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Printer-Friendly Version

Artist creates 'emotional maps' of cities

By LISA LEFF
Associated Press Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — As cartography projects go, Christian Nold's approach to charting the peaks and valleys of urban landscapes is decidedly unconventional.

First, he outfits volunteers with global positioning system devices and the sensors used in lie detector tests. Then, he sends his subjects out to wander their neighborhoods. When they return, Nold asks them to recount what they saw and felt when the polygraph recorded a quickened heartbeat or an elevated blood pressure.

"Tried to stomp on some pigeons," one tester recalled after a stroll through San Francisco's bohemian chic Mission District.

"House right here, it reminded me of flowers at a funeral," another said of what he saw a few blocks south.

"Security guard at a business giving lollipops to kids. I think I wanted one," still another volunteer observed.

Nold, a London-based artist, calls his work "emotional mapping." Having mapped settings as varied as industrial areas of Bangladesh and the red light district of Brussels, Belgium, he recently arrived in San Francisco for his first U.S. project.

He's the first to acknowledge that the intimate portraits that result from his endeavors won't help a confused tourist get from Fisherman's Wharf to Golden Gate Park.

Instead, by taking polygraph technology out of the criminal realm, his goal is to offer a commentary on the subjective nature of reality.

Maps, he notes, have always been influenced by whomever makes them, citing as an example the globes that used to show Europe as being considerably larger than Africa.



Artist Christian Nold displays a map of San Francisco's Mission District on a computer screen as part of his "emotional mapping" project at the Southern Exposure gallery in San Francisco. AP photo

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"There are different ways of mapping the city that aren't strictly about the practicalities or financial sensibilities that we usually guide our urban planning with," said Nold, 31.

Marketers, mobile telephone companies, architects and real estate developers have expressed interest in putting Nold's handheld gizmos to commercial use, a situation the artist finds ironic. He said he gets five e-mail solicitations each day asking about the practical applications, but turns most of them down.

He's working with a government agency in London to gauge residents' perceptions of crime in public housing. The purpose of the project is to determine whether areas that get labeled as being unsafe actually have more crime or just higher population densities, he said.

One trend to emerge from the maps is how people tend to respond to social interactions much more than to buildings. In other words, encountering an accident scene or an attractive person is likely to register a response more than an architectural feature.

Nold's five-week stint in San Francisco was sponsored by Southern Exposure, a local gallery mounting an exhibit of artists whose work dealt interactively with public spaces. Executive Director Courtney Fink said Nold, one of eight artists picked from a pool of more than 300, was a natural choice.

"A lot of times, conceptual art can be very elusive. People just don't get it," Fink said. "This is very cutting edge, conceptual art, but it has a much more universal appeal to it."

Nold points out that as accessible as his work may be, people often assume the technology he employs is more sophisticated than it really is. The devices cannot, for example, detect whether someone's emotional arousal is positive or negative — that puts the kibosh on determining whether a place makes people happy or sad.

"It seems to offer a ... lot, but what the companies want is to be able to slice people's heads open and see what's inside," he said.

Creating emotional maps also is labor intensive. Mapping one square mile around Southern Exposure will require 80 to 100 volunteers to spend at least an hour walking the area, plus more time to be debriefed on their experiences.

Eventually, Nold downloads the information into a computer and comes up with a multicolored display showing where the subjects had the most highs along with their comments. When they are finished, they resemble crude boundaries of medieval kingdoms surrounded by turrets and moats. He prints them out and makes them available on his website.

Nold has been making emotional maps for three years and says he has been heartened by the common threads that have linked neighborhoods in places like Siena, Italy, Munich, Germany, and San Francisco. He's found that his subjects enjoy being given a reason to roam aimlessly, tend to have elevated emotions at corners and on their way to a destination, and are endlessly curious about new stores and restaurants.

"When I go to a place, I'm always kind of a tourist," he said. "But I get a mixture of this ephemeral stuff with an amazing grass roots view you would never get unless you lived in a place for 10 years."

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