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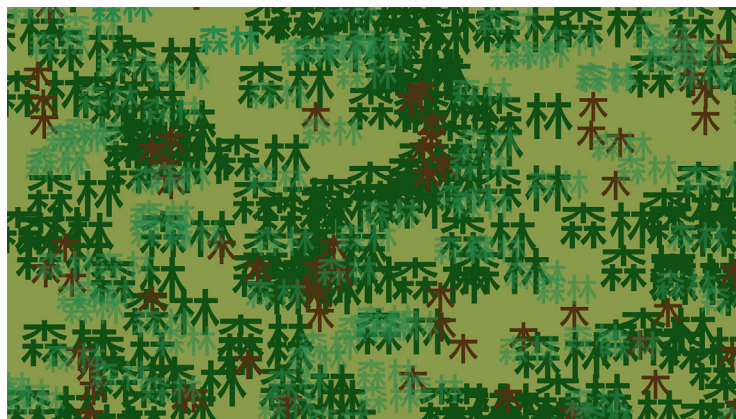
Speak, Pen: A (non)-Instructional Performance

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Speak, Pen is a web-based art tool programmed in JavaScript. It's a drawing tool that replaces the traditional paintbrush with custom text inputs. Users are free to use text on the canvas to make visual poetries, interactive drawings, and performances, etc. Created during a radical tool workshop, the work explores the materiality of text, and ways in which users experiment with text beyond its semantic functions. A *(non-)Instructional Performance* is a live drawing performance combined with vocal narration. Presented as a series of "tutorials", the performance explores the possibilities of using *Speak, Pen* while unfolding the theories and story behind its creation.

Description

Texts have long been used as a medium of conveying both meaning and visual aesthetes. While some artists like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger utilizes texts to get out powerful messages in their artwork, others like Ed Ruscha who's painting often depicts texts as still life objects also emphasize the shapes and compositions of the words themselves. In concrete poetry, meaning is conveyed by graphic patterns of the texts, and rhythm is experienced through the composition. And for digital art, although unseen, every work is power by pieces of text – code.

Fig. 1. 3 types of brushes from *Speak, Pen.*
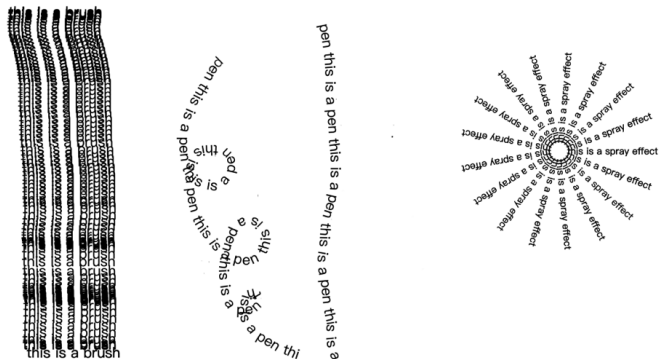
Influenced by visual poetry and the poetics of code, *Speak, Pen* is a digital drawing art tool that replaces the traditional paintbrush with texts. It features basic drawing functions inspired by the classic MS paint, so is its user interface. By arranging the characters from the text input in unique ways, *Speak, Pen* can compose different brush textures (Fig. 1). By utilizing the details of the type-face like letter spacings, ascender, and descender, the trailing texts can create different densities to the stroke. The "pen" option features a thinner stroke line, by printing out the letters of the text inputs individually. And the "spray-paint" effect rotates the text inputs around the mouse position. It outputs a flower-like visual, making each letter droplets from the spray can. The art tool also features an eraser function that prints out texts with the background color, displaying it as the negative space in the drawing. Other functions display texts on the canvas dynamically, like movement, fading, and resizing. "In digital media, concrete poetry gains two more levels of expression outside of linguistic and graphic qualities – time and interaction" (Simanowski, 2004).

As an art tool, *Speak, Pen* invites the users to explore those interactions in creative ways. A (non-)Instructional Performance is a live drawing performance combined with vocal narration. Presented as a series of "tutorials", the performance explores the possibilities of using *Speak, Pen* while unfolding the theories and story behind its creation. For example, in one part of the performance "you are my house", I explore the utterance and the multi-sensory aspect of the text, creating a visual and audio poem that comes into being while demolished. The repetition of the sonic elements in the poem is synonymous with the action that I have to perform to continue writing and reading.

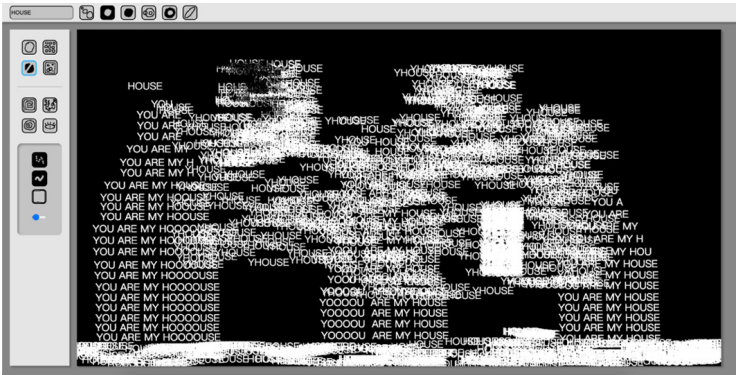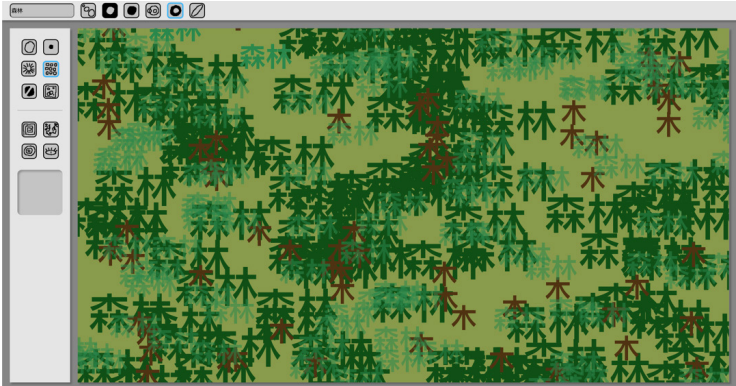**Fig. 2.** Drawing "you are my house" with *Speak, Pen.*

Fig. 3. Drawing of a forest with *Speak, Pen.*

Informed by my fellow electronic writers, I am largely concerned with the presentational and the representational functions of texts and code, and ways that makers convey messages with words beyond their representational functions. As a Chinese artist, language for me is inherently more visual than sonic. To write in Chinese, in a way is to deconstruct the characters into patterns that would inform the meaning of the words. In the performance, a forest is drawn with the Chinese characters "wood" and "forest" (Fig. 2), texts are used as objects here with their suggested meaning. Later in the performance, the trees got cut down and turn into matches (Fig. 3). And in this drawing, the character "i" is used dynamically to create the burning flames. Used as a paintbrush, texts become a powerful material that can express an aesthetic, convey meaning, and perform actions.

Fig. 4. Drawing of a burning match with *Speak, Pen.*
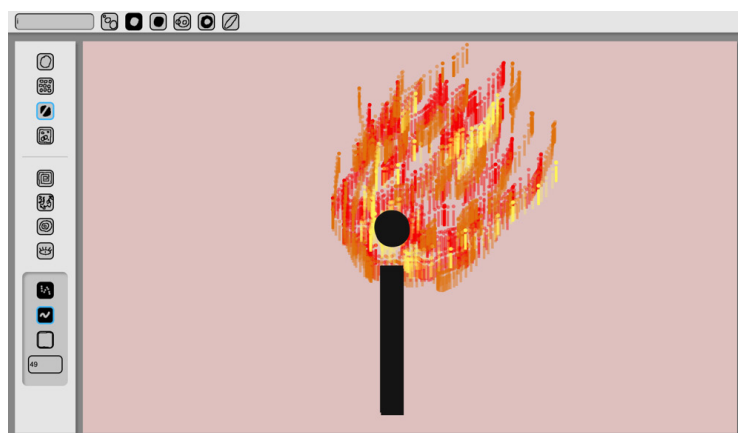
First created at a radical tool workshop at SFPC, *Speak, Pen* takes inspiration from other "radical" tools that encourage DIY spirit and playfulness – like Nathalie Lawhead's Electric *Zine Maker* and *Become a Great Artist in 10 Seconds* created by Michael Brough and Andi McClure. *Speak, Pen* is programmed with JavaScript as a web-based drawing tool for accessibility. It is not just a digital drawing tool, but rather, a community that aims to inspire makers to experiment with texts beyond their daily functions. It is something that can be performed, alone, or alongside others. You are invited to create with it however you like, the intention to use texts thoughtfully to convey messages or simply use words as images is completely up to the users. The makers can then upload their creations to the community page where they will continue to inspire others and be inspired. The work itself grows from it too, I will constantly add new functions to the tool, as performances and interactions with audiences add

iterations to its original form. I intended to blur the lines between users and the creators or mediators of a platform. Our community guidelines are based not on rules for how to use the text brush, but examples of how past audiences have experimented with it. Borrowing from Lori Emerson's blog titled 'making as meaning', the meaning of the works lies not within the interpretation of the texts in the drawings, but the different engagements with the tool within and outside its community.

References

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