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An Interview with Sharon Daniel

Mark Gonzales

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An Interview with Sharon Daniel

Mark Gonzales on Feb 21 2002

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Sharon Daniel is an artist who is developing and exploiting new information and communications technologies for the design of "Collaborative Systems," systems in which participants are given a framework for building a database based on their own experiences and the tools for structuring and interpreting that data themselves.

Introduction: My current interest is exploring the collaborative process in art and education. I am also very interested in collaborative programs that help those who are marginalized and disenfranchised in our society. Initially, I chose to interview Sharon Daniel because of her work with collaborative systems and her strong visual design sense, but during our discussion, I was excited to also learn about her interest and commitment to her local community.

Biography: Sharon Daniel is an artist who is developing and exploiting new information and communications technologies for the design of "Collaborative Systems," systems in which participants are given a framework for building a database based on their own experiences and the tools for structuring and interpreting that data themselves. Daniel's work has evolved from interactive sculpture and video installation to experimental research that re-casts networked, virtual environments as public, community and collaborative sites. Collaborative System participants are given the opportunity to tell their own stories from their own perspective and add these stories to an evolving database or "archive" which is made available to the public. Through these works Daniel provides opportunities for self-representation, communication, and education that effect direct and substantive change in the attitudes and circumstances of individuals and communities. Daniel is an Assistant Professor of Film and Digital Media at UCSC where she teaches classes in digital media theory and practice.

Interview: The interview was conducted in person on Nov. 2, 2001 in Oakland, California.

SWITCH: What is individual subjectivity? Describe how this might occur in art? Is it important to transcend individual subjectivity?

Sharon Daniel: I'm assuming by 'individual subjectivity' you are referring to the enlightenment model of the subject. The Cartesian I think, therefore I am subject. Most traditional art practices assume and perpetuate that model of subjectivity.

The 'subject' of traditional art is a projection of the artist's subjectivity. There is very little consideration for the subjective perspective of the viewer in traditional art practice. The viewer is expected to accept the authority of the arts institution and identify with the artist. There is nothing wrong with that model I guess, but it doesn't interest me. I don't find such authoritative and hierarchical models socially or politically productive.

I am very interested in systems thinking as a way of exploring notions of subjectivity in art practice. I think it is important for artists to transcend individual subjectivity, to set aside personal self-expression -- the notion of the artist as heroic individual -- and

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come up with a way of making art that is relevant to the audience's social and cultural context.

Stephen Willats, a British conceptual artist working during the '70s used the phrase "context-dependent" to describe art that was relevant to the audiences' social context-- as opposed to the social context of the art world and the artist. I have borrowed that phrase to help define the kind of practice that I am engaged in - one that I think of as 'context-provision'.

A context dependent art practice is one that recognizes the individual perspective of each one of its intended audience members. It provides the audience with opportunities for productive self-expression and communication. It creates a community, an inter-subjective network, a system of exchange and collaboration in place of one-way communication from the artist to the audience. Traditional works of art privilege one voice.

I am more interested in the multi-vocality of systems and networks. Of course, it is impossible for us to transcend our notions of the self, our individual subjectivity. The enlightenment model of the subject is so deeply ingrained in our perceptual training. It is central to the way we process information, how we relate to our phenomenal experience of the world -- the movement of perception into consciousness. But, I believe that it is possible to rethink the relation of self to other[ness]. Complex Systems Theory offers several models. From self-regulation (homeostasis) through self-organization (autopsies) to self-evolution (emergence) cybernetics and systems theory offer productive and destructive ways of thinking about the boundaries of the human subject and the technologies we use to cross them. Where the boundaries between individuals, communities, information and technologies blur, subject relations become mobile, transient, and recombinant. Each of these system/models redefines the relation of observer and observed, subject and system. Cellular automata, in particular, exemplify a collapse of the binary opposition of autonomy and community. Cellular automata embody an oscillating, productive, tension between the individual and the social, which suggests, to me, the potential of a new subject position that I am calling the "subject_system."

In the subject_system the bourgeois/enlightenment model of the individual subject is displaced by a contingent subject that may operate as an entity or a distributed network of entities within a system narrative. System and narrative, community and individuality are usually understood to be antinomies -- but not in the subject_system where contradictions are incorporated and relations between particulars is the key to constructing and reconstructing community.

In the subject_system one is a subject, but also part of a system. One's orientation to the system is specific and particular but also fluid, and can be shifted, dispersed and recombined. One's role relative to the system -- where you end and where the system begins -- is in flux.

SWITCH: Corporate vs. personal identity (in collaborative art), What do each of these concepts mean? How do they relate to each other?

SD: I am more interested in 'community' as a model than 'corporate identity'. Incorporation collapses many into one; it makes a group into an individual. This kind of 'unification' is problematic for me -- there is a loss of particularity and the potential for change. A community is a group of individuals in an inter-subjective relationship, one of shared interest and affinity -- linkage not collapse. I think in collaborative art, community is very important. I think of the audience as my community. I also think a group of collaborators as a community. I've worked in collaborations for so long I can barely remember when I didn't collaborate. I have been involved with all sorts of collaborations: traditional artists collaborations, theatrical collaborations and hierarchical collaborations. I've also been in less traditional collaborations. I have worked in collaborations involving scientists, computer scientists and technology developers building infrastructure.

Now I am engaged primarily in what I call 'public' collaborations, building works of art in collaboration with the public. This new "Public Art" opens dialogue around issues within given contexts within and between communities. Participants are engaged in a manner, which facilitates productive self-expression, increases social or political awareness, and challenges cultural codes. My role as an artist is that of "context provider", building systems in which the perspective of each individual participant is actively solicited, and incorporated without censorship. I find that I am increasingly interested in projects that engage, very specific, local communities. I want to make new practical and political realities possible for the individuals and communities these projects engage. For example, in my neighborhood in Oakland there is an HIV prevention clinic called "Casa Segura" just down the street. Because Casa Segura provides needle exchange it is politically embattled and continuously attacked by our district city council representative and others interested in the "economic development"

or gentrification of the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland. Though critics in the neighborhood claim that the needle exchange attracts drug dealers and users to the area, encourages drug use, and increases incidences of dealing and other related crimes, the clinic actually serves the needs of all local residents. Needle Exchange and Harm Reduction clients at Casa Segura live in the neighborhood - some of them in homeless camps or out of shopping carts. Undercutting services to the areas neediest citizens would disadvantage everyone. The community must come to realize how effective needle exchange actually is in stopping the spread of HIV. Casa Seguras clients are most at risk for Hepatitis C and HIV infection. By reducing this risk Casa Segura protects the health of the whole community. Many studies show that needle exchanges reduce HIV transmission and can serve as a bridge to drug treatment. They neither encourage drug use among program participants nor spread drug use throughout a community. The continuation and expansion of the existing needle exchange and harm reduction programs at Casa Segura is critical.

I got involved because I thought it might be possible to build a bridge between the clinic and the larger community where there is resistance by allowing the clients of the clinic to tell their own stories from their own perspective. The project, called "Need_X_Change," is designed to help the staff and clients of Casa Segura attain social and political "voice", through communication with their local community and participation in the global information culture.

When I met the director of the program, Chris Catchpool, he explained the clinic's philosophy of "harm reduction." They take people as they are there, not trying to put some kind of rigid behavioral model on their clients. The clinic tries to say, If you're in injection drug user, that may not be very good for your health. Here, let us help you stay healthy and then when you're ready to quit, let us help you quit. You can recover from drug addiction. There is no cure for AIDS. Let us help you get some warm clothes and a hot meal. Let us help you with herbal and homeopathic treatments that will reduce your craving for heroin. Let us help you with acupuncture, or wound and abscess care, vitamins, condoms, clean needles, or whatever you need to stay healthy. This approach is based on the belief that drug addicted people can help themselves live a positive more productive life-style if given the choice to change, the time, and the appropriate amount of support. The philosophy of "harm reduction" therapy and my own context-dependent art practice share a premise of respect for the "client" or "participant" and a recognition of the value and dignity of all individuals, their experiences and their perspectives.

Bringing access to the global information culture to disenfranchised and marginalized communities through public art is a critical part of my art practice. It's difficult -- when people are living on the streets and their lives are "in extremis" one wonders how access to the Internet can be of immediate help to them. But I actually believe it can. Public art provides a point of entry to another world and a place of empowerment relative to that world. All sorts of things will occur in their lives while they participate in this project that wouldn't have occurred otherwise.

One of those things will be getting their hands on the computer. We will collaboratively build a website and design a series of public graphics, billboards, bus boards and transit posters, that introduce the clients and the staff to the community. We are going to give disposable still cameras and audiotape recorders to a selected group (maybe 20 to 25 clients). We will ask them to record their day-to-day experiences, reflect on their personal histories, and interview their associates, for a period of time. We supply them with tapes, film, and cameras. They'll work with me to design their own web pages and the way their stories are represented in the public graphics program. They will learn through the process of designing collaboratively, one-on-one, rather than through some, Ok, this is the mouse, kind of tutorial. Some of them will be interested in having their stories told and not be interested in the computer literacy program. Some of them might be interested in training and literacy and not in telling their own stories. The structure will be very flexible and individualized. We will create a database and give each participant an account where they can scan their material and start to add their data. We will also develop an interface that they can use to do their own case management. We'll launch the site; the public graphics program a site about the clinic and, hopefully initiate a service network -- that is a long-term goal. I'm interested in working with this particular, specific problem, a very particular group of people. This project has been funded by the Creative Work Fund and is already underway. I am currently working with eight Casa Segura clients on the development of their "first-person documentation." I meet with these six extraordinary people weekly during the Fruitvale Needle Exchange to discuss their progress and supply them with tapes and film. We will set up the project computer "lab" at Casa Segura's offices and I will begin working, one on one, with participants to put their images, audio files and texts online. Most of the participants have never used a computer and, though they have heard about the Internet, have never been online. If this method is successful will pursue similar projects with a variety of politically and technologically disenfranchised communities.

SWITCH: What about artists as individual corporations?

SD: The problem with corporations, like theatrical organizations, is the hierarchy. For a group to act as an individual - as in a corporation - there must be a hierarchy. I worked on a big project at MIT before I came to California called the 'Brain Opera.' It was supposed to be collaboration, but, really when it came down to it, it was a corporation - or perhaps just a traditional production company -- very hierarchical. I was fairly near the top of the hierarchy but still; I was one of the least satisfied "collaborators." I should've been more or less content because I had a certain amount of control over my piece of the project but I had committed to the work because I believed the conceptual premise was very similar to that of Collaborative Systems. In the end I realized there was a philosophical split -- a difference in opinion about what should be offered to the audience in order to provide them with the opportunity to collaborate. And, I guess, there was a fundamental difference of opinion about the meaning of "collaboration".

For me, it was really important to respect the intention of the participating individual user in the audience -- to offer each participant the opportunity to express her own intentions. There's a lot of interactive art that offers only a very limited amount of control to the participant and often these works create a space that lacks a certain respect for the intelligence of the user. For example, many artists using technology say, Let's give the user something to 'play with' that is always going to be aesthetically viable no matter what. The artist, not the participant, defines so aesthetic viability. The participant is asked to play -- "We'll give you all these beautiful things to play with, but we won't let you make anything ugly out of it even if that is what you want to do." This was the philosophy of the artistic director of the Brain Opera. I think that there is an important distinction to be made between "interactive" systems and "Collaborative" systems and the types of subject positions they offer. There are fundamental differences between interaction, participation and collaboration. "Interactive" systems often, either intentionally or thoughtlessly, obscure the "mapping" of input to system output. For example, many contemporary computer-based works rely on sensing technologies that "average" input like gesture or population density within a space. Such systems appropriate the body of the viewer, typically called the "user", to drive the system. The viewer is reduced to mass or velocity, or trajectory within a prescribed sensing field -- often with no opportunity to know how their presence has effected their environment and no means to learn the system in order to produce results based on their own, as opposed to the artist's, intentions. This sort of "interactive" system uses the "user." Some systems are designed to be "learnable" to varying degrees. Learnable systems allow the viewer to develop an understanding of the structure and content of the system (how it maps input to output) and "use" it to express their own intentions within the limitations prescribed by the system. Two philosophies of mapping are common in current technology based art practice, phrase-based and note (or letter, or word-based). Phrase-based mapping is assumed to "reward" the user under all conditions. This philosophy is based on the premise that the system should respond with aesthetically pleasing (as defined by the artist/designer) output regardless of the level of understanding or virtuosity the "user" develops in relation to the system interface. Phrase-based systems privilege the author of the system as artist/composer and merely allow the "user" to trigger or reorganize already aesthetically viable and vetted content. Note, letter, or word-based systems allow the participant to develop their own content based on their own intentions within the limitations prescribed by the system and its interfaces. This approach expresses a higher level of respect for the subject-perspective of the participant and, to varying degrees, abandons traditions of authorship and aesthetic valuation. When note/letter/word-based systems are designed to "learn" from the interaction of participants or to allow participants to contribute the results of their interaction they become "collaborative" systems. Interactive systems address "users". "Collaborative" systems evolve through the through the contributions of collaborating participants.

SWITCH: What is your opinion of corporate art collaborations? Again, thinking of individual artists as corporations.

SD: How does an individual artist "incorporate"? I'm not sure I understand that concept. Again, I am troubled by the potential for loss of particularity and difference that is suggested by "incorporation" --- the unification and blending of difference into indistinguishability. The impulse to blend and unify aesthetically is a problem I have had in the design of Collaborative Systems. In such systems, like Narrative Contingencies, I impose my own aesthetic on the public collaboration -- this is, to a certain extent, unavoidable. In the first version of Narrative Contingencies (1997-1999) I tried to incorporate all of the images that public collaborators contributed into an interface that expressed my own aesthetic sensibility. In the second version (2000-present) I redesigned the interface in such a way that, as much as possible, it displays the images contributed by public collaborators "un-incorporated." The corporate or 'incorporative' collaboration doesn't interest me as much now as the potential public, community collaboration. This is why I want to do the needle exchange project. I want to work one-on-one, with each person telling and representing his or her own story.

With the needle exchange project I really want to deal with the problem of representation and self-representation. I know that my own aesthetic and political perspective will still inflect the design that we develop collaboratively but I hope that each collaborator will inflect my perspective. I'm certain that their sense of themselves will be changed as they engage in the process of self-representation.

SWITCH: Would this be like crashing two systems?

SD: Oh yes. I hadn't thought about it in terms of "crashing," but my meetings with each of the clients of the needle exchange are somewhat like two world-systems colliding. That's what I'm really interested in, creating an opportunity for worlds to collide - it is a first step toward communication and social change.

SWITCH: As a graphic designer, I am very concerned with interface design and aesthetics, what are your feeling concerning interface design and aesthetics?

SD: As I mentioned before, the aesthetics of interface design pose a real philosophical problem for me. I have written about the aesthetics of database, which relies on the participant/collaborator/author's trajectory through a field of data - and, as much as possible, I want the aesthetics of interfaces that I am responsible for to frame the potential for authorship offered to the collaborating participant. When I am designing an interface I still tend to be extremely precise and determined, but then I come up against my other half, which can't even imagine why the interface should look any particular way at all. I actually don't want to impose an aesthetic on a collaboration, despite my training to the contrary, so I have tried to come up with interface designs that are more like open systems. Of course that is really not possible because you have to make decisions even if you go with the most basic and minimal approach. I like that approach. In the new version of Narrative Contingencies I have employed a strategy of dynamically generating the page design based on the participants interaction with the interface (by tiling images from the database into frames based on various types of participant interaction with the database like keyword search or random number generation). But still, design decisions had to be made. I'm always looking for plug-and-play solutions to interactivity online and I find a lot of really ugly, boring, forum-like interfaces that are used in education. I start to reject them because of their graphics and interface design, but then I think, maybe I shouldn't, because it's really getting to the heart of the matter to just have a really functional, easy to use interface. I think that's an interesting problem. What I'm trying to think about now is how to design an interface that is almost blank -- active only activated through collaboration - this interface would visualize multi-user interaction in an online environment in real-time and represent a relational database in such a way that if a data object is added the representation reflects the changed relations dynamically.

There are always issues of ease-of-use and intuitive engagement to address, as well as issues of aesthetics and control. I really came up against this pretty hard when I redesigned Narrative Contingencies and added new interfaces to it for an exhibition last year. The exhibition was an installation of a project that had been only a Web project. So, I had to consider issues of computer literacy that don't have to be addressed when designing for the online audience. The interfaces had to be redesigned with no assumptions about what the gallery visitor might know about computers, hypertext-links, etc. In this case I also had to bring the online, collaborative system with six distinct interactive interfaces into a physical space in a way that would engage the participation of all kinds of un-initiated users. I decided that the only way to handle this situation was to have a human interface available. The Corcoran staffed the gallery continuously with trained attendants to assist those who needed help and to encourage and facilitate interaction with the piece, which included opportunities for participants to scan objects and images, record video and audio files, print out the results of their participation and display the prints in the gallery.

SWITCH: When artists are working together it must be difficult to agree on the aesthetic look and feel of the piece.

SD: If I have someone else help with design, I always find it fun. You can't get past the fact that you have a certain kind of taste. So taste has to somehow match and serve conceptual integrity. In the end, I feel that design is secondary to concept -- there's a really broad range of how any interface might look and still meet the criteria of serving the conceptual premise.

SWITCH: Thanks for your time, it was great talking with you.

SD: Thanks, I enjoyed talking with you, too. I discuss many of these issues in more detail in an essay for a forthcoming publication from MIT Press edited by Victoria Vesna, Margot Lovejoy and Christiane Paul. The working title of the book is "Context Providers." I hope you and your readers will look for it.



::CrossReference

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