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Mapping out our emotional world

London-based artist uses polygraph and GPS to chart peaks, valleys in urban areas

By Lisa Leff
The Associated Press

Article Last Updated: 05/05/2007 10:45:54 AM MDT

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

Click photo to enlarge



Artist Christian Nold demonstrates his polygraph mapping technique. (Marcio Jose Sanchez/The As)

First, he outfits volunteers with global positioning system devices and the sensors used in polygraph 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 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 Barcelona and the red light district of Brussels, Belgium, he recently returned to San Francisco for his first U.S. project.

He's the first to acknowledge that the intimate portraits told 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 as an example of the global used to show Europe a considerably larger than it is.

"There are different ways of mapping the city that are strictly about the practical or financial sensibilities usually guide our urban planning with," said Nold. "Marketing, mobile technology companies, architects and 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 for practical applications, but he 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 unsafe actually have more crime or just higher population density, he said.

One trend to emerge from the maps is how people tend to respond to social interactions much more than to buildings.

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words, encountering an accident scene or an attractive person likely to register a response more than an architectural feat. Nold's five-week stint in San Francisco was sponsored by Southern Exposure, a local gallery mounting an exhibit of 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 don't get it," Fink said. "This is very cutting-edge conceptual art. It has a much more universal appeal to it."

Creating emotional maps is labor intensive. Mapping one 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're finished, they resemble crude boundaries of medieval kingdoms surrounded by turrets and moats. He prints them out and makes them available on his Web site, biomapping.net.

He's found that his subjects enjoy being given a reason to go aimlessly, tend to have elevated emotions at corners and on the way to a destination, and are endlessly curious about new restaurants.

"When I go to a place, I'm always kind of a tourist," he says. "I get a mixture of this ephemeral stuff with an amazing grand view you would never get unless you lived in a place for 100 years."

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