www.alarmbell.org
Proposal for the Dirk Koning Memorial Garden Walkway
Grand Rapids Community Media Center

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INTRODUCTION: Silenced Bells

The departure of the village bell from daily life left a large hole in modernity - to fill this void is no easy task. To contemplate, acknowledge, and move forward from this loss is an appropriate parallel to the loss felt by the many who knew Dirk Koning.

Dirk's "Bell Story" carries at its core a message that no communication technology should exist for its own sake, outside the functions of community life. Ironically, most contemporary bell towers follow just that fate, erected by colleges, cities or other institutions to construct "instant heritage" and the appearance of longevity. Even worse, most analogous technologies of alert are used as instruments of control by powers - witness the air-raid sirens of Cold War-era Civil Defense, or the color-coded Terror Alert System of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Short of forsaking the modern city as a place of work and life, it is near impossible to return to a state of community in which a village bell functions as a communicative medium. Like fireplaces or horseback riding, bell towers today more often serve as nostalgic icons of status or luxury than as essential infrastructure of daily life.

For good and bad reasons, modern communities are simply too dispersed to rely on unaided hearing for communication; a bell functions as a communicative instrument only for those who live within audible range of the clapper. Most communities are better served by the technologies and networks Dirk spent his life building - radio, television, internet.

PROJECT GOALS: Filling the Silence

Still, many functions of the original village bell remain unmet.

Where, today, can a citizen sound an anonymous call to a group that is not self-selected?

Where exists a medium as accessible as a simple bell and rope?

Where can we find a medium today that doesn't merely "send", but "calls?" The old bells disallowed passive reception, required active work to discover the nature of the alarm. One had to cease work to travel to the source and hear the news.

Where today is alarm a real event, and not a hollow instrument of control or commodity? Through the now ubiquitous news "crawl," "special reports," press conferences and carefully chosen language, our most visible means of public alert have transformed alarm into a perpetual state of desire for information and security. Old admonishment against "crying wolf" has devolved into a perpetual state of emergency.

PROPOSAL

This project seeks to restore some of the bell's lost functions, without falling to the dangers of what some refer to as "recursive" use of media, celebrating a technology for its own sake.

I propose a bell system that employs two sites - a physical site and an online site.

The online site attempts most clearly to fulfill the function of the old bells.

The physical site serves as a reminder of the losses we will never fill - the absences we experience in our dispersed communities, and at Dirk's passing. It also serves as a call-to-action, providing impetus to visit the online site and restore the connections we've lost.

NARRATIVE

Once a day, at 12:00 EST, an automated program will send out an anonymous email to a list of recipients designated by the author. (Through the website www.alarmbell.org, anyone may author a message and add it to the queue.)

Before sending the mail, the program triggers a long row of fire bells on the exterior of the Wealthy Theater - each bell rings once in succession, from the rear of the building to the front.

A long list of recipients in the email results in a speedy succession of rings - a short list causes the succession to happen more slowly, taking as long as 1 minute.

After the last bell rings, the email is sent out to its intended recipients.

The email contains only a short statement, alerting recipients to read a full message at the URL - http://www.alarmbell.org.

The message may be viewed by any visitor to the site - though the author and recipient list are always suppressed.

Intended recipients of the email can choose to reply to the whole group, but not to the original author exclusively.

A prominent plaque at the street end of the alley at Wealthy Street displays the URL, www.alarmbell.org. A plaque at the other end of the alley commemorates Dirk Koning's life and accomplishments.

PROCESS

Stage 1   Based on consultation with Landscape Architect, solicit bids to establish a full budget.

Stage 2   Identify Landscape Architect to partner with. Work together to design bench, foliage, and lighting.

Stage 3   Choose bell. Design technical infrastructure.

Stage 4   Design and test website and bell interface. Ensure privacy and lack of trackable data.

Stage 5   Install bells and controls, construction of physical site

Stage 6   Dedication of sites. Announcement and promotion of website to identified institutions, organizations.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why fire bells?

As chronicled by media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, modernity saw a move from sound to vision as the dominant sense. Where bells once relied on their sonic qualities for impact, most contemporary emergency systems are first seen, and then heard. These bells are chosen to resemble a common exterior building element, repeated absurdly to create an amplified visual call to attention.

2. Why do the bells only ring once a day?

Like the mythological village bell, this project endeavors to function as an anticipated and realized event, restoring potency to the experience of alert communication systems. Regular and frequent email-rings would draw the project closer to extant systems of alert and communication, in which new messages merge into a single, undifferentiated blur of time.

3. What if people don't use the website?

Admittedly, this is a risk. If necessary, I believe I could back up my belief in the demand for this service with demonstrated testimony. Revelations about government surveillance measures, challenges to journalistic confidentiality, and the increased value of the "whistleblower" in a mega-corporate globalized market all point to the need for a safe, secure forum for anonymous mass announcements. As long as injustice exists at even the intimate level of domestic violence and everyday racism, there will be a need for calling people out from the safety of anonymity.

Additionally, this project promises functionality even when it is not used - even as a symbolic gesture, it points out the need for specific forms of communication and distribution.

4. Isn't this just contributing to "spam" emails, or even slanderous "flaming"?

A few things differentiate this project from those practices. First, the messages themselves only appear on the website, not in the email itself, and in full view for the public. Second, alarmbell.org's announcements allow for the possibility of anonymous replies to the group - each announcement's recipient list, though obscured from view, is accessible for replies, rebuttals, or responses by any recipient (and only the recipients). In this way, both privacy AND accountability is assured. Short-term listserv-like discussions may even ensue from some announcements.

5. How is confidentiality secured?

The identity of each original poster will be protected through the use of a secure proxy server, with logs erased regularly. All reply emails are handled through the project's own server on an web-based email client, and not through individual recipient's email accounts.

6. How will visitors to the physical site understand what's going on?

There are only three clues for these visitors as to the nature and purpose of the bells - a plaque commemorating Dirk Koning, a plaque listing the URL of the project, and the bells' attachment to a GRCMC facility. These elements will require visitors to learn more through inquiry, word-of-mouth, or through being brought to the site by someone else "in-the-know."

This separation of alert from message is intended to mimic the role of physical travel in the function of village bells - one had to travel from the fields in to the city to learn the nature of an alarm. In this case, information gleaned socially, rather than institutionally, is also intended to highlight the role of community in dissemination of knowledge. For those visitors who already know the project, experience of the bells without the message they carry is also intended to communicate absence, or even loss - something we ought not readily forget.

7. Why do the bells ring from rear to front?

In this way, the passage between buildings becomes a metaphor for passage of a message into the world - visitors to the GRCMC can embody, by walking out into the world, the transference of a signal from private to public.

8. Why are there Japanese Maples?

The trees' red color, and possible transitions from green to red, is intended to act as an additional metaphor for the conveyance of messages into the world. Planted below the row of bells, and also in a line, they invite the comparison of natural to artificial, and are also often associated with sites of contemplation. These plants stay in leaf for longer than other deciduous trees, and thrive in the relative shade of an alley such as the one at Wealthy Street.

9. Won't skaters be using the bench all the time to practice tricks?

Well, yes they just might. I think Dirk would be OK with that, but if the GRCMC isn't up for negotiating this with the neighborhood skating community, then we might need to work with the landscape architect to take non-harmful discouraging measures.

KEVIN HAMILTON

http://kevinhamilton.org

EDUCATION

2000   Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Visual Arts Program. S.M. Visual Studies
1996   Rhode Island School of Design. BFA Painting

TEACHING

02-   University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. School of Art + Design. Assistant Professor, New Media and Painting
01-02 Grand Valley State University, Michigan. Visiting Professor for Foundations
00-01 Gordon College, Massachusetts. Adjunct Instructor of New Media, Drawing
99-02 Rhode Island School of Design. Summer Pre-College Instructor

ORGANIZING

02-   Coordinator, *Program in Temporary Site-Based Artwork*, Siebel Center for Computer Science
04   Symposium Co-Coordinator, *Walking as Knowing as Making: a Peripatetic Exploration of Place*
04   Project Co-Coordinator, *Examining Utopia: Kabakov's Palace of Projects*
03   Lecture Series Co-Coordinator, *Real Life : Expanded Economies of Cultural Production*

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

06   *New Media / New Works*, Arts Interactive Gallery, Boston
05   *Welcome to Fusedspace Database*. Stroom den Haag, Netherlands
05   *Balance and Power: Performance and Surveillance in Video Art*. Krannert Art Museum, IL. (Michael Rush, curator)
04   *When Contemporary Art Speaks*, Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art
04   *Ordinary Aura*. Urban Institute for Contemporary Art, Grand Rapids, MI
04   *Psy.Geo.Provflux*. The Steelyard, Providence, RI
04   *Version>4: Invisible Networks*. Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL
04   *Action Packed*. Marshall Arts, Memphis, TN
04   *Ciberart Bilbao*. Mercado del Ensanche, Bilbao, Spain
03   *MAD '03*. Museo del la Universidad de Alicante, Madrid, Spain
03   *Eshow*. Krannert Art Museum, IL (Barry Blinderman, curator)
03   *In Out 2003*. International Festival of the Digital Image, Prague (with Maria Corejova)
03   *Detroit International Film and Video Festival*
02   *The Meijer Project*. Dynamite Project Space. Grand Rapids, MI

PUBLIC PROJECTS

05   *Chronozone 3*, sited performance for Multiplace Festival, Bratislava, Slovkia
04   *Chronozone 1*, sited performance for Glowlab's Psy.Geo.Conflux at Participant, Inc. New York
04   *Breaking*, broadcast on WFMU by DJ / curator Kenneth Goldsmith
02   *Blue Bridge*. commissioned site project and television broadcast, Alliance for Community Media Conference, Grand Rapids MI
00   *Quad for Crowds*. commissioned performance, Los Angeles CA

ONLINE EXHIBITIONS

04   Bodybuilder and Sportsman Gallery website. Chicago, IL
04   *Fusedspace*. online competition by V2, Stroom, Doors of Perception in Netherlands.
04   Drain Magazine. Issue 2: Remote Control
04   *Digital Visions 2004*. University of British Columbia, Canada
04   *Slowtime: Quicktime as Artistic Medium*. MediaCentre at Le Musee di-visioniste
03   Rhizome Artbase

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

06   Gahlberg Gallery, College of DuPage. Glen Ellyn, IL
06   Design Factory, Bratislava, Slovakia
03   New Catalogue Viewing Room. Chicago, IL
03   Trinity College, Palos Heights, IL

LECTURES

05   *Walking as Knowledge*, lecture and workshop, Walking for Health conference, UIUC
05   Panelist, *Beings in Common: Embodiment and Interconnectedness*, New Forms Festival, Vancouver BC
05   Visiting Artist Lecture, Academy of Art and Design, Bratislava Slovakia
04   Panelist, Dutch Electronic Arts Festival, Rotterdam. V2_Organization, Institute for Unstable Media
03   Panel Moderator, *After Whiteness: Race and the Visual Arts*. Center for Democracy in a Multi-racial Society, UIUC
03   *Giving the Lead: a Trilogy of Walked Interactions with Strangers*, Western Front Artist Run Centre, Vancouver
02   *Time-Based Media and Foundations Curricula*. invited presentation, Syracuse University
02   *FreeForming*. (with Paul Wittenbraker) invited presentation, Dynamite Projects. Grand Rapids, MI

PRESS

04   "Arte.red" annual survey of net.art El Pais newspaper - http://www.elpais.es/especiales/2003/netart/2003_2.html
04   "Synchronaut," review on Glowlab - http://glowlab.blogs.com/news/2004/01/synchronaut.html
04   "Slowtime" exhibition review on Net Art Review - http://www.netartreview.net/logs/2004_03_21_backlog.html
03   "digitalizarte," El Duende Dec 03, yr.VII, no.40 p.25
03   "Monitor, computer driven videos," review on Neural - http://www.neural.it/nnews/monitor.htm
03   "The Other End, percepire la presenza remota," review on Neural - http://www.neural.it/nnews/otherend.htm

AWARDS

04   Nominee, *Fusedspace Competition for New Technology in/as Public Space*, Netherlands.
04   *Critically Connected: a Slovak-American Exploration of Virtual Presence*. "Humanities in a Globalizing World" grant, UIUC
02   *Worn*. Best of Show, Detroit International Film and Video Festival
02   *Remote Interactivity in Public Space*. Research Board Grant, UIUC

Fluent in: Final Cut Pro, Adobe Photoshop, Illustratot, Macromedia Flash, Actionscript, Dreamweaver, Imovie, Audacity, Apple Soundtrack, DVD Studio Pro

Capable with: HTML, XML, Max/MSP/Jitter, Pure Data, GEM, Javascript, analog electronics, sensors

PROJECT SITES

www.kevinhamilton.org
www.theotherend.net
www.avoxia.com
www.walkinginplace.org/converge
walking.omweb.org
www.art.uiuc.edu/projects/real

COURSE SITES

www.art.uiuc.edu/courses/arts441
www.art.uiuc.edu/courses/arts442
www.art.uiuc.edu/courses/arts443
www.art.uiuc.edu/courses/arts593
srg.cs.uiuc.edu/Palace

REFERENCES

Available upon request.

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