
The Talking Poles

Public Art based in Social Design

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Abstract

This case study provides insights for artists, designers, and technologists working with community-generated media in the domain of public art. The authors document their recent public artwork, the Talking Poles, and discuss the adaptation of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) design methods to the project. Community-generated public art has a direct relationship to the field of HCI through the technology that underlies both social computing and quotidian digital documentation. When acknowledging 'citizen action' as a component of public art, consideration must also be given to preservation of the work as representative of an emergent and shared digital world culture.

Keywords

Social computing; Social Design Research; Community Art Practice.

Introduction

Historically, avant-garde artistic movements ranging from Fluxus to the Futurists¹ have worked to advance technological change and to expand cultural consciousness. Design theorist Ken Friedman explains that Fluxus emerged in the late 1950's and early 60's as electrical engineering shifted to electronic engineering. He states that rather than pursuing technical - or simply technological - solutions, Fluxus artists tended to move in a philosophical vein, "direct and subtle" and in so doing "steered clear of the dead-end solutions typical of the 'art and technology' craze". [8] Highly skilled practitioners in the fields of performance, painting, sculpture, photography, film, video, and new media have previously produced works that are currently seen as iconic markers of their era. Jonathan E. Schroeder discusses meaning, measure and the morality of materialism – Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can series is used to exemplify an era of consumerism in American culture. [14,15,16,17] Cultural theorist Lucy Lippard claims that pop artists were united in their recognition of consumer goods as expressive devices and were preoccupied with manufactured objects detached from nature. [13]

With the advent of social computing, digital media works produced by non-professional artists have emerged through the multi-scaled exhibition venues available on the Internet. The mapping of ideas in works created by community participants, recorded on digital media, and facilitated by professional artists provides a forum while having the potential to empower

¹ "The Avant-Garde: From Futurism to Fluxus" was exhibited at the Jonas Mekas Visual Arts Center (2007/2008). See http://georgemaciunas.com/?page_id=184

individual participants. Some public artworks that incorporate social media produced by non-professional artists concentrate on the esthetics, rather the context of the contribution. Flow (2009) is a photo/media-based permanent public artwork in Vancouver, BC. [3] The work is displayed on a large glass projection surface in a new civic centre. Produced by Fiona Bowie and Sidney Fels, the work displays a host of individuals arranged into social groups. Some core characters appear more often than others, but all appear over a photograph of landscape. Bowie documented people and landscapes over the course of a few years, and the programmed system renders the visual mash-up. The interactive component of this work is on the web site where people can input text that will appear in blocks on the projection. While this work combines contributions from both the artists and social media, it does not invite people into the process of the final creation of the work. In a different installation called *glisten) HIVE (2010) produced by Julie Andreyev, animated text and sounds are generated as visualizations of live Twitter feeds about animal consciousness. [2] Like Flow, *glisten) HIVE is designed to use social media as an attribute of the artwork. The artwork then becomes a platform that filters the contributions. In the following sections, we introduce the Talking Poles project, discuss the design methods used to engage local residents, and present our observations of the 'social' as an art form.

The Talking Poles

In March 2008 the City of Surrey advertised a call to artists for public artwork proposals for work to be situated along the Serpentine Greenway area of Surrey, British Columbia, Canada. Our artist team Lorna Boschman, Vicki Moulder, and T'Uy'Tanat-Cease Wyss

submitted two proposals. The first was called Mother Languages Digital Monument and introduced innovative ways to integrate the languages of the area into school programs. The second was the Talking Poles, a proposal to construct six florescent light sabers along the walking path of the greenway. In August 2008 we received notice that our plan for the florescent light sabers was accepted and that we were to proceed to the next stage of production in consultation with the city management. The physical form and interactive components of the poles changed dramatically as municipal employees determined what was suitable and safe for the area. The poles were first conceived as a florescent light saber, encased in a ten-foot tall Plexiglas tube, and supported on a concrete base. In response to concerns that vandals would be attracted to the light, the base became a bench, and the light saber was extinguished. After numerous iterations, (fig. 1) the final design became a smooth metal pole with attached surface visuals that reflect the primary themes to emerge in community-based video and audio recordings.

The Talking Poles were placed north and south of a busy intersection. Pedestrians approaching the Poles trigger sensors that activate pre-recorded sounds played through speakers embedded inside each pole (fig. 2). The electronic components are powered by a solar panel located in the top cone of each pole.

A unique aspect of the project was that community members determined the content and themes of the artwork. Audio recordings of local residents' voices were pre-mixed with music and play in short segments. The clips range in length from 30-90 seconds, and play back from an MP3 player housed in an enclosed metal

cone above each Pole. Our artist team worked with area residents to design the audio and visual components, as well as to determine the themes of the artwork.

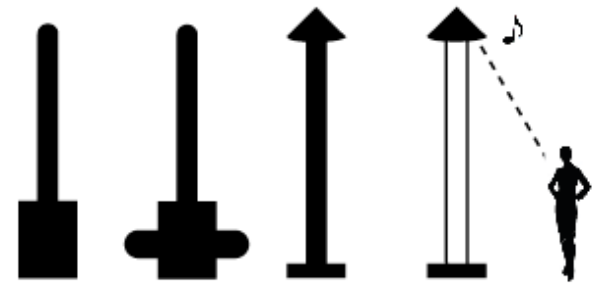


Figure 1: Physical evolution of the Talking Poles



Figure 2: Artist working on Talking Poles surface

The overall process for negotiating the aesthetics and functionality of this public artwork involved many different strategies. For the purpose of this case study we examine how participatory design methods were used to engage local residents, how the integrity of their work was maintained and amplified, and what the implications were of making local residents the primary contributors to the content of the artwork.

Designing engagement

Trends in HCI have evolved to incorporate the 'social' as an integral part of system design. Theorist Paul Dourish has envisioned social computing in the future as matrixes full of exchanges existing separately from current social structures. [5] Researcher Rogerio DePaula situates these emerging HCI discoveries within the study of human interactions mediated by technology in the context of culture. [4] Since the advent of Web 2.0, some scholars suggest that human agency drives the inner workings of the Internet. Tacchi, Slater and Hearn argue that communicative ecologies are a process that involves a mix of media, organized in specific ways, through which people connect with their social networks. [18] For this reason, data uploaded and stored on social media sites are considered a shared creation of meaningful content in a virtual context. These interpretations are invaluable to artists producing public artworks that involve technology. By introducing a new framework for understanding the dynamics of communicative ecologies, both the people involved and the technologies used can be recognized for their separate contributions.

Participatory design (PD) emerged from socio-technical concerns regarding the design and use of information

systems in organizations [7,9]. "Conditions for human development such as learning of new qualifications and democratic participation and communication are designed" according to Pelle Ehn [6]. A definition of a successful participatory design project as discussed by Russell Ackoff includes these three conditions: (1) it makes a difference for the participants, (2) implementation of the results is likely, and (3) it is fun. [1]

Within the Talking Poles project, we wanted people's contributions to drive the overall design of the artwork, including the sound recordings. To engage participants we adapted Ackoff's conditions of success and determined that:

- Participants' design solutions are a meaningful interpretation of their locale.
- Participants can make creative contributions regardless of their prior knowledge of technology.

We planned the participatory design process by first visiting the physical site and reviewing the Statistics Canada Guide for the area. We learned that 30.3 percent of the city's population is foreign-born, 46.1 percent of the population are visible minorities, while Aboriginal people constitute 1.9 percent of the population.² To involve participants, we took the following steps:

1. We invited three people from the area to be our spiritual advisors. These advisors helped us understand the cultural and social complexities of the area.
2. We organized workshops at Kwantlen Polytechnic University with a class of 15 visual arts students. We

² Statistics Canada: 2006 Community Profiles > Search results for "Surrey"

visited the class once a week for three weeks to develop the conceptual theme of each pole.

3. We organized workshops with 25 design students at Tamanawis Secondary School. In these workshops we made recorded messages for the Poles from participants.

4. We organized a feast to celebrate World Drumming Day at Kekinow Native Housing. This gave us the opportunity to introduce our advisors to each other.

5. We designed a Talking Pole prototype (fig. 3) and placed it on location. With printed brochures in hand, we stood in front of the prototype inviting people to sit at a table and to talk with us about their experiences in the area. We worked with a translator who could transcribe Punjabi or Hindi into written English.

In all of the workshops we introduced the Talking Poles project as a public artwork commissioned by the City of Surrey. Then we asked people to tell us “What would you like the artwork say?” and “What message would you send to future generations?” The ways that people interpreted our introduction and request for messages ranged from ‘not interested’ to ‘very invested’. If people were not interested, they did not participate. If they were very invested, they composed their thoughts and spoke directly into the recording device so that their words could become part of the artwork’s recordings.

Initially, we thought because the greenway forms a lengthy walking corridor, most of the people would speak directly about nature. This was true as people



Figure 3: Talking Poles prototype on site

expressed feelings of well-being from walking outdoors, and spoke of love and respect for the environment. As well, we learned that people were concerned about the growing gang violence³ in the area. This concern was reflected in their messages that encouraged people to maintain inner peace and non-violent behavior.⁴ We also learned that a large group of people wanted to address the racial issues in the schools and their experiences based on living as new Canadians. People shared ideas about universal sisterhood and brotherhood, being part of a global family, trying to stop bullying, and compassion. The recorded documentation maps our community engagement process – over seventy-five participants contributed

³ Hundreds turn out to protest gang violence in Metro Vancouver: <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2009/02/22/bc-surrey-gang-rally.html#ixzz11kd3ZjRU>

audio and/or video pieces. The benefit of working with so many people was that we had multiple reflective partners involved in the creation and promotion of the project.

Instead of conventional design approaches like user studies, community-engaged art is influenced by participatory design methods. By incorporating these methods, we became conscious of our role as artists, the participants' role as co-creators, and the context of the artwork in local physical and 'social' space.

Amplifying the social

Unlike the field of science, different forms of art are assembled according to their medium and technique. For example, the materials used in a painting (brushes, paint, canvas) are both the medium and substances used to create the art form. The form of a painting exists in two-dimensional space and reveals the artist's intent through material composition and color usage. The constraints and limitations of any particular medium are called its formal qualities.

Rather than viewing the 'social' as something already assembled, the word is used here to denote the tracking of the 'social' as it assembles, described by Bruno Latour in *Reassembling the Social*. [12] To a much higher degree than their distant relatives, the common streetlight, the Talking Poles perform with non-intentional agency. While the streetlights are also in the same location, their role as evocative objects is limited to their physical function as illumination. Both the streetlights and the Talking Poles are located in a busy walking path. While the streetlights have a known function, the Talking Poles are developing 'socially' because their exterior is covered with uniquely

designed text messages and their sensors trigger interactive audio content. The Poles are provocative because area residents are not always sure what their function is, initiating a process of discovery. The Poles are repositories for the audio recordings of an engaged community-based art process, while the streetlights perform a more limited function.



Figure 4: June Clear-Sky talks about love, one of our themes

In June Clear-Sky's interview⁵ she passionately talks about the importance of love as a vibration that can heal all wounds. She saw the Talking Poles as a means to transfer this knowledge. While some area residents questioned us about "the cost to taxpayers" of the Talking Poles, the same issue was not raised concerning the cost of streetlights. In the syntax of

⁵ June Clear-Sky's message on love and peace
<http://vimeo.com/15649908>

Latour and other Actor-Network-Theory scholars, we believe this was because the streetlights are 'intermediaries' (where meaning is transported without alteration) while the Talking Poles are 'mediators' (where meaning is transformed, modified or distorted). [12]

Functioning as mediators, the artist team worked with translators to isolate strongly articulated visual and media content. Working with an audio designer, the comments gathered from area residents were combined with musical recordings and acoustic effects to produce multi-layered evocative compositions.⁶ Video recordings of community engagement workshops were edited and posted on the City of Surrey's website. Our two themes – love and peace – grew out of community ideals. The words were translated into eight languages spoken by area residents, First Nations iconographic symbols, and binary code. Graphic designer Akash Murgai combined the ten language forms into one visual composition per theme (fig. 5). The idea of the Poles as mediators is not limited to the experiences of pedestrians who activate the sound recordings when they approach the Poles. The meaning of the place is also transformed by the very presence of the public artwork. At an early stage of the project, we realized that our role as artists was to amplify the voices of area residents through the audio recordings. As a result, the 'social' emerged as a multi-scaled voice with many different threads of conversation unique to the people living in close proximity to the Serpentine Greenway.

⁶ Audio samples can be heard at <http://www.interactionart.org/TalkingPoles/index.html>

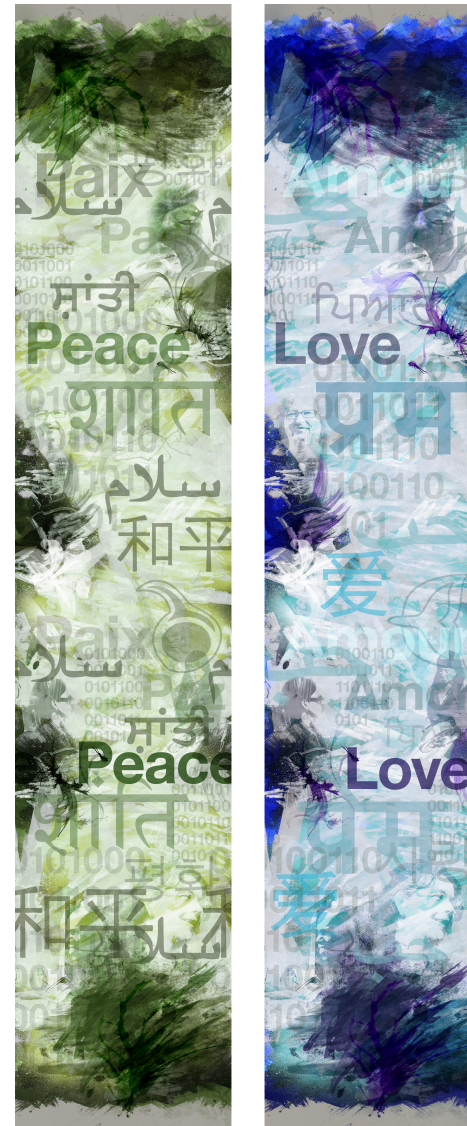


Figure 5: Surface design by Akash Murgai

The aesthetics of this work were characteristic of the region's demographics. When artists work with an art form like painting, the aesthetic properties presented reflect the perspective of the artist. In contrast, when artists work with the 'social', the aesthetics of the work are reflective of the community members involved. By incorporating participatory design methods, we became conscious of our role as co-creators who work with participants, in the context of their local physical and 'social' space. Skills of the artists are used to mediate the audio recordings to ensure meaning is maintained. Instead of being the individual creator of the work, the artist looks for options and tools to enhance collective voices as a primary characteristic of the artwork.

Conclusion

For our team, the most provocative takeaway from this project was to redefine the artist's role and to establish a broader context to discuss the ethics of working with audio recordings collected from local residents.

We learned that the 'social' is an evolving term that can be perceived through many different lenses. Within the design world, the 'social' has been considered a value added to the design process that improves human well-being and livelihood. [11] From the perspective of social networking web sites such as Facebook, the 'social' represents the masses of people who contribute content. Interactions are mined and inform secondary industry product advertising. Within the Talking Poles, the 'social' was enacted when co-creating a digital media installation with local residents. By recognizing and documenting the ideas and aspirations of the community, the art form represents the ideas of people within a space.

Author Dolores Hayden explains that the production of space begins as soon as indigenous residents locate themselves in a particular landscape and begin the search for subsistence. She claims that all of the private and public planning activities of sustaining a community have a social as well as a technological history. [10]

While working with the Talking Poles project, we learned that the social and technological aspects of the public artwork required a very specific subset of skills influenced by HCI. The participatory design methods allowed us not only to engage with the public, but also to understand their concerns conceptually and amplify their aesthetics through the audio recordings. By defining the 'social' as an art form, we were able to lobby for the same ethical considerations and conservation as other public artworks. The implications are that the audio recordings cannot be altered or removed without our approval. The success of the work is that it is seen as an iconic marker, describing a place in time for local area residents.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the generous support of the City of Surrey, Public Art Program (designated Canadian Cultural Capital of Canada by the Department of Canadian Heritage), the numerous contributions of local area residents, and the collaboration of the third member of our artist team T'Uy'Tanat-Cease Wyss.

A full list of the people who contributed to this project can be viewed at this location
www.interactionart.org/TalkingPoles/

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