

kate rich

republicart-interview on *radio20pwhitechapel (interference)*

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raimund minichbauer: you developed uphone within the context of bureau of inverse technology (bit). what are bit's aims and activities and in which way does it work as a transnational group?

kate rich: The Bureau is an information agency servicing the Information Age; it works with information technologies as its primary materials. BIT formed in Melbourne in 1991 at a time when postnational corporations and their artefacts (most visibly in the form of new computer technologies) were becoming instrumental in shaping the cultural landscape. So the Bureau was formed as an anonymous collective - a means to contest what we saw as the insidious consolidation of anonymised corporate power through our own technological production. Over the last decade we have been exploring techniques for producing critical information: via radio piracy, academic output, video documentary, feral robotics, and through information visualisation and product design (see <http://bureauit.org> for more). We developed this work both within and without larger institutions (art, academic, business). The Bureau currently has offices in New York, San Diego and Bristol.

raimund minichbauer: uphone allows people to call a local phone number and leave a message, which will be automatically uploaded to a streaming media server and be accessible via a website in the internet. in *radio20pwhitechapel* this technology was realised in the sparrow line. what is the project about?

kate rich: The Sparrow Report Line deals with the largely unsung yet catastrophic decline in the sparrow population of greater London (and coincidentally also in New York, where we have another sparrow line awaiting deployment). You could describe the project as a form of expanded ornithology: ornithology as a news-medium.

So the sparrow: the Cockney sparrow is an iconic East London bird, profoundly integrated into the social history and identity of London. In terms of information, it is also an icon of global proliferation, inhabiting countless metropolises worldwide. If you take the sparrow as a kind of biological constant - a control - it could render the climatic and environment conditions around it. So the crash of the London sparrow population, whilst poignant for Londoners, can also signal something more alarming.

Much has been speculated as to the cause of the London sparrow crash. Cats, unleaded petrol, mobile phone masts ... In 2003, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds did a headcount, using the distributed reporting of thousands of backyard birdwatchers to assemble a nationwide sparrow decline report. This is useful data, but the Bureau's Sparrow Report Line takes the accounting impulse further, increasing the 'resolution' of the survey by enabling any citizen to phone in to a local number & report their sparrow sightings, theories, recordings or expressions of loss.

raimund minichbauer: what are the political aspects of the sparrow line?

kate rich: Central to the Bureau's work is an interest in techniques for collecting evidence. In the RSPB's distributed birdcount, volunteers had a national day to file their sparrow sightings - basically a numerical response. In the case of the Sparrow Line, the opportunity to present evidence is ongoing; you can present hypercomplex data (verbal or auditory, anything that can be recorded over a phonenumber: the only coordinates are the length of recording, you have 5 minutes). Your call is uploaded immediately to the online audio database for public scrutiny, contestation, annotation, remix or reuse. (<http://bureauit.org/uphone/sparrow>) It positions the contributor less as generic volunteer (accent, delivery, context are recorded along with the 'content' of your comment); it also shares and decentralises the costs of the operation - you actually have to pay the price of a local call to participate.

The Sparrow Line - like the Bureau's Antiterror Line which also uses Uphone technology - is an experiment in increasing the resolution of political representation - literally giving voice to any number of embedded sparrow experts - & actually the sparrows themselves which can also be

recorded over the phone line. It proposes that definitive evidence might be assembled outside of a laboratory-compiled 'expert' report.

raimund minichbauer: what is uphone in technical terms and how can people get access to this tool?

kate rich: The uphone is the technical system designed by the Bureau. It enables any phone (home, cell, booth) to act like a distributed microphone. Technically it is a set of phone numbers and webservers. Phone the London number and a modem connects you to the local uphone server, currently located at Limehouse Townhall. Voicemail software takes your call (we are using Linux, VOCP.. more information at <http://uphone.org>) and a set of scripts converts the audio to streaming format (MP3). When you go to the website, all calls show up automatically, timestamped and with a graphic indicating call duration. You can use the webpage to add a text annotation to any of the calls.

We have 2 Uphone servers, London and New York, we are putting in a 3rd one in riga latvia at the end of this year, a 4th server is scheduled to install in west hollywood in 2005). You can see the scripts and rough instructions on how to set one up on the website - alternately you could contact us to request a mailbox for your own application on an existing uphone server.

raimund minichbauer: how did your background in radio influence uphone?

kate rich: I was interested in the concept of radio talkback. In broadcast radio, talkback is when the public can phone in and go live to air: voice their opinion on something. There is the impression of the democratic voice, but it is getting heavily filtered via the host, who picks which callers go to air and how; when their call is curtailed, what is discussed etc. And - having worked in radio for several years in Melbourne - it's not actually live, there's a legally enforced 15 second delay so the caller can't say anything adverse.

The uphone is more like an audio-BBS: an open format, the filtering mechanisms are when your coin runs out or when the system hangs up on you - 5 minutes, and you know this in advance - it's an open system, the mechanics of it are explained and available. So it's like talkback without the host.

raimund minichbauer: in which way did the political development influence bit's concept of 'inverse technology?' i would like to use two examples: the small airplane with a video camera flying over silicon valley in 1997 (<http://www.bureauit.org/plane/>), and five years later in new york a rocket with a video camera counting the participants of an 'anti globalization' demonstration. (<http://www.bureauit.org/rocket/>).

kate rich: These 2 projects could point out a difference in BIT treatment of scale and agency. The Bit Plane is more historical and heroic in approach: we flew this tiny video-instrumented remote-control aircraft over Silicon Valley to collect a definitive aero-portrait of the Information economy (in its pre-crash configuration). It was a singular flight, visualising and historicising a particularly resonant location.

With the Bit Rocket, the technology is similar (a transmitting micro-video camera attached to an airbourne device) but the scale is much more immediate, it is about distributed, repeated use, reporting accurate news and communicating about and between street protestors. It produces images with immediate utility: the political evidence of the crowd count - as well as a guidance system for protests in-progress. Demonstrators can get equivalent aerial perspective to the live helicopter visions available to their police oponents.

Technologically there is also a shift, triggered by actually a real decline in the viability of amateur equipment like these videotransmitters. In 1996 there was not a lot of cellular phone infrastructure around. By 2004, the massive proliferation of mobile phones and low-power transceivers operating on the same licence-free FM frequencies as the videotransmitters (433 Mhz and 2.4 Ghz) - is causing high levels of interference and effectively terminating the flight range of the BIT devices at a few hundred feet (the BIT Plane in 1996 could send clear control-view video from distances of up to 1km). So in 2004 the rocket, with it's brief ascent and parachute landing, is more realistic.

raimund minichbauer: one difference between uphone and previous bit-projects is the way of collecting data: it is not like a camera reacting to certain signals (noise, motion) and then automatically starting to record, but it is the participation of people who call the uphone. which differences does this trigger?

kate rich: It's a different kind of attention: with the uphone the trigger is still environmental, but you can see it as a more durational process. The sparrows, in disappearing, act as environmental 'canaries'; the caller interprets this, acting as kind of spokesperson for the vanishing birds. The slow accretion of calls maps out this kind of 'sparrow-shaped hole' over London.

Same with the antiterror line - <http://bureauit.org/antiterror> - here people experiencing or witnessing antiterror attacks (as a result of increased policing, post-September 11th) set off a slow, distributed environmental alert to this climate change in civil liberties.

The Bureau is looking at richer ways of collecting data than the simple triggeres of technological systems, allowing that collective interpretation is an essential component of this kind of evidence.