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Code-A-Cell: A Narrative

"Code-A-Cell," a language act, was produced by Anvil/lyre Studio (an arts collective) in April 2002. "Code-A-Cell" took its structure and inspiration from the Human Genome Project. It was an attempt to encode esthetic pleasure in art. DNA provided the encryption. This essay is a narration of "Code-A-Cell," surveying its elements via quotation, description and definition.

A "language act" has evolved over time and practice to name an event that is a public poem. A language act is a poem made out of spacetime, a poem in four dimensions. Its essential elements are: improvisation, collaboration, audience assistance, and an artifact.

"Code-A-Cell" included all these elements. It was composed (some of it on the spot) by two poets, Mike Barrett and Ray Ronci, and two fiction writers, Tina Hall and Trudy Lewis. The composition included film, spoken word, and story. The audience participated by creating, and reciting from, a prompt printed on the program.

The title, "Code-A-Cell," describes the performance's telos: using the language of genetics, splice together a sequence of literary, aural, and visual acts which, when run, produce thought and esthetic pleasure.

The line-up was as follows:

film	*Antraps: 7 Quick Films*
multivocal	*Genophonics #1*
poem	*Pseudo Longinus*
collaborative story	*Chromosome 6*
multivocal	*Genophonics #2*
collaborative poem	*24 Tanka*
film	*Colette's Pearls*
multivocal	*Genophonics #3*
found story	*Erratum: Insert 'R' in Transgressors*
poem	*Neighbors*
multivocal with audience	*Genophonics #4*

improvisation *Peroration*

I will briefly describe each element and then give a longer exposition on the two, "Pseudo Longinus" and Genophonics 1-4, that borrowed most heavily from the Human Genome Project.

Antraps -- Textual animation (a poem that moves) which explored the base antecedents of desire and memory. Its final image, a concrete poem mimicking the shape of the sculpture, "The Dying Gaul," is elegaic. It was, as the final frames told the audience, a look back, before the present appeared as "Code-A-Cell."

Chromosome 6 -- The title names the chromosome which codes the production of phermones. This collaborative story unfolds as two women deconstruct the desire which connects them to each other and drives them toward men.

24 Tanka -- Collaborative poems written on a measure of 5-7-5 syllabification

e.g. Thirty-one is prime
And seven is prime as well
Wind in vowel sounds
The stresses stressed and unstressed
Five lines times time in the lines

Colette's Pearls -- A film and text. The film strung together quotes from Colette, superimposed on footage of mollusc reproduction. The quotations served as touchstones in a story narrated by Colette.

Erratum: Insert 'R' in Transgressors -- A found story from the 1899-1900 Annual Report of the American Microscopical Society. The report becomes a murder plot, as the body of a dead Swedish sailor is examined.

Neighbors -- A poem in which the pursuit of a few grocery items, bread, lentil soup and pepperoni, leads to increasingly complex social interactions. The law intervenes.

Peroration -- The four members of the ensemble improvised verses from language that had been generated during the performance.

The poem, "Pseudo Longinus," is constructed according to genetic mutation. A few words -- *philology*, *hypsography*, *done* -- are the genotype. Under pressure from multiplying contexts, these words mutate according to morphemic possibilities. In this way, the topos, a Longinian treatment of oration, persuasion and the sublime, serves as the environment out of which the phenotype emerges -- the poem itself.

Pseudo Longinus

philogenyhypsographydone Genetics is
philology, antithetical to the audience
present of their own accord. Did drop
of their own accord, fruit dripped
into their peaceable ears. That's why
we study *hypsos*kinship, persuasion
philogynydoes. The audience
is my cousin, seventy-five feet tall;
she coils vascular springs for a living.
She hears when her mind is speaking.
She stops when her heart doth mind.
dropsicalfill-o-genetic you*doest* speak
with your ears. The speaker makes due
with bits of nerve wire, byte forged bits,
"O! Your teeth will wear down
like knobs along the spine
of Sis-a-fis. You take the same
road: genesis. See? There are grooves
in the rocks where you walk." The audience
is time. Speechacting is a discipline
of timing. See? trees, on the same road,
green old branches in hard nuts of bud--
the grove where strawman hangs, doing
God's work. Look for the fly. Swallow the hippo.
Call this blunder *hypso*phistry.
The speaker misdisremembered time as words.
The audience attends to its own life.
It is in its genes to do so.

If "Pseudo Longinus" was an oration, "Genophonics" was the chorus , a collaborative, multivocal arrangement. In a performance, multivocal arrangements are an ideal way to frame and refrain themes and language. In addition, voices in a chorus deliver immediate and visceral

pleasure.

The Human Genome Project provided the score for the choral element of "Code-A-Cell." A 200 letter sequence of DNA was distributed among the four movements of Genophonics. The DNA sequence was chosen because: it tied into the central theme of the performance; it was organic; it was generative; and it was genetic code translated into language.

Each member of Code-A-Cell's ensemble chose a one or two syllable word that began with the letter for the genetic base pairs: **A** for adenine, **C** for cytosine, **T** for thymine, and **G** for guanine. Each letter in a sequence from the Human Genome Project would then be treated as a musical note which would be played as a word. Given the inborn logic of the sequence, the possibilities for an esthetic arrangement of language was myriad.

I'll provide an example with four voices (some of the words are recalled from the show; when memory didn't serve, new words were chosen). For example:

voice 1
A = ass
C = carbon
T = tune
G = garden

voice 2
A = always
C = coming
T = try
G = going

voice 3
A = away
C = care
T = three
G = gift

voice 4
A = alert
C = can
T = time
G = george

If we were to take a short sequence, **TGTGTTTTAG**, arranged in around, the transcript would look like this:

#1	tune	garden	tune	garden	tune	tune	tune	tune	ass	garden			
#2		try	going	try	going	try	try	try	try	always	going		
#3			three	gift	three	gift	three	three	three	three	away	gift	
#4				time	george	time	george	time	time	time	time	alert	george

If we were to take a short sequence, **CAGCGGCTTC**, and give each voice one letter to speak for, the transcript would look like this:

#1 tune tune

#2 always

#3 care care care care

#4 george george george

These examples do little to recreate the rich sonic experience of multiple voices, but they do show how the sequence produces a rich field of words. In this field, the possibility for meaning, fleeting, inventive, complex, is apparent.

a garden alert
a tune, a gift in threes

care for geologic time
george time

gotten and done
try coming

always try going away

The DNA sequence generates these possibilities. The four sections of Genophonics enacted these possibilities in the human voice. The program invited the audience to choose words for themselves. In the final section, the audience read their words according to the sequence, **GGCCTTCTGG AAGAAGAAGG GTAGGCTGCT**. The room resounded with language, word upon differing word, spoken to the rhythm of the human genome.

Essentially, the human genome is a codicil, a text that programs us to endure in the continuous present, wherein all programs reside. The present also includes that which is unprogrammable -- chance. Chance sets the initial conditions and haphazardly reigns over a program's evolution. Because a performance happens in the present, it accepts chance as an element of composition. "Code-A-Cell" was shaped by both script and chance. It allowed us to do two things simultaneously -- acknowledge that we're scripted, and improvise on the script we're given. Acknowledgement is a result of reflection. Improvisation is only available to us when we act. In "Code-A-Cell," the act was art, art out of DNA.