INTERVIEW WITH
Alan Bigelow

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by **Jeremy Hight**, online via email correspondence, February 2011

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Re-Drawing Boundaries, Leonardo Electronic Almanac New Media Exhibition
Curator: Jeremy Hight
Senior Curators: Lanfranco Aceti and Christiane Paul

What are you working on now?
I just completed a new digital story called the 'ABCs of UFOs' and I am working on a new one tentatively called 'Iam Facbook.'

Who and what are some of your early influences? What and who are some of your later influences?
Well, if you are asking about writers, there's theater (Sam Shepard, Tom Stoppard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Luigi Pirandello, Sophocles) and poetry/fiction (Laurence Sterne, TS Eliot, John Barth, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Emily Dickinson, Italo Calvino, Jean-Paul Sartre), and the list goes on and on...

What interests me most about these particular writers is how they approached the common elements of fiction, poetry, and drama and tested the limits of those elements –they were not content with writing in the same way everyone else was writing; they wanted to find new a new voice, a new direction... I believe that if these writers were just starting out now, some of them would be

actively engaged in creating content for the web. Imagine Laurence Sterne or Samuel Beckett writing electronic literature –what fun that would be!

Once I got into writing for the web, my reading practices shifted mostly to online content, but the memory, and lessons, of these early influences linger with me still. And who are some of my other influences? There's art (anything from the Old Masters to Abstract Expressionism to contemporary art) and music (you name it). Nowadays, I roam far and wide across the web (who doesn't), and I'll beg, borrow, or hack whatever I like into something that's usable in a story. I give credit where credit is due, and I don't hesitate to try something new or head in a fresh direction. I am never satisfied doing the same thing twice, unless I can improve it, and as a result you can see a wide diversity in my work, with a lot of experimentation in style.

Your work very deftly plays with elements of several forms quite seamlessly; are your works intentionally cross-disciplinary or is that simply what comes in process and with each work?
I am fortunate in that I have some training in music, creative writing, art and film appreciation, and a variety of other disciplines. As a kid, I had a natural curiosity for the arts which was allowed to blossom in high school and college, and in the arts scenes of New York City, London, and elsewhere. To write electronic literature nowadays, if you want to work alone, and not with a team of discipline-specific experts, you pretty much have to know what looks good within all the elements of a multimedia work. You have to know a little about a lot of different art forms, and you need to be able to cast the same objective eye upon your own work that you use in judging the work of others.

I am not an expert in anything but writing, but you don't need to be an expert to know what looks right in a piece of electronic literature: it's part feel and part experience and it's part memory of what pleased you in the past when you first stepped into the Met (like I did) and deliberately lost yourself in

the vast caverns of its art holdings. Hours later, I found my way out, tired and hungry, but I learned something on the way...

Do that a hundred times with film, music, and everything you can get your hands on, and some ideas are likely to break open in your head.

What role does space play in your works? What elements of semiotics and even history of place and places call out for further contemplation and analysis such as in your work?
As a digital writer, I am very interested in the visual possibilities of empty space, but mostly with what I can do to fill it...

I am not sure if my work calls out for contemplation or analysis, although I know some people have tried...

I am very preoccupied with archetypes and semiotics, particularly as to how they can be used to identify or express cultural myths. This is most apparent in my concept pieces like *MythWatch.org*, 'Archetypal Africa,' and 'This Is Not A Poem,' but the idea pervades my work. I often think what is most revealing in the arts is that which, at first glance, seems devoid of meaning –its symbolic resonance is so obvious, we overlook it. Good art always prompts us to take a second look.

Do the labels such as "vispo", "new media narrative", "new media" "electronic literature" and "hypertext" ever seem limiting or implying a restrictive classification?
These labels are just words. They will change over time, and new vocabularies will replace the old.

What may lie in the future for ways to read, write and express with text?
I think the ways for us to read, write, and express with text are currently around us –they are myriad, and not just on the web and in galleries and museums and in Kindles and in apps for portable devices but include traditional print venues, as well. And then there are the ways we can not imagine

which will, one day, make digital writers obsolete...

Is the absurd useful in terms of iconic metaphors... Both visual and textual? can there be a power in interplay between near kitsch and a newfound symbolic portent (as some of you works powerfully seem to employ)?

I personally like the absurd, especially if it is humorous. Usually bored and often dismayed by my everyday life, I find excitement in creating something outside the norm. This makes my work a bit less accessible and more geared toward a specialized audience, but this is nothing new. I was an absurdist even before I was a writer.

Framed by the right concept, a combination of absurdity and symbol can be a very powerful tool for a writer. There is a harmony, and disharmony, to be exploited and, in that exploitation, a harvest of symbolic meaning.

But I have heard this kitsch reference before! One of my pieces was in a show in Salt Lake City, Utah (yes, electronic literature can find its way into galleries and museums –very much so!), and the curator, who seemingly loved the piece, was asked by a reporter if he thought the piece was too kitschy. This must have been code for "bad," because in a matter of seconds the curator denounced my piece to the reporter, saying he chose the piece because of its kitsch but, in retrospect, maybe it was too over the top. He was sorry, he said. He sounded almost embarrassed as he ratted me out to the press.

What was the piece? It was 'Because You Asked,' and to this day I still don't know what's so kitschy about it...

Can creative works measure things that seem beyond measure or seem to render it moot?

If we believe in the power of creative works to measure that which is beyond measure, there might be a chance to save ourselves. Without suspension of disbelief, we are dead in the water.
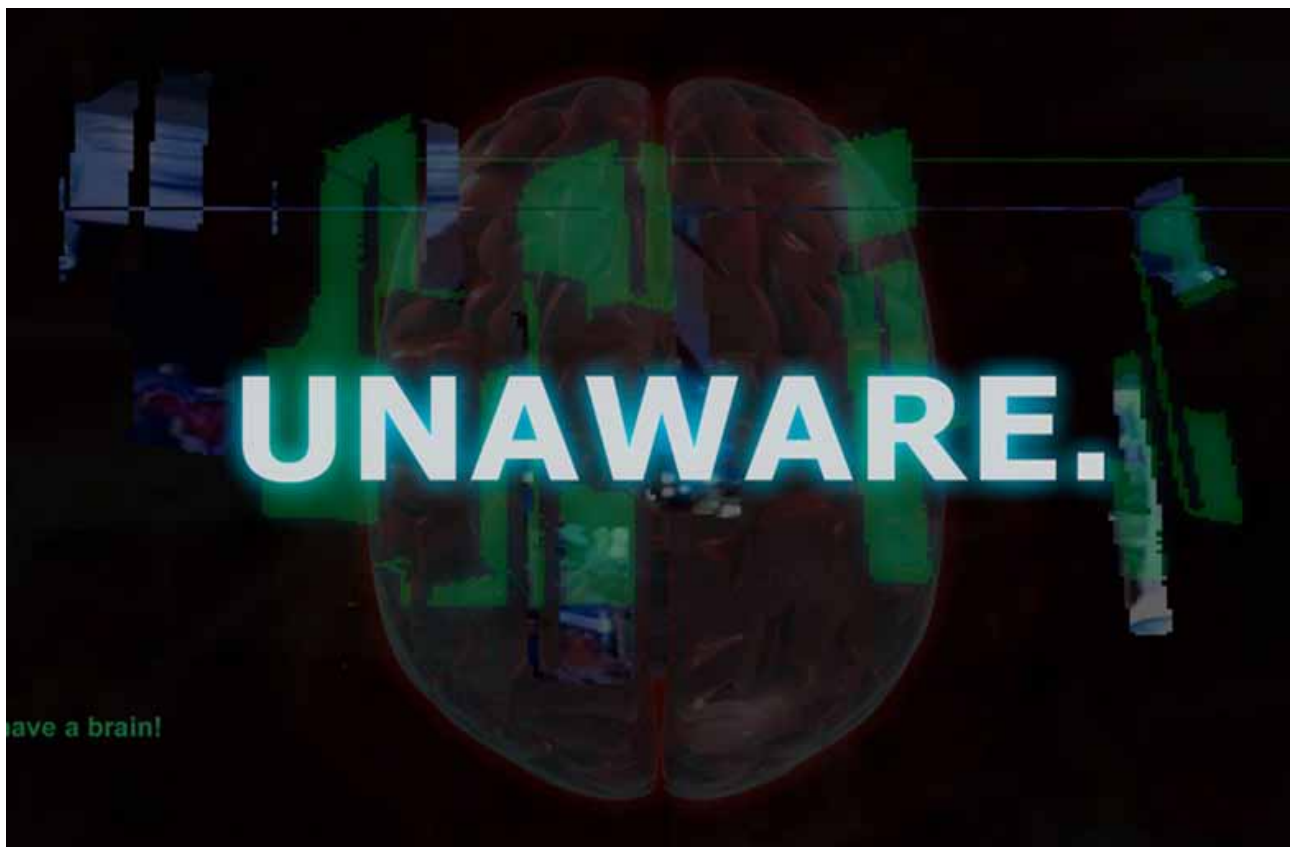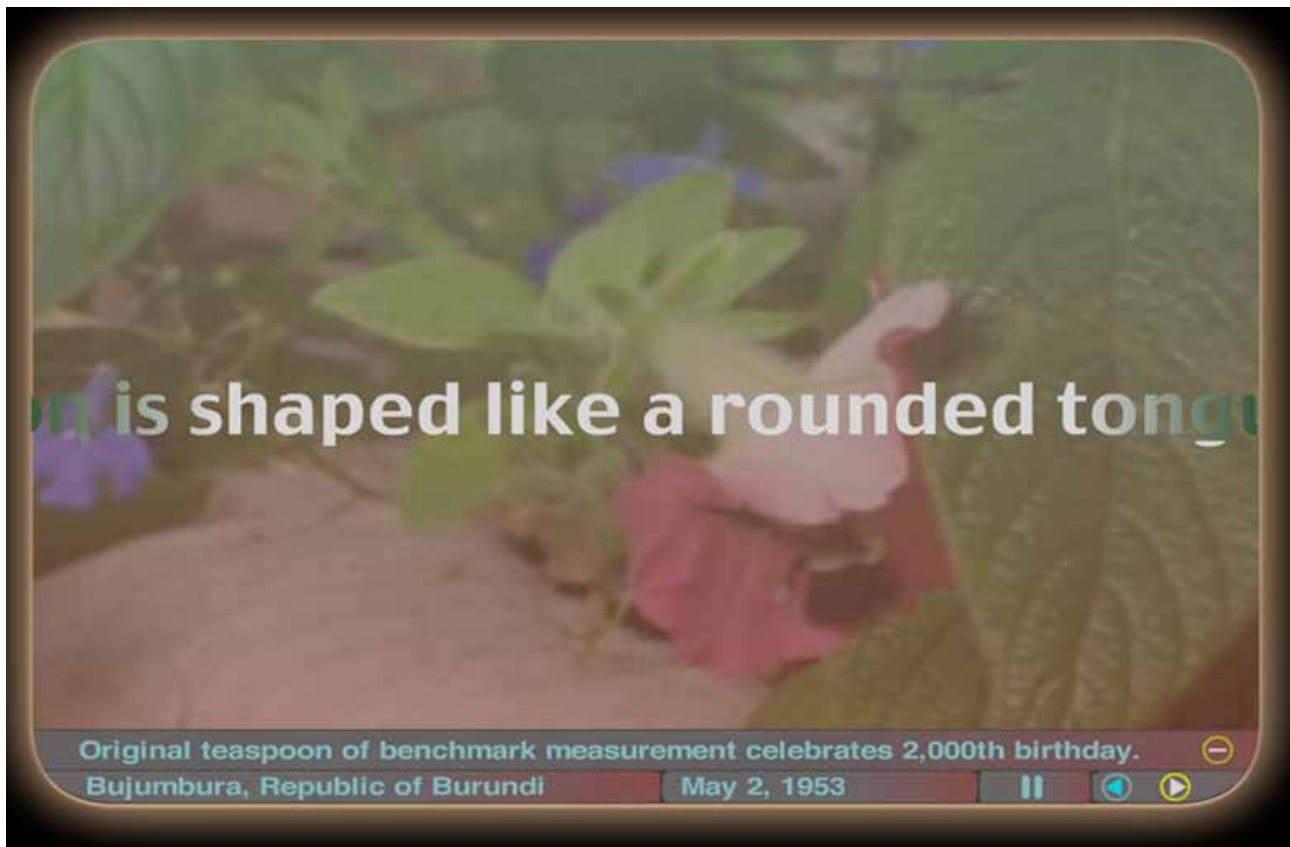
My Nervous Breakdown, 2010, Alan Bigelow. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

My Nervous Breakdown

My Nervous Breakdown (http://www.webyarns.com/ MyNervousBreakdown.html) describes a four-part journey into a mental breakdown, and past it, into recovery and redemption.

A mix of medical facts, talk therapy, visual archetypes, and the lexicon of dreams, the four parts combine imagery, text, and audio to portray a personal, but fictional, record of one man's voyage into an obsessive, but often humorous, world of self-doubt and delusion. After navigating the fours sections, the viewer is led to a closing page which completes the narrative.

is shaped like a rounded tong

Original teaspoon of benchmark measurement celebrates 2,000th birthday.

Bujumbura, Republic of Burundi | May 2, 1953

Archetypal Africa, 2009, Alan Bigelow. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

Archetypal Africa

Archetypal Africa (http://www.webyarns.com/ArchetypalAfrica.html) takes a look at common objects in everyday life, and their symbolic resonance within myth and culture. The piece plays with fact and fiction as it leads the user toward an opportunity to define their own archetypal moment. The work is created in Flash and uses text, video, still images, audio and a searchable RSS feed that generates results from user input.
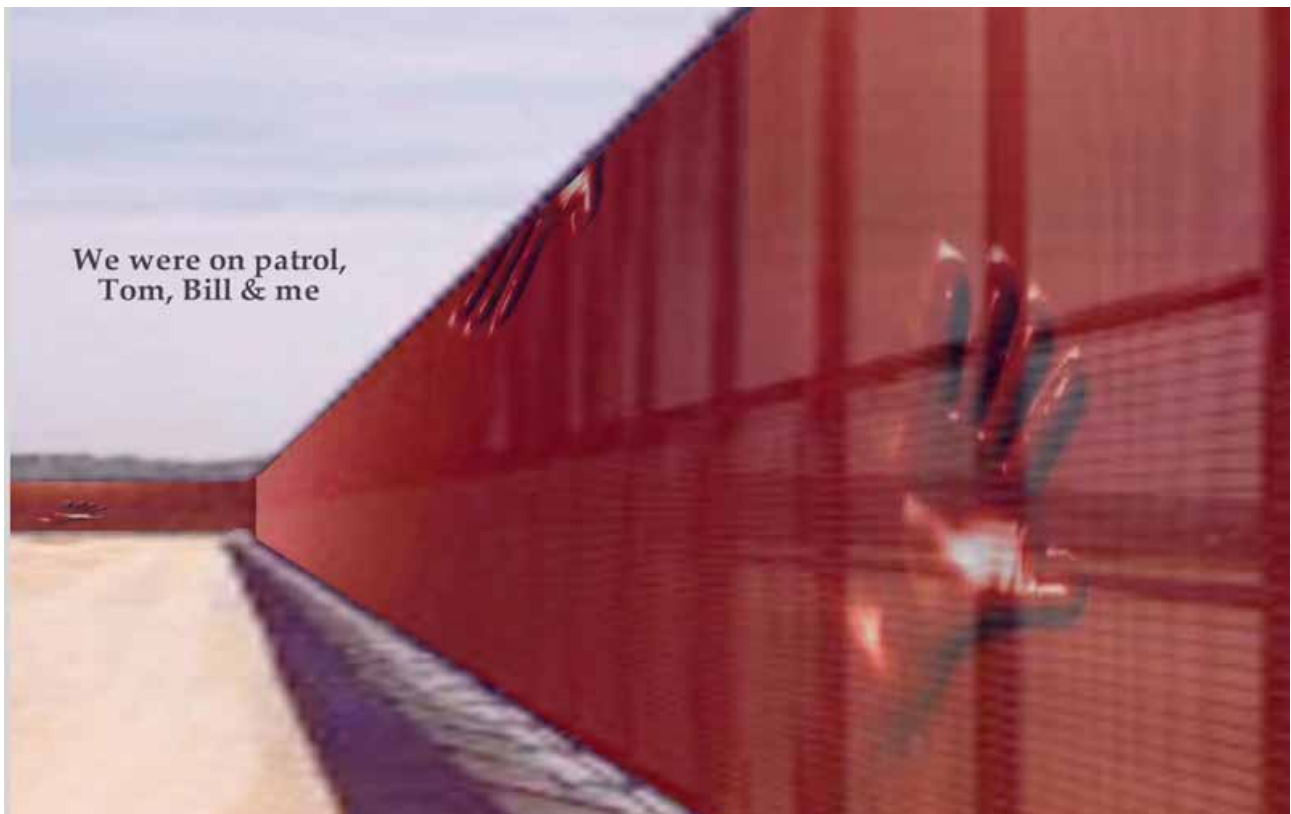
Wander Wire, 2005, Alan Bigelow. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist

Wander Wire

Wander Wire (www.webyarns.com/wanderwire.html) examines an unidentified military conflict from two points of view: the invaders and the invaded. The poem is deliberately unspecific as to time and place; its province is the living and the dead and the short distance that lies between them.

Bio

Alan Bigelow won the media-poetry prize in the BIPVAL international competition (Biennale Internationale des Poètes en Val-de-Marne). In 2010, he was a World Technology Network Award nominee, and he was a finalist for the International New Media Competition of the 24th Stuttgart Filmwinter (Germany). He was also a 2010 finalist for the New Media Writing Prize at the Poole Literary Festival (UK) and the Screengrab New Media Art Award (Australia).

His work, installations, and conversations concerning digital fiction and poetry have appeared in Turbulence.org, Rhizome.org, Los Angeles Center for Digital Arts, 14th Japan Media Arts Festival (The National Art Center, Tokyo), FreeWaves. org, The Museum of New Art (MONA, Detroit), Art Tech Media 2010, FILE 2007-2010, Blackbird, Drunken Boat, Media-N: Journal of the New Media Caucus, E-Poetry 2007/2009, IDEAS, the Istanbul Contemporary Art Museum (Turkey), Electrofringe 2008, New River Journal, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, and elsewhere.

Recently, in addition to teaching full-time at Medaille College, he was a visiting online lecturer in Creative Writing and New Media at De Montfort University, UK. ∎

You can see Alan Bigelow's work at http://www.webyarns.com.