Archival Penumbra

Danny Snelson

$L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ magazine (1978–1981), from the first issue, was figured as a project in recovering "out-of-print books, magazines, and unpublished manuscripts." This description should strike a note of dissonance in the chorus of common knowledge concerning this influential little magazine, which is known for shaping the emergent poetics of the $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ writing community. However, skimming along the surface of the issues today, the reader is struck by the density of bibliographic notes on access and availability. Among the contemporary reviews and short essays that characterize the bulk of the magazine, one finds offers from the "$L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ Distributing Service," a kind of door-to-door photocopy delivery mechanism for out-of-print works. A catalogue of books and magazines could be ordered for fifty cents from the home address of editor Charles Bernstein, who ran this reprint-on-demand service through a neighborhood Xerox machine.

In the first issue of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ (1978), the reader notes that David Melnick's *Pcoet* (1975), originally published by G.A.W.K. just three years prior, could be photocopied by the Distributing Service for $3.00. Similarly, out-of-print titles by Clark Coolidge, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, and Lyn Hejinian, among others, were on offer in Xerox format. The full run of Silliman's foundational *Tottel's* poetry newsletter was announced in both $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ no. 4 and *Tottel's* no. 17. Issues of magazines like *This*, *Hundred Posters*, and *Toothpick* were also listed in the inventory. The catalog included scores of such entries, most of which have never been "properly" republished. For those that follow the distributing services of Craig Dworkin, however, these titles should sound familiar. In fact, all of the above-mentioned works can be found on Dworkin's online archive, Eclipse.

Or rather, they would be found if Eclipse were online. Like the solar event invoked in the site's title, the archive flickered out of sight in December of 2012. When I began this review, the site was functioning regularly at http://english.utah.edu/eclipse. However, due to an oversight in the restructuring of university servers—as much a surprise to the editor as the site's users—the full archive simply vanished. By the time this review goes to press, it will likely return to the internet at a new URL. In the meantime, umbraphiles might content themselves with captures of the site from the Internet Archive Wayback Machine. They might content themselves, that is, if the Internet Archive crawler had uniformly captured the high-resolution facsimile images of the Eclipse archive while they were available. Sadly, that too is not the case.

In the shadow of this syzygy, we might pause, for a moment, to consider the de-publication of Eclipse from the Internet. As Bruno Latour might remind us, once a punctualized actor like Eclipse
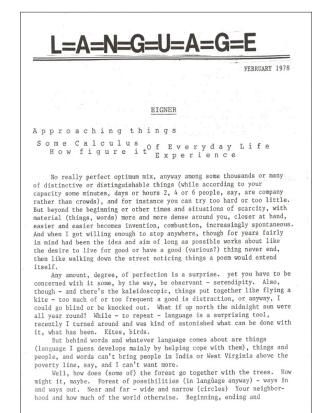
breaks down, its myriad components are on rare view to the user. Of course, there is little need to turn to the Internet Archive unless one needs access to a site no longer available online. On browsing the haphazard collection of captures, date by date, a whole network of automated and variable processes can be traced over time. From a bibliographic perspective, the reader may thus contend with the trickier aspects of digital publication: continually updated (or disappearing) content, changing forms and formats, and a host of contextual and intertextual modulations—all of which dramatically impact our understanding of the material conditions of a little database like Eclipse.

Unlike paper books, frequently accessed digital objects are only **more** *likely to endure.*

At the time the site went offline, it hosted 153 titles of rare and out-of-print works. The archive focuses on "digital facsimiles of the most radical small-press writing," primarily originating in the 1970s and '80s. From early 2002 until the spring of 2006, Eclipse ran on Princeton University servers. After a summer offline, the site returned in the fall of 2006 through the University of Utah's English subdomain. Following the rhythms of academic semesters and charting Dworkin's passage from one university position to another, the archive bears a personal history alongside its material contents. Further, the spatial coordinates of each new edition of Eclipse signal the full republication of its materials. Once physically inscribed to subdirectories within university servers, what remains of these facsimile images can be found amid the petabytes of the Internet Archive in San Francisco and mirrored (pinacographically?) by the New Library of Alexandria.

An attentive user of the Internet Archive might also chart the periodicity of Eclipse. From the twenty-three titles featured in the site's first capture (February 15, 2002) to the most recent snapshot (November 10, 2012), a series of discrete archival release dates have been broken down for the reader. It is as though Dworkin is continually editing a magazine that is only periodically distributed by an unpredictable algorithmic publisher. In this sense, the online "archive"—already more akin to a special collection or perverse library—verges on the formal properties of the periodical, the generic conventions of which anticipate so much of the time-stamped Internet. Here, the orbit of our hermeneutic circle returns to $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ magazine, featured in each capture, dating way back to the origin of Eclipse. This continual republication reminds us that the $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ Distributing Service photocopied as many issues of its own magazine as were ever printed in the first place.

Time aside, the remnants of Eclipse alert us to how the site was used. Only the most popular works are captured. A web crawler called Alexa (another homage to the burning library) determines what is shown and how often sites are captured. There was not enough time for the images of Gil Ott's *Paper Air* magazine to be paged through, nor enough exposure for Clark Coolidge's *Polaroid* (1975) to be fully captured. Other facets of the archival interface are not captured at all: JavaScript navigational tools and unrecorded images mar the page with "Error" notifications, red "X"'s, and broken symbols. In this glitch-ridden record, the

$L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ *cover, February 1978*

persistent presence of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ marks the magazine's continued use. Given that the name of the magazine is often applied to the expanded field of $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ writing—up to and including a 2011 issue of the *American Book Review*—popular curiosity and course syllabi are sure to maintain the magazine's Alexa ranking. Unlike paper books, whose sustained use promises disintegration, frequently accessed digital objects are only *more* likely to endure.

If the Internet Archive maps the temporal and spatial conditions of the database, the variable formats of Eclipse's facsimile images tell the most remarkable narratives. For the first four years of operation, the images were all presented in Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) on a highly compressed grey scale. Starting in 2006, these GIF files were gradually replaced by higher resolution JPEG files in full color. A few texts remain in GIF, with $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ magazine notable among them. This lossy format perfectly reflects the earliest stages of the periodical's publication patterns. Poorly transcoded images of the magazine transport the reader to a medial environment of Xerox and photocopy, of distributing services and mail networks. This is the bibliographic paradox of compression. Beneath the accelerating arc toward greater "fidelity" to analogue formats, there is a strange magic in the lo-fi betrayal of the GIF image. Dispelling the illusion of immediacy, the lossy format reveals deep layers of technical remediation while pointing to the historical specificity of both original and facsimile. Enfolding the book within the mechanism of the format, the material conditions of both may only come to light in a moment when preservation is overshadowed by accessibility, when the archivist is eclipsed by the algorithm.

Danny Snelson is an editor at PennSound, UbuWeb, and the Reissues online archive at Jacket2. *He is the co-author of* Inventory Arousal *(2011) and publisher of Edit Publications. He will be joining Eclipse as an associate editor when the site returns.*