

Generated stories.
Operating Ana Torfs's Story Generator
Dirk De Meyer

Stuttgart, Kunstgebäude, Sat 17 Febr 2018, 20:00

Tools — Annals — Intertextualities — Persistences — *Détournements*

SLIDE Fig. Photograph; Ana Torfs, design drawing

Ana Torfs's *Story Generator* is an apparatus, a rotating object, executed entirely in copper, in which are 'hanging' more than five hundred index cards printed on both sides. It is placed on a small square table. Sitting on a stool, you can operate it alone, i.e. turn the knob and view the cards; or accompanied by another person seated opposite yourselves.

Each index card contains a number in the top-right corner, with to its left a text fragment or an image. Some index cards contain just a number and are otherwise empty. The numbers are in sequence from 1515 to 2015, but *Story Generator* has no beginning and no end. It is a revolving 'loop' where you can 'begin' with any number.

SLIDE Tools

SLIDE Fig. Neilsen patent application, Rolodex

The first thing the *Story Generator*'s form brings to mind is the Rolodex, the familiar device with rotating index cards containing contact details that was patented in 1956 by Hildaur Neilsen. Yet, it is only its overall form of a 'rolling index' that evokes the Rolodex. The more complex nature of the information on its index cards, their depictions and cross-references, makes it relate more closely to another, far larger tool, with a longer pedigree: the book wheel.

SLIDE The oldest image of a book wheel comes to us from *Le diverse et artificiose machine del Capitano Agostino Ramelli* (1588), a book of marvelous and mostly imaginary machines for the French royal court, published in Paris in 1588.

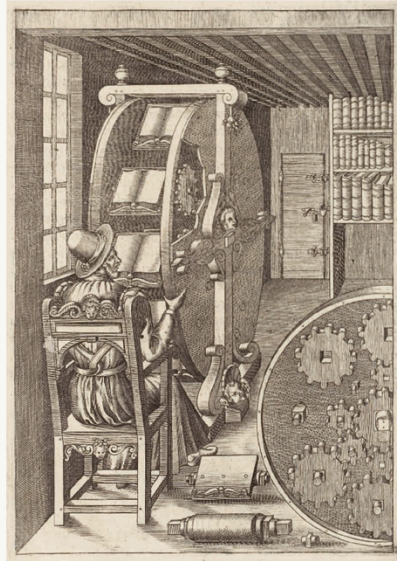
Fig. Agostino Ramelli, *Le diverse et artificiose machine*. Paris, 1588; and Gaspard Grollier de Servière, plate LXXXV.

1588_b

see also

1530 c
1547 b
1548 a
1577 b
1882
1919 a
1930 b
2000 b

1588 b
1930 b



SLIDE Ramelli turns up twice on the index cards of *Story Generator*. His intricate and rather whimsical creations present complex mechanical solutions to commonplace problems. The book wheel is a revolving table, a ferris wheel for books, which Ramelli himself described as follows: “This is a beautiful and ingenious machine, very useful and convenient for anyone who takes pleasure in study, especially those who are indisposed and tormented by gout. For with this machine a man can see and turn through a large number of books without moving from one spot. Moreover, it has another fine convenience in that it occupies very little space in the place where it is set, as anyone of intelligence can clearly see from the drawing.”

SLIDE Fig. 18th-century book wheel; drawing, 1874. Both Ghent University Library collection.

The book wheel, such as the 18th-century one from the Abbey of Saint Peter in Ghent, now in the collection of Ghent University Library, was an early attempt to solve the problem of managing increasingly numerous printed works, which were typically large and heavy. It has been called one of the earliest ‘information retrieval’ devices, and has been considered a precursor to modern technologies, such as hypertext and e-readers, that allows readers to store and cross-reference large amounts of information.

This is, of course, the core difference between the Rolodex and the book wheel: its intertextuality. The context of the Rolodex is the employee’s or secretary’s desktop; that of the book wheel is the intellectual’s study **SLIDE** (as for instance, in the Renaissance historian Anthony Grafton’s office at Princeton). But what Rolodex and book wheel have in common is their attention for the efficient organisation of the desktop, and of the mental space for creation and thought.

Fig. Rolodex in movie; Renaissance historian Anthony Grafton in his Princeton office.

Roland Barthes discussed this in his seminar at the Collège de France, held just a few weeks before his fatal accident in February 1980: *La préparation du roman* (1978-79, 1979-80). For the modernist semiotician who has devoted his life to the classification of words, things and deeds, the organisation of the working material is the key to writing: (one needs) “a space where all objects are within reach.”¹

SLIDE Fig. Barthes in his study

Barthes says about his workspace: “I think it’s essentially a structure, which is to say a localization of functions and connections between micro-functions, for example the writing surface,, lighting, writing instruments, paper clips, blank index cards,, written index cards, papers stapled together, a clock, etc.”²

In ‘Desk, Sofa and Window’, a text in which he compares the workspaces of a number of philosophers, architecture critic Anthony Vidler contrasts the spaces of, among others, Bachelard and Barthes: “For Bachelard, writing is subordinated to thought: for Barthes, writing and drawing are activities, demanding special equipment from dress to desk. For Bachelard the actual space of thought is immaterial, or rather subordinated to the thought itself; for Barthes, the space of painting, writing and sorting is prime — an active participant in the drama of the work, a custom-designed stage for the enactment of specialized operations.”³ — *A custom-designed stage for the enactment of specialized operations*: this would have made a great description of *Story Generator*.

SLIDE Annals

Now, instead of looking at the machine, let us turn to the index cards themselves — and to what is written, what is printed on them.

The text on the index cards of *Story Generator* recalls, as Ana Torfs herself notes, “an old form of recording history: medieval annals or chronicles, in which just one event is described for each year. Often, there are years with nothing to relate.”

SLIDE Fig. Index cards (r/v) 1940 (Otlet) and 1546 (empty)

As you may know, one of the oldest, and most beautiful, annals are the *Annales Alamannici* in the *Codex sangallensis*, a chronicle of events in the kingdoms of the Franks between the eighth and tenth century. Torfs read fragments, in the English translation:

SLIDE Fig. Annales Alamannici in de Codex sangallensis, the period 709-799, continued later until 1059.

“709. Hard Winter. Duke Gotfried died.
710. Hard year and deficient in crops.
711.
712. Flood everywhere.
713.”

On the cards of *Story Generator*, they become:

SLIDE Fig. Index card 1669, and 1578

“1669 — By the end of 1669, 4,000 inhabitants, or 5% of the population were dead. It was the last time that Brussels had to face the dreaded disease, the bubonic plague.”

“1578 — The plague made great ravages; more than 27,000 people died as a result of it in Brussels in 1578.”

Annals are noteworthy for their concise and sometimes even casual style, and for their limited narrative. “In annals, no distinction is made between natural phenomena and human activity. There is no indication of cause and effect. No entry is more important than any other. (...) *It is not a story, nor is it a history,*” says Torfs.

In that sense, the index cards demonstrate a form of recording history from before ‘our’ way of writing history. For us, today, history is something that it never was before the end of the 17th century. That history (as it appears in the annals and elsewhere) was a listing of the deeds and suffering of people, of the events that shaped their lives. Modern history, by contrast, let’s say since the 18th-century Neapolitan philosopher and historian Gianbattista Vico, is based on the idea that history is ‘made’ by humans, in the way that nature is ‘made’ by God.

Moreover, modern history is born, together with modern science, at the moment the search for the ‘what’ is replaced by the examination of the ‘why’. Emphasis has therefore shifted from knowing the things to knowing the processes. The modern historian looks beyond the ‘small aims’ of the actions of man, concentrating instead on the ‘big aims’ taking shape behind his back. Nothing of that in the texts on the index cards of *Story Generator*: they manifest themselves in the old style of recording history; they speak of things, facts, the ‘small aims’.

Yet, when using the cards as intended, the user is implicitly and continuously prompted to reflect on the larger processes: beyond every singular card, with every referral to another year, the user is pointed to what we just called the ‘big aims’. And, as *Story Generator* shows, these develop globally.

SLIDE Intertextualities

In contrast to the matter of fact, sometimes even laconic tone of each individual index card, *Story Generator* in its ensemble draws the user into a tangled web of associations and cross-references that is encyclopaedic nor ‘neutral’ at all. The effect on the user is an immersion into the operations and ramifications of political, economical and financial powers; a fragmentary but all together ‘alternative’ history of Belgium, featuring Brussels as a command centre of 500 years of geopolitical exploitation.

One could say that even in its material aspects the *Story Generator* is partisan: made of brushed copper — likely Congolese. Copper, and its value, is the subject of the chronologically first index card of the whole series, dated 1505: “Horseshoe-shaped copper bracelets known as manillas were among the oldest currencies in parts of West Africa. One source states that in 1505 one copper manilla was worth a big elephant tooth,

while a slave cost between eight and ten manillas. In many African cultures, copper was treasured in the way in which Europe and the Arab world valued gold. [...].”

The strategic importance of copper returns in later cards.

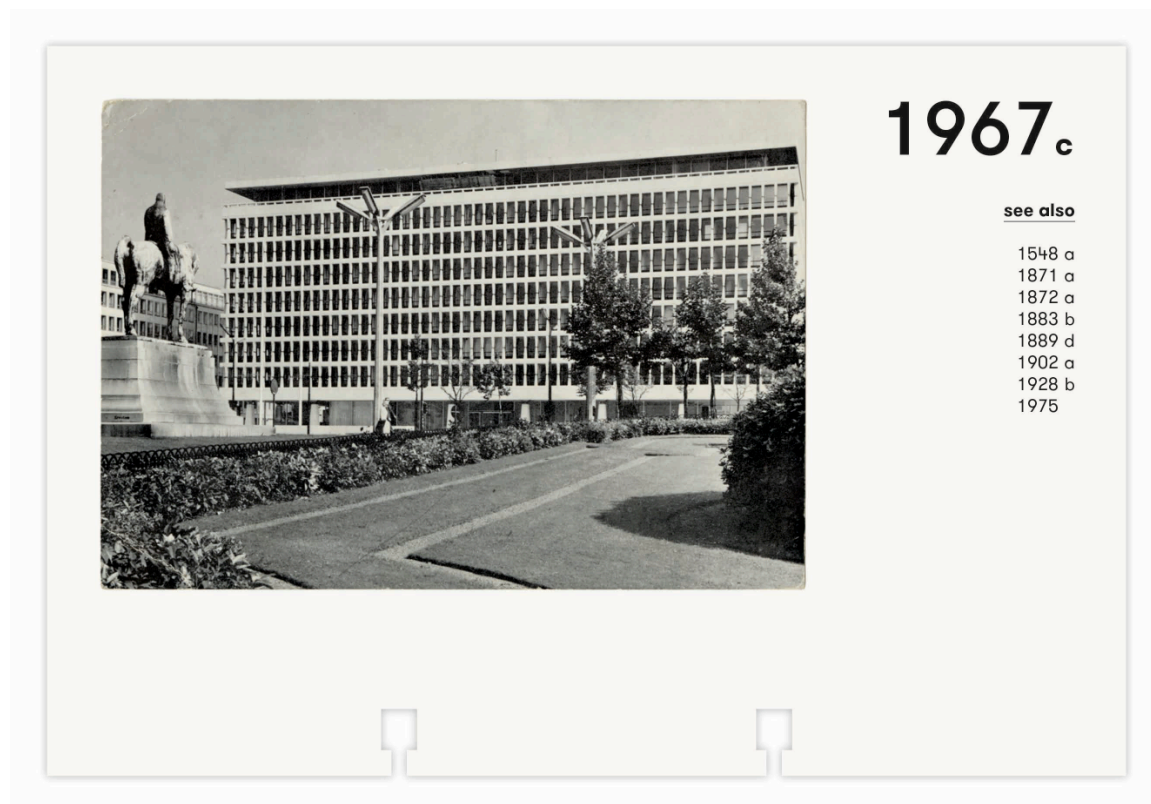
SLIDE Fig. 1505 + 2006 copper mines;

Fig. 1515b + 1518c

SLIDE And one of the following cards mentions 1515 as the year in which Charles, the later Charles V, “was proclaimed of age in a ceremony at the Coudenberg Palace in Brussels” (index card 1515b). It signals the moment in history when the power centre of the Low Countries moved to Brussels.

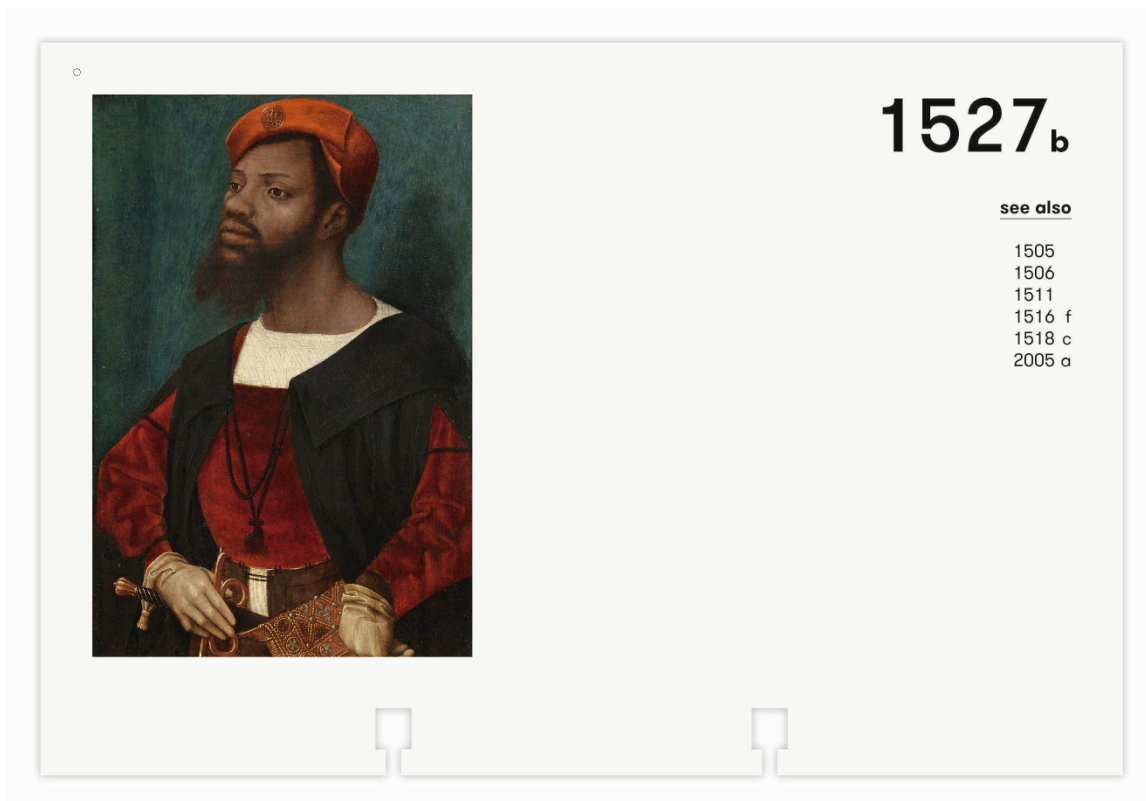
From card 1518c we learn that in that year Charles has granted, to his major-domo, the first exclusive trading right for African slaves, to be shipped to the Spanish colonies in America. “Yet, having neither slave ships nor African depots, he was interested in the money to be made from this license, and he sold it to the treasurer of the Casa de Contratación (...) in Seville. (...) The treasurer in turn resold it to others.” The mix of slavery and capitalism brings Charles, Leopold II and our own times in constant diachronic connection, linking 16th century emperors and 20th century industrialists and bankers. They often find themselves in surprising vicinity, almost back to back on the same index card.

SLIDE Fig. 1523b, 1967 (Banque Lambert)



Yet, however political the pairings of index cards, the starting point for the associations and fascinations is often artistic.

Fig. 1527b (black man dressed as a western European; + 1960e



SLIDE Unquestionably this is the case with the extraordinary painting by Jan Jansz Mostaert, on index card 1527b: an African man proudly posing in luxurious European clothing; he may have been Christophle le More, one of Charles' body guards. On its reverse side is a note about the Belgian General Emile Janssens, Commander-in-Chief of the army in Congo, who, in 1960, refused to 'Africanize' the army by elevating Congolese soldiers into positions of command, igniting a revolt.

Fig. 1527 cut of hands + back side: 1960d Congo

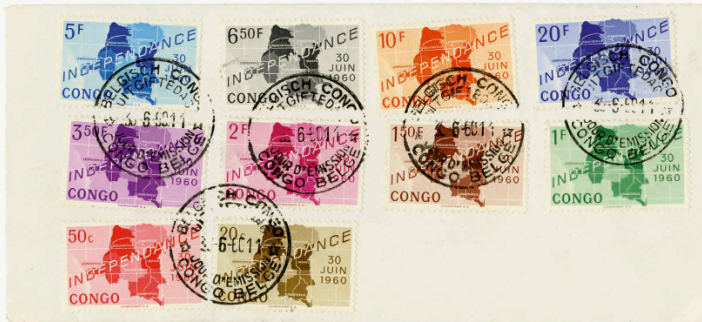
SLIDE On the next index card, 1527c, we see a wood-cut, published that year in a German book on Native Americans. It shows dog-headed cannibals, busy chopping up hands. On its reverse side the index card has stamps with the map of Congo. One can easily think of a less subtle reference to one of the most dire aspects of our colonial past.



1527_c

see also

- 1557 b
- 1590
- 1611 a
- 1706
- 1557 b



1960_d

see also

- 1958 a
- 1960 c
- 1960 e
- 2001
- 2002 a
- 2010

SLIDE Persistences

Steering clear of any apodictic tone, *Story Generator* guides us onto more or less hidden trajectories through geography and history; trajectories that have been winding their way from between the stones of Ravenstein and Coudenberg, in the centre of Brussels, reaching realities as far away as Central Africa and Latin America. Often these paths, with time, have been overgrown by other stories but, still, they exist and persist. In this way *Story Generator* reminds me of a peculiar juridical anomaly in the state of Vermont, USA. In Vermont, if a road has been officially surveyed and, thus, added to town record books **SLIDE** — even if that road was never physically constructed — it will remain legally recognized unless it has been explicitly discontinued. This means that roads surveyed as far back as the 18th century remain present in the landscape as legal rights of way — with the effect that, even if you cannot see this ancient road cutting across your property, it nonetheless persists.⁴

Fig. Vermont road records.

Story Generator unveils these kinds of persistences. (Moreover, I am convinced that the legal papers on which the road records are kept would appeal to Ana Torfs: old property deeds and land surveys, handwritten lists of the geographical coordinates of lost paths, and the accurate physical descriptions of their fences. But that is another story.)

Talking about persistences: when Ana Torfs first told me about what she planned to do with *Story Generator*, it reminded me of something I once read, decades ago, by Jean Cocteau. It is a poetic, almost naive, childlike image that has stayed with me ever since. Cocteau describes how, while walking past the walls of his youth, he would run his hands along the stones in the way that many children do. Touching the wall like that stirred up all sorts of memories that had lain dormant there for so long. Those memories, those histories: stored in the wall — not in the mind, nor in the body — and liberated by the touch.

Ana Torfs touches through text, image and the abstraction of dates. Unlike Cocteau, she is not looking for merely personal memories, but she eases facts out of the walls of the historical heart of Brussels in similar fashion: personalities, power relations, fragments, political and cultural histories, ... — which take place around the world, but that are connected in one way or another with these stones. Or with the stones that preceded those of today.

SLIDE Fig. Index card 1843a 1928a 1930d

On index card 1843a, I read: “While in Belgium in 1843, Charlotte Brontë wrote a series of short exercises in French, known as the Belgian Essays. They were composed at the Brussels boarding school where Brontë studied and later taught, under the guidance of Constantin Héger, a figure with whom she was also to become emotionally involved, to her considerable detriment. In these essays Brontë chose to focus and refract the sinister hiss hiss history, which happens overseas, through the prism of the subject rather than the nation, locating her colonial imagination, in other words, at the interstices between the personal and the political, the private and the public. The school building at 21, Rue Isabelle was demolished in 1909 to make way for the Palais des Beaux-Arts, built by Victor Horta.”

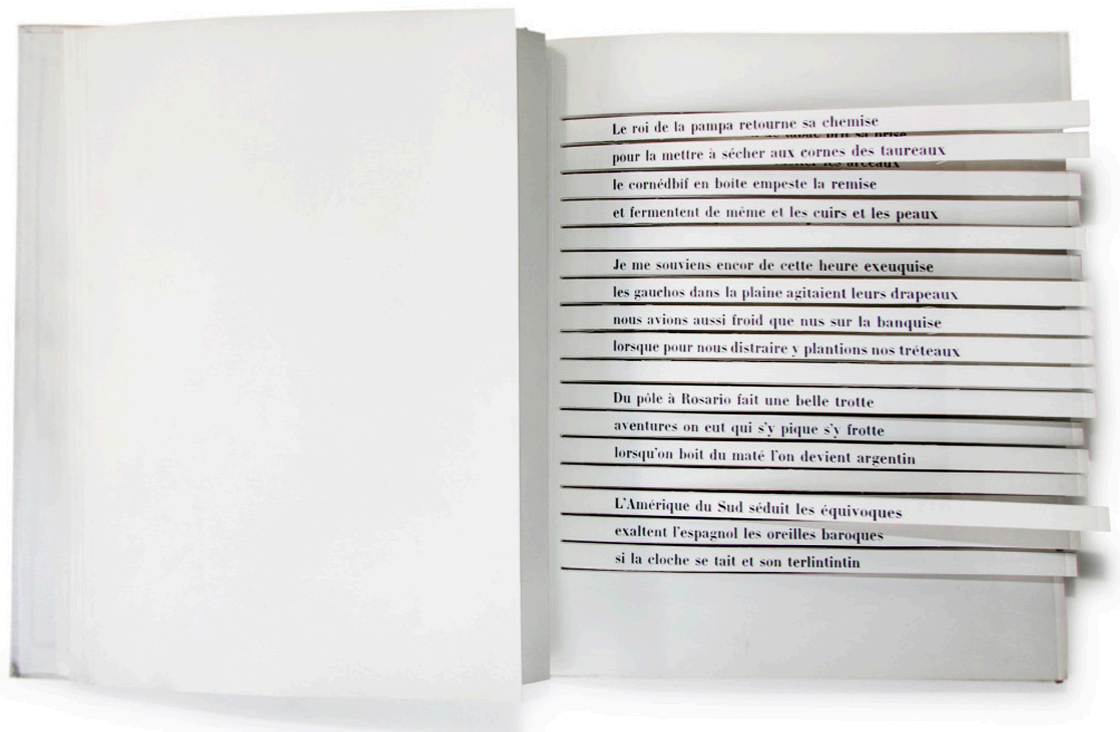
In the reference to the focus of Brontë in these essays, Torfs reveals, in my opinion, how she wants *Story Generator* to work: “locating her colonial imagination (...) at the interstices between the personal and the political, the private and the public.” Yet, when considering the index card in its context, it also shows that if you search the index cards with the rationale of systematically finding information about one specific building, or one history, one personality, you will get lost, ending up with index card after index card of other facts, other continents, other disciplines. The user of *Story Generator* is led astray, diverted to discover other histories, other stories. In a sense, *Story Generator* ‘works’ as the city itself: “the past of a city is a collage of elements that don’t belong together.” (Bart Verschaffel). Torfs makes us re-assemble that past into an infinite amount of possible (his)stories.

SLIDE This makes *Story Generator*, in the way it ‘creates’ stories, resemble a remarkable publication of the early 1960’s: Raymond Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, an animated book of ‘poésie combinatoire’, of 1961.

Fig. Raymond Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, Gallimard, 1961.



Designed by Robert Massin, the little book offers the reader an instrument to combine the verses of ten sonnets, separated in 14 horizontal strips, which may result in the possible creation of 10^{14} poems. As Queneau himself stipulated in the preface, “(t)his little publication makes it possible to anyone to compose one hundred billion sonnets, all correct of course. All in all, it is a kind of *machine à fabriquer des poèmes*, a poetry producing machine (...).”⁵



SLIDE *Détournements*

By looking at various ‘tools’ — from the Rolodex, over the book wheel, to Queyneau’s little book — I have been trying to understand how *Story Generator* operates. How it interacts with the user and how it pulls him or her in an entangled web of expanding references that are, to a certain extent, developing in a random way. I have been showing how it composes narrative trajectories that, while prepared by the artist, leave ample room for the serendipity of the user’s actions. How, in short, it *generates stories*.

SLIDE Fig. Index cards 2009, 1627, 1920

Yet, with so many index cards showing sites or buildings (through their representation on postcards, stamps, etc), *Story Generator* we might think of *Story Generator* in terms of trajectories, in terms of mapping — maps are, by the way, of more than marginal importance to the oeuvre of Ana Torfs. Turning the knob, the user does not only activate a narrative through time and space, but also a virtual walk along the various sites in Brussels, and a voyage throughout its colonies.

The resulting interactions (again: prepared, yet random to a certain extent) between the depicted environments, the texts, and the human mind, recall yet something else: the strategies of the *psychogéographie*. *Psychogéographie* has been defined, in the 1950’s, by Guy Debord as the diverse activities that raise awareness of the natural or cultural environment around us. It tries to understand the interaction between the outer environment and the human mind, and it does so *based on any form of writing*. For Debord,

any kind of scattered text fragments, when put together, will make it possible to 'read' the life story of the urban landscape.

SLIDE Fig. Guy Debord, 1955 (?) "Psychogeographic guide of Paris: edited by the Bauhaus Imaginiste Printed in Denmark by Permild & Rosengreen - Discourse on the passions of love: psychogeographic descents of drifting and localisation of ambient unities"

In its way of operating, *Story Generator* seems to have some aspects, or ambitions, in common with Debord's *Guide psychogéographique de Paris*, published in 1955. A bird's-eye view consciously modelled on the celebrated Turgot map of Paris, of 1739, it images a fragmented city that is both the result of multiple restructurings of a capitalist society and the very form of a radical critique of this society. The city is cut up in fragments, with multiple interconnections, which can be discovered by letting oneself float or drift (*dérivée*) from one fragment to the other. As one critic noted, Debord's psychogeography is "just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban landscape."⁶

But there is more: less known than his map of Paris, but published in the same year is Debord's *Valeur éducative*, published in three parts, in the journal 'Potlatch'.⁷ **SLIDE** It contains carefully selected paragraphs from his beloved grade-school textbook *Géographie générale: Classe de 6ème*.⁸ These excerpts are mingled with fragments of text taken from sources as varied as the Book of Psalms, Bossuet, Saint-Just, Marx and Engels, as well as pages from 'France-soir'. Originally presented as a mock radio transmission, an *émission radiophonique*, four voices speak, in apparently random order, of the need for rain, the story of Tamar and Ammon, Marx's theory of the bourgeois family, the theory of intellectual and material production, the Algerian and Vietnamese conflicts, prehistoric carnivores, and the scandal of the Queen of England purchasing from Dior. Interspersed among these excerpts are fragments from *Géographie générale* that describe the weather, the lifestyles of people in warm and cold climates, the dwellings of man, and the exploration of the polar ice caps. The result is a political-geographical collage that anticipates many of the *détournements* (the word used by Debord to describe these extracts) later employed in the journal of the *Internationale Situationniste*.

Now, Debord's strategy of *détournement* is, I think, crucial to understanding Ana Torfs's operation with *Story Generator* — and maybe not only with this work. The juridical meaning of the word *détournement* suggests embezzlement, and misappropriation of funds, but it can also mean rerouting or even hijacking. It is clear that Debord understood the procedure in both senses: not simply quoting, not simply borrowing, from a wide range of texts of different nature, but through appropriation and recontextualization making new meaning out of these old productions. Both in the case of Debord and Torfs, there is a *détournement* in the form (from text book and other sources to radio broadcast in Debord's case; from text books, news articles and history books to a kind of Rolodex, in Torfs's case).

Fig. Indexcard 1958b, 1960b, 2001

But most importantly, there is the *détournement* in content and impact — at least as socio-political in Torfs's case as in Debord's. **SLIDE** As such, *Story Generator* achieves the opposite of recuperation. Recuperation means that radical ideas are commodified within media culture and bourgeois society and become neutralized and innocuous, morfed into a

socially conventional perspective. Despite *Story Generator*'s 'neutral', dry text book style — yet to a certain extent because of it — the fragments and images are diverted into a *new awareness*, political and cross-temporal. This new awareness takes the fragments far from their original, intended use and meaning, and has them interact in unforeseen associations, and in a near limitless series of *generated stories*.

SLIDE Fig. *Story Generator* operated; photograph.

Notes

¹ “(il faut) un espace où l’on peut atteindre les objets par un geste.” Barthes, *La préparation du roman I et II*. 2003; (English translation by Kate Briggs, 2011, *The preparation of the novel* p. 232)

² “Qu’est-ce que c’est cette table? (...) essentiellement une structure, c’est-à-dire une localisation des fonctions et des rapports entre ces microfonctions, par exemple surface d’écriture, éclairage, instruments à écrire, trombones, fiches neuves, fiches écrites, papiers épinglés, heure, etc.” Ibid. p 235

³ Anthony Vidler, *Desk, Sofa and Window: Walter Benjamin’s Writing Position*, in ‘Le visiteur; Revue critique d’architecture’, 2014, 20; pp. 196-199 (Eng transl.); here p. 197.

⁴ <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/where-the-roads-have-no-name>, and <http://bldgblog.blogspot.be/2015/07/lost-highways.html>

⁵ Ce petit ouvrage permet à tout un chacun de composer à volonté cent mille milliards de sonnets, tous réguliers bien entendu. C’est somme toute une sorte de machine à fabriquer des poèmes, mais en nombre limité; il est vrai que ce nombre, quoique limité, fournit de la lecture pour près de deux cents millions d’années (en lisant vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre).” Raymond Queneau, *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*. Paris, Gallimard, 1961; préface.

⁶ Joseph Hart, *A New Way of Walking*, in ‘Utne’, July/Aug 2004; my italics. <http://www.utne.com/community/a-new-way-of-walking.aspx>

⁷ Guy Debord, “La valeur éducative,” in three parts, *Potlatch* nos. 16 (January 26, 1955), 17 (February 24, 1955), and 18 (March 23, 1955); republished in *Potlatch 1954-1957* (Paris: Editions Allia, 1996), pp. 64-65, 71-72, 76-77. 4. The remarks on this text are taken from: Anthony Vidler, *Terres Inconnues: Cartographies of a Landscape to be Invented*, in ‘October’, 2006, vol. 115; pp. 13-30.

⁸ Albert Demangeon and André Meynier, *Géographie générale: Classe de 6ème* (Paris: Hachette, 1937). This text was authored by Meynier in the series “Nouveau Cours de Géographie,” edited by Demangeon.