

elpicoroco

**Erreur: un parcours
sinueux et imprévisible**

Intellistener

**Real Time2 Cartography:
Personal World Map**

As We Speak

Movement of Moments

THE PRACTICE OF INFORMATION

Media design is conventionally presented as a practice which combines information with usability and aesthetics. Within this triad, the designer is rarely the constructor or arbiter of the information component. Information, for the designer, is mostly a pre-given 'content' for which they will provide the vessel. In doing so, they are always, without exception, constructing a particular relationship between the 'user' of that information, and the information data itself. Yet, the nature of this relationship is often pre-determined or taken for granted. Within the fields that media design is most generally applied – web-design, interactive displays and publications – this relationship is one which most often posits the user as recipient or consumer. That this may be articulated through some kind of 'interactive' interface does not lessen the fact that this is an essentially passive relationship between content and audience. This differentiates media design from its more academically respectable and quasi-scientific sister-practice, Visualisation, which caters to those who interpret and analyse, those qualified professionals who 'know' and 'understand', who have proven their right to interpret information, as opposed to the dummies amongst the rest of us who merely have the right to choose. Media design has perhaps become comparable, in this sense, to interior design, or even, at worst, retail design. It is simply a window dressing of information products. Just as interior design is posited as inferior to the grander 'master' discipline of architecture, so too does media design seem somewhat belittled in relation to the more serious roles of visualisation and information

technology. Nothing encapsulates this more than the "Web Monkey" churning out endless corporate websites and intranets. Media design has become a circumscribed practice, working within limits that frequently it neither questions or articulates for itself.

The media designer, however, works on the frontline of our so-called Information Society in which the task of presenting information is far from trivial. The designer is often seen as being at the end of the long chain through which information is generated, constructed, interpreted and disseminated, simply packaging something which is 'done and dusted'. Yet, for many of us, the produce of the media designer is where our engagement with information begins. To accept a circumscribing of the nature of that practice and what it produces is also to accept a circumscription of how we all, as a society, engage with information, and how we can act with it.

Is it instructive to pursue the analogy with interior design and its relation to architecture. Interior design is only one of a possible multitude of ways of working with and responding to architectural space. Any practice which articulates both perception and engagement with space, also potentially articulates other possibilities of what that space may be. Aside from interior design, practices such as psycho-geography, graffiti, guerilla gardening, skateboarding, squatting, and numerous and un-catalogued forms of 'hanging out', are all different ways of articulating, and questioning, other possibilities of what a space may be. Spatial design theorist, Bill Hillier, has emphasised how children's games frequently improvise and experiment upon notions of spatial purpose, whilst the architect Bernard Tschumi has spoken of how use contradicts space and often defies the intentions of the architect. Such approaches have informed a different kind of 'spatial practitioner', who may indeed incorporate, or build upon aspects of architectural, interior and landscape design but who also

works in ways that go beyond these disciplines. Examples include Muf, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Lucy Orta, Gordon Matta-Clarke, Atelier van Lieshout, and Geoffrey Morris. Some of these practitioners work entirely outside of the traditional realms of architecture and interior design, whilst others work within them but through redefining their role and responsibilities.

The media designer similarly needs to be understood as one amongst a range of 'information practitioners', those who articulate and question different possibilities of what information may be and how we engage with it. The issue becomes not so much one of how information is presented, but rather one of "how is information practiced?" Interestingly, in following such a re-awareness, the significances of usability and aesthetics become not less but more important.

Cartography is one of the oldest, and often most politicized forms of 'information practice'. Even such subtle issues as the placing of the North to the top of maps carries an implicit political argument. No map is merely a neutral record of relations, but rather always a specific articulation of selective relationships and boundaries. Intuitive personal maps, such as those drawn on the back of an envelope or paper napkin, are often the most interesting, the most narratively rich. In place of accurate quantitative measures of distance, these maps trace subjective notions of space and belonging, each a momentary discourse on the 'local'. In developing a method for assessing the impact of urban planning as judged from the perspective of the city dweller, Kevin Lynch drew upon the power of such maps as indicators of a city's 'legibility' read from the street. How easily a city layout can be recalled by its inhabitants is an indicator of how well it facilitates their use, and of how much it receives or resists subjective projections and identifications. With the rise of global media and low-cost international travel, it has been argued that our

notions of the 'local' have been expanded, but does a practice of personal mapping expand to such an enlarged territory?

Roxana Torre's "Personal World Map" seeks to test out aspects of such an intuitive mapping on a global scale. She constructs a map through which we can compare how geographic distance is being altered by factors of airline connectivity and cost. In its current form, the work is a sketch of something that must truly be conducted on a much larger scale, but even this scaled-down version demonstrates that for some the global is more 'localized' than it is for others. The determining factors in this are less those of geographic distance and more those of economic hierarchy. The world has not become more globally accessible, but rather, somewhat like Robert Moses did for New York, international trade has ploughed highways across the world which benefit some, but leave others more disconnected.

A different kind of mapping is explored in Dirk van Oosterbosch's "Intellistener". He describes the project as one of "remediating audio". It is not a mapping of space but rather of sound, but like Torre's project is one which explores the possibility of personal maps in a terrain which has become expanded beyond previous experience. As the constraints on airtime posed by traditional broadcast media have disappeared from web-based media, editing has become less of a necessity and it is not uncommon for content to be available in entirely raw, un-abbreviated streams. This has the benefit of allowing the listener to become their own editor but the main streaming players have so far solely followed the listener-as-consumer model, replicating the paradigm of 'old media'. "Intellistener" is geared towards mapping segments of streaming audio media, and in particular dealing with bringing together and cross-referencing fragments from long discussion programmes and extracts from different streams. It allows listening and editing to be easily combined

through a simple annotation system from which maps of re-structured audio are automatically generated. "Intellistener" is a good example of how media design can articulate new perceptions and engagements with information and where usability is understood as making the raw information usable for the listener's own interests, offering it not as a product but more as a material. In offering the potential for listener-editors to share their maps online it offers the listener the possibility to be less of a passive consumer and more of an active re-mediator.

These two projects build upon existing paradigms of media design whilst seeking to take it in potentially new directions. Anna Andersson and Oliver Meskawi's projects, in their different ways, emphasize more of the aesthetic engagement with information. When aesthetics are normally discussed in relation to media design, it is usually in terms of a making elegant, or an aesthetics of clarity following from that of Adolf Loos and Machine-Age Modernism. At best, such discussions highlight an awareness of how the visual rhetoricizes information, at worst they are merely discussions of what is cool and visually-pleasing.

Andersson's project could be understood as a counter-investigation to the scientism that data-generated imaging so often aspires to. Scanning and image-sampling are two of the main processes through which the body, increasingly unknowingly, enters into data, from the overt and, in principle, consenting processes of medical scans to the covert actions of security cameras, police recordings, and the various image-acquisition and biometric strategies deployed in airports. This is present in much media art too, through the covert surveillance systems that are the hallmark of so many interactive video installations. Through focusing on a simple redeployment of the conventional desktop scanner, Andersson proposes a different

relationship between the body and its data-image. Her tactic is to dislocate the scanner from its 'intended' target of the static piece of paper or family photograph, and instead turn its 'gaze' towards the mobile viewer who is also the instigator of the image. This opens up a space of 'doubt', an area rarely entered by the digital, and from this a series of consciously uncertain images coalesces. The data is somehow 'smeared' into place rather than analytically ordered. Warren Sack has argued that an aesthetics of information visualization most also deal with "the corpora, the bodies, that are engaged and how these bodies are articulated, challenged, and represented by the visualizations." Andersson's installation suggests one such corporealism.

The notion of the aesthetic that Sack encourages is not that of visual pleasure, or taste, but rather a more fundamental notion of the sensate relationship between subject and world. To introduce such an aesthetic into the realm of information usability is to subject it to a kind of critical expansion. Where doubt, uncertainty and difficulty were once excluded, they must now be embraced. The designer Anthony Dunne, who has explored a similar re-appraisal of the aesthetic in relation to product design (where the rhetoric of usability has similar sway as in media design), speaks of the need of thinking in terms of "complicated pleasures". He questions the conventional role of the designer in clothing the complexities of electronic media and communication artefacts under a blanket of simplicity and affordance. A blanket which frequently denies the possibility of dialogue and subjective engagement. This echoes something of Lynch's findings, in which he discovered that the cities which lent themselves best to the imaging of their users were not necessarily those that provided the simplest routes from a to b, or the efficient clarity of a grid, but rather those with which the inhabitant had some kind of sensate dialogue, in which a 'complicated pleasure' of traversal may be productive of values beyond economies of time and distance.

Oliver Meskawi has introduced some such "complicated pleasure" into the traversal of video narratives in his "Erreur, un parcours sinueux et imprévisible" (Error, a sinuous and unpredictable path). The work is constructed from a series of interviews which are edited down into short fragments. Touching on topics of intimacy, desire and identity, yet largely shorn of specific references to people and place they are at once both vivid and ambiguous. Through the use of a speech recognition engine, the viewer is invited to unearth an underlying narrative that spans the different clips by literally dialoguing with the interlocutors. It avoids the rather obvious strategy of a question-and-answer framework however, instead unfolding through a process of probing and testing, in which error has a place in the construction of the narrative trajectory.

The multivariate complexity of dialogue is the basis of Alejandra Perez's work. Computer-based presentations of information generally favour the textual and visual over the aural. The latter being a realm of structural subtleties which often confounds the drive for discrete quantification that algorithms thrive on. Underlying her project is an attempt to re-imagine the information machine in terms of flux and resonance. Systems theory, such as that of Niklas Luhmann, has often drawn upon biological metaphors in describing its topic. This is often misconstrued as suggesting a form of genetic determinism but its metaphoric value is perhaps stronger in highlighting the highly contingent nature of bureaucracy and social ordering. Such systems seek to articulate themselves in the stable, crystalline language of diagrams. The reality of their implementation, however, is a far more ambiguous one of structure accruing upon the palpitations of expectation and disappointment that Luhmann points to as the basis of the drive for normativism. Sound does not lend itself so easily to the inscription of order as the visual, it cannot be laid down in singularity and isolation but always demands an attentiveness to context

and complexity. An information practice built on sound is one which demands an enabling awareness of resonance and palpitation.

Through its attachment to 'new media' media design is often characterised as exclusively 'new', and cut adrift from the long history of information practices of which it is a part. Kim de Groot's "As We Speak" rethinks and re-situates some of the paradigms of computer-mediated information practice in terms of that history. It presents a hybrid mix of database, librarian and rhetorician whom she calls the "Webrarian". Her project reclaims the agentic aspect of our relation to information, that information is always in a process of being acted upon, that 'usability' is a condition of being rather than simply a set of design guidelines. Importantly her project emphasizes that information is never merely presented but always re-enacted. For this is where the true value of information lies, not in being a product, packaged for exchange, but rather in being a process of exchange in itself. As the classical rhetoricians de Groot draws upon were aware, information must be able to act in order to have value. The media designer is not merely some set-dresser to that enactment but deeply involved in shaping its performance.

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