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Art and Science Laboratory

Exposé:

**Art Project with the Cognitive Systems Group (CoSy), FB3 – Informatics,
University of Bremen, for the SFB/TR8**

English Title

NEVER-NEVER LAND

Instants of Free Associations

German Title

WOLKENKUCKUCKSHEIM

Augenblicke des Assoziierens

The German word WOLKENKUCKUCKSHEIM comes from a translation of Aristophanes' comedy *The Birds*. It describes a realm between sky and earth. It is often used when indicating that someone is making plans without reference to reality.

The English word NEVER-NEVER LAND, now well known from the novel *Peter Pan*, was originally a name for the Australian outback and became a term for dreams about a utopian future.

Both terms – synonyms – cover what creative work is about. Splendid ideas appear in fleeting moments, unexpected and unforced. They develop unpredictably in free time and vacant space.

Media

Interactive computer installation, manipulated photographic images

Location

Public space of the Cognitive Systems Group, Cartesium, University of Bremen

Artist

Elisabeth Weissensteiner

The artist has been an independent professional in the visual arts for twenty years with a strong focus on three dimensional work, public art and mixed media including digital photo-based work. For details please see attached CV.

Collaboration

Staff member and students of CoSy

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Description

NEVER-NEVER LAND impersonates the playful process of free association that is the precondition of creativity referencing cognitive research and gestalt theory with the technology of cognitive systems and by identifying and occupying fractional spaces and times within the working realm of scientists.

Independent from and prior to the project, on the floor of the Cartesium that houses CoSy, instead of name plates, small computer screens will be attached beside the doors of the personal working spaces. The proposed project will share these computers. A person approaching a door will find two small words on the screen, WOLKENKUCKUCKSHEIM and NEVER-NEVER LAND, written in tiny letters. Looking at them triggers a sequence of images. The pictures sequence moves by cross-fading and ceases when the viewer turns away.

This sequence develops along certain features in the photographs based on gestalt theoretic relationships (Arnheim 1969). Manipulation of the images identifies these features and makes them visible in highly diverse photographs. When another person approaches and looks at the screen a completely different sequence begins. It shall not be possible either to return to the screen and continue with the image left behind or predict following images.

Touching a computer button will turn off the Never-Never Land installation and return to the regular utilization of the computers.

Rationale

The idea for NEVER-NEVER LAND originated from the artist's long standing involvement in public art projects. Her first large commission dates back to 1996 but other temporary works for public spaces have been created even earlier. The idea is also informed by her ongoing quest how understanding works, which as a side effect has also lead to a scientific publication (Weissensteiner and Winter 2004).

Working with materials means awareness of the physical properties of a specific material. Creating art work in this heightened sensibility leads into investigation of its metaphorical content. Three dimensionality as the basic physical property does not only lead to the question how much an art piece needs from its surrounding space but also how much the environment gets from an art piece.

Elisabeth Weissensteiner perceives her art practice as communication cast in sensual material. This is creation of signs, even texts. Signs hold the capacity to express something. But at the same time they offer a trigger for possible understanding. Therefore a sign theoretic approach to art always considers two sides: the artist who deliberately creates sensually perceivable units and the viewer who puts these perceptions into a pattern of understanding (Ingarden 1931; Iser 1978).

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This general concept of her art practice directly informs Elisabeth Weissensteiner's involvement in public art. Public art accentuates the second step of the mentioned two step approach. The artist tries to identify the parameters of a certain space and then develops the art work carefully regarding these parameters. Such Elisabeth Weissensteiner creates a set of signs about something invisible, nevertheless of something the inhabitants of the space are familiar with.

The idea for NEVER-NEVER LAND builds in the specific conditions and activities of CoSy, in particular its spatial cognition research within the SFB/TR8. Both the actual space in the Cartesium building and the research themes conducted there - the premises that are designed to facilitate goal-oriented, time economic work flows; the research goals that investigate a possible world of engineered spatial cognition – led to this project proposal. The computers that will have been installed beside the office doors can be equalled to the minds of the viewers watching them while back-paddling for a moment at the door. These time *slots* – space metaphors themselves – can be translated into the *spots* at the doors where the viewer is standing. Furthermore, the succession of images set in motion by the gaze of the viewer are derived from highly diverse vistas but will be manipulated as to bring out certain connecting features. This procedure relates to gestalt theory and to the theory of mental spaces (Fauconnier 1994) – impersonating what may happen in the head of the viewer, indicating what may happen within overlooked and unstructured time-spaces.

Insofar, NEVER-NEVER LAND impersonates a space shaped by scientists and their work consisting not only of the actual building but also of the spatial cognition activities conducted within its premises. NEVER-NEVER LAND is not a simulation. Like an actor, this public art piece brings something to the fore what has been present but not available for perception. NEVER-NEVER LAND picks up certain elements, changes and rearranges them, such that the viewer perceives something seemingly familiar. Due to abstraction, isolation and subsequent rearrangement these elements establish an independent syntax that lures the viewer into various attempts of understanding.

Thus, NEVER-NEVER LAND identifies a realm that maps the three-dimensionality of hollow objects (screens, computers), inhabited spaces (rooms), and the three-dimensionality of sequences over time (images taken of objects in spaces) to each other. Being a piece of art it deliberately employs perception as to make viewers identify their mental sensations as stories to be read as parables (Turner 1996).

Literature

- Arnheim, R., 1969: Visual Thinking. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- Fauconnier, G., 1994: Mental Spaces. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Ingarden, R., 1931: Das literarische Kunstwerk: Eine Untersuchung aus dem Grenzgebiet der Ontologie, Logik und Literaturwissenschaft. Niemeyer, Halle.

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Iser, W., 1978: *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Turner, M., 1996: *The Literary Mind*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

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