

CommPose: Visualizing Local Community Through Camera Phone Media

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ABSTRACT

CommPose is an interactive installation that creates an environment where people can share personal camera phone media in public spaces. Participants upload camera phone pictures and video clips to a screen via Bluetooth connection. The collected media is played back in sequence resulting in a collaborative video. By rooting the installation in a specific location, *CommPose* highlights the emergent character of a community through the publicly-shared personal media.

KEYWORDS

Personal Media, Digital Communities, Camera Phone, Mobility, Interpersonal Communication.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As personal media devices become more ubiquitous in modern society, humans adapt and arrange behaviors around the usage of these digital consumer technologies. In particular, the increased accessibility to cheap digital cameras has created a cultural phenomenon where taking snapshots or recording video clips - of anything, anywhere - has become a common preoccupation. More so now than any other era, we maintain an enormous collection of images from our personal lives through this frenzied use of digital photography. *CommPose* is a work that explores this contemporary habit, specifically with the usage of cellphone cameras.

Sharing digital photos is done easily and excessively on the Internet. Sharing digital photos in physical space, on the other hand, is still very cumbersome. Therefore, these snapshots of "anything, anywhere" largely remain on the screens, shared online to a global community, but hardly shared within the physically immediate local community. *CommPose* explores this gap between personal digital media and the physical community by asking the audience of that specific location to contribute their image to the installation using their cellphone's Bluetooth connection. Upon uploading, the image is added to a queue and displayed to the public in a rolling sequence with other images that came before, resulting in a picture-based chronicle composed entirely by the audience. *CommPose* can be arranged by the artist to fit the proper context of the installation site, but control over the images is given to the viewers completely. Since there is no delete function the images that have been uploaded stay in the viewing queue; therefore, the viewer is responsible for what they decide to put up for other people to see.

The locative aspect of this project is the crucial underlying theme. Since *CommPose* isn't connected to the Internet, its media can only be uploaded and viewed at the installation site. The work thus heightens the awareness of the physical presence of others. The end results from each installation site will always be unique. This method echos the bulletin boards found in college campuses, work places, coffee shops, or town squares, where people would put up posters and flyers to announce up-coming events, jobs, pets for adoption, etc. Over time, these bulletin boards express the evolution, memory, and character of that specific place, time and people. *CommPose* applies these qualities to our 'digital memory' represented by photos and videos taken and shared on a regular basis. By turning personal media into a public showcase, the work creates a mediated reality amongst people using a very intuitive and ubiquitous form of interactivity given today's technology.



CommPose installed at FABRICA, Italy 2005.

Contemporary artistic practices appropriate cultural objects or habits in order to reflect on the state of the current society. Our current time and culture is heavily driven by consumer electronics designed to augment human communication. In order to adapt to the information age, humans have enforced technologies into their personal lives and over a brief period have gained an enormous amount of personal digital media. This project attempts to expose one aspect of personal media and to remind us of the human relationships and behaviors embodied within these electronic devices.

TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

CommPose is a self-contained unit, a modified 12" Apple iBook in a wooden box. It is hung on the wall as a picture frame, constantly playing a sequence of images and can receive new images from a nearby camera phone when requested. Within the Bluetooth range, viewers can contribute by choosing to send an image (photo or video) from their mobile phones. The image is then added to the queue and displayed instantaneously.

It is intended to be installed in a public space, where people of the community or passer-by can all contribute to their common picture frame, composing a video sequence that represents their collective memory.

The software that drives the system is custom-written in Cocoa (Objective-C) for the Mac OS X operating system. Connections are made between the computer and participant's camera phone using Bluetooth's OBEX protocol - a widely-supported standard that allows users to transmit media objects without passwords or additional software on their handset. The Cocoa application handles these OBEX connections, the storing and indexing of images, and the display of those images in a dynamic sequence.

RELATED WORK

CommPose is the result of several years of research-based art works done at the Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) at New York University.

The first of these works is *Bass-Station*, a vintage 1980s boom box modified to house a modern computer and WiFi access point. The *Bass-Station* travelled around communities, allowing community members to access its wireless network and upload and download audio media. Over time an image of the particular communities was gained by inspecting the uploaded media.

CoDeck is the second work that picked up on the concept of using collected media to capture and reflect a community. This work uses a classic Betamax video machine modified to include a full computer. The *CoDeck* is connected to a TV and when installed, it enlists the community to upload video content. A content-threaded system was developed where one piece of content has others linked to it as 'responses', offering the community a way to host asynchronous conversations. In some installations, contexts were applied to stimulate these conversations, ie: "Share videos expressing your politics". These cumulative efforts were adopted into *CommPose* to further explore the significance of personal digital content in local communities.

Additionally, a specific practice in contemporary art has influenced the creation of *CommPose*. Artists in the early 90s until now, inspired by today's landscape of communication technologies in the ever-increasing connected world, started to develop works which are participatory and reflected the social relationships among people. French art theorist and curator, Nicolas Bourriaud coined the practice "Relational Aesthetic," whereby the art isn't the finished object or by-product of an activity, but is the arrangement which generates relationships among people and portrays the alternative or existing reality as aesthetic form. While Bourriaud uses the term to describe the aesthetics of artists such as Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose media vary from bulletin boards to acts of cooking and

entertaining, we believe that a system like *CommPose* takes the same point of departure as a work of art: where the artist instigates a situation then waits for the audience to fill in the blanks. From both theoretical and practical stand points, *CommPose* was created to utilize personal digital media in an art form.

PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS

"Where The Heart Is" Toronto, Canada, May 2006.

Gallery patrons were asked to upload iconic imagery of Toronto - people, places and objects - that would then be uploaded to a small LCD worn by the artist.

"Pictures of You" Bangkok, Thailand, May 2006.

This installation, located at the trendy Bed Supperclub, panders to the vanity of Bangkok's wealthy youth by asking them to take self-portraits with their camera phones.

"Left, Right, Center" Bologna, Italy, April 2006.

Installed in the main square of Bologna one week before the Italian National election, this *CommPose* environment invited locals to submit images that expresses their political leanings.

"The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" Treviso, Italy, February 2006 and Seoul, Korea, October 2005.

In this installation three screens are installed in a single space, giving the user the choice: is your image good, bad or ugly? By juxtaposing the three contributed images displayed on the screen, the gallery patron creates their own interpretations of what is good, bad or ugly.



"The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" Seoul, Korea 2005.

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