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By Matthew Fuller

This year's Futuresonic festival in Manchester attempted to spark an alternative vision of social networking software. Matthew Fuller, software critic and participating artist, recognises its urgent necessity

A few days after Manchester United beat Barcelona, their fierce rival in the European creative cities sweepstakes, Futuresonic sprang into life to deliver the coup de gr \tilde{a} ce. Covering a sizable range of venues for exhibitions, events, talks and music nights as well as hosting a number of projects, the festival as a whole is pretty much unreviewable by any one person and I was only there for three days. This change in scale, a big one compared to previous years, is crucial to understanding the diverse ambitions and flavour of the event. Futuresonic must be the only event in the world to have both Richard Stallman of the Free Software Foundation and RZA of the Wu Tang Clan as headliners.

This year's theme was 'The Social', a loose attempt to come to grips with the formatting of the social in relationship management software, particularly as found in social networking websites. The 'Ideas' section of the festival followed up this theme, as did some of the 'Art'. 'Music' seemed to set its own path quite efficiently with well-chosen gigs and club nights following time-honoured formats.

[IMAGE]

Paul Sermon, *They Live (in Second Life)*

Futuresonic faces quite a few of the conditions associated with energetic, underfunded, inclusively scaled events: a certain amount of chaos, the last minute installation of exhibitions and the flat out work by everyone involved. But what it does well is to integrate all of this with the centre of Manchester. The city centre is studded with installations, projects and events, or punters getting the latest installment of one information feed or another delivered to their phones.

CUBE, the Centre for the Urban Built Environment, housed one of the key exhibitions. Included in this was Simon Yuill's project FSF - the free social foundations project. Combining mapping and contemporary oral history, the project grades the openness of the city's spaces and sketches out initiatives such as allotments, squatted spaces, housing co-ops and areas of assumed common land. Free Social Foundations asks - to what extent are the physical foundations of our social lives - free, and figures a way of mapping spaces generated by different ideas of the 'public'. Alongside accounts from groups such as the Hulme based performance troupe Dogs of Heaven or community gardeners, there are quotes from accounts of the General Strike of 1926 and comments on the kind of public space formatted by security and shopping elsewhere in the city.

Thompson and Craighead showed a trio of computer works dumped to video including 'Flat Earth', a documentary made by linking Text-to-Speech readings of blogs from a particular locale with images of satellite footage zooming out and in from the scale of the earth to the street mentioned by the blogger. There is a tension here in the idea that the sourced text has any necessary relation to the geographical images. But equally, this points interestingly towards all manner of automatically generated combinations of different kinds of scraped footage and commentary.[1].

At a basement club venue, Paul Sermon, who specialises in novel telematic links, showed a party space set up in Second Life in which a screen linked to a video feed showing people watching the projection of the scene online. Up the road, a group called plan b set up a shop-window space in which people could make little cardboard and collage dioramas as a version of a MySpace page. As a project

combining both craft and cuddly social networking this was a clear winner. As a girl exclaimed over my shoulder whilst having a look at the display, "Oh Bless!" It was cute and participatory if you were in the mood, suiting the row of indie shops on Oldham Street it was presented in. This project, along with many others, used paper and people as its main medium. For a festival with an emphasis on new media, there was something of a dearth of projects working with software design or computational and networked digital media. Most of the work on show operated by other means, a telling move perhaps?

This dearth was made up for by the contents of the associated conference billed as "The Social Technologies Summit" which brought together internet start ups, mainstream media people, academic researchers, activists and artists. Richard Stallman gave a compelling account of Free Software moving into a wider set of statements on the question of freedom in terms of current political developments. The open discussion with the RZA was lively, generous and funny, hinging on a loose relation to the theme in his changing understanding of Hip Hop as a socially generated street culture gone global. At the other end of the scale was an appearance by an especially glib futurist. Surely it is time there was a professional body for this kind of job? At the beginning of the last century being a Futurist used to be something exciting. Now it's more like being a dentist. Instead of pulling teeth they simply snip platitudes out of the pages of *Wired* or *The Economist* and announce them as a fait accompli, preferably three or four times in the same warm breath. Time to get your factoids extracted.

Notable presentations were the lovely double act of ebullient web-lifer and dry programmer team from Passively Multiplayer Online Games who showed a Firefox plug-in offering a background game system that works by utilising the data generated by web use. Matt Jones, an insightful interface designer who blogs at blackbeltjones.com, spoke about what he called the 'very reduced idiom' of social networking software. He went on to discuss his own focus on building tools which do not attempt to model and thus prescriptively format social relations, but rather allow people to collaborate in handling data in novel ways. Geoff Cox showed a new repository for critical networking software. Antisocial Networking is a great resource for finding projects breaking the meagre format of the digital social contract [<http://project.arnolfini.org.uk/antisocial/>]. Equally, James Wallbank of Sheffield's Access Space and Ravikant Sharma of Delhi's Sarai proposed well-seasoned projects in which the social is seen and actively worked with as a multilayered urban process. Mark Shepherd, a New York based architect, gave a useful set of insights into how architecture and communications technologies combine to 'propagate' forms of spatial composition in a viral or contagious manner. Shannon Spanhake, a Californian researcher showed citizen science projects for monitoring pollution levels. She equips phones with an extra air-sampling circuit for use in Tihuana and Lima and presented a nuanced account of the way in which introducing new technologies and revealing collectively generated data triggered new problems - where does the data go and how does it gain legitimation?

The latter's work especially builds on a range of projects by designers, engineers and artists all working through the development of techniques for distributed public research technologies which deserve some real attention. There's now a very juicy critical mass building in this area of work which needs a means of concentrating the debate and sharing news and techniques by way of a conference, exhibition or journal.

One of the conference's strong points was its development of lots of means for audience members, who were often as engaging as the official speakers, to raise issues and introduce projects. Ele Carpenter set up a range of loosely themed workshop sessions; the CRUMB (Curatorial Resources for Upstart Media Bliss) group from the University of Sunderland set up a sofa - equipped with tea set and confectioneries - for people to sit around and throw out questions to anyone who might have some kind of answer; the Dirt Party group established a gossip network and artist Lois Weaver ran a twelve-place discussion table for an afternoon. All of these initiatives work well in their own way, introducing different paces of discussion and establishing multiple kinds of opportunities for

communication. Needless to say, a range of web-based services were also used for people to weave different kinds of information through the physical event. To a certain extent these forms of side-channel to the conference were necessitated by the fast pace of the presentations in the programmed event. The sessions slotted for the talks, solicited via the calls for proposals, were often of a strict ten minute with scant time for discussion: this within a conference where at least one of the booked speakers made three presentations.

The sheer volume of events, spaces, and projects worked well to bring numerous kinds of work into the event as a whole and it's clear that the Futuresonic team are committed, within the resources they have, to grow its inclusiveness. During RZA's session, one audience member, local rapper Elavi [<http://www.elavi.com/>], spoke of how he was being targeted by the police for selling his CDs on the street. Immediately Drew Hemmett, the festival's director, publicly offered him a place in next year's line up. A listen to Elavi's disarmingly ungrimey album *Soul Science* shows that this unfashionably spontaneous act of trust might even have been a good move. The city centre is being scrubbed of street traders because the cops and city council see behind them to the endless phantom hordes of BMX-riding, Glock-wielding hoodlums waiting to pour into the zones locked off for culture, learning and shopping. If the creative city, scam though it is, is going to thrive it will do so in the teeth of that other one, the security city that moulds the social into the form of a solid state circuit populated by happy electrons. Both of these schemas for cities are brought to the fore in the formats and ambitions of social networking software and devices. As Futuresonic suggests, going beyond their 'reduced idioms' is essential.

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Footnotes

[1] Screen scraping is a technique in which a computer program extracts data from the display output of another program. The program doing the scraping is called a screen scraper. The key element that distinguishes screen scraping from regular parsing is that the output being scraped was intended for final display to a human user, rather than as input to another program, and is therefore usually neither documented nor structured for convenient parsing. <http://en.wikipedia.org/>

Info

Futuresonic 2008 ran from 1 to 5 May, <http://www.futuresonic.com/>