Overcoming the Distance: : Displaying Data-based and Location-driven New Media Art

Title	Overcoming the Distance:
Subtitle	Displaying Data-based and Location-driven New Media Art
Lead-in / Abstract	Questions addressed in this presentation include:

How 'locative' is the online experience?
How do you make the online experience relevant to a 'local' audience?
What can be learned from other community-based collaborative models?

Participants and speakers	Cook, Sarah (GB / CA)
Short biography of participants	Sarah Cook is an independent curator and the co-editor of the online curating

Full text

resource CRUMB. She holds the Doctoral Research position in New Media Curating at the University of Sunderland in conjunction with BALTIC. Sarah has a Master's Degree from Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies (New York), and has curated at the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), Banff Center for the Arts, and the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa). She has spoken at the Tate (London), the Fruitmarket Gallery, (Edinburgh), and has written for the Arts Council of England, AN and Public Art Journal. She is co-editor of CRUMB < http://www.newmedia.sunderland.ac.uk/crumb>

Curators are concerned with the placement of art works for their access by audiences. The question of 'where' the experience of net-based art resides has led to an investigation of 'locative media art' or geographical-sited online art. Many of the projects I have found interesting have been those that gather, in database form, information about real world experience to share with others. These works suggest that the essential functions of the Internet (the storage and retrieval of information) form an inherent part of the art experience.

As the work of **Heath Bunting**, such as *Bristol Tunneling* (2002-ongoing), demonstrates, the Internet is for most peoples' purposes, a contemporary archive of data; it is a collection of information insofar as data is amassed in one "place." *Bristol Tunneling* consists of little more than descriptive information -— photographs and text, drawings and diagrams — contained in a digital-database form on a server connected to the Internet. Like the *BorderXing Guide* (commissioned by Tate, 2001), the project is concerned with how to move around a geographic space using nonstandard routes. Bunting says the purpose of the *Bristol Tunneling*g project is to map tunnels in Bristol — existing spaces, caves, walkways, etc., — in order to use the city as a training ground. The digital practical information generated by the *Bristol Tunneling* project could thus be applied to the skills and techniques expounded in *BorderXing Guide*, which disseminates information on how to cross borders (regionally as well as internationally) without passing through official checkpoints.

A recurring question is how to exhibit this type of online, yet real-world, located work. Cultural production on the Web often plays between the idea of a dispersed virtual audience of contemplators and a sited audience of actual users. It would be easy to argue that information online is useful only insofar as it relates to the proximity of the user of the information (is that object in stock in my local store, which route should I take to drive to that other city, what should I visit when I get there?). While it is true that in the cases where the information is geographically relevant then proximity might indeed be the primary ordering factor; for a project like *Bristol Tunneling*, the usefulness of the collection of information is conditioned entirely by the geographic location of its participant. Yet, for the audience to **Jon Winet** and **Margaret Crane's** *Conventional 2004*, for instance, their location is less of a determining factor that the location on which their attention is trained – here the United States Presidential election campaign trail (though it could be argued it is simply more socially or politically relevant to a geographically-specific group of people, namely Americans).

But as many online art works point out, it's equally hard to think of the Internet as itself being a place as it is to think of it as an ordered, selected, or chosen 'collection' of information. **Nina Pope** and **Karen Guthrie's** *TV Swansong* brought together in online space art activity happening in locations all across the UK. Nine artist teams created projects inspired by or made famous by another temporal and locative media – television. The one-day webcast was a result of a collaborative activity, an interesting model of cultural production. In this sense, information online is today as likely to be collaboratively generated as much as it is selected or edited by a centralized source (witness the rise of the blog or the wiki). *Conventional 2004* incorporates telephone interviews, journalistic on-the-fly reportage, and a collection of user/correspondents to generate the material in the database driving the site. Furthermore, with the question of distance comes the question of time. Information online can be either instantly timely (the news-ticker on the BBC site) or out of date (old archive pages for web-cast events that have

past).

Many art projects online explicitly play with these three factors: the collaborative generation of a database of information, and its relevance in space and time. They point out the interesting spots in the network where the real world gains purchase. **Thomson** and **Craighead's** *Template Cinema* seeks to use live webcams, and live internet radio station feeds to create mini movies on the fly. As **Josephine Berry** writes:

Net artists have become increasingly interested in finding shared languages or a shared experience internal to the texture and logic of the Net itself. In other words, technical features such as software, interfaces, desktops, file structures and transmission protocols which crucially shape millions of users' daily experience move to the centre of Net artists' exploration of deterritorialised collectivity.

While the database is potentially a form of a "language of self and collective identity" bridging online culture and the "real world," the experience of the works collapses the space between fact and artifact. Berry writes:

The global computer network, it seems, is nothing if not abstract; a system which combines the metaphors of software (especially of the office) and the material-technical functionality (cabling, satellites, hardware, flows of data packets, execution of programmes etc.) into an instrumentalised simulation and extension — a virtualisation — of the world. A spectacular regime in which distance is collapsed and substituted by the linguistic sign of country domain names (.uk, .de, .it, etc.), if at all.

Artists working on the Web are collecting, describing, and making useful, aesthetically and otherwise, the information in the database that is the Internet, that is the world at large. The database functions as both a way of creating a collectivity across a space, and of territorializing that space — marking its geography in a useful manner. Artists who use databases are in essence then describing spaces and places in such a way that the activities we as users engage in, in relation to those places, are profoundly altered and highly original.

References [endnotes]:

Sections of this have been previously published as part of my essay "You Can Find Me Here: Geographically-relevant database art online" in Kiendl, Anthony (2004) (ed.) Obsession, Compulsion, Collection: On Objects, Display Culture, and Interpretation (Banff: Banff Centre Press) (pages…)
Heath Bunting, from his presentation at the Art for Networks conference held at Chapter in Cardiff, Wales, U.K., in November 2002.
See the extensive debate which took place on the crumb list and was reprinted in Mute regarding locative media. Graham, Beryl (2004). Exhibiting Locative Media: CRUMB discussion postings. www.metamute.com
Pope, Nina and Karen Guthrie (2002). TV Swansong. [Online]. Available from: < http://www.swansong.tv/symp.htm>.
The example of TV Swansong is discussed in my PhD thesis, "The Search for a Third Way of Curating New Media Art: Balancing Content and Context In and Out of the Insitution", University of Sunderland, 2004. In the thesis I theorise a number of possible models of practice from an examination of examples of curating within the field of new media art.
Berry, 66.
Berry, 55.
Josephine Berry, "The Thematics of Site-Specific Art on the Net" (Ph.D diss., University of Manchester, 2001), 52. The text can be found online at www.metamute.com.
The full text is available as an attachment. Please download it here.

Related internet addresses   http://www.variablemedia.net/
http://www.yproductions.com
http://www.newmedia.sunderland.ac.uk/crumb/