Digital image archives as public artwork and community engagement

Sylvia Grace Borda
Senior Lecturer in Photography and Digital Imaging
University of Salford
Peru Street, Salford, M3 6EQ, United Kingdom
s.borda@salford.ac.uk

This paper focuses on two recent projects developed by the author in which social media and conceptual art strategies were adopted to present alternative ways of exploring the production and dissemination of digital archives. Projects for this examination are: *EK Modernism* (eknewtown.com) – an archive of over 8000 digital images used to map and conceptualise Scotland's first New Town of East Kilbride, and *Glocal* (glocal.ca) – an open source and collaborative global community project that evolved into a live-projection media presentation at the Winter Olympics 2010 in Vancouver, Canada.

The author further explores how different social geographies were captured through digital photography to create the digital image archives forming both these projects and how these archives opened new channels as public 'net' artworks and as platforms for cultural and community engagement.

Digital image archives. Net art. Community art. Digital photography. Social networks. Web 2.0.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to share, generate, and accumulate data quickly through digital means has meant that a plethora of content in the last five years has been placed on the Internet – whether this is through blogs, image sharing sites such as Flickr® (Flickr.com), twitter (twitter.com), and/ or social networking services like Bebo (bebo.com) or Facebook (facebook.com). According to JISC (<http://www.jisc.ac.uk>), as of June 2009, Flickr® has over 35 million members around the world, who between them, use the site to store over 3.5 billion photos. The total equates to over one million photographs per day being uploaded (<http://www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk/stillimages/advice/finding-images-on-Flickr>).

Within this context, it is critical to consider how the role of the digital archive is changing rapidly in view of the plethora of digital content being generated and how use of such content is being driven by new demands. Richard J. Cox argues that personal archives might be assuming a new importance in society, and equally so in relation to public and collective memories that are being promulgated online. In the featured projects *EK Modernism* (eknewtown.com) and *Glocal* (glocal.ca), these aspects are particularly heightened with the respective development of large web-based image

archives in which the function of the producer/artist intersects with the role of community archivist.

2. NEW TOWN MODERNISM

The 'New Towns' were developed under UK government legislation between 1946 and the 1990s in order to relieve the country's crowded industrial cities of their unsustainable populations. New Towns serve as a monument to important stages in the development of social architecture and engineering and civic planning in general. New Towns were envisioned as a one-stop solution for urban rejuvenation, particularly in the early 1950s, and characteristically established as emerging Modernist centres driven by lofty ideals.

East Kilbride, established in 1947, stands as the oldest and most populous New Town in Scotland. It was planned to ameliorate the challenging social conditions and crowding of Glasgow city – one of the largest and economically diverse urban centres in the UK.

The project *EKNewTown.com* started as a commissioned artist's response to the structural changes in East Kilbride in which the original Modernist civic buildings of the township were either being sold for redevelopment or for demolition. Some of these structures were

designed by leading architects of the day, such as Sir Basil Spence (1907–1976) who is famously associated with the redesign of Coventry Cathedral. Over the period 2005–2006, the author meticulously photo-documented modernist buildings in East Kilbride, including exterior and interior features and the surrounding landscape.

This 'chronicling' of a New Town was not dissimilar to the work of artist photographer, Eugene Atget, who documented the neighbourhoods in old Paris about to be replaced by Baron Haussmann's urban renewal scheme between 1898 and 1914. Atget's work, while not directly supported through government initiatives, were bought by the archive of the national registry, Les Monuments historiques, and the Carnavalet Museum; the latter is an institute set up to preserve civic history.

Atget also supplied images to architects, artists, decorators, and publishers. His photographic motivations seem to have been fostered by French literary concepts in salvaging and redeeming both nature and the human spirit. Atget, who called himself an 'author-producer', is not far from the author's own direction in the documentation of East Kilbride, and there are clear resonances with those millions around the globe who routinely use digital technology to author and produce resources about their lived environments for Internet dissemination.

The East Kilbride project resulted in 8,000 digital images, with the completed project supporting two complementary aims: to create a comprehensive visual archive of the original urban plan of East Kilbride for the public to engage with; and to document all the existing Modernist and related buildings in the area as part of a larger artwork.

The visual archive largely comprises the project website *eknewtown.com* which depicts East Kilbride as an interactive map where visitors can create their own image paths to explore places and locations in the city. The creation of this visual database was created prior to the ubiquitous Google street view maps. It is designed as a 'matrix archive' – a non-linear structure where users can view images and information in an openly accessible GUI.

The website importantly exposes audiences to a geographical location that they themselves may not have had the time or inclination to visit in real time. One of the key benefits of the project was the way in which a diaspora of people whom had grown up, been raised, and/or had some personal connection to East Kilbride visited the site and posted online expressions of interest and gratitude for making the town accessible. It further provides a platform for community dialogue about the legacy of Modernist urban development in Scotland that is consequently threatened by the emerging prejudice that New Town urban developments were a failure. These failures are exasperated by stereotypes that

suggest residents bear the burden of living a past Modernist experiment in concrete dwellings.

Figure 1: Opening screen – EKNewTown.com net artwork

The other binary aspect of the project is in its attempt to document East Kilbride as both an image archive and in creating a public Net Art product.

In both instances, the issue of what constitutes public art is rather complicated. The East Kilbride project documents the physical environment in the form of Modernist buildings, but also communal gardens, pathways, and other types urban developments vetted by the New Town arts commissions and boards. As the project reveals, public art commissions are equally the tools of ideology and urban redevelopment, as much as the original town planners themselves.

The Net Art outcome of the project responds to the new public space of the web. It takes on the idea of space on the Internet as a means of extending community space to the online realm, in this case with the goal of 'sharing' the town of East Kilbride and its Modernist heritage with an even larger global community through an amassed visual archive. Net artists like Xavier Cortada (born 1964), a painter and muralist, produced Master-Peace 2000, a retrospective of the millennium's history through murals. In addition to working with Miami high school students in person, he set up a web-cam in his studio and invited students to participate through an online chat room and was able to work with collaborators online.

In this way, bringing East Kilbride to the Internet was a conscious decision in order to use the web platform for collaboration, interactivity and community contributions – and in particular to provide a means for audiences to understand new visual information schemes in the context of art and geo-location.

3 GLOCAL

Glocal (global + local) was both a call to participation and a process that created an independent new media artwork and was exhibited as an urban screen work. This endeavour was part of the Winter Olympics 2010 – Cultural Olympiad held in Vancouver, February 2010.

Figure 2: *Glocal Urban Screen*, a projection of digital artworks from the *Glocal* archive on the exterior of Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre, Surrey, Canada

Under the title *Glocal* an interactive and on-going contributive digital project was assembled. Artists and the public were invited to contribute images to form a large photo Flickr® pool (2008–09) and media installation, while simultaneously being challenged to alter and subvert the conventional use of imaging perspectives adopted in digital photography.

In a world where digital recording devices dominate, shooting at eye level seems to be the most natural approach. What if this perspective was altered? How would these other alternative views appear? What if digital images were archived to support interaction and the understanding of new perspectives? How does one read the notion of time in the picture frame? Through sequential arrangements of multiple still images, often the overlooked and banal gains a new place residing alongside more traditional art subjects. The resulting works produced by contributing artists and public participants captured both metaphorically and physically, alternative views about our world.

One of the participating European artists David Timlin contributed to the *Glocal* project by using himself as the subject of the work, *What do I look like when I should be sleeping?* While time lapse photography is traditionally used to track and monitor environmental changes, among other things, in this series, Timlin set his alarm clock throughout the night to wake himself every hour on the hour. The images reveal the condition of the subject as half awake and barely responsive to the camera. Much like artist Vito Acconci's video works of the 1970s, whose performances reflected the

representation and the act of being psychologically observed, Timlin extends these concepts to show how the body can become a material object, gazed at and out of context in both time and place.

Figure 3: David Timlin – *What do I look like when I should be sleeping?*

Other artists worked to shift our viewing consciousness by adopting systems of representation that verged on the experimental to the linguistic. In *Cat Eating* by Sarah Gale the viewer is presented with a self-evident title, but the accompanying images are atypical. Pictures for these sequences have utilized extreme angles.

Figure 4: Sarah Gale – *Cat Eating*

Public participants through the *Glocal* Flickr® Group such as Martin Cullen (online name: 'Irish Artist') or Flickr® artist 'Helen2006' have responded to the *Glocal* call by contributing images which display how ordinary subjects can become abstracted and reveal other narratives.

While artists and the public have addressed the *Glocal* invitation by re-invigorating how everyday subjects can be portrayed, local participants from secondary schools in Surrey (B.C., Canada) worked with *Glocal* software toolkits experimenting with fixed computer cameras to record and process imagery. Reminiscent in subject to the work of German artist Ilse Bing (1899-1998), students have used mirrors, coloured paper and props. Students unlike most digital photographers passed their subject material in front of their computer's fixed camera lens. While Bing was well known for her process – exclusive use of the latest camera technology – a small-format Leica camera, the student work may also be noted for its new technology use and production.

The *Glocal* software kits enabled a new type of artistic intervention by subverting the computer's camera to function as a time lapse and multiple exposure device rather than a camera for video conferencing. Surrey students were mentored by the *Glocal* team artists Jer Thorp, Sylvia Grace Borda, and M. Simon Levin and to 'sample' contemporary life both in front of a computer screen and through staged events. By challenging how different photographic styles could be staged through *Glocal* software toolkits, students learned first hand about applied and conceptual photographic practices.

Figure 5: Example image generated from motion sequence application. This work generated at workshop held at Semiahmoo Secondary School, Surrey, Canada (2009)

Workshops were also led by *Glocal* team artists in the Lower Mainland- Canada, UK and the United Arab Emirates. In these *Glocal* artist led workshops, participants have developed work related to the portrayal of memory, collecting and cultural materialism. Participants' collaborative efforts reflect and explore the intersections between the everyday and visual framing.

In providing new opportunities for national and international participants to engage with arts creation, and public presentation through collaboration, there remains an equal engagement between the community through self and shared learning in delivering the project outcomes. Similar to the project development this process works since all participants share ideas, enter dialogue and debate with fellow artists and contributors, learning to respond through these processes to create invigorating contemporary artworks informed not by one idea, but by many.

Interestingly, much of the *Glocal* artwork to date has been produced from low angles, and the images have an overall appearance reminiscent of Russian artist, Aleksander Rodchenko (1891-1956), the so-called grandfather of contemporary photography. In particular, projects coming under the *Glocal* archive seem to fit with Rodchenko's radical turn-of-the-century philosophy, summed up in 1928: 'Photography: the new, rapid, concrete reflector of the world – should surely undertake to show the world from all vantage points, and to develop people's capacity to see from all sides.' Comparable to digital photography today, there is a capacity to show the world from all angles and to reflect on it through the medium of photography. The *Glocal* project and resultant artwork indeed demonstrated the vast extent of the medium's expansion and its applicability to revolutionize twentieth century vision in both analog and digital worlds.

The completed *Glocal* artwork has enabled audiences to compare, contrast and examine the world from all points of the globe, and to experience how we share similar horizons and how much we have in common with others, wherever we are in the world. To this extent, *Glocal* as a contributive and open-ended exhibition embraced the ideas that an iterative and incremental approach used by the project is the key to success. This process has so far led to more dynamic outcomes since the community collaboration and work are being solicited in tandem. This process of open ended authoring available through the *Glocal* project also aided in defining it. In the same way, art movements in the early twentieth century, such as *Dada* or *Fluxus* promoted a community or collection of artists to transform the delivery of art.

While the *Glocal* project borrows from imaging strategies of the past, it also moves forward to question how digital media offers other platforms of representation and frames for analysis. In asking the public to adopt digital technologies such as cell phones, portable devices, video recorders, and digital cameras to record the world, new ways of 'seeing' how local identities respond and act in global networks has also arisen.

In turn this technology use also represents the ways in which global frameworks can reshape conceptions of local identities. Indeed concepts of local identity such as nation, culture, and language are continually complicated by the transmission of data. Since individuals do not adhere to discrete categories of one culture, one nation, or one ideological framework – the *Glocal* project invites participants to reflect on their diverse reactions to the way they see and experience the world through image making. The process of using Flickr® and other social networking tools to promote the *Glocal* project process in part speaks about the public's willingness and acceptance that on-line communities can collaborate and work together to create a series of interconnected responses.

Participants whether aware or not may not realise having contributed to *Glocal*, they were subsequently providing information which resides and can be read both on a global and local level. Likewise *Glocal* as a contributive artwork continued to grow through the willingness of the public to participate in the project and through self-organizing teams interested in the exhibition opportunity. Since the idea of the artwork and who can be defined as an artist is opened up to all, the project's expanding criteria made everyone simultaneously a stakeholder, an artist, a participant, and a curator. In this way each person involved could offer and share further experiences to inform the process of exhibition and change its outcome. Particularly, this open ended process to create the artwork and exhibition is not dissimilar to the working strategies of the Russian artists Komar

and Melamid, who ask the public to co-author the artwork under a set of loose conceptual guidelines. In the *Glocal* project these cumulative collaborative efforts produced a more defined and larger exhibition than could be the vision of a single curator. This viral capacity of the public participating and speaking about it with others through word of mouth, increased the project's scope.

The *Glocal* project was on display as an evolving and changing media installation at the Surrey Art Gallery Tech Lab. The *Glocal* Flickr® archive was shown at the International Art Exhibition, Balkans this past Fall. As the *Glocal* image contributions grew, this mass of material was re-staged into a new sequence of media deliverables for incorporation into complementary urban screen events held as part of the Winter Olympics 2010 in Vancouver.

For the artists designing *Glocal* as a call to participation and a subsequent joint authored artwork from public submissions the challenge remained how to bring public and artists' images together to create expressive objects, which traverse formalistic lines, associated with particular historical, cultural, and aesthetic frameworks.

The *Glocal* project as presented was a relational interactive installation that creates moving images that respond to the audience and the environment. These images were adaptive and reactive, illustrating both the capability of new media art to interact organically with users as well as the users' own ability to explore, organize and examine image contributions live from the Internet and Flickr® site. For this program of delivery to succeed, the *Glocal* team worked together in gaining an understanding of how shared working methodologies and material practices can be applied to photography and on-line communities to create interest to help generate a contributive artwork. A study of conceptual, net art and social networks has assisted the group in learning how these can function and how they relate to contemporary art, multi-author publishing, and exhibition. The *Glocal* project further demonstrated that creative inspiration thrives when collaboration extends to include the artist, the public and the viewer as equal partners in the creation, management and production of the work.

4. TRAVERSING THE DIGITAL

[...] the image can no longer be restricted to the level of surface appearance, but must be extended to encompass the entire process by which information is made perceivable through embodied existence. This is what I propose to call the digital image. (Mark Hansen: *New Philosophy for New Media*, p. 10).

In the new media projects, *eknewtown.com* and *Glocal*, the building blocks of each is the digital image. The aggregation of these images forms a visual archive that assigns value to this accumulation but also allows meaning to extend beyond it, especially in the sense of digital geographies and community inclusivity that each archive and project embodies.

The attempt of these projects to challenge how each viewer consumes visual information with different preferences and relationships based on history, location, and experience remains particularly relevant, and illustrates the cross-sections of what can inform the creation of both a successful conceptual artwork strategy and a digital image archive.

5. REFERENCES

Cox, R. J. (2008) *Personal archives and a new archival calling: readings, reflections and ruminations*. Litwin Books Duluth, Minn.

Glocal project (2009) Production archive, Surrey Art Gallery, Canada. <http://www.glocal.ca> (2 April 2010).

Glocal project (2009) An Experiment in Mass Collaboration Flickr® Group. <http://www.flickr.com/groups/glocal> (2 April 2010).

Harris, D. (1999) *Eugene Atget: Unknown Paris*, New Press, New York, NY.

Iglhaut, S. (1997) *Photography After Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*. G & B Intl, London, England.

Lavrentiev, A. (1995) *Rodchenko: Photography 1924–1954*. Konemann UK Ltd, London, England.

Pudlow, J. (2004) Artist's brush brings court cases to canvas: Xavier Cortada. *Florida Bar News*, Florida Bar Publishers, 31:6, pp. 1–2.

Schaffner, W. (1998) *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*. Prestel, New York, NY.

Szarkowski, J. (2004) *Atget*. Museum of Modern Art Publications, New York, NY.