Mapping the Urban Database Documentary

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Introduction

While one of early cinema's primary subjects was the new sensorial and psychological experience of the modern city, the discourse on computers and urbanization has followed a different path. The dominant rhetoric of the 1980s was obsessed with virtual reality (with the implicit presumption that a technologized urban reality would be an improvement upon previous realities) and the 1990s were overrun by a widespread fear of the dissolution of cities at the hands of the Internet. It was believed that cities would no longer serve a significant purpose now that people could telecommute from anywhere. Of course, these two predictions have proved dramatically false. Over the past 20 years, cities have returned from bankruptcy to flourish as centers of avant-garde artistic activity and the hubs of new, knowledge-based economies. Globally, processes of urbanization have continued unabated, and for the first time in human history, more people live in cities than in the country.

Despite this urban renaissance, it remains popular to suggest increasing technological development necessarily results in a diminishing quality of lived urban experience. In contrast to this perspective, the last decade has also witnessed many independent, DIY media arts projects focused upon transforming the experience of the physical city through digital media. As opposed to the widespread fears that the Internet would only accelerate homogenization and disembodiment, this branch of experimental practice has placed the particularity of place and the multisensorial experience of being in city streets at the center of its work.

This essay will both offer a survey of historical practices at the intersection of media arts and urbanism, as well as discuss a series of my own collaborative projects. I describe these works as "urban database documentaries." At its core, the urban database documentary is a mode of cultural practice that attempts to represent a city through a narrative comprising multiple perspectives and has the ability to be re-configured conceptually or literally by the viewer/participant. A key dimension of the urban database documentary is the irreconcilable dilemma of representing the city as a whole. The conceptual architecture of the database provides a means through which to negotiate the presentation of highly individualized perspectives with collective identities. Paradoxically, the database, often thought to be a catalog of objective knowledge, in the context of documentary, enables an open-ended approach to experimentation, allowing for flexibility and planned uncertainty, thus creating new possibilities for capturing the

Parts of this essay are adapted from previous writings on the topic in *New Geographies* (ed. Gareth Doherty) and *Urban Omnibus* (ed. Cassim Shepard). In addition to these venues, this writing owes immense debt to my most intimate collaborators on these ideas in general and projects in particular: Christopher Allen, James Burns, Celia di Pauli, Ann Heppermann, Brian House, Kara Oehler, and Philipp Schwarz.

dynamic qualities of lived experience and changing history. This body of work is not only urban because of subject matter, but also because it's ultimate realization is enacted through transformed perception in physical urban space.

Traversing the Arcades of the Urban Database Documentary

Conventionally, databases are understood to simply be structured collections of information. The first thing most people probably think of is the bland, affectless universe of an Excel spreadsheet, an infinite horizon of rows and columns. However, understood differently, the database, as both conceptual architecture and technical medium, has proven to be a remarkably fertile domain for artistic experimentation related to the city.

If nothing else, the modern city is defined by heterogeneity. It is marked by a constantly changing amalgam of diverse people, buildings, objects, cultures, and processes. The urban is the condensation of the human. As J.B. Jackson said, "Whatever its point of departure, every discussion in the field of human geography sooner or later comes back to the city as the supreme example of man's modification of his environment."[1] One of the primary challenges that has confronted artists since the rise of the metropolis has been how to effectively represent this tremendous complexity and perpetual flux.

Cinema has been a privileged medium for documenting the urban condition because of its capacity to capture movement and approximate the phenomenological experience of embodied presence through the recording of sight and sound. For Eisenstein, the montage of sensations that defines urban living could not be captured in the static medium of painting. In "Montage and Architecture," he writes, "Painting has remained incapable of fixing the total representation of a phenomenon in its full visual multidimensionality…. Only the film camera has solved the problem of doing this on a flat surface, but its undoubted ancestor in this capability is — architecture."[2] Viewing the Parthenon from the perspective of film, Eisenstein sees the sequential design of perspectives as equivalent to the unfolding of camera shots in a montage sequence. To walk and view the buildings from a multiplicity of vantage points is to watch an urban film progress outside the theater. For this reason, Eisenstein says, "The Acropolis of Athens has an equal right to be called the perfect example of one of the most ancient films."[3] Architecture and urban experience is, in this sense, fundamentally cinematic.

While cinema has been able to transport spectators on architectural journeys through carefully sequencing spatialized shots, the dilemma of representing a city's multiplicity of sensations and voices has remained constrained by its linear form. This is where the conceptual model of the database has proven so crucial to independent artists. As a way of thinking, the database evokes an architectural process that emphasizes intense attention

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[1] J.B. Jackson, "Introduction," *Landscape*, volume 4 (Winter 1954-1955: 2.
[2] Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture," in *Assemblage*, No. 10. (Dec., 1989): 117. My reading of Eisenstein is deeply indebted to Giuliana Bruno and her explorations of film, art and architecture in *Atlas of Emotion* (Verso, 2002), among other works.
[3] Ibid., 117.

to detail while aiming to construct a singular whole, all interrelated elements available for experience at any time and in different constellations. As in a building, no element in a database is ever entirely isolated (e.g. each brick is always in relation to another) and the whole is never static, always morphing through daily use and further additions.

One of the most remarkable explorations of the modern metropolis is not a film, but a collection of fragments, textual and visual. Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* is in many ways the prototypical urban database documentary. With the intent of excavating the mythological history of modernity, Benjamin worked intensely for years scavenging through the Bibliothèque Nationale and the streets of Paris, gathering quotations and writing commentaries related to the dreamworld of the 19th century, the philosophy of history, and modern life in general. The ostensible focus was the arcades, corridors of small shops covered in glass and iron trusses that came into being in the 19th century. For Benjamin, these new forms of urban space were poignant concentrations of capitalism's perturbations, the arcades "a city, indeed, a world in miniature."[4]

With interjections of his own writing (often short, aphoristic statements or brief essays), the work was a constantly evolving collection. The bulk of the project's notes were gathered in multiple manuscripts, alphabetized and indexed for cross-referencing. Beyond this fine-grained structure, Benjamin consistently imagined different thematic groupings, often enigmatic such as "The not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been stems from the now."[5] For Benjamin, the *Arcades Project* was the ultimate experiment in a new method of historical materialism, with the modern city as its primary subject. He described the approach in cinematic terms: "The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event."[6]

To confront the *Arcades Project* today is to bear witness to the intellectual history of new media potentialities. The invention of the computer did not give rise to the database documentary, it only enabled new forms of its realization. Benjamin's methodology was to meticulously record and organize history through fragments of voices from other texts, along with personal observations culled from lived experience in the city. But he resisted transforming this material into a unitary synthesis. Even if he had survived to “complete” the project, it is clear from Benjamin’s notes on method that he understood the process of collecting quotations and short commentaries itself to be a work in itself, an illustration of an open-ended aesthetic caught in-between the particular and the totality, a dialectic at a standstill.

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[4] Walter Benjamin, “Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Metropolis: Center and Symbol of Our Times,* ed. Philip Kasinitz, (New York: NYU Press, 1995): 47.
[5] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999): 902.
[6] Ibid., 461.

Challenging Urban Imaginaries in *The Colors of Berlin*

In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino presents this fictional conversation between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan:

> Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone. "But which is the stone that supports the bridge?" Kublai Khan asks. "The bridge is not supported by one stone or another," Marco answers, "but by the line of the arch that they form." Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: "Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me." Polo answers: "Without stones there is no arch."[7]

Choosing to focus upon the traces of everyday life in the city is akin to paying attention to all the stones that constitute an arch. A city is not constituted by a sum of its monuments, a collection of its "highlights" but by the combination of all of its details. *The Colors of Berlin* started with an ambition to generate such a sensitivity to the city of Berlin.

Operating in the border zones between contemporary art, urban design and ethnographic research, Stadtblind[8] is an independent collective dedicated to the investigation and transformation of urban life. *The Colors of Berlin* was our first project, an exhibition consisting of over 1,000 photographs and maps, along with an experimental guidebook to be used on the city's streets. The project arose in opposition to the suffocating images of reconstruction and historical memory that dominated the city. Targeting the lacunae in the representation and perception of the city, we developed the project under the premise: "Too often Berlin is seen blindly [*Zu oft wird Berlin blind betrachtet*]."

The project is based on a re-invention of two classic design tools: the Pantone color-fan and commercial paint chips (the little strips of color samples you receive when you go to a paint store). We modified the color-fan to create a structure that contains five interrelated elements: color blocks, an image, a theme, a text, and a map. Like the *Arcades Project*, the conceptual architecture of the database provides a generative framework that is ultimately focused upon transforming the perceptual experience of physical space.

The front pages of the guide show an image, with two colors blocks below and a single, poetic word at the top. The color tones are drawn directly from the pictures themselves and are intended to intensify and complicate the images, aiding viewers to see these often-mundane objects, scenes, and spaces with new eyes and feelings. The choice of colors is not scientific nor algorithmic, but in every instance intensely subjective, foregrounding the viewer's agency in constructing meaning and perception in the city. For example, one of the most suggestive details of a city that distinguishes one place from another is pavement. In Berlin, many of the city's sidewalks are large flagstones with small granite blocks meticulously placed by hand to form a unique form of interwoven stonework. Ubiquitous, the unusual character of this pavement is often never

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[7] Italo Calvino, *Inivisible* Cities, translated by William Weaver (New York: A Harvest Book, 1972): 82.
[8] Stadtblind was founded in 2002 in Berlin by myself and German architects and planners Philipp Schwarz and Celia Di Pauli. Since then, the group has expanded its activities to Stuttgart, Innsbruck, New York City and Cambridge, MA. More info at www.stadtblind.org.

noticed by residents or visitors. However, this everyday element takes on a new life and is perceived differently through the structure of *The Colors of Berlin*. A photograph of the sidewalk is combined with two blocks of different shades of grey. Through this design framework, the seemingly mundane image is re-presented and made available for new interpretations. This same strategy works to draw out the details in all forms of imagery: whether façades of buildings, strange vehicles parked on a city's street, urban furniture like trash cans, crowds of people in major public spaces, or handwritten signs in storefront windows.

On the back of each page is a zoomed in map, along with a quotation. The text selection echoes Benjamin's wide explorations of multiple genres and voices. There are quotations from such classic Berlin-commentators as August Endell and Wim Wenders, citations from the daily newspapers the *Berliner Morgenpost* and *die tageszeitung*, statistical information, and personal observations. In an age when a central form of communication is the rapid consumption of images, we find the insertion of texts necessary to slow the viewer/reader. The exact location where the picture was taken is marked with a black circle on a cutout from a Berlin map. This localization is essential to our documentary process, lending every image a crucial specificity and allowing readers to travel to that precise location themselves.

One of *The Colors of Berlin's* most consistent reference points is the tourist industry. Tourism in Berlin feeds off the two dominant urban imaginaries: Berlin as construction site and Berlin as historical landscape. Top tourist destinations are Checkpoint Charlie, the Brandenburg Gate, Potsdamer Platz, the Jewish Museum, the Reichstag, Museumsinsel, and the Hackesche Höfe. Tertiary tourist destinations might include the "bohemian flair" surrounding Kollwitzplatz in Prenzlauer Berg, shopping on the Ku'Damm and around the Gedächtniskirche, the Kulturforum, the fabricated medieval alleys of the Nikolaiviertel, or a trip to the top of the TV Tower. The power of tourism rests not only in the experience of a city that is transported to visitors. The tourist industry and all of its apparatuses also have a tremendous impact upon the residents of a city. The touristic approach to a city tends to reduce a place to a fixed collection of isolated monuments and districts, blending out everything in-between. In the interest of increasing the touristic attractiveness of a city, planning policy attempts to develop a place that fits the dominant touristic image and focuses upon blockbuster events and monumental building projects. It is precisely these chosen "highlights" that receive the attention and investment of the city planning office. That which seemingly does not fit into the touristic image of the city is, for all practical purposes, forgotten.

Stadtblind's response to this relationship between tourism and urban development has been to adopt the mass-oriented strategies and language of the tourist industry, but to focus upon those places outside of the normal tourist program. It could be said our aim is to open up the static database of the city's image. We see *The Colors of Berlin* as a critical highjacking of the guidebook medium. Instead of being confronted with the classic tourist sites and a map guiding you to them, the seemingly banal scenes and details of lesser-known inner-city districts and the vast periphery are mapped out for potential tours.

The aim of the project is to distance viewers from that which is familiar, to re-frame the familiar in such a way that it becomes unfamiliar, fresh, and worthy of attention. The colors are the core component of this mixed-media framework, enabling this defamiliarization. In his 1918 essay "Art as Technique," Viktor Shklovsky writes:

> Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.[9]

For Shklovsky, art is not exclusively a mode of expression (as the Romantic ideal assumed), but instead a tactical technique for producing new forms of understanding corporeal and cognitive experience through the unique capabilities of the aesthetic faculties. As such, the central domain in which art intervenes is the realm of perception, that space between social context, individual consciousness, and sensorial experience. It is precisely the everyday aspects of our lives that are most often overlooked; and it is precisely these everyday aspects that most constitute our lived experience of the city.

Database Aesthetics and Physical Cinema

While artistic methods using the database as conceptual architecture manifested before the invention of computers, the proliferation of networked computation has dramatically altered the prospects for database documentary practices. As Victoria Vesna writes, "Artists working with computer technology have to think through the invisible backbone of databases and navigation through information as the driving aesthetic of the project."[10]

This implies a shift in the modes of artistic production. Vesna writes, "Ultimately, artists working with digital media necessarily work in collaborative groups and are context providers. Indeed, the development of context in the age of information overload is the art of the day."[11] For Benjamin, it is the context and method of the arcades as material and conceptual anchors for a new historical materialism that enables the individual entries to accumulate meaning. Historically, the artist was understood to make unique works within a particular medium. And these works often addressed limited audiences. With the advent of mechanical recording technologies, images began to circulate more widely than ever before. As Benjamin writes, "Now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public."[12] Again, film (new media at the time) shares much with architecture. Benjamin writes, "Painting simply is in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience, as it was possible for architecture."[13] In addition to changes in reproduction, historically the

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[9] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Critcism: Four Essays*, translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1965): 12.
[10] Victoria Vesna, "Introduction," in *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow*, edited by Victoria Vesna, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008): x.
[11] Ibid., xiii.
[12] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings: Volume 4*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002): 741.
[13] Ibid., 745.

level of interface did not exist — a painting was simply a painting. With new media, the definition of a work itself is reconfigured as content and interface become distinct. It becomes possible to not only reproduce works infinitely, but to create different interfaces to the same material. The *Arcades Project* is a database from which multiple essays can be written, quotations and commentaries strung together in different constellations.

For media theorist Lev Manovich, cinema is the prototypical database-driven medium. He writes, "Cinema already exists right in the intersection between database and narrative. We can think of all the material accumulated during shooting forming a database.... During editing, the editor constructs a narrative out of this database, creating a unique trajectory through the conceptual space of all possible films that could have been constructed."[14] In principle then, for Manovich, all films are database narratives. More importantly, particular approaches to filmmaking and media arts generally foreground this fact. For Manovich, possibly the greatest “database filmmaker” of all time is Soviet avant-garde documentarian Dziga Vertov because the foundation of the film itself is exposing the database-driven nature of filmmaking. Manovich writes, "Although I pointed out that film editing in general can be compared to creating a trajectory through a database, in the case of *Man With A Movie Camera* this comparison constitutes the very method of the film. Its subject is the filmmaker's struggle to reveal (social) structure among the multitude of observed phenomena. Its project is a brave attempt at an empirical epistemology that has only one tool: perception. The goal is to decode the world purely through the surfaces visible to the eye. Thus, in the hands of Vertov, a database, often thought of as a static and “objective” form, becomes dynamic and subjective.

Why does Vertov choose to use the city as his subject? Vertov recognized that the city itself can be interpreted as a highly complex, ever-changing database waiting for new forms of navigation to be layered upon it. In a basic conception, the schema of a city as database might consist of physical matter (e.g. buildings, objects), human actors (e.g. people), non-human actors (e.g. animals, insects), historical memory (e.g. the infinite perspectives from the past on human activity at a specific place), sensory experiences (e.g. sounds, smells, images), and infrastructural networks (e.g. sewers, trains). All of these categories might be associated with metadata such as specific geographies, times of day, shot angles, visual tricks, etc. *Man with a Movie Camera* is in effect a compendium of these different cells, organized through multiple intersecting narrative trajectories. These narrative paths are the evolution of the city from morning to night, the shooting, editing and screening process of the film itself, and the gradual sophistication of visual experiments.

Like *Man with a Movie Camera*, the *Arcades Project* is boundless, yet bounded. Although closed in content, the *Arcades Project* is open conceptually, its framework and content suggesting a specific mode of being in the city. The experience of the *Arcades Project* is not limited to reading the book. It is ultimately through walking in the city with the conceptual provocation of this "magical encyclopedia," that the work is performed.

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[14] Manovich, Lev, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001): 237-238.

The shift enabled by new media, in particular the Internet, mobile devices, and wireless technologies, is the ability to literally transform the lived experience of the city into an active read/write database. While the performance of the *Arcades Project* and *Man with a Movie Camera* as urban database documentaries relies on cognitive journeys, today, the media artist can craft physical cinema that takes place on the streets of the city.

The documentary component of the work is no longer just the experience of recorded images and sounds, but the real-time unfolding of a city's life seen through the lens of artistic prompts. In the urban database documentary, the city itself "performs" through the cognitive and material acts of the spectator (also a performer). Interactivity is produced through a spectator's own actions, in mind and body. On a fundamental level, of course, all art is concerned with the transformation of perception. However, these works understand their ultimate realization to not take place through the viewing of an object, but instead, through a transformed way of being on the part of the spectator, enacted in daily urban life, outside the theater, gallery or museum space.

Yellow Arrow and the City as Read/Write Database

The Internet has opened opportunities for new methods of representing cities. In particular, with the rise of platforms such as Google Maps, a whole subfield of urban media arts has evolved, one whose origin lies in the ability to attach photographs, videos, sounds or text to specific places on a map. Whether produced by an individual artist or consistently evolving through new user contributions, projects within this subfield work with the assumption that the traditional map or aerial photograph, now open for re-interpretation and annotation with the Internet, must be the basis for a new cartography.

Many of these projects give rise to the concern that the lived experience of cities is being transplanted by virtual, screen-based mediations. The result of a unique collaboration between independent computer programmers, urban designers, performance artists, and documentary producers, *Yellow Arrow*[15] aims to critically intervene in the space between physical and virtual experience.

People get stickers in the shape of yellow arrows; printed on each one is a unique alphanumeric code and telephone number. Participants are invited to place the sticker anywhere they choose. Then, by sending a text-message with the sticker's code to the telephone number and including an original statement about the location, the person is able to attach a message to that actual place. When someone else sees the sticker and sends a text with the code to the phone number, he or she receives the person's original message. The screen-based dimension comes in later, as users are able to upload photographs of their arrows and plot their exact locations on an online map.

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[15] *Yellow Arrow* was created by Brian House, Jesse Shapins, Christopher Allen and Michael Counts in 2004 with the support of Counts Media Inc., a start-up entertainment company. The project culminated in 2006 and was archived in the public domain at www.yellowarrow.net.

Computer scientist Theodor Nelson is recognized as having initially coined the term "hypertext" in a 1965 lecture at the 20th national conference of the Association for Computing Machinery. His speech focused on his work towards developing a new system for structuring files he called the ELF, short for *evolutionary file structure*. He said, "Let me introduce the word 'hypertext' to mean a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or represented on paper." He also used the term "hypermedia," when referring to systems that interlink not just bocks of text, but also audio, video, or other media material. Roland Barthes's vision of an ideal text echoes this vision for hypertext. In *S/Z*, he writes,

> In this ideal text, the networks [*réseaux*] are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable . . . ; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.[16]

Yellow Arrow aims to turn the city into this form of "ideal text." In effect, each Yellow Arrow sticker serves to transform an instance of the urban into a database entry. The arrows are tools for indexing the complex interplay between subjective experience and physical space, each entry a recording or prompt that can now be made accessible to others through a real-world navigational system facilitated by mobile phones and wireless networks. Radically democratic, *Yellow Arrow* provides a context through which anyone can add and access the database of subjective urban experiences. Stanford archaeologist Michael Shanks described *Yellow Arrow* as a "deep map," which he defines as a form of cultural production that "attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place."[17] The practice of deep mapping performs a double movement of estrangement. At once, the deep map defamiliarizes that which is ordinary by reframing it in a new context. At the same time, the deep map expands the frame by incorporating people, places, and artifacts that are normally omitted. To create deep maps, a mode of sincere receptiveness and patience is essential. As Shanks writes, "An imperative here is to keep open things which are passed over in an instant."[18]

Fundamental to the project is the idea that sending a *Yellow Arrow* text-message on the street is categorically different than seeing a top-down representation of media plotted on a city map, whether on a computer or mobile phone screen. The mode of experience being adopted by mainstream development — bringing the screen onto the street — is very dangerous. If one is walking around Manhattan and enraptured exclusively in a two-by-two-inch map on a phone screen, perception of the environment has not been reframed

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[16] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974): 5-6.
[17] Michael Shanks and Mike Pearson, *Theatre/Archaeology* (New York: Routledge, 2001): 64-65.
[18] Shanks, "Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past."

but inhibited. This amounts to a commodification of experience by the provider of that particular service, who is then free to exploit the user's attention.

Many of my favorite Yellow Arrows are the ones with immediate imperatives to interact with the city, such as one placed by 'cook' in Times Square: "Stand facing this arrow and you'll hear the best urban symphony of your life." For someone to encounter this sticker in the city, then to receive this message and respond instigates a transformed sensorial experience. The limitations of text-messaging (no images, no sounds, only 140 characters) allow the visual and sonic environment of the city to take precedence. The mobile phone screen only serves as a brief prompt to look and listen in a different way.

This approach draws upon the legacy of the Situationists, in particular, their emphasis on critiquing the presumed objectivity of the map, and instigating play and experimentation in the physical environment. In the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste,* Debord calls for a "unitary urbanism" that is "the combined use of art and technology leading to the integrated construction of an environment dynamically linked to behavioural experiments."[19] This description could just as well serve as a description for *Yellow Arrow*. The city readily becomes a psychogeographical[20] laboratory when one takes up the set of tools the platform provides. The world of blurred fact and fiction created by *Yellow Arrow* supplants the supposed objectivity of the database, transforming the city into a collectively authored subjective database and a new sphere for embodied action.

Mapping Main Street and Database-Driven Tours and Detours

Whereas Yellow Arrow was concerned with making all places and experiences possible entries in a database, *Mapping Main Street*[21] uses a fixed database to critique popular political rhetoric and open alternative paths for exploring overlooked space across the American landscape. Since the publication of Sinclair Lewis's book *Main Street* in 1920, Main Street has been a highly contested, shifting metaphor for what constitutes traditional American values and the "average" American experience. Since the Great Depression through today, Main Street has been deployed by the left as a form of populist revolt against Wall Street's monied interests. On the right, it has been a tool for provoking anger at a perceived elitism of Washington politicians and a wedge for instigating the culture wars.

The urban imaginary of Main Street evokes the 19th century small town center, the image commodified by Walt Disney as Main Street, USA. However, the term's urban history ranges as far back 17th century New England villages and Spanish presidios and missions. And today, Main Street is a national movement for historic preservation and the revitalization of decaying downtowns, as a well as an aesthetic moniker for New Urbanist

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[19] *Internationale Situationniste* #1, June 1958.

[20] "Psychogeography" is a word that in past years has once again gained attention from artists internationally. Originally coined by Guy Debord in 1955 in "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," it was described as "the study of specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals."

[21] Mapping Main Street was created by Kara Oehler, James Burns, Ann Heppermman and myself in 2009 and is ongoing. More info at www.mappingmainstreet.org.

design and exclusive lifestyle center developments. The built environment of Main Street, constituted by the physical forms that dot its thousands of miles of streets and the everyday practices of its millions of inhabitants, tells a story that constantly complicates its political mythology and urban imaginary. Not just historic downtowns, Main Streets are suburban roads, blocks of 1950s strip malls, and the food courts on America's military bases throughout the world. Read together, these corridors of commerce and community present a highly variegated picture of America's past, present, and future political and urban history.

When politicians, the media, and urban boosters mention Main Street, they are often only talking about one mythical people and place. Originally developed in the context of the 2008 election's rampant rhetoric of "Main Street vs. Wall Street," *Mapping Main Street* is a collaborative database documentary that aims to unsettle assumptions by recording photos, videos and stories on streets named Main across the country.

There are thousands of streets named Main in all 50 states. From New York City to Omaha, Kansas City to San Francisco, Galesburg, Ill. to Houston, Wasilla to Scranton. Some of the streets are historic commercial centers, emblematic of the imaginary evoked in Lewis's novel including blocks of brick buildings, a hardware store, a pharmacy, and a soda fountain. However, many themare cul-de-sacs in mid-century suburban developments (e.g. Honolulu), primary strips for prostitution (e.g. Chattanooga) or the central arteries of military-industrial complexes (e.g. Norfolk). While Main Street typically conjures up small town America, it is fundamentally urban, as well. New York City has five Main Streets, one in each borough. In Queens, Main Street is the center of Flushing's Chinatown. Los Angeles has one of the longest Main Streets in the country, starting in downtown just above the LA river, passing through skid row and down into South Central before reaching Long Beach.

Instead of accepting the abstract unity of Main Street as a political constituency, a complex montage of individual and collective identities emerges through the stories of those people that live and work on America's actual Main Streets. The fixed database becomes generative — by focusing upon this single street name, an infinite heterogeneity is able to be recorded, while maintaining a common reference. Moreover, by selecting this focus, the expanse of already-existing content in other online databases and archives becomes relevant and accessible. The thousands of historical photos on Flickr and relevant videos on YouTube are automatically incorporated into the *Mapping Main Street* database. By focusing on just one street name, a new, creative territory emerges, directly in dialogue with the country's political mythologies.

We initiated the project by traveling on a 15,000 mile road trip, visiting as many Main Streets as possible. Others have been inspired to take the same approach. Since the project started in 2009, over 600 streets have documented. Amy Fichter, an artist in western Wisconsin heard about the project on the radio, and has now been to over 40 different Main Streets in her region, places that she previously did not know. She has recorded an extensive series of captivating images of forgotten objects, varied faces and haunting landscapes. Fichter says, "Through working on this project I have learned more

about who my neighbors are, what they care about, and how they identify themselves. I have learned about the history of these people and places."

In addition to transforming perceptions in physical space, *Mapping Main Street* is also an experiment in new forms of online database documentary. In the age of information overflow, a common online experience is to feel overwhelmed by so many possible decisions — which button to click, which story to read, which video to watch. The level of distraction is so high it is often impossible to conscientiously experience a crafted work of online media art. In designing the online component of *Mapping Main Street*, we focused upon creating an immersive user experience that allows visitors to easily follow routes without having to make a lot of decisions. By simply clicking once to start, a user is taken on a journey through photos, videos, and sound pieces created by people across the country. However, no journey is ever static. Every visit to the website effectively is a new performance of the work, as new images and videos are contributed and automatically integrated into the site's routes. But not all media is treated equally. The short documentary videos we produced through extensive investigation at three Main Streets, along with other selected features, frequently appear interspersed between the submissions of ordinary citizens. Whereas the traditional cinematic urban documentary was materially fixed after editing, the new media documentary is an ever-evolving work. The role of independent artists shifts from exclusively crafting their own media to situating their sculpted pieces through specific constraints that contextualize dynamic streams of content automatically pulled and filtered from multiple sources.

Towards a Critical Urban Media Arts

All of these works have been produced outside the mainstream, imbued with the particular sensibility inherited through the history of independent, avant-garde practice. In different ways, each project insists upon fostering a critical subjectivity in its audience, whether vis-à-vis the role of capitalism in shaping modernity, the biases of city planners or the myopia of accepted political rhetoric. These works are critical in that they insist upon an urban media arts practice that explicitly challenges the commodification of everyday life. In their 1999 book *The Experience Economy*, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore promote this terrifying forecast:

> The history of economic progress consists of charging a fee for what once was free. In the full-fledged experience economy, instead of relying purely on our own wherewithal to experience the new and wondrous—as has been done for ages—we will increasingly pay companies to stage experiences for us, just as we now pay companies for services once delivered ourselves, goods we once made ourselves, and commodities we once extracted ourselves.[22]

One of the products of the explosion of the Internet and the widespread adoption of mobile phones has been an ever-increasing commercialization of all hours and dimensions of human experience. Everyday life is now fundamentally mediated, and thus networked media, aesthetics, and perception form a key battlefield of contemporary

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[22] Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 1999): 61.

politics.

The question is not whether urban database documentary is political. Or whether a certain politics is aestheticized. For Jacques Rancière, this is a moot point, as politics and aesthetics are necessarily always entwined. He writes, "Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality. They define models of speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making. They define variations of sensible intensities, perception, and the abilities of bodies."[23] Rancière shifts the question away from a vague and misplaced notion of an artwork's political commitment to art's larger role as a vehicle for constructing "regimes of sensible intensity." In this light, the lens becomes whether artistic practices enable opportunities for new voices, images, and practice to be seen, heard, and enacted or whether they increase control of thought, speech, and action.

By dislodging entrenched delineations between important and trivial, fact and fiction, objective and subjective, urban database documentary contributes to the formation of political subjects that challenge the given distribution of the sensible. To explore artistic avenues opened by new technologies does not mean we have to embrace the use-assumptions of the technology's producers. Rather, we can work at developing our own tools that may serve to further connect us to our history and enable our own actions. The history and present of urban database documentary shows the prospects for independent media arts practices that utilize technology and the conceptual architecture of the database to transform sensory experience and foster critical subjectivities in physical space.

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[23] Ibid, 39.