

Physical Facebook and User Generated Art

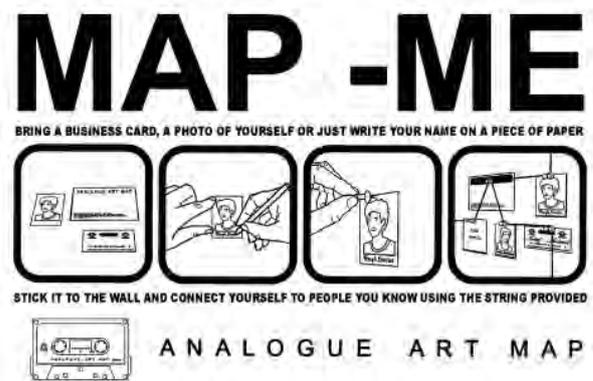
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Connecting and reconnecting with other people has traditionally been an activity associated with face to face meetings. However, recent social networking environments such as MySpace, LinkedIn and particularly Facebook have given rise to new public forums that offer digital specific interactions such as posting photos, forming groups and distributing videos and music. But how do these new interactions differ and relate to traditional social exchanges in physical space?

The installation Map Me explores this issue by bringing virtually back to reality. Map Me materialises the act of networking so that the connections, the media and the people appear in real time and space.

First, you create a profile for yourself using bits of paper, drawings or business cards. You are encouraged to bring small personal items such as photos from home but stationery is also provided for the unprepared. On completing your self fashioned profile, you can then hyperlink to the profiles of people that you know using coloured wool and drawing pins. This wool traverses the space, highlighting the invisible lines of connection between individuals, describing the convoluted structure of social architecture. The resulting installation is a spatial and tactile version of a social networking page like MySpace or Facebook. However, does this work have any implications for digital interaction?

Map Me is both a celebration and a critic of digital society. By presenting the digital and analogue combined, it also pits them against one another. Map Me prompts the audience turned collaborators to evaluate physical versus digital interaction, as they are encouraged to compare, combine and evolve rituals and tactics from both digital and physical experiences, and in doing so, playfully develop new hybrids of interaction. While often shy to involve themselves at first, participants build up confidence with each exchange and act of creativity to gradually become competitive in their inventiveness. The empowerment of the audience to expand and individualise the form and meaning of the work not



Interaction instructions on the flier promoting for the Map Me exhibition

only highlights the familiar keywords and axioms of the user generated generation: “personalisation”¹ and “community is content”² but also dilutes notions of authorship and questions the authority of the artist as creator.

From a social perspective, Map Me raises questions about the value, diversity and nature of the relationships formed in digital congregations as compared to their physical counterparts. Are connections made in physical space of higher value than those made in an online environment? Do social networking tools, UGC applications or physical networking events actually foster new communities or do they just reinforce old ones? Does the resulting network of contacts enrich our lives as social beings, or does it just supply another stage to parade extroversion and competitive individualism?

While Map Me can be read as a critical discussion of the cult and culture of online social networking applications, its proximity in content and concept to these very applications leaves it open to the same criticisms.

But there is more at play here. Through its presentation in art galleries and related cultural contexts, Map Me is regarded as an artwork that records and prompts relational aesthetics — interactions between audience



Image from Map Me exhibition at 2007 Conflux Festival, NY.
Photograph: doryexmachina

members and the artist through the work.³ Conversely, when similar interactions occur in an online environment, they are generally considered low culture.⁴ What is the nature of this hierarchy of physical over digital?

Digital art has been seen as culturally inferior to traditional art forms in many respects. Consider digital painting as compared to oil on canvas, or 3D sculpture against their real space counterparts. Yet as the world has moved from a produce to service based economy, likewise art has shifted from being object based to experience based. Surely digital technology has the potential to dramatically improve the communication and facilitate these experiences, but does it hold the same creative and cultural gravity as experiences located in the physical world? Even though the context is not artistic, can the actual interactions on MySpace and Facebook also be considered as relational aesthetics? Or is this representative of a larger perception of digital interaction as culturally inferior than analogue? What does this mean for electronic art?

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