

The Mobile Audience
Art and New Located Technologies of the Screen
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Annie Lovejoy Interview 14/02/05

MR So It's visible aesthetics, visible data

AL I think aesthetic visualisation of data has potential for wider shared experience. Locative media can move beyond cartographic documentary style narrative. My work is generated through interactions with sites or situations, technological tools are party to this, but not central. I'm currently attempting to articulate a non media specific overview of this approach for a web space. "*Interfaces of location & memory*" is a helpful phrase: *interface* – as a point of connection between things, *location* - the site, situation, context or position of something and *memory* – as experiential, collective, associative, knowledge base, data & archiving.

MR Where shall we start -do you want to talk through chronologically or shall we talk about Millennium Square first.

AL OK, the Millennium Square project presented a chance to explore 'context-aware' technologies within a research environment at Bristol University's Mobile & Wearable computing group. The resulting 'prototype' offered an immersive experience: an audio led compositional journey dependent upon moving around the square. The project hurled me into a world of wearable technology issues, to do with encumbrment ('bearables'), elitism and invasiveness.

MR Invasive in terms of the way it feels when you wear it or the way people react to someone wearing it?

AL More like the nature of GPS, the business of being locatable and gridlocked, although it's not always totally accurate. Mobile phone networks demonstrate this pervasiveness.

MR But are you talking about the political implications of tracking people? That's invasive.

AL Yes, and discovering the types of applications that the Wearables Group at Bristol were producing, such as where is the next pub?; or ideas like, if your friend you haven't seen for 20 years is around the corner you will know.., and you can decide if you want to meet them. So my big question is: where does spontaneity go, where does surprise go, when everything is data driven?

MR It drives out happenstance?

AL We would miss so much in our lives if we had no serendipity.

MR Are you saying we all become Stepford wives in our predictable suburbs?

AL Too much information and too cerebral, and the fact that it's embodied – you & the data. In Millennium Square the experience of the audio was limited by the number of wearables available. Issues of access & security were highlighted when suggestions of a deposit for use of the jackets arose, such as a credit card or passport.

MR So it was very limiting in terms of public participation

AL Yes, an experience restricted to evidence of identity! For me, the project was quite a learning curve, I felt uncomfortable with these limitations. The kind of thing I was suggesting at the time, was to bring in a visual component to the jackets. The audioscape contained maverick moments such as a skateboarder crossing the square. I was interested in introducing a performic element, a skateboarder wearing a jacket programmed to display graphic LED representations which changed dependant on the located space. To extend the experience beyond the plugged in participant to other passers by.

MR That's interesting because in Riot in Queen's Square and some of the other (Mobile Bristol) projects I felt that if there had been some kind of indicator on the ground, then the spectators of those walking around with headphones would have had some engagement with the project

AL That's the gap which led me to consider that the environment might be a better situation for responsive technologies than the encumbered body, freedom from clutter, not having to carry anything.

MR It's a richer experience?

AL the bus stop might give you poetry

MR Before we move away from Millennium Square, just give me some idea of how the sound bites were intended to work.

AL I can show you some documentation, this is the indoor ultrasound rig at HP Research Labs (also used by Liz Milner for A Walk in the Woods) - it's totally out of context, a diagrammatic exercise, a technology demo.

MR One of the things we have discovered is that when you get an ambient sound which coincides with a sound within the piece you get a very strong moment of reinforcement or counterpoint and all the sonic accidents become quite profound when read from within the piece. An indoor installation leaves that out.

AL For Millennium Square, composer Roger Mills & I collaborated on a conceptual mapping of audio content based on the physical attributes of the site. For instance, in proximity to the large mirror ball structure of the Imaginarium the audio-led experience reflected multi faceted & multi ethnic aspects of the city, sourced from adhoc interviews conducted in the streets, cabs, shops etc.

MR And the transitions of each sound overlap with the next on their borders.

AL The sound was spatialised, so in the central area you would be led by audio streams enabling you to compose vocal & instrumental elements as you walked. This area of the square was based on a musical collaboration with singer Ketí Nickoladze from Bristol's twin city of Tbilisi (Republic of Georgia).

MR Were all the cities represented in the work?

AL No, just Tbilisi, as a result of the Here nor There project, an international collective of musicians & artist working across geographical & cultural boundaries.

MR So there is quite a wide fall off-its on a large scale across say fifty feet. Because in Riot if you moved out of one sound you couldn't go back, they didn't stay there

AL You could return to the sound, the spatialisation was great but there were loads of other glitches & cut offs. Apparently the compasses didn't work well in the square, due to the presence of the underground car-park & magnetic field. But isn't it interesting that even when it's full of glitches people have this excitement, this urge for new & imagined applications. I found this very evident in the Mobile Bristol events which were incredibly useful for HP Invent 'end user' research but for the artist quite frustrating! I guess that's the same story for any industry led 'emergent' technology.

MR You struggle with the limitations. Let's now deal with wearables proper. I know that after Pillow you worked with Cliff Randall and made a number of designs for garments to be used in different contexts.

AL The customized jackets I produced have been used by the Wearables Group for various applications.

MR They had no aesthetic

AL Aesthetics hadn't come into the agenda, & wasn't an aspect of application interest or development. Their previous jacket apps were consumer-led, the tourist jacket, shopping jacket etc. Let me ask you something, when you refer to a "Mobile Audience", what do you mean? – it implies that technology is essential to experiential being, surely mobility is inherent to life, the audience of the everyday. Technology is just part of that.

MR Not necessarily in an artwork-I know we have had public art and people have been walking around sculptures for thousands of years, but I think when you add interaction

of the kind we are familiar with from computer-based artwork, then you do have something new.

AL that depends on what you mean by “interaction”- referencing computers it originally meant the ability to open another programme from within the one you were running. Now that makes sense, because the problem with binary architectures of information is that they invite designed interaction, which is very different from human understandings of the term “interaction”.

MR But artists have to bridge between the two-that's the whole problematic.

AL We are interacting now in a far more sophisticated way, gesturally & face to face, than will be gleaned from the recording or transcript you end up with - that's interaction.

MR To get back to wearables and your position in the group.

AL Having produced Pillow (presented by HP Invent at the Tommorows World 2000) which used intricate embroidery to combine working & redundant technology, I was invited to work with the Wearables Group. I was keen to explore the merging of circuitry and fabric. The Wearables Group needed an artist (or maybe a seamstress!) to sort the ergonomics and invisibility of the hardware. Their previous jackets housed the tech in ripped linings stuck together with gaffer tape. The jackets held various components; cpu, gps compass, aerial, accelerometers and heavy camcorder batteries. The lack of opportunity for aesthetic visualisation of data led me to deconstruct the hardware as far as I could without destroying the connections.

MR So you started exposing all the wiring connections

AL I started to, but then held back as the project was slowing down due to the magnetic field problems.. the ideas channeled into a more recent collaboration with Wearable Group technologist Cliff Randell.

MR A sort of Richard Rogers approach where what's inside is made visible and external?

AL A making transparent of the technology.

MR So how did all this lead to "Your Heart on my Sleeve"

AL I had always been fascinated by various e-broidery projects, particularly the Sensatex vest which merged sensors & fabric – you know, the one which tells you when you've been shot!! Cliff knew I was keen to experiment with electroluminescence & when the opportunity to show work at Siggraph arose, he invited my input.

MR Unfortunately so much of the technology is driven by military imperatives

AL But that's nothing new. Here's another jacket I made for a performic demo with Martin Dupras (UWE). The sensors allow gestural input to generative sounds. Here, light is achieved with reflective bands.

MR So this brings us on to "Your Heart on my Sleeve" which appears to be really elaborate embroidery. The threads are illuminated-are they optic fibre?

AL It's electroluminescent wire which looks like neon, but is flexible. It's a bit gimmicky so I've worked it down, made it more subtle by combining it with various transparent & reflective materials.

MR So there is a pressure monitor on the chest that transfers the data through a computer to the lights- is that how it operates?

AL A Polar heart rate monitor wirelessly transmits data - the heartbeat, to another person wearing the sleeve, hence ..your heart – on my sleeve.

MR Ah, I had read it as the other way around

AL Yes, you may be confusing it with Cliff's "Heart on my Sleeve", which is a small screen displaying a pulsating heart animation. This one goes a little further... you are separated from your lover and their presence is reflected on your clothing.

MR Laurie Anderson talks about the danger in her performances of the technology becoming a "Cool Tool" and that overriding the intentionality of the artwork. Isn't that the major problem-How do you stop the technology dominating the meaning of the artwork and what you want it to say to people.

AL Absolutely. You see this often with technology driven artwork, the seduction of the medium. I'm terrible when I go to an exhibition, I find myself figuring out the tech before considering the art. So there has to be a big leap for the work to become meaningful. We need to find ways to work with technology that are emotive and experiential. It's often too defined by the software or hardware, too cerebral, too gimmicky or too info based.

MR That brings us on to a whole other argument that are we now part of the mainstream and is technological art something that happens in the galleries anyway, so why are we bothering with these metaphors? We know the debates around these technologies are very important but are they exhausted? So we appear to be in a transitional period.

AL I think it's a tricky time for institutions, particularly galleries. What were once defined disciplines have become hybrid, trans-disciplinary, experimental & collaborative. There's a proliferation of networks that exist without needing to be building based, and which are not driven by a curatorial overview. 'Emergence' is a continuum, yet there's still this obsession with the 'new' - innovation, new & surprising ways, new contributions to

knowledge, new audiences – buzzwords for funding criteria, in this sense the debates don't really change.

MR Well not since the 60s and EAT-we seem to be continually revisiting those debates

AL Artists making experiential work in response to context, situation & social relations, have always made use of existing & emerging systems. The pervasiveness of technologies within society is reflected in cultural practice – networked projects, time-based interventions, social interactions, performic events and architectural integration. Ubiquity is here to stay, these technologies exist, be they intimate, useful, dangerous, invasive or prone to glitches. They permeate the everyday and artists will, as they always have, find potentials for emotive communication.

URLs:

<http://www.al-located.net>

<http://www.herenorther.org/msquare/index.htm>

<http://ginger.hpl.hp.com/hosted/mbristol/>

<http://wearables.cs.bris.ac.uk/index.htm>

<http://wearables.cs.bris.ac.uk/cyberfash.htm>

Image Title / Credits:

'Your Heart on My Sleeve' by Annie Lovejoy & Cliff Randell
presented at Siggraph 2004 Fashion Show Los Angeles, USA

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