One degree of separation - shopping super locally

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In his introduction to *Radical Thoughts in Italy*, Michael Hardt wrote, 'capital is undergoing the postmodernization of production' (1996: 4). In lieu of the Fordist focus on the mass production of consumer *goods*, capital is generated through the production and collection of *information* via a networked, technological system. The change Hardt alludes to, though immediately relative to economic systems, echo through the cultural landscape affecting art and social practices. In *Chat Rooms*, Hal Foster's book review of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, Foster wrote, 'In a world of shareware, information can appear as the ultimate readymade, as data to be reprocessed and sent on.' (2004: 191). Foster's 'world of shareware' is a way of rewriting what Bourriaud terms the era of 'postproduction' where an artist's work emulates postproduction techniques common to the contemporary networked consumer society. By way of quoting and remixing Hardt, Foster, and Bourriaud, I posit that as *information* has become the focus of production in a networked society, it is the new media artists' material for appropriation, collection, and redistribution. The information is transformed through the artists' interface or platform as a readymade manifestation where socially adept participants have access to adding, modifying, and acting upon it. It is through this lens that I will be presenting two works of art, both inhabiting the Internet as a vehicle of distribution and a virtual commons, where the agenda of consumer culture is reverse-engineered.

Utilising normative features of information exchange online, social networking and consumption, *Delocator.net* and *Your Neighbours' Biz* encourage web users to shop locally. While *Delocator.net* supports local coffee shops, movie theatres and bookstores by providing users the opportunity to locate their favourite local stores as an oppositional tactic to shopping at corporate chains, *Your Neighbuors' Biz* transforms 'shopping locally' into shopping amongst friends. *Your Neighbuors' Biz* is a Facebook application that relies on a user's social network to connect friends, as well as friends-of-friends, in order to locate off-the-grid services such as baby-sitting

or lawn care, or artisan foods or crafts. In the wake of the *Craigslist Killer[1]*, friends who socialise on sites such as Facebook have a (or an assumed) decreased impetus to fear the person on the other end of the online bargain. These two web projects share a common theme: shopping locally. On *Delocator*, postal codes are used to geographically identify local areas. *Your Neighbors' Biz* interprets locality as a community of friends.

Why should we shop locally?

In *Relational Aesthetics* Nicolas Bourriaud succinctly discloses why 'modern life is rubbish' (to quote the British band, Blur, from an album of the same title released in 1993): 'The widespread failure of modernity can be found [here] through the way inter-human relations are turned into products, along with the impoverishment of political alternatives, and the devaluation of work as a non-economic value, to which no development of free time corresponds' (Bourriaud 2002: 84). I interpret the 'impoverishment of political alternatives' as the global economy where international corporations proliferate a whitewashed culture in the disguise of Starbucks coffee (1203 on Forbes' 'The Global 2000' largest Corporations list of 2009), Gap jeans (640), and Wal-Mart (8) home products.[2]

Although local alternatives do often exist, international enterprises have greater market-share on formulating consumer habits through advertising campaigns.[3] Corporate industries invading neighbourhoods, from coffee to book and movie theatre 'chains' pose a threat to the authenticity of unique neighbourhoods. Although there is room on the map for shared territories - both the homogenous corporate enterprise and the independent ventures, community-operated businesses are significant contributors to our local neighbourhood economies.

In *An Analysis of the Potential Economic Impact of Austin Unchained*, Civic Economics reports: 'For every $100 in consumer spending at Borders, the total local economic impact is only $13. The same amount spent with BookPeople (an

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[1] There are many illicit events that have resulted from offline meetings established through Craigslist.org including robberies, murders, and slayings. The 'Craigslist Killer' is the nickname given to Phillip Markoff, a 23-year old medical student at Boston University, arrested on April 20, 2009 for the assault and robbery of two women and the murder of one. For more information, view this online news article: http://www.bostonherald.com/news/regional/view.bg?articleid=1166939

[2] http://www.forbes.com/lists/2009/18/global-09_The-Global-2000_Counrty.html (note: yes, 'Country' is inaccurately spelled at the end of the URL)

[3] See Naomi Klein's *No Logo* and Kalle Lasn's *Culture Jam* for a greater elaboration on these ideas.

independently owned bookstore) and Waterloo (an independently owned music store) yields more than three times the local economic impact' (*Civic Economics* reporters 2003: 2).

Many independent shop owners invest time and interest in their communities, create authentically friendly atmospheres, place supporting the community at the forefront of the business model, and take the time to chat with loyal customers. 'People say we're cozy, not corporate,' said Café Nora (Latham, NY) owner Melody Holler. 'We can make our own rules and we can empower our staff to do so as well. A Starbucks employee doesn't have the pride in ownership that they do at our store' (Degroodt 2000: 2). Locally owned stores aim to please local customers.

In mass culture, supporting local stores is like supporting the underdog sports team. It promotes a future that includes the locally oriented culture of small businesses. Independent bookstores are facing a grave challenge. Cody's Books in Berkeley, California was a bona fide cultural institution on Telegraph Avenue. In his May 10, 2006 announcement, owner Andy Ross said, 'It is with a heavy heart that I must announce that Cody's will be closing our doors at the Telegraph Avenue store for the last time on July 10.' (Ross 2006: Cody's website). In the prior fifteen years, Cody's sales declined by 66 percent. Cody's is certainly not the only independent bookstore to close its doors. The American Booksellers Association has seen a decline in membership from 5200 bookstores in 1991 to 1702 stores in 2005.[4]

With chains on the rise, supporting local institutions (and many independent bookstores are truly thought of as cultural institutions) promotes a future that includes our neighbourhood bookstores, movie theatres and coffee shops and denies the type of news that Andy Ross so sadly delivered.

Project details: Delocator.net

In 2005 I created Delocator.net, a website people could use to find independently owned coffee shops in their neighbourhoods by searching with a zip code. The search results display a comparison between the differences in the amount of Starbucks stores and local coffee shops in a selected radius within a U.S. zip code. I provided the list of Starbucks stores and addresses, while users were prompted to

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[4] http://www.norwichbulletin.com/news/business/x418531163/A-novel-approach-to-selling-books

enter the location of locally owned coffee shops. On the day the site launched (April 1, 2005), only a handful of independently owned shops populated an empty database. Today there are over 4500 entries. The Delocator.net logo mimics a similar green circle to the recognizable Starbucks logo; and the coffee results page lists independently owned stores in the left column of the page while corporate store locations are listed on the right side of the page.

When I launched this web project, which obviously opposes a Goliath of mainstream culture (Starbucks), I did not expect to be involved in a tidal of media frenzy. There was so much traffic on the website that I had to purchase more bandwidth from my Internet service provider. The site also generated media reviews, first from blogs such as *BoingBoing* and *StayFree!* followed by *The Village Voice, The New York Times, The Boston Globe,* and more. The site was reviewed by international media sources and I was interviewed on the radio, in the press, and for Ian Urbina's book, *Life's Little Annoyances*. I left the code used to create the website on Delocator.net and two international sites were made for 'delocating' coffee (one in Great Britain and one in Canada). In 2006, movie theatres and bookstores were added to the website. In 2009, I re-launched the site with a better distance calculator (used to determine where the stores are located on the results page) and a log in feature. While many reviewers wrote about Delocator.net as if it were an anti-Starbucks website, my personal attitude has always been that alternatives are healthy for a democratic society. I am not rigidly against Starbucks (many of my students will tell you – there is a Starbucks in our campus building and it is very difficult for me to resist buying from the store that is one level above where I teach - during a ten minute class break), but I like to know where the alternatives are located. The impetus to create this website was simply to develop a tool for locating independent coffee shops. As many media artists who make projects utilising code collaborate, I worked with several programmers – one during each separate launch or re-launch of the website (Vasna Sdoeung, Kyle Cummings, and Jim Bursch, respectively).

Project details: *Your Neighbours' Biz*

Craigslist may be the most popular website where online users post information about items or services for sale, barter, or free. Launched in 1996, the site serves about 570 cities in 50 countries and more than 20 million page views are accessed

per month.[5] While this website creates a backdoor for shoppers and traders, it comes with a dangerous element: whom are you dealing with when you meet in the analogue world for a Craigslist exchange? *Trust* is increasingly important in the execution of offline meeting or exchange initiated on the Internet, so embedding a trading community within a social site where users are already connected makes use of the trust-factor being built into the network. *Your Neighbours' Biz* allows users to search within their pre-existing social networks to shop with the confidence of a personal recommendation assumed by friends and friends of friends. This interface is searchable in two ways. A map is used to find neighbours holding hobbyist side jobs, resulting in new local friendships and an increased social network on the Facebook platform. It is also searchable through one degree of separation of a user's friends. Though many of us are likely to be acquaintances with a portion of our Facebook 'friends,' we are likely to be acquaintances with our Facebook 'friends of friends.' This application was created for two purposes: 1. To connect Facebook friends with friends-of-friends in the pursuit of supporting hobbyist side jobs, thereby creating a wider network of interactivity in the analogue world; and 2. To encourage Facebook users to meet their neighbours as they shop for hobbyist services on an interactive map.

Web projects as social interstice

In defining *relational art*, a way that these types of web projects and other works of tactical media can be categorized, Bourriaud posits these types of art works represent a social interstice. This Marxist terminology is used to describe an elusion of the capitalist context – and surely any work that aims to reverse-engineer consumer culture also aims to elude the nature of capitalism. As Bourriaud writes, a project that falls into the arena of representational commerce 'creates free areas, and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the "communication zones" that are imposed upon us' (2002: 16). The dichotomy between *communication zones that are imposed upon us* and those that are *freed from everyday life* by way of the artist's project is at the conceptual root of *Delocator.net* and *Your Neighbors' Biz*. Both projects aim to transform shopping and consumption into a local habit, while avoiding mass consumption from corporate enterprises. Corporate commodities act as the *zones that are imposed upon us*, symbolically through massive advertisement

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[5] http://www.craigslist.org/about/factsheet

campaigns, and physically by inserting shops in our local neighbourhoods. While users on *Delocator.net* share information about local stores for travellers and newcomers to a geographic location, *Your Neighbours' Biz* is used for supporting friends and neighbours with hobbyist jobs. Strangers who participate on *Your Neighbours' Biz* are encouraged to become friends in analogueue and virtual communities by connecting through offline exchange and adding each other to their personal online social networks.

Information as readymade

Both projects are made visual through their web interface designs, however the aesthetics of each work are second to the ideas fostered by users who participate in generating and exchanging information. The works act as tactical economic agents that provide a forum for sharing online in order to support local businesses, neighbours, or friends offline. Here, information about store locations or locally made artisanal goods is transformed into art by way of organization and publication.

Conclusion

As an artist working with the web as a platform for altering consumer habits for the past five years, I've noticed a few challenges and have hopes for the next generation of web users and developers that I will pass along as a conclusive list:

1. *Delocator.net* has always been challenging to launch, update, and maintain. I am not a web programmer, so I always have to find a collaborator in order to keep the site functioning and there has almost always been something wrong with the site – ever since it has launched. *Your Neighbours' Biz* has been even more challenging as I waited for three years with the idea for the site before finally finding someone willing to do the programming (still, it has taken years for the project to develop as programmers who labour for free generally don't work rapidly). However, in the past five years the web has become easier to use and I hope that the tools for generating, modifying, and maintaining content will continue to mature, becoming easier and more accessible for a wider range of people. With the power to structure and organize any kind of information, I believe a society has a greater capacity for acting democratically.

2. Assuming that one day it does become easier to make and maintain a collection of data, making new projects visible will always be challenging. The press quickly picked up *Delocator.net* because people like to think in black and white terms – the site was reviewed as an 'anti-Starbucks' operation in many cases, even though I always spoke about the project as being anti-homogenous. (The press often prefers smaller words and sound bites, so let that be a lesson too.)

3. The third challenge is in how we interact with media, material, people and information. I single-handedly maintain what I think of as this little web project that happened to garner a lot of attention once, back in 2005; and I receive email that reads as though the website has a staff of 'customer service' workers. For example, correspondences are often addressed to 'you guys' such as this one from December 2008: 'Just so you guys know, Harrisonburg, Virginia uses both 22801 AND 22802 as area codes.'[6] As more and more projects are crafted and launched by individuals or small teams, the receiving culture will need to change. Attitudes and expectations closer to what we see on Wikipedia where users modify, add to, and make better existing contributions, would be much more pleasant to work with in all aspects of life – both online and off.

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[6] 'Harrisonburg, Virginia delocator.' Email to the author. 10 Dec. 2008.

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