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Portraits in People-Knowing

What can a Civil War Society in Philadelphia reveal about online social networking? Why design a GPS system that gets people lost? How can you hear a city hold its collective breath? *Portraits in People-Knowing* deploys technological interventions to create unexpected portraits of people's lives.

Abstract:

There are a variety of ways to know and understand people. Embedded observation, interventions and interviews are all ways of working that characterize social scientific inquiry. Professional storytellers such as journalists and documentary filmmakers also use these same methods.

As a media designer, I too use the techniques of embedded observation, interventions and interviewing in my design work. However, I feel that these tactics of people knowing, as they are traditionally employed in the academic social sciences, while affirmative are inflexible. As a media designer, I am also able to work across a range of media platforms. This ability frees me from the constraints of a particular designed outcome such as a book, film or exhibition and allows the information to dictate the appropriate media type to tell the story.

For me, media design offers the framework for working *between* the disciplines of people knowing and storytelling. For the past two years, I have been exploring different tools for media designers to know people and tell stories. I call this method of working *Portraits in People Knowing*.

Specifically, these portraits mine the idiosyncratic and everyday for multiple purposes. On one hand, this approach is a direct response to the self-affirming tests often employed by traditional user testing which portray people as superficial and one-dimensional. *Portraits in People Knowing* offers tools to media designers to get involved with people, cultivate relationships and understand a lived life.

On the other hand, this approach is a direct reflection in a process of “knowing through making” and represents an inclination to grow personally. These insights into people and everyday life provide a platform for telling stories, asking questions as part of critical design practice and speculating about new methods for invention within the design industry.

As a mode of representation, the tropes of portraiture offer a frame of reference for understanding this body of work. It should be noted that *Portraits in People-Knowing* is not a critical take on portraiture. Rather, portraiture offers a lens for explaining the complex relationships involved in a practice of designing for and with people. Central to the task are the dynamic relationships found in all portraits: the subject, the viewer and the artist.

Subject-Artist Relationship

Introduction

Traditionally, a commission motivates the relationship between artist and sitter. But what if the intent of a portrait is not commercial but creative? How does this change the traditional relationship between subject and artist?

The projects presented in this body of work exemplify a wide range of social relationships between artist and sitter from friends and family to relative strangers. What unifies this work, however, is that each project begins with an *explicit invitation* for the subject to participate in the creation of these portraits.

While the level of participation varies from project, this invitation to co-create is a vast departure from an artist responding to an occasion. This moves the traditional “subject” in portraiture from *passive* sitter to *active* participant. But how does this invitation to co-create differ from other disciplines that actively engage participants as way to know and understand human behavior?

Participant Sociology and New Journalism

I acknowledge movements within the academic social sciences (Participant Sociology) as well as those in storytelling (New Journalism) that place the author in the participant's point of view as a way of understanding. However, any attempt to categorize or define these projects within these movements is outside the scope of this project.

Participatory Design

Furthermore, I acknowledge that Participatory Design is an established practice within the design community. In an attempt to place *Portraits in People Knowing* within this context, I turn to Liz Sanders article *An Evolving Map of Design Practice and Design Research*.

To understand a design research landscape in a “state of flux,” Sanders offers a visual map of “the various approaches, methods, and tools” within design research. Two intersecting dimensions define Sanders’ map: one by approach (research-led vs. design-led) and one by mindset (expert mindset vs. participatory mindset).

Working from this model, an expert mindset and participatory mindset are distinguished by intent. An expert mindset designs *for* people while a participatory mindset designs *with* people. As a practice that upholds the co-creative process, the majority of projects included in this thesis were designed from a participatory mindset. But does a participatory mindset best contextualize this body of work?

Portraits in People Knowing expands beyond the reductive/instrumentalist uses of participatory design. Rather, the projects in this body of work draw from a wide range of

methods including applied ethnography, generative design, critical design and cultural probes and working between an expert and participatory mindset.

It should be noted that working between across disciplines is not unique to media design or media designers. As Peter Merholz mentions in his article *Why Design Thinking Won't Save You*, a “savagely complex” world requires “a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives to bear on whatever challenges we have in front of us.”

What distinguishes media designers, however, an understanding of understanding of the affordances and constraints of certain media types as well as the ability to work across them. From this perspective, Sanders’ model is useful in that it visualize a variety of approaches within designer research. A media designer’s ability to pick and choose from these methods provides a foundation from which media designers can communicate with those working traditional social sciences. On the other hand, this ability to work with a variety media types allows me to choose the most appropriate form for externalizing the collaboration between participant and designer.

Portraiture and Form

But does the physical form of a portrait dictate what is portraiture? On a recent visit to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC, the museum defined its collection through the mediums of paintings, sculptures, photographs, prints with the curious addendum "In the future, film may also be an important part of our collection." From an institutional model, the ambiguity of this statement leads me to believe that the definition of what constitutes a portrait, when it comes to medium, appears up for grabs.

Portraits in People Knowing challenges the traditional understanding of portraiture in both form and content by presenting non-descriptive images in a variety of media types including books, graphs and videos. Unlike traditional fine art portraiture where the form of a portrait is predetermined, the portraits in this body of work are only incidental in that they reflect the best way to express that data. Thus, the difficulty lies in applying the appropriate media to the appropriate context. This requires not only an agility and improvisation in the design process but a nimbleness of media.

Portraiture and Content

If the new genres of portraiture are not bound by form, does a portrait’s content matter? Could anything be called a portrait? In their book *Portrait Now*, Sandy Nairne and Sarah Howgate examine “stylistic developments within portraiture as a genre.” While new media may extend the idea of what constitutes a portrait, the authors “want to demonstrate that the portrayal of others (and of the self) remains central to contemporary art.” Thus, the “new genres” of portraiture are not necessarily an issue of form, but reflect traditional themes of the human condition such as identity, representation, power and nationality in a contemporary context of global systems and spontaneous images (5-5).

Similarly, the projects found in *Portraits in People-Knowing* address these issues of identity, representation and power. What distinguishes my approach, however, is that it employs technology interventions to mine the idiosyncratic and everyday as a way to create content. The content created by these interventions include the shapes people make from their commute, text messages and minutes from a meeting. Such non-descriptive

imagery challenges the traditional of understanding of portraiture because they "attack the importance of physical resemblance as the criterion for assessing the quality or insightfulness of portrait" (Brilliant 9). While non-descriptive images are not without precedent in the genre of portraiture as exemplified in Francis Picabia's *Portrait of Marie Laurencin* and Pablo Picasso's *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*, these portraits raise the question: Can anything be a portrait?

In his book *Portraiture*, Richard Brilliant points to two essential characteristics of portraiture: a title and a representation of human relationships (9). Even though Brilliant's discussion is confined to a painted portraiture, I find this definition useful for a variety of reasons. For one, I believe this view is consistent with an understanding that the new genres of portraiture are not about form but the issues that arise in depicting human relationships. Otherwise, the debate inevitable spirals into whether a portrait of a dog or the human genome can be considered a portrait.

Moreover, Brilliant's emphasis on the representation of human relationships provides context for exploring the larger issues within the genre itself such as the co-creative relationship between subject and artist and the use of technology to elicit content as well as the time and energy necessary to develop a relationship with the subject. The importance of time and energy, the most basic method of People-Knowing, should not be overlooked. As Brilliant writes, "Portraiture is not an art of the momentary, and its aim is not merely to capture fleeting appearances. The aim of painting is to give insight, and the creation of an appearance is only as an expression of thought" (58).

At the same time, this personal knowledge of the subject can be a hindrance in portraiture. For example, in traditional portraiture there is often a disparity between what the artist portrays and how the subject(s) view themselves (Brilliant).

The Importance of Being Earnest

The disparity between what the artist portrays and how the subject(s) view themselves can be seen in the variety of talk and reality TV shows that often humiliate or glorify their participants. In response to the current zeitgeist of a confessional culture (Lunenfeld), *Portraits in People-Knowing* reflects a set of values that portray its participants in a sincere and honest way. Ira Glass's radio show *This American Life*, books by *David Sedaris* and films by *Wes Anderson* all reflect a similar approach towards their subjects.

This shared attitude is what Charlotte Taylor calls "intellectual whimsy" in her article *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Central to "intellectual whimsy" are the meaningful connections between among "apparently unrelated things." For example, Glass creates these connections through three different takes on a similar issue. Sedaris' narrative structure ends with a moment of reflection and as Taylor points out,

Wes Anderson's films are whimsical because their unexpected juxtapositions are imbued with sentimental significance. As a visual mode, whimsy favors busy frames and compositions that distract viewers from the centre. It rewards those willing to explore the edges with jokes buried in marginalia or Dalmatian mice

sniffing around in the corner of an elaborately composed shot. In all cases whimsy values the ability to appreciate the aesthetic harmony possible among myriad incongruent objects. It draws attention to the act of perception and the sensibility of the perceiver.

Portraits in People-Knowing draws on these associative tactics as well. For example, the introduction to the exhibit poses a variety of questions to the viewer such as: What can a Civil War Society in Philadelphia reveal about online social networking? What is implied is that artist will make these connections evident. As a result, this style can also become grating because it “invites you to be pleased by the innovations of another person’s taste.” But as Taylor also points out, the intent of whimsy more “suited for appreciation than criticism,” its intent is to amuse through perception and discovery.

What separates intellectual whimsy from the Dada, a movement that also relies flirts with the “insignificant and random,” is that connections must be meaningful. This is an important distinction given the role of DADA to portraiture. According to James McManus, Marcel Duchamp’s stripped both the painting and the genre of portraiture of meaning with his take on the Mona Lisa titled L.H.O.O.Q. *Portraits in People-Knowing* attempts to reclaim the importance of identity to portraiture not only by a sincere approach to its subject, but by making the participant a stakeholder in the creative process itself.

Portraits as Permission

Portraiture offers a way in to meet my participants. Regardless of any prior relationships with my subjects, I am often overcome by a feeling of fear and inertia before beginning these projects. How do you engage in a practice of people knowing if you are afraid of people?

For photographer Katy Grannan, taking photographic portraits "is kind of a permission- a way in. It's a catalyst for extraordinary experiences that otherwise would not be possible." In the same way, I view portraiture as a way to initiate a conversation with the project's participants. This begins with an explicit invitation for the subject to participate in the creation of these portraits.

From the perspective of traditional portraiture, this invitation to co-create, established before the project even begins, is vastly different than an artist responding to an occasion. In establishing a social relationship between artist and sitter, this approach moves the subject from *passive* sitter to *active* participant through technology interventions.

The most compelling examples of this agreement reveal hidden information about the sitter (West 24). This requires, at some level, the portraitist's ability to identify the innate characteristics of the person or persons being portrayed and represent them visually (Brilliant 13). In short, the practice of portraiture is an also practice in people knowing.

Viewer:

Introduction

Portraiture offers a controlling metaphor for understanding the larger issues that a co-creative relationship raises between subject and artist in *Portraits in People-Knowing*. But is portraiture the best metaphor for explaining this body of work to a general audience?

The Importance of Titles

In his book *Portraiture*, Richard Brilliant notes that unlike other genres of art viewers are “not compelled to ascertain the title of a work as they are in portraiture”. Because many of the projects uphold non-descriptive images, the title of group portrait, couples portrait or family portrait offers the viewer a way into the work. This is important given that many of the viewers have no relationship to the subjects themselves. Moreover, many of the viewers may have entering assumptions about the people being portrayed.

Entering Assumptions:

Anticipating the entering assumptions of the viewer helps inform the design decisions in the design process. For example, when I tell people about my work with a Civil War Society I am often asked if the members of this society "are crazy." Knowing this is a shared assumption allows me to develop a narrative arc that reinforces and then challenges these stereotypes.

There are also assumptions about the genre of portraiture itself. For example, most people have posed for or taken a portrait. Because of these familiar associations it is often difficult to explain my process to potential participants. An invitation to participate in the creation of a documentary is more discernable given the familiar associations of the documentary genre within contemporary culture.

But for the viewer, the genre of a documentary work is also more ambiguous and less defined. For example, the documentary films *The Thin Blue Line* and *Salesman* all constitute a documentary film yet they reflect varying ranges of artistic influences. While portraiture also has these varying subgenres, I believe what constitutes a portrait is more defined to a general audience.

The Idiosyncratic and Everyday

Instead these projects point to the shared behaviors found in the idiosyncratic and everyday. Commuting, texts messaging, phone contacts, the minutes of meeting are topics familiar to most viewers and serve as entry point into the work. Thus, while viewers may be able to relate to the people being portrayed they can relate to a shared behavior.

Over the past two years, the terminology to describe how I design has evolved from alternative portraiture, to a Media Designer’s approach to the documentary and finally *Portraits in People-Knowing*. While there are many ways to explain my work to a larger audience, portraiture provides me with a way to meet my participants and the vocabulary

to talk about it.

Artist:

Introduction:

What are the next steps in self-initiated work? I have learned from showing my work to other companies is that they will often attach their own meaning to my process and work. For example, T-Mobile's Innovations Lab saw my work primarily as way of telling stories. On the other hand, the advertising company GMMB, whose clients include the Obama campaign, viewed my process through the lens of systems management.

There is an appeal in applying this approach to other contexts. For example, how could this process be of interest to scientists at the Jet Propulsion Lab (JPL)- perhaps as a way to reflect their process? How could Art Center use these methods better understand its culture?

In general, I believe that I am developing a practice that could be applied to a variety of contexts: the museum world, exhibition design, installation, marketing, and research groups. But rather than focus on where this practice could be applied, future focuses on the issues this type of work could raise.

The Self-Portrait:

A deeper understanding theoretical understanding of the underlying philosophy of portraiture provides a reinterpretation of past work as well as inspiration for new projects. For example, the self-portrait is a natural step in a critical practice of portraiture. For the past year, I activated Google History on my computer to record my patterns of surfing the web. This combination book and presentation draws on the built-in narrative of the web, the importance of *where you surf* to *what you surf* and the rituals and routines associated with our web activity.

The Delivery Device:

The interactive presentation displayed on the 8x12 footwall reflects one way to share my work with a larger audience. The decision to build this wall makes reference to the large portraits displayed within museums as well as plays to the nostalgia associated with slideshows. As a media structure the wall can display a variety of media types including video, type, images and sound.

Future projects draw on different shapes, dimensions and audience interactions depending on the content of the work. One on hand, this style of performance could engage a larger audience than say publishing these finding in a magazine. On the other hand, this method of delivery could serve a variety of functions including promoting a book or promoting a practice.

V. Qualifying Statements and Qualifying Questions

Does this matter?

This is a difficult questions considering to whom this question is directed: the participants, the viewer, the artist himself?

Participant

The relationship between subject and artist has been explored at great length throughout this paper. In particular, the invitation for the subject to become an active participant raises a variety of questions. For example, what does it mean for the participant to reap the benefits of the research process? How does the medium and form of technology influence self-representation?

In an attempt to answer whether or not these projects matter to the participants, I recently began returning many of the finished portraits back to the participants.

On one hand, I can say that these projects were not as successful as I imagined they might be in my own head. Not one member of the Meade Society asked me for a copy of the book that I showed them. In returning the GPS book to Brennan and Fawn, I have yet to hear any response from them. But does this mark these projects as unsuccessful?

I know that these projects have made some impact on the people that have participated in these projects. For example, many of the members of the Meade Society stayed for over an hour to read the book. During this time, we talked about whether the Meade Society would exist in ten years. A member of the Sundberg family still has the contact Wall in her phone.

But in some ways the way the books were received were also a reflection of how they were presented. The Meade Society received an unbound copy of the book at the end of the meeting. I also had not been in contact with the Society for five months. The members that did respond were also the members that I had spent the most time fostering a relationship with.

In my opinion the answer to whether this practice matters is not something that is necessarily quantifiable. For design and designers, this is mark an abrupt departure for a traditional understanding that is usually measured in sales or awards. As a physical artifact, who is to say what the impact of such a book will be in five to ten years time?

Artist

From the perspective of the artist this raises the larger question of what type of footprint these projects leave. Thus, the question of whether this matters to an artist is a question of intent. On one hand, this way of working allows me to portray my subjects sincerely and dynamically. These projects also open up a conversation space. In this sense, these projects are open-ended.

On the other hand, the question of whether this approach matters to me is that in truth, these projects are all about me. As Oscar Wilde writes, "...Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely an accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself." These insights into people and everyday life provide a platform for telling stories, asking questions and speculating about new methods for invention.

Viewer

Perhaps what is most difficult to quantify is the impact that this work may or may not have on a viewer. Because these projects are in many ways personal projects between artist and subject, I have used titles of these works as a way into the work. Moreover, these projects mine the idiosyncratic and everyday that most people can relate to. Rather than speculating whether this approach could matter to a viewer, a better question may be to ask where this type of design practice could exist. For example, does this appeal to a like-minded audience and what is the best format to present the work? Is it in a journal or is it in an interactive performance?

Media Structures and Social Structures

Text Story exemplifies the range of considerations media designers must make in interpreting the intersection between media structures and social structures. On one hand, this project us asked us to invent a media structure (The Text Wall) that allowed family members to send text messages to their living room wall. To do so, this media structure hacked an existing social structure (Twitter) to create a contact named Wall on each participants phone.

On the other hand, this method for inputting data, the medium of a phone was chosen primarily because it fit the scope of the study that examined the influence of streaming media on families. But it was also chosen because it promoted self-authorship of the text-savvy children in the family¹. This choice was deliberate given that the intent of the intervention was to challenge traditional power relations and communication methods within the home.

Many of the projects within *Portraits in People-Knowing* draw on these theme of power relations and the role of technology within that. For example, does viewer comments allows men to share emotion? Do The Hands really bring out what people always wanted to do but were afraid to do? What is the hierarchy within the Meade Society? How does that conform or not conform to traditional understanding of group portraiture?

While this raises the question of medium and form of the technology (i.e What if it was a fake foot and not a hand?), it also raises the question of the role of the designer in

¹ We knew the children were more inclined to text than their parents based on a pre-study interview with the family.

facilitating this relationship. Again, many of these projects bring to the surface the unspoken and unexpected.

The Expert in Contemporary Culture

When I think of people who influence culture, what comes immediately to mind are entertainers and politicians and not people like Bob O'Connor. Bob O'Connor re-enacts as Ward Hill Lamon, Lincoln's bodyguard. With over "55,000 books written on Lincoln," O'Connor saw an opportunity space within the Civil War community. Moreover, O'Connor is also the same height and weight as Lamon. Both grew up in the same area.

As a re-enactor, Bob has a profound responsibility as a living historian to represent Lamon accurately. Bob's personality will influence the public's perception of Lamon. Moreover, his academic rigor affects his ability to educate. As the only known impersonator of Lamon, Bob is the sole expert on his life within the re-enacting community.

Traditionally, conventional notions of expertise reflect a top down structure that requires extensive training. But platforms such as Wikipedia and blogs have given voice to the self-initiated to comment and influence culture. The Neshaminy Reenactment Weekend had 1000 Bob O'Connors- each with his or her own take on the Civil War. Like blogs, the decimation of knowledge at these events usually begins through word of mouth and travels at a local level. As a former teacher, I found that this event was a magical educational experience because it was so intimate and personal.

As a microcosm of contemporary culture, reenactments also function as a commentary on identity. It is easy to target re-enactors as crazies. They dress up in costumes and re-enact in battles without ammunition. But I would also ask, how is this any different than the various identities we choose to present on Facebook each day? Aren't we the party girl one day and the caring aunt the next? For Bob O'Connor he is both author (O'Connor) and educator (Lamon), someone who has used self-initiated research and homespun education to become an expert.

This bottom-up structure also mirrors the role of today's media designer. As a jack-of-all-trades, media designers require a nimbleness to navigate the affordances and constraints of a variety of media types. But this ability to navigate between media types is often at the expense of mastering one. While the skills for ideas tradeoff is the source of debate within design education, a similar debate exist within the field of human-centered research. From the perspective of a media designer, statistical significance is often sacrificed for a limited but reliable sample size. Here the intent is one finding inspiration. But a lack of quantifiable data and a defined set of goals leaves such an approach open to criticism open from traditional social scientist and with media designers with an inferiority complex in trying to justify its methods to a larger community. Moreover,

there is not a structure in place for these methods to be approached from the larger academic community- there are currently no journals produced within the United States that uphold a critical design practice nor is there a PhD degree within academia.

Serendipity And Ambiguity

GPS: Tracking Love visualizes the commute of a newlywed couple through the use of a GPS tracking device and Google Earth. Particularly beautiful are those images where their paths appear together. These images suggest a shared adventure, a rendezvous or simply the LA way to travel: two cars going to the same location. I, however, prefer a more serendipitous view where their paths may have crossed unconsciously. Whatever your take, these and other images offer glimpses into the couple's larger back-story and are tools for the imagination.

Projects throughout *Portraits in People-Knowing* leverage the ambiguity of images, interventions and text to allow viewers to draw their own conclusions about the work and fuel inspiration. For example, the project The Hands allowed participants to creatively express the ways in which they have always wanted to use their own hands but were afraid to in public. The book *Me or Meade* asks a series of reflective questions to the viewer as a way to create dialogue about the social societies.

For me, this type of practice allows me to tell stories, ask questions and speculate about future methods for invention within industry. It provides me with inspiration to author material and allow me to reinterpret words like expertise and serendipity in a contemporary context.

The Role of Storytelling in Design Research

Last winter, I visited T-Mobile's Innovations Lab in Seattle. The company saw the potential for my work as a storyteller, suggesting that it could be used to tell the stories of their products. It is my belief, however, that the role of storytelling should be used at the beginning of the design process to inspire innovation and invention.

For example, I believe that radical innovation of online communities will not come simply by analyzing those who use it. Rather, tangential social societies, such as the Meade Society, could provide valuable insights for innovation. In particular, I point to the importance of a shared language, meetings in both physical and virtual space and tradition of events as a way to maintain and promote society.

VI. APPENDIX

CASE STUDIES

Case Study: The General Meade Society of Philadelphia

From December 2008 to May of 2009, I documented the General Meade Society of Philadelphia- a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote and preserve the memory of General Meade. Through film and photography, my documentation included a variety of events from an educational symposium to a reenacting in a Civil War battle.

Part One: Video as Data Collecting Device

At the Society's January meeting, I asked members of the Meade Society if they were interested in creating an "alternative" portrait. Unable to define alternative portraiture in an understandable way for my audience or to myself, I then proposed the making of a documentary film with the Society. The framing of the project from portraiture to documentary changed the expectations of the project as well as a lens for my participants to view their role in it. As a seemingly familiar language, this understanding can be viewed in how members of the Society addressed the camera. On the other hand, this moved my role as embedded designer from a person taking notes in the background to active participant.

There is precedent for the use of video as a tool for design research. In their book *Designing with Video*, Salu Yliriksi and Jacob Burr employ the use of video as a way to focus the user-centered design process. On the hand, Rachael Strickland draws on the history of observational cinema as a way for "discerning relationships among phenomena and imparting structures to experience, for dwelling the alternating currents of ambiguity, for making sense through association, combinatorial play and projective construction" (119).

Working from Sanders' map, my approach is similar with Yliriksi and Burr as well as Strickland in that there are elements of both applied ethnography and generative design in our techniques. What distinguishes my approach, however, is the translation of this video across a variety of media types. For example, only through the editing process did I realize that a documentary film was not the best approach to tell the story. Nor was the variety of media types that attempt to translate my analysis of the video to including a poster, an exhibition and an interactive presentation.

Part Two: Books as a Tool for Conversation

Eventually, this project became the book *Me or Meade* that I eventually gave to the Society as a way to promote discussion within it. As a physical artifact, this move is consistent with a key characteristic of participatory design that uses "physical artifacts as thinking tools."

However, the book also provided me with the medium to pose my own questions and

share lived-experiences². Using my “expertise” on the Society to author my own material and pose questions are characteristics of an expert mindset and of critical design. Moreover, posing larger questions about social societies and sharing personal experiences was an intentional move to open the book to a larger audience including companies that may view this book as a design brief on social networking. The “explosion of interest” in co-creative marketing is an emerging area of design research “that takes advantage of social networks in harnessing enormous amounts of input at a low cost.”

Case Study: Text Story

Introduction

The family participating in the study was given a phone contact named "Wall." Text messages sent to "Wall" were anonymously projected on the living room wall. These same messages were also collected in a database and later designed into a book.

Part One: The Footprint of Design

The primary motivation for creating Text Story was as a gift to the Sun family for participating in Super Studio's yearlong research project. The design, which leveraged this personal knowledge of the family acquired during this time, was meant to be evocative rather than didactic, reflective rather than authoritative. Like the book *Me or Meade*, the book was also designed to promote conversation within the family. As the father noted during the exit interview, "I never realized that my daughter was so funny."

Finally, the book as a gift remains as a physical artifact that will, in theory, live within the home. On one hand, it asks what type of footprint design research projects leave with the subject. On the other hand, it also asks what does it mean to design an object that you will live with?

On the other hand, explicit interventions create a more conscious co-creator capable of crafting identity³. In many ways, this is consistent with the dialectic of portraiture in which "self-representation and artistic representation come together" (Brilliant). What distinguishes *Portraits in People Knowing*, however, is the use technology as tool for authorship. But how does medium and form of technology intervention influence the data collection process?

Part Two: Technology and Authorship

In *Text Story*, family members were given a phone contact named "Wall" which allowed participants to send anonymous text messages to a shared space within the home. As a method for inputting data, the medium of a phone was chosen primarily because it fit the

² For example, using the Society as a metaphor allowed me to speculate on the reasons people join social societies, how social societies are maintained and the role of expertise in contemporary culture. Moreover, the book gave me the forum to share with readers the fear I experienced during my first re-enacted battle.

³ In fine art portraiture, there are a variety of ways subjects have created artificial categories of identity through the use of wigs, costumes, makeup, etc (Brilliant)

scope of the study that examined the influence of streaming media on families. But it was also chosen because it promoted self-authorship of the text-savvy children in the family⁴. This choice was deliberate given that the intent of the intervention was to challenge traditional power relations and communication methods within the home.

In the exit-interview following the *Text Story* project, the Sun family acknowledged what those chose to text was influenced by the knowledge that their text messages were being monitored. On the other hand, they also felt inclined to text more knowing that these messages would one day be returned to them in the form of a book. This raises the question: What does it mean for the participant to reap the benefits of the research process?

Definition of Terms:

Authorship

The authoring of material can be seen through two perspectives. Because *Portraits in People-Knowing* upholds the co-creative process, subjects are asked to help author their own portraits. In many ways, this is consistent with a traditional understanding of portraiture in which subjects, through dress, make-up, posture, create an aura of self-representation. What distinguishes *Portraits in People-Knowing* is the role of technology in this facilitating this process. This raises the larger question about the role of medium and form to self-representation.

On the other hand, these portraits provide a platform for me to tell stories and ask questions. The “authoring” of material is not limited to books, but rather to a variety of media types including graphic design, films and an interactive presentation.

The Idiosyncratic and Everyday

The portraits in *Portraits in People-Knowing* use technology mine the idiosyncratic and everyday such as how we commute, the text messages we send, the minutes of a meeting and our phone contacts.

While the illumination of the idiosyncratic and everyday is not without precedent, I employ its use for a variety of purpose including as a way to draw the viewer into the work and to create a more objective way for participants to view their life.

Media Design

Media designers distinguish themselves through an understanding of the affordances and constraints of certain media types as well as the ability to work across them. As a media designer who is interested people and their daily lives, this ability to draw on wide range or people-knowing techniques puts me in conversation with both social scientist and professional storytellers. On the other hand, this ability to work between the disciplines

⁴ We knew the children were more inclined to text than their parents based on a pre-study interview with the family.

allows me to choose the most appropriate form to express the relationship between my subjects and me.

It should be noted that working between across disciplines is not unique to media design or media designers. As Peter Merholz mentions in his article *Why Design Thinking Won't Save You*, in a “savagely complex” world requires a diversity of viewpoints and perspectives to bear on whatever challenges we have in front of us.” However, what media design does offer is a perspective within design that considers not only how different media types work but how they work together.

People-Knowing

In many ways, these projects are a direct response to the methods such as interviews and surveys used in traditional user testing that paint people in a one-dimensional and stereotypical ways. *Portraits in People Knowing* offers tools to media designers to get involved with people, cultivate relationships and understand a lived life.

Technology Interventions

In the western world, technology has moved from a luxury or convenience to something of a necessity. This shift becomes apparent to anyone who has ever lost a cell phone, been unable to connect to the Internet or had their car breakdown. Moreover, technology allows us to know people differently. For example, I have different relationships with my phone contact than say with people I am friends with on Facebook.

Technology is not just a tool but is central to the way we live. Thus, it makes to use technology interventions as a way to understand how we live. It's a different way to know someone.

Moreover, it shows the limits of formal interviews or survey performed by traditional user testing because they reflect an unmediated way of collecting data. I believe this tactic reflects a more accurate reflection people live because the method of collection is relatively objective.

In *Portraits in People Knowing*, technology interventions are used in both explicit and implicit ways. Examples of implicit interventions include the use of a GPS Tracking Devices and viewer comments on YouTube because their unmediated. On the other hand, projects like Text Story took a more conscious approach towards authoring.

Together this view of technology offers a way to examine our cultural and physical relationships.

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