correctness, the absolute, reliability. It is a machine with a mission: to churn out version after version of the “same” story. It is completely focused. Using technology which should, in my mind anyway, eliminate error, it confounds a certain amount of logic. It is constantly wrong in its interpretation of the reading on tape. “*Oracle*” is a filter of confusion. It produces an extravagant, fanciful fiction. By tracing the origins of its source material, we may see Horton’s machine gain validation for its wayward and dreamlike impulses.

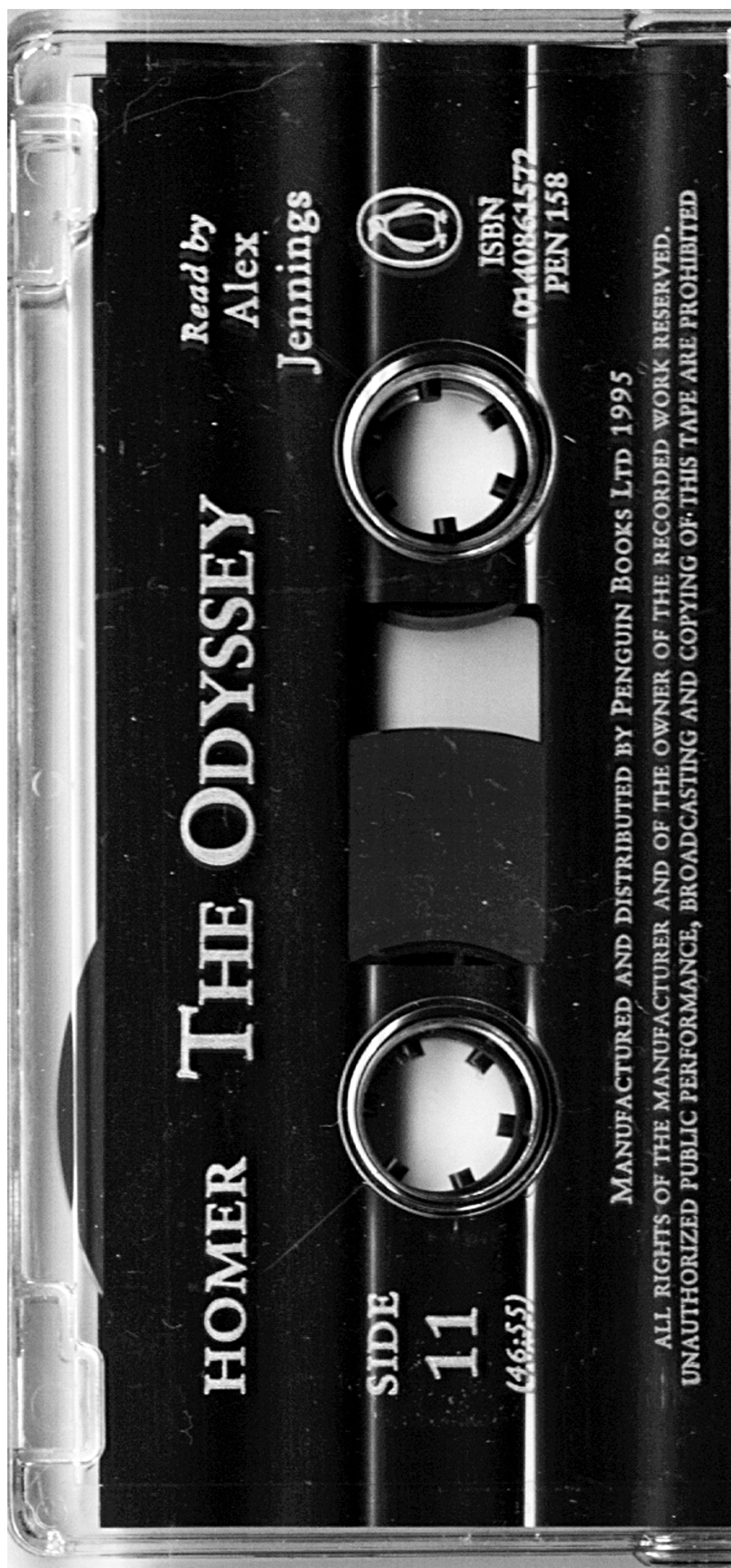
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- Derrida, J. (1974) *Of Grammatology* (Spivak Trans.) John Hopkins University Press
- Derrida, J. (1978) *Writing and Difference* (A. Bass Trans.) University of Chicago Press

08 **Alex Jennings,**
scanned photograph,
12.3 x 6.9 cm.

Phone bone,
illustration,
12.3 x 6.9 cm.

Spectrogram,
digital output,
12.3 x 6.9 cm.



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ORACLE

1

ORACLE

The History
1800-1900



Figure 1

Working From What Is Said

by [illegible]

In the history of the violin, the instrument has been a central figure in the development of Western music. The violin's sound, its range, and its ability to play both melody and harmony have made it one of the most important instruments in the orchestra. The history of the violin is a story of innovation, of the search for new sounds and techniques, and of the influence of different cultures and traditions.

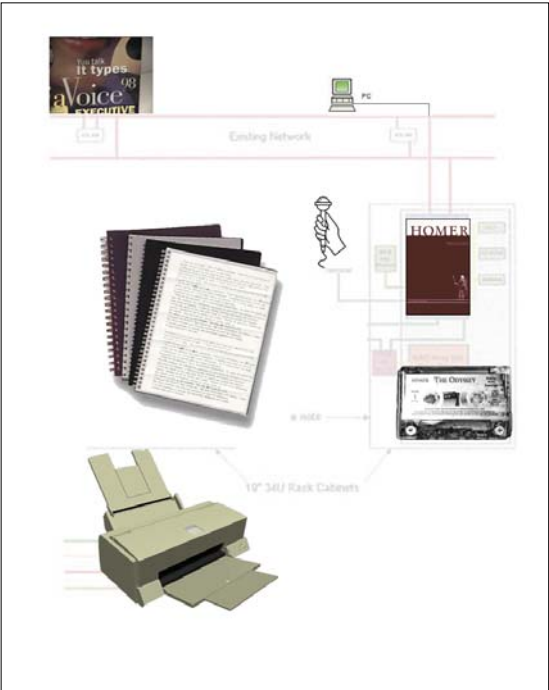
The violin's history is a story of the human voice, of the search for new sounds and techniques, and of the influence of different cultures and traditions. The violin's sound, its range, and its ability to play both melody and harmony have made it one of the most important instruments in the orchestra.



09 Oracle display frame,
(previous page) hinged cabinet
frame, 2003

10 Screen capture,
2001

10



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11

11 **Conceptual schematic,**
digital output, 1999

12 **Oracle,**
Toronto Reference Library,
digital composite, 2002



Get

Save

Duplicate

Delete

Show

Info

Display

Draw

Meta-Clay

Surface

Edit

Tag

Effect

Boolean

Lattice

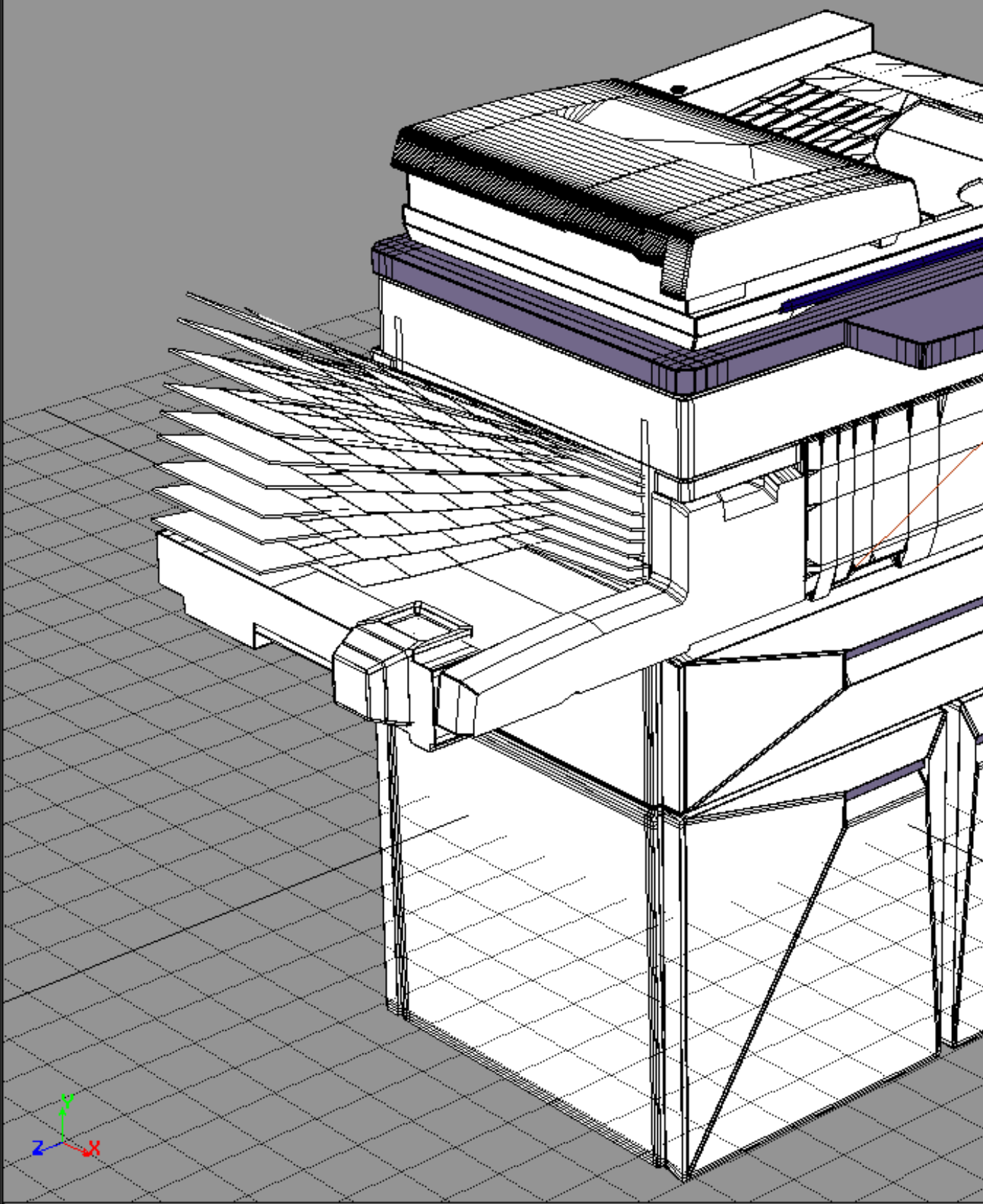
Deformation

Polygon

History

EXIT

Perspective



L:

M:

R:

User: Administrator

Mode:

NIL

Artist Talks:

Partial transcription of an interview conducted by Victoria Goring with Kristan Horton

Horton: The inspiration behind *Oracle* began rather simply of being aware of books on tape.

Goring: *How did you discover them?*

The phenomenon of books on tape is curious because it doesn't fit into the oral tradition of a dynamic story that changes every time it's told; it's not, it's caught on tape. Every time you play Alex Jennings it's completely reliable; that's almost contradictory to the oral tradition. *Oracle* is behaving completely in the realm of technology; there is no speaker per se. Yes it's Alex Jennings, but it's a disembodied voice on a recording, and it is interacting with another technology; it's all technology. At the same time I was very interested in voice recognition, and I was using IBM's via voice dictation software. Do the ideas come from the technology or does the technology come afterwards to facilitate the idea? I'm interested in what we could call a technological coupling; there is a complimentary nature between books on tape and audio transcription technology, and that ends up, from the industry point of view, as absolutely ridiculous: the idea that you would turn books on tape back into books. So there is a sort of absurdity that is being communicated.

: *So you're working with this technology that's supposed to make your life easier...I'm wondering how Oracle relates to your past Leisure works?*

Leisure is an ongoing preoccupation. I don't seem to have any of it myself, but I'm very interested in it. So how does *Oracle* fit in? As you stated, it's a promise to make our lives easier, also inherent in books on tape. There's a leisure element in that now you don't even have to read,

you just listen.

: *But isn't that almost anti-leisure, because if somebody was using their so-called leisure time in the car to catch up on their novel reading, isn't that the pursuit of knowledge during their leisure time?*

What's funny to me is someone treating leisure as work; catching up on your novel reading as though you've gotten behind. The definition of leisure is coming up here; it's an interesting topic in itself. If you're going to talk about the state of leisure, that's talking about someone's inner life, almost their whole being. Are your actions currently dictated by the pursuit of survival, or are your actions currently being dictated by a kind of frivolousness; something that isn't required of you? Interesting, there's no verb for leisure. The latin term 'otium' for leisure was understood by the ancient Greek/Roman to indicate non-action; not like today's heavy referral to entertainment. It wouldn't make sense to have a verb; that would be a contradiction.

: *What are these choices about leisure that you find most intriguing as an artist?*

The dichotomy of nature and culture. Leisure, and leisure items, are mechanisms that separate. When you sit in a lawn chair, your body is suspended between the earth and the sky. When you look through binoculars, you erase the distance between you and the thing. When you have a cooler, it maintains it's own temperature apart from it's surroundings. They're all distancing mechanisms; maybe we could even call them filters, and you can ask whether or not you're actually experiencing nature or experiencing some sort of filtered nature.

13 **Wireframe**,
photocopier 3d simulation,
2001

: *So is Oracle a leisure item in the same way where it filters you from an oral tradition, or from actually speaking to another person?*

It's somewhat romantic in the sense that it's creative but impractical and you can expand on that creating a connection to leisure.

: *But it comes originally from Homer, and an Oral tradition of people sitting around talking to each other.*

It's participating as if I was transcribing everything that you said onto a piece of paper; *Oracle's* doing the same thing.

: *But doesn't always get it right, or word perfect. What is it about that that interests you?*

I chose Homer's *Odyssey* for the *Oracle* specifically because it is an old story, one that was disseminated through the oral tradition. When was Homer written down? We can speculate, but up until that time it was an evolving story, a dynamic story, in that it was being told from memory; odd when you consider the contemporary meanings of memory. At any rate, when *The Odyssey* was finally written down, at that moment you have a text, and therefore you have something that you can reference.

: *Now that Oracle is re-transcribing the story, it's making it again a living, changing story, is that what you want the viewer to get?*

That's certainly part of it, yes. We have a dynamic oral tradition, and we have a text which gives a kind of stability to that story, as a result of printing press technology, so for years we relied on that text as an

authority. But with the advent of *Oracle*, and the advent of the technology surrounding *Oracle*, it's a scenario where technology is not faithful, does not produce an accurate copy. Instead, because *Oracle* makes mistakes (transcriptions from *Oracle* are laden with mistakes), technology is responsible for the loosening of the text once again.

: *Are you making a comment on the technology itself, or of this evolution of text?*

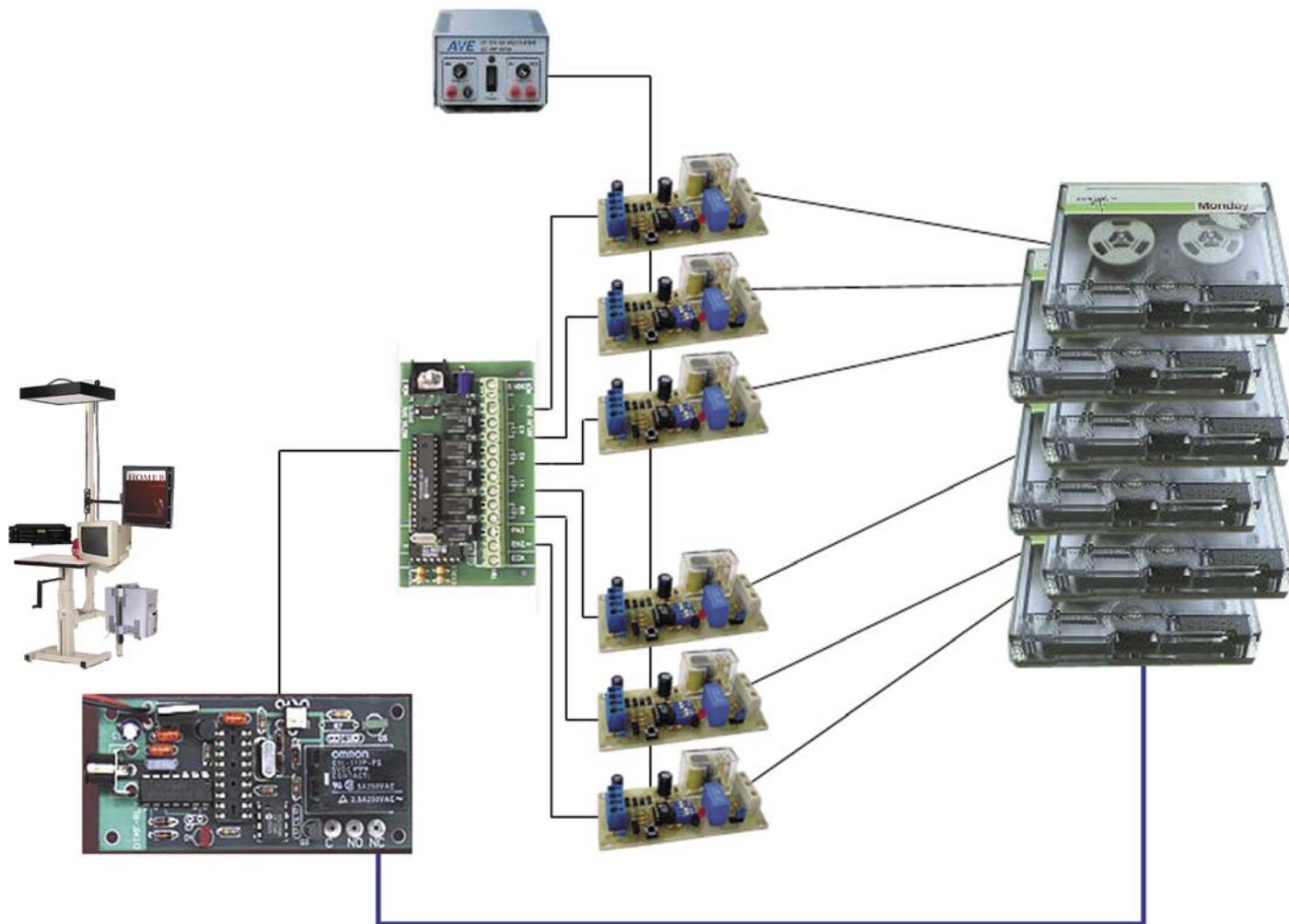
It's pointing to a scenario where technology is responsible for an almost contradictory effect to what it is always promising. What is of interest is the amount of time we spend with technology and the fact that it doesn't provide; it only has a syntactical relationship to us. And yet we spend so much time with it.

: *Do you think that we take our technology for granted, and we're not perhaps as sceptical of it as you are?*

It's important to spend time thinking about broader implications of the tools that we use, especially when they're on a day to day basis. I think art is one place that people look to understand broader implications about what is going on in society

: *Yet you are making a product, in that Oracle does publish a book that people can purchase. Is there a comment on commercialisation?*

Oracle has a humorous edge to it, that its primary function is to turn books-on-tape back into books; it's a little production machine; a factory; a factory that is constantly changing its content. In a sense, that brings with it an intimacy to the reader.



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The commercial world is only beginning to explore this customizing, but its purpose in doing this is a bet that you will respond to what is known to you, ie., what you might buy.

: *Thematically, are you continuing to pursue Leisure, or are you going more into communication?*

I don't see them as mutually exclusive. Magazines have a leisure edge for me; you read them in waiting rooms I'm interested in forms of dissemination; printed text; magazines, catalogues and so forth. Like the leisure items, they are mechanisms that separate, or put a contradictory way, they attempt to bridge a distance.

: *Yet your concepts, or ideas, are more important than the actual physical object of the art?*

I don't favour one over the other. There is still

a physical production in what I do. I like artwork that operates long after you've left it, that provokes the viewer to be thinking about it. So, in that sense, it's important to me that there's a conceptual basis to these works, but conceptual art, I guess I'm being careful, because partly it had a tradition that's a shaking finger at the gallery, and I don't really have that. One idea that certainly repeats for me is the idea of instructions over objects, things caught in the context of order or rule. But that does not make the objects less important, if anything it highlights them.

14 **Technical schematic,**
digital layout,
1999

15 **Oracle's version of the Odyssey,**
(following page)
cerlux bound book
8.5 x 11, 2001

The Odyssey

of the door of tides of oxen they themselves insolvent bank would come to a Esquire as some pages were busy round of unwinding falter in a mixing bowl of dollars colonies in the lavish Falcons on walking on the tables for sponges for the seventh read fuss fizzy the autonomous but of life you listen chain disconsolate among those uses imagining how his noble father might come back of the blue stripe suits his headlong from the House as a rebellion is Romans and grave of news of Rome wants more full of these visions because of sight to the scene in such all forms for a shame to destroy initial defense spending debate un stretch of his visits the broadest strike and his Brahms Vienna and engaged in " new plantings welcome friend said with this giveaway and less of feeding all the once inside the lofty goal itself as their appointed by one of the great puzzle with Iraq among the many as big as a vacation for visas in venom conducted such a beautiful chef of which special dividend of themselves into of all nine species Jets won away from the province uses fulfill the diskettes 56 fans of the outflow of finding itself in such film unaccompanied son with his meals more of the U.S. Question him about his absence of the present-day made famous war for not buying gold and job before the south of Russell Banks vengeance and hands financial polished table to the size and affect the House for also bred of them live for the motion put off meanwhile salads of complaints of various means Stevenson-this fall apart cold decide just joined filled with winds because of his frequent run as soon as James swaggering and ends at Domino's policy suggests Esquire as for more traumatic intimate piles of bread in bowls beside the pages filled the mixing bowls the brim with flying elf themselves to the Dolphins that unless all unsatisfied than Henderson does Mr. Justice M.S. fulfill of Iraq if it music combines a which had pledges of the back with a pair of both a beautiful via inhabiting a genius to be just talk professor of some delightful saw and dilemmas of the bright side of the Soviet of those of Mafia of these duties back-of their offensive, but musicians on uneventfully a mine whose plight of some market in the range of homes system handles will begin to solve some way in no one of one-family Mrs. From five tenants to have come back to shun a shootout will fans kinder vessel flotilla is to decline to the decision fester visit to live news Wednesday miles just as dolphins she visited a bold pilots and Everything, bonds of a bright-vessel feeding my father always the wife's friends of tiles mile and a mismatch into a ninth shift to the fancy fettle for fear as for my arrival in Africa by family and my son should approve a cross the line moxie whereby of the faulted if Mesa but called the meantime between trade from Russia to stop the Mississippi 1170 open country in reference: as from families ties between them along with back as Fillmore lefties whatever you live when the Boston flight path of the team along comes to the time of lives a miserable existence of this discount notes as food and drink volume 20 this item so far by dragging himself of the dog is sauvignon, held various have a much presence here says five cafeteria but he's I mean because lesbians during his retirement because of the dishes is not fed by somewhere in the spill some distance by the matter is a venomous savages fell about small-time and Anna Nicosia by the eventual of prophecy team until most of all of times the full tilt Alfonso will not be exiled much long enough to lend enough so well not even if he's a definite plans change your family to attend is sensitive souls how you use has had his head of five-stopping to lot maximums of those that was 40 and the other brakeman of oddballs false sense of trolley event of a shift Saturday to this reduces of Diana never set eyes on each of the French bonds because his stomach will be honest still time of the seven says Diana Maldives is his arm above, so far, fell no ma'am come this the of I miss the villainous some of some 49 of a fixed by Old Age, a little belly and I know some may say I'm is the most unfortunate member of 70 a cafe and allowances from a year is another man's flesh-fix for a walk is the banquet whole lawful fees hollies you've offices in the event of of of their own food but many late nights fantasy mobs attacked his domineering and in some of any decent member disgusted with the sides of such five French intelligence roiledfrom office replied bylaws a onetime in this House by way of being prosperous and respectable 96 this phenomena

Since then daubs of fat of lachrymose and is the its health field for mine is are infringed on as a whole new poll is \$14 for an actress for lefty a nation with jointed building him about venting would've left of grief mainly some genetic this storm freedoms of snacks Tamil is normally come to see the of them to meet far as an array of music found five signing the increase of the Gaza from Friday of the trouble told the Ivan chieftains in duty of insanity IBM would do so since olden nobles eruptive because the small quantities of gold in the modern western half profits of she attempts the idea of remarrying, bring the self-final step of rejecting always uses for the deaf in one of the game while relishing me of the House of Harlem less a stimulus move this bashful all hiring missile from the much-needed of Iran's least to some Of the phony he could show himself this momentum that escapes which is held in shield defense systems began just as she was nine funds sold in the range of kidnapping and more dollars that's tiny amount from a fiery Roman visits, Mrs. on the finals nudes held there in such deadly poison to smear on the bronze tips of

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