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I want to know you I want to understand you

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I WANT TO KNOW YOU
I WANT TO UNDERSTAND YOU

A THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate School Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
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B.F.A., Louisiana State University, 2002
M.A., Louisiana State University, 2006
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To my son Guilherme
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ABSTRACT

*I want to know you I want to understand you* is a new media work that uses the World Wide Web to discuss the issues of traditional and new methods of communication, as well as exploring the concepts of collaborative and interactive art.
THE CONCEPT

“Art is experimental or isn’t art.”
Gene Youngblood

All peoples of all regions of the planet share a fundamental human quality that transcends language, culture, or social organization. This essential quality manifests itself universally in actions and reactions to dualistic events. Certain emotions can be communicated without the influence of any cultural or linguistic process. Individual humans can connect by way of our common humanness. One can argue that this humanness is our consciousness and that humanness is what connects us all.\(^1\) Taking that into consideration, perhaps one of the greatest human contradictions would be that, at the same time that consciousness unites us, language -- which is only possible because of consciousness, and therefore should also unite -- can actually separate us.

Language and culture can create barriers that impede communication among peoples. The Biblical story of the tower of Babel, and many other myths around the world, try to explain the origin of language.\(^2\) These myths are generally rooted in the belief that before language was created, there was a better understanding among peoples. Language would have come to separate and confuse.

Despite geographic, linguistic, or cultural diversity, visual communication can be a powerful tool for overcoming these barriers. This thesis project was conceived in the belief that

\(^2\) Genesis 11:6-7: “And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”
visual communication can facilitate and allow dialogue outside of traditional communication methods - what Jaron Lanier\(^3\) would call “post-symbolic communication.”\(^4\) He argues that in the future one may find a way to communicate with our bodies through behavioral expression of thought. The intention of this thesis is to create alternative ways of looking at people’s eyes and surroundings, and of letting people’s real meaning reach us.

In this day and age, telecommunication has become so ubiquitous that it has changed our perception of communication per se. Language is no longer the main means of communicating with others. The variety of possibilities created by image-based communication systems has extended the notion of communication by sound and symbols, voice and type.

*I want to know you I want to understand you* uses the World Wide Web to reach people because of the Web’s central and intrinsic quality as a popular and accessible means of communication, even in economically disadvantaged regions. Computer sales have skyrocketed over the last decade. While computer use is a solitary activity, plugging into the Internet and navigating the Web allow users to access information and people that were previously difficult to reach or for all practical purposes inaccessible. The *I want to know you I want to understand you* project, through the website [www.eyeconproject.net](http://www.eyeconproject.net), intends to stimulate multivariate communication by allowing a broad range of connectivity among people from different cultural backgrounds.

This intense activity in the digital world mirrors our moment in history, when time and space no longer represent temporal or logistical barriers. The notion that time and space have

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3 Jaron Lanier is a computer scientist who popularized the term “virtual reality.”

4 “Post-symbolic communication refers to various speculative scenarios of human communication methods that bypass the standard symbolic communication used today, as exemplified by spoken language, the written word, and other non-standard symbolic languages such as Braille and American Sign Language.” 22 Jan. 2007 <http://www.wikipedia.com>
changed is now so much a part of our daily lives that it is difficult to even realize it. All we need, however, is to think about the use of a remote control and the concept becomes clearer. The use of computers and other devices that are more elaborate than a simple remote control is an even more sophisticated way we use technologies to supercede the traditional concepts of time and space. We can now be in different places at the same time. Cyberspace has introduced an opportunity for connectivity, reinventing our perception of the present.

The project also explores ideas of collaboration and interaction. These two concepts are central to the new media arts. Artists are more than ever able to collaborate with each other, as well as with the public. The concept of performances, originating in the 1960s when artists started interacting with the public, takes a new shape where the stage is cyberspace. Interactivity, says Eduardo Kac, “destroys the contemplative notion of the beholder or connoisseur to replace it with the experiential notion of user or participant.”

The primary content of the piece is the assembly of multimedia material located at the project website (Fig: 1 - 3): (1) cell phone videos revealing users’ themselves and/or their places of origin; and (2) manipulated symbols which participants will have augmented by physical interaction (liberally interpreted). The concept is an extension of the 1968 Warholian claim, “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes,” as well as earlier models of interactivity such as mail art. More contemporary are the works of the VanGogh TV artist group known for their “pirate” broadcast initiatives. At Documenta IX, in Kassel, they created an unprecedent media space that linked participants via satellite, live TV, a computer network,

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5 The word cyberspace was coined by William Gibson in his sci-fi book *Neuromancer*, where it meant “a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system.”
6 Eduardo Kac is internationally recognized for his interactive Internet installations and bio art.
ISDN phones, videophone, and fax. Another artist, Agnes Hegedüs, in her piece *Between the Worlds*, sets up an unusual communication system that includes the composite for faces and processed real-time images of the hands of communicators.

Stephen Wilson elucidates:

“Many artists who have found these theory-based analyses compelling have been attempting to develop an approach in which deconstruction itself is the main agenda. The theories provide concepts, themes, and methodologies for creating artworks that examine and expose the texts, narratives, and representations that underlie contemporary life. Even more, the work can reflexively examine the processes of representation itself within art. Roland Barthes describes the process in “Change the Object Itself”: It is no longer the myths which need to be unmasked...it is the sign itself which must be shaken; the problem is not...to change or purify the symbols but to challenge the symbol itself.”

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9 Ibid., 524.
10 Ibid., 27.
THE PROCESS

The Videos

Collaborators post videos on the www.eyeconproject.net site, and others, unhindered by
time or geographical distance, can view them. In this process any mediation is eliminated. This
situation can be contrasted to that of television, a medium that is perceived as a “voice of
authority” by many. Television works as a one-to-many type of medium, distorting human
reality with the intention to create more appealing programming or pure sensationalism. Not only
that, once a subject appears on TV, it acquires a sense of validation, in as if it were definitely
true. Television can and many times does manipulate public opinion. On the other hand, the
World Wide Web can be seen as a more democratic means of communication because of its
ability to connect disparate people in a many-to-many communication system. Where there is
lack of mediation, there is improvement of the degree of connectivity and greater perception of
reality. The participant is “encouraged to intervene in the action, abandoning his condition of
object and assuming fully the role of the subject.”

11 Mark Poster mentions in his book “Yet, as
Baudrillard has shown, the electronic media, in their material form and their space-time regime,
construct a hyperreal or simulacral world.”
12 Although it is reasonable to say that electronic
media creates a kind of simulated reality, or simulacrum, the case of the World Wide Web can
promote a bridge between the two parties more effectively than a medium such as television,
mostly associated with a high level of mediation.

11 Augusto Boal, Theater of the Oppressed, The New Media Reader, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and
12 Mark Poster, What’s the Matter with the Internet? (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota,
2001), 14.
The video component of this piece is concerned with the notion of creating the possibility of eye contact among unrelated people. One might question: where is the eye contact? But, as Margaret Morse says in her book *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture*, “There is a human need for and pleasure in being recognized as a partner in discourse, even when the relation is based on a simulation that is mediated by or exchanged with machines.” Thus, the project does not differ from TV, for instance, in terms of having a machine as a mediator. The difference here is the absence of an intellectual intervention of a third party.

The Symbols

I rendered a set of four symbols (circle, square, triangle, and cross) (Fig. 4) based on my examination of language for the project. The set arose from the international multilingual symbols drawn from past and present examples. These primal symbols are simplifications of existing ones in many languages (Fig. 6). Abstracting these shapes was important because, this way, we can utilize them to generate new compositions circumventing the traditional use of language and recreating its meaning.

Participants in the project are invited to download the symbols and make them their own, or in the language of Post-structuralism, to redefine the signifier.

These graphic images created by the participants are not to be considered as the product of the work but the records of a visual dialogue promoted by the collaborators.

The Synthesis

These symbols and videos form a dialectic, a confrontation between *icon* (symbol) and *eye contact* (video). The resulting synthesis supplants the contributions of the particular elements.

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THE INSPIRATION

The fact that many people in the world live outside of their places of birth inspired this project. Also, communication is an increasing necessity inherent in human society since earliest times. The combination of art and science has become an increasing presence in the world of art, especially in the area of digital art. In the final analysis, we live in a world with ubiquitous means of communication, which creates the contradiction of more information and less understanding.

Today, the United Nations counts one hundred and fifty million men, women, and children who live outside their country of origin. This number does not even count “internally displaced people,” who account for twenty five million worldwide. This displacement is personally important to me because I share in the experience. Indeed, understanding gained from my situation pushes me to produce work that directs attention to this subject matter. Given that this is the reality of global society today, there is a growing need for people to communicate with their place of origin, with others who are displaced, and with their new community. My intention is to participate in this effort of linking people without verbal language and without boundaries.

Digital art is a contemporary form of expression, and it fits this project well because of its social and technological qualities. Today, artists have adopted the digital medium both because of its malleability and its ease at displaying one’s art. Also, digital artists use visuals as part of a much larger, interactive, bidirectional communication context. Images and graphics are created not simply to be transmitted by an artist from one point to another but to spark a multidirectional visual dialogue with other artists and participants in remote locations. Museums around the world have created venues to display this new type of material. The Whitney Museum, for

15 1 Mar. 2007 <http://www.internal-displacement.org>
instance, is responsible for ARTPORT, a portal to net art and digital arts since 2002. European countries are known for their support of digitally based artistic endeavors. Stephen Wilson says: “As part of its concern about maintaining future competitiveness, the European Union has initiated efforts to encourage cultural institutes in which artists collaborate with researchers in developing new technologies. It is based on the premise that Europe has rich media traditions that can inform innovation in a way not necessarily following the American model.”

Eduardo Kac, a cutting-edge media artist, explains:

“This new immaterial art is collaborative and interactive and abolishes the state of unidirectionality traditionally characteristic of literature and art. Its elements are text, sound, image, and eventually virtual touch based on force-feedback devices. What is commuted is changed, rechanged, exchanged. One must explore this new art in its own terms, that is, understanding its proper context (the information society) and the theories (poststructuralism, chaos theory, cultural studies) that inform its questioning of notions such as subject, object, space, time, culture, and human communication.”

To return to the idea of more information and less understanding: at the present time we have unlimited ways of communicating with others. Take for example the consumption of cell phones and computers in the last few years. In 2002 alone, about five hundred million cell phones were sold globally. In the same year, video cell phones, already a very popular device overseas, were introduced in the United States. Their proliferation and easy access is the reason why I chose to use cell phone videos in my work. The videos are readily produced and unproblematic to share online. Not only cell phones but also computers experience a constant increase in demand. People want to be connected. This need for connectivity is part of human

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16 Edward Shanken, Artists in Industry and the Academy: Collaborative Research, Interdisciplinary Scholarship, and the Interpretation of Hybrid Forms, Center for Computation and Technology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 26 Oct 2006.
17 Wilson, Information Arts, 46.
18 Kac, Telepresence and Bio Art, 5.
19 14 Mar. 2007 <http://www.pcworld.com/article/id,113788-page,1/article.html>
nature. The World Wide Web is only part of a long history of efforts to be close to each other. As Stephen Wilson says, “Humans have long dreamed of travel, of visiting faraway places and peoples. They have been both curious and wary about ‘the Other.’”

The Web is also the motivation for criticism and discussion. The net critic Geert Lovink discusses in his works the problems related to the popularity of the Internet and the World Wide Web. He believes that, although computers have a massive potential to promote global discourse, they are also problematic because of corporate and political interests, not to mention problems with censorship.

Even though we are living in a moment in history where all of these technologies are available, we still do not understand each other better. Given these emerging technologies and their possibilities, we still face war, xenophobia, famine, displacement, natural disasters, and economic poverty. My hope is that art can contribute toward resolving some of these generally intractable problems.

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21 Wilson, *Information Arts*, 459.
THE PRESENTATION

*I want to know you I want to understand you* consists of three different components: the web site [www.eyeconproject.net](http://www.eyeconproject.net) (Fig. 1 - 3), the Design Building Atrium Wall display (Fig. 5), and the Foster Gallery Installation (Fig. 7).

The web site is posted online so people all over the world can have access to it and can collaborate on the project. The online network ORKUT™ powered by GOOGLE was the choice to announce the site. According to its home page, “ORKUT is an online community designed to help people connect, build relationships and create engaging communities around common interests. Since its inception in 2004, ORKUT has seen incredible growth around the world.”

Of its approximately fifty million members, around 50% are Brazilian and 20% American, and the remaining 30% come from other parts of the world. For this project, reference was an important tool because it is an easy way to contact a broad number of people from different places and cultures, who are already connected to computers.

The second component, the Atrium Wall display, was designed so the work would be placed in a high traffic area at LSU; thus people could interact with it while lounging in the Design Building atrium. One of two screens on display will feature the [www.eyeconproject.net](http://www.eyeconproject.net) home page, and on the other will show a grid of the videos sent by collaborators. Also, there will be a computer station where people can connect to the web site and participate instantaneously.

The third component, the installation at the Foster Gallery, intends to create a setting where people can feel immersed in a digital environment. This experience generates the viewer’s awareness of one’s self and others, and an engagement without the usual forms of mass communication as mediator. The room will have a projection on one of the walls of a grid of the

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23 [http://www.orkut.com](http://www.orkut.com)
videos sent by the collaborators. The opposite side of the room will have a series of television sets turned on and disseminating white noise. The use of television sets intends to make a contrasting statement with respect to the videos. The background sound will be the voices of a number of participants speaking their native languages, as if to say, “I want to know you I want to understand you.”

Finally, these three parts of the presentation of the work complement each other by being connected to the two main ideas of this piece, which are collaboration and interactivity.


Welcome!

CONCEPT
"Eyecon project" is a plea for a world where people understand each other despite the barriers created by language and culture. It is a collaborative project where people all over the world are invited to share their identities and ideas. Through this action they can show the world their places of origin and the way in which they interpret a visual symbol. The concept of this project is based on the belief that people can use visuals to communicate beyond the use of a written language. This way, this effort would work as a substitute founded on our ability to express ourselves visually. Ultimately, this venture has the aspiration to make a small contribution to the vast whole of the Web generating more interest and understanding of other cultures through a pleasant and interactive way.

INTERACTION
Collaborators in the "Eyecon project" are encouraged to participate in two components of the experience. First, each person will take one of those symbols and manipulate or mutate it to become a new idea and then submit it to the site. Second, is to submit a short video of their surroundings and/or of themselves.

Figure 1 – Home Page
Figure 2 – Video Gallery
Figure 4 – The symbols
Figure 5 – Design Building Atrium Wall display
Figure 6 – Language elements.
Figure 7 – Gallery installation three-dimensional model.
VITA

Jeane dos Santos Alves Cooper was born in São Paulo, Brazil in 1967. In 2002, she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Louisiana State University. In 2006, she received her Master of Arts in art history from LSU. She will receive her Master of Fine Arts degree from the same university in May 2007.