

9 MAY –
11 AUGUST 2024
Online

CURATED BY
REA MCNAMARA

ORGANIZED BY
THE MACKENZIE ART GALLERY

EXHIBITION DEVELOPMENT
CAT BLUEMKE AND JONATHAN CARROLL

WAKE WINDOWS: THE WITCHING HOUR

Participating collaborator Claudia Cornwall with curator Rea McNamara

Claudia Cornwall is the author of seven books in a variety of genres. Her 1982 children's book, *Print-Outs: The Adventures of a Rebel Computer*, was one of the earliest computer fiction works in Canadian children's literature. It became an important source text for the *Wake Windows* exhibition, to the extent that its main character, Edgar, became a character in the exhibition's interactive narrative.

Below is an edited and abridged interview I conducted with Cornwall via Zoom in September 2023.

Rea McNamara (RM): You've stated that the genesis for *Print-Outs* was your curiosity back in the early 1980s regarding the philosophical worldview of a computer — a then-nascent phenomenon due to the rise of personal computing.

Claudia Cornwall (CC): That's right. But I was also interested in making the book somehow part of the story in a stronger way.

I wanted the book to be a facsimile of what a computer could produce. What it looked like... you know, you had these roller things and with the little pegs and the paper was a tractor feed and the paper was attached to those, to those little things, and rolled around. So that was how computer printouts looked in those days. I wanted it to look like that.

And that's one of the reasons the book was successful. I sold 4000 copies. In those days [that was] considered pretty good for a kids' book in Canada. And I think the appearance

of the book, the fact that it was this kind of facsimile of a computer, made it easier to engage people with, and so they were intrigued.

RM: How did you write it then?

CC: I think my first draft was probably on an electric typewriter cause that's what I had. Nobody had personal computers.

[But] I still wanted it to look like more like a computer product and also the drawings I thought might be easier to do on a computer rather than the electric typewriter. It was tedious. So, I told a friend about this, and he was out at [the University of British Columbia]. He was in the IT department, and I asked, "Can I rent an hour on your Mainframe or something?" And he says, "Oh no. Just use my ID and password, pretend to be me, and do what you want." So that's what I did.

But anyway, I learned how to do word

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processing—as it were—on this Mainframe [computer]. One day as I was sitting there, [and] this thing flashed across my screen, “Jason, get your ass on down here!” And that was [for] my friend, right? And that’s [from] his boss. I thought, “Oh Lordy!” So, I shut everything down and swiftly left the building. I don’t think there were any repercussions [but] I thought that the boss knew that two people were using this password. [Laughter]

RM: Edgar first appeared in a short story for *The Canadian Children’s Magazine*. The stories that makeup *Print-Outs* were then self-published by your imprint, Nerve Press. Can you talk a bit about your choice to publish independently?

CC: Yeah, so I approached publishers. I got a favourable response, but people said, “Oh, get back to me in a year. My list is full.” I was anxious to get going because I thought it was a great idea. It had to be now. I thought someone would steal my idea. So I published it myself. My husband and I did this—we coined the name “Nerve” for the publishing company because it took so much nerve to do it.

By then, my husband was not in computers, but he decided to make a career switch and get some training in computing. He then made a kind of interactive Edgar. I remember doing a presentation at a library. Kids could actually interact with the character. It was kind of a primitive-like ChatGPT kind of thing. There were questions the computer would ask and things that the kids would say or write. It was all done by typing. And, depending on what they said, the computer would go in a certain direction. My husband wrote that in BASIC to

kind of illustrate the experience of interacting with Edgar.

[*Print-Outs* is] out of print [now]. It was sold [to] a number of libraries. You get money if your book is in the library, [so] I used to get money for *Print-Outs* for a long time. The only place where you can still buy it is in a bookstore in Vancouver called Paper Hound, which likes quirky books. [Laughter] So they usually have a copy that they can [still] sell. They say it’s unique [and] nothing else like it.

RM: Wow, what a journey. Not only did you self-publish the book, but you also did all the ASCII drawings yourself!

CC: Yeah, I did the drawings, and it was [actually] easier on the computer [than on the typewriter]. Going to the Mainframe was awkward and weird, and the instructions were difficult to understand. But it was fabulous to be able to edit the way you could on a computer. That gave me such a feeling of liberation...you could decide, “Oh, I’ll change the ending, I’ll put it at the beginning,” and still end up with a clean copy.

RM: Edgar, as you know, is a computer who not only goes on strike but also self-publishes their poetry by infiltrating a library database and circulating his poems there. At one point, since you’ve written about the history of Vancouver and been a long-time resident there, I was curious how much of the city’s renown as a tech hub might have informed *Print-Outs*’ “progressive” depiction of computing.

CC: I’m a child of the ’60s, right? And so, that was still kind of in [the air]. Lots of

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demonstrations and protests and things like that. That was kind of part of the zeitgeist. It was waning [in the early 1980s], but we still had many big demonstrations. Like, in 1986, there was a huge peace march in Vancouver. It was the largest one we ever had. One hundred thousand people came out, so people were more receptive to different ideas. There was a lot of anti-corporatism and [Students for a Democratic Society] (SDS) and so on. I went to SDS meetings at UBC. Only one. I didn't really like the atmosphere—they were very angry and didn't appeal to me, but that was [SDS]. They were pretty left-wing, pretty out there.

RM: The last story is pretty meta: Edgar meets a “writer” named Claudia, who helps them co-write the book that ends up being *Print-Outs*. It's fairly prescient, given the emergence of AI and ChatGPT, your exploration of human-computer collaboration. Do you look back and think, “Oh, I got that right.” [Laughter]

CC: The whole thing [was] about, you know, what it is to be a person, right? That's what this is all about. I think you can be a person and be

electronic. I don't think we have to be biological creatures. That's a big topic, and people always say, “Oh, you know computers or an AI could never equal...” Humans always like to have this exceptionalism business, and we did it with animals for years...you know, I was interested in Washoe, the chimpanzee who learned sign language...and then there was Koko, the gorilla who was also taught sign language. I visited them in 1985: Koko and her researcher were at Stanford, and I visited them and saw her signing to people. It was pretty intentional.

So, I don't buy the idea that only a human can have a soul or a spirit or be a person. Some animals may sometimes be persons and like [laughter] why not? So that's true. I was kind of on that, saying that computers could be persons, have intentions and desires, and so on. It's just how you program them.

ABOUT THE COLLABORATOR

Claudia Cornwall is the author of seven books in a variety of genres. Her 1982 children's book, *Print-Outs: The Adventures of a Rebel Computer*, was one of the earliest computer fiction works in Canadian children's literature. Since *Print-Outs*, Cornwall has written *Letter from Vienna: A Daughter Uncovers Her Family's Jewish Past*, which won the 1996 B.C. Book Prize for non-fiction. *At the World's Edge: Curt Lang's Vancouver, 1937-1998*, was shortlisted for the City of Vancouver Book Award in 2011. The American Library Association's Booklist selected *Catching Cancer: The Quest for its Viral & Bacterial Causes* as one of the best books of 2013. Her most recent book, *British Columbia in Flames: Stories from a Blazing Summer* (Harbour Publishing, 2020), was a finalist for the BC Lieutenant Governor's Award for historical writing.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Rea McNamara is a writer and curator based in Tkaronto/Toronto. Her curatorial work has long been shaped by networked counterpublics' participatory cultures, particularly the collaborative processes of transformative fandom, alongside a social practice shaped by organizing community-based art initiatives. In her research, she often focuses on the emergence of otherness and hybridity within digital identity formations, informing an on/offline curatorial approach that connects and capacity-builds.

McNamara has previously held curatorial and public programming positions with the Gardiner Museum and Drake Hotel, and been awarded grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. She has curated and organized a range of exhibitions and public projects, including *dis-ease* (Vector Festival, 2021), *Obsessive Pop Tendencies* (Pleasure Dome, 2019), *Community Arts Space* (Gardiner Museum, 2016-2019), and *Safe Space* (Scotiabank Nuit Blanche 2024). In 2011, she founded the art party series *Sheroes*, which engaged with female celebrity fandom through music, performance, installation, and internet-based art. Her work has been presented at The Art Gallery of Ontario and is in the Whitney Museum of American Art collection.

Additionally, McNamara has written about art, culture and the internet for *frieze*, *Art in America*, *The Globe and Mail*, and been commissioned to write exhibition texts for Trinity Square Video, the Remai Modern, and Daniel Faria Gallery. From 2020-2021, she was the Emily H. Tremaine Journalism Fellow for Curators with *Hyperallergic*. She also gives talks, moderates panels, and lead workshops on fandom, curatorial practice, and the labour of mothering for The Toronto Public Library, Toronto Metropolitan University, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and more.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Wake Windows: The Witching Hour

Led by a rebellious AI Chatbot, this interactive online exhibition guides viewers through interactive and time-based art by artists who are parents, caregivers, or educators who engage with public databases and "living archives." In touching on maternal world building and our ever-evolving relationship with AI, *Wake Windows: The Witching Hour* intends to make visible the missing datasets in our collective understanding of the often invisible labour that is mothering. From animations to machinimas or virtual reality (VR) to interactive narratives, the digital exhibition traces how the artists' creative outputs have shifted since taking on this care work. Curated by Rea McNamara, participating artists and collaborators include Claudia Cornwall, Alejandra Higuera with Magnolia Higuera, Faith Holland with Ben Bogart and Hildegard Holland Watter, Wednesday Kim, Lauren Lee McCarthy, Rory Scott, Skawennati, and Rodell Warner. *Wake Windows* is part of a series of digital exhibitions created through the MacKenzie Art Gallery's Digital Exhibitions Toolkit and Art Installation Launcher (DETAIL)—a newly developed resource championing the development of art exhibitions for digital platforms.

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ARTISTS

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Faith Holland with Ben Bogart and Hildegard Holland Watter
Wednesday Kim
Lauren Lee McCarthy
Rory Scott
Skawennati
Rodell Warner

SPECIAL THANKS

Cat Bluemke
Jonathan Carroll
Iain Soder
Claudia Cornwall
Rodney LaTourelle and Louise Witthöft
Geoff Yuen and Lee Froese of The Hatchery
Crystal Mowry
Nicolle Nugent
Jayne Wilkinson
Lisa Karen Cox
Onika Powell
Sharn Peters
Natalie Haddad
Rosemary Heather
Linda Wilson
Tony Halmos and Quincy Lou McNamara-Halmos.

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