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# Learning to Love the Poetry Blog

By Lewis LaCook

Self-confessed cybersnob and net.artist Lewis LaCook relates the tale of his conversion to poetry blogs. The blog, he argues, is a medium which opens up the net to poets whose forte is words and not (necessarily) code

## Subverting the Cybersnobs

I know HTML, JavaScript, PHP, and some Perl. I've worked with MySQL databases and Macromedia Flash. I know the difference between headers and cookies. And on feverish nights I've dreamed in code.

When Brandon Barr, webmaster of the Texturl web log [<http://texturl.net/>] and co-coordinator of the Banner Art site [<http://bannerart.org>], first told me just how popular web logs ('blogs' for short) were becoming, I scoffed. And why my initial disdain for the form deepened when I noted just how popular blogs were becoming with poets. It seemed too simple to me.

As an artist whose primary interests were computer science and literature, the Blogger phenomenon [<http://www.blogger.com>], wherein any poet could publish to the web with minimal or no knowledge of HTML, seemed beside the point. Where was the interweaving of multimedia and reactivity that is so alluring in digital poetics and net.art? Any cursory look at poets' blogs reveals that the only break with literature's tradition of monolithic, static text here are links and images, often pointing only to other poets' blogs. From a distance, it looked like just another way for the old boys' network of contemporary American poetics to co-opt the growing migration of literature from page to file, and to enjoy an aura of innovation that few of them had earned.

All of this, of course, was before I got a blog. Now, at this point one may ask: if you had such a dim view of blogs, Mr. LaCook, why did you feel the need to have one yourself? After all, you know HTML, JavaScript, PHP and some Perl. You've worked with databases. Heck, you could even write your own version of Blogger, the wildly popular online blog publishing system. With all of this in your repertoire, why would you start a blog, and on Blogger none-the-less?

Well, be patient. This is a love story, but not one about love at first site...er, sight.

## Subject, Blog, Object

I started the Stamen Pistol [<http://stamenpistol.blogspot.com>] blog in September of 2003. I'd been poring over numerous poets' blogs on the net, from Nada Gordon's poem blog [<http://prrowess.blogspot.com>] – unfortunately, abandoned since August 2003 – to Eileen Tabios' Love's Last Gasps [<http://loveslastgasps.blogspot.com>], and I decided that I liked the easy access blogs provided to poetry by writers I liked. Sometimes, I just want to read.

Stamen Pistol is a group poetry blog whose member list grows monthly. Originally, the blog's contributors included myself, Sheila E. Murphy and Allen Bramhall; as of today, blog members also include Cyril Duneau, Lendon Heide, Mez, and Daniel Carter. There are some members who don't post (Nada Gordon is one, and Nick Piombino, whose own blog fait accompli [<http://nickpiombino.blogspot.com/>] is perhaps the second best-known poet's blog out there, next to Ron Silliman's [<http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com>]). All members have administrative privileges; they can edit or delete posts at will, not only their own (it doesn't happen very often, but the option is there). At this point the membership list is exactly the sort of mix of well-known contemporary poets (Sheila Murphy's work has appeared about everywhere one finds poetry, and she is probably one of the most

influential poets writing today; Allen Bramhall co-edits Potes and Poets Press; Mez is the legendary net.artist and codeworker whose work has helped shape the experience of language online) and newcomers (Lendon Heide, I don't believe, knew what a blog was until I showed her Stamen Pistol) that weaves the kind of textual pastiche I most love.

The basic blog format looks like this: time stamped entries ordered by date, the most recent entries appearing at the very top of the page. This form lends itself well to archiving. What separates the blog most from the printed book or chapbook of poems is just this reliance on a database structure, as opposed to the narrative approach print implies. Any book of poems in which each individual piece is quite intentionally where it is lives fully within a narrative structure, even if no explicit narrative is visible. The sequence of poems on a poem blog, however, is determined programmatically; it's a simple call to a database, in which tables of data are ordered in a reverse chronology and formatted in a friendly way.

This might be why the first poets to take to the blog form in a big way were L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and post-L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers. One of the most significant breaks with tradition these poets enacted was a willingness to experiment with 'new' ordering principles within the poem; unity of voice was something to play with, as well as linear monological structure and the concept of closure; many of these works read like lists of linguistic or sensory phenomena. Some are aware of the debt they owe to earlier American poets who also challenged form: read a poem by Whitman and one senses alternative methods just on the horizon.

### **What it is, what it was, what it could be**

Blogs use database logic because blogs are database logic. In their original incarnation, a web blog was in essence a links page. Blogs sought to filter the dizzying morass of information available on the net via daily or semi-daily updates. Commentary was often included, helping to further mediate the cacophony. The net user could look at a blog and get a different take on news events of the day; blogs shone light into often little-traversed corners, gleaning tidbits that might interest their readers.

Of course, today's blog is more commentary than link list, and the form has become a sort of public diary for many users. LiveJournal [<http://www.livejournal.com/>], Blogger's only serious competition, has capitalised on this trend..

Something else that happened in the evolution of blogs was the diminishing need to know HTML. Before Blogger and LiveJournal provided users with friendly GUIs for online publishing, bloggers had to know HTML in order to construct their spaces. Both Blogger and LiveJournal have eliminated that need; both provide a simple textfield, with some buttons to automate link creation and other HTML mark-up capabilities, as a conduit to fast web publishing. The skill set needed to publish a blog is relatively sparse. You have to be able to navigate to the editing page, and be able to type.

So while data dandies like myself may scoff at the simplicity of blogging, there's really something profound in the fact that one doesn't need heaps of knowledge to maintain a blog. Public expression is available to anyone who can use language and has access to a computer. While in the '90s the net seemed to promise liberation in the form of home pages, we now have the blog, and the swiftness and ubiquity of blogging point to a phase of culture wherein everyone can have their say, and everyone can be an author.

It's an exciting phase, to be sure. When the second Gulf War broke out, many turned to the Salam Pax/Raed blog [[http://dear\\_raed.blogspot.com](http://dear_raed.blogspot.com)] to find out what was happening in Iraq through the eyes of an Iraqi. There have been some doubts as to the authenticity of the blog (we never know just precisely where anything is coming from on the Net, do we?), but the blog did play an integral part in

the anti-war push here in the U.S. and in Great Britain. Raed showed us the human face of our own colonial urge.

And that's what blogs do. They humanise the net. Sure, net.art and digital poetics may be forging new forms with their interweaving of aesthetics and computer science, but blogs are the intimate spaces where humanity speaks through the bytes.

### **Ten blogs to start with**

As-Is: Group Poetry Blog founded by Andrew Lundwall and Clayton Couch

[<http://as-is.blogspot.com/>]

My Angie Dickinson: Michael Magee's serial poem in progress

[<http://myangiedickinson.blogspot.com/>]

A Million Poems (Jordan Davis)

[<http://millionpoems.blogspot.com/>]

Jimpunk's group net.art blog

[<http://544x378.free.fr/>](WebTV)

The Well-Nourished Moon (Stephanie Young)

[<http://stephanieyoung.durationpress.com/>]

Mez

[<http://www.livejournal.com/users/netwurker>]

K. Silem Mohammad's lime tree

[<http://limetree.ksilem.com/>]

Language Hat

[<http://www.languagehat.com/>]

Word Placements (Clayton Couch)

[<http://home.earthlink.net/%7Ecacpublicjournal/>]

P-Ramblings (William Allegrezza)

[<http://allegrezza.blogspot.com>]

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