

Picture Projects | The Big Picture On A Small Screen

By Maya Churi
November 2003

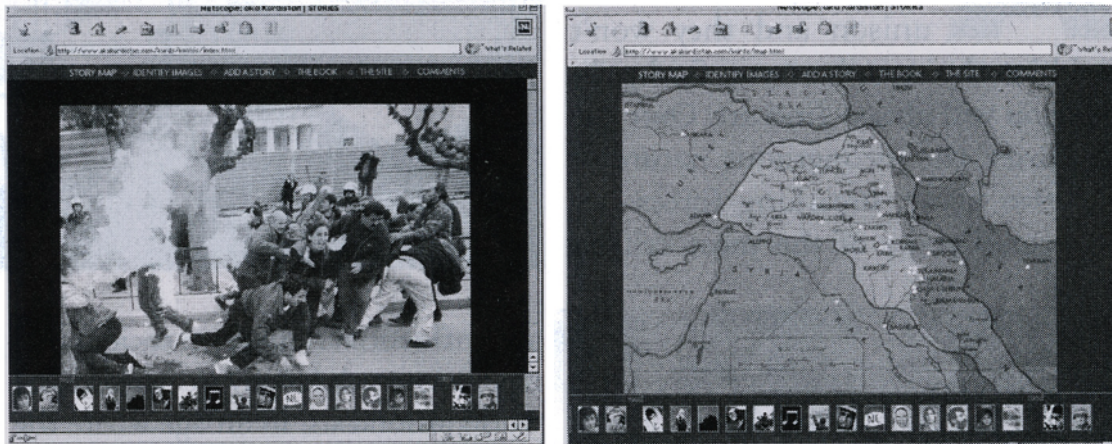


A North Carolina prison's execution chamber, from Ronald Frye's story on 360degrees.org.

Art and politics have always walked side by side. They don't walk in unison and they won't hold hands, but where you find politics you will always find art. Over the centuries, the incongruous nature of the two living, breathing forces has instigated some of the most critical and influential changes in society, and revolutionized the way we perceive the world around us. In an age where the word "democracy" has taken on almost antithetical definitions, art has one of its biggest challenges yet.

For the past eight years, Alison Cornyn has been confronting these challenges head on. With her online work and installations, she is constantly provoking us to take a close look at the mechanics of our society, and insisting that we participate in democracy not just in the voting booth, but also where we eat, sleep, live, and breathe. But her work is not only political—it is also stunning. Cornyn has planted her feet firmly at the intersection of design, art, and politics by creating some of the most impressive work on the internet today.

Cornyn is the co-founder and director of Picture Projects, a New York City based interactive studio. She has created such works as 360degrees.org: perspectives on the U.S. criminal justice system; SonicMemorial.org: a cross-media documentary of the World Trade Center and the neighborhood surrounding it—before, during, and after September 11th; akaKurdistan.com: an image-based archive for Kurdish history; and Re:Vietnam: Stories Since the War. "What motivates me is a deep sense of injustice. I identify deeply with those who do not have a voice and who need a space where they can share ideas and experiences and can forge long and short-term communities that are strategic and/or supportive. It has been essential for me to put in communication people who are likely never to meet, and to team up people who are often from radically different horizons and very different ethnic, racial, and social castes."



Screen shots from Picture Projects' politically interactive online projects

Cornyn's work makes clear that it is not just the act of telling stories that will change the political arena; how the story is told, the format in which it is developed, and the medium by which it is presented all play into our perception of our environment. "Because these projects are online, the spaces created are especially appropriate for bringing together people, who separated by geography, class, and ethnic backgrounds are very often on different sides of difficult issues, otherwise unable to know of, let alone understand, diverging perceptions. It is clear that despite our acute awareness of what has will for some time and for some constitute a digital divide, the internet, (to the reverse of television), is already the public space, the agora of now, where everyone has a voice and where all voices can be heard."

To do this effectively, Cornyn incorporates art, documentary, journalism, and oral history with interactive design. She uses video, audio, and digital technologies to create entirely new environments that encourage dialogue and community building with engaging visuals. "The beauty of storytelling on the web is that it can provide a home for multiple perspectives, diverse voices and first-person contributions. Sometimes (often) it is more representative of a situation to present fragments of stories, rather than a singular linear narrative. In the case of 360degrees.org, we are able to present on person's story to look at one issue from the experiences and stories of five or six people involved. Often their views are different or contradictory. A visitor to the site may choose to hear from any one or more of the storytellers. And they can choose who they want to hear from first. In 360degrees, we pair each person's voice with a QuickTime VR image of his or her primary space—prison cell, living room, courtroom, office, etc. We wanted visitors to the site to be 'in the shoes' of each of the people talking, as well as to acknowledge the strategies of surveillance and control used in the panopticon."

If there is one thing that Cornyn makes so abundantly clear through her work it is that how the story is told is as important as the story itself. By embracing the internet with all of its flaws, and all of its promise, she is helping to create and define an entirely new storytelling structure. And that structure never veers far from her ultimate aim, democracy. "Democracy as defined in the constitution is a process; it is something to be invented every day, reinterpreted in the light of new technologies, new realities and

broader participation. It is because of the possibility of creation of that democratic process that I am interest in the internet. Rather than seeing it just as a big searchable space, or as a shopping mall of idiosyncratic personal interests, what I want to develop for it is a strategic vision that does not deal with the superfluous or the trivial in each of us, but on the contrary, maps out processes of decision making and information sharing that go beyond the superfluous to address deep societal issues.” Cornyn continues, “I’d like to transform Picture Projects into a cultural space that can truly be of service to diverse communities. In short, to have a coherent practice that builds channels, brick by brick, community by community—developing art, design, and technology in innovative ways—such that my fellow citizens have a real alternative option from the top-down processes we often experience today, (whether it be in politics or the media), where somebody tells them what to thing, what their truth should be, what their real needs are—so the process can be, in fact, inverted.”



Co-founder and director of Picture Projects, Alison Cornyn