Critical Making: the role of shared material production in ethnography

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Workshop Rationale and Goals
Anthopology has come a long way from the days of the objective anthropologist and the passive 'other'. Increasingly, ethnography is becoming a participatory practice, with respondents taking an active role in the accumulation of field data. Techniques such as auto-ethnography, 'thick participation', and reflexive ethnography shorten the distance between 'observer' and 'observed'. In addition, techniques such as 'cultural probes' allow respondents to actively create field materials including text, photographs, and other material objects.

Critical Making, a mode of engagement that links critical reflection and physical production, supplements previous forms of ethnographic activity through the creation of specific, goal-oriented experiments. These experiments are intended to re-map the relationship between conceptual and linguistic forms of social analysis (e.g. social scholarship), and materially and embodied forms of shared making. In past work (Ratto & Hockema, in press) we have found these techniques to be useful in exploring stakeholder's critical issues around new technological developments. Critical Making experiments have been carried out in London, Amsterdam, and in Canada. (http://criticalmaking.com/index.php?cat=3).

The planned workshop will explore the possibilities, potentials, and challenges of critical making as a method for business-oriented ethnography. Our focus for this workshop will be two-fold; first to use a focused critical making exercise to explore questions of visibility, public space, and identity; and second, to review our shared process from a more 'meta' level and to think about how it supplements and extends more traditional ethnographic field work.

Working in teams, session participants will use pre-coded and assembled software and hardware and craft materials to build simple personal and environmental tagging and recognition devices - something like the 'social crown' recently made in a course taught at the University of Toronto (http://criticalmaking.com/?p=277). We will then use the building and testing process to think and talk about the above topics, and about how shared 'making' practices can supplement traditional ethnographies and user-studies.
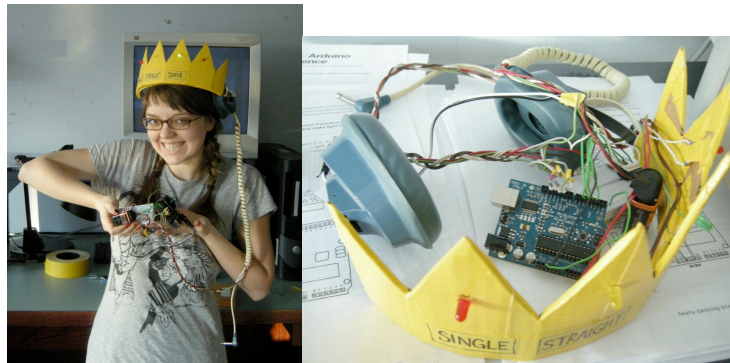
In this work we will make use of the arduino micro-controller and IDE (http://www.arduino.cc), a platform developed for rapid prototyping by artists and designers. Participants will be required to bring laptops (one per team) to the session, be prepared to install an open source software package, and to engage in hands-on work. All materials will be provided by the organizers. **NO EXISTING TECHNICAL EXPERTISE IS REQUIRED.** If possible, the resulting objects could be displayed during the conference at the poster session or other event.

Workshop Plan:
The workshop will require 2 ½-3 hours and will consist of 5 phases:
- a) A brief explanation and exploration of critical making as a method for supplementing ethnography. This will include introductory and framing remarks by the organizers and group discussion.
- b) An overview of the technologies being used, guided installation of necessary software, and description of the pre-assembled toolkits.
- c) A hands-on assignment involving designing, building, trouble-shooting, and testing the prototypes.
- d) Group discussion of the projects, their commonalities and differences, what they offer critical reflection of visibility, public space, and identity.
- e) A final discussion on critical making as a supplement to ethnographic practice.

All materials will be provided by the organizers. The workshop will be limited to 20 participants. A/V requirements are an apple-compatible video projector.

About the organizers:
Matt Ratto (PhD University of California, San Diego, 2003) is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, Canada, where he teaches courses in critical information studies. His past work examines how information technologies are involved in the processes by which cultures, societies, and institutions make sense of the world and simultaneously work to construct and organize it. The object of this work is both theoretical and pragmatic; working first to conceptualize the connections between culture and technology through ethnographic analyses of knowledge-making practices; and second, using these insights to support the design and exploration of novel types of information applications and infrastructures. The defining goal of his current research is on the current intersection between social computing and new forms of rapid prototyping and craft production. Ratto is director of the Critical Making lab at the University of Toronto.