

A global (net)work of art

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I like the challenge of boiling down a potentially rather abstract discussion about the relationship between aesthetics and globalization to see how this is manifested (or not) in one particular work of art. And I particularly like the idea of discussing this with the artist of the work. This is why I have made my way to London to meet with João Wilbert, the artist behind *Exquisite Clock*. We meet at a bar on Hoxton Square, London, June 19, 2010, me with notes and theoretical questions prepared on my papers and João with a super-potent MacBook Pro, which includes every picture, film and piece of code ever made in relation to *Exquisite Clock*.

Basically, *Exquisite Clock* is a real digital clock hosted on a server. The clock consists of six digits (hours, minutes and seconds) and all the digits are photographic images uploaded to the webpage by users – hence the title, which refers to the Exquisite Corpse strategy, by which small parts of a text or an image are successively added by different contributors. The clock is visible on its own website (www.exquisiteclock.com), and it can also be downloaded as a screensaver and an iPhone application. It has been exhibited in museums in installation versions with the numbers displayed on homemade screens built from obsolete monitors.



Exquisite Clock shows the time: 16:37:08.

LP:

Globalisation seems to be at work in *Exquisite Clock* in three different ways: In the institutional development of the work, in its aesthetic concept, and on its technical level. I find it relevant to discuss these different global dimensions and how they perhaps overlap or differ from each other.

Starting with the aesthetic concept: As a viewer it is a sudden and rewarding aesthetic experience to ‘crack’ the code of the work – to realize that the shifting images on the monitors display the time and that the images are numbers in a clock. This immediate recognition of the clock part of the work is then, later, followed by a second revelation: that the image numbers are actually added by users to the webpage and that you can add images yourself, which will then be included in the clock. That second revelation, to me, is where the global dimension starts kicking in, insofar as potentially anyone, anywhere in the world, can contribute to the work.



Exquisite Clock exhibited in Luxembourg, 2009.

JWH:

I just love that first moment, when people ‘see it’! Watching the audience in an exhibition looking at the work and then seeing their face suddenly change as they smile is the best part for me, because it means that the work somehow touches them. But the fact that people realise that the numbers are added by other users, and people start to add numbers themselves is really the most important dimension of the work. In this sense I am very inspired by Nicolas Bourriaud’s idea on relational aesthetics, in which the work itself initiates relations among the audience. I find what happens in the gap between different people very interesting, and the aesthetic strategy is to make the clock facilitates creative interaction among the audience. In this respect *Exquisite Clock* has undergone an interesting development since it was born, which roughly goes like this:

The very first version had the clock displayed on a website I made and submitted as an entrance trial to Fabrica, which is a creative communication research centre in Italy, owned by the Benetton Group. The numbers in this version were photographs of objects and body shapes made by myself and a friend of mine. The first installation version (with the homemade monitors) was then made when Fabrica was asked to contribute with clocks for the Milan Furniture Fair in 2009. For the second installation version in New York I upgraded the platform so everybody could contribute with image-numbers for the clock, and I added a tagging feature to the webpage so everybody could create their own individual clock out of ‘cables’, ‘vegetables’ or one of the other categories, or the user could add a category herself. The fact that people watching *Exquisite Clock* could now add to the work and determine their favourite output category was really important to me – the clock encourages people to be creative themselves and in this respect it functions as an open platform not only technically but also on a creative level. And it is this *creative* platform of the work that I find most interesting. Another interesting aspect is the fact that the clock continues to be developed at the same time by the users that contribute to the ongoing platform but also as sculpture that is different for every exhibition.

At the same time, it has been important for me not to develop *Exquisite Clock* as a social media. I deliberately did not launch it on Facebook or Flickr or similar

forums, though they may seem the most obvious places to do it instead of technically developing the platform myself. There is so much noise in the form of meaningless gossip, and so little meaning in these platforms, and I prefer *Exquisite Clock* to have a narrower, deeper meaning – consequently, it will remain relatively small in quantity but genuine in expression.

LP:

The fact that you have made your own exclusive platform for *Exquisite Clock*, rather than launching it on existing social platforms, gives the work a touch of a clean, modernist or minimalist aesthetic in the sense that it is not ‘tainted’ by other social activities. How does that relate to your core idea of initiating creative relations among the audience? And why, from your point of view, do Facebook updates not qualify as creative relations among people?



The *Exquisite Clock* webpage.

JWH:

I believe that on one level, the instant relation created among the audience with *Exquisite Clock* is that it immerses you in a global discussion about form, aesthetics and limits of recognition more in the mode of a game than by being very formal and boring about these topics. There's something truly beautiful and playful in the contrast between different numbers and in thinking that they come from different people who think and see different things. To me, that is a very different and much more creative way of relating to other people than what Facebook can offer.

Another stage of development that the clock has gone through is to make it open source. One of the core ideas of the clock, which is to allow people to create their own clocks, applies also to the way the platform was set up. The code, made available through a social coding platform, allows other developers to fork the code and create new developments that were not present in the initial project and collaborate also on coding bits of the clock itself. Thus, the mash-up that started in the numbers has now been extended to the code of the clock.

LP:

Also, there seems to be a mash-up aesthetics at work in the gallery versions, where the use of homemade monitors with visible cable clusters and screws conveys a 'trashy' do-it-yourself look.

JWH:

Actually, in the beginning the homemade monitors were a result more of necessity than of aesthetic considerations – our budget simply didn't allow us to buy monitors for the exhibition. In this case it was a matter of necessity rather than choice. However, as I started experimenting with bits of obsolete technology to sort out the monitors for the exhibition I could clearly see different aesthetics being born with it. In the first exhibition in Milan, I decided to use the hanging cables as part of the 'techy' aesthetics, in the second iteration, for NYC, the monitors were also stripped out to their cores. I usually say that as the clock is made from found numbers, the installations are made from found hardware. I really like the homemade look, and it

fits very nicely with the whole idea of the work that literally the audience's own contributions 'build' the work.

For instance, I find it interesting that some contributors have added numbers that differ from my own idea by being conceptual numbers, whereas I have thought of the numbers as visually mimetic. Thus, through their own creativity, some of the contributors have not only added to the total number of images, but also expanded 'the rules' of the clock. In the examples shown here, you can see how the contributors 'think' differently: The number four is a conceptual, minimalist, clear cut photograph, whereas the number five visually resembles a '5' and is put together ad hoc from things at hand at an office desk and then quickly photographed. At first I thought about it and didn't really know what to do with these conceptual numbers because I didn't anticipate them, but I decided to respect the creativity of the users and think that it is great that they saw things differently than I did and made me think about it. This makes the clock a work that connects different people.



Examples of the numbers 4 and 5 added by users.

LP:

Does this imply that you would consider the aesthetic strategy of the clock – the exquisite corpse invitation of a platform to which the audience adds the contents – to be just as successful if the work was analogue – if, for instance, the users photographed the numbers with Polaroid cameras and snail-mailed them to you for display in some kind of a mechanical clock which was then publicly exhibited?

JWH:

I actually had proposed some time ago an analogue version of the *Exquisite Clock* made by a set of six slide projectors programmed to change slides as a clock, and this installation would fit very well with that idea. As Andy Cameron (former creative director at Fabrica) said once, ‘The most important thing about these works isn't the fact that they are digital. They are contemporary in a different way – they are contemporary in the way that they involve the audience’.

LP:

I think this is a good example of what Henry Jenkins refers to in *Convergence Culture* where old and new media mix and interact in such a way that it does not make sense to separate the two. In this respect it may be fair to state that the ‘digitality’ of the work belongs more to a communicative dimension than an aesthetic one, insofar as digital technology facilitates the aesthetic strategy but is not really a part of it, and that also, of course, the fact that it is a digital web version helps communicate the work much broader internationally than an analogue version ever would.

JWH:

Yes, but it is important to recognize the significance of this communicative dimension. Looking at the history of the clock it is very clear to me that the most important thing in the development was the launch of the iPhone application in the summer of 2009 (the app was developed by Steve Baughman and Oriol Ferrer Mesià under the creative direction of Andy Cameron). Basically the app took advantage of the iPhone features and made it much easier for people to photograph and instantly upload numbers to the clock. As opposed to an activity that requires many steps – photographing,

downloading the picture to a computer and uploading – the clock could be easily tied to day-by-day situations: you see, you photograph, and you upload. When the app was released numbers really started pouring in and the creativity exercised was enormous. So digital technology in the form of the app has contributed significantly to *realising* the aesthetic idea of the work, and helped globalize the clock.

The clock is very much based on the real world: made by people, made of found objects, displayed in found screens. And this calls for a sculptural dimension for the installation that goes beyond display images trapped in the screens. The idea is to make the clock a real object, part of the real, as if the clock is physically transporting the objects and landscapes that form its numbers through the networks and showing them raw and real as they are.

LP:

So the aesthetic principle of mash-up that is at work through the different contributions of the user and the open source of the code can be expanded to include the technical, digital dimensions of *Exquisite Clock*, which facilitate these contributions from all over the world and thus provide the work with global potentials on a very concrete level.

There is, however, yet a global dimension of the work that I would like to discuss with you, which is the rather heterogeneous institutional framework around the work. First of all, depending on the mode of presentation – in a museum exhibition, as an iPhone app, at a furniture fair, on a webpage, or as a screensaver – it can be regarded as a work of art, creative tool, project, pure entertainment, or digital design. And all of those identities exist equally in their own right. In this dialogue I have noticed that you simply refer to all versions of *Exquisite Clock* as ‘the clock’, avoiding differentiating between terms like ‘the work’, ‘the project’ etc., but we talk about ‘audience’ as well as ‘users’ and ‘contributors’. In this respect the clock moves across the boundaries of traditional categories, or it can be considered a multidimensional chameleon that works on different discursive platforms to which different values and meanings can be ascribed depending on the context. It is not narrowly confined to be ‘just’ art or ‘just’ an app, for instance, and this enables it to fit

into a number of different discourses rather than just one specific 'local' context. In my opinion this multidimensionality provides the work with a sense of what Roland Robertson terms 'glocalization' – not in the sense that it involves different geographic localities, but that it engages in several different epistemological discourses.

So we may even speak of an institutional mash-up that enables *Exquisite Clock* to fit into different institutional 'localities' on the side of reception. But how about the side of the production? I know you have been working with other people from different countries. How are the conditions for creating a work like *Exquisite Clock* in today's global world?



Joao Wilbert (on the chair), Luciano Alban and Nicola Camata in the process of building the installation version of *Exquisite Clock*.

JWH:

Regarding the creator role, it comes very natural to me to work in collaborations and to get inspiration from other people and other disciplines than my own, which is

advertising and interaction design. Perhaps it is because I am from Brazil, which has a strong tradition of incorporating and mixing phenomena from others cultures into its own – a practice of anthropography, which means that if we find something foreign interesting we appropriate it and make it part of our own cultural practice. I find this approach very useful and think that a creative practice benefits highly from exchanging ideas with people and cultures on a global level across disciplinary boundaries. Exchanging ideas with others is a natural and necessary part of being creative, and today that exchange takes place on a more global level because technology has made communication easier and because people travel more and young people often study at universities or art schools abroad.

So, in *Exquisite Clock*, I as a creator have an international background and the clock itself becomes international because the users and contributors are from all over the world. However, I can see from the management system and report files of the clock's added numbers that the clock is more popular some places than others – for instance, an abundance of numbers are added to the clock from Asia compared to other parts of the world.

LP:

I started out by wanting to consider the global character of *Exquisite Clock* according to the aesthetic, technical, and institutional dimension of the work. I think that we can conclude that in *Exquisite Clock* there is a very close relationship between the aesthetic and the technical dimensions insofar as the two have evolved (and still evolve) symbiotically: The significant global aspects of time and clocks (at least after adopting standardised chronometric time at the expense of solar time); of Arabic numerals; and of the internet constitute a mash-up in itself, in which it perhaps does not make sense to separate aesthetics from technical communication. And in this light the question of institutional affiliation seems irrelevant – it simply does not really matter whether people experience *Exquisite Clock* as a work of art or not, or whether they are categorized as users, audience, or creators.

It also seems that the idea of generating relations among people – by encouraging creativity in finding numbers everywhere – to a very great extent goes

for your own creative process too. The difference between production and reception being, however, that whereas the first actually needs certain institutional frameworks in order to initiate a transnational creative process (art schools and, in this case, Fabrica), the latter is a very concrete example of a piece of global aesthetics that, in its web version, is independent of locally grounded institutions.

Exquisite Clock (2009) by João Henrique Wilbert and Fabrica. Discussed by Joao Henrique Wilbert (creative technologist, programmer) and Lotte Philipsen (art historian, PhD)