

RAW : Rethinking the editing process and mediation in audiovisual narrative experience

Title	RAW
Subtitle	Rethinking the editing process and mediation in audiovisual narrative experience
Lead-in / Abstract	RAW is based on a tool that captures a minute of sound before and after a picture is taken. It is meant for allowing people to capture their everyday subjective experience. A third party, like journalists or documentary filmmakers, doesn't mediate the sound and visual material created (it remains 'RAW'). In August 2003, the tool was taken to Mali in Africa and given to 23 people who expressed themselves on their daily lives, recording sound and taking pictures, without editorial direction. The installation presents their content, without alteration, and allows the audience to immerse itself in a collection of moments of humanity.
Participants and speakers	Agamanolis, Stefan (IE / US) Bitton, Joëlle (FR / IE) Karau, Matthew (US / IE)
Short biography of participants	Joëlle Bitton, from the Human Connectedness group at Media Lab Europe is an artist and researcher exploring perceptions of the world. How do they affect our life and understanding of others? By confronting people with intriguing or disorienting experiences, she wants to challenge our assumptions and habits of urban, social and intimate environments. In particular, the project RAW presented at ISEA2004 invite people to shift the awareness they have of a distant culture. <i>Her academic background includes post-graduate studies in media arts at the School of Fine Arts of Paris and in history at the Sorbonne where her research focused on the influence of emerging technologies and networks on the 19th century European society.</i> <i>She co-founded Superficiel in 2000, an experimental platform for digital art projects: 'Palpitations' on sexuality and memory; 'Plakatieren Verboten' with Rupert Huber, 'Kindergarten' on children and fair monsters, 'Passages' inspired by Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project...</i> <i>She has also been working as a free-lance interaction designer between Vienna and Paris and presented her work in numerous international events.</i>
Full text	RAW is a system combining a tool and a process for capturing and conveying audiovisual impressions of everyday life. The project aims to enable a relationship between the user of the tool and an audience in a different place or time with an absolute minimum of editorial mediation by a third party. The tool itself incorporates a digital camera and a binaural audio recording device that captures the minute of sound before and after a picture is taken. We tested RAW in workshops within several cultural contexts, the most important of which was an expedition to Mali in August 2003.

Initial research directions

The RAW project began with the realization that, for many reasons, we don't always have a good sense of what everyday life is like in other places in the world, and that having this sense might be helpful in improving understanding and relations between people in different cultures.

However, the most common perceptions that people have about life in different places in the world are often the result of choices made by the popular media and

news channels that tend to focus almost exclusively on extreme events...For example, like the latest war, famine or chaos happening in the continent of Africa.

We feel these factors can degrade the full sense of awareness and appreciation we can achieve of other peoples and places, above cultural stereotypes and clichés.

RAW aims to address this problem by highlighting the moments of everyday life, a common and familiar reference to everyone: when the trivial and the banal can reveal much about the realities of the societies and cultures that people inhabit.

We chose the African country of Mali as a starting point for thinking about the project because we feel this country has a particularly rich and diverse culture that is not well recognized or understood within Western societies. We conducted a large scale workshop over three weeks in August 2003 in three locations in Mali: Bamako, Timbuktu and Ségou; and worked with 23 people. The content gathered by these participants is presented in our project.

The tool

The tool we developed is meant to allow users themselves to reflect more directly on their everyday lives, without the traditional mediation of a third-party, like a documentary filmmaker or journalist.

The material gathered with the tool remains "raw" and unedited all the way from production to archive to presentation; hence the name of the project.

Finally, we felt it was important that such a tool be tested and considered relevant and valuable within a plurality of cultures.

In detail, the RAW tool is an audiovisual recording device that combines a digital still camera and an audio recorder. Audio is recorded binaurally using high-quality miniature microphones that are placed in the user's ears. The tool records 1 minute of sound before and after a picture is taken. The captured material is archived in a totally raw form, with no deletion or modification allowed by the user or any third party.

Sound and still images

We chose to work with sound and still images because we believe that video is not the only way to relate sound to image. In the domain of video-making we feel that audio is typically considered secondary—that audio is seen as supplementing the visuals, not the other way around. Yet we believe audio, and especially ambient audio, holds great potential for conveying certain kinds of impressions of everyday life with a richness not possible with visual media.

We wanted to innovate in the field of audiovisual expression so that sound and image could have a different and more equal dialog than they have in the domain of video. The design of the RAW system aims to consider both sound and image of the same importance. The audio provides context to the image and the image provides a context for the audio.

There have been several experiments in the domain of "audiophotography" in recent years. These primarily research or artistic efforts partly trace their roots to earlier projects such as Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), a short film made up entirely of still images and a soundtrack.

Depending on how RAW material is presented to its audience, the availability of that minute before makes it possible to add a dimension of mystery, set up by a sense of progressive discovery—wondering how the sound being listened to will converge to the moment depicted in the image. In photography theory, a recurrent subject is the question of what could have happened just before a picture was taken.

The previous minute of sound captured by RAW gives some element of an answer and reveals the picture like the chemical development process, while the following minute of sound haunts the user who is already forgetting about their last picture.

In this sense, the RAW tool differentiates itself from the few seconds of "audio caption" available in some new digital cameras. Sound is not an option with RAW—it is a core constituent of the recording made with the tool. A composition can treat sound and image equally or it can take on different emphases. The user might desire to capture a sound that piques his attention as the primary subject.

Conversely, he might illustrate a scene he likes with contextual audio, whether it's his own narration or that of a stranger talking in the street, or just ambient noise.

“Non-editing” process

We also chose to design a tool that would leave the content unedited. Indeed, with video content, a producer must review the footage shot, possibly multiple times, before choosing specific moments to be edited into a final movie. This process stands in stark contrast to that designed for RAW in which no editing is allowed. In effect, knowing this constraint in advance, the user is compelled to “edit” at the same time he is capturing material.

The act of taking a picture is itself a selective process that marks a specific point of interest. The immediacy of these moments is enhanced because they are chosen in real-time, not while reviewing the material at a possibly much later time.

After his experience with the tool, the user obtains an immediate result that doesn't need further processing. This result intrinsically possesses a story-like quality since each photo is enclosed by two minutes of contextual audio that, together with the image, create a natural rise in suspense, a climax, and a resolution.

Minimal mediation and exhibition

Because we felt there were many different ways one might want to be able to present RAW records to audiences (on the web, interactive museum installations, mobile devices, to name a few), we created a set of guidelines that exhibitions of such records should obey in order to maintain the spirit of a minimally-mediated relationship between the user and the audience on the presentation end of the pipeline. For example, no modification of, deletion of, or favoritism toward any of the content is allowed by the presentation apparatus itself or by any other party acting between the capture and display of the material, and all the photographs and audio captured in a particular user's session with the tool must be accessible in their entirety to the audience. These presentation rules were instrumental in helping to guide the design of our installation.

We were in search of presentation designs that would provide an engaging experience while also respecting the project's ideal of minimal mediation. This would prove to be a difficult task since the very idea of a presentation somewhat implies that there is some kind of mediation or editing happening.

We tested several presentation prototypes with various groups of people. We realized from their feedback that some staging of the content was needed, so the audience could better understand the rhythm underlying the capture process and control the progression of the presentation.

The Mali experience and types of “narration”

The exhibition 'RAW' presents a series of experiences captured in Mali during the month of August 2003, more specifically in Bamako, Timbuktu, and Ségou. 23 people participated in this project, expressing themselves, for an hour or thereabouts, on their daily lives, recording sound and taking pictures, without editorial direction.

The records created by our participants were inspirational to us in their originality and immediacy.

But the most significant result of our experience in Mali is that we began to observe some clear categories for how our participants exploited the RAW tool for different kinds of capture or storytelling purposes.

These span a range from personal reflection to more outward styles of engagement, with either a passive or active stance toward the audience. They emerged despite the care we took to not suggest any particular styles or themes to our participants in our initial discussions with them.

We identified four categories:

Type 1: Social glances

This category represents uses of the tool that occur primarily in a social mode, or in which social contacts and spontaneous encounters are the primary content underlying the media captured by the user.

Many of our participants used the tool as a means to strike up conversations with people in their workplace, at home, or on the street. Or conversely, sometimes friends of the user would be curious about what he is doing and interrupt him during his session, resulting in a social exchange.

But at the same time, no particular audience is addressed by the user.

The RAW records that fall into this category convey a rich impression of the social fabric and relationships that exist in the society, and they are also the records in which we hear the greatest variety of spoken languages.

Type 2: Caught in activities

Some people chose simply to perform their everyday tasks or livelihoods and capture impressions of them in more of an individual mode.

Again, no specific audience is actively addressed, but the user is aware that these moments are indeed a kind of "performance" that will be experienced by an audience at a later point in time.

Musicians were the most likely to share their daily experiences in this way, often capturing themselves playing in a jam or rehearsal session. Another woman recorded her daily journey to obtain water from a community well in this fashion.

Type 3: Active documentation

In this category, the user of the tool actively addresses the eventual audience of the record he is creating with spoken narration or even live interviews with people he encounters, as a way of documenting some aspect of his everyday life or his society.

There may be a specific theme, determined in advance, or a looser structure based on spontaneous encounters with interesting scenes or personalities.

In some cases, the user clearly had a foreign audience in mind that would wonder what life is all about in their Malian city is all about. Hence, the language most often used in this context was French, sometimes even English.

For example, one participant walked around Timbuktu, interviewing people along the way about the development of the city infrastructure.

Type 4: Intentional discourses

This category refers to exploitations of the tool in which the user has a very specific message or commentary that they wish to relate to the audience.

The user's speech is not intended as a narration of the audio or visual moments they are capturing, but rather it is the other way around—the pictures and sound are an augmentation of the commentary.

The user may operate alone with a more "political" or "activist" perspective, and the record might take the form of a monologue or spoken contemplation.

For example, one participant used the tool to convey specific thoughts concerning the development and position of academia in Malian society, which he illustrated with loosely related audio and visual impressions from his university.

The visual and sound materials all of our participants created are gathered in the RAW installation, without alteration, in a presentation that allows the audience to discover a collection of moments of humanity.

Thus, the experience of RAW aims to transform audience behavior by using sound media and still pictures as a way to immerse oneself in the life of another person, hence enabling a different and more direct kind of connection with distance societies or future generations, in different places or times.

Related internet addresses

<http://www.medialabeurope.org/hc/projects/raw>

<http://www.medialabeurope.org/hc/raw/video.html>

<http://www.medialabeurope.org/hc/raw/>