

Document : An Oral History of Washington Square Park

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Abstract

Document is an interactive storytelling installation placed in New York's Washington Square Park constructing a polyphonic oral narrative through the assimilation of historical images and stories recorded by individuals in the park. The installation is a column-like wooden kiosk that plays an uninterrupted stream of stories recorded during the lifetime of the project, accompanied by a real-time 'mix' of live video with archival photographs taken from a similar perspective. People can interact with the installation by listening to the stories or use the "Tell a Story" button to record an experience of their own.

This paper will introduce the project, covering the design process, decisions regarding structure and interface, public response to the installation, findings and possible developments. Theoretically, we will examine the project within the context of John Berger's idea of the "landscape's *address*," where the physical experience of Washington Square Park both during the recording and playback of stories is necessary to preserve the spatial resonance of the narrative. We will also discuss the techno-ethical implications of creating a public history and argue for the elimination of any form of editorial intervention or system of categorization. Lastly, given the recent decision by the *New York City Department of Parks and Recreation* to redesign Washington Square Park, the project will be assessed in terms of its affordance as a counter-hegemonic platform for dialog.

INTRODUCTION

In 1987, two years after the completion of *Forest of Bliss*, a poignant and consciously enigmatic anthropological film about the city of Benares in India, filmmakers Robert Gardner and Akos Ostor recorded an informal conversation about its making, "...prompted by a desire to rescue from fading consciousness our many reflections on an undertaking that ended with the film's completion in 1985" (Gardner 6). With both filmmakers working entirely from memory, the dialog takes on the function of actively documenting "the difference of experience of being there—of what was in your mind then, what was in my mind, of what was there in Benares—and how it all came together in the film" (Askor 16). While *Document* is far from both the ingenuity and scope of *Forest of Bliss*, this paper is a similar attempt to re-establish our intent and examine the social context project through a more considered lens.

Document was originally conceived as a response to a design constraint to develop an interface that allows for communication between two groups of people - storytellers and story listeners. From this broad functional premise, Charles Yust developed the first iteration of an interaction comprising a storytelling kiosk with visual and auditory components. During the course of working on the project, a broader scope emerged drawing significantly from the field of oral history in terms of facilitating a collaborative, publicly maintained form of history through the act of storytelling. This 'borrowing' from oral history posited the functional considerations of Design in an operational relationship with the reflexive analysis of social science and left us with the

assiduous challenge of arbitrating the dialog between these two almost antithetical standpoints. For the sake of brevity and clarity the first half of this paper primarily covers the research phase regarding the social context and definition of scope, while the second half of the paper is mostly concerned with the design process and implementation.

ORAL HISTORY, ORALHISTORY, PUBLIC HISTORY

Oral history is a form of historical documentation that consists of recorded interviewing of individuals or communities who have experienced certain events for the purpose of historical reconstruction. That said, the preceding statement is to be regarded as a placeholder rather a comprehensive definition for the practice, which as Charles T. Morrissey, a past president of the Oral History Association points out, “Stubbornly...resists a unifying terminology” (Morrissey 13). In his summary on the general discourse in oral history, Morrissey emphasizes the sheer impossibility of proposing a universally acceptable definition given the irregularity of both terminology and methodology in current practice. For example, E. John B. Allen, a practitioner of oral history, argues that the term be re-titled as a single word -‘oralhistory’- to differentiate the discipline from history, and yet connect it to the idea of “what happened in the past, and...what the historian concocts from available evidence” (qtd. in Morrissey 15). This semantic debate is further complicated by the application of the term by practitioners to an eclectic body of material from personal memoirs to semi-fictional works of literature.

That said, we were drawn to idea of creating an oral history, or should we say oralhistory, because of the ideological underpinnings of the field. Alistair Thomson, coeditor of the British journal *Oral History*, says that oral history is “an invaluable and compelling research method for twentieth century history ...[providing] access to ‘hidden histories’ of people on the margins... opportunities to explore aspects of personal experience that are rarely recorded...[and] offer rich evidence about the subjective or personal *meanings* of past events” (Thomson 584). While Thomson concurs with Morrissey’s commentary on the inconsistencies within the field, he celebrates the procedural flexibility where, there is in fact, no single model or ‘correct’ scientific method of enquiry for research. Instead, practitioners need to be “sensitive to the relational and communicative patterns of particular subcultures as defined by gender, class, race an ethnicity, region, sexuality, disability, and age” (Thomson 583).

Further, Thomson also discusses the use of oral history as an agent of social change in terms of advocacy and the empowerment of oppressed or silenced communities. Thomson cites several successful initiatives in this area, from development projects to ensure that foreign aid interventions such as agricultural technology draw upon traditional knowledge and land use in sub-Saharan Africa, to challenges against the state control leading to the democratization of memory and history in Russia. These projects are based on a model of writing history “from below,” although Thomson admits that even in the case of participatory projects it can be extremely difficult to maintain a shared authority, and prevent disempowering the subjects of research.

The central objective for Document was derived from this proposition, with one major distinction: rather use techniques of oral history to study a community as research subjects, our goal was to facilitate the creation of a collectively maintained form of history; an autopoietic system without extraneous involvement. Having arrived at a general understanding of the potential scope, we began to also examine the material conditions surrounding the production of history with regards to the potential use of technology in oral history.

Mary A. Larson, an assistant director of the University of Nevada Oral History program, provides a detailed critique on the possible uses of oral history on the Internet. While Larson's classifications of Web based oral history projects are somewhat baroque, her line of questioning exploring the ethical implications of online initiatives are both insightful and extremely relevant given the nature of Document. "If it *is* legal [to place an oral history on the Web with a release form], is it still ethical? If oral histories are placed on the Web, can repositories guarantee that they will not be used in a manner that is contrary to the interviewee's wishes? [...] Should oral histories on the Web be presented without appropriate context or utilized without providing relevant background material?" (Larson 602).

SITUATED HISTORY, SITUATED SOFTWARE

Our response to these ethical considerations of ownership, representation and access was to propose a 'situated' model of history that is inseparable from the place of its origin. The stories, once recorded would not be distributed on the Internet or a

CD or even as book transcripts, but would only be made available at the project site. Also, rather than focus on a specific community or event, we began to consider to the idea of creating an oral history of *place*, in keeping with John Berger's idea of the "landscape's address" as "the background of meaning which a landscape suggests to those familiar with it" (Berger 68). In an eloquent discussion of Velasquez's "Portrait of Aesop" Berger discusses Geography as,

...something larger than what is usually thought. We have to see the geographic as a representation of an individual origin: a representation which is constant yet always ambiguous and unclear because what it represents is about the beginning and end of everything. Many different things can fill the foreground with meaning: personal memories, practical worries about survival; the traces of recent events and crimes...all these occur against a constant common background... the landscape's address..." (Berger 68).

Within this reading of place in mind, the decision to make the project specific to a public space was advantageous in a practical sense in terms of access, as well as on a more abstract level, in terms of validating any story told within the space by virtue of the definition of the term 'public.'

While Berger's idea of address gave us an abstract understanding of the social positioning of the project, more specific to design, Clay Shirky, a professor at the New York University's ITP program, proposes a similar idea of situated software as being

“designed for use by a specific social group, rather than for a generic set of users” (Shirky). Here the term ‘situated’ refers not to geography, but to the ideas of scalability and building applications that is specific to the schema of a narrow user group.

“Situated software isn't a technological strategy so much as an attitude about closeness of fit between software and its group of users, and a refusal to embrace scale, generality or completeness as unqualified virtues...[situated software] doesn't need to be personalized -- it is personal from its inception” (Shirky)

RESEARCH : PRECEDENTS

A significant part of our research also involved identifying and critically evaluating existing projects concerned with oral history, with a significant technological component. We have included three of the most relevant projects as a sampling of a much larger tradition that *Document* was simultaneously able to draw from and differentiate itself within.

Urban Tapestries¹ “...is an experimental software platform for knowledge mapping and sharing – public authoring. It combines mobile and internet technologies with geographic information systems to allow people to build relationships between places and to associate stories, information, pictures, sounds and videos with them.” While the premise is similar to *Document* in terms of facilitating public narratives of place, *Urban Tapestries* requires participants to have access to a GPS enabled device in an effort to understand how people can use emerging technologies to enable people

to “embed social knowledge in the wireless network of the city” and not merely act as “consumers of content provided to them by telecoms and media corporations.” The project has definite merits in terms of the re-appropriation of personal technology and social empowerment of the individual in being able to contribute to a collective memory. However, the premise does not consider the composition of the community with access to the required technology and the resulting socio-economically segmented qualification of space.

With *Vanishing Point*ⁱⁱ, Mauricio Arango, states that the “...goal of this project is to decipher the world that news media reconfigures and to observe if media coverage, or lack thereof, is creating a new cartography...” The flash based Web site uses a world map as the interface to represent how often a country is mentioned in eight of the leading newspapers published in any of the G8 member nations. The incidence of how often a country is mentioned in newspapers is indicated by color saturation on the world map, representing a visual correlation between media coverage and political hegemony. *Vanishing Point* illustrates the fact that history (media coverage) recorded by the official means of the press and publishers is both biased and negligent, with gaps that need to be filled in terms of both representation and counter-histories.

Lastly, *Crossing the Boulevard: strangers, neighbors, aliens in a new America*ⁱⁱⁱ by Earsay is mixed-media oral history project that provides “a kaleidoscopic view of new immigrants and refugees living in Queens, New York... the most ethnically diverse neighborhood in the United States.” Judith Sloan and Warren Lehrer, the creators of the project, use a traditional fieldwork based approach to personally interview and document stories that are later made available in print, on an audio CD,

and excerpts on the Web site (radio interviews). While the process of personal interviews was entirely inapplicable, *Crossing the Boulevard* provided a rough framework for maintaining the context of place in a virtual environment.

INTERFACE DESIGN

Apart from the recording and playback of stories, a visual component of the project comprising a live motion 'mix' of park pedestrians "walking through" historical images on screen was devised to visually reinforce the idea of a historical continuum. While designing the interface we decided to take Richard Gabriel's advice and keep it simple, "both in implementation and interface. It is more important for the implementation to be simple than the interface. Simplicity is the most important consideration in a design. The interface itself comprised a single, large red button, which when held down begins to record audio and completes a circuit causing the embedded LED to glow. Holding down the button also triggers a waveform of the audio to appear on the screen providing intuitive cues regarding the functionality of the interface.

A conscious (and conscientious) decision on our part was made to limit the functionality to recording stories, as opposed to introducing a system of user rating or tagging. While this may seem like a reasonable, even logical step in terms of embracing the user-categorized schema of Web 2.0, when viewed within the context of oral history, the idea of facilitating a 'personalized' version of history is entirely incongruous. At the same time we were also concerned about the incidence of 'bad'

stories as a result of interruptions or otherwise, and again voted against the intervention of any editorial process.

SITE SELECTION

A shortlist of potential sites was created based on the criteria of public access, political relevance, availability of images and archival material, and logistical feasibility. Some of the sites that met these criteria included the Brooklyn Bridge Park with its view of the Manhattan skyline, the New York City Hall Building, Union Square, and Washington Square Park. Washington Square Park proved to be an ideal site given its counter-cultural history, proximity to Parsons The New School of Design and controversy given the recent decision by the *New York City Department of Parks and Recreation* to redesign the fountain. The Arch on the North side of the park also proved to be the subject of a fair number of photographs as we discovered while conducting archival research. This body of 'historical' photographs would also inform our decision on where to place the kiosk within the park itself. Images of the arch were gathered from the archives at The New York Times and the New York Historical Society. We decided to use the two sources since it seemed fitting that a public history should in fact encompass both news coverage and traditional historical documentation. The pairing of these two archives also proved to be ideal since the New York Historical Archive had images between 1880 and 1940, while the New York Times collection spanned roughly between 1950 until the present.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Design Influences



We chose wood as the material for the kiosk for two reasons; firstly, because of the functional consideration of weight, and secondly, as a reference to the original Washington Square Arch, which was also constructed from wood. The aesthetics for the kiosk were derived from architectural elements and forms prevalent in the Park to propose a sense of familiarity and suggest a historical continuity. Marcus Pingel proposed a structure with dimensions in proportion to the negative space in the center of the Arch to create what Pierce has called ‘a

On a map of an island laid down upon the soil of that island there must, under all ordinary circumstances, be some position, Sign of itself,’ i.e., some point, marked or not, that represents *qua* place on the map the very same point *qua* place on the island...we shall, or should ultimately reach a Sign of Itself, containing its own explanation and those of all its significant parts... (Charles Pierce 2.230).

Prototype



A full-scale prototype was constructed and tested in the park to determine dimensions of the kiosk in relation to the perspective of the Arch in the photographs acquired. An analysis of pedestrian traffic was also undertaken to identify a location within the park where the kiosk would be sufficiently visible without obstructing the flow of people.

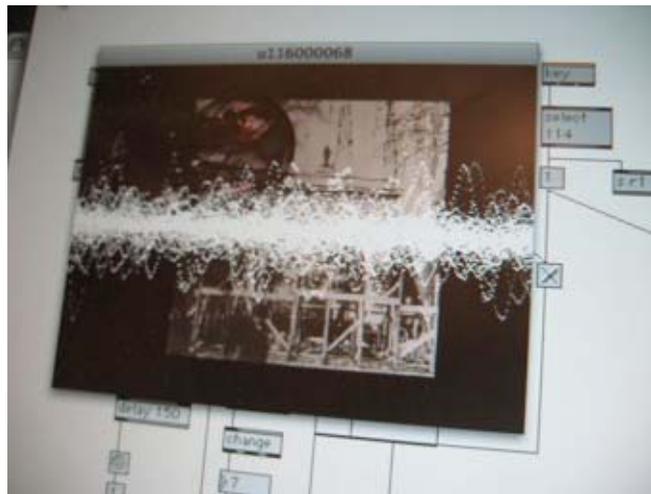
Construction



The frame for the kiosk was the first component to be constructed as a reference for the other devices that would be placed inside. These included a boat battery for

power; a camcorder; the button; a Mac mini; a shotgun mic; speakers; and a 19" monitor. Once the internal shelves had been fitted, the frame was sheathed with a wooden veneer with a trim along the edges, and the exterior was stained as a protective measure. Shelf position, screen, and equipment height were also determined by averaging the heights of various users.

Software



The graphical programming environment Max/MSP/Jitter was used to run the live video mix and audio recording and playback. Max proved to be a flexible and relatively stable platform for the interaction, with a built-in modularity that allowed us to switch between recording and playback modes efficiently. In keeping with the idea of presenting the body of recordings as a singular unit of spatial resonance, we used a linear numbering system to record files and a random function for retrieval.

PROJECT EVALUATION

The overall response to the project was extremely encouraging; over thirty stories were recorded during the initial two-day installation period, including stories by a park ranger, tourists, a man in a Santa suit, and a resident of the neighborhood who voiced a position statement about the renovation of the Park. While most people found interaction with the kiosk fairly intuitive, we realized that it was necessary to provide some background information regarding the nature of the project and included a handout for potential users on the second day.

We also realized that while our role was quite different from historians using the traditional model of oral history, the project being community based would always require some degree of interaction on our part.

While we still retain our position on preserving the stories and sounds recorded in their whole unedited form, we are considering the possibility of including a 'skip' forward button that will allow users to move through the stories and listen to ones that they find a personal resonance with. There is also much more research that needs to be undertaken regarding the role of social software and the idea of situated history. While our original vision was to provide a counter-hegemonic platform for contestation and public discourse, we realized that the project in its present form does not support any one political ideology, but rather accommodates a plurality of narratives and proposes a self-conscious form of history.

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