Janet Zweig
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Janet Zweig

Janet Zweig's work with electronic media began when she started writing simple programs to drive kinetic sculptures. In these works, the computer is a device that "thinks"—that is, permutes and writes—thus taking over a certain amount of creative control in the piece. Because of the combinatorial nature of some of the programs, the computer often comes up with surprising results, the effect of chance operations within set parameters. Zweig creates a structure that is both a physical sculpture and a computer program that drives it, and the active quality of their interaction lends the work an appearance of being alive. Once the machine is created, it works on its own, without Zweig's interference or assistance.

Zweig's interest in texts, reading, and machines is an outgrowth of earlier work in artist's books and offset technology. In the late 1980s she began to make computer-driven sculptural works that could be thought of as books composing themselves in a gallery space. Working with systematic procedures allows Zweig to be a writer without actually writing. She is able to generate new, imaginative, and surprising texts by using the computer as a production tool, but not in the sense of digital image making or manipulation in standard software programs. Instead, she uses simple programming to employ the computer as a simulacral thinking device. The computer is the hidden brain behind the wall, like the Wizard behind the curtain in the Land of Oz. The computer solves problems and dilemmas—does the mental work of the piece—while the performance of this task in the gallery results in a sculpture. Because the computer actually spends time solving the problem, the pieces are time-based, performing objects.

In *Mind over Matter,* 1993 *(fig. 1),* Zweig fed a computer three sentences: "I think therefore I am," by Descartes; "I am what I am," by Popeye; and "I think I can," by the Little Engine That Could. She gave the computer some grammatical rules and then asked it to write every possible sentence from the parts of those three sentences. Amazingly, the computer wrote sentences that seemed to speak about itself and that were filled with self-doubt. It wrote: "I think I can think," and "I can think I am therefore I can think I think," and "I am what I think, I think," and so forth. The sentences fell into a basket suspended by ropes on pulleys. The ropes were in turn attached to a rock, which was slowly lifted by the "thinking" of the computer. In *Everything in the World* (1996; see cover), the computer is systematically permuting and printing the infinite combinations of binary code, theoretically writing code for everything in the world. The giant roll of paper has a landscape on it drawn after a seventeenth-century Dutch panorama. The paper unrolls as it feeds into the printer; eventually the picture will be gone, the world turned into code.

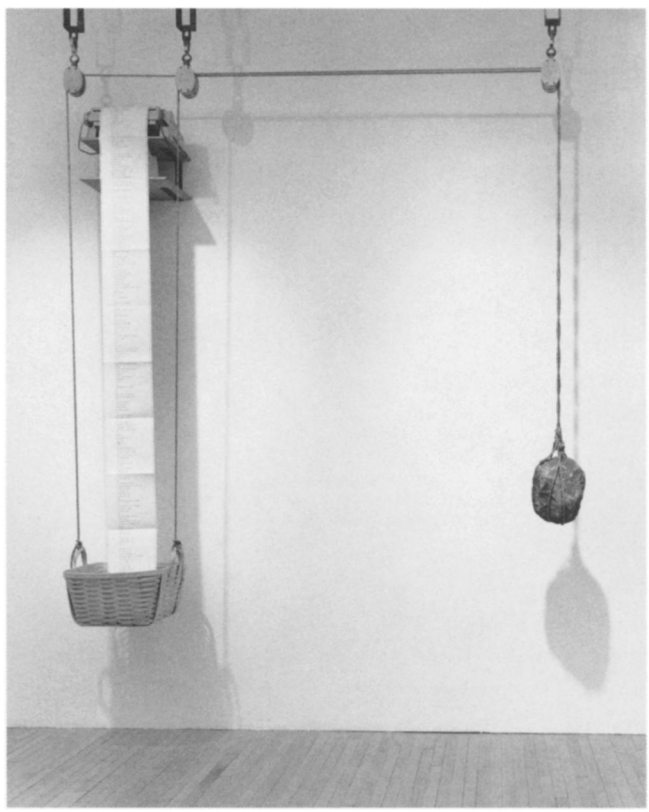

FIG. 1 Janet Zweig, *Mind over Matter,* 1993. Courtesy the artist.