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Freequent Traveller: Interaction versus Contemplation

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Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

The materials, assembled for each issue around a theme, include analytical essays and articles, interviews, art projects, photographic images, etc. Static will welcome feedback, argument and commentary from scholars, artists, and other readers, and will be regularly updated in order to communicate the most recent and relevant ideas and interpretations on the chosen topic.

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Freequent Traveller¹ was originally produced as a playful but sensitive research element for a questionnaire concerning issues of mobility, home and identity. How much technology do we need? What's home for you? What's the aim of travelling for you? What do we really need? Freequent Traveller puts the subject in a state of moving and being moved. It's a catalyst for interaction between people and for rethinking our needs and actual living situation. The inspirations for Freequent Traveller, were archaic immersive rituals, the HIBYE nomadic work of Martí Guixé², The Viridian Neologue Contest, developed by Bruce Sterling and Natalie Jeremijenko³, and John Thackara.

Concept

The terms Freequent Traveller relates to frequency and periodicity, while free emphasizes the state of being elated. Traveller is used as a metaphor for our life-long journey. Using Freequent Traveller means to make a journey. Travel is the unification of impulse and action, movement and excitement, impression and expression - Travel is first and foremost self-movement, desire, and change. Travelling in space includes the travel inside oneself at the same time.

In describing the concept of Freequent Traveller, Susanne Schuricht quotes John Thackara: "Being embodied is our nature as earth-born creatures. The danger in our infatuation with digital communication is that we feel compelled to reduce all human knowledge and experience that we have by virtue of having bodies. When we persist in trying to substitute virtual experiences for embodied ones we end up with the worst of both worlds. Digitization speeds the flow of data but impoverishes our lived experience. Modern mobility is unsustainable. As a system, mobility is locked into a mode of perpetual growth in a world whose carrying capacity is limited. This modern development has also transformed the ways we experience "here" and "now" and "there" and "next"⁴.

The participant of Freequent Traveller doesn't cover a real distance, the user moves at the very same spot, moves in the mind, while the interaction is an embodied and unconscious experience. Lying in the hammock this swinging motion is synchronized with the sentences animated across the projection screen. The hammock's movement is translated into animated type in real time. Analogous to the pendulum-like movements of the hammock itself, the animations are based on sine waves. The user is immersed in the stimulating synchronous loop of her/ his own physical motion and perceived visual dynamics.

The hammock has been chosen purposefully as it creates a situation of peace and contemplation, though one is passive and active at the same time. The hardware components are simple, plain mechanics. The visibility of this simplicity is part of the aesthetics of the installation. A computer mouse is deconstructed and reconstructed, but instead of a ball, there is twine going through. The twine is fixed to the end of the hammock, transmitting the amplitude and frequency.

The text consists of statements from artists, friends and visitors from all over the world about mobility, home and identity and it emphasizes a global awareness. The text is entered beforehand. The text-passages also

contain contemplations by the artist and excerpts from collected interviews and conversations with the audience of this travelling installation. The content is frequently updated.

Frequent Traveller is explorative, sensuous and playful. Its use is intuitive. Interactions are continuous and not in discreet steps; it is unencumbered, poetic, involving, engaging, has cognitive (visual/textual) as well as sensuous (tactual) qualities.

Expanding Boundaries

As an artist, Susanne Schuricht is looking for processes by which to see the well known with new eyes and thus re-perceive oneself as well. She creates and jointly constructs objects, environments and situations to use them as catalysts to find out more about our and others' culture and, to better understand our position in society. Her role is to inspire people to expand their boundaries, to broaden one's mind by changing ones position and perception. Every traveller needs this ability to be able to open up to the new and unknown in foreign situations.

Thackara believes that the aim and responsibility of new Media Art is to search "for aesthetic, political and individual messages that touch people and help us to better understand the present. (...) To create critical interfaces that allow the spectator to keep a certain distance from all the hype that surrounds virtual spaces and suggestive computer worlds."⁵

Frequent Traveller explores these boundaries of Media Art and inspires people to become creative themselves through participatory elements of the work. With every public presentation its content grows with newly added statements.

A central component of the work is rhythm. On one hand this is a physical rhythm and on the other a metaphorical one—an ebb and flow of themes and events. All indigenous cultures have rituals that include repetitive motion to get into an elevated and engrossed state of mind. At the same time this rhythmic activity increases the activity of the brain.⁶ The feedback loop created by the soft, swinging motion of the hammock linked to the dynamics of the animated text imbues the consciousness with a mild form of intoxication one can happily submit to. Using Frequent Traveller makes the participant happy!

Frequent Traveller makes use of this method to transport the visitor into a state of mind beyond the everyday providing the possibility to engage in the universal themes but at the same time reflecting personal needs of home, mobility and identity. Thoughts of fellow participants from different backgrounds and cultures become unobtrusively visible, raising a local and global awareness.

Conclusion

Life is a frequent travel - travelling more consciously, being aware of the various options and perspectives supports to better navigate (through) the world.

Frequent Traveller⁷ makes its users look at their surrounding from a fresh perspective. It is a catalyst for starting to re-think our way of life in

today's times. To lie in the hammock and sway through the text helps set the mind into a moving state of flow. Some didn't believe that it would be such a strong experience.

The participant is from the beginning subconsciously in full control. Participants use a computer without being aware of it. During usage, the installation becomes intuitively accessible: They can play by making the text pause, submit to it, step in or step out. The piece does not conceal its interface but reveals it as part of its appearance; its transparency often creates a surprising effect of becoming aware of her / his action in relation to the construction. In *Freequent Traveller* bodily motion and technology, the analogue and the digital coalesce. It becomes another exploration of the question: How much technology, which technologies, and which tools do we really need?

Besides it brings strangers playfully together – it's a tool, which creates a special relaxed and social atmosphere to make people feel comfortable talking about personal issues.

Being elevated and set into a symbolic state of dislocatedness people might feel confronted with themes such as constituting a transnational society, global information exchange, the loss of the notion of place, the breaking of boundaries.

Freequent Traveller recognizes the problematic, sometimes uncomfortable atmosphere of the melting of personal and public situations and provides an adaptable sensitive tool for engagement with individuals in public space.

Supporting a rhythm based feeling of pleasure, the hammock offers a flexible, personally adaptable space in a situation of exposedness to the public while being in a receptively, emotional therefore also vulnerable state.

The exhibition context creates a situation, where the text messages are viewed by everybody. Closing the hammock however, visitors can create a cocoon like space, where they experience the text messages in a more intimate atmosphere.

As mobile research tool *Freequent Traveller* is on its way to different places and cultures collecting statements and experiences about different behavior, interaction and contemplation.

Examples of the projected text passages (a selection)

"What technologies or tools - official - nomadic - domestic - objects - stories - to interact in person, face-to-face, stories instead of objects – meet somebody like you" *Yui*

"After spending a week in the woods on a corporate Outward Bound trip, with almost nothing - My trip changed my whole way of thinking, as far as what 'being connected' means. I no longer need the 'stuff' I thought kept me connected to home, and office. Today's technology keeps me as connected as I choose to be." *Senior Project Manager*

“How much technology do we need? Unfortunately ‘need’ and ‘have to live with’ are irretrievably mixed up. The world is so full of technology and inter-mingled systems that we can't just throw them away. But I'm confident we are moving away from the idea that tech is a good thing by itself. Most of us feel far from in control. We're filling up the world with amazing devices and systems - on top of the natural and human ones that were already here - only to discover that these complex systems seem to be out of control: too complex to understand, let alone to shape, or redirect. But things may seem out of control - but they are not out of our hands.” *John Thackara*

“For me, much interesting about the dream - I sometimes think that kind of the dreams, is it same for people who are living in different area - Japanese, German, British, African, whoever? Because, I've always slept as Japanese, so I never know. Do you know what I mean? ” *Masa*

“I am a frequent traveller in the images stored in my memories. I continuously capture them. But it is impossible. I only can look and look and again look. Words, Images, Emotions, People, Voices – What does it mean? I don't know. I'm not able to understand the travel. I can only look and again, look and love it.” *Mauro*

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References

- ¹ Frequent Traveller was developed in collaboration with Tobias Schmidt as programmer <<http://t081.de>>.
- ² Guixé, Martí. *HIBYE Nomadic Work* in Workspaces exhibit at Museum of Modern Art, NY (2002) <<http://www.guixe.com>>.
- ³ The Viridian Neologue Contest, (2000) <<http://www.viridianrepository.com/neologue/neologue.Htm>>.
- ⁴ John Thackara, *In the Bubble: Design in a complex world* (MIT Press, 2005).
- ⁵ Gerold Baier. *Rhythmus, Tanz in Körper und Gehirn* (Rowohlt Tb, 2001) p. 188 and following.
- ⁶ John Thackara, *New Design in a complex world*, interview from Susanne Schuricht and Mirjam Struppek with John Thackara, an excerpt is published in the Italian magazine *tema celeste*, 2005 (ISSN 1128-6601).
- ⁷ Further information about Frequent Traveller: <<http://www.sushu.de/free>>.