On random text fragments contained inside your keyboard

An interview with designer Bryce Wilner

April 5, 2018 –

As told to Elliott CostLily Bartle, 2777 words.

Tags: Design, Poetry, Writing, Process, Collaboration, Beginnings.

Talking about websites can be kind of boring, but could you describe yours a little bit?

My site is pretty raw at the moment. The format hasn't changed in a big way since 2013 or 2014. The main premise right now is that the home page is a chronological feed of my client work and collaborations.

The only other two things I really want to draw attention to immediately are my information—how to contact me and where else I work on the internet, because there are a lot of things that I do that aren't specific to my personal URL—and my open-source font library. That's something that I spend a lot of time on and that I try to maintain, but is separate from my graphic design work for clients because it's a set of tools that I'm offering to people for free. I think the "Fonts" page of my site is the one that sees the most interaction. I see it popping up on other people's feeds, or Are.na channels, more so than any other aspect of my website. People like free things, especially fonts.

I noticed recently, or maybe not so recently, that you put all your fonts on GitHub, and I'm curious what your reasoning behind using that platform was?

When I'm working on a font, I'll begin doing so locally on my machine, and when I feel like an initial version is ready to publish, I'll push it to GitHub. I do that because I can version files easily, and other users can see the history. I always publish a font with a log of how many versions something has been through, and to credit other designers if I'm publishing a translation of an older typeface. My hope is that other people will, if they want to, go on to modify them, or contribute back to my repository in some way. I started doing this because back in 2014 the type designer and artist Raphaël Bastide emailed me recommending that I use more formality in the way that I version and license works. He pointed me in the direction of the SIL Open Font License, which a lot of designers use to say, "This is open-source. Anyone can use and change it now."

I recently wrote a short collection of typography-related computer files for the online arts archive Library Stack, featuring pieces by Weiyi Li, Nate Pyper, and Ana Maria Uribe, among others. I reference the SIL Open Font License throughout this collection.

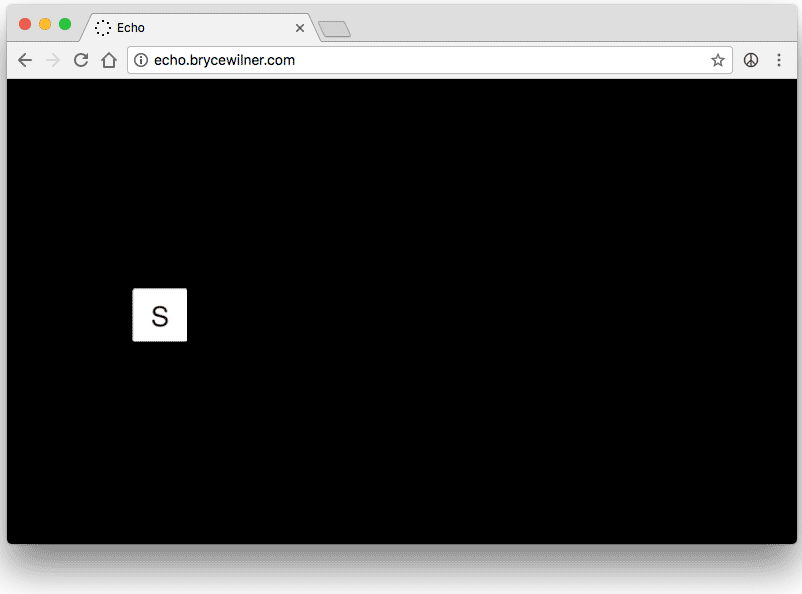
Library Stack poster, 2017. Vinyl on inkjet print, poster: 24 × 36 in.; vinyl: 33 × 51 in.

Speaking of your Library Stack piece, I was interested in your use of Samuel R. Delany for the intro, where you borrow the syntax from a passage in *Dhalgren*. What's the significance of

his work to you? I also noticed you have an Are.na channel full of his writing.

I'm a great fan of Delany's writing. I started reading him in my early twenties, and recently picked back up on him to fill in some of the gaps in my knowledge of his work. I think the first book I ever read by him was *Babel-17*. That was useful for me at the time because I had never before seen anyone position a poet in the role of a protagonist in science fiction, which is funny to me because I don't think any poet would ever want her work to be directly responsible for the survival or destruction of a civilization. I was really inspired by this, and it's not even specific to that one novella. Delany's characters—Kid in *Dhalgren*, Katin in *Nova*, Adrian in *Phallos*, Ni Ty Lee in *Empire Star*—are in these bizarre, psychedelic situations and are constantly interrogating the form of the novel or the poetic text while they're in dialogue with other characters.

In the Library Stack feature, I borrowed the syntax of an excerpt from *Dhalgren* for my introduction. Delany was writing about the visions that enter a character's head just after orgasm; I was writing about the text fragments that enter my brain when I'm blanking on the thing I'm "supposed" to be writing, and the way that my keyboard affords such fragments.

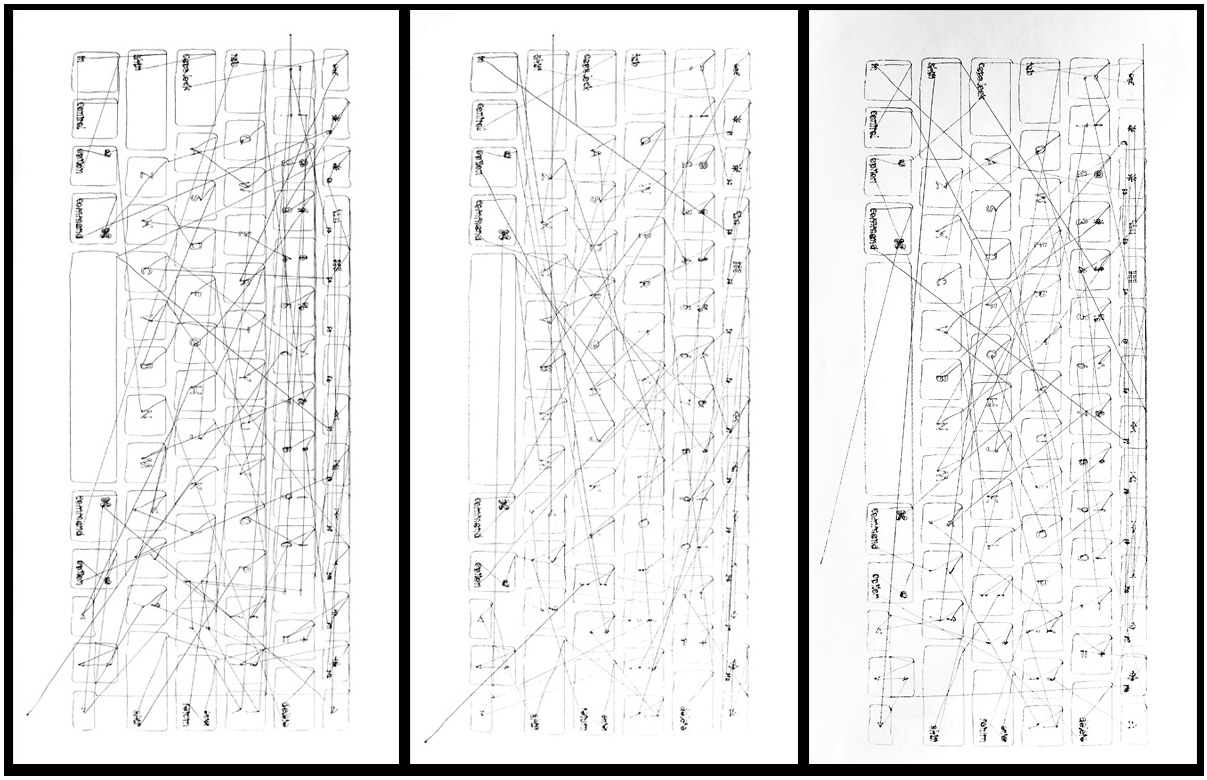


Echo, 2017. Website

It seems like designing fonts is sort of like being a proxy, graphically. You're creating this typeface for people to use, but do you ever think about these users, and what they're using your fonts for?

That's a question that many people who make digital tools ask themselves. It's not specific to type design. To be honest, I don't think too much about the convenience of other users when I design fonts. There are type designers who try to anticipate every possible scenario in which someone would want to use a font, and so support it with lots of specific glyphs, or provide different weights or widths. But my method of designing type is much faster and less precious in a lot of ways. This is not to say that the designers who do make fonts in an accommodating fashion aren't doing something really important; they certainly are. But I usually make something because I think it could be useful for my own purposes, and when I'm done, I just assume that if I have use for it, somebody else will too. Often I'll make a font in only one weight, perhaps with an italic, and that's enough for me, but it's not enough for a lot of other designers.

Recently I've been producing portraits of my keyboard. I made a font called Counter, for example, which assigns a number value to every glyph as it appears on a US keyboard. One is "1", two is "2", three is "3", four is "4", five is "5", etc., but then zero is "10". The next line down starts with "Q", so "Q" is "14". It continues to count up so that when you type an actual sentence like "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," you see a string of digits that look like this: 7331263434 66 39214322261615 17311515 1721 26 2719434315163627 282618. If you were to print a text set in this font, you would create a code that's difficult to break because you wouldn't know if two numbers are, say, "3" and "12" or "31" and "2". But if it appears on a computer screen, a computer will be able to read it perfectly well, because each of these glyphs is encoded with what's called a Unicode value.



Plotter's Tour (Keyboard), 2017. Plotter-lead Sharpie on paper; 19.5 × 39 in.

I wanted to see what it looks like to design with this font, so I used Counter to typeset this Greg Egan novel called *Permutation City*. The page numbers are also set in Counter. They look normal except where there appears a zero, because then it looks like it's page "2310", when it's actually page "230".

Would you say it's the story behind each typeface that is your main interest?

Many of my fonts don't necessarily rely on the viewer knowing their conceptual beginnings, and are only driven by a formal output. I made a font called Evening that's a nice balance of meaningful source material and formal interest. I drew it from a 1970 screen print by the concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay called *Evening/Sail*, which he later repurposed for a catalogue cover coinciding with a 1991 exhibition he did at Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh. I really enjoy the way these letters look—the proportions of the "O" are very unusual, for example—so I used them to make an alphabet. I had a certain amount of information determining how the capitals should look, but there were many gaps that I had to fill in on my own. I've been using this font a lot in my studio work here at Yale.

In your Are.na article you primarily talk about screen translations of poetry. How did you become interested in this?

My brother Brandon studied literature, and I studied graphic design. From a literary perspective, he's interested in graphic design, and from a design perspective, I'm interested in literature. We have ended up collaborating and doing a lot of research together on these sorts of things.

A related area of interest for me is a subgenre of experimental literature that allows the reader to generate a text by rearranging a kit of parts determined by an author. Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1* or maybe even Brian Eno's *Oblique Strategies* fall within this subgenre. These works often rely on randomization, and their original editions are generally quite rarefied so there have been many web-based translations of them over the last fifteen years or so. One assumes that it's easier to automatically randomize something on a screen than it is to do so in the physical world. And for years that made a lot of sense to me because I had only seen the screen translation of, say, Robert Grenier's *Sentences* that the original publisher put online decades after it was initially released. But then I saw the original *Sentences* in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library here at Yale, and I started considering that maybe the screen translation is not actually the ideal way for it to be read. The physical object is more random than the screen translation because it's not easy for computers to reproduce true randomness. I wrote a short essay for the Are.na Blog about this distinction.

Is it also about archiving for you?

Yeah, for sure. The archiving aspect is really valuable for me because in a lot of cases these books are so rare that they only exist in research libraries and collections. I can at least read and get the general idea of what Robert Grenier meant with this text by experiencing it online. It's a much cheaper way of distributing it as well. I really appreciate the fact that these things are cheap and distributable on the internet, but I'm still of two minds in that I feel like I can't really understand them until I've seen both translations. And in some cases, there are many translations of a work. Alison Knowles's *A House of Dust*, for example, has been made into many different websites and a Twitter account. I guess I can't really grasp the essence of these works until I've looked at the spectrum of how the text lives in different areas.

Do you think that being a Yale student, you're kind of obligated to be a bridge to the public in a way? You have access to all of these resources, like the Beinecke, that most designers out there don't usually have. And it seems like, a lot of the time, your work makes these resources public.

I haven't done too much in the way of my own translations of poems just yet. But there are works that I'll come across in the Beinecke that I'll have scanned and then put on Are.na, or whatever research repository I'm using at the time. It's amazing to me how much of the printed world is still not on the internet and vice versa. I don't know if it's a responsibility specifically having to do with the privilege that I have here at Yale, but it is a responsibility I feel as an internet user to make things open and available when I can, within reason.

You're very active on Are.na, especially in its early days. Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with that platform?

I've been using Are.na for my own research since 2012. A huge amount of my brain is on there at this point. One of the founders of Are.na, Charles Broskoski, has spoken about the value in collecting things and looking at the patterns they form over time, and that's been very productive for me. I'll have a casual interest in a subject, and start following it not knowing its real utility. I've done a lot of this research in collaboration with Laurel Schwulst; it's difficult to overstate the influence she's had on my art and design work. There have been a few cases where these collections have turned into artworks for me.

Vacant Startup, 2017. Inkjet-printed vinyl, wood, and metal screws. Furniture: 60 × 78 × 36 in.; banner: 48 × 144 in.

For the past four years, I've been collecting names of startups that are made up words, like Zillow, Plaxo, Twilio, et al. Many of them aren't even in business anymore. I began gathering them because I could tell that they related to my interests somehow, but I wasn't sure in what way. I eventually made a website that breaks apart the syllables of these names and recombines them to propose new startup names. Whenever the user clicks a button, the site proposes a new business venture, simultaneously generating a gibberish text.

What would you think if someone actually built something based on one of these?

I would be okay with it. I think I'm okay with somebody actually trying to use the site as a professional tool, although I think that's completely unrealistic.

It seems like a lot of the time you're building tools. You have a resources section on your website, for example, and that's something that we've been working on at TCI – to make it more of a resource. Can you talk a little bit about what a resource means to you?

For me, a good resource is something that has an immediacy to the way it works but is also customizable if one wants to put in the time to do so. A lot of the resources I list on my website are useful tools that the user doesn't even need to think through if they don't want to. A tool for converting a font from an OTF to a web font, for example.

Always Remember, 2017. JPEG

I sometimes wonder about how in the real world, resources are discussed as being finite, but on the internet, they are often thought of as infinite. It's always about growing or expanding…

I feel heavily indebted to the generosity of other internet users, especially those who make YouTube tutorials, which I and many other designers rely on heavily for so many skills. There are so many different aspects of the web that still feel extremely generous in that way. I'm interested in highlighting the ones that I use, and I'd like to produce some of my own. I'm even interested in producing tools that aren't necessarily practical, but could be regarded as such in the distant future.

Bryce Wilner Recommends:

Damon Zucconi, *Lyrebird's Song with Silences Removed* (2017).

Sara Knox Hunter, *There is Nothing to Divide Us if We Do Not Exist*, (Dominica, 2016).

Abbas Kiarostami, *Five (Dedicated to Ozu)* (2003).

Last year I attended a Donna Haraway lecture, where among other things I learned that there are only two universities in the United States who have molluscs as their mascots: Evergreen (the geoduck) and UC Santa Cruz (the banana slug).

On the evening that Ursula K. Le Guin's death was announced, I spent hours scrolling through Twitter. Her readers, myself among them, posted quotations, interviews, and anecdotes that spanned her career. A few weeks prior, I heard her recite her 2017 poem "Looking Back" on the podcast *A Phone Call From Paul*. As far as I know it hasn't been published so I can't say that the line breaks and punctuations are as she would have liked, but I transcribed it anyway:

Looking Back

Remember me before I was a heap of salt

The laughing child who seldom did what she was told

Or came when she was called

The merry girl who became Lot's bride

The happy woman who loved her wicked city

Do not remember me with pity

I saw you plodding on ahead into the desert of your pitiless faith

Those springs are dry; that earth is dead

So I looked back, not forward into death

Forgiving rains dissolve me

And I come still disobedient, still happy

Home

Name
Bryce Wilner

Vocation
Designer