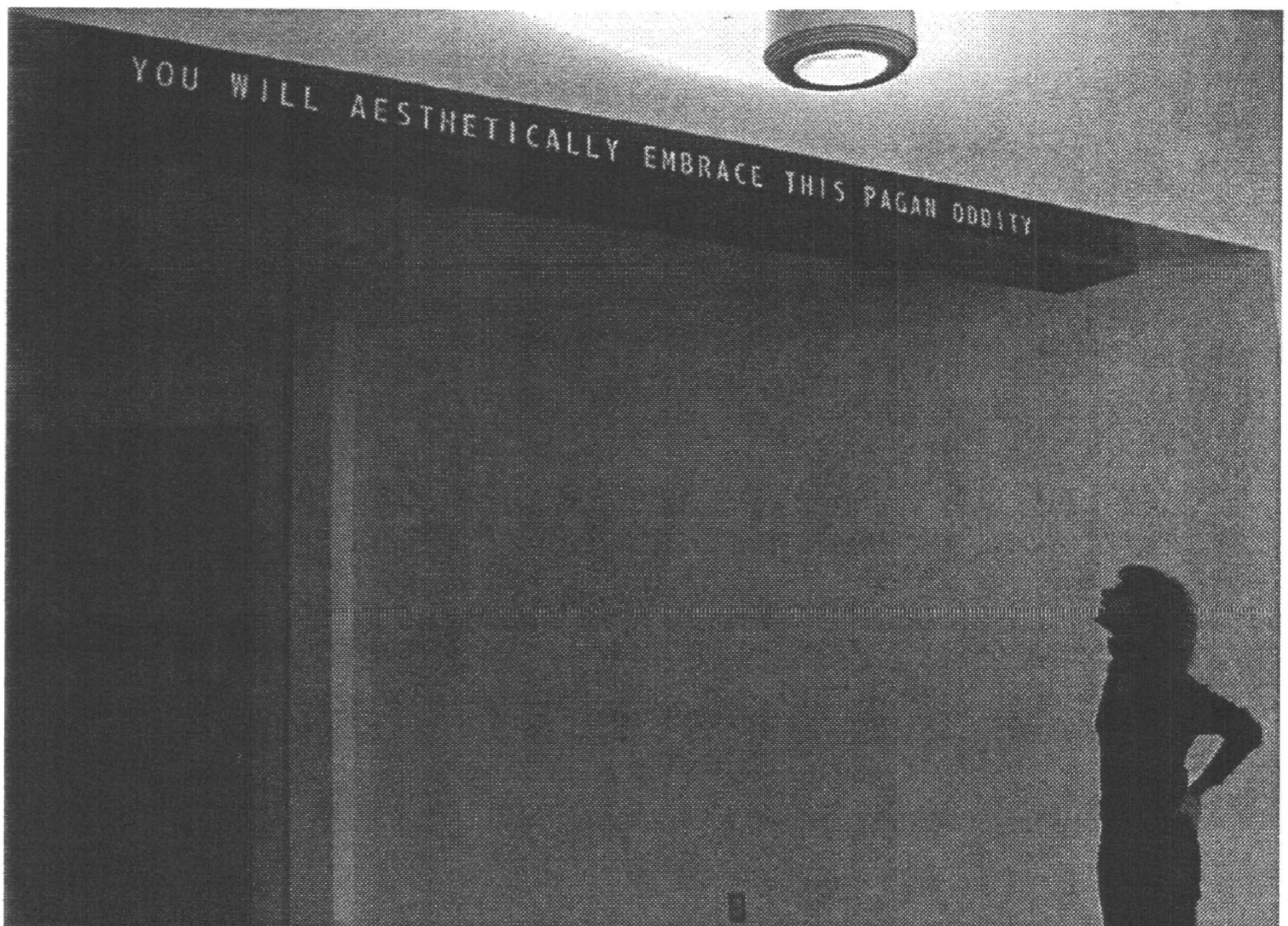


JANET ZWEIG

Impersonator 2002

Public art for the Instructional Technology Center, Santa Fe Community College. Commissioned by New Mexico Arts. 2002.



10" x 9.5' x 10" steel, electronics, language generating program written by Janet Zweig using software developed by Jonathan Meyer.

FOR A PUBLIC ARTWORK COMPETITION through New Mexico Arts, I proposed making a text-generating program that activated a mechanical sign. Although strongly connected to my past work, this particular piece was designed specifically for Santa Fe Community College's new Instructional Technology Center. I wanted to make something that had a challenging computer component and used the computer in a novel way. I wanted to provide something that was engaging and delightful, but that also might make students think about the artistic possibilities of computer programming—a work that was not sited on the web or the computer monitor, which have been the conventional sites for computer art.

I had always loved the mechanical flip signs that announced trains in Europe. I researched the manufacturers of these signs and located one that agreed to work with me within our budget. The sign itself is a marvel of engineering. Each letter has a "rolodex" of forty flaps with characters and punctuation. Each rolodex has its own stepper motor. All the units are connected to a computer within the sign that receives our code and makes the individual letters change accordingly.

The sign works this way: whenever someone enters the main doorway, a contact in the door is triggered and sends a signal to a "hacked mouse" built by Dana Moser. The mouse then simulates a mouse click that tells the computer program to generate a brand new sentence randomly from the software. It then sends this sentence to the flip sign via an ethernet cable. All this happens instantly so that the person entering the door immediately sees and hears the sign flip to a new sentence made especially for the occasion.

To make the sentence-generating program, I worked with an artist and programmer, Jonathan Meyer. Jon knew that I wanted to write the language components and structures myself, so he developed some very ingenious software in Java language within which I could program the content.

There have been a number of computer-generated language programs, but they usually generate mostly nonsense or uninteresting texts. I decided that, instead of teaching the computer to know all about language, I would instead give it a large lexicon of vocabulary and then give it some prototypical syntactical structures to plug that vocabulary into. Right now there are over forty syntactical structures and thousands of words in the lexicon. This

means that every sentence will be unique. Over the four months I worked on the programming, I never saw the same sentence twice, except in cases where I specifically programmed some recurring sentences that I thought would be useful for repetition. For instance, I created one structure that always begins with: "ASK ME TO TELL YOU ABOUT" and is completed from a large database of words which refer to the history of computing, cognitive science, or language play. For instance, it might say: "ASK ME TO TELL YOU ABOUT NEURAL NETWORKS" or "ASK ME TO TELL YOU ABOUT LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN." I was hoping these occasional interjections might pique computer students' curiosity about the history of their field. The other sentences, however, are vastly variable, so that, depending on the specific structure, there might be nothing at all familiar about them.

Some of the sentences it generated during the first few days we ran it in Santa Fe:

YOU WILL AESTHETICALLY EMBRACE THIS PAGAN ODDITY.
 WAS OUR SLEEP NOURISHED BY DELUSION OR DESPAIR?
 YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE SUPERMARKET OF TOLERANCE.
 THING THREATENS GIRLFRIEND. A NARRATIVE OF PRIDE.
 WHAT IF FORENSIC EXPERTS WERE TO RISK EVERYTHING?
 HYSTERIA, HONEY, IS SO GENUINELY TRANSPARENT.
 IT'S PERKY, THIS DIPSTICK, YES OR NO?
 I REFUSE TO BE ALIVE IN SPITE OF YOUR PATIENCE.
 FABULOUS POETS WILL SLEEP WITH YOU IN THE FACTORIES.
 THERE MIGHT BE A TRUE-BLUE ALGORITHM AHEAD OF YOU.
 WELCOME ABOARD THE TRANSIENT VIRUS OF MARRIAGE.
 SOON, COLLIES WILL WALK ARM IN ARM WITH SCIENTISTS.
 FILL IT UP ON THE MAGNETIC BYWAYS.
 THIS SIGN IS CONCERNED WITH POVERTY IN OUR COUNTRY.
 THANK YOU FOR NOT COOPERATING.
 MOVE SLOWLY TOWARD THE RESERVOIR OF ERROR.
 ASK ME TO TELL YOU ABOUT GERTRUDE STEIN.