AUGMENT_ME: AN ALGORITHMIC MEMORY, ABSENCE AND PRESENCE IN THE CLOUD

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Can you have a memory without photographing it? Where does a memory live? How do we make sense of them? If it's online, who owns it? What is association at a global scale? What are the conventions of western time and how might that be visualised or utilised? Can you live forever in the cloud? This paper examines these questions through the media art installation augment_me.

augment_me, 2009, Brad Miller, Installation, Artspace Sydney. Image Copyright Brad Miller.

The ultimate promise is that the flow of data may restore the flow of life when it is temporarily halted. Biological death becomes a small death, data becomes the through line that joins old subject to new. [1]

Data and Identity

The autobiographical starting point to augment_me was an ontological crisis not dissimilar to the one experienced by the protagonist in the Italo Calvino story The Adventure of a Photographer [2] that Lizzie Muller cites in her article [3] about my interactive media installation augment_me. When what was to become augment_me began, I was an amateur photographer resembling a life logger who lackadaisically aimed to record every moment of his life.

In 2000, prior to the existence of Facebook® and Flickr®, I bought a low-resolution digital camera on a trip to China. The speed, ease and in-expensive production costs the camera afforded me meant that I was soon obsessively snapping everything: the daily state of my bed, an empty car park, signage, friends at a wake, a flower, architectural detail, a sleeping girlfriend. Eight years later, I bought a digital SLR camera with better lenses and more capability. The photographs changed. There were panoramic landscapes, a closer attention to skies, a greater awareness about light, angle, resolution and focus – they sat alongside the 'snaps' with no superior value ascribed. My only interest was the actual moment and recording it. Those 12,000 or more photographic moments, taken over 11 years, became the images comprising the augment_me database: my through line that connects past and present, the banal and significant, public and private, life and art.

Also germane to my obsessive recording and the subsequent creation of a database was a loss of artistic identity, in part a result of the fact that the technologies (for example, the CD ROM including the Mac "Classic Operating system" and analogue video) that I had worked with early in my artistic practice had become redundant and were superseded by other technologies. Consequently, my work [4] and the evidence of its existence disappeared. The loss was traumatic. augment_me was born, I came to understand, only retrospectively, from an anxiety about not disappearing as a creator.

In early 2008, I mocked up the first version of augment_me on a computer with multiple screens; in November 2009, the first public version was exhibited at Artspace in Sydney, Australia as a large scale installation, using continuous, long format projection, a responsive granular synthesis soundscape[5] using multi-channel audio and video tracking (the interface between the media and the audience is through this tracking system).

Mediated Memories

Films or photos are not "memory"; they are mediated building blocks that we mold in the process of re-membering. [6]

Definitions of memory and experience are inextricably linked up with notions of place and time, notions that obviously affect our memories. As memories are increasingly mediated and thus constructed by networked technologies, the boundaries between present and past are no longer a given. [7]

A memory can be of a moment, an event, a feeling, a person, or object – existing in the past, remembered but not always reliably. Memories can be repressed, re-configured, forgotten and re-found. If, like the photographer of the Calvino story, I set out to photograph every minute of every day, I would fail to capture my internal life and the internal lives of others. How to photograph aversion? Contradiction? A lie? Can I have a memory without photographing it? Yes, of course.

My focus on memory, is not memory as the subject of philosophy, cognitive psychology or neuroscience but is specifically, about the interplay between memory and technology transforming how we create identity and memories – and possibly miss, in that process, the elusiveness of identity and memory.

I have described augment_me, in the past, as a memory machine of sorts. It tracks my relationships with people, things, places and scenarios via the use of streaming photographs and an algorithm, devised by

me and a software programmer, [8] which is used to structure the flow of thousands of photographs unfurling in horizontal film-like strips, sometimes in different directions, triggered by the movement of a viewer, under sensors, in the exhibition space.

The horizontal, moving film-like strips, other than the nostalgic allusion to super 8 or 35mm, were devised originally because I wanted to make use of western conventions of time used in Mathematics and Science: negative space or time (past) is to the left and positive space (future) is to the right; at the center is the origin (stasis). And so, with augment_me the viewer can change the film strips' velocity and direction, by moving their position relative to the center line of the installation. With a movement, the viewer can make the strips appear, at least conceptually, to move back in time or forward to the future.

Walking into the dark space of the gallery, the viewer was not always aware that their movements in the room were triggering the shift in speed and change in the direction of the horizontal strips. What I had not predicted was the oft-repeated impulse of the viewer to move closer to the individual photograph, the want to take a closer look, to stop the flow of data so they could connect with an image.

This presented an opportunity to re-think not only the interactive element of augment_me but also how I thought about memory. To take a photograph or be in possession of one, to feel that you have somehow entrapped the experience by making it still in time is a denial of the slippery nature of time.

When I began, I didn't question the "truth" of the photos, they were a record of my experiences, places and people, light and darkness. As the database grew and I was able to manipulate and alter the flow and order of the images, I was able to re-make the memories, alter the context of each individual photograph within the greater whole and to each other. My relationship to the images became more plastic, less resolute and so did the "truth" of them. I relaxed. Perhaps because I no longer feared the memory disappearing, stored as it is in cyberspace, in the cloud.

I came to see the photos less as mementos significant only to me and more as fragments caught in a digital stasis which when re-arranged could throw up new meanings and associations – not only for me but for others and how they think about their own mediation of memories.

augment_me, as a form of algorithmic memory provides an opportunity to experiment with the record of past observations and images evoking memories; I re-make them and their relationship with one another, I disprove, for me, their fixed place in the hierarchy of my memory.

The modularity and flexibility of media creates the possibility of an algorithmic memory: an increasingly intelligent self-organising extensible memory which can circulate independently of human intervention. [9]

References and Notes:

1. Lizzie Muller, "Data Flow," in Column 5 (2009): 71-74.
2. Italo Calvino, Difficult Loves, trans. William Weaver et al. (Vintage: London, 1999).
3. Lizzie Muller, "Data Flow," in Column 5 (2009): 71-74.
4. "A Digital Rhizome," CD–ROM, 1994; "Planet of Noise," with Ken Wark, CD ROM, 1997; "crowd-seen," SP Betacam PAL, 2000; Jason Gee and Brad Miller's "Frame by Frame," Low Band Umatic PAL, 1989.
5. Ian Andrews with additional credit to Derek Holzer.
6. José Van Dijck, Mediated Memories in the Digital Age (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 24.
7. José Van Dijck, "Flickr and the Culture of Connectivity: Sharing Views, Experiences, Memories," in Memory Studies 4, no. 4 (2011): 401–515.
8. Adam Hinshaw.
9. Katrina Sluis, "Algorithmic Memory? Machinic Vision and Database Culture," in New Media and the Politics of Online Communities, eds. A. Mousoutzanis and D. Riha, 227 - 235 (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010).