ULCA Wight Biennial – twothousandone | 360degrees.org

By Gloria Sutton

October 2001

www.360degrees.org: redefining the terms of interactivity

What does it mean to curate a documentary website into an art exhibition? The inclusion of www.360degress.org in this year's Wight Biennial is an attempt at a two-part demonstration. Logging onto this web-based documentary focused on the U.S. criminal justice system is foremost, a technical demonstration. 360degrees effectively displays the tools specific to new media art that works in tandem with social activism. Secondly, the inclusion of this markedly "non-art" website serves as a protest demonstration—a modest rally against the current pattern of exhibiting net.art projects offline as static images reformatted to fit the viewing conditions of the gallery/museum space.

Within the thriving domain of net.art, work is often divided into subcategories such as "interface design," "browser art, " "open source," and especially "data visualization." 360degrees clearly operates within the framework of the latter. Alison Cornyn and Sue Johnson, along with their numerous collaborators, transform alienating statistics and rote data specific to the exponentially growing prison industrial complex into an intelligent interface with intuitive navigation and a stunningly sharp layout. Sleek form and refined graphics articulately punctuate the site's message without relying on extensive plug-ins. Within the clamor of the net, Cornyn and Johnson produce the near impossible: a meaningful interaction.

"Visualization" is a key component of information design practice. Specifically, it provides the context and orientation for websites by helping the viewer to see a larger pattern in which to place the object on the screen. In 360degrees, the process of visualization is actualized not just in terms of design, but structurally as well—formal and social patterns become visible. The site's well-researched content allows one to begin to recognize the larger political patterns and socio-economic trends inherent to the criminal justice system by acclimatizing you to the current conditions of the courts, prisons and contemporary judicial theory. Moreover, the site provides a clear background against which cultural perceptions and prevailing misconceptions about who exactly is in prison and why become more visible.

Activating the power of database structures, 360degrees demonstrates the scalability of information as the site employs various modes of addressing and interpreting large volumes of data—an operation inherent to computer systems. This is most evident in the

ALISON CORNYN - SUE JOHNSON

"Timeline" section which formally illustrates that criminal justice is never static, but responds to fluctuating customs, politics and economic factors. The content of the "Timeline" doesn't follow a linear trajectory. Your cursor not only moves back and forth in time, but also between and around specific dates or moments in history. This allows you to pause at self-determined intervals in time and place. Because 360degrees is constantly asking you for your opinions, the site points to the various strategies at play behind visualizing data/statistics as content. More specifically, the site's formal solutions for displaying large volumes of information point to the subjectiveness of material usually deemed objective. Here facts and dates do not exist in isolation from one another, but expose a ratio of cause and effect. Through a detailed credits section, the site pinpoints informational sources and more importantly, it brings questions surrounding authorship and authority to the forefront. In the end, 360degrees clearly proves that visualizing data remains an interpretive project, making it necessary to add "documentary" as another subcategory within net.art.

The site's content revolves around the visual and audio documentation that Cornyn and Johnson have gathered in what are referred to as "stories." These first-person accounts narrate specific criminal cases and include the perspectives of inmates, correctional officers, lawyers, judges, parole officers, parents, victims, and others whose lives are bound up within the case, one another and the system. For example, through RealPlayer audio you hear from Ronald Frye— interviewed just nine days before he was executed by lethal injection at Central Prison, in Raleigh, North Carolina, on August 31, 2001. You also see images and hear statements from Frye's brother, defense attorney, and warden as well as Pat Winkler, the sister of Ralph Childress who was murdered by Frye in 1993.

Currently, there are three "stories" presented online (including Frye's) with the intention of adding five more within the next two years.

360degrees is an interdisciplinary project as it relies on the integration of standards and practices from journalism and law, documentary film and photography, sociology and media arts. Rather than merely adapting each field's protocol to fit the parameters of the web, 360degrees synthesizes the methodologyunique to each practice to create a truly dynamic, responsive platform. For example, in the case mentioned above, Frye's story is not just retold through conventional off-camera interviews nor fictionalized narrative accounts. Instead, 360degrees integrates documentary film techniques with the responsiveness of web-based media while providing more academic research as background material. The resulting edited "perspectives" associated with each figure in the case are presented along side one another in the form of a circle. As you move your cursor over each image, voices release facts and reveal concerns for each figure. Within the same screen, you can activate what seems to be "assigned voices," figures outside of the specific case who represent certain political or theoretical positions such as anticapital punishment advocates. In addition, you can access transcripts and other documentation as well as a glossary of terms to review in conjunction with the disembodied voices on the screen. 360.degress stands apart from other web-based work because it moves beyond visual metaphor; circles are not just used as organizational motifs for the stories. Here the formal emphasizes the cyclical nature of narrative, but also its subjectiveness: each story may lead you to another's perspective, but the circular structure will eventually lead you back to a point of revision.

A parallel process occurs in visual terms. By activating the Quicktime VR images that accompany each figure, you can do a literal 360 and pan the room in which the person lives. These compelling images look like a cross between digital photography and video stills. They are made by photographing each person's room, cell, or office at 20-degree intervals and then splicing the individual shots together. The seams are digitally erased producing a fluid pan of the interior space that positions the viewer in the center of the room. To date, the most common application of these types of interior pans is by real estate or tourist board websites. Both use this technique because they want you to imagine yourself in that space. Through the structural logic of this site, your perspective is generated from within the confines of the Polk Youth Facility in North Carolina or a Rhode Island juvenile court regardless of where your computer is located.

360degrees isn't a website by default. It is the rare instance where the web is being employed as a medium not as an alternative or derivative mode of distribution or exhibition. It is a true hybrid form: a network built with both digital and grassroots activist channels. 360degrees integrates various forms of new media to create the point of focus, but the work finds a multitude of old media channels for further redistribution including radio, television, print, classroom discussions and verbal debates making representing the site in a Biennial quite challenging. While we are directing your browser to the site through the gallery, the project exists and circulates outside the confines and constraints of the art exhibition system. It has to because 360degrees relies on a decentralized mode of production as well as a distributed audience. The .org in the

address alludes to the collaborative nature of the entire project. A large point of the work is devoted to the idea that there isn't a singular author or perspective. This idea is carried out on an organizational level, as the concentration of editorial and artistic power does not reside with one central authority. The credits register that the site evolved out the collaboration of dozens of scholars, statisticians, activists, ex-offenders, students, educators, artists, and programmers working in different states. In addition, this decentralized team is in turn developing the site to address a dispersed audience with varying levels of institutional, social and economic access including current inmates, community residents, gang members, corrections officers, ex-offenders, academics and legislators located across the U.S.

Art vs. advocacy— why insist on a line? Within the hyperbole-prone world of the web, artists, curators, academics—categorical "users"—point and click, drag and drop in an effort to make images on the screen "do something" under the pretense of interactivity. This blunt form of "cause and effect" interaction is the dominant condition of net.art. 360degrees offers an alternative to this model through its insistence on pro-activity. While documentary tends to be a descriptive form, 360degrees positions words and images in prescriptive terms. They want to address issues, resolve problems and induce change one user at a time. Within 360degrees, interaction comes in the form of reaction or response. The site poses some complicated questions and at every turn, on every page, you are asked, what do you think? Through a myriad of online and grassroots channels, 360degrees gives you a place and a means to respond. Within this framework, the user is asked to "do something" instead of the image on the screen. Employing the scaleable terms of the database, 360degrees.org lets you select a category from one or more of its pull-down menus that will put you in touch with an off-line organization in your area. Options include volunteering your time, getting information about how to begin initiatives, or learning how to access public services or just thinking about the issues presented in this work.

The site's formal logic builds on the fundamentals specific to the web: a decentralized network addressing a dispersed audience. Within 360degrees.org, this logic functions as an operating system for art production that is self-archiving and infinitely expandable. This is what art looks like when art attempts to address systemic issues with something more complex than a symptomatic response.