

bpNichol
First Screening
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Text by Alex Turgeon

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First Screening

I REMEMBER THE FIRST COMPUTER that was brought into my house. I must have been somewhere between the ages of six and seven, as I recall this occurring in the first house I can remember living in. The computer was of fashionable beige or a warm grey with a large blown glass monitor. This infantile technology seemed to operate as more of a decoration than as a fully functional piece of equipment, but somehow defined my single mother's household as essentially modern. During the computer's short existence in the basement turned wreck room, I had given my hand at trying to comprehend this beast under the stairs. Firstly, my mother would type a short command into the matrix, which would subsequently provide me the ability to process words across the infinite space of the screen. Free from the interfaces of operating systems, rudimentary orange characters appeared floating on the surface of a black abyss: a, b, c, d, and a, e, i, o, u and sometimes y populate the blank space before me as I punched the protruding keys. Gibberish on the edge of the fathomless void which made up the negative space around the typeface. A space only actualized when the random letters and numbers were pushed into and out of the temporal rift stored in the shadowy depths of the computer. Free of time and place. Without the ability to save or replicate any of my random compositions, or to ultimately understand my goal with this technology, my relationship to this computer lasted very briefly. Eventually focusing my screen time on more in depth adventures provided by video game consoles.

It takes a unique perspective to look into the expanse of the unknown and to have the ability to see endless possibilities rather than pure nothingness. To take the mechanics of a medium and forge it into a material for creative outlet requires an interest in upending convention. Within the work of Canadian poet bpNichol there is an attention and sensitivity to the structure of language. His work challenges how we perceive and comprehend the visual and auditory construction of words and their purpose. Repetition and rhyme allow for the flow of meaning to extend from one word to another causing the listener, reader, or both, to develop thematic interpretations as the lines of definitions become blurred together.

DREAM YOU LOST TOSS ALL NIGHT

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bpNICHOL, still images from *First Screening*, 1984,
images courtesy of Ellie Nichol.

programming moves from brute stumbling to some more elegant solutions, a record of the process of programming, the process of composition..."¹.

With this new technology accessible on a consumer market, the process of publishing digital poetry became more localised, allowing for publishers, like bpNichol, to distribute digital works at the vanguard of digital publishing. Previous poets who employed digital technologies, such as Stan Vanderbeek and his experiments at the AT&T labs during the 1960's, required elaborate equipment and precise installation to experience early digital renderings and animations. bpNichol understood the new consumer platform and produced this pioneering digital work by taking a democratic position towards distribution, making it available for the personal computer. The original version of First Screening was published on 5 ¼" floppy disks in a numbered and signed edition of 100, therefore essentially producing one of the first ebooks of poetry before the concept of this format would have ever be conceived.

During the time of my first computer, my mother was working as a secretary at a local university. I rightfully assumed this impossible calculator was more a creature "for work" as my mother put it, and subsequently left it be finding no solace in the strict confines its orange text on a black screen. In the end, this formidable beast lasted only a brief time in the lexicon of my childhood, and only physically present until my family moved house shortly thereafter. In doing so we caught up with the rest of society, who were already invested in operating Windows 95.

As technology evolved past the Applesoft Basic programming language that bpNichol employed for First Screening, the archivability of this early digital work came into question. How can we reconcile our digital past in the wake of our exponential future? As technology progresses, how can we archive these early forms of computing while the adaptability of technology is so geared to new aspirations, discarding the past in its wake? Fortunately now we are able to experience this work, or collection of works, through detailed archival process. A daisy chain of transferring the files from one operating system to the next, taking over three years

¹ bpNichol, Introduction to First Screening, Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1984. <http://vispo.com/bp/pm3.htm>

to complete, brought First Screening back to life for the twenty-first century. Although the experience of the work has changed from the floppy disk to, for this exhibition, an embedded video, the sensitivity of the computers' construction and the construction of language still resonates with the artist's unique sensibility.

I realise now it was within the computer screen's particular depth of black space where the true potential of the technology existed. Not so much within the short commands or tax calculations that the device was intended to be used for. The work of bpNichol explores the poetic capabilities of programming by employing the principles of the medium for his own artistic endeavours. He initiates a poetic future set against the backdrop of the blown glass monitor, to stare into the black expanse and visualize its potential for creativity rather than alienation. bpNichol offers a unique observation into the fathomless potential of the abyss, and proposes a newly forged digital, and distributable, future for poetry.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

bpNichol (B. in Vancouver, British Columbia 1944), was one of Canada's most important poets. In his lifetime he wrote concrete poetry, novels, short fiction, musical scores, computer texts and scripts for the muppet-based children's show Fraggle Rock. bpNichol died in Toronto, Ontario on September 25, 1988.

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