

TITLE

"(Post)Colonial Skins"

DESCRIPTION

A project on the making of real-time, computer generated, data driven tattoos that raise curious questions on social patterns, skin diseases and Google on the (post)colonial information era.

INTRODUCTION

This project is a study on data driven, computer generated tattoos. Your name as the sole mark of your existence, the only representation in the information world, is traced in Google, the most powerful search engine, the interface, the gatekeeper in the datascape. It is counted and the number of recurrences in almost 3 billion web pages (by March 2004) is used for generating a tattoo. The tattoo is constructed with a repetition scheme of individual tiles that are combinations of both text and graphic elements . The text being the actual search result retrieved is incorporated to a graphic image which is modeled based on a skin disease pattern. The data from Google is used as parameters for determining the size, shape and content of the mark, such as defining the number of repetition of a certain tile, its relative position to other tiles, and how the text component(i.e. the title of the link, the URL) is combined with the skin disease image.

A computer algorithm then, generates the custom tattoo and projects the result with a projector on the desired place on your body.

Your degree of inclusion to this new social formation is reflected to yourself, while not being aware of the current number of results of your name search, you become host to a little alien, an indeterminable tattoo, which acts merely like a skin disease. Which literally grows like an epidemic and works with infection algorithms based on data-mining studies on real skin diseases like plague and small pox.

Some key concepts that are explored in this study are as follows.

TATTOO making has a long history in the inscription of self on the skin. Although its different vocabularies show cultural, and social specific variations, skin becomes a screen or perhaps a mirror projecting oneself to the other, becomes a canvas where 'I' find a way to express 'me' to myself with the "other's" mark.

Skin, as a negotiation between the inside/outside forces, as Foucault might say stands for a political ground, where reflection of outside becomes not only a

decoration, or surface graphics, but also an evidence of depth of what's been transformed, interpreted and internalized from what it is experienced in the social domain.

Tattoos are social patterns; they reveal many clues of influences, personal preferences in following fashions, and styles. Going to the trendy tattoo shop, and picking up a certain image, graphic, mark, floral pattern from the catalog become expressions of different social values (i.e. gender, race, politics, class). The mark is the contract, between you and the other, and opens the systems of exchange, flows of meaning... You can be associated with a social group, or become subject to acceptance into marginal populations, yet become one of the 'diverse clientele' of buyers of meaning...

MEMORY is your awareness of yourself and the outside world, and it's content is the inscription, fixation or trace of what's been lived and still evident to you about the other. The memory of Google, is a new prosthesis, a new archive for the source of information. Although it is often forgotten that it keeps track of only the recent versions of the web sites, it is very widely expected as the most generous source of knowledge which is accepted to include all or most of the content being produced for internet. So your existence in the Google archives is based on it's memory... And beyond your control, like an involuntary memory, all the information about yourself is merely a history of traces, of what's been associated with you by Google via your name.

Tattoos being radical fixtures on your skin, are rethought by a conception of TEMPORALITY in the information space. The tattoo will be also temporal and for the moment of its creation, will be a reflection of the current status of the search results. The projected image is an ephemeral display not only due to its technical nature, but the size, shape and content of the tattoo is also depending on the current number of sites being tracked by Google, when they are tracked by the crawlers/spiders/search bots, the algorithms being used, your name's popularity.

Your IDENTITY represented only by your name may sound as a problem to you, but it is actually not for Google. If your name consists the same alphanumerical characters with somebody else's, you are no different for Google. If your name is quite a generic one, and as Google makes no differentiation among them, your tattoo will include the "other" people's information and therefore populate, expand and infect your tattoo. Like an epidemic, your body will become a host to some other.. And likewise it is also possible to give somebody else's name to the system and skin oneself with an other tattoo. Identity, in Google's vocabulary is no longer

an issue of singularity, or individuality and corresponds only to a mapping/association of one data to another in degrees of relevance.

The search engine is an interface to a vast number of data, and by its very nature, presents an ENCLOSURE, a framework, a politics of inclusion and exclusion by its sorting, indexing, ranking, referencing algorithms. There are tricks to make your site listed above a regular search, but it is often undetermined, and can easily be changed by various conditions. The enclosure of information is also studied in determining the size of the tattoo, how many tiles(data snippets) to be repeated to build the tattoo. Your body, being a very enclosure to your natural self, is introduced another coating, a framing of you in the other's world.

The AUDIENCE for this work are individual participants. Although it very arguable how names convey a singularity in internet, the project is planned to be a performance piece where individual people will be asked to interact with the system, pose under the projector, say their name, and let the process begin generating the graphic. As it is a real-time experience, one can change its posture and see how the projected image can actually differ in shape. The audience will become screens for themselves, and can follow the very making of the tattoo on their own body instead of following from Google's interface on the computer screen. By incorporating a machine vision system (based on a camera tracking the person and computing the boundaries of the body and it's differentiation from the background) it is planned to make the system actually being aware of the position and posture of the body, and react differently if one moves and changes its posture. The participant can interact with the actual making of the tattoo by moving its body and alters its place so that the system can recalculate the boundary of its canvas and adapt.

The visualization of the information is based on an skin disease epidemics' INFECTION mechanics. Infection in this project's context correspond to the involuntary nature of the spread of information. One can never be in total control of how Google collects the information or the way your name is being used in different contexts in different semantical references and associations.

The working title of the project is POST-COLONIAL skins. It is intended to raise some curiosities on the nature of skin after post-colonial conditions. Google, now becoming a new map for an information landscape imposes its own norms for stratifying the territory. Being known, traced, accepted by Google corresponds to a colonizing condition for this project. Google makes money by the number of sites it can keep track of(conquer) or know about(territorialize). Therefore, strangely

enough, it opens up new discussions for mapping geographies of knowledge (on almost everything including culture and ethnicity). One is confronted with web sites on almost everything that's been thought and accumulated in the collective memory.

Although the TRUTH value for this knowledge is often left unquestioned by Google, its access is controlled by the ranking algorithms imposed on the sorting of index of the sites. The twenty thousandth link will prove to be quite unimportant, or evidently less related for Google and can be easily skipped within any search... The representation of information becomes evident when its browsable under Google's interface. Yet, it is determined by Google how relevant it is to your search query.

THE CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

This project intends to explore the creative potential of new media by raising questions on many layers discussed within the conceptual framework. Modeling the behavior of a skin disease by real-time data retrieval can be seen as a different approach for looking scientific visualization or data mining studies in artistic context. Instead of providing clear and true explanations for the use value of the data, it is considered important to focus on its visualization that opens up many possibilities for expressing subjective or aesthetic qualities. While blurring both the technologies and thinking modals between artistic and scientific studies, the person who wants this tattoo will become the host where different systems of signification will work expressing and communicating.

The working mechanics of a skin disease, the most advanced information processing algorithms at work for Google, and a very primitive/personal desire to mark oneself to one's own body is brought together as a context of discussing how different relations can be explored between art, biology and computer science... Between natural and the artifice, material and immaterial how can one frame questions on the dynamics of information, its use, storage and social meaning. As the contemporary interdisciplinary multimedia scholarship opens many exchanges or flows of interdisciplinary knowledge and skills, this project intends to find a ground where different layers of conceptual inquiry can be used for critical interpretations for practical theories.

On the technical level, the environment that generates the tattoo makes use of already written codes(Python modules), algorithms and APIs(OpenGL, Google Web API) are used in a context of aesthetics of information, skin disease and tattoo, body graphics.

The choice of programming custom graphics is found important to showcase a common ground where different articulations on media, critical theory, biology and computer science can be explored together in contemporary scholarship.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

- Apple PowerBook running MacOS X (with Python 2.3, and OpenGL 1.4)
- Currently Photoshop is used for tracing the digital skin disease images and making the graphics)
- A projector(capable of displaying 1024 x768 pixel resolution) and a tripod.
 - A low-cost camera (with additional hardware to mount on installation location)
 - A pedestal to put the laptop.
 - A backdrop to be hanged on the wall (to ease differentiation between the background and the participant).

PROJECT URL

The study, project description and screenshots from participant tests can be seen at:
<http://www.orkantelhan.info/p1.html>

BIOGRAPHY

Orkan Telhan is currently an MFA candidate at the program of Media Study at University at Buffalo, State University of New York. Telhan is a designer worked in print and digital media in Turkey, Belgium and US in collaboration with artists, choreographers, musicians and architects. His current focus is on real-time, interactive computer graphics programming(2D and 3D) with an emphasis on immersive virtual reality environments and machine vision. He holds an MFA from Bilkent University/Turkey with a concentration on critical theories on media and representation. He is proficient with Mac, Windows and Linux environments, besides using latest versions of Adobe and Macromedia design suits, he is using Actionscript, Javascript Python, C/C++ and Java for different projects.

Personal Homepage:

<http://www.orkantelhan.info>

Current resume can be viewed and downloaded at

<http://www.orkantelhan.com/otcv/index.html>