

Mapping Danger, Making Connections

Matthew Battles

metaLAB at Harvard

Sarah Newman

metaLAB at Harvard

Luca Simeone

metaLAB at Harvard

Tables and chairs, markers and glue, the slicing afternoon light of Cambridge in early Spring — there's a hush fallen at NuVu Studio, an innovation hub for young people in Central Square, bracketed by the hum of a laser printer and the snick, snick, snick of scissors. Teens cluster here and there beneath the high ceilings, some sitting at tables, other propped on hands and knees on the floor, delicately constructing collages from hundreds of printed photographs. The images they're piecing together chart the everyday weirdness of the city: scattered litter, cracked walls and sodden streets, a gallery of tired and beautifully broken faces. Patiently, with X-ACTO blades and glue, they're arranging these pictures together into expressive portraits of life in Central Square — maps of another kind, charting the evanescent geography of danger and curiosity in the city.

A few weeks earlier, in air-conditioned spaces far away in the sunny, broiling-hot, metropolitan Emirate of Abu Dhabi, another clutch of young people had labored over maps of danger of their own. Students at New York University's (NYU) Abu Dhabi campus, representing a global cohort of incoming freshmen, used digital imagery to express a wide-ranging geography of danger: bodies of animals and computer viruses, discarded shoes and cigarette packs, the charged prospect of a kiss. Having just arrived from around the world, these students brought a variety of ideas of danger (and dangerous ideas) to a new and different place, one with its own highly specific notions of danger, risk, and wrong. Their work, in the form of digital files printed and distributed, enlivened the discussion that later took place in chilly Massachusetts.

These interwoven acts of making and encountering took place in the context of Media Art Knowledge Engaged (MAKE), a project fostered by a group of artists and researchers affiliated with Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and a host of global partners, who together created a series of workshops to explore themes such as copyright laws, privacy, danger, and gender equality. Their interest in fostering this set of encounters was piqued during the planning phase of the Digitally Connected symposium, which unfolded at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society over the course of the academic year 2013-14. The symposium's goal was a comprehensive one: "to map and explore the global state of relevant research and practice, share and discuss insights and ideas from the developing and industrialized world, and encourage collaboration between participants across regions and continents." (www.digitallyconnected.org) In the fall of 2013, several of us (including the authors of this essay) started thinking about ways to bring those goals to life in an engaged way, collaborating with young people around the world by employing art, media, and digital skills.

In dialogue with the symposium's organizers, a group came together around the idea of shaping a series of workshops, hosted by youth arts and media programs in the Boston area in partnership with sites around the world. The coordinating team included the following: Matthew Battles (metaLAB), Dalida Maria Benfield (Berkman Center); Giuliana Cucinelli (MIT); Tim Davies (Berkman Center); Primavera de Filippi (Berkman Center); Sarah Newman (metaLAB); and Luca Simeone (metaLAB). Meeting frequently throughout the academic year, this group collectively forged a vocabulary for collaborative



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work, sought global partners, and settled on a design for the program as a whole: paired workshops in local and global sites, with each fostering a dialogue through art- and media-making, whose work would come together in a pop-up exhibition staged at the Digitally Connected symposium at Harvard in April, 2014. Together, we also settled on the name for the initiative as a whole — MAKE — an affirmation of the emphasis of the project on crafting, making, and enskillment in digital media and the materiality of art, and (retrospectively) an acronym, standing for Media Art Knowledge Engaged.

MAKE workshops have since been hosted in several cities (including Bogotá, Colombia; Quito, Ecuador; and Abu Dhabi, UAE), where young people have had the opportunity not only to work in local groups, but also to share their experiences with their peers at mirroring sites around the globe. These workshops consisted of three clusters, each facilitated by Berkman Center affiliates with colleagues from around the world, and each focused on a particular theme and set of art-making practices and media methodologies. The Public Domain Remix, which took place in Somerville, MA and then Dakar, Senegal, encouraged people to remix, use, and reuse public domain works in a creative way by encouraging the shift from one medium to another (such as illustrating a song, or creating a sculpture out of a story). Mapping Networks, Making Worlds, in Boston and then in Bogotá, Colombia and Quito, Ecuador, engaged children and youth in an exercise of critically mapping their communication networks, working to understand with whom they communicate using information communication technologies, as both transmitters and receivers of information. Mapping Danger, located in Cambridge, MA and NYU Abu Dhabi, UAE, explored how photography can inform and shape our understandings of danger.

The initial impulse to map ideas of danger through photography and collage belonged to one of the authors of the present paper, Sarah Newman, a fellow at metaLAB at Harvard, a Berkman-affiliated research group exploring technology's changing roles in the arts and humanities. Acknowledging that the meaning of "danger" differs with gender, class, and culture, it seemed a charged and fruitful focus for a global dialogue through art. Sarah was joined

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In seeking a partner internationally, they turned to Mo Ogrodnik, a filmmaker, NYU professor, and the Founder/Director of FIND, a hybrid cultural lab dedicated to creating a transnational portrait of the UAE through the lens of artists, scholars and technologists. Ogrodnik and her colleagues agreed to host a parallel instance of the "Mapping Danger" workshop tuned to the unique setting of NYU Abu Dhabi. Ogrodnik and her colleagues contributed richly to the process of shaping a workshop to the needs and capacities of their students, keeping in mind the fraught cultural and political context of the Emirates, both for Emiratis and students from abroad. At the Nuvu Studio in Cambridge, high-school age students from that program, as well as the City Studio Program at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Boston Arts Academy, gathered on Saturday, April 5 in Central Square. Over the course of the day, they surveyed the practices of a variety of dynamic visual artists whose photographic work courts widely-defined notions of danger, and discussed their own notions of the dangerous, from the fanciful (lions, alien invaders) to the tangible (illness, accident, and crime). Then, they went out into the diverse, sometimes-challenging urban fabric of Cambridge's Central Square to find their own images of danger. Taking hundreds of photos, the students explored the specters of homelessness, gender disparity, traffic, pollution, and surveillance through imagery they gathered on the streets. In the balance of the workshop, they combined those materials into large, expressive collages. They also looked at the work produced by Mo Ogrodnik's students in Abu Dhabi. An older cohort, with skill in digital art-making, Ogrodnik's students had produced work that was charged and complex, expressing a range of encounters with danger as it arises in the context of gender, travel, and unbending cultural mores. With her students, Ogrodnik had also designed a work of art that took the form of a survey posing questions on the nature of the dangerous, which they distributed on the buses that carry commuting NYU students and staff in Abu Dhabi.

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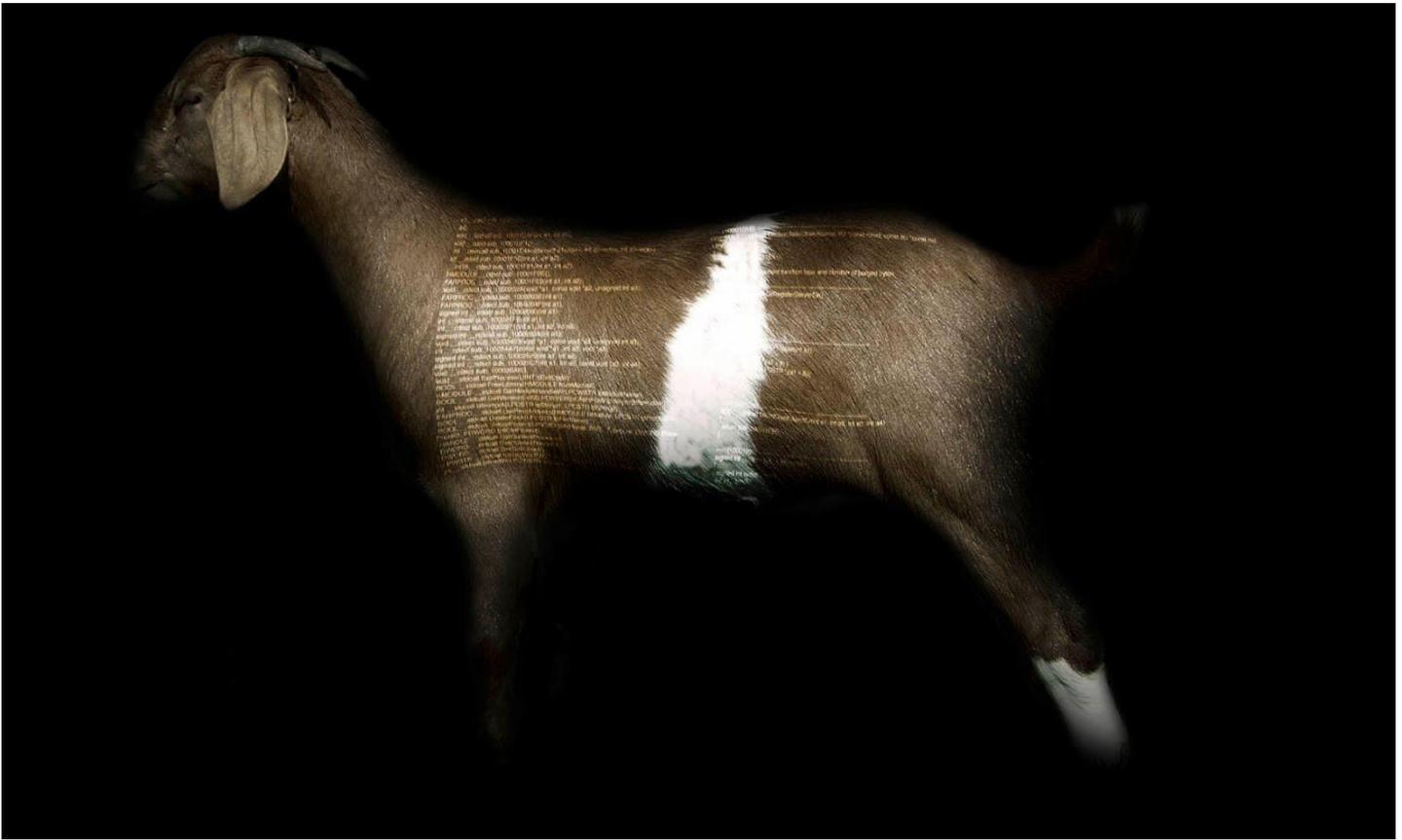
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At the symposium at Harvard Law School, co-hosted by UNICEF and the Berkman Center, these works finally came together with those produced by the other workshop teams, taking the form of a pop-up exhibition. This material culmination was a crucial part of the MAKE initiative, allowing local participants to come together (with Mo Ogrodnik, who traveled from the Emirates to participate in the symposium, and who contributed instrumentally to the design and installation of the show). There, the theme of “Mapping Danger” came into dialogue with the themes of the other workshops, whose organizers and participants all contributed to the impact and outcome of the show.

Ultimately, the exhibition became a conduit for injecting the voice and vision of young people themselves at the Digitally Connected symposium. Through the exhibition itself and a reception held for the young artists during the conference, participants had the chance to explore a couple of key conjectures: first, that technical enskillment is never a neutral thing, but is always bound up in civic engagement, social and economic empowerment, and cultural attitudes toward work and value; and

second, that any pedagogy that seeks to build skills and knowledge also models social norms and ideals. Art and design, which represent fundamental modes of knowledge-production and enskillment, also entail networks of social relations that can empower students not only to express themselves, but also to forge meaningful ties with others. With these assertions in mind, MAKE's organizers designed encounters with collaborative art and design work that prioritized affirmative, reflective sociality and sensitivity to global connectedness and difference. Thus the idea was born to foster a series of art-making workshops that not only focused on topics of vital interest to digitally-connected youth, but also offered young people the chance to make, share, and reflect upon work in tandem with peers in geographically-distant sites around the world.

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