◈ In conversation with Christian Nold author of Emotional Cartography (ebook)

Interviewer Kaye Shumack — University of Western Sydney

Photograph Tibor Bozi, 2006

Christian Nold is an artist, designer and educator working to develop new participatory models for communal representation.

Shumack: So how did the publication of *Emotional Cartography* (2009) come about?

Nold: The book was an attempt to understand and contextualise the participatory mapping projects I had been creating for the last years. It all started in 2004, when I invented the Bio Mapping device at the end of my time in the Interaction Design course at the Royal College of Art. I had been watching other students build sensors that display intimate and personal data about the environment and people's bodies. While I found this really interesting, I felt there wasn't much awareness of the way these devices were setting up implicit social control situations. I thought it must be possible to develop other kinds of sensors so I started to unpack the lie detector and try to structure the interaction differently.

The Bio Mapping project came out of appropriating the galvanic skin response sensor part of the lie detector which measures the sweat level on your skin. With a lie detector, one person is watching the other person's biometric data which is contextualised by asking questions such as "Did you murder somebody?" and then looking at the subjects' biometric spikes. The way the sensors are used, reinforces the way the power of institutions and technology are used to intimidate people. Interestingly, law enforcement agencies will privately admit that the data from the lie detector is highly ambiguous. They purposefully make the testing very spectacular and performative to overstate its effectiveness and push people into changing their behaviour and confessing. I was fascinated by the way these supposedly 'rational' institutions were creating performative manipulation technologies. I realised that perhaps I can build something equally performative but that creates different social relationships. So the Bio Mapping device is essentially a lie detector connected to a GPS. There is no interrogation process, instead the context becomes the local environment, so the device becomes a way to documents your responses to the world.

Bio Mapping started off as a symbolic device aimed at creating different social relationships. Then began a journey of exploring how other people made sense of the tool and letting their experiences guide the way in which it would be used. From 2004 to 2009, I used these devices with large numbers of people in many contexts around the world to create large scale collective emotion maps of people and places. Maps such as the Greenwich Emotion Map (2005/6) and the San Francisco Emotion Map (2007) brought together hundreds of people to collectively construct printed maps that visualised and combined their personal emotions and experiences of the local area.

At some point in this process, I was offered a chance to set up a research project with neuroscientists to try and make sense of what was going on in these projects. It was interesting to understand their way of thinking about emotion. One of the things they wanted to do was take people into the lab, wire them up and simulate the experience of walking through a city. Another scientist wanted to use biometric feedback to enhance the performance of opera singers. I was disappointed that for the scientists, art and science collaborations pointed towards simulation and elitist culture rather than research embedded in the world. Their notion of feedback was individual and constrained within the solitary brain rather than a social feedback process of communal sense making.

The neuroscientists I found the most interesting were not the purely theoretical or academic ones but the clinical researchers working with children with ADHD. One of them was taking them on experimental outings where they used bio-feedback to understand and manage their own biophysical responses to difficult situations. Another researcher developed her own methods which involved giving digital cameras to young people and asking them to document and reflect on their experiences when they were on and off medication. I thought both of these are positive examples of technology for revisiting experiences which ends up empowering people. I feel that this type of hands-on research with people creates a much clearer and situated understanding of what emotion is.

The book was a way to summarise all this research. While the book ended up having a bit of neuroscience in it, I see it as describing a much broader cultural and situated notion of emotion. The only essay that specifically deals with neuroscience is from Dr. Tom Stafford, who sees emotions and the mind as tools for hacking. He wrote a fantastic book called *Mind Hacks*, which describes simple DIY hacks that you can do yourself at home, which allow you to understand how your own mind works. He believes in the power of empirical self-experiments for developing personal knowledge. He thinks that we can 'hack' emotion and that this will allow us to break through the division between the individual and the collective, towards a new kind of social. I find this metaphor of hacking applied to intimate and complex issues like mind and emotion to be quite empowering. All in all, the book is an attempt to document a large variety of approaches to what a cartography of emotion might be.

Shumack: So how did you select the people to include in the book?

Nold: A few of the essays were great pre-existing texts, such as one by the Raqs Media Collective. Their essay tells a history of fingerprinting and biometrics as developed in India during the British Empire period. Some of the other essays were commissioned because they uncovered complex but not often tackled issues. For example, Sophie Hope's text examines the function or dysfunction of socially engaged art in relation to regeneration. She asks the question, of how artists can respond to funding imperatives and the challenge of utilitarianism. She sees in *Emotional Cartography* a dynamic combination of readability and unreadability, utility and futility.

Shumack: This book is a really interesting collection of perspectives about how the technologies are being used to gather different kinds of data, and the place of creativity within the art/science debate. Do you see much critical debate about the impact of social media and social data on general society and everyday life?

Nold: While there is certainly a public discussion about the political role of technology, I don't think it engages with a deeper historical analysis of the how and why. There are some major changes taking place in the way that data is reshaping personal relationships. I guess it may take ten years before we start seeing class actions from people who feel Facebook contributed to them being abused while they were teenagers. I don't know to what extent people are really aware of the invasiveness of technology but I am seeing the growth of a technocratic and essentialist idea of emotion. Here in the UK the government recently publicised a happiness survey of the whole country offering a geographical and demographic breakdown. So while the global economic system is collapsing, governments think they should to be involved in the emotional branding of peoples' experience. The idea of 'wellbeing surveys' and of including emotions as a factor in public policy, is growing. Yet what we really mean by 'emotion' is contested and we need to reclaim emotion as something collective and embedded in the material reality of the world.

Shumack: So you think this recognition shows there is a growing need to gather different and complex kinds of emotional data, or is it really still at a basic level?

Nold: I think that many people are using emotion as cynical politics [in a way] that institutionalises banal happiness metrics to escape the difficult facts of inequality. I think the recent riots in London raised interesting debates about inequality and the internalisation of capitalist consumption. I think focusing on feelings is a very important way to proceed, it's just that the way its being done by institutions is crude and manipulative.

Shumack: You just presented a talk titled "Feeling London" where you reflect on the emotional status of the city. Can you describe this in more detail?

Nold: I talked at an event called "London Incorporated" which was about how we physically and emotionally ingest the city around us. I tried to describe emotion not as an essence, but something that mediates between the internal and external world as a social practice. Rather than something that we feel inside our bodies, emotion is something we do in the world and it's an

active way of making sense of that world. My "Sensory Mapping" projects suggest that emotion is not something you can separate from the rest of the world – [for example], smelling something … immediately triggers an emotional reaction. People tend to think of emotion as something passive and weak, which you are 'receiving' – I see it as an active way of relating to the world where you are renegotiating the importance of things, and finding our own position towards it. I think this is knowledge making process which creates insight and reflection and allows people to articulate what they care about and what is important. I think this is at the centre of all political action. When you look at any historical political change it was always about the social reality as well as an intense emotional feeling of injustice.

Shumack: In your talk you use the example of the death of Princess Diana in 1997, and how this was an emotional public event played out in the media and also in a public space where crowds of people brought flowers outside the palace, creating a kind of historical social moment that nobody anticipated.

Nold: Yes, the media didn't know how to make sense of it. The media narrative was of stupid working class people who only watch TV and feel this senseless emotional connection with a television celebrity. It was interesting to see how disruptive this public show of emotion became. Masses of people were leaving huge bouquets of flowers at an entrance in such a way that it started to block up the gates of the royal residence, and the royal maintainers didn't know how to deal with it. They couldn't just clear away the flowers, they had to leave them. I think the way emotion can became material in public space is very interesting.

Some of the recent demonstrations in London like Democracy Village outside Parliament, involved people painting simple emotional statements onto placards such as "we're hurting", "why does it always have to be like this?". The media and politicians dismissed it as "a shanty town full of loons" because it didn't fit into their model of rational political dialogue which revolved around things like taxation. The same thing happened to the Occupy Movement. While a number of politicians were broadly supportive of controls on banks, they were baffled by the lack explicit demands by the protestors. For the Occupy participants the process of unframed and emotional discussion was the point of them being there. I think these examples show the bizarre institutionalised way that politics is framed as being outside of emotions rather then having emotion at its core.

Shumack: Your work is really engaged in questioning and exploring what is emotion – its situated-ness, with these examples showing how it can be manifested in the social and public sphere. It may be that you are building a kind of typology of the emotional through mapping – linked to place, space, through an orientation, a relationship, a commonality that can be identified in some way, with individual and common features. This is almost working at another level with data and context, trying to find a productive approach to how emotion may be explored through interventions, as a framework for critical thinking. What are your thoughts about this particular approach to reading emotive data linked to social context?

Nold: I have recently been reading about the idea of models and how they function historically as well as today. The current concept seems to be of the model as a mediator, computer models are constructed out of data to produce an 'object' that can be interrogated by researchers and used as instruments to understand the world. In this sense, models are reflective objects that allow public discussion. Yet the data they use to generate these model is numeric data, which are things that can be numerically represented and thus captures only a certain part of experience. I'm curious about whether it is possible to make models of emotional experience. I don't mean computer models that turn emotions into metrics but situated models of people's experience that can be used to understand what is happening and then intervene in it. I think the printed emotion maps are models of a specific local dynamic that people can use to understand and intervene in spatial and political or social processes.

This is also the case with the local currency projects such as the Bijlmer Euro where I tagged bank notes with RFID tags to understand and intervene in the local money flows. So a map can become a model and a currency can become a model. My suggestion is that a whole variety of artistic and cultural products can be considered as models of the world.

There is an article by Steven Shapen, called "Pump and Circumstance" where he discusses the link between the production and the communication of knowledge in the work of Robert Boyle1. Robert Boyle moved from the notion of fact as religious knowing to an experimentalist concept of knowledge that he calls, "matters of fact". His "matters of fact" are not infinitely truthful, but are socially constructed. For something to become a matter of fact it requires social witnessing to make it a "matter of fact." Boyle applies a legal model of having multiple witnesses back up what you are saying, as the test for what becomes knowledge. These insights meant he paid a lot of attention to how he documented his experiments to insure reproducibility and to create physical models that represented and communicated his observations.

What I find fascinating is that in this way models are both end results of observations as well as models for communication to establish them as collective matters of fact. So this idea of knowledge is both social and epistemological. Boyle's concept also doesn't appear to exclude emotions being used to build these matters of fact. If the agreement of multiple people in their observations lends matters of fact their power, then the collective public deliberation of feelings is similarly important. Today, the models that contemporary science produces are rarely publicly accessible. I think we need to return to this earlier notion of knowledge which requires public experiments to establish public matters of fact.

Shumack: The article in *Emotional Cartography* by the neuroscientist Dr. Tim Stafford about using these tools to hack emotional responses is a form of science that engages with situated contexts. How would you describe, for example, your Bjilmer Euro project in terms of this discussion about models and their usage?

Nold: I think of the Bijlmer Euro visualisation as a model of the Bjilmer neighbourhood which considered to be the 'Bronx' of Holland. The same way a computer model of a place, might be used to describe the key dynamics of a place, the Bijlmer Euro traces the economic and social flows of money within a local area. What's exciting is that people can go to the public website and look at a particular transaction that has just occurred as well as the electronic message that they wrote onto bank note.

Imagine if you live in this place, and you can follow the path of a singe bank note, how it may change your concept of the local area. The visualisation becomes a public entity for understanding how the economic, social and cultural are intertwined in this area.

Shumack: The potential of conceptualizing your practice in this way seems to be suggesting that there are many possible ways to engage peoples' experiences. Can you describe some of the ways you have worked with groups of people to draw out their involvement?

Nold: I was working with the designer Daniela Boraschi on a mapping project for Brentford where we made the data gathering as well as the model building public. We purchased a professional large format printer so that we could print huge collective visualisations of the area. What was really exciting was that we could paste up rough versions as we went, and anybody could physically annotate and edit the content. We then scanned this back in and incorporated into the next version of the map. So this was a map as dynamic public model that changed throughout the process. We ended up with a 10 metre long visualisation, that stayed in a public context exhibited at the Council. The next step would have been to take the printer and put it in a tent, on a traffic island, where people could just wander in and be part of this public modelling process.

Shumack: So how were people entering their data, were they responding to questions?

Nold: For Brentford we tried to have a broad range of ways for people to get involved. We set up workshop activities for classes of architecture students, pensioners, the local history society, the boat club as well as people who randomly came by. The idea was to develop activities that would allow people to contribute to the collective map if they only had one minute or many hours. We had simple drawing sheets that asked people to draw "what the future of Brentford should look like?" or "who are the most dangerous people in Brentford?" Sensory Deprivation Mapping involved people walking the local area while blindfolded and deafened. Other groups did Bio Mapping workshops and yet others were discussions about the history of the town. To curate these activities I use an educational model that suggests that people have different styles of learning: uni-structural, multi-structural, relational or extended abstract. Some people see things as linear connection between things, others see the overview and others want to step outside the constraints of the project. So when I setup projects like this, I try to structure them so that people can have different ways of understanding the process so that their contributions have value for themselves as well as the project. Some people are prepared to spend 10 seconds doing a drawing whereas others are prepared to sit down for 3-4 hours. The Brentford project was an attempt to build a dynamic collaborative model with different ways of engaging with it.

Shumack: So do you see these kinds of projects affecting any change?

Nold: It varies. Sometimes there is lots of momentum generated by the projects in others there is lots of local inertia. For example, a project I am currently working on Finland, is totally dictated by the governing organisation that is running the historical island. While we have the support of the inhabitants, the governing body is trying to block the project which they perceive as a threat to their control over the image of the island. In other contexts, institutions can be very supportive. For the Bethlehem Emotion Map, we had the local major coming to every workshop and had the involvement of the economic development board from the start. In that context the final public map could make broad recommendations such as closing a major bridge to car traffic. The project we did in Denmark had practical results where a local citizen group has now formed to organise a regular farmers market which temporarily closes the traffic through the main road in town. Other times the change is more in terms of people's perceptions and awareness and social relationships. I have had a lot of feedback from people who have enjoyed seeing their local area in a new way or a new awareness of their body. Also in terms of academic research I am seeing a variety of people being inspired to visualise people's perceptions and document other intangible experience for collective change.

Shumack: To finish up, could you give some thoughts on your current PhD research

Nold: I just started at an exciting research group at UCL called "Extreme Citizen Science" which is trying to articulate a bottom-up vision of Citizen Science. Citizen Science is a peculiar term, for an institutional practice that tries to find ways of working with 'amateurs.' A lot of the time scientists see this as a way of extracting free labour out of people to collect data. On the other hand the subject has the potential for a massive shift in the way that science is done to encompass social and cultural production. Essentially it's about a different model of knowledge production that recognises that research happens in a very broad variety of places not just academia. So one of our questions is how to form productive alliances between academia and groups with agendas. I am looking at how to import my own way of working into Citizen Science, so that the knowledge and processes are productive and creative for the community as well as for the researchers.

Footnotes

1 Shapen, S. (1984) Pump and Circumstance: Robert Boyle's Literary Technology *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 14, No. 4. pp. 481-520

About the interviewer

Kaye is Associate Professor in design and visual communication in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at UWS. She is a practicing artist, design theorist and media producer. Current projects include mapping as participatory practices of critical visualisation of local contexts around transport mobility, urban landscapes and food systems.