Cultures of Listening
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Public Authoring and Everyday Life

Over the past five years many of Proboscis' artworks and projects have explored and developed the concept of 'public authoring', the everyday mapping and sharing of knowledge and experience by people about the places and spaces they live, work and play in.

The concept and act of listening are crucial to this vision of public authoring: where public authoring offers space and agency for people to use their voice it also needs to encourage that voice to be heard. The everyday experience of sound, and the skills of listening, are largely dominated by visual culture, yet cultures of listening are crucial to cultural experience and understanding human relationships, from the intimate to the civic, local to international. Proboscis' long-term *Social Tapestries* programme aims to investigate and develop practices of public authoring that engender 'cultures of listening'—places and spaces in which we pause to reflect on what we hear and disentangle meaning from the babble of noise.

Social Tapestries includes challenging and playful artworks, projects and experiments exploring how public authoring can pervade everyday life in different situations and contexts. Building upon the *Urban Tapestries* knowledge mapping and sharing software platform (developed by Proboscis and its partners), *Social Tapestries* includes discrete works and public collaborations with specific communities addressing education, social housing, community arts and local government. The flow of ideas from *Social Tapestries* has increasingly emphasised the importance of storytelling and narrative as a living, everyday process that underpins how people co-create and inhabit culture and society.

Fragmented Narratives and Storytelling

From cutting edge mobile and internet technologies to traditional paper-based methods, our recent work has involved exploring non-linear and fragmented narratives using visual, three-dimensional and spatial methods. Artworks and projects arising from this include *DIFFUSION*, the *StoryCubes*, and *Endless Landscapes*. In different local contexts and situations these have been adapted into tools for storytelling and public authoring that link the online and offline worlds.

Urban Tapestries mobile client. Image courtesy John-Paul Bichard 2004.

Bridging analogue and digital media *DIFFUSION* is a downloadable book format (to print and make up) using Adobe PDF technologies that can be shared electronically, by photocopy or as hand-made paper books—*samizdat* for the digital age. Six years into publishing commissioned texts by artists and writers an innovative web service is being created that enables people to generate their own *DIFFUSION* eBooks without the need for design expertise or professional DTP software. The aim is to extend the reach of the *DIFFUSION* publishing format by creating an online community tool.

DIFFUSION. Image courtesy Proboscis 2006.

Traditional paper technologies also underpin the *StoryCubes* and *Endless Landscapes*. They are poetic and playful, shifting and fragmenting narratives, making unforeseen associations and connections. As formats for creating two- and three-dimensional narrative structures, that reveal multiple possibilities in storytelling, they have been used as discrete artworks and as part of public projects that build shared narratives.

Each face of a *StoryCube* can illustrate or describe an idea; placed together to create large constructions or landscapes it is possible to construct multiple narratives with interlocking three-dimensional relationships. Each cube can be folded in two different ways, presenting two different ways of telling a story, and like books turned inside out they can be read by turning and twisting in your hand or by following the flow of vertical and horizontal constructions, adding a new dimension to what we now think of as interactivity.

StoryCubes. Image courtesy Proboscis 2006.

The *Endless Landscape*, or myriorama (meaning 'many views'), was a popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century storytelling game. It consists of paintings, depicting fragments of a panorama, that can be arranged in many combinations to form a continuous landscape with each card extending or shifting the narrative. Originally created for the bookwork A *Case of Perspectives*, Proboscis' first *Endless Landscape*, by Alice Angus, was inspired by creating non-linear narratives of the city. It connects real and imaginary fragments of London's present with traces, shadows and spectres of its past. It has been further developed into a resource used by schools and in participatory projects.

Endless Landscape. Image courtesy Proboscis 2006.

Communities and Collaborations

Since 2004 Proboscis has run a number of projects with specific communities exploring the uses of public authoring. These include Havelock Housing Estate, St Marks Housing Co-operative, Jenny Hammond School, users of London Fields and the Institute for International Visual Arts (inIVA) in London.

In Southall Proboscis has been working with residents of the Havelock estate to enable people to gather evidence about systemic neglect and failure of the housing authority. The information gathered by the residents can then be used to assist the service providers in

dealing with the maintenance and repair issues and also to hold local authorities to account.

A project with members of St Marks Housing Co-operative captured and recorded the memories of the co-op to help the organisation carry on its mission in the future, as the make up of the co-op changes. Ongoing recording of the activities of the co-op, including its history of successes and negotiations with housing associations, will aid future developments.

Workshop with St Marks Housing Co-operative. Image courtesy Proboscis 2006.

The *Everyday Archaeology Project* was the third stage of a long-term collaboration with Jenny Hammond School in North West London which enabled students in key stage two to learn about, explore and gather evidence of the relationship between pollution and their local environment. Using new media tools, cameras, sound recorders, *DIFFUSION* eBooks, the *StoryCubes* and *Endless Landscapes*, the project cuts across subjects in the curriculum.


Everyday Archaeology. Image courtesy Proboscis 2006.

For *Participatory Sensing* Proboscis has been building experiments such as *Robotic Feral Public Authoring* (with Natalie Jeremijenko) to enable people to record and map pollution in their environment. The experiments combine adaptations of toy robots and cheap home electronics with GPS positioning, environmental sensors, wireless data and online mapping technologies.

Robotic Feral Public Authoring. Image courtesy Proboscis 2006.
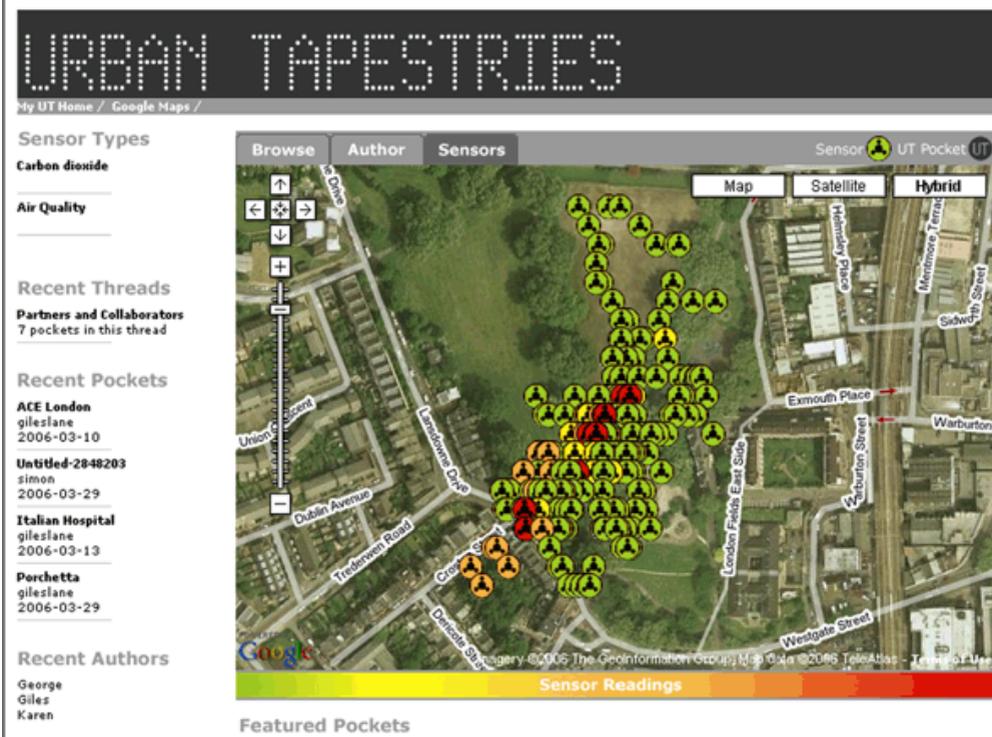
Feral Robots' sensor data viewed with *Urban Tapestries* web client. Image courtesy Proboscis 2006.

Snout. Image courtesy Proboscis 2006.

Building on these Feral Robots, *Snout* is a new collaboration, between London's Institute for International Visual Arts (inIVA), Proboscis and researchers from Birkbeck College, London, which explores relationships between the body, community and the environment. It will investigate how data can be collected from environmental sensors as part of social and cultural activities, creating two prototype sensor wearables embedded within costumes based on traditional carnival characters.

Scavenging free online mapping and sharing technologies, as forms of 'guerilla public authoring', the project also explores how communities can gather and visualise evidence about local environmental conditions and how that information can be used to participate in or initiate local action. *Snout* proposes 'participatory sensing' as a lively addition to the popular art form of carnival costume design, engaging the community in an investigation of its own environment, something usually done by local authorities and state agencies.

Weaving Threads of Engagement

Through our processes, collaborations, tools and techniques Proboscis seeks to foster spaces of exchange and encourage a culture of listening. A crucial part of the *Social Tapestries* programme has been the creation of networks and partnerships with intermediaries and peers—in grassroots communities, civil society organisations, arts and culture, academia, business and government. Without this kind of collaborative and collective effort we would not have been able to bridge such vastly different sectors, often bringing together people with diverging views and interests who would otherwise not meet. We do not believe in quick technological fixes for the complex community development issues encountered in the programme, and are working with local groups to develop our understanding of how knowledge sharing, mapping, and public authoring can contribute to the communication ecology at the local level.

Creative artistic processes, artworks and thinking are central to all our projects and the fact that we are artists is also crucial to the process of collaboration, it gives us licence to act and to engage across these different, often conflicting agendas without being co-opted by any single one. From the *Urban Tapestries* software platform to the *StoryCubes*, the *Social Tapestries* programme seeks to offer

models of playful experimentation for how society can question and understand what it is to be social beings in a networked world. As twenty first-century communications evolve, this vision of grassroots knowledge-mapping and sharing is a reminder that people are not just consumers—but that they are actors, agents and authors of their own experiences.

Link

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