

**Generated Thoughts:
On Ana Torfs' Story Generator**
Dirk De Meyer

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To mark the 'unveiling' — or perhaps more accurately: the 'commissioning', or the 'entry into service' — of Story Generator, I wish to share with you some ideas, some 'generated thoughts'.

In terms of their shape and order, I have drawn inspiration from the systematic approach and associative way of working so typical of Ana Torfs.

I. the occasion : a venue

The occasion for Story Generator is a place.
In her draft proposal, Ana Torfs states:

“In response to the invitation to make a new work for the Vlaams Bouwmeester, the intriguing word 'Ravenstein' — part of the name of the arcade and adjoining street where the studio of the Vlaams Bouwmeester is located — quickly became a source of inspiration. The suggestive word turned out to refer to the powerful Burgundian family Van Cleef-Ravenstein. Incidentally, a remnant of their city palace built in the late 15th century is still located in Ravensteinstraat, next to the Palais des Beaux-Arts, directly opposite the entrance to the Ravensteingalerij. Ravensteinstraat, which only acquired its current shape in 1853, was named after the family. So I was fascinated right from the start by the studio's geographical location, in the historical heart of Brussels, close to the historical Coudenberg, the centre of economic and political power of the (Spanish) Low Countries in the 16th century.”

III. Index card 2009c, 1627, 1903c

And a little further on:

“Historically, the district around Coudenberg was a centre of economic and political power, and therefore also a place where ‘symbolic capital’ was accumulated in the form of western art treasures and ‘loot’ from all sorts of international ‘exchanges’. In other words: violent confrontations with non-western cultures (Mexico, Congo...). (...) “In terms of composition,” writes Torfs, “I will draw inspiration from the multitude of sources from various periods, all of which have directly or indirectly affected the history of Coudenberg and the Kunstberg with its buildings and the people who have lived there.”

When Ana Torfs first told me about what she planned to do with Story Generator and how central the area around Ravensteingalerij was to that, 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 Ravenstein and Coudenberg 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.

III. Index card 1843a 1928a 1930d

“1843a, see also 1928a 1930d

— 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. What Ana Torfs sets up in this Ravensteingalerij — which is, in essence, let’s face it, an arcade, in other words an urban shopping mall — is an intellectual, a cognitive *Gruen transfer*.

III. Victor Gruen; Gruen shopping mall

Named after Victor Gruen, the Austrian-born pioneer of the American shopping mall, the Gruen transfer is the moment when the consumer, confronted by an unexpectedly wide range of possibilities and varieties — other products, competing brands, comparable services — loses sight of what he or she originally came to buy. The need, or the desire, for a certain product is transferred, beyond one’s control, to other consumer goods or experiences. And that transfer is the calculated, the consciously cultivated, although not entirely predictable, side-effect of how the space, like a machine, is designed.

Moreover: although you can enter the shopping mall everywhere, you’re not supposed to be able to find the exit quickly. In Story Generator, the user gets lost in a continuously diverging system of relations and cross-references that gradually cause him to lose his grip on logic.

With Story Generator, Ana Torfs adds an undoubtedly unexpected layer to what the owners of the arcade describe on their website as “Galerie Ravenstein: a historical and commercial experience”.

III. Victor Gruen; Gruen shopping mall; + website Ravenstein

2. the form : a machine

Just as the shopping mall by Victor Gruen became a minutely designed machine, Story Generator acquired the form of an instrument.

III. Ana Torfs, design drawing

Ana Torfs: “‘Story Generator’ can best be described as a rotating object, executed completely in copper, in which are ‘hanging’ five hundred index cards printed on both sides, which you can view alone, or else with two people seated opposite each other on a squarish stool at a small square table (...). 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 as I never indicate where exactly the index card with number 1515 or 2015 is positioned, ‘Story Generator’ has no beginning and no end. It is a revolving ‘loop’ where you can ‘begin’ with any number.”

III. Neilsen patent application, Rolodex

Story Generator, therefore, takes the form of a Rolodex, the familiar device with rotating index cards containing contact details that was patented in 1956 by Hilda Neilsen. Yet, although Story Generator in its overall form of a ‘rolling index’ clearly refers to the Rolodex, the more complex nature of the information on its index cards, their depictions and cross-references, makes it relate more closely to the book wheel.

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

The oldest image of a book wheel comes to us from *Le diverse et artificiose machine del Capitano Agostino Ramelli*, a book of marvelous and mostly imaginary machines for the French royal court, published in Paris in 1588. We find an almost identical but less technically detailed machine in later works such as *Recueil d'ouvrages curieux de mathematique et de mecanique, ou description du cabinet* by Gaspard Grollier de Servière, published in Lyon in 1719. That book contains plates of the most outlandish machines, such as watches driven by balls.

III. Index cards 1588b Agostino Ramelli

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, built like a ferris wheel, 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.”

III. 18th-century book wheel Ughent; drawing 1874.

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 big 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 (for instance, the one of the Renaissance historian Anthony Grafton at Princeton).

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

But what the 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. 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: “(il faut) un espace où l’on peut atteindre les objets par un geste”.ⁱ

III. Barthes in his study

Barthes says about his workspace: “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.”ⁱⁱ

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."ⁱⁱⁱ Vidler's reflections on Barthes seem to cast light on the work of Ana Torfs. And moreover, the site on which Story Generator focuses contains the biggest such instrument: the Royal Library.

III. Index card 1559a; Photo of periodicals reading room of the Royal Library in the 'palace of industry' (1882; used until 1962); model of project Albertina, 1930 (Source: Hannes pieters p.13)

3. the style : annals

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. In this case, one side of an index card per year. Often, there are years with nothing to relate, resulting in a blank side of an index card."

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

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:

III. 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:

III. 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.

Yet, they implicitly prompt the user to reflect on the processes.

4. the impact : critique

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 the Ravenstein area as a command centre of 500 years of geopolitical exploitation.

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: "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.

III. 1505 + 2006 copper mines;

III. 1515b + 1518c

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, back to back on the same index card.

III. 1523b, 1967 (Banque Lambert)

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

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

Unquestionably this is the case with the extraordinary painting by Jan Jansz Mostaert, on card 1527b: an African man proudly posing in luxurious European clothing; he may have been Christophe 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.

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

On the next card, 1527c, we see an engraving, published in that year in a German book on Native Americans. It shows dogs that represent 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.

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, 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 — 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.^{iv}

III. 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.

Yet, thinking of Story Generator in terms of mapping — maps being of more than marginal importance to the oeuvre of Ana Torfs — I was reminded of the *psychogéographie* of Guy Debord. *Psychogéographie* has been defined by 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.

III. 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"

Debord's *Guide psychogéographique de Paris*, of 1956, 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 (*dérivé*) from one fragment to the other.

Described as “a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities...” 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.”^v

Remarkably, there is more than its strategy that relates psychogeography and Story Generator. Debord's psychogeographic maps of Paris were shown in 1957 at the *Première exposition de psychogéographie*. It was organised by the LPA, the London Psychogeographical Association, a semi-fictitious organisation that pre-dated by a few months the formation of the *Internationale Situationniste* and that was centred around the British artist Ralph Rumney. Rumney was later linked to, but amicably expelled from the *Internationale Situationniste* for his failure to deliver a psychogeographical report on Venice.

That *Première exposition de psychogéographie* may have been somewhat obscure, but it is well documented (in the collections of Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library).^{vi}

III. Invitation for *Première Exposition de psychogéographi* at Taptoe Galerie; Gentil Haesaert and Christian Dotremont outside Taptoe

Its invitation card learns us how the exhibit was held from the 2nd to the 26th of February 1957, in Brussels, in the Taptoe Gallery, situated place de la Vieille Halle aux Blés, some 200 m down from the Ravenstein area.

... Just another generated story — for an empty card.

III. Index card 1957

ⁱ Barthes, *La preparation du roman I et II*. 2003; p. 303.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. 305-306.

ⁱⁱⁱ 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.

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

^v Joseph Hart, *A New Way of Walking*, in 'Utne', July/Aug 2004 <http://www.utne.com/community/a-new-way-of-walking.aspx>

^{vi} Beinecke has recently acquired a near complete collection of posters, catalogues, and ephemera related to the short-lived but influential Taptoe Gallery in 1950s Brussels. Cf. <http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/about/blogs/2012/07/12/taptoe-gallery>

See also: Ralph Rumney, *The Consul*; pp. 40 ff.