

The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader  
Edited by Stella Brennan and Su Ballard  
Designed by Jonty Valentine  
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## Onsite and Online

Stella Brennan and Stephen Cleland

The relationship between contemporary art galleries and Internet art projects is complex. Many online projects are now lost; remaining archives are festooned with broken links, missing files and unavailable plug-ins. They represent an early bloom of interest when the Internet was seen as a new and experimental context, and artists were working out what exactly it might be good for. As the Internet has become more widely accessible and more ubiquitous, the impetus for galleries to stake a claim in the digital has subsided and the realms of gallery practice and online art have diverged. This separation avoids the often clumsy gallery articulations of net art that is decontextualised and removed from its network habitat, yet most galleries' use of the Internet as space for documentation misses the opportunity to expand discussions around digital practice. Surges of online art have often had connections with prominent contemporary art institutions, such as the Walker Art Centre's Gallery 9 that ran from 1997 to 2003 and the Internet works initiated in conjunction with Documenta 10 in 1997.<sup>1</sup> In a local context, the 1997 Codec project presented online works commissioned by artist-run galleries Teststrip in Auckland and Galerie Dessford Vogel in Dunedin, and public galleries Artspace in Auckland and The Physics Room in Christchurch.<sup>2</sup>

Michael Stevenson's work for Artspace, *alt.waysofseeing* was a project blending dodgy HTML aesthetics and luridly coloured text and tessellating images of UFO conspiracy sites with artworld paranoia. Could a sphinx-like structure on Mars be proof of alien influence in modern sculpture? Was Dan Graham secretly working for NASA? Stevenson worked with Robert Hutchinson in realising this project. Hutchinson's own Spatial State of A and B was the first local site dedicated to contemporary art projects for the Internet. As he describes it:

*Really it was some kind of idealist fantasy: 'We can bring artists and technicians together and they can make amazing computer art.' I had been working in the web industry for a while so was able to access considerable resources at little or no expense.<sup>3</sup>*

The first Spatial State project, in 1996, was Terrence Handscomb's *Before Information there were the Machines*,<sup>4</sup> an Internet version of the interactive work included in the *Electronic Bodyscapes* exhibition held at Artspace that same year. *Electronic Bodyscapes*, curated by Deborah Lawler Dormer, was a key moment for digital art in New Zealand, investigating the interface of art, electronics and the body through the work of local and international practitioners. Works included Sean Kerr and Keri Whaiteri's *Dialogue*, an interactive installation juxtaposing Māori and European concepts of *te kore* or the void, French artist Orlan's photographs of her self-orchestrated cosmetic surgery and Australian artist Stelarc's performance *Ping Body*.

*Ping Body* interfaced the artist's body with the Internet. Pings are electronic signals measuring both physical network distance and traffic loading. In the performance, ping values controlled electrodes that applied voltage to the artist's body, creating a spasmodic contraction and relaxation of muscles, movement

*Previous page top:* Nathan Pohio, *Asleighofhamanewerihogofastillimgentosomehningwing: Horses 2*, 2006, dual screen video projection.  
*Below:* Nathan Pohio, *Sleeper*, 1999, two-channel video, 3 minutes.  
 "In the early eighteenth century Edward Muybridge used the most extraordinary technologies of the time to give still images the illusion of movement. One hundred and fifty years later, and after the cinema, the video, and the digital revolutions, Nathan Pohio reduces movement back into something realised by the human hand. Holding a lenticular photograph of horses in front of his camera Pohio reanimates the inanimate. In the dual screen projection *Asleighofhamanewerihogofastillimgentosomehningwing: Horses 2*, we see gentle blurred movements as running horses shift in and out of focus. This is cinema returned to its roots: tricks of the eye, illusions of movement, and the captivating magic of slow motion. *Sleeper* is an equally slow cinematic video. Movement is reduced to the flickering light of a surreal night sky. The artist's nephew dreams beneath the day-go lights of his decorated bedroom ceiling, to a soundtrack of Angel Corpus Christi's *Dream Baby Dream*. A peaceful portrait, evoking the deep calm of watching a child sleep, *Sleeper* generates an awareness of the intimate lure of the screen." (Su Ballard)

1. <http://gallery9.walkerart.org> and [http://www.documenta12.de/archiv/dx/english/frm\\_home.htm](http://www.documenta12.de/archiv/dx/english/frm_home.htm)
2. <http://www.dannybutt.net/codec.org.nz>
3. Danny Butt, "Spatial State of A and B: Robert Hutchinson," 1997. <http://www.dannybutt.net/codec.org.nz/robnj.html>
4. <http://www.terrence.org/old/>

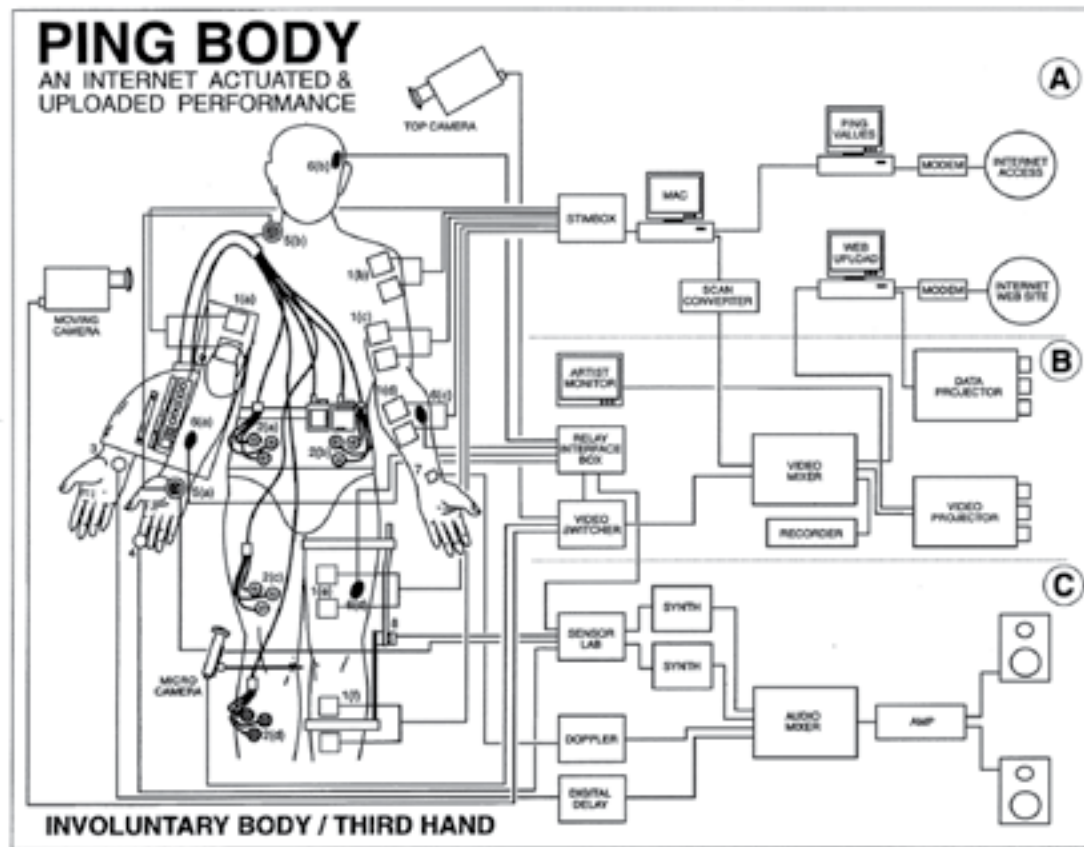


fig. 3

### Onsite and Online

which in turn generated sounds related to the body's physical position and posture. Although Stelarc did not control the parts of his body under the influence of the stimulating electrodes, he could respond by activating his robotic 'Third Hand', using it to upload images of the performance for online viewing. In *Ping Body*, rather than exerting physical control of the human computer interface, the body was controlled by flows of data external to it, by the collectivity of Internet traffic.<sup>5</sup>

This relationship between the corporeal and technological was central to both Handscomb's *Before Information there were the Machines* and the later interactive, gallery-based *Space Invaders: black satire and the BBS* (1998). These visceral works incorporated explicit medical images of autopsies and deformities, photographs of murders and accidents, and extreme sexual practices. Much of this material was sourced from hardcore websites, discussion groups and bulletin board services (BBS); many of the images used were widely distributed online.

Handscomb's works subvert the language of the computer: drop-down menus offer options from 'Retreat' to 'Litigation', clicking on twitchy GIFs of bodies and organs spawns pop-up windows with grainy video and psycho-analytical texts, while dialogue boxes offer bleak diagnoses. With navigation that is often circuitous or dead-end, the works superimpose a recontextualised biological and social space. *Space Invaders* is metaphorically structured in terms of zones of the body where exterior and interior worlds meet: the 'Oral Frame,' the 'Optic Frame,' the 'Penile Frame,' and viewers navigate through the site as if penetrating a body.

*Bypassing the editorial structures which have traditionally regulated the distribution of information, the Internet provokes new darker issues of access, power and control. Space Invaders does not seek to glamorise pornography or to support marginal sectors of the Internet, but rather to indict and interrupt the utopian rhetoric that inadvertently supports them by embracing new technology as necessarily liberating, and somehow exempt from historical cultural and philosophical determinations.*<sup>6</sup>

In these works Handscomb is preoccupied with the way codes—legal, diagnostic, technical or linguistic—are used to marshal the wayward and excessive body. Censorship continues to be a key concern and these works trace early uses of the Internet as a contested subcultural space, before e-commerce, blogging and social networking broadened the online demographic and context.

Other works developed for Spatial State included Greg Wood's *Noisemill*, which, based on the names of visitors to the site, generated music from a bank of samples, Sean Kerr's *again-n-again*, which spawned an enormous, repetitive email ('againandagainandagainandagainandagainandagainandagain'), evoking threats from those inadvertently spammed with it, and Tessa Laird's *Elvishnu*, which followed the adventures of Elvis Presley as the 10th incarnation of the Vedic god.

In terms of the web presence of offline gallery spaces, beyond the specific moment of *Codec*, The Physics Room has had a sporadic online programme, while Dunedin artist-run space The Honeymoon Suite, established by Warren Olds, Emma Bugden, Jonathan Nicol and Kate Ross in 1997, featured works such as Olds' *Endless Summer*, a Quicktime VR offering a spooky 360-degree beach panorama with the same bikini-clad bathing beauty reappearing, clone-like in

5. <http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/pingbody/index.html>  
 6. Robert Leonard, "Space Invaders: black satire and the BBS," *Artspace*, 2000. <http://www.artspace.org.nz/exhibitions/2000/terrencehandscomb.asp>



fig. 4



fig. 5

#### Onsite and Online

every segment of the digitally smoothed-together image. There was a lull in the early part of the decade, with galleries tending mostly to use their web presence for archiving text and images on shows and for publicity purposes. Window's Onsite and Online projects, running in parallel since 2004, represent a now more unusual conjunction of Internet art with an ongoing architecturally situated project.

Window itself is something of a hybrid: an artist-initiated and run gallery housed in a university context. Window was founded in 2002 by students at the Elam School of Art: Michelle Menzies, Stephen Cleland and Luke Duncalfe. Online projects began in advance of the construction of the Onsite gallery in 2004. The purpose-built Onsite space is positioned in a public setting—the foyer of the main library of the University of Auckland. The gallery is a glazed, fluoro-lit box, evoking both the shop window and the display case. It is a place for visual consumption, drawing in audiences beyond those already familiar with contemporary art and new media projects. Window Onsite draws on the tradition of exhibiting moving-image work in public spaces, such as the Auckland Film Archive's 2002 – 3 project using shop-window screens to show artists' film and video works—a kind of expansion of the black box of the monitor to an architectural scale. The situation in a foyer space also recalls the displays of corporate art collections in the glinty, glossy entrances of downtown high-rises. A shallow glazed room with the depthlessness and immutable framing of a painting, the Onsite space emphasises the mediations of the gallery context, analogous to the Online projects' bounding by the screen and by underlying computer and network structures. These reciprocal constraints emphasise that neither space is entirely neutral.

Window's programme sometimes draws together the physical works with an online component, while at other times projects run in parallel. In a work spanning both sites, Toby Collett's exhibition *Processing Vision* (2005), curated by Stephen Cleland, was a performance of Collett's doctoral research into engineering software for visually representing robotic perceptions of space. Collett considers that, "it is the programmer's lack of understanding of the robot's world view that makes robot programs difficult to code and debug."<sup>7</sup> *Processing Vision* explored the use of Augmented Reality, combining real-time video with computer-generated graphics in order to enable viewers a better understanding of the world from a machine's perspective.

Onsite, the window was coated with translucent vinyl. The small, wheeled robot was visible as it approached the glass frontage, fading into a blur as it wandered deeper into the space. Live footage of the reverse view was rear-projected onto the vinyl and graphics overlaid this feed: red lines fanning out in front of the robot represented input from the robot's navigational sonar system. A single green line traced the robot's record of its movement through the space. While the visualisation of the sonar input demonstrated the basis for the robot's decisions, the convoluted mass of green lines mapping the robot's path was so wide in relation to the actual space that the robot clearly had no sense of its actual position in the world. Divorced from its spatial origin, the robot's record of its journey was streamed to the Online website, where it appeared as an autonomous drawing. The Augmented Reality video feed supplementing or replacing the viewer's glimpses of the robot through the frosted glass and the disconnected plan-view

7. Toby Collett, "Developer-oriented Visualisation of a Robot Program: An Augmented Reality Approach," 2005. <http://window.auckland.ac.nz/archive/2005/11/tech.php>

scribble of the robot's movements seen online represented partial, overlapping and sometimes contrasting methodologies for viewing, recording and controlling movement. *Processing Vision* succeeded in mapping the divergence of these systems across both physical and online spaces.

In a work located firmly within the online context, Luke Duncalfe's *Interlayers for Window* (2005) toys with imperfections in analogue processes. The works are animated specks and scribbles that hover over the browser's window, appearing like dust and scratches on a film's surface. These uncontrollable floaters rupture the analogy of the desktop, but also highlight the flaws of the retinal screen. The forms recall *muscae volitantes* or 'flying flies,' entopic images caused by flaws in the vitreous humor, the translucent gel filling our eyes. These opacities within the eye create the sensation of spots and threads that drift involuntarily across the field of vision, and are particularly noticeable when looking at a bright surface such as the sky or a screen, or a white page.

Duncalfe situates the most obstructive element of these screen animations on the Window home page: a diagonal cross covers the entire interface. In page layout documents the crossed box is a stand-in replacing lost or unlinked images. This wayward and disobedient stand-in points to the operative assumptions and controlling protocols of Internet space. When the user scrolls downwards, for instance, the box overstates this action, jerking wildly in the screen's foreground. A technology is never developed in isolation from the language and history of a culture. Rather, it pulls in information from existing technologies, appropriating the terminology and metaphors of existing tools. Duncalfe's drifting flies draw on Bolter and Grusin's notion that "all media are on one level a 'play of signs,'" superimposing artefacts of the physiological, the analogue and the digital.<sup>8</sup>

This mismatch between user input and computer response causes us to question our assumptions of control and the dominant logic of the human computer interface that creates the context for Internet art. Kento Yamada's interactive work *Listening Heads* (2006) plays with notions of interactivity and responsiveness, putting a human veneer on the computer, literalising the interface. In *Listening Heads*, two portrait-format screens show coolly-lit images of a man and a woman. Speaking into one of the microphones hanging in front of each of these large-scale video portraits evokes a silent but emotive response. The heads yawn or smile, look sleepy or turn away. Sometimes the spoken input and the video response coincide, but other times the head's reply leaves the viewer with the sense of a communication breakdown. *Listening Heads* plays with our human perception of the face as privileged object. By clothing his hardware and software in his friends' visages Yamada constructs a kind of wordless Turing test. The illusion that the heads listen and respond turns the portraits into a kind of mirror, returning our gaze.<sup>9</sup>

Window Onsite's international reach has included presentation of the collected works of expatriate New Zealand net artist and activist Josh On and American artist William Boling's work *You Ain't Wrong* (2007, curated by Luke Munn).<sup>10</sup> *You Ain't Wrong* is an archive of auction pictures from the largest internet auction sites in New Zealand and the United States: TradeMe and eBay. The images of objects for sale are displayed in pairs, one for each day of the exhibition. Boling describes how these images are:

...usually presented artlessly and without pretension. The picture begins its

6. Toby Collett, *Processing Vision*, 2005, installation, robot with projection, projection details, window interior.  
 7. Luke Duncalfe, *Interlayers for Window*, 2004, Flash and JavaScript.  
 8. Kento Yamada, *Listening Heads*, 2006, interactive installation, photo: John B. Turner.



fig. 6



fig. 8



fig. 7

- 8. J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1999), 19.
- 9. Jaenine Parkinson, "Onsite + Online/ Kiss / Kento Yamada," Window, 2006. <http://window.auckland.ac.nz/archive/2006/06/onsite.php>
- 10. <http://youaintwrong.com/about.html>

life with a certain purity of intent. The picture taker is primarily motivated to allow the viewer to 'see clearly' the item offered for sale... This artless stance leads to picturing subjects and aspects of subjects, e.g. the back of a refrigerator, that would not be photographed, but for the intended sale.<sup>11</sup>

This daily pairing of found images forms a strange map of cultural difference, tracing the incidental and background details of a utilitarian but somehow exotic image bank.

At times there is a strong resonance between the methodologies and formal qualities of the works in the two spaces, such as the pairing of Jae Hoon Lee's works *Andrea 2001* and *A Leaf Onsite* with Alex Monteith's Internet project *Invisible Cities*. Monteith's work feeds the nouns and page numbers of Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* into a search engine, generating layered panes of images linked by the often tenuous relation of the search terms from the novel to the results pages. This aleatory collection reflects an anxiety about narrative and its subversion by technology often described in Calvino's works. Another of his books describes a novelist dismayed by a literary researcher's method of tracing his themes by atomising and electronically reading his works:

Now, every time I write a word, I see it spun around by the electronic brain, ranked according to its frequency, next to other words whose identity I cannot know, and so I wonder how many times I have used it, I feel the whole responsibility of writing weigh on those isolated syllables, I try to imagine what conclusions can be drawn from the fact that I have used this word once or fifty times. Maybe it would be better for me to erase it... But whatever other word I try to use seems unable to withstand the test... Perhaps instead of a book I could write lists of words, in alphabetical order, an avalanche of isolated words which expresses that truth I still do not know, and from which the computer, reversing its program, could construct the book, my book.<sup>12</sup>

Jae Hoon Lee breaks objects down into flat images, echoing this distillation of narrative into ranked and numbered words. Lee creates composites, using scanner and camera to capture forms and textures that he reassembles as videos and stills. His work digitally blends disparate angles and sources to create seamless yet oddly discontinuous images that are both highly descriptive and completely strange. *A Leaf* is a montage of scanned foliage accompanied by the white-noised hiss of summer cicadas. The video is mesmerising, scrolling endlessly up the screen in a rolling time-lapse as the leaves turn orange and brown and back to green again.

*Andrea 2001* is an image of a naked woman's body, scanned in pieces, pasted together and displayed on a life-size lightbox. The flesh pressed against the flat glass of the scanner and the high level of detail it provides creates an image that is disturbingly flayed, rolled out for examination, a body as disjointed as Calvino's atomised novel.

The logic of montage is a key to the juxtapositions of works *Online* and *Onsite*. Bringing works in the two spaces into conversation has sometimes been physically achieved by having a computer available at *Onsite* openings, making the site available to gallery visitors. Another factor in the relationship between on and offline practice is economics. *Window Online*, hosted on the University server and maintained by voluntary labour, reflects Hutchinson's earlier

9: Jae Hoon Lee, *A Tree*, 2003, 1200 x 2000mm, digital print.  
10: Jae Hoon Lee, *Andrea 2001*, 2001, 600 x 1800mm, Duratrans on light box.  
11: Alex Monteith, *Invisible Cities*, 2004, screenshot, software designed by Sean Kerr.

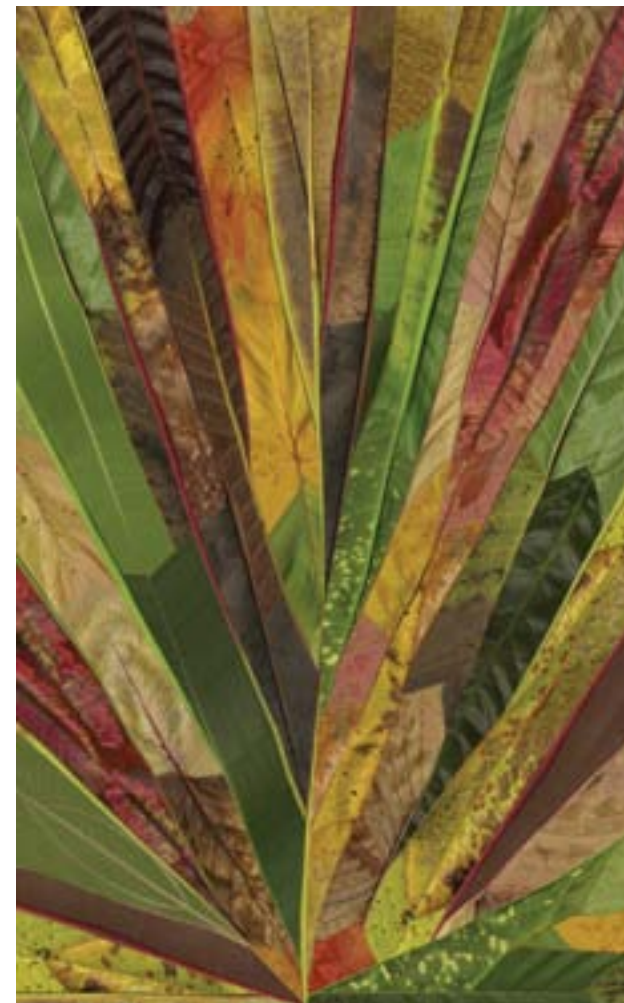


fig. 9



fig. 10



fig. 11

11. Stephen Shore, "Interview with William Boling," 2007. <http://www.window.auckland.ac.nz/archive/2007/08/online.php>  
12. Italo Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker and Warburg, 1981), 148.

leveraging of favours and expertise in completing projects for Spatial State of A and B. As Michael Betancourt describes it:

*The digital presents the illusion of a self-productive domain, infinite, capable of creating value without expenditure, unlike the reality of limited resources, time, expense... that otherwise govern all forms of value and production.*<sup>13</sup>

The Online space has “never cost a cent” while the bureaucratic processes of construction and maintenance have placed a definite dollar value on the physical space.<sup>14</sup> This split between a gallery’s demands of rent and overheads and the often more insubstantial requirements of websites that are squirreled away on company or institutional servers and maintained in late-night coding binges underlines a more general Internet tendency of extracting corporate value from the voluntary labour of bloggers, posters and file sharers. But this volunteerism is also part of a grand tradition of artist-run spaces fuelled by the dedication, enthusiasm and self-interest of artists.

In New Zealand, with no dedicated funding support for art self-consciously identified as electronic, digital practices have remained disparate, linked to personal expertise and collaborative relationships. Digital art practice remains more contiguous with other aspects of contemporary art, often operating within the context of extant forms such as theatre or experimental film. This is less the case in comparable nations such as Australia in part because of the historical policy preferences of funders and the technical resources of exhibition spaces. In an early example of this local bias, Spatial State tended to present projects by artists such as Michael Stevenson and Tessa Laird who were well versed in contemporary practice, but not necessarily technically savvy. This is an approach with benefits as well as limitations. As Hutchinson noted, working with such artists was:

*...more work for me, and perhaps they aren’t as inclined to really push the medium as far as it can go, but the ideas are just as strong, and they’re being presented to an audience that may be used to ‘virtual bodies’ and ‘viral complexity’ but probably hasn’t dealt with a carefully placed fried egg on the floor.*<sup>15</sup>

13. Michael Betancourt, “The Aura of the Digital,” CTheory: 1000 Days of Theory, ed. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, 9 June 2006. <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=519>

14. Luke Duncalfe in conversation with Stella Brennan, December 14 2007.

15. Butt, “Spatial State of A and B: Robert Hutchinson.”

Luke Duncalfe, *Untitled*, 2008. Duncalfe plays with a CAPTCHA, an acronym for ‘Completely Automated Public Turing Test to tell Computers and Humans Apart’. The tests are an online security measure attempting to sort the people from the bots, often through reading distorted text.

