

---

# Handheld Histories

**Carmin Karasic**

Boston Cyberarts, Inc.  
and The Art Institute of Boston  
18 Narragansett Rd.  
Quincy, MA 02169 USA  
carmin@pixelyze.com

**Abstract**

This paper is submitted in response to a call for participation in the "About Face / Interface: Creative Engagement in New Media Arts and HCI" workshop. The paper describes my interest in the workshop theme and some of my multimedia artworks that address social implications of communication technologies.

**Keywords**

Pervasive computing, multimedia art, new media artist, mobile technologies, GPS, data visualization

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.1. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Multimedia Information Systems.

**Theoretical Perspective**

Emerging communication technology and network access will eventually enable wireless connectivity anywhere and anytime. Public desire for instant gratification and acceptance of pervasive digital devices generates demand for digital services. I use emerging technologies in my art to increase social awareness. My artworks consciously examine the hyperreal, because representation has become more important than personal opinion, observation, or even reality itself. I am specifically interested in modes of interaction with pervasive computing.

Interface issues are not new to me. I have many years of professional experience in software application development. As a Senior Information Architect for iXL, a major website development company, I was responsible for using an iterative approach and a variety of tools to effectively architect positive user experiences. Research is also critical to any contribution I might make in the field of pervasive computing. Scientific research is not new to me, as I have worked many years in a tissue culture lab, but 'research for art' will be personally novel.

Commercial research and development benefit from artistic sensibilities. Iterative development methodology, e.g. define, develop, test, refine, retest, refine, retest, until complete, is ideal for artistic intervention. Artists can parallel and/or join researchers and developers in emerging technologies experimentation, rather than function as consumers who use the completed product. In this way, artistic creativity becomes an independent zone of analysis.<sup>1</sup> Future discoveries and their consequences are unpredictable. Indeterminate results add to the iterative approach, enriching the development process. Corporate artist residencies, such as Boston Cyberarts' A.R.T.C.O.M. exist precisely to bring artists and high tech corporations together.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Wilson, Stephen. (1993) "High Tech Artists' Stances Toward Cultural Theory" in *Light and Dark Visions: The Relationship of Cultural Theory to Art That Uses Emerging Technologies*. San Francisco State University. Retrieved Dec. 27, 2004 from <<http://userwww.sfsu.edu/%7Eswilson/papers/postmodern.pap.html#footnotes4>>.

<sup>2</sup> Fifield, George. (2004) "A.R.T.C.O.M. Artists in Residence at Technology Companies of Massachusetts." Boston Cyberarts,

Ultimately, my ambition is to contribute to the social engagement of new technologies through art. Working together artists and researchers can cultivate fresh information. Their synergy can lead to new cultural insights and potential rather than reinforce old assumptions. I want my work to contribute to invention and the extension of digital enhancements. I hope my work will optimistically investigate implications of:

- Cultural and social repercussions of technology control and access
- Hyperreal constructs generating demand for specific technologies
- The transparency of human-to-computer interfaces and computer-to-computer interfaces.

### **New Media Artworks**

Time based art must be worth the time it takes to experience it. With that in mind, I try to make the commitment worth the time the user is willing to spend with my art. My challenge is to present hypermedia that quickly invites further exploration.

*FloodNet (1998)*

*<http://www.thing.net/~rdom/zapsTactical/zaps.html>*

I am interested in social events that use data communication to empower people rather than institutions. I am a founding member of the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), an internationally recognized net.art activist group. "FloodNet", our net.art project explored the use of the internet as a site

---

Inc. Retrieved Dec. 27, 2004 from <<http://bostoncyberarts.org/air>>.

of political protest. "FloodNet" was an electronic civil disobedience performance art project that engaged activists world wide in virtual protest of the low intensity war on the indigenous people of Mexico. I have often heard activists claim that net.activism is not real activism because people do not lay down their lives in the street while participating in an online action. Sarah Wolff, a handicapped woman told me "FloodNet" made her see that she could use the web for political activism. Sarah cannot join street actions because of her physical limitations, so the idea of international online protest empowered her.

Given the breadth and depth of increasingly global mass communication, denying the impact of our personal choices on the rest of the planet is now inexcusable. Recycled information can lead to new perspectives by presenting the data differently. Information is accumulating faster than it is possible to track; knowledge databases, multi-national industries, social contexts, and technologies effect everything. Contributions to emerging technology and future cultural development require data analysis. Data visualization is critical for new analysis.

*Stateless Half Life (2004)*

<http://www.carminka.net/shl>

In my web art project "Stateless Half Life" refugee movement is visualized in dynamic trails. Refugees and repatriation are expressed as data points because without living the experience, our only reference is representational data – data that we are free to label and pigeonhole. This net.art project was inspired by the varied psychological and emotional impacts of being expelled from one's homeland as expressed in Edward Said's essay, "*Reflections on Exiles*". "Stateless Half

Life" engages you with interactive visuals, luring you deeper into the website, only to kick you out and forever deny you re-entry.

This net.art piece successfully elicits a visceral response to an infringement on assumed rights within the context of cyberspace. The emotional response to the project is meant to cause further reflection on the plight of refugees. Ideally, the work would move one to action.

*Handheld Histories (a work in progress)*

Using the GPS and Nextel's network, TeleNav and ViaMoto can determine your location and download location specific information directly to your Nextel phone, typically accurate to within 5 to 10 meters."<sup>3</sup> "Handheld Histories" is an artwork that addresses visual elements in historic bias and hints at media literacy through GPS and mobile computing technologies. History is typically a story perpetuated as fact and published by the dominant social structures. Historic texts often skew event details to favor the victors, typically illustrated with drawings, paintings and photographs that support the victors' tales. These images create an interpreted history, filtered by an artist or image producer. I want to construct hyper-monuments at the sites of historic monuments. The intent is to create electronic monuments as symbols of lost alternative perspectives.

---

<sup>3</sup> Aquino, Grace. (2004) "Dialed In" in PC World. Retrieved Jan. 2, 2006 from < <http://www.pcworld.com/resource/printable/article/0,aid,115273,00.asp#> >.



Given a prominent historic monument, shrine, location, etc., "Handheld Histories" will play a location specific movie clip that regresses the present day image to a pre-manipulated image for the specific history. For example, imagine your cell phone 'bells' you near the African Meeting house in Boston, MA. You 'answer' and see an easily identifiable photo of the African Meeting House building labeled "African Meeting House, c. 2006" just as it appears right there in front of you on the street. You press "Play" and see the building morph through images that move backwards in history to a time when that location was at its natural, undeveloped state – perhaps on a forest hillside.

Images displayed in "Handheld Histories" will be artist interpretations based on archives and tales of the specific location. Because of limited historic records, initial sites chosen for this project will be national monuments. When available colloquial anecdotes will be illustrated and presented. Accompanying multimedia components will include a related website and audio downloads. Participants will be able to contribute text, image, and/or audio content from the monument location via their cell phone to the project website.

This project will require extensive historic research and technical research. Boston, Massachusetts is an ideal initial location because of the city's rich history and technical resources. The Lion and the Unicorn on top of the oldest surviving public building in Boston, The Old State House, remind me that history is a tale of sorts. Teri Rueb's GPS based site-specific sound installation,

"Itinerant"<sup>4</sup>, directly inspired my project. As one strolls through Boston public spaces holding an audio and GPS enabled palm pilot, Rueb's project 'plays' personal stories told in location specific voices. My project will focus on sites of historic importance, adding a visual component, and wiki style interactivity.

The project has obvious potential educational and tourist uses. It would also continue to expand via individual content contributions through the "Handheld Histories" associated wiki style knowledgebase website. Ultimately, I want to create a type of digital disturbance in which voices from a forgotten history contact people passing through a hyper-monument. ...Perhaps a whispered update about the underground railroad... The "Handheld Histories" artwork will serve as version 1.0 toward the digital disturbance project.

### Bibliography

[1] Aquino, Grace. (2004) "Dialed In" in PC World. Retrieved Jan. 2, 2006 from <http://www.pcworld.com/resource/printable/article/0,aid,115273,00.asp#>>.

[2] Fifield, George. (2004) "A.R.T.C.O.M. Artists in Residence at Technology Companies of Massachusetts." Boston Cyberarts, Inc. Retrieved Dec. 27, 2004 from <http://bostoncyberarts.org/air>>.

[3] Wilson, Stephen. (1993) "High Tech Artists' Stances Toward Cultural Theory" in Light and Dark Visions: The Relationship of Cultural Theory to Art That Uses Emerging Technologies. San Francisco State University. Retrieved Dec. 27, 2004 from <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/%7Eswilson/papers/postmodern.pap.html#footnotes4>>.

<sup>4</sup> More information about Itinerant can be found at <http://turbulence.org/Works/itinerant>