

The Embroidered Digital Commons: Rescension

Carpenter, Ele

Goldsmiths College, University of London UK

The 'Embroidered Digital Commons' is an artwork facilitated by Ele Carpenter as part of the Open Source Embroidery project, utilising social and digital connectivity. The artwork is a practice-based research project exploring the language of the digital commons through close reading and stitching, in which conference delegates are invited to participate.

In 2003 the Raqs Media Collective wrote *A Concise Lexicon off/for the Digital Commons*. The full lexicon is an A-Z of the interrelationship between social, digital and material space. It weaves together an evolving language of the commons that is both poetic and informative. The terms of the lexicon are: Access, Bandwidth, Code, Data, Ensemble, Fractal, Gift, Heterogeneous, Iteration, Kernel, Liminal, Meme, Nodes, Orbit, Portability, Quotidian, Rescension, Site, Tools, Ubiquity, Vector, Web, Xenophilly, Yarn, and Zone.

The 'Embroidered Digital Commons' is an ambitious project to hand-embroider the whole lexicon, term by term, through workshops and events as a practical way of close-reading and discussing the text and its current meaning. Each term is chosen in relation to the specific context of its production through group workshops, conferences and events. The term 'Yarn' was embroidered at the HUMlab Digital Humanities Media Lab at Umeå University in Sweden, 2009. Here at the DH2010 conference we will aim to stitch the complex term 'Rescension'.

The concept of the digital commons is based on the potential for everything that is digital to be common to all. Like common grazing land, this can mean commonly owned, commonly accessed or commonly available. But all of these blurred positions of status and ownership have complex repercussions in the field of intellectual property and copyright. The commons has become synonymous with digital media through the discourse surrounding free and open source software and creative commons licensing. The digital commons is a response to the inherent 'copy n paste' reproducibility of digital data, and the cultural forms that they support. Instead of trying to restrict access, the digital commons invite open participation in the production of ideas and culture - where culture is not something you buy, but something you do.

The use of metaphor to explain technological concepts was expertly developed by Lady Ada Byron Lovelace in her letters and notes accompanying the Analytical Engine. Her love of poetical science combined the influences of her father, Lord Byron, and her mathematical mother, Lady Lovelace. Ada gave us the textile - metaphors for code and programming in the 1830s, informed by the binary punch card programming of the Jacquard Loom and Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine (Plant, 1997).

Rescension

The project for the DH2010 conference is to consider and embroider the following text: "Rescension A re-telling, a word taken to signify the simultaneous existence of different versions of a narrative within oral, and from now onwards, digital cultures. Thus one can speak of a 'southern' or a 'northern' rescension of a myth, or of a 'female' or 'male' rescension of a story, or the possibility (to begin with) of Delhi/Berlin/Tehran 'rescensions' of a digital work. The concept of rescension is contraindicative of the notion of hierarchy. A rescension cannot be an improvement, nor can it connote a diminishing of value. A rescension is that version which does not act as a replacement for any other configuration of its constitutive materials. The existence of multiple rescensions is a guarantor of an idea or a work's ubiquity. This ensures that the constellation of narrative, signs and images that a work embodies is present, and waiting for iteration at more than one site at any given time. Rescensions are portable and are carried within orbiting kernels within a space. Rescensions taken together constitute ensembles that may form an interconnected web of ideas, images and signs." (Raqs Media Collective, 2003)

The embroidery is a rescension of the lexicon. As we sew we retell the story of the digital commons (itself creative commons licensed to be retold). And as we emphasise the line of our stitches and falter over knotted words, we make our own subtle interpretations of the text, adding nuances of colour, and personalized references.

The Digital Humanities is a large net woven by many scholars from many fields, each with their own perspectives on the concept of how the digital is common to all people, and how it is restricted. Curiously we watch people sewing in the dim light – what does it say? What does it mean? Where are you from? How do you retell the story of your knowledge? What is your lexicon?

A Concise Lexicon of/for the Digital Commons uses its own terms to describe new terms. So the word ‘rescension’ is described in relation to ‘fractal’, ‘kernel’, ‘node’, and ‘ubiquity’.

In the ‘Embroidered Digital Commons’, the text forms a kernel which is “the central rescension, of a narrative, a code, a set of signs ... that invites modification, extrapolation and interpretation, by its very presence.” (Raqs Media Collective, 2003). It is the core of an idea at the centre of discourse.

The text is open for any group to embroider, as a fractal or fragment of “free cultural code” as described in the lexicon: a fractal “is a rescension of every other fractal that has grown from within it. In the same way a fragment of free code, or free cultural code, carries within it myriad possibilities of its own reproduction and dispersal within a shared symbolic or information space.” (Raqs Media Collective, 2003)

We are nodes in the network of communication, and each thread and word is reinforced through repetition, where every utterance is both the same and different each time. The lexicon describes “echoes and resonances” as “rescensions” which travel through nodes, “and each node is ultimately a direct rescension of at least one other node in the system and an indirect rescension of each junction within a whole cluster of other nodes.” (Raqs Media Collective, 2003). The embroidered patches become a central node, where ideas and arguments can cluster.

According to the Lexicon ‘Ubiquity’ is: “A rescension, when in orbit, crosses the paths of its variants. The zone where two orbits intersect is usually the site of an active transaction and transfer of meanings. Each rescension carries into its own trajectory memes from its companion. In this way, through the encounters between rescensions, ideas spread, travel and tend towards ubiquity.” (Raqs Media Collective, 2003)

By the end of the conference the term ‘Rescension’ will become ubiquitous: in our minds, in our presentations, in our conversations, in our pricked fingers and in our notes scribbled incomprehensibly in the dark. And possibly in a patchwork which defines or redefines the term, and enables it to continue traveling.

References

Plant, Sadie (1997). *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*. London: Fourth Estate.

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Ele Carpenter is a curator, artist and writer based in the UK and Sweden. She is a lecturer in MFA Curating at Goldsmiths College University of London, and is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at HUMlab in affiliation with Bildmuseet at the University of Umeå, Sweden.

Since 2005 Ele has facilitated the Open Source Embroidery project using embroidery and code as a tool to investigate participatory production and distribution methods. Ele is currently working on

the 'Open Source Crafter' publication, and facilitating the 'Embroidered Digital Commons' distributed embroidery.

Ele received her PhD on the relationship between politicised socially engaged art and new media art, with CRUMB at the University of Sunderland in 2008; and was previously Curator, NGCA Sunderland (1997-2002); Associate Curator, CCA Glasgow (2003-5).

<http://www.elecarpenter.org.uk>

<http://www.open-source-embroidery.org.uk>

<http://www.eleweekend.blogspot.com>.