Hypnosis As Data Retrieval And Web Searches As Railway Signs: Q&A With Artists Thomson & Craighead

By Diana Stevenson — May 20 2013

Thomson & Craighead, Belief, 2012. Two channel digital installation. Courtesy of the artist and Carroll / Fletcher

Thomson & Craighead (aka artists Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead) use video and data to create works of art that reflect upon the digital world. By reworking pre-existing material often found on the internet, they're repurposing the digital detritus of our everyday lives and using the vast wealth of data we've cumulatively created to hold a mirror up to our actions, exploring the strange ways it's changing our relationships and interactions.

The artists have an upcoming exhibition called Never Odd Or Even at London's Carroll / Fletcher gallery running from May 24–July 6 2013. Below is an interview between the artists and curator Diana Stevenson, which took place during the preparation for the exhibition, where they talk about their work and inspiration.
working together, as opposed to independently, informed what you were doing when you first started as artists?

Thomson & Craighead: We met while studying at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee in the early 1990s. We were making our own work at that time of course, but quickly started helping each other out. We both happened to be working mainly with video and everything was ‘hardware heavy’ back then. Even a broadcast quality camera needed more than one person to carry and operate it, so we were used to cooperating anyway. Of course we’d always be discussing the ideas in the work along the way and so this practical way of assisting each other quickly blurred into collaboration, where the form and content of any given work just couldn’t be attributed to one or other of us.

Today you mine the Internet for much of your source materia. Was there a time when you first started working, either before the Internet existed (in its current form) or before you started using it, that informed the way you work now?

Our reworking of the classic computer game [Space Invaders] Triggerhappy (1998) and our sound installation Speaking in Tongues (1998) were both made without using the internet at any point, if that’s what you mean? Triggerhappy replaces the pixilated alien invaders of the original game with sections of text taken from Michel Foucault’s essay What is an Author?, while Speaking in Tongues lets you use a stethoscope to navigate a mass of speakers behind a wall that are all playing scanned phone calls captured from the local
sign *Here* (2011) also does not use the internet unless you count using the web to find a suitable fabricator to make the sign.

**How did you become interested in looking for the systems and structures by which we navigate existing information in a pre-internet world?**

Arguably if you collage existing material something new *is* put into the world, and for us the appropriation and manipulation of existing information is a documentary practice—one that seeks to tell *us* about *ourselves* by re-looking at how the endless digital media we all create and broadcast is interconnected, stored, owned, recycled, and changed by the passage of time.

As artists, we are less interested in adding to the exponential growth of this endless archive and more interested in looking at what’s there already, how it’s stitched together and what makes it tick. So reworking something that is already there seems quite natural to us whether it is reconfiguring live information in works like *BEACON* (2007) (in which web searches from around the world are displayed on a railway flap sign) or making documentary artworks like our *Flat Earth Trilogy* (2007-2012) (material from on-line sources edited together).


**How did this idea of repurposing existing material came about?**
This might seem like a bit of a jump, but it started with learning analytical drawing at art school. When you learn how to draw a tree (for example) you’re forced to look at what is there and not to make assumptions. This makes you see the world differently. The idea of ‘tree’ doesn’t necessarily help you draw the tree, because what you need to convey is the visual assemblage of reflected light that you perceive at that particular moment. Broadly speaking, this way of seeing that you learn when drawing in this particular way is the same whatever you are looking at. So what you end up engaging with and thinking about as you draw, is how you are perceiving the world in the first place, whether it’s drawing a tree, the view out of a bus, broadcast television, or capitalism.

Your agency as an artist shifts towards more fundamental concerns about perception, and from there it seemed like a small step to begin repurposing existing material, as it’s the cracks between everything that fascinate us. This is why we describe A Live Portrait of Tim Berners-Lee (an early warning system) (2012) as a live drawing and Decorative Newsfeeds (2004) as an automatic drawing.

**Thomson & Craighead, A Live Portrait of Tim Berners-Lee (an early warning system), 2012. Digital projection from online sources. Courtesy of the artist and Carroll / Fletcher**

During our conversations, and in other places, you’ve talked a lot about the influence of the Oulipo group of writers and philosophers as a way of thinking and working. It would be very interesting if you could explain a bit more about this, and what it is about their way of thinking that attracts you?

What we like about the Ouvroir de littérature potentielle (Oulipo) is how they shift emphasis from what’s being written to how it’s being written, and in doing so they remind us how much the architectures and
own work—a simple example being our *Flipped Clock* (2009) where a real-time animation of a clock is made unfamiliar by means of a simple and singular modification. The clock is still the clock, but it’s momentary visual strangeness reminds us that clock time is a social construction, but one so pervasive, that it threatens to contain us.

Another example is *The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order* (2010) where we have re-edited the 1960 movie of HG Wells’ novella into alphabetical chronological order. It is an attempt to use a system of classification as a way of performing a kind of time travel within the timeline of the movie. Oulipo described many of their experiments as constrained writing techniques and in this case, you could describe our modification of this feature film as a constrained editing technique, and in doing so we make it mean something new.

*Thomson & Craighead. Several Interruptions, 2009. Three channel video, 3:37 min. Courtesy of the artist and Carroll / Fletcher*

From some of your earliest projects, right up till now, you’ve made works that explore what we could call the spiritual, or the occult. I rather like the melding together of something so immaterial as a belief in fairies, with the immense immaterial miasma that is the internet. Was this a conscious decision, and if so could you speak a bit more about it?

You’re right that this does crop up in our work from time to time. It’s not so much an interest in spirituality itself, but rather an attempt to connect humanity’s strategies to create belief systems that explain life on earth
a man experiencing a past life under hypnosis as a way of thinking about data retrieval (Thalamus, 1995). We also re-enacted and filmed a séance as a visual metaphor for the ubiquity of surveillance in our society (Obituary, 1997). Most recently we made a documentary artwork called Belief (2012) that looks more specifically at how some of us use social media to broadcast our own beliefs about the world, around the world.


Something I find quite intriguing about your work is the relationship between the indoors and the outdoors. On one level, the work is very much indoor work: made on the computer, shown on a screen where you need electricity and an Internet connection. However, it often points outdoors, or points towards the world outside. It’s almost as if you are the armchair travellers. Is this something intentional?

That’s a funny way of putting it! Our Flat Earth Trilogy is perhaps closest to being about armchair travel in that it explores the seductive panoptic and treacherous view of Google Earth and is made entirely from information found on the web. But you’re right that other works like Horizon (2009), Here (2011), London Wall (2010), A Live Portrait of Tim Berners-Lee (an early warning system), and even More Songs of Innocence and of Experience (2012) all try and connect our physical location with the wider sphere of influence that the virtual world affords us.
For us, it's not so much about 'indoors and the outdoors' but more about being 'here' and 'there' at the same time. A simple smartphone is capable of connecting us to anywhere in the world in a number of different ways at any given time and that shift in our personal spheres of influence has utterly changed our understanding of the world.

*Never Odd Or Even* runs 24 May – 6 July 2013 at *Carroll / Fletcher* gallery, London.