Intersecting Approaches to Electronic Literature:
Close-Reading Code, Content, and Cartographies
in William Poundstone's
"*Project for the Tachistoscope: [Bottomless Pit]*"

```
updateWords = function () {
    // erase old words
    myStoryMovie.box3.text = "";
    updateAfterEvent();
    // scale spam box
    scaleBox(myStoryMovie.box2, myStoryMovie.spamArray[myStoryMovie.i]);
    // flash spam word
    myStoryMovie.box2.text = myStoryMovie.spamArray[myStoryMovie.i%spamLimit];
    updateAfterEvent();
```

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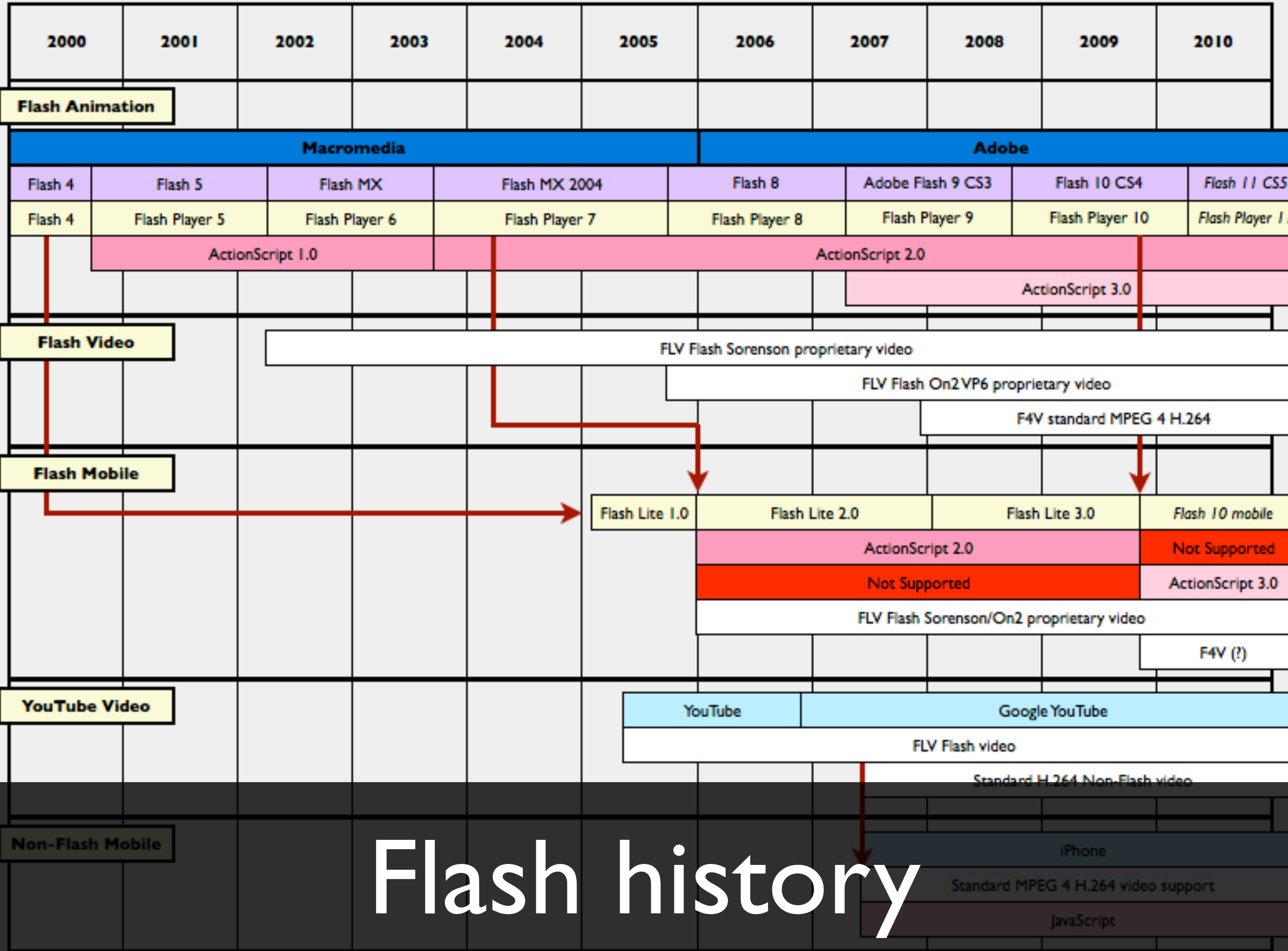California

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Flash history

"all Flash animations can be 'exposed' in their hard code (as actually can be the HTML pages behind drag 'n' drop intuitive web authoring packages). The net effect of working in Flash is that the digital underside is constantly exposed as code, unlike most other programs (image, sound, or video) which never reveal their mathematical roots.

For this reason, working in Flash can be a liminal experience. At the same time as users appear to be working intuitively, making marks on the screen and applying menus, some actions will expose the complete mathematical 'encoded' nature of all these actions – at times requiring arcane privileged knowledge (programming code) to animate or complete further creations. " (107).

Sefton-Green, Julian. Timelines, Timeframes and Special Effects: software and creative media production. Education, Communication & Information, Vol. 5, No. 1, March 2005
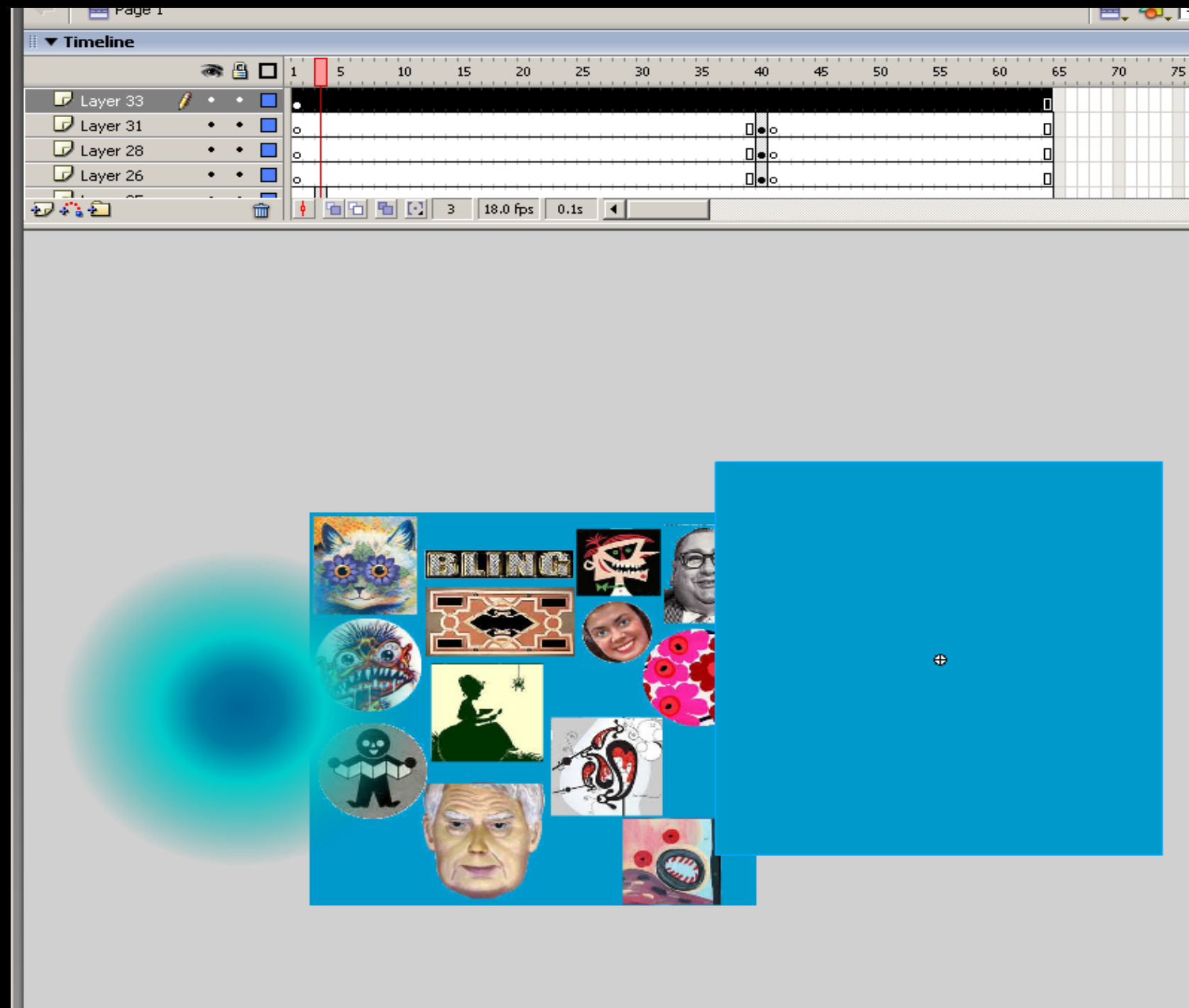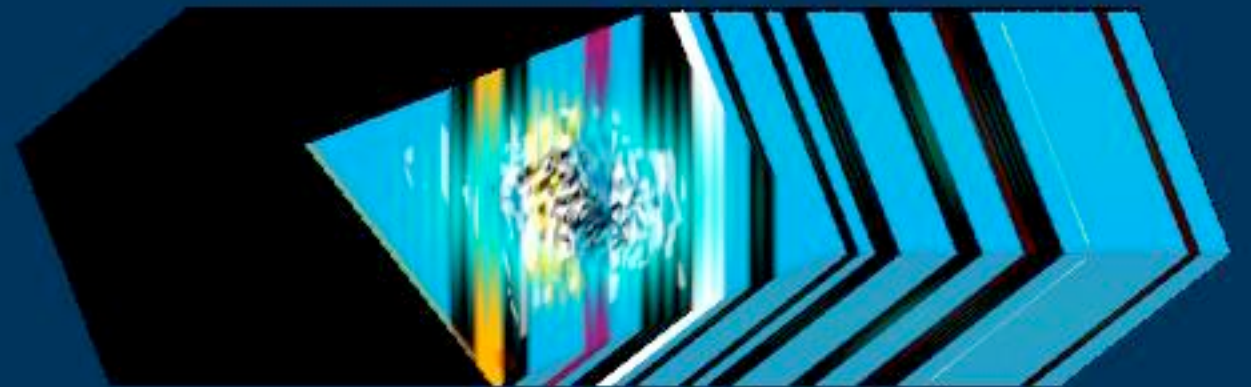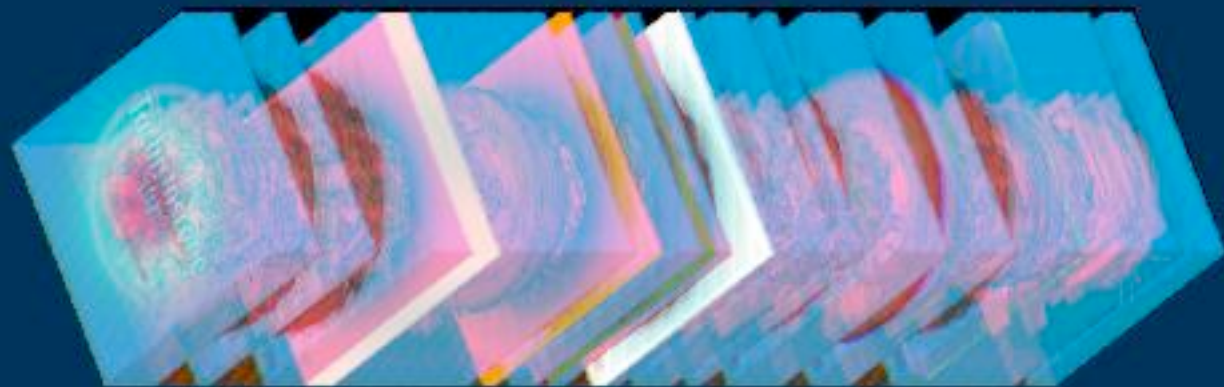
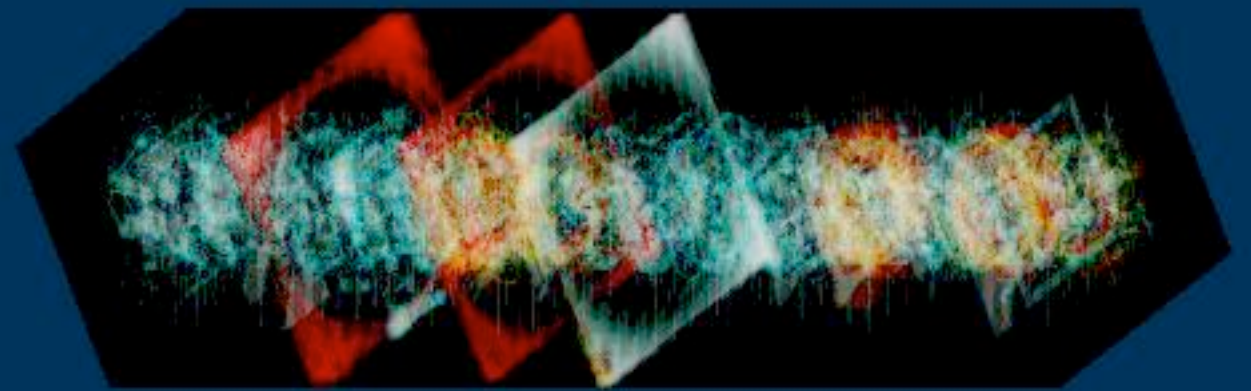# Flash as liminal

swf timeline and layers
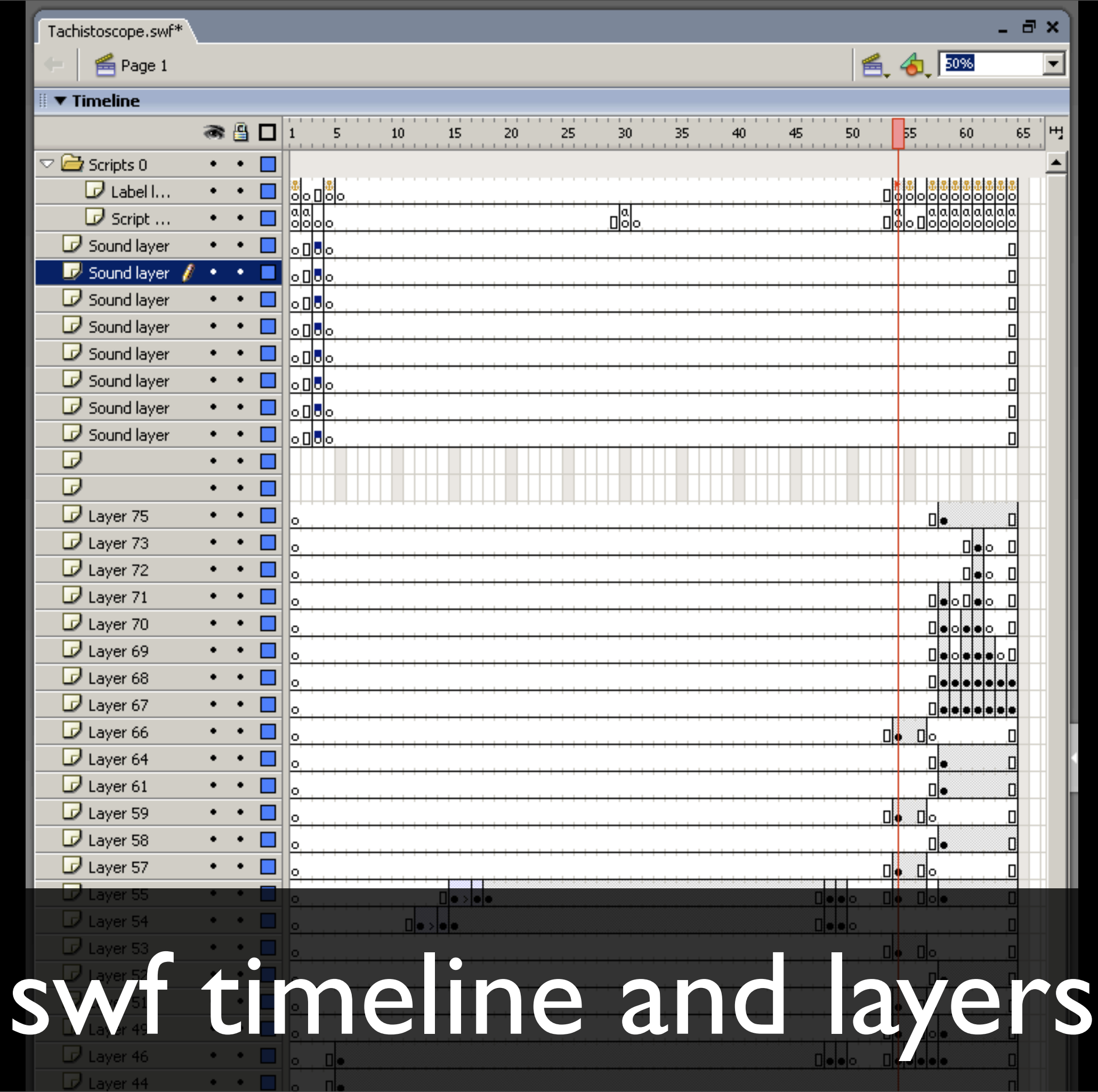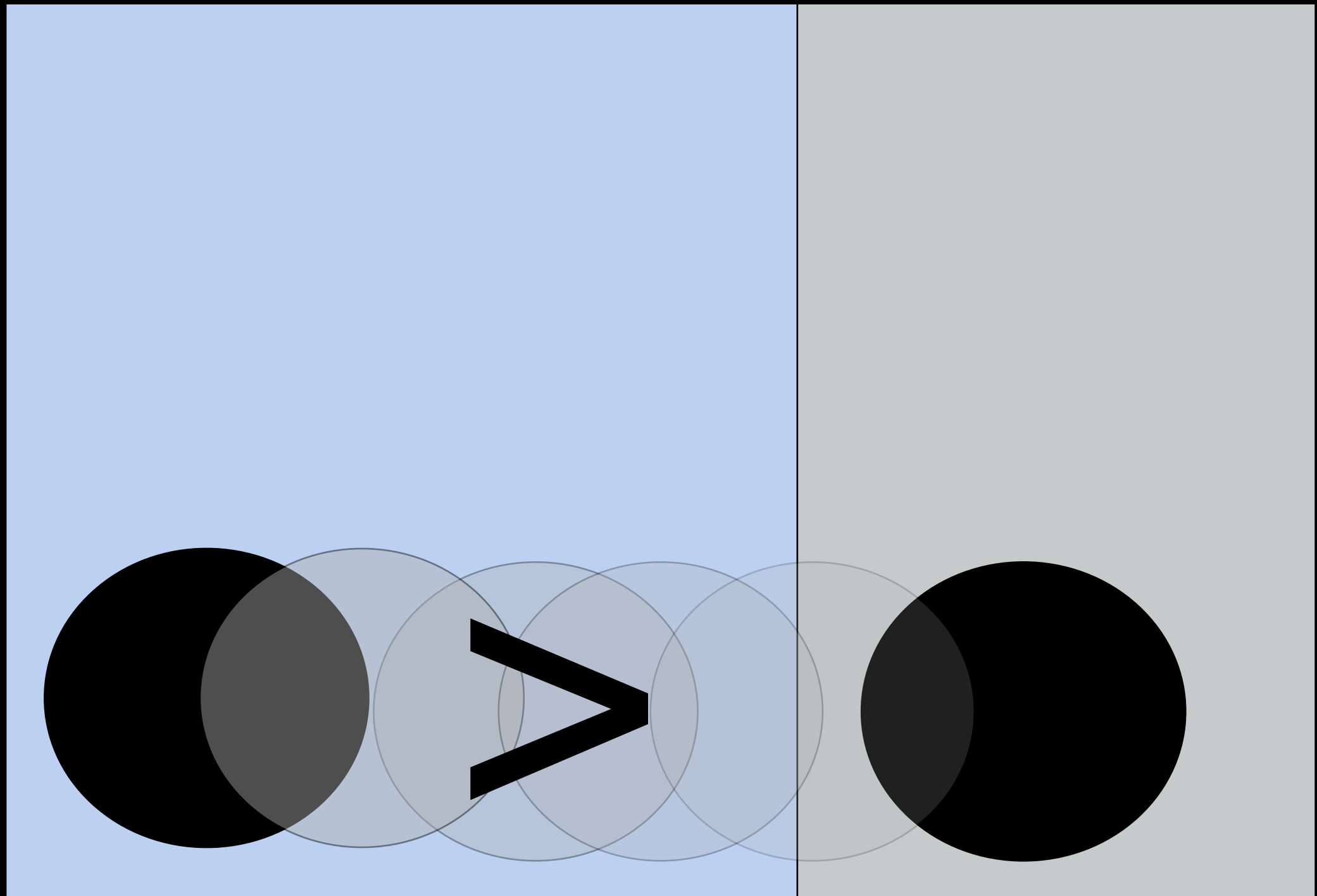
subliminal tweens

subliminal images
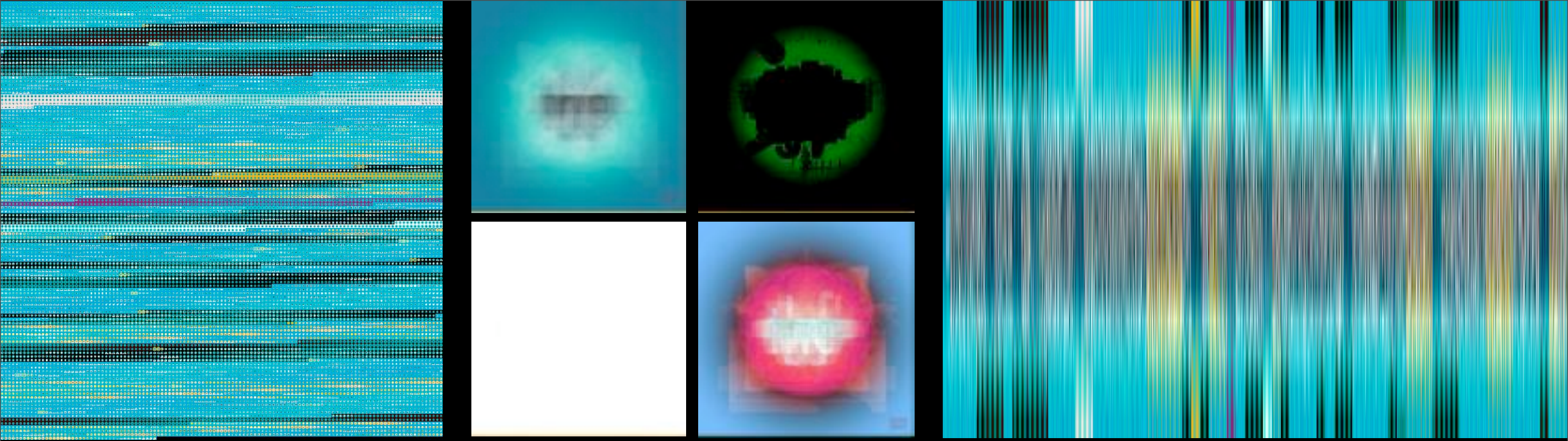
humanities info-visualization
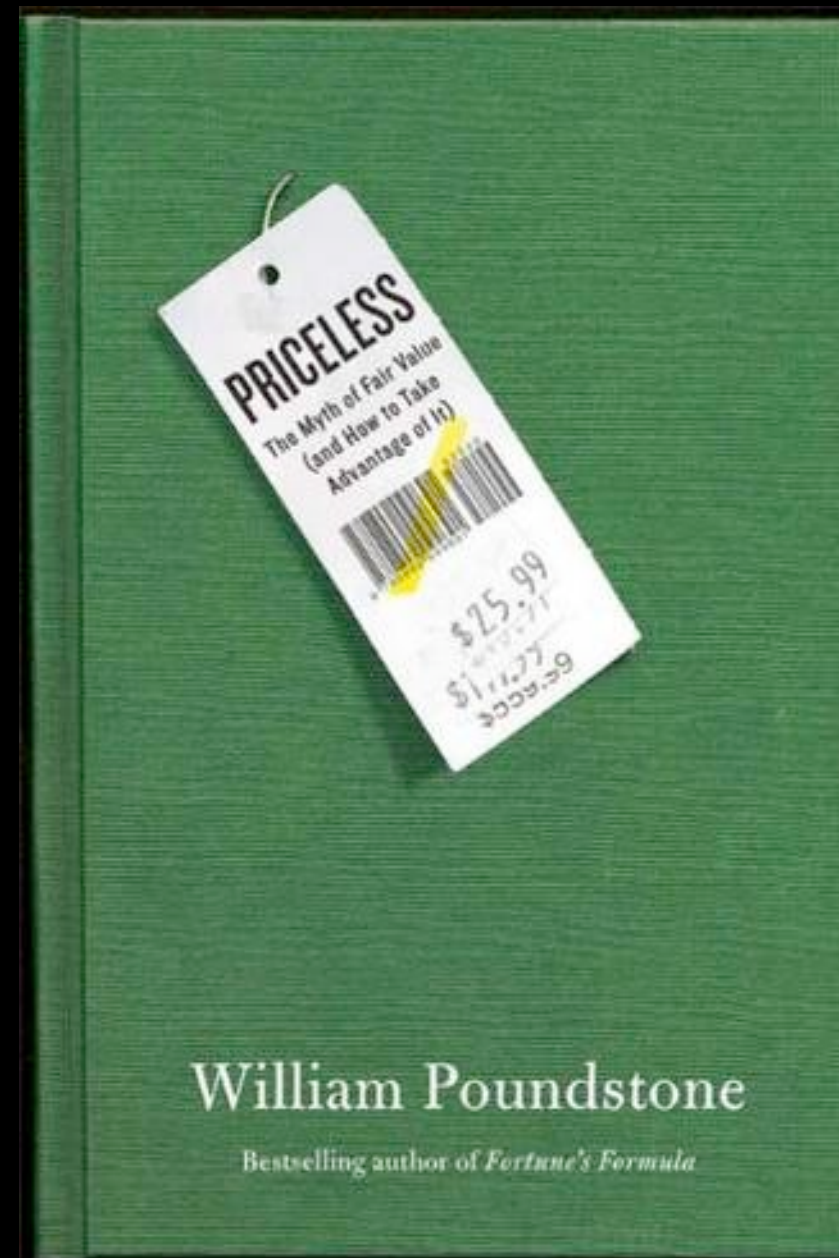
William Poundstone
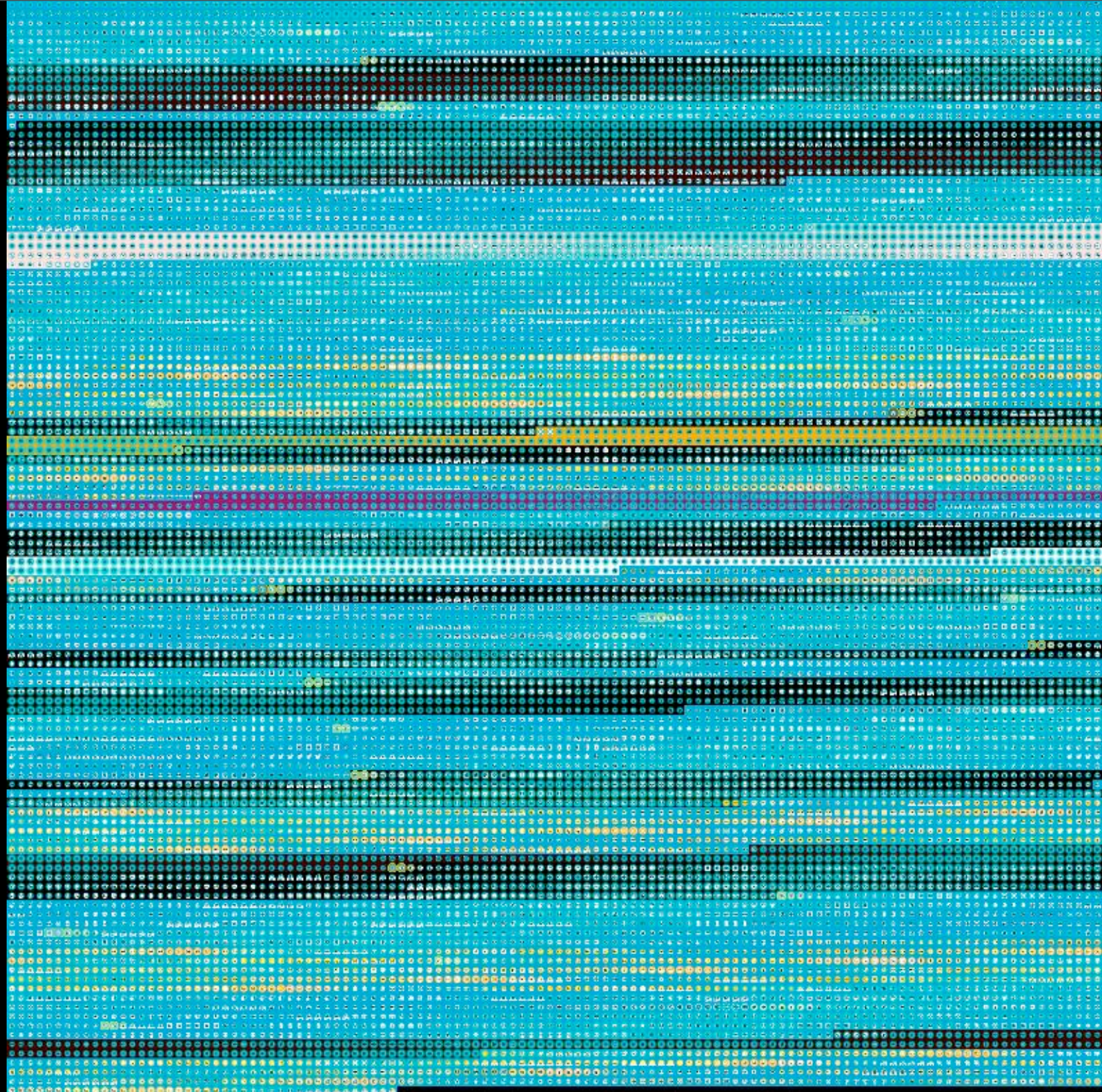
This montage shows 24 frames a second for the duration of a complete loop of the Botomless Pit text. The montage reads like a page, left-right, top-bottom.

montage
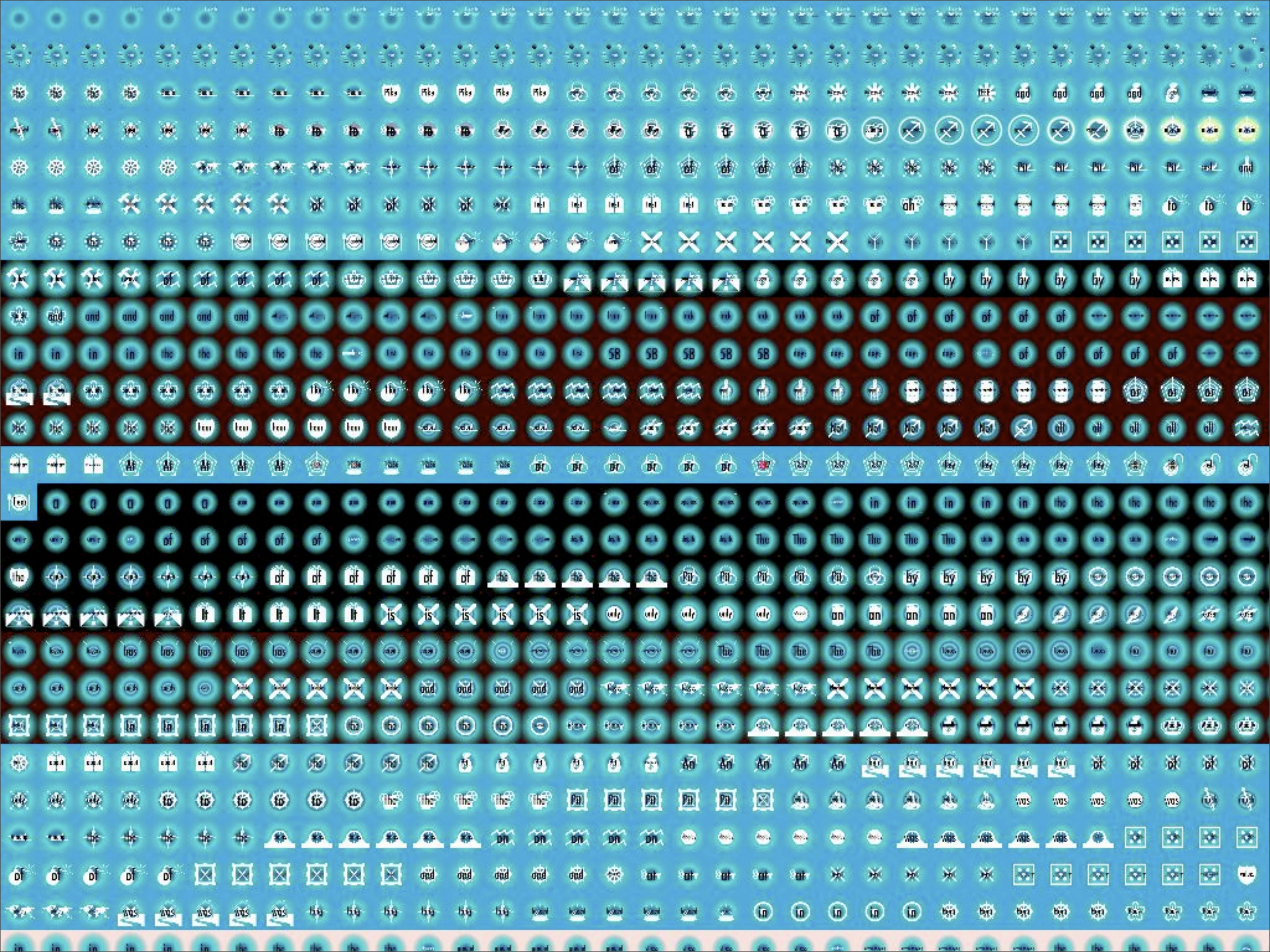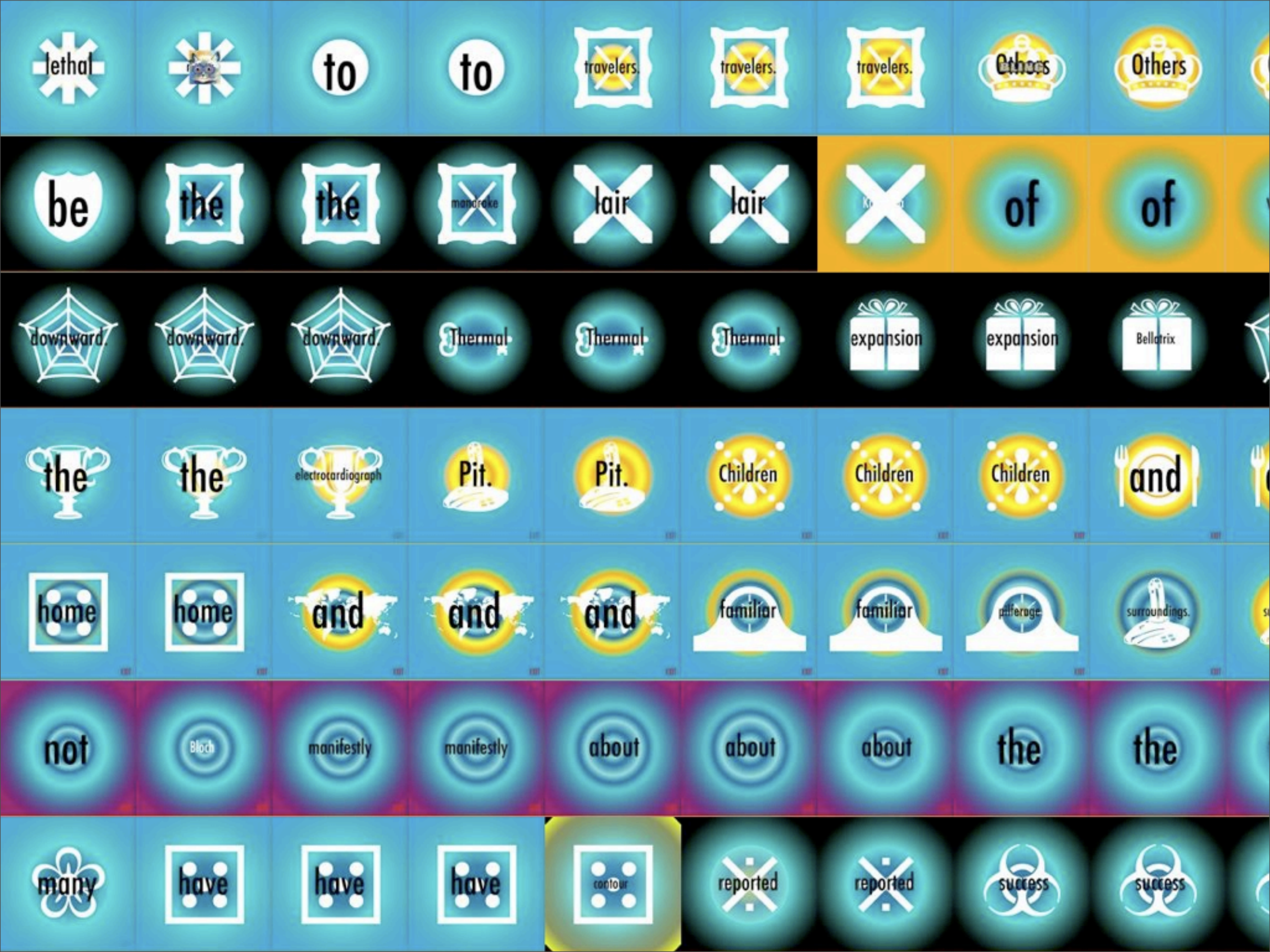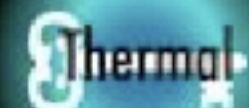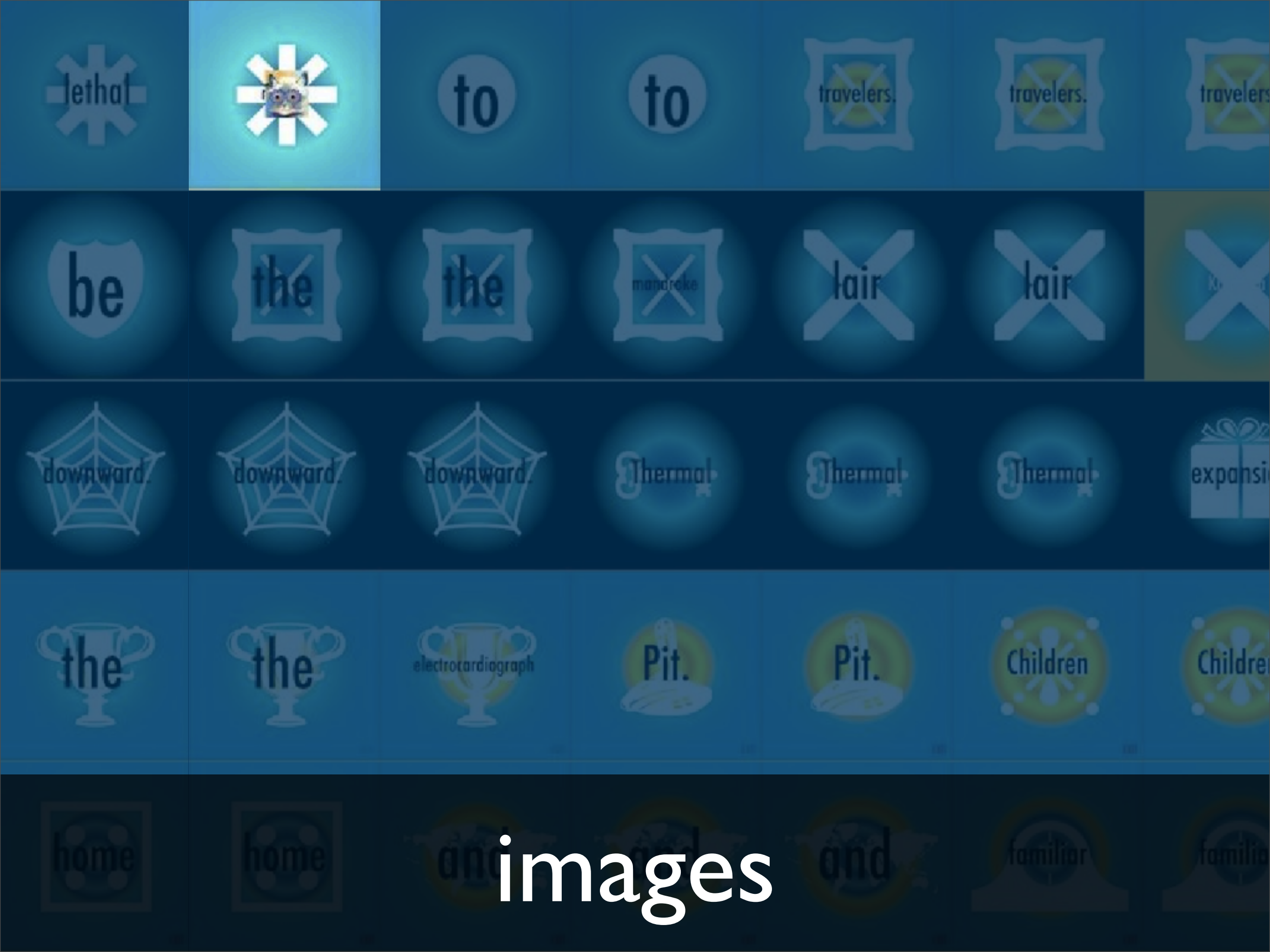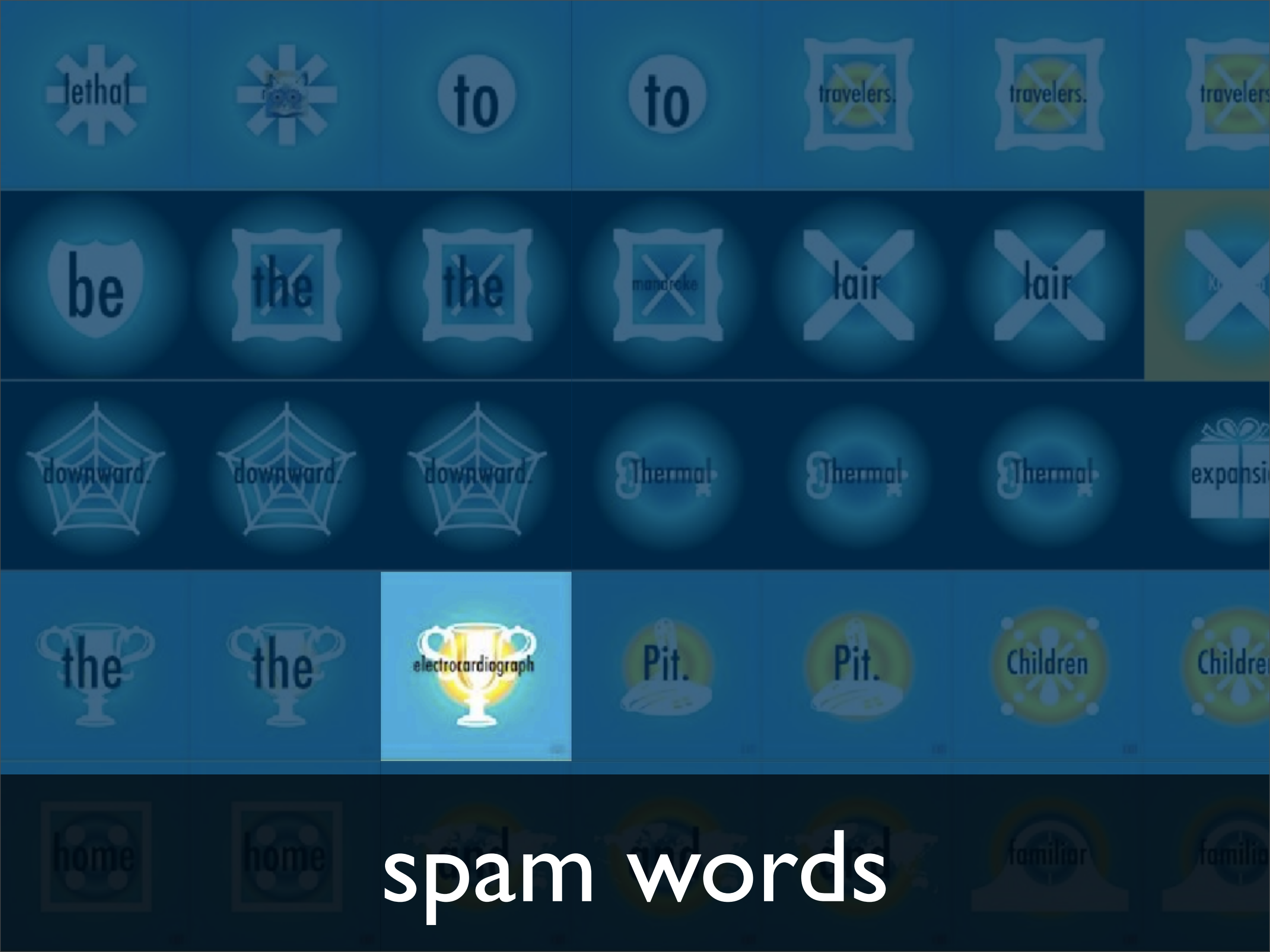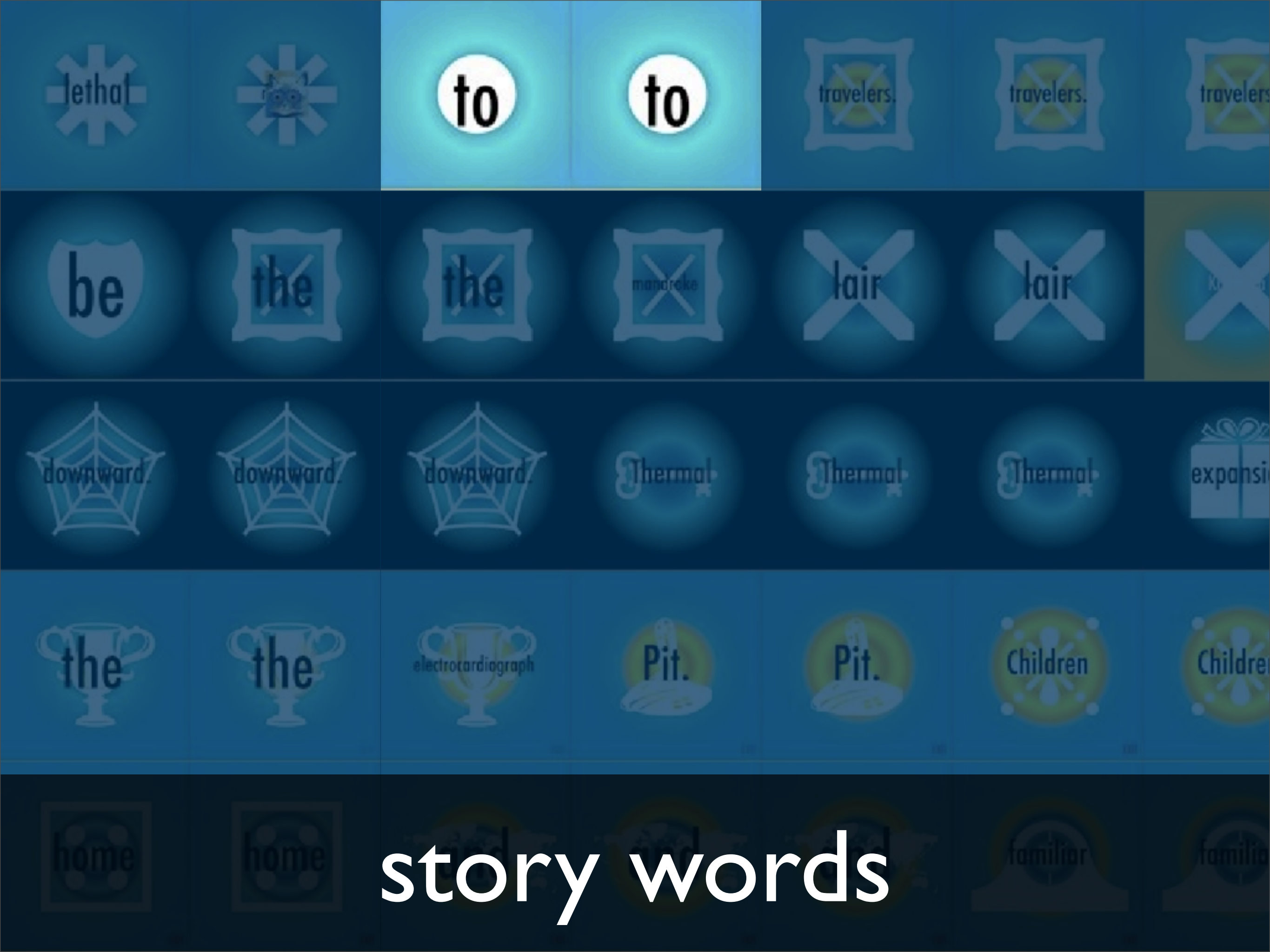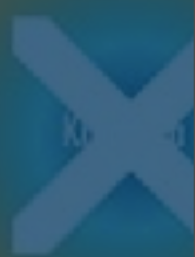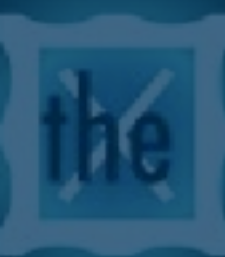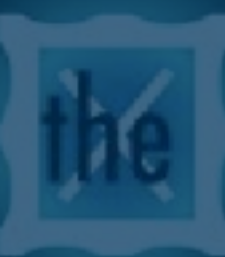
lethal to to travelers. travelers. travelers. Others Others

be the the mandrake lair lair of of

downward. downward. downward. Thermal Thermal Thermal expansion expansion Bellatrix

the the electrocardiograph Pit. Pit. Children Children Children and

home home and and and familiar familiar pilferage surroundings.

not Bloch manifestly manifestly about about about the the

many have have have contour reported reported success success

lethal		to	to	travelers.	travelers.	travelers
be	the	the	mandrake	lair	lair	
downward.	downward.	downward.	Thermal	Thermal	Thermal	expansion
the	the	electrocardiograph	Pit.	Pit.	Children	Children
home	home	and	and	and	familiar	familiar

images

spam words

story words

Sinkholes and unstable soil characteristic of the karstland around Bluefields long plagued construction of the Beale Pike between Breezewood and Roanoke Park. The route was selected for its distance from the Bottomless Pit and the perceived need to allow a generous margin of safety mandated not by necessity but by the psychology of the people in this region, whose conceptions of the Pit and its supposed hazards are not easily dispelled by the best scientific testimony. Engineers supervised the drilling of test holes designed to detect unstable areas in a 30 foot grid extending 200 feet on either side of the intended highway's shoulders. Workers pulled up core samples revealing a subsoil of finely compacted kaolin silica and gabbro. 200 foot piles of steel-reinforced concrete supported by native soil friction were sunk to anchor highway margins against a substrate judged to be sandy and suffering from lack of compaction. The soil problems were not considered serious. No subsidence incidents of any importance were reported in the first 58 days of construction. The 59th day began unseasonably warm and cloudless. Towards mid morning highway workers began hearing sounds like distant gunfire detonations or firecrackers. Several strong bursts each a cluster of reports lasting a few seconds occurred in the hour before noon. Not all workers were able to hear the sounds which some ascribed to the backfire of pavement machinery. At 12:56 or 12:57 they felt the ground rocking beneath their feet. Those who could run to safety did. Behind them a great chasm opened in the earth. 73 workers and nearly four million dollars worth of government equipment disappeared into a cavity of unknown depth. The state brought in geologist Nelson Playfair who had experience with deep wells. Playfair's attempts to measure the depth of the Pit by triangulation failed owing to poor visibility at the lower levels. The Pit is not an isolated phenomenon. It is only an extreme case of what has been happening all along in this region where integration of geologic layers has become compromised. The forces that maintain the Pit remain a puzzle to geologists. The soil in the entire area is sandy friable and loose. Playfair explained: You're really not on solid ground anywhere in this region. The Pit's early history is sketchy. In the nineteenth century Chandler Moody described as a sign painter inventor libertine and atheist collected all that had been written about the Pit. An heir of Moody's established the New Lebanon Historical Society which preserved maps newspapers books paintings relating not only to the Pit (which was much smaller and shallower at that time) but to the entire region and its people. Among the items on display was Church's famous unfinished painting of the Bottomless Pit. Moody complained that maps of the Pit are of limited and at best temporary value. Walls and ledges are subject to sudden settling rearrangement and complete disappearance. The Historical Society was long housed in Hoar House the first substantial dwelling built in the area; and unfortunately Hoar House was pulled apart in the ground stress accompanying the 1993 subsidence its timbers and foundation stones being scattered in the characteristic rhomboid pattern. The debris was pulled into the Pit during a relatively minor subsidence event the following night. A number of residents attested to the former existence of books and clippings in the Society library alluding to earlier similar events in the past; i.e. to incidents in which all or nearly all existing records of the Bottomless Pit's history were effaced by its own unpredictable expansion. The lost records were themselves reputed to have contained accounts of similar catastrophes and irretrievable losses of history in past times yet more remote. Government psychologists have noted the self-validating elements of these stories. At least one of the persons making these claims was judged by a psychologist to be a woman capable [of] doing or saying anything in order to draw attention to herself and her emotional problems. Daring men have attempted to attain great depths in the Pit. Kellogg the astronomer, described as being in an erratic mental state after having quarreled with a colleague with whom he shared a house, descended to the 14,000 foot level, where he believed that he would be able to view extra-galactic nebulae at midday. Kellogg claimed in the caption of a once-popular lithograph that that stars were visible during the daytime when viewed from the bottom of deep wells or chimneys. The fact is that Kellogg was unable to see anything below 22000 feet, even his own lamp held inches from his eyes. Visibility in the Pit is a complex matter. Haze and shadow permit little visibility below the 4 mile depth. Dense fogs have been reported at lower levels. At still lower depths air pressure creates mirages. Other reported mirages may be psychological in nature. Much depends on angle of the sun and atmospheric conditions. Kellogg was the first to describe many famed optical phenomena of the Pit. Weather permitting a viewer standing at the Pit's rim at sunrise or sunset may see weird shadows cast on a bank of fog miles away haloed by a prismatic effect of light producing a famous illusion of Our Lady. Kellogg described the odd lights seen on moonless nights, locally supposed to be the spirits of brigands or lost men. A theme of Kellogg's writing was that the Pit was related to the Pit of Conklin or more often the Well of Conklin, a subject of local legend held to contain malign influences lethal to travelers. Others believe this pit was only a well poisoned out of spite by a man named Conklin, over disappointment in a legal matter. Kellogg wrote articles for such popular publications as Enigma Strange and Libido. He suggested the Pit to be the lair of vortices and fantastic beings whose description varied with his reading popular tastes and motion pictures and television programs he had seen. In 1962 Kellogg perished when an ambitious two-man winch broke at the 54,000 foot level sending his gondola tumbling downward. Thermal expansion of chain and an unusual ratchet mechanism for drawing out the chain were blamed for the accident. The Pit has become an integral part of life in the region. Children are told to behave lest Father Christmas throw them into the Pit. Children and to some extent the adults of the area are subject to recurring dreams and nightmares about the Pit. Dreams of falling into the Pit are common. Often in the dream the Pit is ever widening and threatens the dreamer's home and familiar surroundings. In another locally common class of dream the dreamer finds him or herself already in the Pit and unable to scale its walls. Feelings of anxiety despair fear abandonment and anomie are frequently reported. Even when dream content is not manifestly about the Pit residents dream of falling off cliffs or being stranded in crevices. The Pit was long popular with church groups. Chartered buses brought church members who proof of the literal reality of Hell. Some brought telescopes and cameras and many have reported success in viewing hell fires or demonic beings. More often they fail (as have geologists with more sophisticated equipment) to see any evidence of a fiery inner layer. For many years Miltown Evangelical Church presented a passion play at a pavilion on the south rim. Sermons invoked the Pit as an allegory. The performance began with a costumed angel trumpeting followed by the meteoric appearance of a magnesium flare star that fell from the sky into the Pit remaining visible up to 4 minutes. The Pit was symbolically opened with a golden key. There issued great billows of smoke and a plague of locusts enacted by the release of 600 horned lizards caged in concealed locations on the perimeter of the Pit. The play's elaborate costumes and sets were made by local people. Families rehearsed many months for a short season in midsummer. A lawsuit brought by the family of a woman who fell into the Pit while trying to get a better view brought an end to the production. The Pit remains an attraction to travelers. Devil's boiling pots are a natural formation as are calcite spars sold at roadside stands as devil horns or Satan's jewel boxes. Locusts sold in bamboo cages as souvenirs are actually the local 17-year cicada. Compasses and dip needles act erratically near the Pit. Normally reliable water witches fail. Tame animals turn hostile. It has been reported that dogs refuse to approach the Pit or act strangely in its vicinity. A common behavior is to hunker down and crawl across the ground propelled by the hind legs while emitting low gurgling sounds. Flocks of birds are sometimes observed flying down into the Pit. The flocking behavior may be an instinct triggered by the absence of a ground sense. Nests have been found down to 3,340 feet. Near the so-called nidificatory limit nests become disorganized irregular composed of bizarre elements (wire debris pebbles hard candy chewing gum religious tracts). Fleas have been found down to the 18,000 foot level. A blind midge first discovered in the Pit (Cinea horribilis) has since been found in stagnant waste pools from the brewing industry worldwide. It has become popular to throw small or valueless objects into the Pit. People talk of casting something into the Pit when they mean to get rid of it with certainty. Metaphor has become reality: People literally cast into the Pit last packs of cigarettes photographs of ex-husbands images of the disgraced bad cars marriage certificates household junk. One commercial enterprise throws unwanted objects into the Pit for a fee. An expedition to the ledge on the southeast rim found its bottom lined with a layer of coins smooth stones beverage containers fast food wrappers, and feral cats. It is such a frequent practice to throw unwanted kittens in the Pit that an animal rights group patrols the perimeter on a selective basis. At least 23 people have attempted suicide by jumping into the Pit and all but one have succeeded. Confusing the matter is a reported tendency to jump involuntarily into the Pit. It is possible to lose all sense of direction in the vicinity of the Pit for obscure reasons that are under investigation. One individual questioned by police reported the illusion of transposing the sky and the Pit. Thus some suicides may have been the result of reflex actions hallucinations or magnetic anomalies while others are the consequence of depression grief and loss of emotional affect. Motel owners in the area have agreed to an informal system of psychological screening. The subsidence has devastated the local real estate market in an area extending far beyond that where measurable subsidence has occurred. Homeowners in this marginal zone find disaster coverage impossible to obtain or prohibitively priced or available only with exclusions for damage owing to further ground subsidence. Cracks in pavements sidewalks driveways breezeways patios and interior and exterior walls are a universal sight. Doors will not open or are impossible to shut. Windows shatter explosively. Makeshift repairs have made shantytowns of formerly fine neighborhoods. Authorities warn that areas once viewed as remote from the Pit are in fact slowly sliding inward. The few remaining residents of Carbondale sit isolated in their homes surrounded by houses their neighbors have long abandoned. At night the community is pitch black. Ground stress has snapped power lines water pipes sewer connections and television cables. Squatters are unaware of developments in the outside world; some show signs of derangement. When Carbondale resident Devon Little moved here, this neighborhood was considered to be a vast distance from the Pit. This was not considered to be a risky area. Like many residents Little sleeps in his car. His modest amenities (a satellite dish a construction crew's portable toilet and a microwave oven and cooler plugged into a portable generator) are steps away. I am comfortable living outside now. Little's home has been on the market for nearly two years finding few lookers and no buyers. One potential buyer backed out after discovering that the area had landslide problems. In an attempt to secure the house's foundation Little nailed plywood over the studs to form a cripple wall. Local handymen report a brisk trade in such work yet these very measures have been ineffective against major subsidence events in the past. Residents are moody and fearful about the future, yet there is also an element of denial. Mentions of the Pit are conspicuously absent from area real estate brochures and Chamber of Commerce publications. If the Pit is mentioned at all it is only via such circumlocutions as describing the general region as a geological wonderland. It is not uncommon to hear residents talk animatedly of potholes or sinkholes they saw on a vacation or business trip concluding with evident satisfaction that subsidence is a problem wherever you go in the world! We're actually luckier than a lot of people! Things could be much worse! A common theme of conversations is that the Pit is filling up and will eventually stabilize. Geologists deny any basis for this hope. A 3,000-room Indian casino was once planned for the Bottomless Pit's south rim. It was to have featured a spectacular glass ballroom cantilevered over the Pit. Guests would have viewed the glorious abyss opening beneath their feet according to promotional literature. Financing fell apart when it was discovered that an engineer had been tampering with survey markers in order to conceal progressive subsidence. The shift was less than one half of an inch according to documents filed with the Gaming Board but it was ominous nonetheless for it had occurred within a six month period. A state engineer told the Board that such subsidence transmitted as a torque [force] to the glass floor would cause it to shatter unpredictably. The casino's owners responded with a plan to measure the deformation of the glass floor through sensors. In the event of dangerous stress alarms would sound and the projecting ballroom would be evacuated. The Building Safety Commission rejected this plan. Glass, though it possesses a greater tensile strength than steel, does not undergo a plastic deformation and may fail without any warning of the magnitude contemplated by the Commission as the basis of a catastrophe scenario. A portion of the northeast corner of the casino's lobby has since fallen into the Pit. Test pilings for the projecting ballroom are still visible as is the construction firm's temporary office whose walls are now several inches out of plumb. Large cracks parallel to the Pit's rim have appeared in the ground where construction was to have begun and this pattern of ground deformation has preceded past subsidence events. The Pit has swallowed part of the safety rail system encircling the Pit's perimeter. In recent years the Pit has both widened and gotten alarmingly deeper.

paratext: "The Subliminal CON"

In September 1957 ad man James M. Vicary announced that he had used a device called a tachistoscope to flash split-second ads during movies. The ads, too fleeting to be perceived consciously, worked. One that said **"Drink Coca-Cola"** increased sales 18.1 percent. A similar ad for popcorn boosted sales 57.5 percent.

Vicary had already achieved modest fame with a profile in Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), a best-selling expose of how "depth marketing" touted cars as phallic symbols. Vicary's press release on the subliminal ads described a scientific test involving 45,699 participants. He told the *Motion Picture Daily* that his test had been conducted in a theater in Fort Lee, New Jersey. The theater's manager was strangely evasive when contacted. Questioned by Hofstra psychology student Stuart Rogers, the manager denied that an experiment had even taken place.

The doubts were lost in an uproar. Editorialists railed against subliminal ads. The FCC asked Vicary to demonstrate his system in Washington. (After the demonstration, Michigan Senator Charles Potter quipped: "I think I want a hot dog.") Pre-empting likely legislation, the National Association of Broadcasters banned subliminal ads. Meanwhile Vicary sold his services as consultant to American corporations. It was estimated that he took in $4.5 million in consulting fees in nine months' time. Then in June 1958, Vicary dropped out of the marketing world. He had reportedly emptied his bank accounts and closets. In 1962, Vicary admitted to *Advertising Age*: **"This was a gimmick."**

In September 1957 ad man James M. Vicary announced that he had used a device called a tachistoscope to flash split-second ads during movies. The ads, too fleeting to be perceived consciously, worked. One that said **"Drink Coca-Cola"** increased sales 18.1 percent. A similar ad for popcorn boosted sales 57.5 percent.

the hoax

Décio Pignatari
Brazil | b. 1927

"beba coca cola" (1957)

split-second words (slow motion)

decompiling the source

19 buttons

6 fonts

64 frames *

13 images

20 morphs

47 scripts **

125 shapes

12 sounds

159 sprites

48 "texts"

Elements of decompiled Flash source code

fonts sounds images buttons morphs scripts texts frames shapes sprites
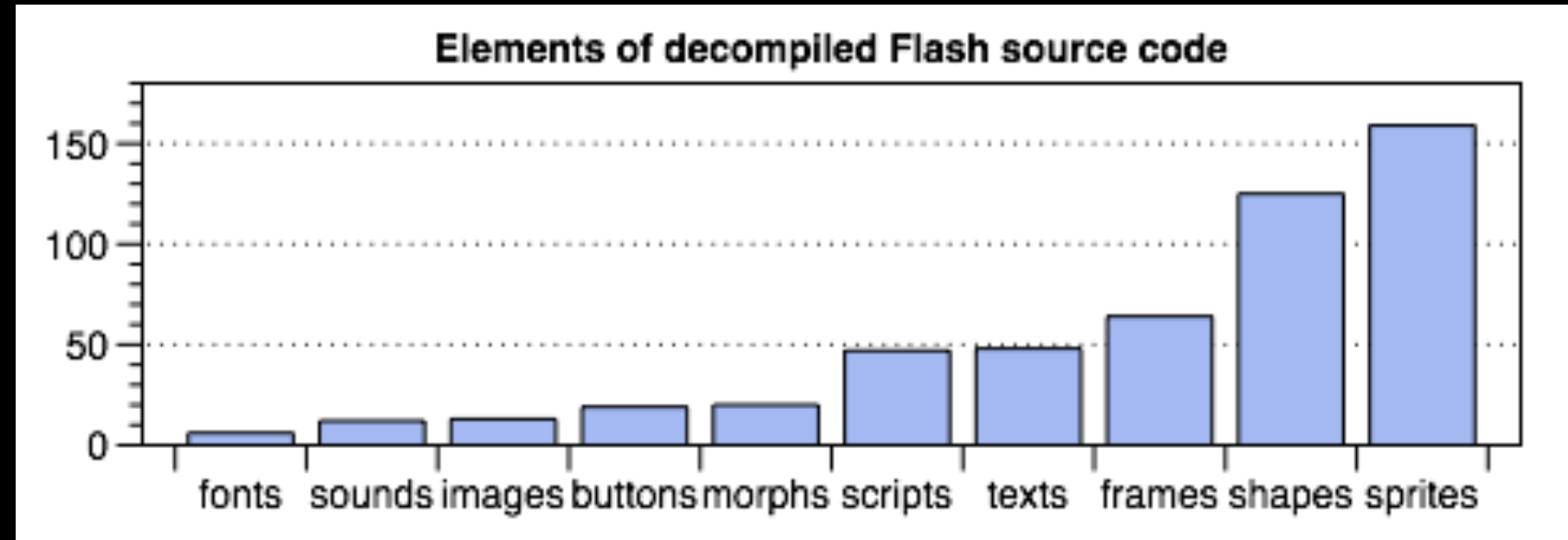
*   a nice round 2^6
** code snippets attached to objects or frames

Resources in total:
3017

Total size:
251.26 KB

Images (14)
67.75 KB

Shapes (125)
23.09 KB

Morphs (20)
4.25 KB

Fonts (11)
23.75 KB

Sounds (200)
63.49 KB

Scripts (47)
29.33 KB

Other (2600)
39.60 KB
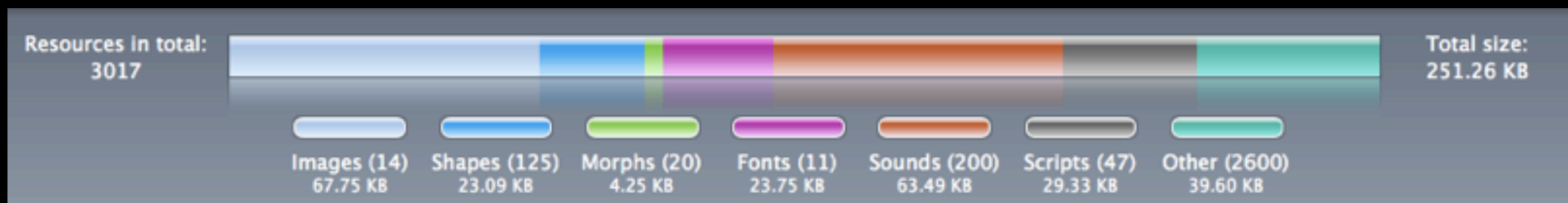
inventory of resources

Acapulco acropolis Adelia adoptive ah ah airmass algorithm alterman alumna amiss anatomy ant arduous Arlington armchair audiovisual Barnet beck Bellatrix Bloch bombast Brennan Brisbane bullish cabana calla Cameron caprice cash cauldron Cerberus Chinatown Chomsky combine commodious compelling complicate congressional contour convolute Conway corruptible corundum cotman covariate crackpot craftsperson crawlspace creek CUNY cup cupric curvilinear Cushman dashboard depreciable diagram diathermy Dietz difluoride discrepant distant dogfish dominate earthshaking edict electrocardiograph eliminate Elinor elongate endomorphism epitaxial equivocate erect escape Evans exogenous exploration ferrous Fogarty fogy formatting formulate forswear fresh gallberry gallus gauleiter glycerin gorse hatchway Heidelberg henbane Henrietta hepatica hepatitis hereafter hermitian Hitachi horseman Icelandic IEEE impale impute Inca informative Jesse jetliner Johanson John judicial junketeer Kampala Kathleen king klaxon know Kowalski Kuwait lament landfill leap legible levee lion Mackinac mandrake Masonic mausoleum mayor mite mold Mollie monarch moneymake moneymaker morsel Morton Mouton move neutron Nicholas Nile normative nuclear offend operand paid panjandrum parliamentary patriarchal pear penna petroleum pharmaceutic philanthropic physiochemical pilferage pitchblende pressure progress propel psychotherapist punch purslane quadruple rabbi radon rapacious Rasmussen ravage RCA registrable reportorial retail retinue retribution Rico Roger Rollins sacrosanct sassafras schoolteacher screenplay scrooge sea semantic separate sheriff showy shrugging silicon snag softball soliloquy songful squid Stanhope successful sulfonamide swag synapses taboo test therefrom tireline tristate treble menopause turtle TV twinkle urbanite utopian Valois virtuoso vocate volatile wiry woven wrongful Zan

spam word list

Henrietta hepatica hepatitis hereafter hermitian Hitachi horseman Icelandic IEEE impale impute Inca informative Jesse jetliner Johanson John judicial junketeer Kampala Kathleen king klaxon know Kowalski Kuwait lament landfill leap legible reeve from Mackinac
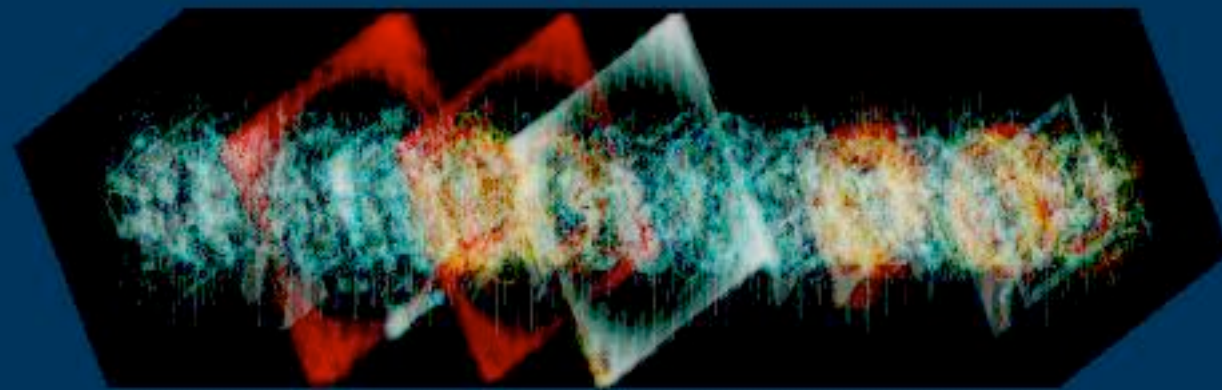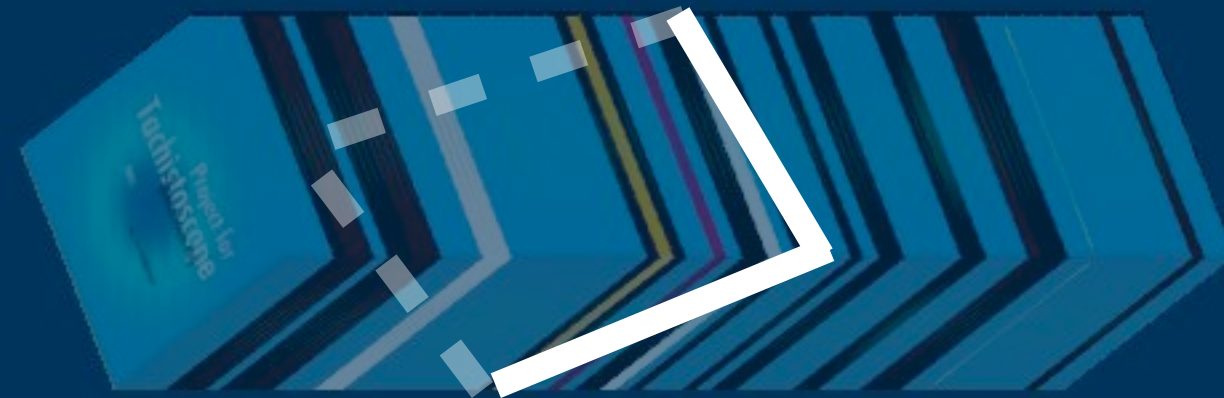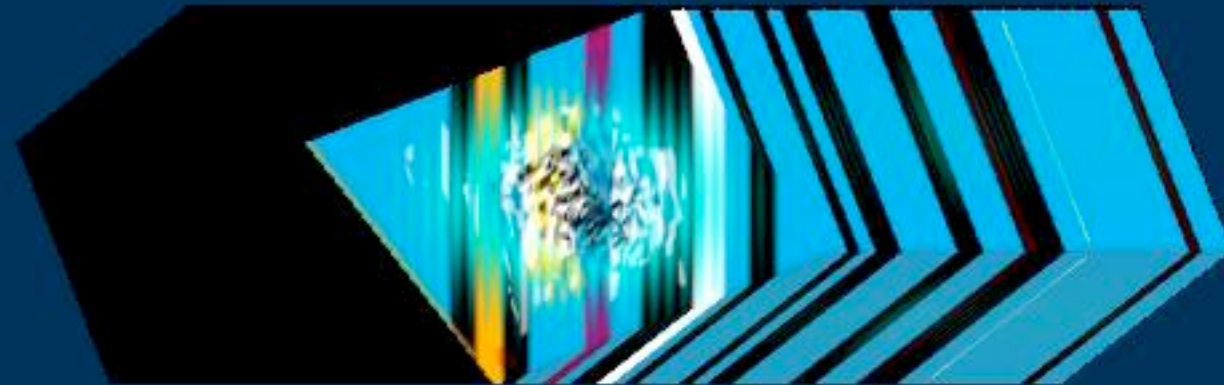
spam word list

volume view
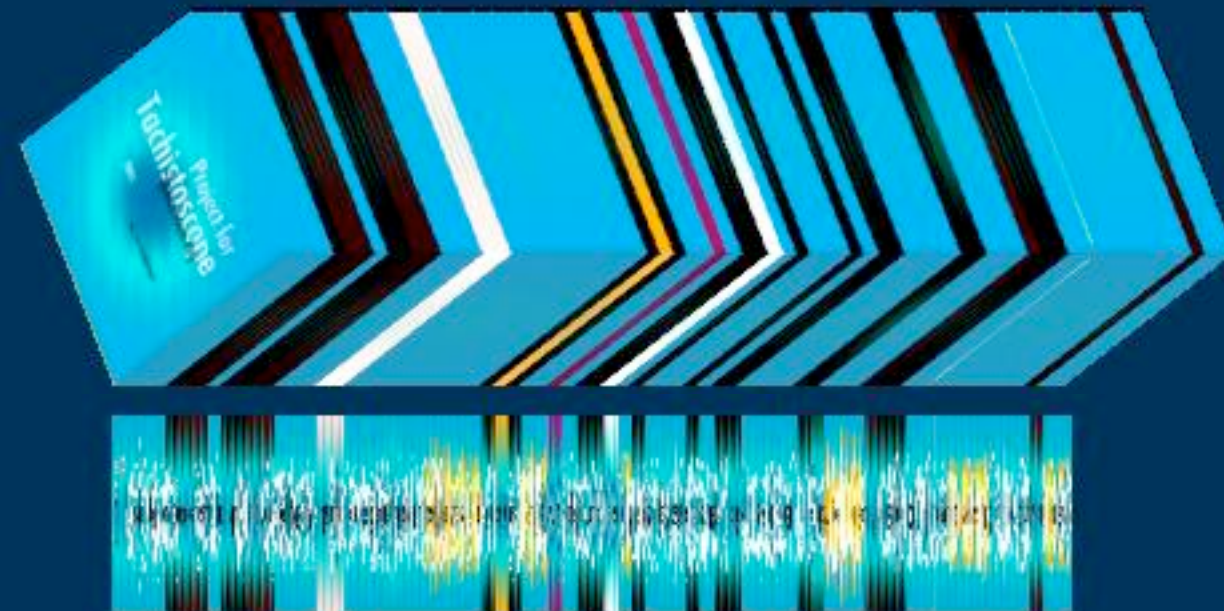
volume view

volume view

volume view

slice

slice

slice

slice

slice

files:

STORY
FILE

BP.txt

FLASH
CODE

MEDIA
ASSETS

Tachistoscope.swf

memory:

main story
word list

storyvar

"subliminal"
word list

spamvar

effects
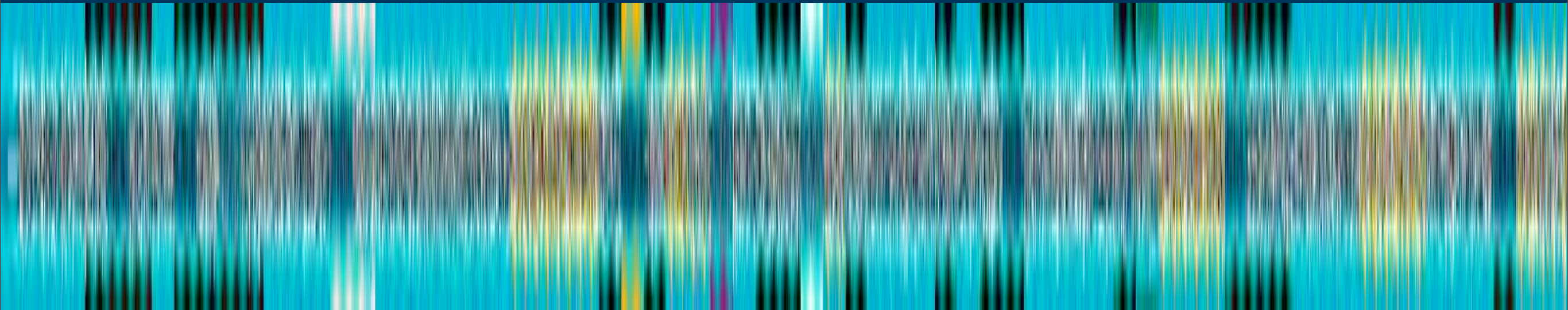
screen:

SPAM
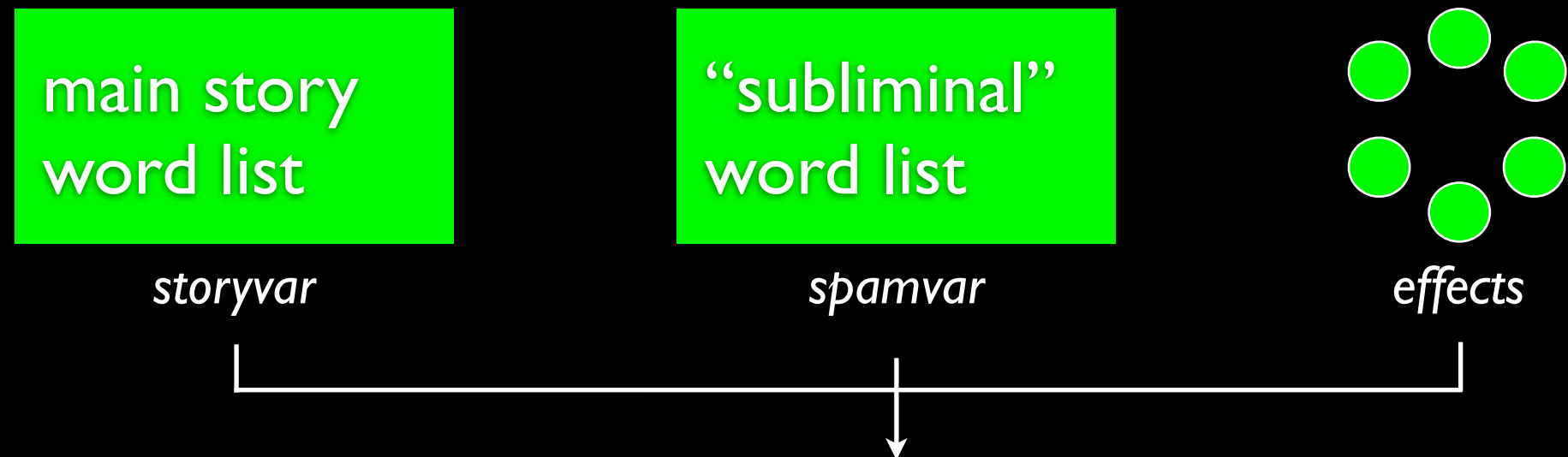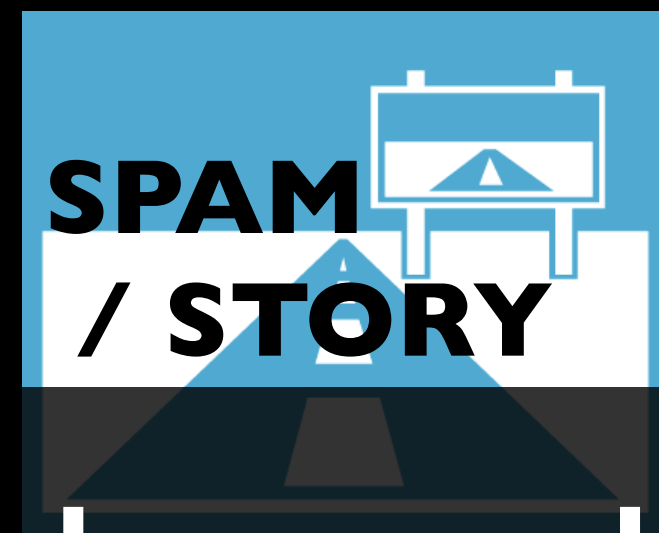/ STORY

critical code studies

```
// this randomly sets the "level"
var index = math.random();
if (index>.875) {
        level = 0;
        // the level always purges added backgrounds
        _level0.centerPoint.level2Effect_mc.unloadMovie();
        _level0.centerPoint.level3Effect_mc.unloadMovie();
        // set blue background color
        myColor.setRGB(0x0099CC);
        mySubliminalColor.setRGB(0x000000);
} else {
        if (index>.75) {
                level = 1;
                my_extraSound.attachSound("My Song26.mp3");
                my_extraSound.start();
                // get rid of purple background but allow orange-yellow if playing
                centerPoint.attachMovie("inwardGradient", "level4Effect_mc", 111);
                _level0.centerPoint.level3Effect_mc.unloadMovie();
                // set blue background color
                myColor.setRGB(0x0099CC);
                mySubliminalColor.setRGB(0x000000);
        } else {
                if (index>.625) {
                        level = 2;
                        my_extraSound.attachSound("My Song5.mp3");
                        my_extraSound.start();
                        // allow purple if playing
                        centerPoint.attachMovie("level2Effect", "level2Effect_mc", 100);
                        myColor.setRGB(0x0099CC);
                        mySubliminalColor.setRGB(0x000000);
                } else {
                        if (index>.50) {
                                level = 3;
                                _level0.centerPoint.level2Effect_mc.unloadMovie();
                                var hue = Math.floor(Math.random()*numColors+1));
                                myColor.setRGB(palette[hue]);
                                mySubliminalColor.setRGB(0xFFFFFF);
                                fixation_mc.attachMovie("fixationCrosses", "myFixationCrosses", 300);
```

decompiled source code

```
scaleBox = function (myBox, myWord)
{
        var l = myWord.length;
        if (l === 1)
        {
                myBox._xscale = 600;
                myBox._yscale = 600;
                myBox._y = 0 - 390;
                myBox._x = 0 - 2520;
                return;
        }
        else
        {
        if (l === 2)
        {
                myBox._xscale = 500;
                myBox._yscale = 500;
                myBox._y = 0 - 300;
                myBox._x = 0 - 2100;
                return;
        }
```
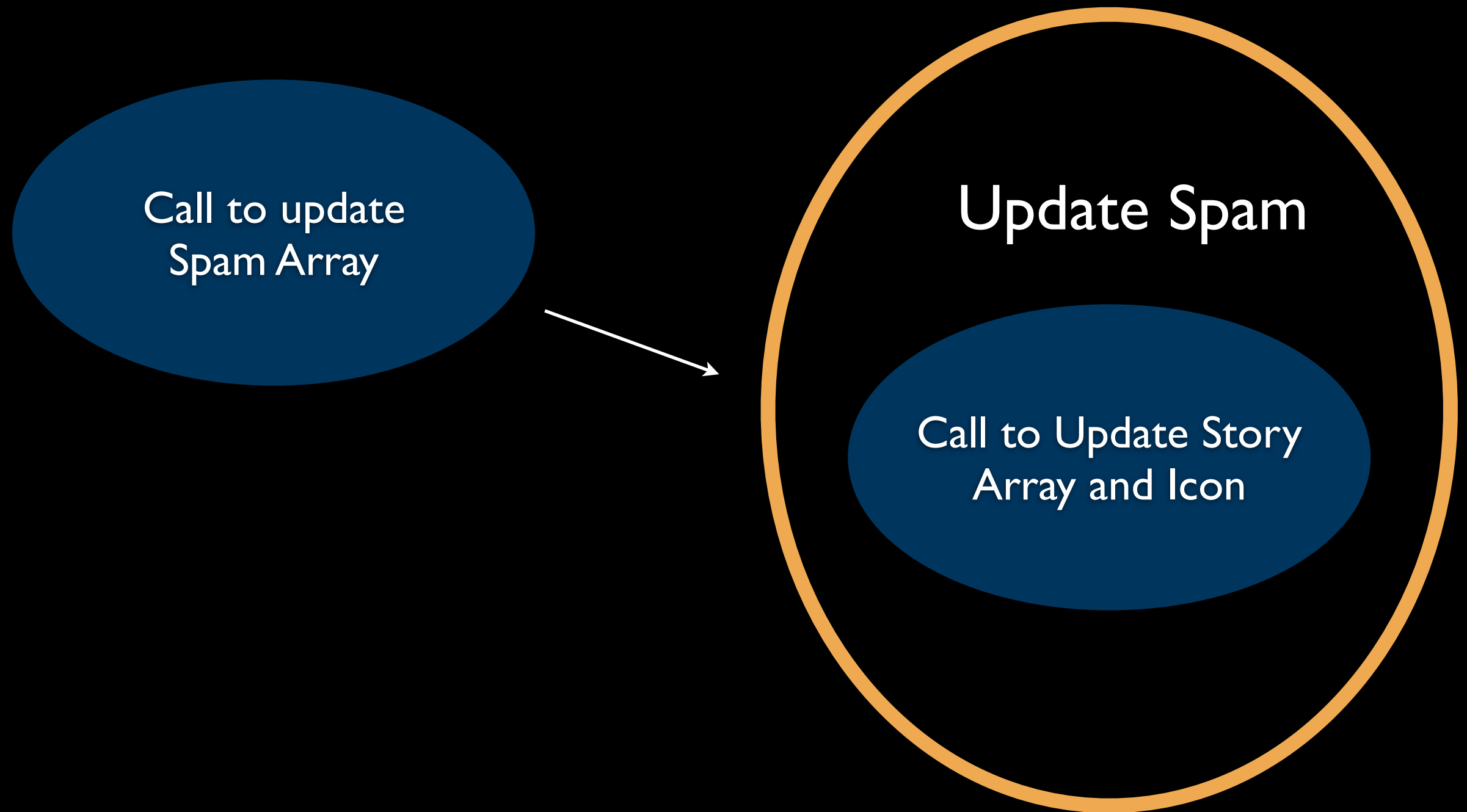
decompiled code

```
scaleBox = function (myBox, myWord) {
    var l = myWord.length;
    switch (l) {
    case 1 :
            myBox._xscale = 600;
            myBox._yscale = 600;
            myBox._y = -390;
            myBox._x = -2520;
            break;
    case 2 :
            myBox._xscale = 500;
            myBox._yscale = 500;
            myBox._y = -300;
            myBox._x = -2100;
            break;
```

Poundstone's code

story as a subprocess of spam

```
//Main loop, now a setInterval
updateWords = function () {
      // erase old words
      myStoryMovie.box3.text = "";
      updateAfterEvent();
      // scale spam box
      scaleBox(myStoryMovie.box2, myStoryMovie.spamArray[myStoryMovie.i]);
      // flash spam word
      myStoryMovie.box2.text = myStoryMovie.spamArray[myStoryMovie.i%spamLimit];
      updateAfterEvent();
      // flash picture if level = 1
      if (level == 1) {
            if (myStoryMovie.i%cuePicture == 0) {
                  _root.attachMovie("imageMovie"+k, "myPicture", 200);
                  myPicture._x = 300;
                  myPicture._y = 300;
                  updateAfterEvent();
                  k++;
                  if (k>noOfPictures) {
                        k = 1;
                  }
            }
      }
      killInterval = setInterval(killSubliminal, subliminalMilliseconds);
      // loop back when it reaches the last word in the story file
      if (myStoryMovie.i == myStoryMovie.limit) {
            myStoryMovie.i = 0;
      }
};
mainInterval = setInterval(updateWords, textMilliseconds);
```

```
//Main loop, now a setInterval
updateWords = function () {
    // erase old words
    myStoryMovie.box3.text = "";
    updateAfterEvent();
    // scale spam box
    scaleBox(myStoryMovie.box2, myStoryMo
    // flash spam word
    myStoryMovie.box2.text = myStoryMovie.s
    updateAfterEvent();
    // flash picture if level = 1
    if (level == 1) {
        if (myStoryMovie.i%cuePicture == 0)
```

```javascript
//Main loop, now a setInterval
updateWords = function () {


        killInterval = setInterval(killSubliminal, subliminalMilliseconds);



}
```

```
// subliminal loop
killSubliminal = function () {
    myStoryMovie.box2.text = "";
    updateAfterEvent();
    _root.myPicture.unloadMovie();
    updateAfterEvent();
    // scale story box
    scaleBox(myStoryMovie.box3, myStoryMovie.storyArray[myStoryMovie.i]);
    // show story word and icon
    if (level != 3) {
        myIcon.attachMovie("icon"+Math.floor(1+Math.random()*noOfIcons), "icon", 3);
        myIcon.icon._xscale = 110;
        myIcon.icon._yscale = 110;
    } else {
        myIcon.icon.unloadMovie();
    }
    myStoryMovie.box3.text = myStoryMovie.storyArray[myStoryMovie.i];
    updateAfterEvent();
    clearInterval(killInterval);
    // increment word counter
    myStoryMovie.i++;
};
```

Sinkholes and unstable soil
characteristic of the karstland
around Bluefields long plagued construction
of the Beale Pike between
Breezewood and Roanoke Park.

The route was selected for its
distance from the Bottomless Pit

opening passage of *storyvar*

Sinkholes and unstable soil
characteristic of the karstland
around Bluefields long plagued construction
of the Beale Pike between
Breezewood and Roanoke Park.

The route was selected for its
distance from the Bottomless Pit

consonance in language

...Barnet beck Bellatrix Bloch bombast Brennan Brisbane bullish...

...paid panjandrum parliamentary patriarchal pear penna petroleum pharmaceutic philanthropic physiochemical pilferage pitchblende pressure progress propel psychotherapist punch purslane quadruple

sacrosanct sassafras schoolteacher screenplay scrooge sea semantic separate sheriff showy shrugging silicon snag softball soliloquy songful squid Stanhope successful sulfonamide swag synapses...
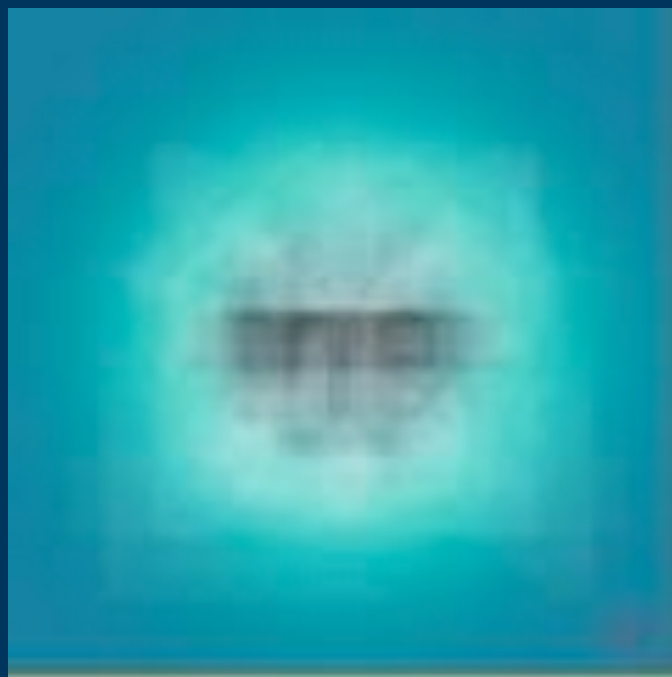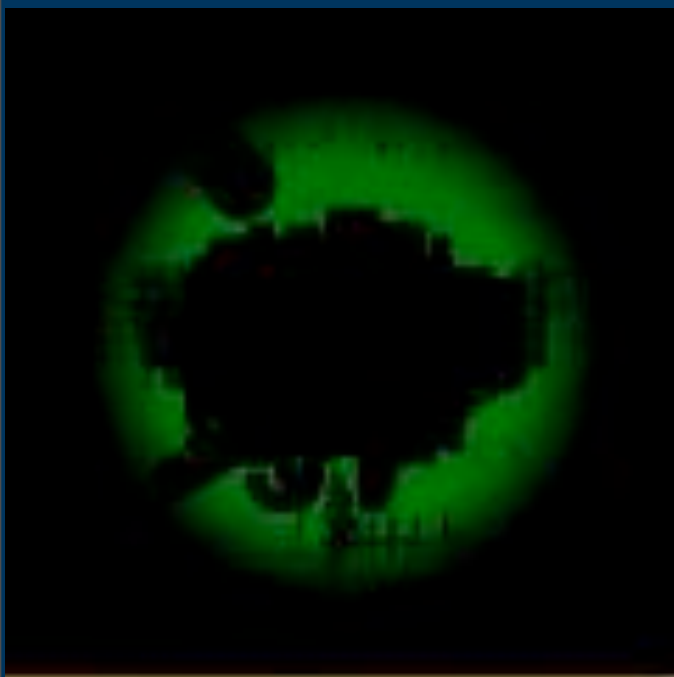
similar words in *spamvar*
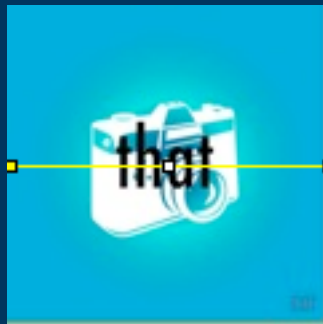
z-projection
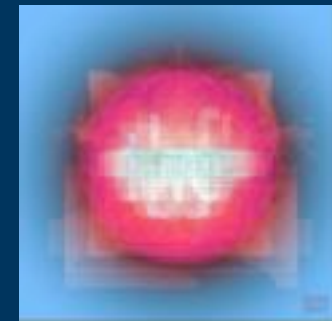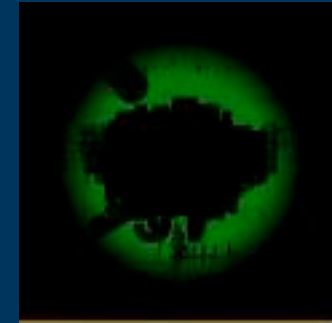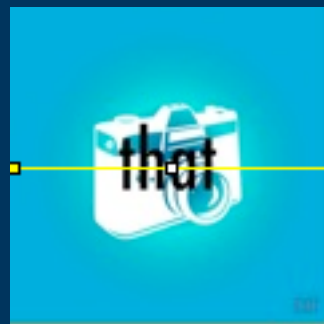
z-projection

z-projection

A blind midge first discovered in the Pit (Cinea horribilis) has since been found in stagnant waste pools from the brewing industry worldwide. It has become popular to throw small or valueless objects into the Pit. People talk of casting something into the Pit when they mean to get rid of it with certainty. Metaphor has become reality: People literally cast into the Pit last packs of cigarettes photographs of ex-husbands images of the disgraced bad cars marriage certificates household junk. One commercial enterprise throws unwanted objects into the Pit for a fee. An expedition to the ledge on the southeast rim found its bottom lined with a layer of coins smooth stones beverage containers fast food wrappers, and feral cats. It is such a frequent practice to throw unwanted kittens in the Pit that an animal rights group patrols the perimeter on a selective basis. At least 23 people have attempted suicide by jumping into the Pit and all but one have succeeded. Confusing the matter is a reported tendency to jump involuntarily into the Pit. It is possible to lose all sense of direction in the vicinity of the Pit for obscure reasons that are under investigation. One individual described having the sensation of the illusion of transposing the sky and the Pit. Thus some suicides may have been the result of reflex actions hallucinations or magnetic anomalies while

metaphor of the rim

" [...] In recent years the Pit has both widened and gotten alarmingly deeper. "

~*fin*~

REFERENCE:

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

CONCRETE POETRY & SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING

SUBLIMINALS VIA THE WWW

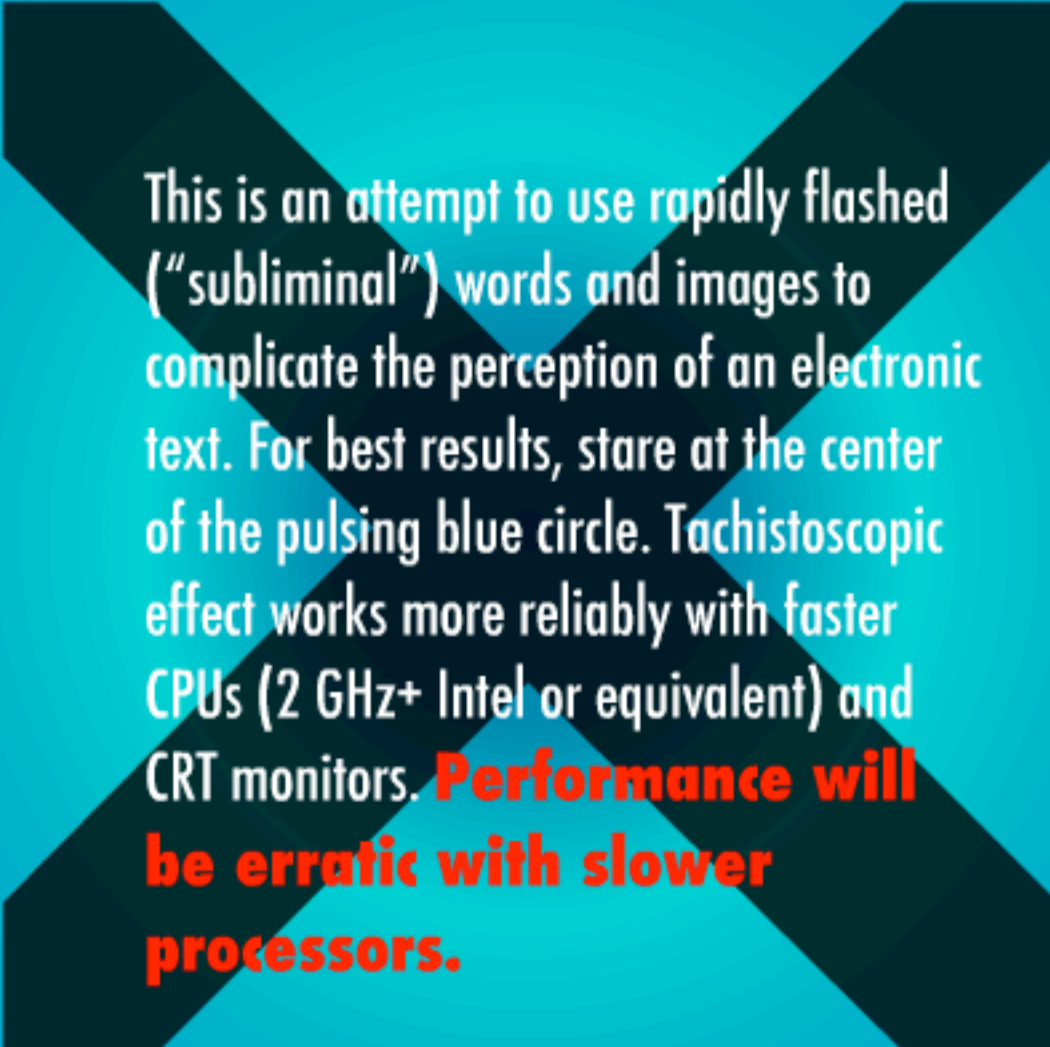START

APORIA

FALLING INTO THE VOID
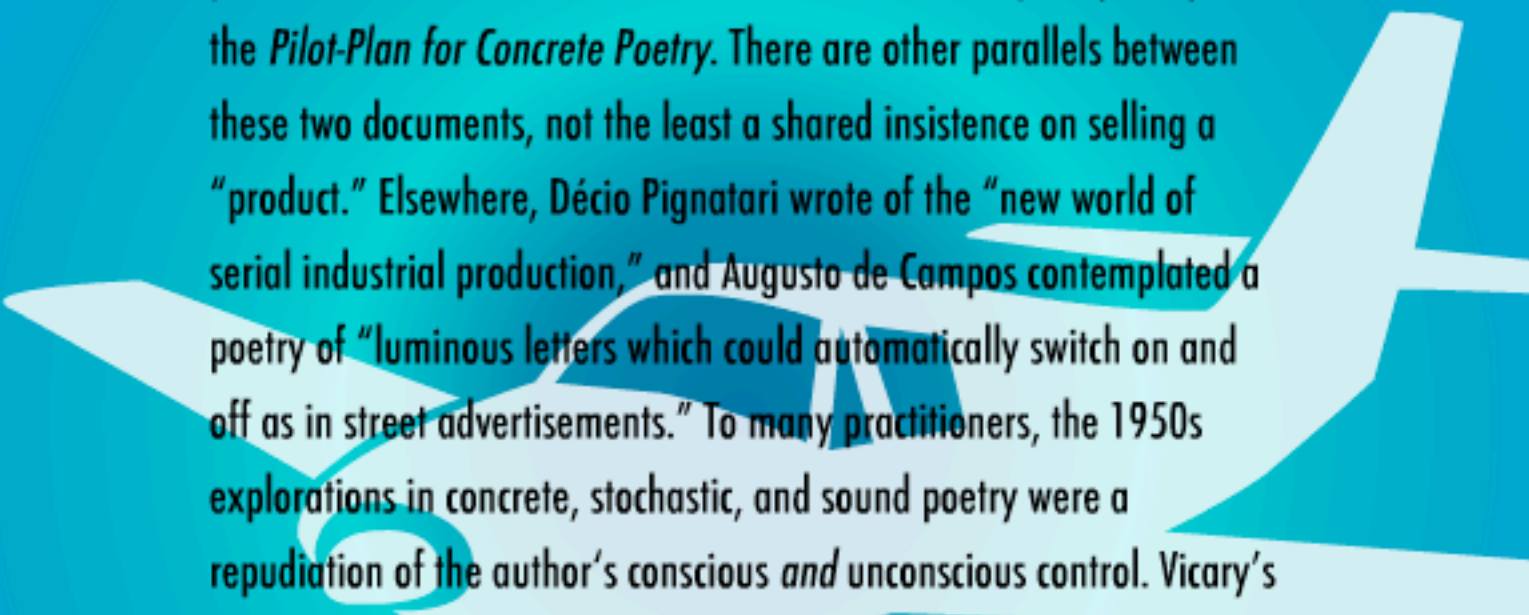
THE SUBLIMINAL CON

COLOPHON

apparatus and epitexts

This is an attempt to use rapidly flashed ("subliminal") words and images to complicate the perception of an electronic text. For best results, stare at the center of the pulsing blue circle. Tachistoscopic effect works more reliably with faster CPUs (2 GHz+ Intel or equivalent) and CRT monitors. **Performance will be erratic with slower processors.**

Subliminal advertising is coeval with concrete poetry. James Vicary's press release on subliminal ads dates from the same year (1957) as the *Pilot-Plan for Concrete Poetry*. There are other parallels between these two documents, not the least a shared insistence on selling a "product." Elsewhere, Décio Pignatari wrote of the "new world of serial industrial production," and Augusto de Campos contemplated a poetry of "luminous letters which could automatically switch on and off as in street advertisements." To many practitioners, the 1950s explorations in concrete, stochastic, and sound poetry were a repudiation of the author's conscious *and* unconscious control. Vicary's subliminal ads could be called the precise counterpart in the world of marketing. Both Vicary's and Pignatari's pivotal 1957 achievements masqueraded as authorized ads for an American soft drink. The putative text of Vicary's subliminal ad ["Drink Coca-Cola"] is the English equivalent of Pignatari's **"beba coca cola."**

In September 1957 ad man James M. Vicary announced that he had used a device called a tachistoscope to flash split-second ads during movies. The ads, too fleeting to be perceived consciously, worked. One that said **"Drink Coca-Cola"** increased sales 18.1 percent. A similar ad for popcorn boosted sales 57.5 percent.

Vicary had already achieved modest fame with a profile in Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), a best-selling expose of how "depth marketing" touted cars as phallic symbols. Vicary's press release on the subliminal ads described a scientific test involving 45,699 participants. He told the *Motion Picture Daily* that his test had been conducted in a theater in Fort Lee, New Jersey. The theater's manager was strangely evasive when contacted. Questioned by Hofstra psychology student Stuart Rogers, the manager denied that an experiment had even taken place.

The doubts were lost in an uproar. Editorialists railed against subliminal ads. The FCC asked Vicary to demonstrate his system in Washington. (After the demonstration, Michigan Senator Charles Potter quipped: "I think I want a hot dog.") Pre-empting likely legislation, the National Association of Broadcasters banned subliminal ads. Meanwhile Vicary sold his services as consultant to American corporations. It was estimated that he took in $4.5 million in consulting fees in nine months' time. Then in June 1958, Vicary dropped out of the marketing world. He had reportedly emptied his bank accounts and closets. In 1962, Vicary admitted to *Advertising Age*: **"This was a gimmick."**

This site invokes one of the best established subliminal effects, "semantic priming" (Marcel 1983; McCauley, Parmelee, Sperber and Carr 1980; Bar and Biederman 1998; Merikle, Smilek, and Eastwood 2001). Subliminal words can affect perception of subsequent, conscious stimuli: When the word **ANGRY** is flashed subliminally, subjects asked to read a passage and describe a person in it are more likely to do so in hostile terms than those receiving no subliminal cue. The meaning of subliminal cues apparently bleeds through onto succeeding stimuli. In this site the subliminal content is unrelated to the words it precedes. The intent is to create a text in which each word is, at least subliminally, an aporia. It is in the spirit of a number of exercises in randomly distorting semantic content while preserving elements of structure — among them the telephone game, exquisite cadaver, and the Oulipian N+7 algorithm.
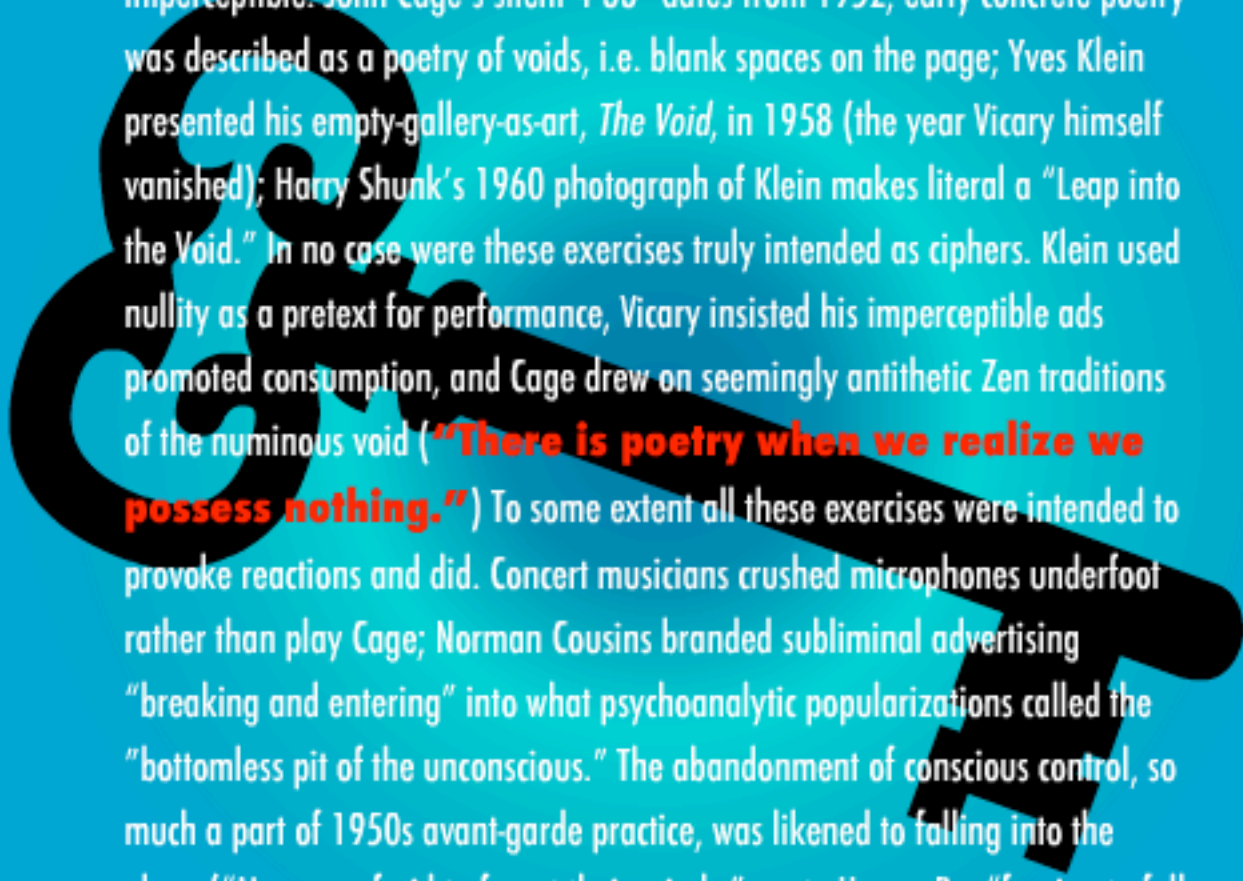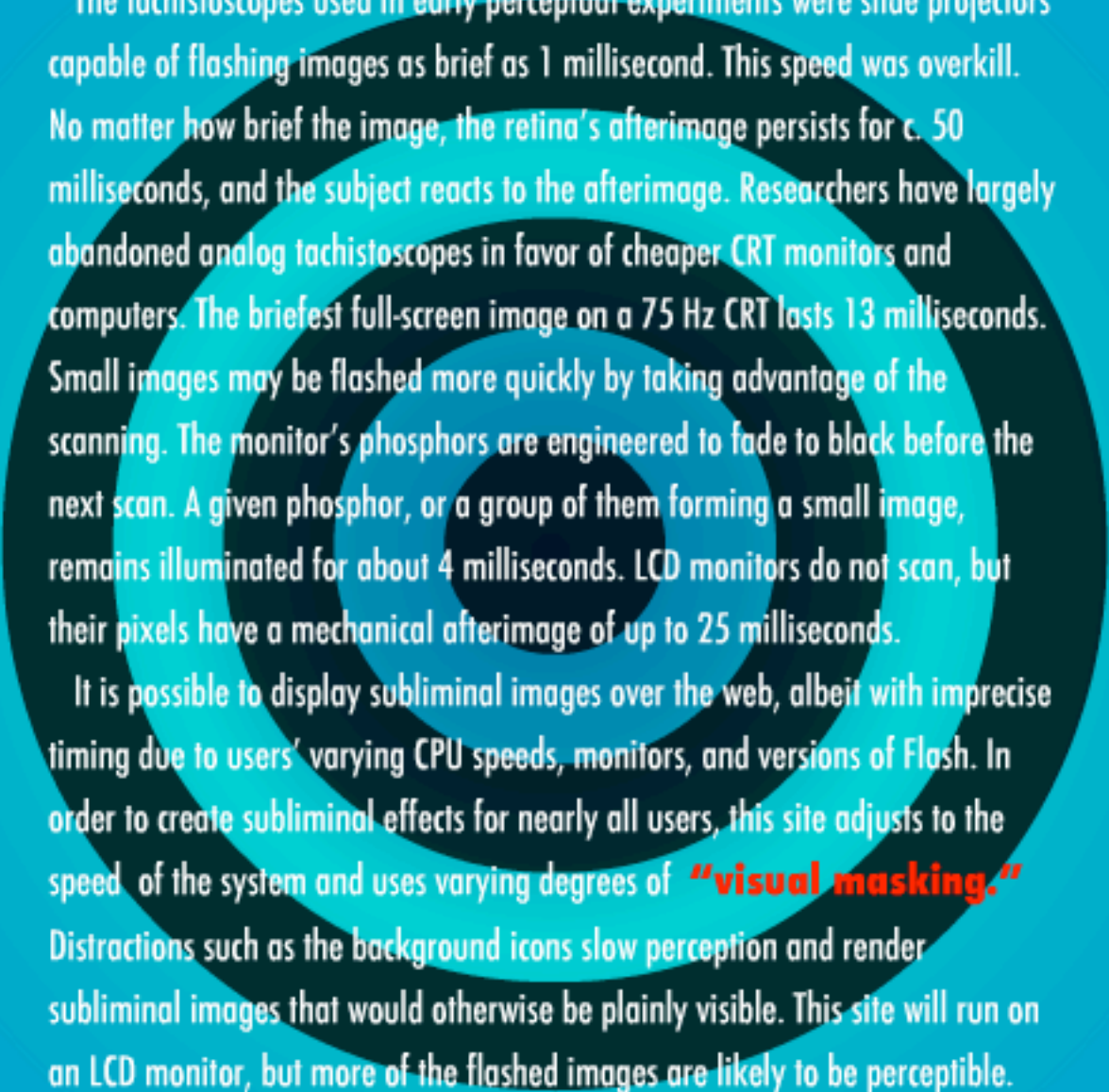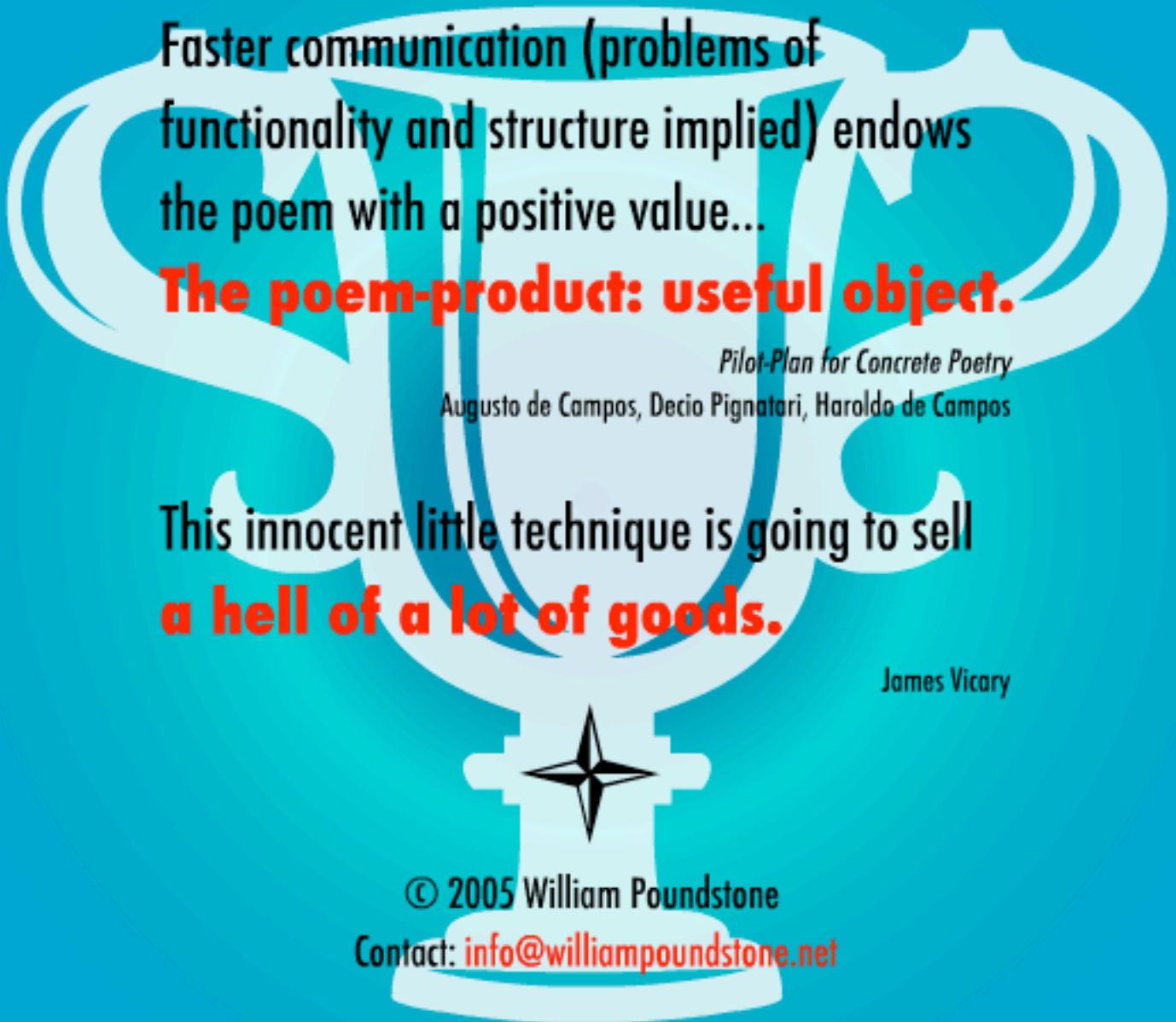
Corporate America's brief interest in subliminal advertising bears comparison with the avant garde's infatuation with the void: with art bordering on the imperceptible. John Cage's silent 4'33" dates from 1952; early concrete poetry was described as a poetry of voids, i.e. blank spaces on the page; Yves Klein presented his empty-gallery-as-art, *The Void*, in 1958 (the year Vicary himself vanished); Harry Shunk's 1960 photograph of Klein makes literal a "Leap into the Void." In no case were these exercises truly intended as ciphers. Klein used nullity as a pretext for performance, Vicary insisted his imperceptible ads promoted consumption, and Cage drew on seemingly antithetic Zen traditions of the numinous void (**"There is poetry when we realize we possess nothing."**) To some extent all these exercises were intended to provoke reactions and did. Concert musicians crushed microphones underfoot rather than play Cage; Norman Cousins branded subliminal advertising "breaking and entering" into what psychoanalytic popularizations called the "bottomless pit of the unconscious." The abandonment of conscious control, so much a part of 1950s avant-garde practice, was likened to falling into the abyss ("Men are afraid to forget their minds," wrote Huang Po, "fearing to fall through the Void with nothing to stay their fall.")

The tachistoscopes used in early perceptual experiments were slide projectors capable of flashing images as brief as 1 millisecond. This speed was overkill. No matter how brief the image, the retina's afterimage persists for c. 50 milliseconds, and the subject reacts to the afterimage. Researchers have largely abandoned analog tachistoscopes in favor of cheaper CRT monitors and computers. The briefest full-screen image on a 75 Hz CRT lasts 13 milliseconds. Small images may be flashed more quickly by taking advantage of the scanning. The monitor's phosphors are engineered to fade to black before the next scan. A given phosphor, or a group of them forming a small image, remains illuminated for about 4 milliseconds. LCD monitors do not scan, but their pixels have a mechanical afterimage of up to 25 milliseconds.

It is possible to display subliminal images over the web, albeit with imprecise timing due to users' varying CPU speeds, monitors, and versions of Flash. In order to create subliminal effects for nearly all users, this site adjusts to the speed of the system and uses varying degrees of **"visual masking."** Distractions such as the background icons slow perception and render subliminal images that would otherwise be plainly visible. This site will run on an LCD monitor, but more of the flashed images are likely to be perceptible.

REQUIREMENTS   CONCRETE POETRY   SUBLIMINAL CON   APORIA   THE VOID   VIA WWW   COLOPHON   EXIT

Faster communication (problems of
functionality and structure implied) endows
the poem with a positive value...
The poem-product: useful object.

Pilot-Plan for Concrete Poetry
Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos

This innocent little technique is going to sell
a hell of a lot of goods.

James Vicary

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