

# PREHISTORIC DIGITAL POETRY

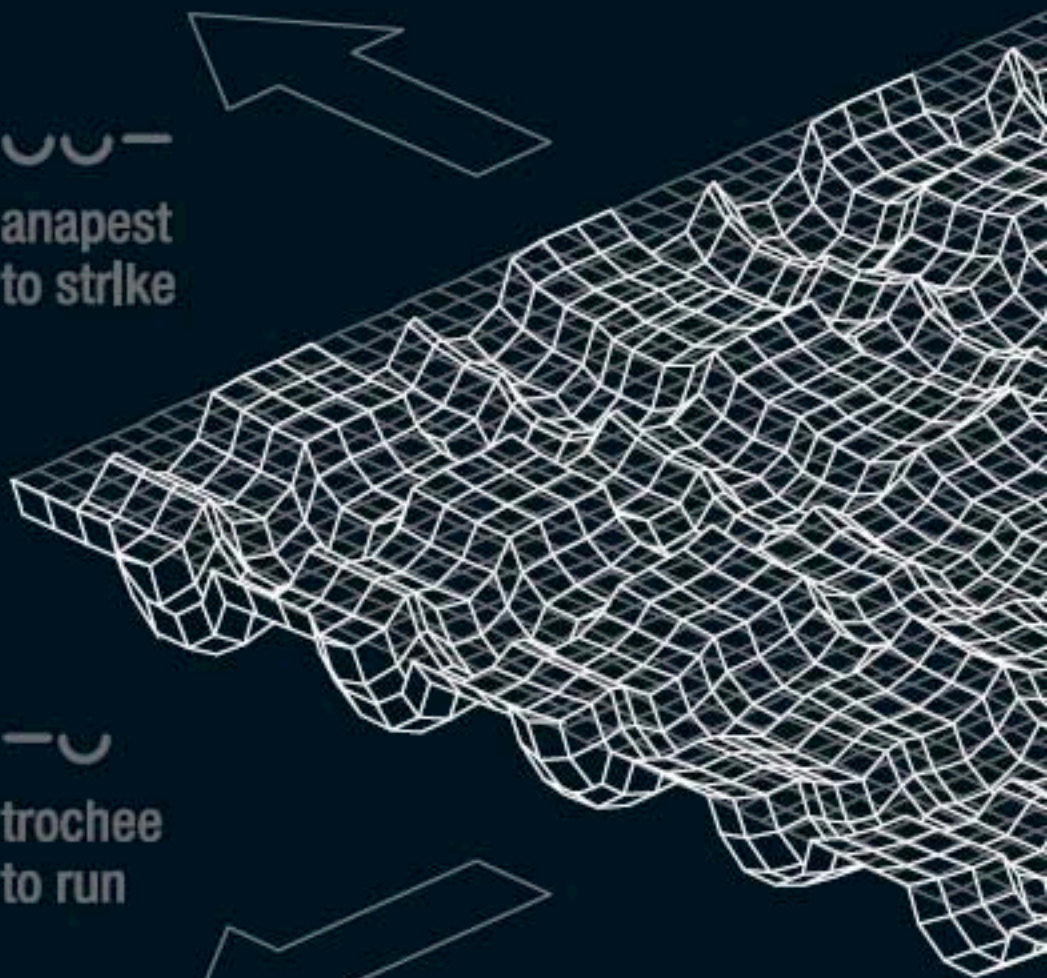
AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF FORMS, 1959–1995 C. T. FUNKHOUSER



anapest  
to strike



trochee  
to run



and could use the output as a starting point for their own expressive articulations.

### Slotted Works

As seen in the discussion above, one can impose outside (artificial) order and formal structure in computer poems by designing a framework where only certain components are randomly filled by grammatically appropriate words. Assembling texts using different varieties of a slotted framework was pervasive in the prehistoric era of digital poetry. In this type of work several layers of randomization may be involved. The author creates slots, and the program randomly chooses words from a database (or “pool” or “deck,” etc.). In some examples the sequencing of several different potential styles of output are also randomized, so texts produced under the same title do not contain the same verbal patterns every time a program is activated. The slotted structure makes it easier for grammatical meaning to remain intact, as long as the correct types of word forms are inserted into the pool from which output text is selected.

“A House of Dust” (1968), written by Alison Knowles and James Tenney, is among the first poems featuring collocation via a programmed slot-system and appears in several publications (each time with a different title).<sup>37</sup> The poet-programmers in each instance establish four categories (materials, situations, lighting, and inhabitants) that determine the content of each line within a stanza. “Random meetings” of one element from each of the four categories generate a serial poem, as seen in this example from *Cybernetic Serendipity*:

A HOUSE OF STEEL  
 IN A COLD, WINDY CLIMATE  
 USING ELECTRICITY  
 INHABITED BY NEGROES WEARING ALL COLORS  
 A HOUSE OF SAND  
 IN SOUTHERN FRANCE  
 USING ELECTRICITY  
 INHABITED BY VEGETARIANS  
 A HOUSE OF PLASTIC  
 IN A PLACE WITH BOTH HEAVY RAIN AND BRIGHT SUN

## USING CANDLES

## INHABITED BY COLLECTORS OF ALL TYPES. (16)

Hundreds of “houses” can be created if all of the possibilities of this program are exhausted. The cumulative effect of the disparities in each of the poems, with their lightly absurdist expressions, begins to create a mental architecture for readers, though the output syntax is fixed and this work is repetitive. The words or phrases that fill the slots in the second and fourth lines show notable versatility. In the second line, which serves to establish a location, instead of getting a simple word each time, the program can insert in one instance, “a cold, windy climate,” then in the next “southern France,” and then “a place with both heavy rain and bright sun.” Or it can repeat the same line in the same slot for several poems in a row. Such flexibility or variation spares the cumulative poem from being monotonous and redundant, even though it is cyclical.

More than twice as much text appears in the samples of the poem included in *Fantastic Architecture* and *Computers for the Arts* than in *Cybernetic Serendipity*.<sup>38</sup> One can discern only slight differences in the individual iterations of the project—which is not surprising given that they are written by the same program—though later versions include expanded, elaborate fourth lines in some stanzas. Instead of brief lines like “Inhabited by collectors of all types” or “Inhabited by vegetarians,” the fourth line in the first stanza of “Proposition No. 2 for Emmett Williams” (in *Computers for the Arts*) reads: “Inhabited by all races of men represented wearing predominantly red clothing” (15). The expansion of text in the last sentence occurs somewhere between the 1968 and 1971 publications. Otherwise, the central structures and language of the poem are similar. Incidentally, the notes for the poem in *Cybernetic Serendipity* claim that one of the houses would be built in New York City a year later, and an online biography that appears on the Left Hand Books WWW site reports that Knowles’s “computer instigated dwelling *The House of Dust* is located in California as a permanent installation.” The database for the work is thoughtful and effective. These poems invoke the imagination, as the reader constructs the various houses or the one house, shifting in forms with subtle variations. Selecting one of the houses from the poem and constructing a piece of art (or an entire architectural structure) based on it is a palpable—and as far as I know, unique—idea.

*Syntax* includes “Aphorismes,” a clear yet varied slot-oriented piece by