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Interview with Jeremy Hight
by Ana Finel Honigman

Dec. 2011 - When the internet emerged as a creative forum, scholars, artists and practitioners were hopeful that it would become an overwhelming artistic utopia. Although the internet has established itself in everyday life, internet art has not become a central force in art discourse. Computers contribute greatly to contemporary art creation but internet art is still somewhat marginal. Yet the internet offers extraordinary platforms for discourse, discussion and innovation outside academia, where artists and thinkers can produce and share immaterial works that can be viewed as art, and at the same time can be free of dealers and the agendas of state institutions and corporations.

Scholar, artist and educator Jeremy Hight is a leading thinker in on-line art and the internet's intellectual potential. He currently teaches at Cal Arts and in the ICAM and VIS ARTS departments at U.C. San Diego, as well as serving as New Media curator and Contributing editor for MIT Press's Leonardo Electronic Almanac. He is an expert on locative media, which challenges conventional forms of narrative and augmented reality.

Now, Hight is curating a multi-part exhibition of key creative artists in Locative Media, New Media and Mapping. The show raises vital questions of how we interpret time, place, space and history. Here, Jeremy and I discuss the current state of new media, the internet's potential and his scholarly and artistic work.
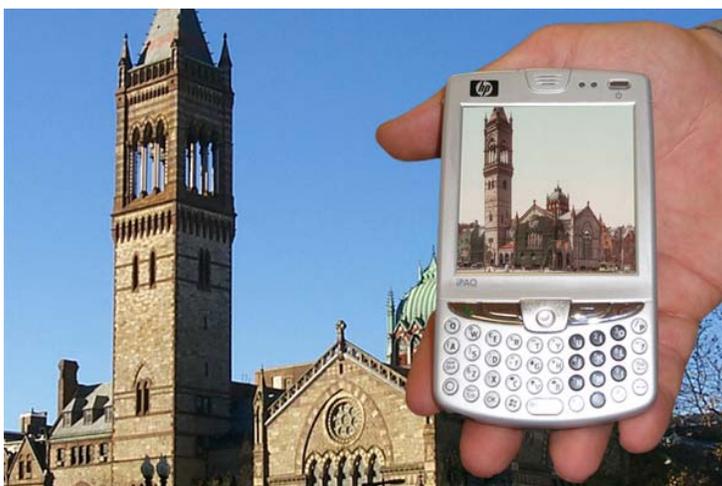
Carmin Karasic and Rolf Van Gelder, *Hand Held Histories*; Courtesy of the artists

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Ana Finel Honigman: How has new media art developed differently than you initially expected when the genre was born?

Jeremy Hight: Fantastic question and hard to give a simple answer.   The difficulty with the term "new media" is more in how it does not change. This was part of what inspired me to develop Re-Drawing Boundaries. There are so many different types of work that are put under this somewhat opaque umbrella and really many different genres in their own right. There was a huge wave of people like Vuk Cosic that formed what came to be known as "net art" and there now are new media game art works, new media narratives, net art, new app or tool hack artworks etc. The term itself is such an odd semantic and semiotic read as it deeply subjective as to its very own parameters.

Some see it as rising with net art, others with interactive online works, others with works that began fusing tools and platforms, others take it back to hundreds of years ago with any new platform and works exploring it. This last thread can go back logically to the net, video, the computer, the camera, the printing press, cuneiform writing etc.

I was deeply honored when a project I collaborated on was asked to be in the Whitney Museum's artport online collection. It is fascinating to start there and explore the range of works and styles just in that one collective digital space. There has been talk in new media circles for years as to how to also explore new "third" spaces (digital and real world) and we are beginning to see this more with location-aware works and augmented reality and mixed reality art.

This is exciting to see evolve as it allows the world itself to be the exhibition space and at times catalyst and still see the cohesiveness of an online or digital work.

Lize Mogel, *Sludge Economy*; Courtesy of the artist

### AFH: How does your work as an artist relate to your other disparate intellectual activities?

JH: It has been an interesting journey from being a shy, curious little kid fascinated with etymology, stories, drawing and the weather to where things are now. I planned to be a research meteorologist from about six or seven and had the PhD application at fourteen (kept it in a drawer...took it out and petted it like a cat). At about thirteen, I developed a system to do graphic real time visualizations of hypothetical and history weather events from data; it was to have a simulated satellite loop, radar loops from above and side view and rain totals, wind speeds, shear etc., running too. Topography would be taken into account in the "storm" lifespan as well. I told only a few people and starting making art. About fifteen I developed a game theory-driven computer system that would aggregate all of the world's paleontology papers and books and look for meta data to try and help the discussion as to aesthetics, history and certain species. I also won my first poetry award in some little school contest. I was also playing with typography, painting, mixed media and other stuff while doing weather forecasts for neighbors and getting in trouble for drawing weather maps on my homework. Senior year I both won some awards in writing and totally bombed my math classes. A huge decision had to be made. I let the science go and went full on into creative writing and art (much to my family's chagrin). I later began doing sound art, conceptual works and in the mid-nineties got into new media work (whatever that means...the term is so impossibly problematic).

At Cal Arts I made a web magazine that was a hurricane and an installation work that had text run by motors in blank spaces in a fake painting that was actually processed video stills in a huge frame that had hinges (Roland Barthes on the red phone). I gradually spread out with growing confidence (the good part of getting older it seems...) into semiotics, information design, GPS art and narrative, photography etc...and science was coming back. I developed an immersive three-dimensional method of recording and running back events in time a few years ago and somehow even math came back, not the details and failed quizzes part, but concepts, functions...really surprised me and my wife. Now curating and editing and everything else is really all connected...as is art, science and technology to me. I also see now how we unfortunately are not taught to see this.

AFH: How does "Narrative Archaeology" relate to traditional forms of local history, local lore and local identity?

JH: Ah, excellent question. The thing that first hit me was how there can be suppressed history, lost history, local histories obscured and obfuscated beyond its place and local resonance as great as it may be.

Places with GPS could "speak." Back in 2001, GPS was not in wide use at all. History could go from books in far off libraries or classes on things such as ethnic studies (as in 34 north 118 west the viewer/participant learns of the huge importance Latina women had in the railroad-related industries of mid-twentieth-century Los Angeles where it is otherwise largely ignored now) to held in place, as signal, as something of the layers of not just time, but place, people, lives, events, and possibly even things to otherwise sadly slowly ebb into erasure the way some languages are passing right now across the world. "Narrative Archaeology" I chose as it shows how the stories and information of any place can and should be preserved and appreciated, not only as art or literature written and read in the physical world, but also of simple preservation, like artifacts.
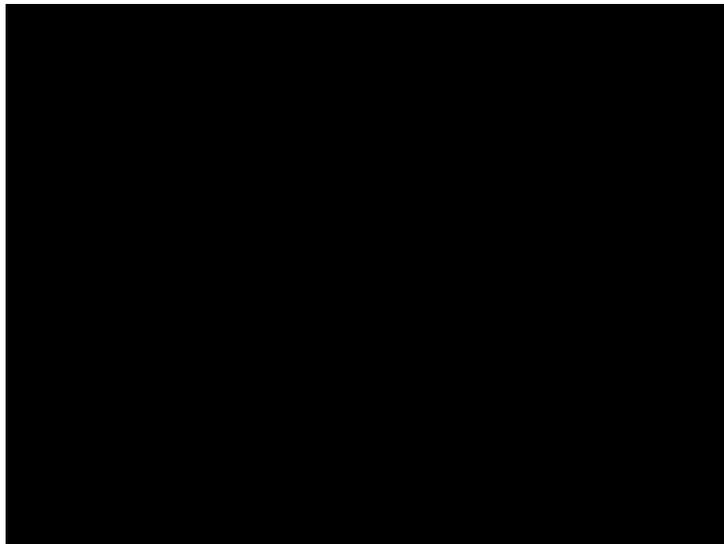
Vuk Cosic, *The Birds*; Courtesy of the artist.

AFH: How will the exhibition you're developing for MIT function differently on-line and in physical reality? Is it essentially an on-line show showcased in a series of galleries and museums or is the internet closer to an installation-location separate from what viewers will encounter in the other "spaces"?

JH: It first is online, then a book and a traveling exhibit. I initially developed it honestly as a conceptual work in its own right; the whole exhibition is a work asking about measure,space, the problematic nature of naming of "fields" in art and art and "non art" as being not always that way at all. The show has thirty-one artists total: they are new media artists, new media writers, locative media artists, mapping artists, hacktivist artists, the head of the cartography lab at Columbia, an architect and his work in an imaging lab at MIT and the inventor/thinker/writer/general polymath Buckminster Fuller. These designations are what in general these folks are classified as, but they all do work that crosses boundaries, and en masse will be seen as all working with basically, space, information, movement and measure. The fifteen waves I paired and sequenced as curator to also show these similarities and amazing cross pollinations. The interviews always have one question about space and another about naming and art. This also will hopefully lead to thirty-one voices across this range about issues of space, art and how we see more and more cross over in work and what influences and inspires each other.

MEZ, *still from Twit Lit*; Courtesy of the artist

AFH: How do you think the current mass-media focus on hacktivism, the internet's effect on writing and social networking will affect the development and perception of new media art?

JH: New media has been declared dead and arrived dozens of times. In fact in the last three months in large publications it has been declared both dead and arriving at least twice.   I also work in information design and have been developing augmented reality applications and functions as well as related theory since about 2003 and it now is also fighting a huge hype wave that in its case is being driven by the middleground screen-based AR apps. The danger right now in AR is that the dancing bear on a business card held up to a webcam and qr codes on ketchup bottles may give the impression to many that this is all there is and create a backlash. The key to studying technology as well as technology-related art is to also be aware of the history, the waves and undulations and polarities along that path.   The mass media is so often myopic, like some great cyclops lurching along with a limited lens in terms of the area of trends and "new"ness among things. The next set will come, then another, then another. At the same time though, this interest is often beneficial as it introduces people to possible tools, interesting happenings and forms the archive. The hacktivism meme can be traced back to circuit bending, prank art, video art and happenings, etc, using manipulated tools and machines but now is infusing an interesting new thread with hacktivist art and the maker movement cross pollinating each other in new ways more and more.

AFH: Does "Narrative Archaeology" offer a potential alternative or antidote to the globalization of information offered on the internet?

JH: The interesting thing for me is that it has gone in a number of directions in the last ten years. When we first created it on 34 north I felt that it had a potential far beyond just a project or a few projects and seemed to tie into place itself. I was thrilled and deeply moved to see that in Barbados a GPS narrative had been made that allowed visitors to "read" their port's history in relation to the slave trade and this area of their history. I also helped years back a small town in Northern Ireland that wanted to save their history and had come across my work on their one computer on a rickety dial up. We traded emails while the town met in one small church. I come from a family, like everyone else with long roots from other lands and to see that something I did for art and what might be possible could actually help someone somewhere else was really the greatest thing art has brought my way. McLuhan was of course on to something with the "global village" but the globalization has also been tied to a growing governing and corporatization of information that is troubling. The talks of monetizing a pay-to-play internet (pay a dollar for each click was one model and this is before the recession), of censorship, of growing public acceptance of spam while the levels of spyware and adware's sophistication skyrockets are dystopic elements of our shared space. The idea that all is needed is a signal and info with GPS enabled allows possible localized information not just as art and narrative, but of portals, of mini archives, of non erasures, of not forgetting. The wild notion is of these connecting in some future to form a kind of public-made geo-spatial internet.
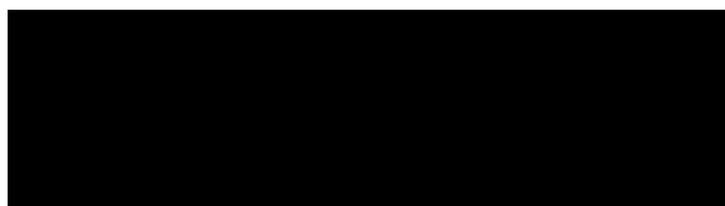
Jonah Brucker-Cohen, *Alerting Infrastructure!*; Courtesy of the artist.

AFH: How attentive and careful are you about the information on you, accessible on-line?

JH: I used to worry about those sites that aggregate your info online but they seem so goofy and haphazard and most only trawl what is available anyway. Facebook did sting me though in the past. I got too cozy in the "walled garden" there that I added someone I thought I somewhat knew and they actually at 3 am chatted with me while trying to hack my bank info. It was not fun and was a huge wake-up call. I read white-hat hacker blogs and articles on safe surfing for a few hours that night and found that you should not post any personal info on Facebook like your cat's name is flufffy unless you are 100% sure you will never use any of that info for a password. The number three cybercrime (name to me makes it sound cooler than it is which is awkward for basic theft) is through social networks. The person runs fluffy and whatever else you have listed online along with code creating algorithm software and tries banks, PayPal etc. If it hits, they are in.

Jeremy Wood, *My Ghost*; Courtesy of the artist

AFH: Can you describe the new media objectives for LEA/ Leonardo online?

JH: The journal is the online branch of Leonardo. Leonardo and LEA look at the nexus of art/technology/science and creativity. The larger construct for my show is also how an architect and a cartographer do work that is perfect side by side with "artists" and "writers. The idea that science is not creative is of course absurd, as is the cultural construct that the artist and art is not possessing any internal logic. Calculus can be beautiful as can be quantum physics etc. Art made using technology shown along with scientific visualizations is also deeply beautiful. I can't say what the larger objectives would be, but for me as LEA's "new media curator" and a contributing editor, it is to show the range, the history, the newest developments as well as the cross pollinations.

ArtSlant would like to thank Jeremy Hight for his assistance in making this interview possible.

--Ana Finel Honigman

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