

20 to 20 Project

Studio of Narrativity and Communication

Interactive Institute, Malmö

Project Leader : Sara Roberts

sara.roberts@interactiveinstitute.se

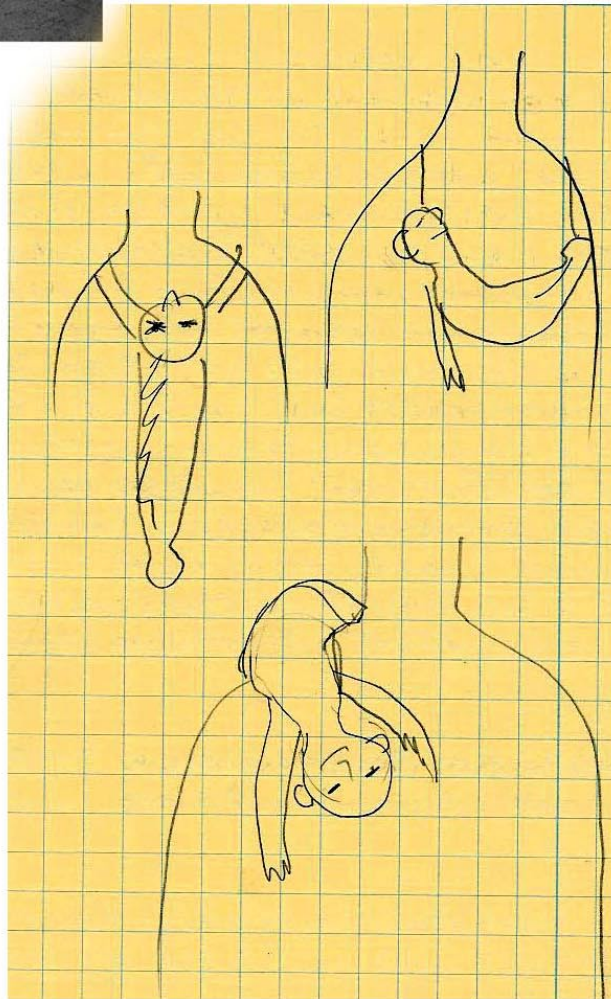
Abstract

The goal of this 20 member network is to create an environment/ensemble for experimentation with collective communication, a kind of mobile laboratory, a social group in both physical and virtual space.

The 20 to 20 project consists of an open voice channel between twenty people in locations all over the world for the length of a year. The communication device carried by each of the 20 participants is embedded in a figure, easily portable and hard not to anthropomorphise, it starts as a blank totem, accreting the group identity over time. Anything spoken to it is reshaped into the characteristic voice of the channel. The 20 participants on the line will not be able to immediately tell which among them is speaking. All voices speaking into it will come out as one voice.

The project creates an experimental zone that suspends the primacy of personal identity in communication and asks if a composite identity, even flickeringly, can be created between people.

Proposed models for figure.



20 to 20 project - Project narrative

description

Described simply the 20 to 20 project is an open voice channel between twenty people in locations all over the world for the length of a year. There are two peculiar things about the nature of this channel which shape the social and artistic activity happening on it. First, the communication device (basically, cell phone technology with global location sensing and limited environmental sensors) carried by each of the 20 participants is embedded in a portable anthropomorphic object - a figure that acts as a blank totem, accreting the group identity over time. The second peculiar thing about the channel is that it reconstructs whatever is spoken into it, passing along a reshaped, largely synthesized voice that gets the words right but changes the sound. The 20 participants on the channel will not be able to immediately tell which of them is speaking. (Though nothing stops them from asking.) All voices speaking into it will come out as one voice.

The goal of this 20 member network is to create an environment/ensemble for experimentation with collective communication, a kind of mobile laboratory, a social group in both physical and virtual space. A long term global performance in everyday life.

the scope of the project

This is an ambitious project. It seeks to completely integrate an art experience into everyday life - an ideal since before the modernist era. It asks a group of people to make a profound commitment over an extended period of time. It uses technologies that are established but have not been used in quite this way before, so it will require sustained technical engagement. **Most ambitiously, it is a political/social/spiritual laboratory, an experimental zone that suspends the primacy of personal identity in communication. It asks if a composite identity, even flickeringly, can be created between people. And in a time when other identities, national, political, and religious are so challenging, this place where even personal identity can be suspended, is a useful, and even vital experiment.**

the participants

The project asks the twenty participants to carry the figures with them and participate in the conversation as much as is practical. This is not a small commitment - to share personal space, both the pocket of personal space that is typically taken by a purse, backpack, briefcase, or any other item we carry with us, and space in the social sense - one's time alone, traveling from place to place, idle moments at home and at work. The members of the group will be carefully chosen on the basis of commitment to carry out a year-long project, and interest in improvised performance. At this point there is a long, open, list of volunteers.

the figure

Why embed the communication device in a figure? The figure is emblematic of the group - a totem, initially without much character, (referred to only as "figure" it could not be much more of a blank), but accreting meaning over time. As a three-dimensional representation of a being it will function quite differently than an on-screen avatar (or a cell phone) in that we relate not only through it, but inevitably *to* it. The flickering other-ness of the figure and the singularity of its voice contribute to leverage the conversation from self-consciousness to group consciousness, from information exchange to formation of an aggregate character.

Since it is going to be carried around for a year its important that the figure be easy to get along with. (See sketches) It will speak only if it is being held or carried - it can be put in your bag and it will keep quiet - it's only activated when warm and being handled. Clearly the most important attribute for the figure is that it be sympathetic - but it must also be wearable, unobtrusive enough to carry regularly, and tough enough to be tossed around like a backpack or purse.

in the context of my work

Each of my works has used a study of the dynamic of a particular relationship as the root of narrative. The question of form in these works has always been a matter of bringing narrative into the physical realm for kinetic interaction.

Mobile networked communications now make it possible to leave the comfort of

formal context, to make work integrated in the complex, messy, everyday physical world, and this is an opportunity I welcome. Typically my projects are large scale and long term. In particular my last seven years as a program director, developing a graduate peer group, has prepared me to work with 20 people in this way, and has in some ways inspired this shift from singular authorship in an art space to group improvisation in the everyday world.

importance to the genre

20 to 20 - makes reference to the "many to many" communication model. Typically in cultural production the words and visions of a single person are sent out to many people - the "one to many" model. The situation in which numbers of people exchange material with each other - a many to many situation, is considerably less well understood as a form. Most examples of many to many communication have arisen spontaneously. As a platform for experimentation this unashamedly anthropomorphic approach may, by shifting self-consciousness to group consciousness, be a first step to a more articulated understanding of distributed making.

feasibility statement

A residency at the Studio of Narrativity at the Interactive Institute in Malmö, Sweden is giving the 20 to 20 project a home and a liaison to Scandinavian telecommunications research. The Interactive Institute is a research institution with close links to universities and industry, a public company owned by the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Research. The mission of the Interactive Institute coincides very well with my own aims for this project. (For more information about the Interactive Institute see appendix A.)

The other researchers at the institute, engaged in narrative projects of similar scale and complexity are providing invaluable advice and assistance. A year's leave from CalArts is making it possible to devote myself fully to the project.

use of work

This work will find a variety of audiences. The 20 participants, of course, the support team, the authors, composers, media artists, etc. who propose projects for the 20 to 20 network. All those who spend time logged onto the server

acting as operator. These mentioned will make up an audience with long-term, intimate involvement with the project.

The greater audience though, are those who run across it happening in everyday life - the friends, family, and co-workers of the 20 to 20 group - people who sit next to them on the bus, in a restaurant, who hear them give a talk about it, all the people that the 20 participants come into contact with over the period of a year, (a number likely to be an order of magnitude larger than the audience for a typical gallery installation).

There is no plan at the moment for the 20 to 20 project to provide a public vantage point for "listening in" on the conversation. But it is an open platform, the conversation is available. Everyday life in mediated society inevitably involves media - it may be that the audience develops its own best vantage point. (e.g. media designer Celia Pearce proposes to use the GPS readings from the participants of the 20 to 20 project for her own project, a global map dynamically tracing the movements of the group. Celia's project plans a public display and a web-site.)

For archival purposes all network activity between the participants will be saved as sound files, indexed according to time and which of the 20 originated the message. **After the performance year it is be possible to replay the entire year's conversation or selections of it, back through a gathering of the figures.**

Interactivity plan

This interactivity plan 1) describes the ground rules for the situation, and 2) includes a scenario - a fictional interview with one of the 20 participants in the third month of the project performance.

This completely speculative "interview" illustrates my intentions for the experience of the piece.

Ground Rules

- There are 20 participants. In the beginning they know each other very slightly if at all. They live in different cities, different time zones.
- If you are a participant you are asked to carry the figure with you as much as practical. This does not mean always, just as much as you can. This is not a tamagochi exercise - it's not going to die if you don't pay attention to it.
- Figures will only speak when they are activated. They are activated by warmth and movement, adjustable sensitivity. If you carry them on your back or put them on your lap or over your shoulder they will be activated. It will not be activated lying on your desk, or in your backpack. The idea is: body contact - on, otherwise - off.
- Figures will prompt you to charge them (like a cell-phone) and to take them outside occasionally for GPS readings.
- To speak to the figures you've got to hold them fairly close and speak toward their heads - they are something like a telephone that way, they just pick up sound that is quite close to them.
- Speech, or any sound that its head is put close to, will go out to the other 20 figures. Spoken voice will be re-constructed, through filtering and synthesis, to the characteristic channel-voice. Sounds will remain sounds. There will be some lag time, but communication will be close to real time.
- Everything going through the channel goes through a server, and is archived, saved.
- Much of the time there will be an operator, a 21st participant, logged onto the server. The operator acts as a witness to the activity on the channel, and, in the initial stages, help, if needed.

That is the basic plan - beyond that there are many things to try...

The 20 to 20 project goes on for the length of a year in order to give the group time to develop as an ensemble, and to give the ensemble time to try out a variety of experiments in narrative and composition. What kind of things?

- Simple structural things, like a prompt - if nothing has been said into the channel for some length of time all the figures that are active could say "What can you tell me?" or "What are you seeing?"
- More complex things such as having the operator seed scenarios ... ("I had a dream last night...") that can be taken up by the ensemble. Techniques from improvisational music and theatre may be useful for this. The operator, being logged on to the server, has access to location information for the figures, knows which of them are active, and which participant is saying what. The operator can act as an author, seeding the conversation, or setting up the rules of a game.

Scenario - from an interview with a 20 to 20 participant, month 3

What do you call it?

Well, that's still changing, the last couple days she's been Madeleine ... she sounds like Madeleine Albright - and you know the real Madeleine Albright never carried a purse. She made her secret service guys carry her lipstick. So this is even more extreme I guess ... we're carrying Madeleine... It's been other things ... we were calling it Bob, last ... I don't know, Madeleine's not going to last, something better will come up.

How do you carry it?

Most of the time I put her (it's a her at this point) in my backpack cause otherwise she attracts attention – it's like having a puppy – people want to see it. Good if you feel like talking to random strangers. At work everyone knows I have this thing, it's not getting many comments anymore ... there's one guy who's just weird about her – he thinks she's watching him or something. I told him there's no camera, but he's like – “that's what you think.” People come in my office and hold her so she'll talk.

I take it biking – I took her on vacation ... it was interesting going through security at the airport ... they x-rayed her a couple times - next time she's going in my luggage.

Do you have to take care of it?

I have to admit that I have let her run down once or twice, and gotten that plaintive but irritating chirp. Sometimes I'm inside all day on the computer and I don't feel like taking her out for a GPS reading (you have to see the sky to get a reading), but she bugs you about it. I used to take her out to the street – but actually I can just hold her out of my kitchen window and its enough sky.

I was careful with her, with it, at first, but its not gonna break. Somebody said they threw theirs out a window ... that's a little ... abusive. I wouldn't throw a cell phone out the window just cause somebody said something stupid on it.

I did have a problem with her – the first week I got her she just stopped turning on – I'd hold her – I stuffed her under my shirt to warm her up, and shook her – she just was dead, not even chirping. So I told the operator and they fedex-ed me a package with instructions – I opened her up, unplugged a few connectors and pulled her whole little package of electronics out, put in the new one, plugged her in, she was fine.

What is it like to talk to?

It took awhile to sink in that when you talk to her what you say is what she is saying to everyone else ... I mean that's obvious, sort of ... but usually when you talk on the phone you're just talking to one person. It is *not* like talking on the phone, and that took awhile to get used to. It's more like playing in a band - you put something out there and somebody else puts the next thing out there and on it goes. I've heard her talk like a comic, doing standup comedy, and I think that's just one of the players, maybe.

There have been, when I was there, at least two times where it was sounds only, one time where we just tapped pens that was very cool.

Last night she said “Never, never, never order the rib-eye at Outback”. And I said “never, never, never order the 'donut' at Sam Wo's”, and then we go back and forth with never, never, never order this or that...

Meeting another 20 to 20 player

She told me there was another one of the players in the area – “there’s someone you should meet” she said, and sure enough this woman called and we made arrangements to meet at a café and sure enough, this girl walks in with one just like mine! And when the Madeleines got like a foot away from each other they cry out ... a sort of greeting and sing a song together! Everyone just froze waiting to see what they’d do next. And they did the usual ... they said things, but in unison. The woman, Celia, was Australian, she's got a show here, she knows Sara and Palle and we actually know lots of people in common. We compared notes about this whole thing. I went to her opening and the figures did it again when they saw each other.

How it's changing

It was lots of “who’s out there, identify yourself” kind of thing at first, till everyone figured out that it’s not really good for a back and forth conversation, and it doesn’t really matter who is out there, its more getting into the drift of what's being said and going with it or changing it. It’s like a band playing together.

Giving it back

Yes, I know Sara’s going to want it back, but she’s mine now. No way.