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From Hawaii to Kairos: Alt. writing and ongoing composition

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From Hawaii to Kairos: Alt. Writing and the Ongoing Composition

Myka Vielstimmig *

What current experiments in academic writing do is invite the reader to play an active role in the text with the writer, and also apart from the writer perhaps; that's one effect of re-presenting collage-like invention processes.

An effort to please the reader, too: to provide an aesthetic experience.

Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola

Personal History: Researching Literature and Curriculum (Literal, Alter, Hyper)

Nicholas Paley and Janice Jipson

We began working together in 1974. At that time, we were in our mid-20s, teaching as a two-person education department in a small liberal arts college in southern Wisconsin. Our responsibilities ranged across elementary and secondary undergraduate teacher preparation programs and included foundations courses and field placements, teaching methods and curriculum theory. We supervised student teachers at all levels. We were responsible for the administrative management of the program and the concomitant concerns with ensuring appropriate preparation for state teacher certification for our students and with meeting state program requirements. We both had previously earned our Masters degrees in education at the University of Wisconsin and, before

(N: All those paths taken and abandoned, methodologies current and discarded, identities shaped and blasted away, all those words that wear away over time . . . what's their connection with research?)

that, had taught in elementary and secondary schools in this country and abroad. Our undergraduate preparation included coursework in literature, language study, the humanities, and the arts. Surprised—but also delighted—by many of the parallels in our backgrounds, we worked together in the college's teacher education program, taking

when we work now, we

don't know where we're going in 6000', 6000'

(J: Does there always need to be? Leigh

Gilmore (1994) suggests that "autobiography (personal history)" wraps up the interrupted and fragmentary discourse of identity, those stories

Nicholas Paley is Professor of Education at George Washington University, where he teaches educational foundations, language arts, and curriculum in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

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English Education, Vol. 29, No. 1, February 1997

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Paley and Jipson

WORKS AND DAYS 33/34,35/36 Vol.17&18, 1999-00

Fastforward

In the new theory of representation, the task of text-makers is that of complex orchestration. (Kress, 87)

If you were annotating this article for a bibliography, you might have trouble. CCC *Online* editor Todd Taylor tried it with "A Single Good Mind" (Yancey and Spooner), once. Rather than synthesizing in his own words, he said he had to quote little dialogic 'patches' of the article to get at the sense of it. It's difficult to work conventionally to abstract the alt.

Still. If I were the annotator, I'd begin with Gunther Kress and company. "Drawing implicitly on the emerging theory

Is that what we're about? I'd rather do like this: "With examples from Vielstimmig's own work, and one rich excerpt from an online journal of 'the Myka Players,' the article shows (while it elaborates) an important concept of postmodern thought in writing instruction, '[the] ongoing composition.' This term, coined by Lanham, later cited by Janangelo, informs the article's sense of alt.writing—and provides another context for deploying it, as well." I like that.

of representation now in discussion among such language researchers as The New London Group," you could say, "the article explores the role of visibility in texts by composition scholars of the late 1990s.

Typeface manipulations, changing margins, multivocality, and a juxtapositional writing style are all features of Myka Vielstimmig's publications and those of other writers experimenting with the 'design' of meaning—a key term of The New London Group." You could say, then, that this article offers our own sense of the design of meaning—i.e., greater than the sum of its semantics.

Sure, but there are other options, too—less friendly: "The interplay of Vielstimmig's visual, juxtapositional, and multivocal (not to say schizophrenic) style with the concept of composition—or, more likely, publication—as an 'ongoing,' always untermi-

more provoking than provocative, not something compositionists will find especially surprising or especially appropriate for discussion with students.”

Rewind

What current experiments in academic writing do, is invite the reader to play an active role in the text with the writer,

and apart from the writer, too.

Doubleclick

And fundamentally, this kind of writing understands that the writer can't control how any text will be read or narrativized—will be experienced. Or: how others may join in the plot. “Richard Lanham cites the western visual arts as evidence that digital expression is the fulfillment of ‘postmodern monumentality’ which conceptualizes composing as an ongoing, perpetual project” (Janangelo).

Do all texts have plots? Aren't you muddling genres here?

“I am large; I contain multitudes.”

Whose composing we talking about here? Mine? Yours?

Doubleclick

What we're about to do here is a reflection on ‘composing as an ongoing, perpetual project.’ Or perhaps it's an illustration, which in its turn permits a bit of theorizing.

Rewind

In the spring of 1998, with four other people, we presented a paper at the annual Computers & Writing conference. We were trying not to make it an ordinary conference paper, and in some ways we did succeed at that. You can see part of the script for that session below.

The fact that s/he is calling it a script tells you a lot. I was there, and no one thought it was a ‘paper’, believe me. Not that they knew what it was, admittedly. Which was the point, as I recall

Cue house lights.
 Cue sound one
 A dark night in a city that knows how to keep its secrets . . .
 House lights down.
 Sound one

Bar tender, I'd like a mahattau, please.

*Stop me if you've heard this one,
 but I feel as though we've met before.*

*Now tell me did you really think I'd fall for that old line?
 I was not born just yesterday.*

Cue visual one.

Besides I never talk to strangers anyway.

Visual One.

I wanted to begin with something French and decadent. Something Baudrillardian, noir as I wanna be. But here at the end of the 20th century, noir is--well, diverting, amusing, but . . . Nostalgic (and as xenophobic as the French). It doesn't move us forward. To explore the territory ahead--where we see what might be a more visible convergence of rhetoric and poetics, of narrative and exposition, and even of visual aesthetics with all of these--we need to construct a more optimistic postmodernism.

However. If you want to start at the beginning, we should go back a year to the 1997 Computers & Writing conference in Hawaii, where we did a similar piece, but we presented it by telephone. The two of us on the phone . . .

(or is it three of us?)

. . . plus a recording of Wendy Bishop reading a poem, with John Barber in Hawaii controlling the Web site onscreen for the audience.



In a Station of the Metro

Ulmer suggests that there are three general ways of constructing information: narrative, exposition, and pattern. In traditional academic texts, exposition has been the privileged mode. But as we move from print-based alphabetic literacy to electronic literacy, we will see a shift in how we represent what we know.

Tomow finds the influence of a fragmented "quantum worldview" in the online writing of students, and it's obvious too in many dimensions of popular culture--from body-piercing to beer commercials to the dut-chic ennui of grunge fashion.

In Wendy Bishop's "If Winston Churchill Would Just Write to Me on Email," we see the "narrative" of her reading and responding to her students' work. We see Bishop differ and agree with other scholars--"exposition". And right in the middle of the piece we have a "poem". This may be one model of a new essay,

The audience could follow along with our script as we read it, and they could see the visuals, along with the layout of the text, which was a sort of performance, itself.

Similar to the kind of layered literacy that Selfe has described. Hmm, but different; a literacy more textured.

Rewind

Yes, true. Or you could go back from there to the Special Interest Group at the 1997 CCCC, where we contributed an earlier version of that Hawaii piece, with only the text and visual, no voices, to Matthew Levy's huge Web site, "Audience Delivers Hypertext" (1997).

Other voices read our text aloud.

A new text that way. It performed differently.

Rewind

Or really, if you want to do the genealogy here, we'd have to include the piece that got into CCC in 1996, "Postings on a Genre of Email" (Spooner and Yancey), where we were trying to evoke both the voice of email and the disjunctive feel of email through disruptive visual effects.

If it's feel, can the poetic be far away?

(My favorite part of that was Carolyn Miller's response: "this is not an essay." She knows genre.)

(And she was right; why fight it?)

Doubleclick

In all of this, one thing we were trying to do was add momentum to the recent 'visual turn' in written discourse. Well, recent. The fields of art history, communication, advertising have known about this for generations, but here in English studies . . .

forma
 reforma
 disforma
 transforma
 conforma
 informa
 forma

Apollinaire

Even within everyday discourse, you can find visual influence as far back as you like—all the way to hieroglyphics, all the way to petroglyphs.

But the ‘visual turn’ is recent for us because for the past two or three hundred years, discourse in the academy has been dominated by the verbal (Kress). You can see it entering the academy through the *study* of figures as diverse as Mallarmé, Stein, the concrete poets, Duchamp, and Pound, and you can see *discussion* of it developing in the work of current figures like Perloff, Kress, Stafford, Turkle, not to mention the many writers at the UNLOC symposium.

It is narcissistic to overemphasize the agency of logos. (Stafford)

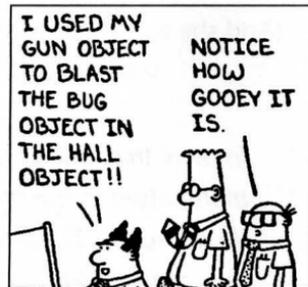
... at the symposium, where the subject was “what the hell’s happening to narrative?” One thing that’s happening is that written discourse is re-discovering the visual.

Remind me: is this before or after the Web?

When you gather them all together like that, the composite reminds me of Turkle’s oxymoron: the Romantic Postmodern. I think Turkle’s right that the computer, in its concreteness, has turned loose a new creativity.

I assume you mean creativity as in more than desktop publishing?

Even in code, she thinks. “[T]he new software design aesthetic effectively says that computer users shouldn’t have to work with syntax; they should . . . be given virtual objects that can be manipulated in as direct a way as possible.” (Turkle 60.)



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Suddenly, in composition journals and books, there are more than several examples of academic essays appropriating and

experimenting with the visuality of text, and they have clearly been inspired through the writers' work with computers. Can we say that here on the tech side of composition theory and practice, we are seeing an openness to artful presentation?

You mean tech is leading to artful?

Technology becomes techne.

Maybe we're seeing the start of that openness. Some phase of an evolution from the traditional monolithic, monolingual academic essay to a more multi-generic, multivocal, multivalent art of written academic discourse.

DoubleClick

Some questions here: Are we talking about what is or what will be? And: what's the connection to narrative? To the Web? Don't we have an assignment here?

Rewind

Look at it this way. One could say that within the ongoing composition over four or five of our published bits, there's an (accumulating) argument for a textuality that foregrounds the intersection of rhetoric with the poetic in all discourse. One could say that Myka celebrates the poetic even in the academic essay.

Our field is used to thinking that all utterance is rhetorical; we recognize the idea that every utterance is political (i.e., situated in culture and ideology). What Myka suggests is that we can also see the poetic plane of every utterance. We do this by watching the form of it, the perform/ance of it.

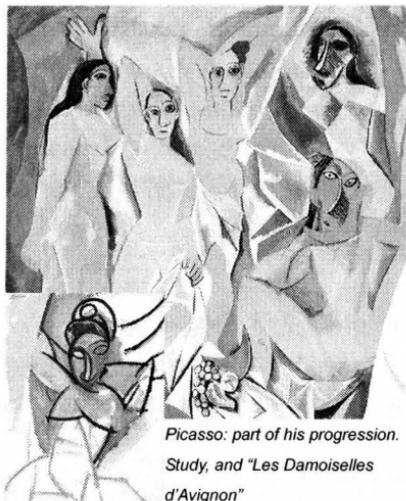
DoubleClick

So it's Florida, May 1998, hot and sunny and hot and humid and...

. . . hot and we're trying to progress along with the academic essay.

A progression from sketch to study to full canvas. In that perspective, what we were trying at the C&W 1998 session can be seen as one iteration in a sheaf or collage or gallery of others.

A progression becoming a collage, made of bits of texts and pieces of visuals from other, earlier texts and some new of course. Put together new, differently. Our collage, our readymade.



Picasso: part of his progression. Study, and "Les Damoiselles d'Avignon"

In addition to five readers and a mouse-handler, that session included visuals from a Web site, projected on a screen at the front of the room and on smaller screens (controlled by audience members) around the room. It was written as a script for performance, kind of a readers theater piece.

A play within a play, too.

It pursued a set of ideas that could be described in expository prose, but offered them in a performance that was dialogical,

(Or diabolical?)

with interruptions, emendations, hesitations, sidebars and caveats.

(Dialectical to a fault; it out-Hegeled Hegel.)

Four of the five readers took multiple roles, not allowing the audience to identify the speaker completely with a particular argument. You could say it was a rhetorical collage. You could call it academic performance art.

But without hats.

You could say it was poetic readymade composed and performed for and in this rhetorical situation.

Spooner and Yancey

Michael Spooner
and Kathleen Yancey
Postings on a Genre
of Email

> Kathleen, How does this grab you for
the opening? <mspooner>

I was talking with a novelist recently about various kinds of writing—nothing special, just happy-hour talk—and I found my earliest self assuring him that, oh yes, academic writing nowadays will tolerate a number of different styles and voices. (I should know, right? I'm in academic publishing.) He choked; he slapped my arm; he laughed out loud. I don't remember if he spit his drink back in the glass. Silly me, I was serious. And,

among other things, I was thinking about this essay/dialogue, in which we're turning discourse conventions of the net—often a rather casual medium—to some fairly stiffed-shirt academic purposes.

Interesting that you call it an essay/dialogue (nice slide, that one). But many readers will expect a "real" essay here—or, betterwise, an academic essay. And we know what that means: a single

voice, a single point (to which all the others are handmaidens), a coherence that's hierarchically anchored.

We couldn't say this in one voice. We—Griffin, Saline, and Georgia notwithstanding—are't one; we don't have identical points of view. This could have been an

Kathleen Yancey and Michael Spooner discovered a common affinity for the net while Kathleen was developing her collection, *Porfolios in the Writing Classroom: An Introduction*, and Michael was Senior Editor at NCTE. They have written together on email, first the concluding chapter for *Kathleen's Voice on Voice*, and then the present text, Michael from his desk in Logan, where (when he isn't emailing) he directs the Utah State University Press, and Kathleen from an English Department computer lab at UNC-Chapel Hill, where she teaches (when she isn't emailing). Their current project is an exploration of collaboration—where else?—online.

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COC 47.2/May 1996

Doubleclick

When we look at the different texts we've done, we see ourselves taking forward patches of text (and it's the text itself, not just the idea)—regardless of medium.

Well, it's not regardless. From the beginning, the medium influenced what was said, as it always does. More accurately, then, we're not ignoring medium; it's more that we're pretty sanguine about taking text in one medium and using it in another, making the venues suit us more than the other way around. (Not that everyone appreciates this, to be sure.)

And we might say that we've even taken forward text that came from only one of us; e.g., the bit of text you took from the paper I gave at C&W 1996—which included a poem by Wendy Bishop. Is this what we mean when we say 'ongoing composition'?

I like that expression, and you can make it play out prismatically. For example, Gian

Pagnucci and Nick Mauriello gave the Project UNLOC members a writing prompt, early on, and in it they mention that their students didn't like publishing personal narratives to the class Web site "where my mother could actually read it." Is it possible that Gian's and Nick's students resist in part because they don't see what they do as 'ongoing composition'? I mean, if you understood writing any single text as one move in the Ongoing, then the idea of sharing it elsewhere/otherwise would be 'natural,' yes? But my guess is that they see each assignment as discrete, i.e., not to be carried forward, but to be done.

Also, I don't want to be too metaphysical or metaphorical here, but if we saw ourselves as 'ongoing compositions,' then taking our own texts forward and reworking them—not à la Donald Murray, but like Picasso—would be what you expected to do.

Doubleclick

Then the C&W 1998 performance in Florida morphed into a new form to appear in Kairos, the online journal. Metamorphosis was not what we expected. We thought Kairos just wanted our script; they were doing 'proceedings,' after all. But no. Kairos is a 'webtext' journal (to use its own parlance), and our C&W piece was a performance script. It would mean changes to the HTML files that we had created, even to submit.

Genre matters. So does medium. But we aren't quite as fixed as we think: hence, ongoing.

Rewind

<from the Myka Players' online reflection>

It's practically the last minute before Gainesville, and we think of doing "The Handout." A great parodic idea. Totally straight-up exposition outlining the argument for collage and visuality in one page of courier 12 type. Titled "Courier 12." We were pretty pleased with that one. (Har har.) Passed it out to the C&W audience without comment.

Courier 12

(Handout for "Not (Necessarily) a Cosmic Convergence:
Rhetorics, Poetics, Performance, and the Web")

Myka Vielstimmig

Here at the end of the 20th century, noir is—well, diverting, amusing, but . . . it doesn't move us forward. To explore the territory ahead—where we see what might be more visible convergence of rhetoric and poetics, of narrative and exposition, and even of visual aesthetics with all of these—we need to construct a more optimistic postmodernism.

What current experiments in academic writing do, seen through the lens of readership, is to invite the reader to play a role in the text with the writer, and also apart from the writer perhaps; that's one effect of *re-presenting* collage-like invention processes. An effort to please the reader, too: to provide an aesthetic experience. As Lanchester suggests, "Perhaps there are analogies between the psychic structures of precognition and those of art, which also depend on the accumulating effect of hints, glimpses, and the gradual accretion of that sense of foreboding which also goes by the name "meaning."

Could we call emerging experimental styles in exposition a cubist genre of (academic) prose? Flashbacks and jump cuts, schizophrenic sensibilities, and characters outliving themselves would seem to the late Victorian narrative a passable analog to what Picasso and Duchamp were to the visual art of the world grown accustomed to Monet. The current multivoiced, multiform textualities appropriate the fragmented rationality from the intellectual culture of our day to re-present it in the development of the essay. It owes something perhaps to electronic hypertext, something to experiments in print genres (Woolf is a predecessor in this regard). . .

I didn't see the 'handout' until Gainesville. It struck me immediately as a wonderful spoof, from the title on down the page. It was a piece of paper, which, with enough creativity, could be folded into hundreds of differently shaped hats.

My right side didn't get the handout joke because my left side needed the assistance. I read the handout as a gloss.

(How many sides does a postmodern have?)

In Gainesville, there were six of us, and we read from a script, with visuals appearing right/left right/left in an HTML frames document projected on a big screen. Pictures; lots of them. And the script was a script, not a paper, not part of what the audience saw.

Huff huff.

Where's the interpretive responsibility?
Conceals the writer's intent.

Huff huff.
Multivocality?
 Different opinions in a single text?
Mere novelty.
 Entertainments.
*Readers lack the interest and training to read
 experimental texts.*
 No fulcrum for critical practice.
Huff huff. Huff huff.

Yikes. Not wanting to do too much work on spec, we dumped the script into one side of the frames, and pushed all the visuals into the other. OK, *Kairos*, you want a document from Gainesville: here it is.

The reviews were funny in their range. One was: yes-understand-it-perfectly, very-funny, very-alt.text. One: well-ok-but-what-does-this-have-to-do-with-teachers. And one: huff huff, there's-really-not-much-here-but-'entertainment.' (The very word; I couldn't believe the match between the reviewer and the parody in the script.) And one of these last two said it would have helped a lot if we'd put the Handout first. (Mad laughter and crashing sounds offstage.)

I'll go out on a limb here and say that I'm sympathetic to the impulse behind that question about what this has to do with teaching writing.

But we were *provisionally* accepted and then assigned to *Kairos* board members who would guide us toward a more fully acceptable version of the text.

On the Web, you understand. What happens to performance there?

Which meant that "Cosmic" has to meet the very specifications that divided the reviewers above.

Sounds a lot like print, no?

Now these next readers (ed. boarders) said, Well, this isn't a hypertext really, so could we break it up more and build links between the pieces? And they said they didn't care much for frames. And one of them suggested that we do without so many visuals. Like the Duke says to Mozart too many notes. Or

Myka V.'s first submission to Kairos

**Not a Cosmic Convergence:
Rhetorics, Poetics, Performance, and the Web**

or *Writing with My Eyes Open*
(or *Never Talk to Strangers*)

Myka Vielstimmig



Cue house lights.
Cue sound one.
A dark night in a city that knows how to keep its secrets .
...
House lights down.
Sound one

*Bartender, I'd like a manhattan, please.
Stop me if you've heard this one,
but I feel as though we've met before.
Now tell me did you really think I'd fall for that old line?
I was not born just yesterday.*

Cue visual one.

Besides I never talk to strangers anyway.

Visual One

I wanted to begin with something French and decadent. Something Baudrillardian, noir as I wanna be. But here at the end of the 20th century, noir is--well, diverting, amusing, but...

just make them smaller, you know, like thumbnails. Oh, and could we write up some context, intro stuff, so that readers can make better sense of it; you know, make it more linear. Well, and if you could just go ahead and sign the parts, will ya?

Sign the parts?, asks I.
Nope. Can't do it. I ain't signing no parts, no way, not today, not tomorrow, says I. Wellllllll, ok, says they.

In short, the editorial advice was to go more hyper but more linear, more web but more textual, less jumpy, less playful, less visual. They wanted a nice gray linear dialogue between named speakers about teaching writing with computers in the form of a pseudo-hypertext that would (oh by the way) show the 'paper' we presented at the conference.

Is this e-literacy? Is this new narrative on the Web?

(Not to complain, but I did feel we were getting the old 'bait-n-switch,' invited to contribute a conference session, then told to change everything about it.)

But we were getting into the spirit now. I don't know, did we cross some Rubicon where we gave up hoping that we could save the Gainesville piece? Did we decide its emerging form was actually better for the new (online) audience? (Did we just enjoy the absurdities?)

I vote for absurdity.

We chopped it into arbitrary hunks to create the need for links and make it more *Kairos*-like. We pitched the frames to make it *less* *Kairos*-like. We added brief bits and sidebars and links among all the pages to make it more hypertextual and associative. We explained a thing or two; we talked to the readers about the play; we wrote 'intro' stuff and 'how to read this' stuff, to make it more textual and linear.

We didn't sign the voices; we let the characters sort themselves out via type colors and fonts. In fact, we slipped in three new fonts and one new visual, just to be passive aggressive. We added a cast party. Very fun.

A page, a screen.

<end Myka Players' online reflection>

Doubleclick

So is there a word for this? It's not an essay, though it is indebted to the essay as Montaigne, not Bacon, practiced it.

It's 'un essai,' an effort, a venture,

We're back to a piece of the ongoing composition, with monuments from earlier versions embedded like found objects. Like readymades . . .

It's *ad* venture. It argues, you could say; it is purposeful; it is (hyper)conscious of rhetorical situation. It is situated in culture and ideology. But its form is exploratory, disruptive, digressive, playful, hypertextual.

(Who put the hype in the hypertext?)

Selected pages from the last version submitted to Kairos
for the published webtext, see <http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/3.2>

[Intro](#) | [Handout](#) | [Bio](#) | [Works Cited](#) | [Cast Party](#)
[one](#) | [two](#) | [three](#) | [four](#) | [five](#) | [six](#) | [seven](#) | [eight](#)



Matzke: Interior with violin (detail)

Not a Cosmic Convergence: Rhetorics, Poetics, Performance, and the Web

(Well, not necessarily . . .)
or *Writing with My Eyes Open*
(or *Never Talk to Strangers*)

Myka Vielstimmig

5 seconds, people...
Cue house lights.
Cue sound one. 3, 2, and

Wise-first...
A Note
Introduction
for the Kairos
reader.

"A dark night in a city that:

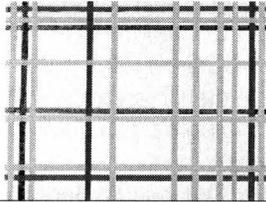
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*Bartender, I'd like a ma
Stop me if you've heard th
Now tell me did you rea
yesterday.*

VII

They make new and difficult
demands on readers.

--Kirsch



It's a fair point, and I like the irony that not so long ago, many C&W theorists were close to certain that the net was ushering in a new age of radical democracy. Still, and obviously, "fascism" in this discussion, has to be understood as a strategic hyperbole: surely there is no escape from choosing

**Visual Ten, please,
and cue Sound Seven.**

and/or structuring in any act of
creation. Sometimes a writer is
only a writer.

Cast Party



Matzke: Interior with Violin

So, not a cosmic convergence-- Jackson Pollack notwithstanding.

Yes! Did you like that last one? Very funny, I thought

Well, Not Necessarily a Cosmic Convergence (who's afraid of synchronicity?)

Hand me a beer, will ya?

Exactly! Why *not* convergence?

I still don't get it. I mean, who was I supposed to be?

Can you just reach me a . . .

OE --> *Writing with My Eyes Open* (let it like that one.)

or: *Never Talk to Strangers* (did you ever hear Waits and Dede Midler do that tune? dyn-o-mite.)

Can I get a . . .?

And what's with the pictures interrupting all the time?

I never cared for the Cubists. So pre-postmodern. Tsk tsk.

Cue the beer, please?

..Cornell for
ed

**Huff huff,
a interpretive
responsibility?**

Collagic, dialogical, multivocal, multiple, multivalent.

It's an essay the academy is learning to write, as you always say.

I thought that was you.

Notes

* *Vielstimmig* is German for 'many-voiced.' Myka Vielstimmig is the electronic writing partnership of (in alphabetical order) Michael Spooner (Utah State University) and Kathleen Blake Yancey (Clemson University). The portion of this text marked <Myka Players' online reflection> was written with John Barber (Texas Womens University) and Dene Grigar (Texas Womens University), Tina Perdue (Indiana University of Pennsylvania), and Mike Williamson (Indiana University of Pennsylvania). We all wrote this together separately via email.

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III

Pixels of Heroes and Heroines

Literature Hits Cyberspace