Dialog between Lev Manovich and Jenny Marketou. *Breeder*, no. 5 (Athens, 2002)

> These e-mails between Lev Manovich, San Diego and Jenny Marketou, New
> York were exchanged from January 25 to February 4, 2002.
>
> >
> > Lev Manovich wrote:
> >
> >> L.M.
> >> Lets begin by talking about mapping. I see mapping one data set into
> >> another, or one media into another, as one of the most common
> operations in
> >> computer culture. For instance, it forms the basis of a whole field
> of
> >> visualization - taking the results of an experiment and visualizing
> them as a
> >> van animation; or taking statistical data and presenting it as a 3-D
> shape;
> >> and so on.
> >> These kinds of mappings are also common in new media. For
> instance, I
> >> have come across a few projects where network traffic was translated
> into
> >> music. One of most well known projects which lies at the intersection
> of
> >> science and art (because it seems to function well in both contexts)
> also
> >> involves this kind of mapping - I am thinking of Natalie
> Jeremijenko's wire
> >> sculpture which translates network behavior into the movements of a
> >> suspended wire.
> >> Few questions can be posed here. It is not hard to notice that
> most
> >> mappings go from non visual media to visual media. What about
> mappings which
> >> will go into the opposite direction? Another question which we may
> ask about
> >> what exactly is at stake in these projects aesthetically. I always
> find
> >> myself moved by them - but why? Is it because these projects carry
> the
> >> promise of rendering the phenomena which are beyond the scale of

> human
> >> senses into something which is within our reach, something visible
> and
> >> tangible?
> >>
> >> J.M.
> >> Before I can answer your questions I would like to let
> >> my mind wander among some random thoughts about
> >> mapping and data esthetics.
> >>
> >> Last night I had the opportunity to view the
> >> large-scale installation "Cloaca" by Wim Delvoye,the
> >> Belgian artist at The New Museum in New York. This
> >> extreme work is built from chemical beakers,electric
> >> pumps,and plastic tubing arrayed on a series of seven
> >> stainless steel tables,fully computer monitored in
> >> order to duplicate and map the human digestive
> >> system.I found this contemplation of mapping bodily
> >> wastes another good example of how art,technology and
> >> science intersect.
> >>
> >> I found the piece challenging and although this
> >> simulacrum mapping path of what we eat from the mouth
> >> to the anus allows us to see the mechanical process
> >> and catch ourselves in the act of self identification,
> >> surprisingly it lacks the possibility and the
> >> sensibility of meaning located in the magical
> >> randomness.
> >>
> >> In general I tend to think of mapping data in a broad
> >> sense like genetics blocks which generates a
> >> recombination of elements, systems, algorithms,
> >> happenings.This recombination generates the emergence
> >> of new structures for visualization which explores an
> >> iconography of media pictures.What attracts me into
> >> this forms is that they represent the artifacts of
> >> our times which have been generated by taking into
> >> account our everyday functions behaviors and
> >> information input.
> >>
> >> So for me the question here is how any kind of data
> >> mapping can create beauty and meaning uncovered by
> >> applying loose formal structures,randomness and forms
> >> which take into account information behaviors which
> >> take into account everyday life.
> >>

> >> As you know I am also attracted to crawlers and
> >> extractors which function as data collection systems
> >> but in their accidental search through the web show
> >> each time how we have mapped our world . Like
> >> "flaneurs2 their aim is to uncover paths through the
> >> topology of our data system of knowledge and it is up
> >> to the users and artists to interpret the data in any
> >> way they want..
> >>
> >> But how can we create the magic of randomness in a
> >> visualization from non visual media to visual media as
> >> you suggest without loosing the magic of the process?
> >> How we can express the beauty of the "trajectory" as
> >> you once said talking about info esthetics ? Certainly
> >> the beauty of data is different from the beauty in the
> >> "cannon" which we learn at art schools. But again what
> >> happens to the content in a meaningless visualization
> >> which lends itself in a pure data formalism like this
> >> of a "wallpaper"?
> >>
> >>
> >> LM.
> >> I can think of at least one example example of mapping which has both
>
> >> meaning and beauty. This is Jewish Museum Berlin by Daniel
> Liberskind. The
> >> architect put together a map which showed the addresses of Jews who
> were
> >> living in the neighborhood of the museum site before World World II.
> He
> >> then connected different points on the map together and projected the
>
> >> resulting net onto the surfaces of the building. The intersections of
> the
> >> net projection and the design became multiple irregular windows.
> Cutting
> >> through the walls and the ceilings at different angles, the windows
> point to
> >> many visual references: narrow eyepiece of a tank; windows of a
> Medieval
> >> cathedral; exploded forms of the cubist/abstract/supermatist
> paintings of
> >> the 1910s-1920s. Just as in the case of Janet Cardiff's audio walks,
> here
> >> the virtual becomes a powerful force which re-shapes the physical. In
> Jewish

> >> Museum, the past literally cuts into the present. Rather than
> something
> >> ephemeral, here data space is materialized, becoming a sort of
> monumental
> >> sculpture.
> >> But there was one problem which I kept thinking about when I was
> >> visiting the museum building. On the one hand, Liberskind's procedure
> to
> >> find the addresses, make a map and connect all the lines appears very
>
> >> rational, almost the work of scientist. On the other hand, as far as
> I know,
> >> he does not tell us anything about why he projected the net in a
> particular
> >> way as opposed to any other way. So I find something contradictory in
> fact
> >> that all painstakingly collected and organized data then just
> "thrown" over
> >> the shapes of the building in a arbitrary way. And this is the basic
> problem
> >> of the whole mapping paradigm. Usually there are endless ways to map
> one
> >> data set onto another, and the particular mapping chosen by the
> artist
> >> typically is not motivated. As a result the work feels arbitrary. We
> are
> >> always told that in good art "form and content form a single whole",
> >> "content motivates form," and so on. Maybe in a "good" work of data
> art the
> >> mapping used have to somehow relate to the content and context of
> data -
> >> although I am not sure how this would work in general.
> >> On the question of the beauty of data: permit me to quote
> something I
> >> wrote in a different context: "Ultimately we would not want to submit
>
> >> information to the standards of conventional, classical beauty.
> Ultimately,
> >> we will have to discover what the new beauty of information is. It
> may turn
> >> out to have nothing to do with a smile of a girl on a beach or the
> shape of
> >> iMac or the machine-like sounds of Kraftwerk. If we are unlucky, it
> may be
> >> something that even our machines will find ugly. At this point, we
> just

> >> donut known yet."
> >>
> >>
> > J.M.
> >
> > Lev, I like very much your comments about Daniel Liberskind's mapping
> in
> > the Jewish Museum in Berlin and about Janet's Gardiff's walks .But
> talking about mappings of
> > walks , I am always fascinated with the situationist mappings .It
> comes to my mind something that I read
> > about mapping from an anonymous post "..The 19th Century opium eater
> Thomas de Quincey with no other goals in
> > mind spent entire days randomly strolling around London.In the 60 ties
> the Situationists
> > took this activity to the next level by developing psychogeography:
> the science of the dérive, the drift.". Of
> > course these dérives were not random, but persuaded the
> psychogeographer to use his or her imagination
> > to experience the urban surroundings in a new way which was
> unpredictable and for this reason
> > irrational and unstable. Methods they adopted for these mappings were
> for instance to literally
> > follow their nose by chasing smells or navigating through Paris on a
> map
> > of London.
> >
> >> From my experience ,Janet Gardiff,s audio walks introduce to the
> viewer
> > a parallel mapping of visual and censorial data which is very
> engaging
> > to the viewers because the audio effects subordinate to the demands
> of the narrative and create
> > a fantasy.
> >
> > For the same reason I find extremely appealing the spectacular impact
> >
> > of the audio visual special effects in science fiction cinema which
> exist in
> > their own rights and offer the pleasures of excitement, fantasy ,
> magic and escape in the
> > electronically mapped and textured fabric of space and time .Perhaps
> the audiovisual effects
> > differ widely when applied in the setting of the big screen instead
> of the context of walk in the
> > museum or public space. But there is no question

> > in my mind that the popularity and enjoyment of audiovisual effects
> > lies exactly in the pleasure of enjoying the awareness of the
> illusion in which we partake.
> >
> > Love it or loath it but we can not ignore it, that one of the reasons
>
> > why net art is perceived without content or meaning , is the fact
> that a
> > large number of viewers/users are not comfortable to seek meaning
> along the lines of
> > the esthetics which is related on the dynamics of code and data
> mappings on
> > a single computer without any audio visual censorial input . So the
> issue here is not
> > about the form nor the content in which the data is mapped but how
> we experience art generated by
> > pure data.
> >
> > Many times in my work e.g. in Taystesroom, I find this necessity to
> > create a tangible situation to integrate the viewers, where the
> physical space echoes the virtual
> > worlds of the net to create a „single whole‰ as you say. The problem
> with this is that we fall
> > again into the same conventional methods of presenting traditional and
> monumental art. Perhaps there is
> > no answer yet but already we can experience beautiful sounds on an
> ipod computer or via wireless phones
> > or we can see videos on wireless wrist monitors.
> >
> >
> >
> > L.M.
>
> N navigating through Paris using a map of London - how wonderful! This
> is the kind of poetry and conceptual elegance mappings in contemporary
> "data-art" rarely achieve, if ever. Most often they are driven by the
> rational impulse to make sense out our complex world, the world there
> many
> process and forces are invisible and are out of our reach. So they take
> some
> data - Internet traffic, market indicators, amazon.com book
> recommendation,
> statistics of text access in rhizome.org database, or even weather - and
> map
> it in some way. (I should note that the similar impulse to "read off"
> underlying social relations from the visible reality animated many

> artists
> in the 1920s, including the main hero of my 'The Language of New Media,'
>
> Dziga Vertov. Vertov' 1929 film 'A Man With a Movie Camera' is brave
> attempt to do visual epistemology - to reinterpret the often banal and
> seemingly insignificant images of everyday life as the result of the
> struggle between old and the new).
>
>   To come back to the present: Important as these projects may be,
> they
> miss something else. As opposed to being a kind of "data-espistonology,"
>
> trying to make sense of data surrounding us, art has also another
> function
> to play - show us other realities embedded in our own, show us the
> ambiguity always present in our perception and experience, show us what
> we
> normally don't notice or don't pay attention to. Traditional and normal
> "representational arts" - literature, painting, photography, cinema -
> can
> do this very well. For me, the real challenge for "data-art" is not how
> to
> map some abstract and impersonal data into something meaningful and
> beautiful
> - economists, graphic designers, and scientists can do this quite well.
> The
> real challenge is how to speak on the level of a personal subjective
> experience. How can we represent this experience in new ways? How can
> new
> media allow us to experience the ambiguity, the otherness, the
> multi-dimensionality of our experience in new ways, thus enriching our
> lifes
> - for this, this is the real challenge lying before us.
>
> > J.M.
>
> I agree with you Lev that new media has challenged our perception and
> practice
> in all kind of ways.I would like to end with a few sentences that
> I heard once from Hans Haacke.
>
> ...make something which experiences, reacts to its environment,
> changes, is non-stable...
>
> ...make something indeterminate, which always looks different, the
> shape of which cannot be predicted precisely...

>
> ..make something which the 'spectator' handles, with which he plays
> and thus animates...