

Signs of expression

Sinais de expressão

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art, video, media,
narrative, visualization

This paper takes as a starting point McLuhan's (1966) ideas of media as an extension of the self, and that technology extends natural human abilities. To discuss and reflect on these issues, we chose to conduct practical research through asking artists and designers to each produce a video as a personal/professional response to a specific prompt. This collaboration developed from a discussion initially centered around organising a series of interviews on the subject of media and specifically choice of media employed within a practice, and the ways in which this may contribute to meaning, creating interpretations of a resultant work. The decision to ask contributors to use moving image as a way to represent their own medium and way of working moved this project away from a text-based format. A series of videos was produced exploring a subjective discourse where one can perceive these media as an extension of the physical, or an environment where a language can be shared. In these works, the process of viewing, imagining, judging, and making meaning becomes reliant on active, reflexive, self-critical, construction of vision, through subjectivised experiences.

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Este artigo tem como ponto de partida as idéias de McLuhan (1966), sobre as mídias, como uma extensão do self, e que esta tecnologia estende as habilidades humanas naturais. Para discutir e refletir sobre estas questões realizou-se pesquisas práticas. Foi solicitado a artistas e designers para produzirem um vídeo como forma de expressão de um discurso por meio das mídias, tendo como ponto de partida um copo d'água. Essa colaboração se desenvolveu a partir de uma discussão inicialmente centrada na organização de uma série de entrevistas sobre o tema da mídia e especificamente sobre a escolha da mídia empregada em uma prática pessoal ou profissional e as maneiras pelas quais isso pode contribuir para o significado, criando interpretações sobre os resultados dos trabalhos. A decisão de pedir aos colaboradores para usar a imagem em movimento como forma de expressão afastou este projeto de um formato baseado em texto. Como resultado uma série de vídeos foi produzida explorando um discurso subjetivo onde se pode perceber os meios como uma extensão do físico, e um ambiente onde uma linguagem pode ser compartilhada. Nestes trabalhos, o processo de ver, imaginar, julgar e fazer sentido torna-se dependente da construção ativa, reflexiva e autocrítica da visão, através de experiências subjetivas.

1 Introduction

This work began at the School of Communication of the Royal College of Art in London. The question that guided this work progressed from the reflection that, based on the words of McLuhan (1966), media is in extension of self, and technology extends natural human abilities. Technologies are not simple additions to human existence; they change how people think, feel and act, even individuals' perception and 'information processing', to use the language of technology.

To discuss and reflect on these issues, we chose to conduct practical research through asking artists and designers to each produce a video as a personal/professional response to a specific prompt. This work considers visualizations of diverse media by practitioners using video-making. Practitioners invited to contribute represent diverse fields in art and design, and may usually use other means of expression including text, mark making, object, film, sound, as well as video. These practitioners express their own practice and use of media through digital video.

This research aims to encourage reflection on the articulations between the multiple means of expression made available by digital media and to consider how information may be obtained or lost depending on the medium being used. The form of an abstract discourse allows the start point of a glass of water to be used in any way relevant to the contributor's practice. The water or the glass may be present or not present in the film, for example, it could prompt visualizations of place, or perhaps the 'publicness' of the water glass could be explored, as an object of the everyday and allowed in this case to be 'relevant' (Arendt, 1959). Other ways may be found.

This paper will be presented in the form of a dialogue between the two authors. We will present the results of some experiences as a series of digital discourses in video format.

2 Theory

The initial discussions are based on McLuhan's ideas on the expression of mediations that allow the process to be collective and extended to a whole society.

During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media' (McLuhan, 1966, p. 19).

In the same line of thought, we can cite Kerckhove (1997): it is assumed that, as each technology extends one of our faculties and transcends our physical limitations, we wish to acquire the best extensions for our body. It seems to us that our machines, be they mechanical or a new digital computer, have powers much above the use that we can make of them.

McLuhan (1996) builds on classical communication theory to emphasise the influence of the medium used. His ideas rests on a conception of the media in general, emphasizing four different aspects of the media:

1. Media are not neutral tools, but they have considerable psychological and social consequences, without regards to their content
2. Media are extensions of the senses
3. Each medium is in constant interplay with other media
4. Media manipulate our perception of space and time

The question that guided this work progressed from the reflection that our cognition is modified as we use digital media. Camera and video as cognitive artifacts extend cognitive skills, such as abstract thinking, memory, problem solving, and language use. Cognitive artifacts, as psychologist Donald Norman (1993) has called them, are artifacts that are able to represent, store, retrieve and manipulate information. Videos produced by practitioners become a medium through which representations, in the form of symbols, images, sounds or texts, are perceived and can be manipulated.

3 Method used

Method used to develop this project involved participants contributing videos and started from the work done by Karen Bosy (KB) and Cristina Portugal (CP), which will be presented as follows.

Participants

Practitioners are requested through open calls within RCA and potentially using artists' databases such as Axisweb, for example, and in person (sometimes during workshops), to send publicly available Vimeo links (Vimeo is an online platform with open access to the public). Any practitioner is welcome to send a link.

Vimeo links are gathered together and posted on a blog page (another public online platform). Links to practitioners' websites (public online platforms) are also posted if requested by the participants. Practitioners are asked to return a signed consent form with permission to generate links to the blog. Vimeo links can be withdrawn at any time, by the participant changing their Vimeo privacy settings or changing the link connected with their video. Participants can also withdraw by requesting their video be removed from the blog.

KB: This collaboration initially centered on conducting and recording a series of interviews exploring media choices and communication within art or design practice. In a development from this start point, in this project, *Seminar: Signs of Expression*, practitioners were asked through open calls and in person (sometimes during workshops), to contribute publicly available Vimeo links to their own videos (Vimeo is an online platform with open access to the public). *Seminar* continues to be active, and all contributed links will be posted.

In classical communication theory, communication is a one-way message to be passively received or decoded by those with those with the required skill, but the meaning is controlled by the sender (Roman Jakobson, as explained by Mieke Bal in *Vision and Textuality*, 1995). In this project, however, the receiver, in this case the viewer of the *Seminar* blog page, participates in making meaning through interpreting descriptions of the water glass in an experiential way.

CP: My research project is entitled, “*Design * Technology*”: *contemporary design in digital environments*. The project is comprised of a series of books that bring, didactically, the basic concepts, studies and reference contents about design and its relationships with technologies and other common areas - concepts that can serve as a basis for Digital Humanities projects. Considering that Digital Humanities projects involve designers who are concerned with the symbolic representation of language, design, as producer of contemporaneous languages – among them the hypermedia and the transmedia – has an active and determinant role in the society where it acts, as one of the main builders of culture. To make flourish, unequivocally, perception and awareness about this role of design is one of the main objectives of this research project.

With this idea in mind, I presented my work to Karen Bosy and she presented her research which is also related to discussions on digital languages. We started a collaborative work with the main goal of creating videos using the various digital media. My initial idea was to use these videos as examples in my book to demonstrate narratives through the various media.

KB: The open-ended nature of this project and inclusion of all contributions parallels the nature of an earlier artwork, *Inside here*, within my diarist documentarist art practice, an artwork in the form of an online platform using a native mobile app. *Inside here* uses altitude as a prompt to provoke a relational interaction with site, and invites individuals to express opinions through posting these on my blog, another form of online platform. When participating in *Inside here*, the process of using the app is documented by the participant through the sharing of an opinion, and each share joins the list of text-based comments on my blog. The prompt (altitude) is also documented in another way by the content of the comments within the text. In addition to this, altitude is documented numerically when this is shared, along with the comment, and, as altitude is

set relative to ‘home’ within *Inside here* by the participant, this also has a relational aspect.

In a similar way to *Inside here*, *Seminar* offers a prompt (a glass of water) resulting in a list of comments, although in this case, the comments are in video format and not text. Also similarly to *Inside here*, the prompt is documented in a relational way, in *Seminar* by the contributed videos. My expectations are that as more contributions are posted, although some videos will seem unrelated to others, the videos as a whole form an evolving list of diverse, dispersed perspectives relating to the prompt. In this case, similarly to *Inside here*, no contribution can be inappropriate and contributions will be posted as and when received, so deadlines are unnecessary. *Inside here* as well as *Seminar* can be found on my blog (kmbosy.com/blog).

This way of working (diarist documentarist and using video) fits within my art practice. In my own videos, I use structuralist film techniques, and within experimental film, including structuralism, by foregrounding surface and using a frame to defamiliarise the filmic space, a window can be denoted. In this way, space is brought into view, creating a gap or a generative space between the filmic space and the space the viewer inhabits. Catherine Russell explains this very clearly in *Experimental Ethnography* (1999). As a progression from this, the online platform (my blog) frames *Seminar*’s presentation of Vimeo links. These videos, framed by the blog site, are placed in a subjective discourse potentially offering an experiential space.

4 Findings

Since each medium requires the use of different senses and also different levels of engagement, McLuhan (1966) explains that ‘the medium is the message’ encompassing the idea that media, not their content, should be the focus of media studies, since media formats change responses and the information it conveys. In our project, a series of videos was produced, exploring a subjective discourse where one can perceive this media as an extension of the physical, or an environment where a language can be shared. Two videos were selected to be presented in this work. All other videos are available on “Seminar Collection / Means of Expression.” [kmbosy.com/blog](http://www.kmbosy.com/blog/) (blog), n.d. <http://www.kmbosy.com/blog/seminar-collection-means-of-expression/>.

4.1 Video: Private

KB: My contribution, *Private*, (Karen Bosy, 2018) is videoed from within the water glass, to frame the image, a way of working within my practice which I developed to map sites. The camera view is masked by translucent tape and the view is reduced to the changing light and

some diffused colours as I carry the glass around a building and up some stairs. Aside from occasional glimpses of trees, the moving water reflects the interior of the glass downwards to the camera, at the same time blocking the upwards view. For me, the glass of water in this video refers to sites of presentation, which can be challenging, as sites where ideas are given a public airing, and glimpses of the personal are allowed. For me, the water glass present at these sites, to be used in case of a dry throat, also helps to privatize an area. It marks the area in which the speaker is to be installed, functioning as placeholder and prop, and alluding to other speakers and other sites. In this way the water glass at the site of a presentation points to other sites, as, similarly, the video works on the blog site point to other sites.

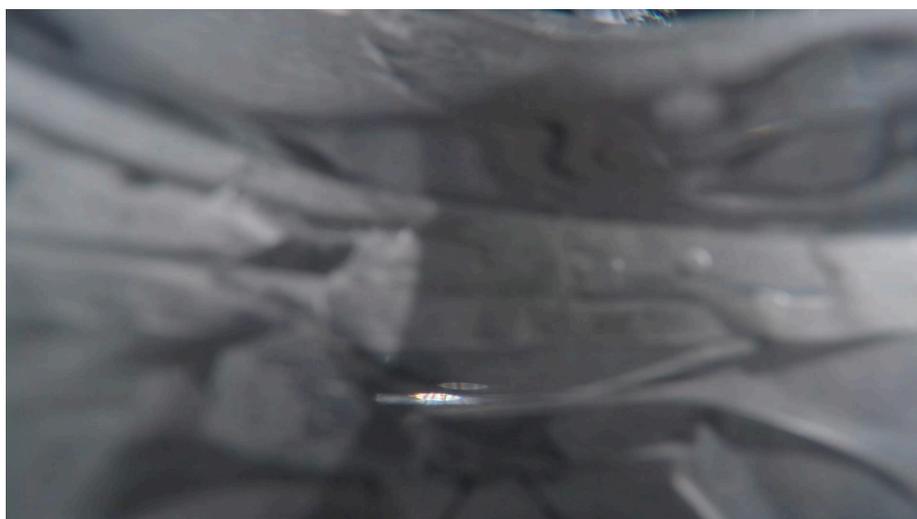


Figure 1 video screen Private, (Karen Bosy, 2018)

4.2 Video: Ephemeral

CP: My contribution, *Ephemeral* (Cristina Portugal, 2018) is videoed from within the water glass and a camera was also used to film this water glass. In an environment of light and shadow – the viewer is guided by the sound to identify and potentiate the effects of visual images. Presented is an ephemeral world where everything flows, material and immaterial objects arise and disappear, provoking in the viewer an experience of immersion in a virtual world.

We sought to create a narrative by enhancing the visual effect through sound. Although the sound was one of the last stages in the composition of the video, the sound indications were efficient to give the tone and climate of the scenes, seducing the spectator and instigating even the creation of the image and the rhythm. Awareness of the narrative use of sound can activate imagination, creative conciseness to complex or mundane scenes (Cristina Portugal, 2018).



Figure 2 video screen Ephemeral (Cristina Portugal, 2018 In: Bosy, 2018)

4.3 Participating practitioners:

Seminar

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Collective|dispersed

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5 Conclusions

Finally, this project encourages reflection on the articulations between the multiple means of expression made available by digital media. The method allows expression of curiosity, creativity, cooperation and the experience of the ludic, by enabling each individual to create their own discourse. Although there is no 'natural' way of interweaving texts, images, sounds and images, the video series presents a variety of media, from born-digital events to documentation of physical interventions.

This proposal of work is based on the ideas of Ken Friedman when he observes that

Methods, theories, even historical accounts, and interpretative frames begin as proposals. These proposals begin in some form of idea or inquiry or even in some form of intuition or inspiration. The professions, technology, the humanities, social science, and natural science are all littered with ideas that seemed promising to someone. Proposing ideas must always be free: once proposed, the ideas must be subject to critical inspection, application and perhaps even testing to see which work (Friedman 2000: p. 21).

This project involved participants contributing videos to generate reflection on and investigation of the possibilities of the medium. Consequently, as Friedman remarks in his essay : *Design Knowledge: From Research Into Practice*, that 'the interplay of experience and reflection, inquiry and theorizing generates knowledge.' (Friedman 2000: p. 23). A series of videos was produced exploring a subjective discourse where one can perceive these media as an extension of the physical, or an environment where a language can be shared. In this project, the process of viewing, imagining, judging, and

making meaning becomes reliant on active, reflexive, self-critical, construction of vision, through subjectivised experiences.

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