

i = i + 1

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ABSTRACT

The practice of research in the context of a university with industry partners and government funding is necessarily pulled in multiple directions at once. But underlying the research of the PORTAGE project is the fact that we are art and design practitioners first and foremost.

Practice-as-research is increasingly important in both the academic environment and in standalone art practice. The understanding in graduate and post-graduate studies is that the singular form of knowledge resulting from art production has value comparable to the general form of knowledge coming out of traditional research endeavours, while art theories like Relational Aesthetics extend the unformed and inquisitive nature of the Dadaist project with an obvious social imperative.

The methodologies of practice-as-research are as varied as those of art *per se*. This presentation will reflect on some of the strategies we have employed in PORTAGE to arrive at innovative forms of expression and production for the rapidly changing mobile media domain.

1. ARTISTIC METHODOLOGY

I'll begin with an excerpt from a web/audio piece I created about Norman White and what he was doing during the early Photo-Electric Art years at OCA in the 1970s.

(Play Shooting in the Dark;
www.unscrambled.com/robots)

In these snippets from several conversations I had with Norman he raises some points which have surfaced again in the context of our cell phone research project, Portage, primarily around methodology and motivation.

In both cases we share the need to understand. By that I mean a form of knowledge that is deeply held and transformative. Graeme Sullivan talks about the artist's research practice this way, as exploring the realm of the possible, as much as the probable or plausible. The artist's goal is to provide knowledge

through experience, so that it moves beyond an academic or intellectual form of understanding and becomes part of the fabric of the viewer's being.

*"Some perplexing issue or event is reconciled or resolved as we draw on known theoretical knowledge... In other situations, theories are based on experience, which helps us understand more complex things."*¹

At this point the function of art making and practice-based research can be compared, as "contraptions for generating knowledge" in the words of Sarat Maharaj², who goes on to enumerate some elements that we may recognize: practices that probe and test experience, thinking-doing as visual art practices vis-à-vis other knowledge systems, modes of thinking beyond academic methods.

Here, knowledge generation, as a singular and provisional activity, incorporates the practice of theorizing.

In both cases, art and research, there are pressures to deliver socially useful products. These are worthwhile endeavours, but what I would characterize as applied research or applied art. They seek to turn existing available knowledge into market ready deliverables, be they products or entertainment.

Interestingly, Norman uses biological metaphors (although I think he was trained in chemistry). The extreme redundancy of a plant generating ten of thousands of seeds in order to reproduce itself a few times is familiar to the researchers working in the Mobile Experience Lab. Concepts and themes to explore and develop are generated by the bushel full and constantly recombined, expanded and otherwise interrogated. The result is a state of productive instability, with each answer generating more than a reasonable number of subsequent questions.

Norman's reference to the signaling of birds and insect, in particular, parallels one of our sub-projects, Cicadas. In this streetscape installation, swarms of electronic sound and light emitting circuits residing in trees respond to the electromagnetic frequency emanations of passersby talking on cell phones. The level of activity and excitement of these virtual cicadas parallel the level of energy we humans are expending to emit EMF signals in the hope of

achieving communications with our own swarms. Most of the other components we are building in the lab are geared towards some form of active user intervention, but this is the only one that establishes a passive interaction: a real time, responsive engagement of the artwork with the viewer.

This pursuit of pure knowledge through biological metaphors is explored in Saul Bellow's novel, *More Die of Heartbreak*, where lichen is offered as a suitably arcane subject in which to discover everything under the sun. In this case botany as research as science as literature is clearly speaking to the purposeful inutility of knowledge generation. The study and debate around the function of productive knowledge in science is vast: as one apologist put it: Physics is science, everything else is collecting butterflies.

The Mobile Experience Lab is an example of the increasing interest in the overall evolving nature of technical and social research, especially as it is manifest in the context of art and design practice, study and pedagogy. Simply put, it works on the principal that knowledge gained through direct experience (qualification) is likely to result in changes in thinking and behaviour among the participants, in contrast to the extractive models of research (quantification).³ The methodologies available in this context are as varied as the methodologies at work in the broad range of artists' studios.

2. SOFTWARE AS ART

Another area where we can compare Norman's art practice to the lab's research is in the area of software programming. Conventionally programming is broken into two categories, which again reflect the goals of practicality versus discovery: top down and bottom up. With top down, the prevalent industrial model, a final working product is imagined. The required components are identified and broken down into sub-components until you reach the level of creating practical coding tasks. In bottom up, the method that I think Norman employs, the set of available or achievable components is identified first, and then the question of what they could be built into emerges.

Parallel to this, of course, is the relationship of theory to the artist or practice-based researcher: whether it precedes or emerges out of the activity.

But given the long history that OCAD has with artists using software and the more casual approach to coding that is part of our expanding new media lexicon, we might move away from both of these models to something more akin to extreme programming, pioneered by Kent Beck in 1996. Roughly, it favoured developing quick and dirty solutions to an identified need, with the assumption that the need itself would probably change very soon.

In fact, I've spoken here before about the Inside Out approach in which software applications are quickly

written and tested with artists and designers, revealing both unexpected uses and areas for going back and redirecting the software development path. I bring it up again here now as an interesting comparison to Norman's methods.

After a certain stage of technical development we would enter into charettes in which artists, designers and students who were not closely associated with the project would be invited to create sample content with the platform that we had developed. Charettes had two significant research/creation results.⁴ First, the possible uses for the tools would expand significantly. Creators would regularly imagine uses outside of what we had predicted and thereby broaden the applicability of the tools. At the same time, their uses (produced or imagined) would reveal shortcomings of the technology and identify opportunities for rethinking what features should be incorporated into each platform.

The other way of viewing this, either in the case of artmaking or research, is the iterative approach, as suggested by my title, $i = i + 1$. Here a given condition or state is considered the starting point and by looping through a set of functions, that state is changed and becomes the new starting point for another iterative loop and then another.

There is a certain humility required to be able to accept that the problem you are working on will no longer exist once it is solved and will automatically be supplanted by a new problem. That moment of satisfaction of having completed your work becomes elusive. At the same time there is an intriguing appearance of contradiction in this statement. Read in the mode of the familiar deductive logic lesson ($a = b$ and $b = c$, etc.) it seems inherently contradictory. Yet what it is revealed is the ongoing transformation of the subject. This act of the iterative expansion of possibilities within the realm of art can be seen in Martin Creed's work: the whole world + the work = the whole world.

The possibility of creating experiences in which the user-to-user interaction is integral (as opposed to the producer-to-user model employed in broadcast media) is characterized by Nicolas Bourriaud as relational art, which takes "as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than an assertion of an independent and private symbolic space."⁵ He argues that the emergence of a worldwide urban culture, with its increased mobility and deterritorialization pointed towards a more participatory form of engagement with art and culture.

This iterative approach to content and delivery problem solving is familiar to many studio-based artists. The result is a shift from product to process. Taken together with popular interest in remixing and mashups, the theories of Relational Aesthetics,⁶ the goal becomes the inclusion of process in the final presentation. That is, rather than imaging a narrative or gameplaying production as the final public presentation, we move towards a collaborative, co-

creation experience in which users reshape the 'event' and find new uses for the publicly installed apparatus and the producers see themselves as contributors to a work in progress.

3. CONCLUSION

Overall, this methodology favours an evolving thought process and highlights the need to *include* theory construction within the research process as opposed to having it precede the commencement of measuring and testing.⁷

Malcolm Quinn warns us that “the governmental, institutional and intellectual alliances forged in the neo-utilitarian fantasy of 'the knowledge economy', means that it will be pragmatic for all of us to accept the sacred status of culture and sociality as the foundation of both art and research, while rendering it taboo and untouchable”⁸

PORTAGE's success has been in the open spirit of self-critique that occurs throughout the process, an imaginative, implicit exploration of tacit knowledge⁹ —to our desires to become destabilized by better reason, data or apparent findings that suggest the need to change course for example in terms of concept, technological aims or user experience.

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