

HOTHAUS PAPERS

PERSPECTIVES AND PARADIGMS IN MEDIA ARTS



Abundance in Scarcity

Michelle Kasprzak

The best condition for fostering innovation is within a system with strict limits. Systematic approaches grow out of a need for a stable framework within which to act, but also to contain and channel creativity effectively. An endless list of options is exhausting and stifling. In a common example, consider the magnitude of brand names, each offering extremely similar products that we confront as consumers on a regular basis. In the face of large quantities of information and abundant choice, we seek constraints on our actions which are necessary to guide our processes, particularly creative ones. In addition, systems that restrict the flow of incoming information or reduce choice need not be engineered, because it may be the case that creators are unintentionally operating with an absence of knowledge. These cases of working within chance limitations can also produce favourable conditions for the development of innovative responses to one's environment. Being presented with fewer options, not more, can offer greater opportunity for original thoughts and actions.

Systems are constantly in use, enabling us to express ourselves for purposes both mundane and sublime. The rules of the English language, for example, allow us to communicate in both oral and written forms every day. Knowledge of the system of musical notation enables a violinist in Austria to read, understand, and play from a score written by someone in England. Rules, systems and conventions permit us to act reflexively, perform according to expectations set by our communities, and transmit an anticipated result. These basic conventions are part of normal existence, and so they are largely taken for granted.

Even though these conventions are now so quotidian that they have become virtually transparent, they did spring from somewhere, and the same ingenuity that resulted in their generation is at play when new systems are being constructed, or old ones are modified to produce a new outcome. New boundaries are built, and old ones are destroyed by those who approach from other disciplines, or by those who are forced to modify a system so that it better serves their needs, or by those who are unaware that a system was already in place for the action they wish to take. A paucity of information and choice, whether self-imposed or unintended, can act as the catalyst in a chain of events that provide moments of beauty and insight, allowing us to better appreciate human innovation.

To return to the notion of musical notation, it functions as a system that allows musicians around the world to understand and perform each other's work effectively. Music could be considered to be a kind of language, and so while the basic structure of the notation that represents it on paper may remain the same, it also must expand to incorporate evolutions in its vocabulary. A graphical system of musical

notation, for example, was pioneered by Karlheinz Stockhausen to support his additions to the vocabulary of music. Other conventions in music, such as instrument handling and tuning, are perhaps more mundane. However, the conventions surrounding tuning an instrument were reinvented by musicians who are now known as Hawaiian Slack Key guitarists. In 1792, guitars were brought to Hawaii by Mexican and Spanish cowboys, who were hired to assist with an overpopulation of cattle. When the cowboys departed, some of their guitars were left behind. The Hawaiians who acquired these guitars were left no instructions as to how to tune them, and so each person who obtained a guitar and learned how to make music with it also developed their own individual way of tuning the guitar. These varying methods of tuning became highly prized, and musicians would loosen their strings when they put their guitars down, so no one could steal their tuning. When tuning styles were shared, it was mostly within families, and this created a unique kind of family history, with some musicians able to re-tune their guitars and play in the style of their father, and re-tune again and play in the style of their aunt, et cetera.

The conventions of guitar playing dictate a clearly defined, customary method of tuning, however, in the absence of this information, an innovative variance occurred. The established method of guitar tuning serves musicians who wish to play exactly as others do, and be able to faithfully reproduce melodies from scores. The Hawaiian Slack Key approach allows the instrument to become a conduit through which individual expression and interpretation is privileged over similarity and convention. Even today, with the knowledge of how conventional tuning works, Hawaiian Slack Key guitarists continue to develop their methods, reinforcing the establishment of this parallel system. The conditions under which tuning styles are shared also reveals where trust relationships lie in the social network. Sharing a piece of knowledge such as a method of guitar tuning reveals a significant level of trust in a relationship.

Relationships and behaviour are major components of another project that instead of operating in the absence of accepted conventions, as Hawaiian Slack Key guitar playing does, applies new rules to an existing system. *Bumplist* is a mailing list, created by Jonah Brucker-Cohen in 2003. *Bumplist* provides an open forum for discussion and exchange that any e-mail user may subscribe to, and participate in. One simple added condition makes *Bumplist* unique among the thousands of other mailing lists: the subscriber list is limited to six people. When a new person is subscribed, the person who has been subscribed to the list the longest is automatically removed from the list, or 'bumped'. The *Bumplist* users are never sure precisely when they will be bumped, because it is impossible to predict when the next subscription request will come in, bumping one unlucky user off the list. By adding this unusual rule to a familiar concept, the principle of supply and demand is activated. Because the supply of available spaces on the list is extremely limited, and the demand to be on the list is great, the social manners exhibited are wildly different than

on conventional mailing lists. These unique modes of conduct are generated primarily by a singular desire: to be connected to the list continuously, and for as long as possible. The users of *Bumplist* have exhibited territoriality, passive-aggressiveness, and devious behaviour, but most often the users are simply incredibly tenacious, living up to the *Bumplist* slogan, "An email community for the determined". *Bumplist* aficionados have demonstrated their determination not only in their incredibly frequent attempts to subscribe, but also by creating *Bumplist*-related mailing lists and websites, to discuss and chronicle their experiences with the list.

The *Bumplist* website supplies statistics on each user, and a 'Hall of Fame' indicating the most active users by the number of hours they have been on the list, the number of times they have been bumped, et cetera. Making the statistics publicly available is another subtle method of inspiring a different sort of behaviour on this particular list. Striving to become a part of the *Bumplist* Hall of Fame is a long road studded with many subscription requests, and many emails from the system with the dreaded subject line – "You Got Bumped!" Perhaps the most valuable information is the scarcest, however. Statistics are plainly available, but the emails sent out to the list are not archived publicly. When you are off the list, you are out of the conversation, and the more time you spend off the list, the more dialogue is irretrievably lost to you. The unpredictability of when a 'bumping' might happen, and the possibility of missing out on messages keeps the *Bumplist* users on their toes – and by their computers.

BUMPLIST

subscribes | bumped | re-subscribes
 47961 47957 46644

AN EMAIL COMMUNITY FOR THE DETERMINED

Bumplist is a mailing list aiming to re-examine the culture and rules of online email lists. Bumplist only allows for a maximum amount of subscribers so that when a new person subscribes, the first person to subscribe is "bumped", or unsubscribed from the list. Once subscribed, you can only be unsubscribed if someone else subscribes and "bumps" you off. Bumplist actively encourages people to participate in the list process by requiring them to subscribe repeatedly if they are bumped off. The focus of the project is to determine if by attaching simple rules to communication mediums, the method and manner of correspondences that occur as well as behaviors of connection will change over time.

>>> SUBSCRIBE HERE >>>>>>

Date/Time of Post	Duration of time on Bumplist	Subject of Message
Sun, Oct 19 16:58:47 2003	42 days, 07 hours, 50 minutes	[Bumplist] I WONDER WHAT STEVE DID BEFORE THE LIST?
Sun, Oct 19 16:55:52 2003	42 days, 07 hours, 50 minutes	[Bumplist] STEVE COME FROM A LARGE FAMILY
Sun, Oct 19 16:53:13 2003	42 days, 07 hours, 50 minutes	[Bumplist] A GREAT STEVE RECYCLE
Sun, Oct 19 16:50:57 2003	42 days, 07 hours, 50 minutes	[Bumplist] STEVE RECYCLED
Sun, Oct 19 16:47:52 2003	44 days, 06 hours, 08 minutes	[Bumplist] make it a grope effort and I'm in!!!!
Sun, Oct 19 16:46:26 2003	42 days, 07 hours, 50 minutes	[Bumplist] FRM STEVE AND ANNETTE

BUMPLIST ACTIVITY

STATS
Check out Bumplist Stats including: Who's On, Hall of Fame, Personal Stats, and more soon!

FAQ
Frequently Asked Questions: Everything you wanted to know about Bumplist and more!

BUMPMANIA!
Bumplist in the press, blogs, related links, store and more coming soon!

CREDITS
Design/Concept - Jonah Brucker-Cohen | Technical/Concept - [Mike Bennett](#) | Copyright 2003
JB/C/HO/MLE/TCD - For more info see: <http://www.coin-operated.com/projects>

The internet is thought of as nearly boundless, with millions of pages devoted to a dizzying diversity of subjects, and seemingly no end to the number of lists and discussion boards one can take part in. Introducing limits to a component of something that is seen as limitless makes our online experience more like our everyday experience, wherein there are more definite boundaries and edges. In daily life, it may seem normal that we can only have a certain number of people on a conference call, while our experiences on the internet are treated differently, and may lead us to believe that there would never be a reason for there to be 'no room left' on a mailing list or online community. Imposing restrictions that are more often associated with physical objects and concrete reality allows our typical conduct in the offline world to become incorporated into these online experiences.

Like the Slack Key guitar example, the modification that *Bumplist* proposes to a system provides insight into social practices. The Slack Key guitarists achieve distinction by their level of ambition in developing their individual styles, and trust is expressed by sharing their methods among members of the community. *Bumplist* users are rewarded for their persistence in pursuing a commodity that has only become a commodity due to a forced scarcity. In each case, the formation of a community around an alternative structure has made the practice a successful venture. Communities may act as valuable conduits for expressing and supporting a modified practice, but individuals sometimes also defy the internal logic of their communities to develop variant personal practices.

In the visual arts, where one may imagine exceptions are the rule, systems and conventions appear, disappear, and then reappear again, depending on factors that run the gamut from the dictates of the art market, to the influence a teacher may have on a group of art students. Certain established aesthetic principles and compositional norms have withstood the test of time and still have some currency today, such as the 'rule of thirds' and the 'Golden Ratio'. Although these norms have a classical appeal, the conventions that are determined to be relevant at the moment can shift depending on a convergence of thinking among tastemakers in contemporary art. Looking beyond trends and movements, the conventions of perception itself dictates which senses are relied upon to convey essential information that is interpreted by the artist. The sense of vision seems an obvious candidate to take priority, and although the interpretation of visual input may change as movements in art shift, inspiration is still often drawn from what a creator sees – whether it is a live model in a studio, or the surrounding landscape.

Recent work by visual artist Nicolas Fleming confronts the traditional reliance on the visual sense to interpret a physical landscape that is later depicted in a painting. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, Fleming integrates a performative element into his investigation of landscape. In this body of work, Fleming invites colleagues to choose a location that he is not familiar with as the subject. Once his colleague has chosen the location, Fleming is

blindfolded and led to the location. At this point Fleming encloses his body in a large canvas bag, and proceeds to drag himself over the landscape, in an effort to read it with his body. When the artist feels he has gathered enough information from his physical sensations of travelling across the landscape, he exits the bag and is escorted away from the scene, still blindfolded. He then retreats to the studio and paints the landscape where he has been, based on memories acquired through his senses of touch and hearing, and the traces of his journey that remain on the canvas bag.



Nicolas Fleming *L'Histoire d'un Vieux Sac* 2004

Fleming's approach is uncommon in its questioning of the investigative methods available to a painter. His use of a performative action to attain knowledge of a landscape discloses a desire for a greater intimacy with both his subject matter and his senses. Where the other examples cited here modify or reveal information about interpersonal relationships, Fleming's experimentations divulge something more internal, about an artist's relationship with his senses and how this relationship may be developed. This work also exposes how an interdisciplinary approach can pose compelling questions to each discipline that is implicated. In the case of Fleming's work, how do his impulses as a painter impact the execution of the performance, and how do the experiences of the performance manifest in the final painting? In an exhibition context, the video documentation of the performance (recorded both inside and outside the bag), the canvas bag as art artefact, and the final painting presented side by side act as separate lines in a complete dialogue about a personal experience of place. The questions about the interaction between disciplines, and the interaction between senses, are answered when the elements of the work are presented together.

As Fleming's work is a highly personal and visceral exploration of landscape from an unusually limited perspective, so the Slack Key guitarists have conducted their personal investigations into sound in a uniquely isolated situation. The style of each Slack Key guitarist is distinctive and belongs to the individual, though tuning styles may be shared. Analogously, Fleming's style of becoming familiar with a landscape belongs to him, and his experiences while in the

bag are very solitary ones, but he openly shares his process in the complete installations of his work. For all three examples, the piece of information that is lost or left out defines the singular shape that each project will take. *Bumplist* users join and rejoin the list in an effort to miss nothing of the conversation, Fleming rejects visual information in favour of what his body tells him about a place, and the Slack Key guitarists develop a new style in a vacuum of information. Each case is motivated by curiosity about the human capacity for expression, creation, and self-knowledge, and how these things happen when we induce or endure scarcity. When less information is available, we change our behaviour and discover new subtleties in the information we have. The gaps where the missing information might be take shape as an unfamiliar melody, an unseen landscape, an imagined conversation that may or may not have happened.

-
- > Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar playing:
 <www.slackkey.net>, <www.slackkey.
 com>.
 - > *Bumplist*: <www.bumplist.net>, <www.

- coin-operated.com/>.
- > Nicolas Fleming: <www.
 nicolasfleming.com>.