David Rieder interviewed by Thomas Rickert and Michael Salvo

Part 1

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
Well, ok. So, should we try for the first question?

Dave Rieder
Yea, and, oh, BTW, I can't remember off-hand: it's like a 20-minute interview?

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
Ah, let's just run these questions and see what happens now.

Dave Rieder
Yea. Sounds good.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
Ok. Uh, so, the first question is how is your webtext innovative in the historical and/or material or technological context that you've created?

Dave Rieder
Man, I don't know. Well, um...

Dave Rieder
Ok, so one thing that comes to mind is that there are a series of words that I guess could be called multimodal texts that are at the center of that project, which, in a way, are kind of like you know a celebration of that kind of post-alphabetic approach to composition that was on the rise and continuing to rise I think especially in the context of some of what I was talking about in that piece seems apropos. But I think what would have been different or innovative in my approach to multimodality is that it was done algorithmically. I basically wrote a software program that took photographs that I'd taken around town and used the color from every 10 or 20 pixels going across and then down the pictures to place selections of text on the screen recut to the images dynamically. So, I think whereas many of us in the field are working in extremely creative and innovative ways in new media, creating among other things multimodal texts, I don't think many of us are working at the level of programming or algorithm to generate those texts. So, I think that was a contribution or that was a moment of innovation. And then related to that offering the software programs themselves, so anyone can go out and generate their own versions of those kinds of compositions.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
So, you say that it's post-alphabetic, but those algorithms nearing texts on an image, creating a new image, using text. So, can you talk about that choice, and the way that you

use the alphabet to structure the overall texts. There's real irony in the post-alphabetic and then your arrangement, structural arrangement,

Dave Rieder
Yea, no that's a really good point. I think that let's me speak to a moment within in this attempt to move beyond the logocentrism of alphabetic writing where we're still kind of trapped within it. In order to try and articulate something beyond, we're kind of still using... still using it explicitly. But, no, I think, to answer the question, I think my approach to writing tends to work out of folks like... I guess you could say... Jacques Derrida, but to me, I really like going with Leroi-Gourhan and Ingold and a linguist named Harris -- all of whom have described an origin of writing that really begins with gesture. So, for example, Ingold and Harris will talk about how if you look at the word writing etymologically, in Ancient Greek and Ancient Egyptian, the term means drawing; it means etching; it means scratching. The point is that writing really begins as a visual technology, or as a way of inscribing something visual into some substrate. One of the many ways that writing can be deployed is to approximate moments of inflection in speech, i.e., the alphabet. And I think, as a side note, some of us forget just how imprecise the connection is between alphabet and speech. I mean, I think we have this notion in our heads that the twenty-six letters of the alphabet represent twenty-six distinct sounds that constitute the letters that make up words that make up sentences. Frankly, I think we all know that language is not that atomistic. It's that discrete. As one linguist whom I've enjoyed reading, as Studdert-Kennedy has talked about [it], it's really more of a sonic event that represents the continuum of sound, and we just use the alphabet to mark moments in order to kind of try to make sense of something that's otherwise so ephemeral and difficult to lock down. So, anyway, the point I think, getting back to what I was saying, is, yea, in a way it's kind of incidental that it's text on the screen or text in those multimodal compositions. I think for me, what you are looking at are drawings. And I think part of the appeal rhetorically is because we in the humanities are so focused on print-based language, text, that we tend to see the text first in those compositions. But I think that's incidental to what's going on more broadly, which is just a novel way of doing visualizations.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
One of the really interesting things about Ingold is he takes that notion of gesture, and he weaves it into a larger notion of lines.

Dave Rieder
Yea.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
He talks about lines.

Dave Rieder
Yea.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
So, arrangement, in a sense, it's post-alphabetic because the alphabet functions simply as a structure that is pointing. In other words, you're just drawing lines across the community, in a sense.

Dave Rieder
Yea. And I think that, you know, what I find really wonderful Ingold - yea, he's focused on lines - but as he says in I think the end of the first chapter or the second chapter of that book, Lines: A Brief History - is that it's really about the surfaces working in conjunction with line. You can't talk about lines without talking about surfaces; so, there's a real focus on materiality. The lines, in other words, become an expression of a material -- of a kind of differential between two or more materialities that are coming together. And, so, related to that, I think, you know, getting back to the kind of multimodality that I was putting together algorithmically in those twenty-six image-texts... where exactly or what exactly is the surface that's being described? And it's obviously computational. It is programmed. The lines that really are quite different from the kinds of lines you might put down on a blank sheet of paper, or on some other inert substrate. The notion of surface is part of what is being created in the context of those compositions, and that might be another interesting thing to think about in terms of how multimodality is being explored in that piece.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
You mention this a couple of times, and I'm really struck by how you're using the alphabet itself as an algorithm, to guide the form and the... you are using that to program. Are you thinking about that as you're going through -- the talk about writing and lines is really interesting, but I'm wondering if you can get back to that algorithmic theme that you'd brought up.

Dave Rieder
I'm not sure where to go with that.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
So, my question is about the alphabet as algorithm. Or, you were talking about the gap between what we think language is? And that one-to-one correlation - and how you are talking about the gap between letters say and how they make words and how those words make sentences, and how that makes paragraphs - and how that's a nice corollary to how binary makes machine languages make programming languages make GUIs; so, I'm thinking about how language stacks the way that code stacks.

Dave Rieder
Yea, I mean, you know, what you're saying kind of reminds of a moment in that piece where, as I look closely at some of the compositions that were that were generated dynamically, there were these really wonderful mash-ups of text that you just really

couldn't kind of plan in advance. You know, like these... there were some... there were some moments within those compositions where texts just came together in such a way where it created this really interesting blurred effect, almost like wind, you know, pushing across some kind of watery surface. Other places, it almost looked like chain mail, just by the coincidence of the ways in which certain lines came together. But, you know, and so, another way to kind of think about the question you're asking is, yea, I think it's just so interesting to kind of recognize just how big a gap there is between the letters of the alphabet and what they try to represent, and speech. And so, for example, when I'm, you know, when I'm... when I was teaching my kids how to read - and Harris talks about this in his book, Origins of Writing - you know, we teach a kid "A" is like "Apple." "A" has that sound. But "A" can also have four or five other sounds depending on the other letters in which its deployed. And, you start to realize quickly that we probably really need forty or fifty alphabetic characters, if we want to come close to representing each of the distinct sounds. Like, we really need four or five As. Um, so the plan is that each alphabetic character is just, you know, good enough to get us to a facsimile of what it wants to have said, and/or to what can be said, based on what's notated. And so that gap, I think, is an opportunity to exploit what writing is more broadly, which is, you know, if you want to look at it in kind of humanistic terms, an expression of gesture. Or, if you want to look at it in kind of "posthuman" terms, it's just an expression of force within a differential of materialities. Um, and I think that what's nice about working algorithmically is that you do work explicitly with that gap. And then, you can go in so many possible directions -- and I don't think, as compositionists, many of us have really, um, broken free of the alphabetic mandate as fully as we can. In fact, we all neither of that piece, and I do think that is partly generational - or at least I'd like to think so - that the ways we define writing are still wed, and I think in a lot of ways just disciplinarily, to the ways in which the humanities is still so focused on text (and) to the alphabet, but there's no reason it needs to be there. We could really take that gap in so many directions.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
Do you see, uh, your webtext as having any influence on the field?

Dave Rieder
That's a great question, you know - and this may not seem like the most obvious response - but academia is so weird to me. I just never get a lot of feedback on much of anything. You know, like... you know, you publish stuff, and you bump into people at conferences, and you might get a few pats on the back, but it's just... it's never... There's never as much responsiveness in the field as I'd like to get. So, Cheryl Ball has told me that she's used that piece in some presentations, and it's been well-received, and that's been wonderful. And I've heard, I've gotten some great feedback here and there, but on another note, it's been interesting to see how it doesn't show up that much in the scholarship as I would have liked to think it would. And I think it's largely because it's not easy to cite. The problem with doing new media stuff is that it's relatively opaque to the ways text are saved in databases, cited, etc. And what exactly do you cite in that piece? You can't copy and paste

and text. You can't make - you know what I mean? So, I think that's part of why, if I can really kind of jump to a different - take a different tangent on that question - why I'm increasingly interested in public projects? Because the response is so great. If I'm already doing kind of creative work, so to speak, or doing work that is rhetorically engaged beyond just a kind of scholarly audience, then why not just focus exclusively on the public. Having had now three pieces in museums and one of them over at Cs in St. Louis I think three or four years ago... being able to sit back, for example, and watch that Kinect piece in St. Louis engage people as they were walking from one panel to another, it was just so exhilarating, so wonderful, to actually see the responsiveness. I wish we could all get more of that from the hard work that we do with our scholarship, but I think perhaps, more so with folks doing new media, it's hard to see that work show up in the scholarship because of the opacity that it has compared to more text-centric stuff. I'll stop there.

Part 2

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
Well, one of the things that I've been interested in - and I follow you on Strava - you spend a lot of time in the saddle on your bike. And I'm really curious how you... how the text interacting with the text with the maps that you're using in mapping these places around your town, how that, being on the bike, changes your perception of those things. How mapping your town changed your perception of it, your relationship to it? It's different when you are passing through town in a car, when you are walking on your feet, or when you are on those two wheels; so, is there any dimension to that cyborg consciousness about how you are getting around town on two wheels or in a car.

Dave Rieder
Yea, no, that's a great question. You know, at each speed at which you operate, you are in a different town. You know, I mean I don't think it would be hard to say that speed has a lot to do with the notion of space, and so my relationship with a space around town is going to change with the speed at which I'm operating.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
Part of the phenomenal encounter, what makes a space a space.

Dave Rieder
Totally. Yea. I think - I'll get back to the issue of, you know, the biking thing, because I'd love to go back there - but initially, I think what really fascinated me about doing the around town alphabet stuff was how it actually helped me change my notion of the alphabet. You know, one of the texts that was an inspiration of that piece was a series of pictures of objects and settings in one or more urban environments in which you can see the outlines of each of the alphabetic characters, so, for example, one of them was, I don't know what they would be called, but one of saw horses that are used to put like a big caution sign up.

You know, those two triangular saws - well, side view, that looks like an A. And, you know, a cul de sac can look a bit like a C or an O. And you can easily trace out an H from a downtown street grid, or other letters like that. I just started to kind of see the alphabet in town, and then I started to see town in the alphabet, which means that the alphabet became alienated to some degree from its logocentric relation, its naturalized relation, to speech. And that, among other influences, was an opportunity to start thinking beyond - to start thinking about writing as a gesture or as a physical kind of expression. But, I think what I find really interesting about the biking thing that you brought up are the metrics. You know, like, I just posted something about this on Facebook a couple of weeks ago because I just bought another sensor for my bike. You know? And most of the guys that I'm riding with, they take it pretty seriously. Some of them are racers. And they're recording six or seven dimensions of data on their rides. They're doing speed, you know, miles per hour. They're doing cadence, which means RPM of the pedals going around. They're doing temperature - you know, just ambient temperature because obviously that's going to say a lot about why they did well or didn't, among other things. They're doing heart rate. They're doing watts - if you've got the money for a power meter. How hard are you pushing on the pedals, or how much power are you actually putting into the bike. So, all of that stuff will then show up on a two-dimensional graph in some saved program. And of course there's GPS. So, getting back to your question, I'm really fascinated with the opportunity to kind of use data like that. I mean, if we look at writing as a line that can be deployed in all different kinds of ways. And if we look at that line as connected to different kinds of surfaces, it's interesting to think how I can use a sensor in some context to create new kinds of compositions, which, you know, in an indirect way, is what I was trying to do - not with sensors obviously. But in that piece. But, you know kind of, going off digressing first for a second to make a statement related to that, I think it's really important for us compositionists to just move away from the alphabet. I think that the importance of the alphabet related to literacy and to to literacy is incredibly powerful and we can't let go of that (obviously), for reasons related to politics, disciplinary identity, I mean, culture, society. I mean, that alphabet, you can't just - I think it would be irresponsible to say, 'Forget the alphabet. Let's just move on.' But, I also think that when you look at where communication is going - or has gone - in contemporary society, which has largely moved beyond the alphabet to other forms of expression that because they're numerically-based can just be almost anything. If we can get back to a notion of writing that I think is not just alphabet but can be most anything, then we have a chance to really explore the ways in which technologies on something like a bike, or, for that matter, in a programming language, can represent new forms of research in the field. And connect us to other fields in STEM or in the humanities that have also made that turn because they could. Because they weren't so wed to text the way we are.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
Well then, you start by saying this is a digression, but I don't see it as a digression at all. Because one of the things that I see you doing is talking about found art and data interpretation and data manipulation, and how that leads to new writing. We're writing about writing and we're writing about the sensors - and then seeing relationships that are

only possible because the sensors are showing us what we wouldn't have access to otherwise. I think that's one of the hopes of big data, that by collecting all this we'll start to see relationships and correlations that we wouldn't have otherwise. And that's, you talk about the chain mail images and some of the other images that you produced that were surprises, and like you said, it's just a start. And that's where we start to begin to see those relationships, we reveal those relationships, between data that nascent, that we don't have access to, but that by displaying it and by playing with those algorithmic relationships to bring something out, we can start to, to visually, to see, relationships that otherwise aren't available to us.

Dave Rieder
Totally. Yea. I really like that, and one more thing about the biking thing. When you save your data from the rides, it'll give you a GPS drawing with a map overlay of, like, where you went. And a buddy of mine did a ride on a mountain bike on some little off-road trail. And the drawing that his ride created was beautiful. I'm like, riding on the roads, you know, where things are, the roads are wide and relatively straight. You don't have these sharp turns, at least not on a road bike. His drawing was just so intricate, you know, with all of these little switchbacks and turns. You know, I could just imagine him like having to stop and do 180 around a tree and then go back. You know, it made me think, we should be, you know, I should create like, you know, a little company or something or just blow out posters and some of the data at the bottom to like commemorate really interesting rides because the drawings are so beautiful. Anyway, the point is to say, I could see where, if I were to say, 'That's writing. That's a composition,' someone in art would say, 'Well, yea, sure.' But where our field is, I don't think we're all ready to all say, 'Oh yea, totally. That, also, is writing.' And that I think needs - I would like to see more of the acceptance of writing off the page on different surfaces, deploying different lines post-alphabetically as part of where we're going. I just don't see a lot of it. Or enough of it.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
So, is this what you're working on now?

Dave Rieder
On what? On those posters? No, no.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
What are you working on now? Is it related to what you just said.

Dave Rieder
Yea, actually, it is. So, I presented of piece what I'm finishing up right now in Indiana, at the Indiana Digital Rhetoric Symposium. So right now, just kind of a month and a half away or so from finishing up final revisions for a book titled Suasive Iterations, which is all about rhetoric, writing, and physical computing. And I said in Indiana, this is explained in the book, like physical computing is a kind of post-PC era of computing - it's an opportunity for

us as rhetors and writers to really kind of engage with the new form of innovation computationally. You're not working within a computational medium that that kind of separates the virtual from the real so to speak. You know, if you think about the PC era, i.e., a personal computing era in which we're operating right now and most of us do a lot of work as scholars. You've got a screen through which you engage with the virtual realm of the computer, and you've got a minimal set of sensors with which you do that - the keyboard, the mouse, and maybe in this case the webcam. But in the era of physical computing, you know space now is becoming increasingly everted as its been characterized or hybridized. Where because of the ways sensors can take in data, and because of the ways in which we can feedback interesting mash-ups and creative applications of that data back into the real world, you are operating in a more kind of - you're operating within a virtual-real space where it's just not possible to draw that line. So, the book is really about how we can play with that era. You know, how we can work within that that new era of innovation creatively, suasively. And so, yea, each of the main chapters I've got computational projects that I've developed. And several of them have got lines streaming across the screen to visualize the potential of what you can do with the data. So, yea, lines are all over the place.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
And this, of course, is what I like to call ambience.

Dave Rieder
Yea. Exactly. You know it's fun because when I drafted the book I just hadn't downloaded your argument fully. And now, it's part of what I'm going to be doing in the next month is just getting your book all over my book. In fact, I kind see some real compliments between what I'm trying to do computationally and a lot of what you're arguing.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
Yea, but you're able to pursue the argument in terms of some of the more concrete aspects that I simply wasn't able to touch on. And I think it's really exciting what you're doing. I also completely agree with your point that the virtual and the actual is a distinction that no longer has critical capacity. We have so much feedback from the dematerialization of information that transforms who we are and what we do that in some ways holds FINISH THIS.

Dave Rieder
Totally. I couldn't agree more. I mean, even with the data that I'm even reading in real time on the bike, you know, I mean there's - I'm not - I mean what kind of a space am I'm in when I'm in paceline going at whatever speed with a bunch of people, as I'm looking at my data thinking about the data, thinking about where I am in relation to the data. And even, and even in shorts and a jersey on a bike, you know, in some rural setting, North Carolina, it's a virtual space.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo

Well, then one of the ironies though is that when we try to get out into the world with our new mobile devices, to try and erase those distinctions, we have to retreat to our offices because we have better bandwidth, more connectivity. Seeing the post-PC, we're seeing what's next. But then our limitations are dragging us back. So, our wifi and whatever the latest speed of our phones is isn't quite enough. But we're seeing what is possible. What I think is so interesting is the relationship between the thin computing and the little devices with very little power and how they're connected to these big computing engines behind the scenes. So, we're back to that 'big iron' - thin terminal driving us.

Dave Rieder
How?

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
It's allowing us to create these new relationships with our physical spaces. I love that idea, you know, you talk about in your jersey in your padded shorts on your bike out among the fields. But, yet, your mind is at least in part going through parsing the data, looking forward to the data that's going to be delivered, and thinking about what is this ride going to look like.

Dave Rieder
No, without a doubt. I mean, you know, the smell of the farm, you're out there with the wind and the trees. It seems so natural. It seems so outside and beyond technology and yet because of all the data and the data-centric ways in which I relate to the bike and the ride, during, post, yea. It's a hybrid, everted sport.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
But then I was so frustrated all winter doing those half hour or forty minute rides on a stationary bike in the FINISH THIS. Just so delighted for my first ride, even though it was a little early, and there was still snow everywhere. But to smell the smells and to feel the wind, I mean it's still an important part of cutting through real space.

Dave Rieder
Yea, and getting back to Thomas, that's the ambience. You just need all those extra dimensions of ambience to make it feel quote unquote real, you know.

Thomas Rickert/Mike Salvo
Quote unquote. It's not the real. It means something different.

Dave Rieder
Yea, no. We're through the looking glass. Even when you are totally disconnected, you're bringing the virtual with you. How can't you?