CultureLab
Where books, arts and science collide

Visualising the hidden networks of Silicon Valley

14:42 17 September 2012
Jim Giles, consultant

The City from the Valley *by Stamen Design (Image courtesy of Patrick Lydon and ZERO1 Biennial)*

Where is Silicon Valley? There's an obvious answer: it's the 65 kilometres of sun-drenched Californian sprawl that separates San Francisco and San Jose. But that's not quite satisfying. There is no focus to those 65 kilometres, no one point that can be called the capital of the valley. Even the homes of the tech giants - Google, Facebook - have spread as the companies have grown, so that they now cover multiple locations and lack an obvious hub.

This paradox - that the global home of high tech is both there and nowhere - is the theme of Seeking Silicon Valley, the latest biennial organised by Zero1, an arts organisation with a interest in technology. It runs until December and the line-up takes in visualisations created by some of the foremost data artists, as well as live events - not least an opera composed by Blur frontman Damon Albarn and performed by NASA scientists.

The ZERO1 curators provide an answer to the question they pose: Silicon Valley is sustained by overlapping networks rather than a central heart. These networks - of people, companies, capital and technologies - are the subject of many of the festival's works.

Many of the networks in the valley are only partially visible to residents. Take the fleet of Wi-Fi-enabled private buses that ferry workers from San Francisco to the tech office complexes south of the city, for example. Stamen Design, a highly regarded San Francisco-based firm, has now mapped this ethereal web. *The City from the Valley* was an effort that, to judge by the company's exhibit, was akin to a group of naturalists tracking migrating animals. The result is a map that looks like a diagram of a modern transit system, but instead reveals a set of independent services that are open only to employees of big-name tech firms.

The Open Source Reading Room *by Stephanie Syjuco (Image courtesy of Patrick Lydon and ZERO1 Biennial)*

Artist Stephanie Syjuco is interested in a different kind of network: file-sharing sites and the impact they have on the flow of knowledge. She's created a space - the *Open Source Reading Room* - that is a physical analogue of a file-sharing website. It's a quiet area, around the size of a classroom, featuring blond-wood shelves holding around 150 texts that Syjuco has downloaded and printed, many from MediaFire, a cloud storage website. There is a table where visitors can sit and read, as well as series of posters advertising each text, complete with tear-off strips containing the appropriate URL.

Syjuco has made no attempt to verify the copyright status of anything that she has printed, which is pretty much the point. I found it exhilarating to think that so many books are available for free, but also a little unnerving. Not because of the copyright issues, although as someone who makes a living selling words I should probably have been thinking about those. Instead, I found the place overwhelming. Syjuco's books have URLs in place of titles: these

often-meaningless strings capture the chaotic nature of the file-sharing world, and left me longing for the quiet order of a library classification system.

Other works follow the same theme, attempting to transform the online world into something more tangible. Christopher Baker has recreated the emotional outpouring that occurs on Twitter by suspending 30 printers from the ceiling, each of produces a stream of tweets containing phrases such as "mmm" and "grr". Pe Lang's kinetic sculpture, a mass of tiny black rings that move back and forth along 50 or so white strings, left me feeling that I'd peered into the heart of a beautifully ordered and calm computing system. There are several less impactful pieces and the interpretation is let down by the use of art-world jargon, but those are minor quibbles.

Many of the artworks can be found in the Zero1 Garage, an exhibition space that occupies an appropriately low-key warehouse on a quiet street in San Jose. Twenty-four artists have a presence at the hub and more than 100 others are exhibiting and performing at locations around the Bay Area. The Garage is a notable start to a festival that should be getting more attention.

Seeking Silicon Valley, the 2012 Zero1 biennial, runs until 8 December in locations in and around San Francisco and San Jose, California