

INTERVIEW WITH

Jonah Brucker-Cohen



by **Jeremy Hight**, online via email correspondence, February 2011

Re-Drawing Boundaries, Leonardo Electronic Almanac New Media Exhibition

Curator: Jeremy Hight

Senior Curators: Lanfranco Aceti and Christiane Paul

What deeper things do you see in your use of vintage/older items and functionalities (radios, televisions, hand crank... etc.) beyond aesthetics and functionality/interface as you collide them and/or merge them newer technologies and data streams?

My intention with this approach is twofold. First, by connecting older technological artifacts with new advancements in technology such as networks or the Internet it brings about a clearer understanding of how we got to the point we are in today with technology. Second, by bridging the “interface-gap” such as using a crank or an old vintage radio, it makes newer technology much more accessible to people and brings it to a level that everyone can understand and appreciate. For instance, some people have never tuned into an Internet radio station, but most have the experience of using an old radio, turn-

ing dials, etc... to get a station. By connecting these two interfaces, it allows people access to technology that might have been beyond their reach or understanding previously. Also, I am interested in discovering what older technology can teach us about the technology we use daily and make us appreciate it and the interfaces it engenders to a higher degree.

What first brought about the scrapyard challenge? How has it progressed? Do you see this tied in any way to the maker movement?

The Scrapyard Challenge workshops began in Dublin, Ireland in 2003. When I lived there I founded an organization called the Dublin Art and Technology Association (DATA) that still exists today. The idea with DATA was to provide a space where people could present their work with technology in an informal space and break down the barriers of entry to people who were interested in experimenting with technology in their work. The Scrapyard Challenge workshops are co-developed with Katherine Moriwaki and were originally centered around the 1 year anniversary event for DATA which was a festival centered on the theme of the "Democratization of Technology" where our intent was to lower these barriers and allow anyone to participate in the creative process. The Maker movement and Make magazine began two years after the first Scrapyard Challenge workshop, so we were not directly involved with them, but we have run the workshop at several Maker Faires in the past.

What are you working on now?

I'm co-developing a workshop with Katherine Moriwaki along with several different invited artist participants this summer at the Banff Institute in Canada that examines Re-Use, Recycling, and Pervasive Media in urban centers. More to come...

How has locative media and especially wearables moved into different territories? Or have they been shed as subsets into larger streams? Is this positive or negative?

Wearable technology is married to locative media to some extent since wearable technology travels with

its user, the same way that locative media such as cell phones does as well. They are unique from other media forms because they are omnipresent in public space and rely on transmission towers for their data streams, thus making those that own them outside of these broadcast areas, essentially useless. This reliance on locative media is a positive trend since there is countless data that can be gathered through the use of software for their devices that enables us to have varying perspectives on urban life and actually write our histories as we live them through the constant tracking (GPS) and reporting (GSM) that these devices enable. Thus the combination of a device knowing where we are and able to connect to the Internet simultaneously has created fertile ground for countless creative projects that utilize these features.

How has our sense of space changed in the recent past? Where may this be going? Is this a golden age of digital cartography and potential or more dystopic corporate inroads into problematic areas of ownership, control and dissemination/distribution?

Locative media and mapping artworks have been increasing steadily since mapping software and APIs have been released and more widely available. Especially with the advent of mobile devices becoming cheap and more powerful mapping tools, the possibilities for projects seems endless compared to what it was just a few years ago. So because of this mobility of location and instant data access in any location, our sense of space has actually gotten smaller to some degree since every location is now mappable and can act as a trigger for events or projects to take shape when a user is co-located inside a specific region. I know that you have done mapping projects in the past, and it's interesting to note that even your projects which used to run on laptops and other larger devices, could now just work as an iPhone app or Android app and be carried with a user or participant daily to map their journeys. I feel as if several of my older projects could work the same way, so it's an interesting progression to see how technological art has shifted from multiple devices into single apps running on one mobile device.

Are some of your projects more to raise awareness like a conceptual call while others are on a different tack from initial idea to conception?

How has your work progressed?

All of my projects have some form of functional prototype that I built. Whether that is software only or a software / hardware mix, there is usually some form of working demo that accompanies the idea. So although they are meant to raise awareness conceptually of an issue or a technology, they all actually work and can function if installed in a gallery for instance. I think originally I was starting out with a question and using simple technological solutions to answer that question, and then I built a larger concept or use scenario from there to advance the question into a provocation. The same force that propels the spread and popularity of these technologies will ultimately fuel a broader and more critical participation in place making, spatial practices and cultural identity.

Where are we at currently in terms of design, interface, wireless and space? Where may it be going? What issues and elements do you feel we should most be aware of?

This question spans several different questions which are not all related. Looking specifically at the realm of wireless space, I think that wireless technology is definitely becoming more ubiquitous and it has almost come the point where we are more used to finding and expecting connectivity built into every new device that we purchase. This is obvious in devices made for communication such as cell phones and computers, but we now expect connectivity in objects such as furniture, appliances, and motor vehicles.

Who are some of your influences? How did they influence you and your work?

My main influences have always been what I see or witness happening in popular culture and the media. Especially as it pertains to technology and networks such as the Internet or cellular networks. Most of the work that has influenced me is not made by “artists”, but rather by people who create provocative projects out of minimal materials and means, usually in a lim-

ited time frame or in a specific location. One example of this would be Norman White, a Canadian maker/artist who created a great project several decades ago called “The Helpless Robot” which is a robot with no moving parts, but only a recorded voice that tells people around it to move it or pick it up. These types of obvious and simple projects influence my work a great deal.

Has your process been affected by any of your previous interests? How so? By any newer interests outside of your known sphere of work and analysis?

I did my undergraduate studies in English: Cultural Studies/Theory so I find that a lot of my work speaks to instances of convergence between theory and practice. This is especially true with my “WiFi-Hog” project that examines wireless conflicts in the public sphere and brings to light the theory of Jurgen Habermas and his discussion of the Bourgeois Public Sphere. Besides theory, my work also has a humorous side to it and this might stem from my previous work as an illustrator and designer of fanzines and comic books growing up. Also as a musician and drummer, some of my work, including the Scrapyard Challenge workshops that I co-run with Katherine Moriwaki bring music and music software/hardware creation into the mix as the final output of the workshops. So those two elements of my previous interests have affected both my process and output.

What labels do you feel in art need to be let go or updated? Which of the labels applied to your works do you see as most fitting to your process as opposed to falsely divisive/negative semiotically charged?

I would say that the best label for my work is “Interactive Networked Projects”. Since my work has taken the shape of both hardware based installations as well as purely software based simulations or downloadable software that can be run as a standalone project, it’s difficult to categorize my work based on the medium used. The common theme in most of the projects is that they are interactive and involve some aspect of networked communication, either using the

Internet as a medium to disrupt or challenge, or to simply involve some networked technology and use it in a way that it was not intended to be used. So I do not think there should be a specific label put on the work, but more a categorization of the work so that they are understandable to a wider audience.

What do you see beyond the utopic and dystopic elements of wired city emerging from where we are now?

Instead of “wired city”, I see it more as a “wireless city”, where the technology itself becomes less of a focal point, and the city becomes more useable for people living there and more understandable to people that have never been there before. A dystopic scenario might be that the city becomes too technologically sophisticated for people to understand how to “use” it and thus becomes a victim of increased feature creep and is abandoned by its population in search of a simpler living solution. A utopic version of this would be to find a balance that supports the steady increase of technologies into cities by effortlessly educating its population into one that accepts and embraces the influxes of new technologies and ultimately end up being its creators as well as its users.



Alerting Infrastructure!, 2003, Jonah Brucker Cohen, still from video. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist.

Alerting Infrastructure!

Alerting Infrastructure! is a physical hit counter that translates hits to the web site of an organization into interior damage of the physical building that web site or organization represents. The focus of the piece is to amplify the concern that physical spaces are slowly losing ground to their virtual counterparts. The amount of structural damage to the building directly correlates to the amount of exposure and attention the web site gets, thus exposing the physical structure's temporal existence. The proliferation of web sites as virtual representations of physical locations has reached a saturation point. Despite the massive surge of bricks and mortar spaces (such as schools,

businesses, organizations) maintaining online presences, there is still little connection between the people simultaneously inhabiting these spaces. Alerting Infrastructure! addresses this by connecting a physical space such as a building to its online counterpart or web site that represents this structure/organization by scanning access logs of web site for new unique visitor "hits" and translating each new site hit into physical output in the form of activating a large, pneumatic jackhammer.

Alerting Infrastructure! video:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/LEAbroadcast#p/c/272279007EEFA15E/2/GbPPNKMV2CA>

subscribes | bumped | re-subscribes
47961 47957 46644

AN EMAIL COMMUNITY FOR THE DETERMINED

BumpList is a mailing list aiming to re-examine the culture and rules of online email lists. BumpList only allows for a maximum amount of subscribers so that when a new person subscribes, the first person to subscribe is "bumped", or unsubscribed from the list. Once subscribed, you can only be unsubscribed if someone else subscribes and "bumps" you off. BumpList actively encourages people to participate in the list process by requiring them to subscribe repeatedly if they are bumped off. The focus of the project is to determine if by attaching simple rules to communication mediums, the method and manner of correspondences that occur as well as behaviors of connection will change over time.

SUBSCRIBE HERE

| Date/Time of Post | Duration of time on BumpList | Subject of Message |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Sun, Oct 19 16:58:47 2003 | 42 days, 07 hours, 50 minutes | [BumpList] I WONDER WHAT STEVE DID BEFORE THE LIST? |
| Sun, Oct 19 16:55:52 2003 | 42 days, 07 hours, 50 minutes | [BumpList] STEVE COME FROM A LARGE FAMILY |
| Sun, Oct 19 16:53:13 2003 | 42 days, 07 hours, 50 minutes | [BumpList] A GREAT STEVE RECYCLE |
| Sun, Oct 19 16:50:57 2003 | 42 days, 07 hours, 50 minutes | [BumpList] STEVE RECYCLED |
| Sun, Oct 19 16:47:52 2003 | 44 days, 06 hours, 08 minutes | [BumpList] make it a grope effort and I'm in!!!! |
| Sun, Oct 19 16:46:26 2003 | 42 days, 07 hours, 50 minutes | [BumpList] FRM STEVE AND ANNETTE |

BUMPLIST ACTIVITY

STATS Check out [BumpList Stats](#) including: Who's On, Hall of Fame, Personal Stats, and more soon!

FAQ Frequently Asked Questions: Everything you wanted to know about [BumpList](#) and more!

BUMPMANIA! BumpList in the press, blogs, related links, store and more coming soon!

CREDITS Design/Concept - [Jonah Brucker-Cohen](#) | Technical/Concept - [Mike Bennett](#) | Copyright 2003
JB/C/H/C/MLE/TCD - For more info see: <http://www.coin-operated.com/projects>

Jonah Brucker Cohen, 2003, BumpList. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist.

BumpList

In the digital age, networked communication platforms and mediums are becoming more and more user friendly and allow for multitudes of types of interaction, voices, and exchanges of images, sounds, and text, both synchronously and asynchronously. Messages can be sent, voices can be heard, and events can be realized with organization and clarity that never before existed. In particular, emailing lists have become important means of maintaining ties within groups, relaying important information among peers or collaborators, and forging a sense of community that transcends all national and cultural boundaries. Currently, we are actively encour-

aged to join public email lists. Unless a list adheres to certain rules, is password protected, or made private, anyone with a valid email address can join the discussion. We are also used to conventions of email lists such as subscribe/unsubscribe functions, digest mode, broadcast mode, and public archives of threaded messages. BumpList functions like a standard, public listserv, but adds the constraints of limited membership (currently only 5 people can subscribe at once) and the urgency of forcing people to re-subscribe if they get bumped and want to continue the conversations, discussions, arguments in which they are engaged.



Jonah Brucker Cohen, 2003, Police State, still from video. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist.

PoliceState

PoliceState is a Carnivore client that attempts to reverse the surveillance role of law enforcement into a subservient one for the data being gathered. The client consists of a fleet of 20 radio controlled police vehicles that are all simultaneously controlled by data coming into the main client. The client looks for packet information relating to domestic US terrorism. Once found, the text is then assigned to an active police radio code, translated to its binary equivalent, and sent to the array of police cars as a movement sequence. In effect, the data being “snooped” by the authorities is the same data used to control the police vehicles. Thus the police become puppets of their own surveillance. This signifies a reversal of the control of information appropriated by police by using the same information to control them.

PoliceState video link:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/LEAbroadcast#p/c/272279007EEFA15E/1/B4cOJrgBYrg>

Artist's statement

My aim as an artist is to create work that challenges people's assumptions of what they perceive or take for granted, specifically examining the mass usage of computers and networks. My goal is to shift our daily experience with networks into new forms of meaning and interaction. As technology gains ubiquity, networks will continue to proliferate but what will differentiate them will be their specific context and use. My work interrogates how networks integrate into existing architecture and social patterns outside of traditional computer interfaces by creating projects that bring people together that might not have typically connected in physical spaces. By maintaining an online connection while allowing simultaneous presence in physical space I bring physical world interaction into online environments. By creating open systems that allow people to experience networks collectively and individually, I aim to encourage a unique understanding for each participant. Since 2000, I have been working on a body of projects that fit into the theme of "Deconstructing Networks". These projects critically challenge and subvert existing aspects of network interaction. This approach describes our changing relationship to computers and conventional Internet interfaces by bringing virtual processes into physical spaces and shifting rule sets and paradigms surrounding these ubiquitous systems.

Bio

Jonah Brucker-Cohen is an adjunct assistant professor of communications in the Media, Culture, Communication dept of NYU Steinhardt School of Culture Education and He is co-founder of the Dublin Art and Technology Association (DATA Group) and a recipient of the ARANEUM Prize sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Art, Science and Technology and Fundacion ARCO. His writing has appeared in numerous international publications including WIRED Magazine, Make Magazine, Neural, Rhizome.org, Art Asia Pacific, Gizmodo and more, and his work has been shown at events such as DEAF (03,04), Art Futura (04), SIGGRAPH (00,05), UBICOMP (02,03,04), CHI (04,06) Transmediale (02,04,08), NIME (07), ISEA (02,04,06,09), Institute of Contemporary Art in London (04), Whitney Museum of American Art's ArtPort (03), Ars Electronica (02,04,08), Chelsea Art Museum, ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art (04-5), Museum of Modern Art (MOMA – NYC)(2008), and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) (2008). ■