



Ethan Zuckerman's musings on Africa, international development and hacking the media.

October 18, 2007

Pop!Tech: Christian Nold's Emotional Maps

Filed under: [Pop!Tech 2007](#) — Ethan @ 10:00 am

[Christian Nold](#) is a different kind of cartographer, a biomapper, who's trying to map spaces in an entirely different way. He's interested in mapping cities in a way that acknowledges that cities aren't just infrastructure, but accumulations of people. He points out that we've hit a point in time when more than half the world's populations live in cities. This cities, he offers, are fragile things - London has about a three day supply of food. If the rest of the world disappeared, Londoners would starve in a week. He speculates that cities are "consensual hallucinations" where more than half of the world lives.

Maps of cities are sterile things - they show roads and structures, but not people or emotions. He shows us a map from the 17th century, showing trees, rivers, people fishing and hunting. He's hoping to create modern maps that are humanized in a similar way.



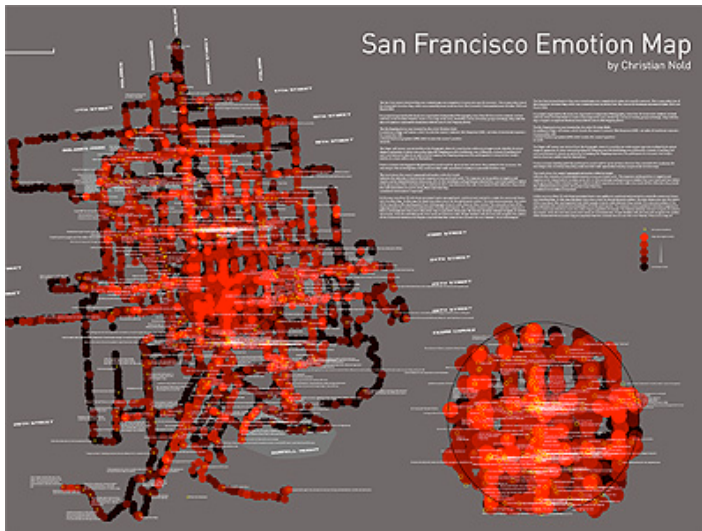
One way to build these maps is to deny people access to certain senses and force them to use other ones. Working with a set of high-school students, he blindfolds and deafens students and invites them to explore an area, using smell and touch.



The maps that emerge are built from the overlay of people's reports at specific points in space. He notes that only 27% of the

emotions are positive, and that those emotions tend to cluster together.

Another means of mapping involves a “biomapping” device that Nold has built. It detects galvanic skin response using similar techniques to a lie detector and associates those reactions with GPD data. The result are walks through cities that have graphs of arousal associated with physical places. A busy intersection, for instance, might generate high levels of stimulus on a map when different paths are overlaid. Other maps might have personal spikes - an argument with Mum that leads to emotional stress for one individual, but not for most.



The [San Francisco Emotion Map](#), annotated by participants, shows sparks of positive emotion in “hidden parts” of a city - pocket parks, murals that are off the main streets. Nold is using this mapping technique to work with the local council and local developers in Stockport, a small town near Manchester, England. The town, like many in England, is basically a space for the young and old - most people out of school and below retirement age, have left for Manchester. The emotion map is annotated with sketches people made of what they were doing, which have a strong tendency towards “hanging out”, “drunk in public” or “avoiding drunk kids”. It’s a powerful and complicated document for people trying to figure out how to build a town that works for residents emotionally as well as physically.

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