

Street with a view

November 10, 2008

PITTSBURGH, PA – In May 2008, artists Robin Hewlett and Ben Kinsley teamed up with Google Inc. to create the first ever integration of art into Google’s Street View mapping platform. Partnering with the Mattress Factory, a museum of contemporary art on Pittsburgh’s Northside, Hewlett and Kinsley invited local residents to help stage a series of scenes along Sampsonia Way. Over 100 neighbors, and other participants from around the city, gathered to create a parade, a marathon, a seventeenth century sword fight, a heroic rescue and much more. Street View technicians documented the street with the scenes in action and the project went live last week. *Information about the project can also be found on the artists’ website:*
www.streetwithaview.com

Integrating fiction, community story-telling and performance art into the Street View platform of instant-access, 360 degree imaging, Street With A View explodes the barrier between reality and performance, life and art. The artists joined together with the local community to take back the power of representation—defining themselves and their environments and using technology as a tool of self-expression. For one day a small, one-way alley became an elaborate montage of spontaneous performance and provocative visual art. Local observers inspired by the scenes were invited to join in with their own improvised performances, and in the process, reach out to the world.

Captured by Google, Inc. technicians, and integrated into the Google Street View map, the event can now be seen by viewers everywhere. The once-tranquil Sampsonia Way has been transformed by a monumental sculpture of a de-feathered chicken looming behind a fence while a medieval battle of swords and armor plays out down the street. Nearby, a faux-marathon of local runners sprints past a mad scientist’s laboratory. A marching band, a pair of firefighters and a new home-owner enact stories individually plausible. Lined up one after the other, however, these scenes begin to test the limits of our suspension of disbelief. Life blurs into theater and back again.

Kinsley and Hewlett occupy an exciting realm of artistic experimentation that reaches beyond traditional art venues to meet new audiences in the real world.

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“For neighbors who experienced it first hand, it was a block party, a community gathering, and a performance. They were both audience and actors,” says Hewlett. “For those viewing the project in Google Street View, there is a different level of interaction. You can navigate the street and discover the more subtle scenes as well as the spectacular ones. Turning onto another street, you might wonder if the person walking their dog was also staged? We’re interested in the necessity of sorting it out for yourself and, ultimately, the inability to do so... you’ll just never know for sure what is real and what isn’t!”

Both Hewlett and Kinsley are alumni of the School of Art at Carnegie Mellon University, where an interdisciplinary approach to art practice is strongly encouraged. The artists received support from the Carnegie Mellon School of Art, as well as the Carnegie Mellon College of Fine Arts Deans Office.

Street with a View was also made possible by a Seed Award from the Sprout Fund.

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ROBIN HEWLETT is an artist/organizer, whose work creates spaces for discussion, exchange and collective learning. Robin is a founding member of Backstory—a café, resource center and community space located on the South Side of Chicago. Robin formerly operated Spare Room—an artist residency, performance venue and exhibition space in Pittsburgh. In 2005-2006, she was the Arts and Community Programs Coordinator for Baan Unrak School in Sangklaburi, Thailand. Robin has also organized workshops, conferences and events in conjunction with the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry and The Brew House Association in Pittsburgh; Khoj International Artist Workshop in Kolkata, India; and NY Forum in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Other recent and ongoing collaborations include: The Howling Mob Society; One Mile Garden, with Bob Bingham and Ally Reeves; Sunday Soup @ the Convergence Center and Other Options Pittsburgh, with InCUBATE; and ReTool with Carolyn Lambert. *For more, see : www.robinhewlett.com*

BEN KINSLEY is a multidisciplinary artist who creates site-specific responses to particular situations through collaboration and playful exchange with local residents. His projects have ranged from conducting an orchestra of screaming humans, directing a maritime-themed play for boaters on a lake in Maine, organizing a shadow play in the middle of the California High Desert, and choreographing a real-life mash-up between a medieval battle society and a fantasy metal band in the middle of a city street. Ben's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in museums, galleries, and film festivals and is included in the permanent collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art. He received his BFA in 2005 from the Cleveland Institute of Art, is a 2006 alumnus of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and received his MFA from Carnegie Mellon University in May of 2008. Ben is currently in Iceland participating in several artist residencies around the country. *For more, see : www.benkinsley.com*

Carnegie Mellon is a private research university with a distinctive mix of programs in engineering, computer science, robotics, business, public policy, fine arts and the humanities. More than 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students receive an education characterized by its focus on creating and implementing solutions for real problems, interdisciplinary collaboration, and innovation. A small student-to-faculty ratio provides an opportunity for close interaction between students and professors. While technology is pervasive on its 144-acre Pittsburgh campus, Carnegie Mellon is also distinctive among leading research universities for the world-renowned programs in its College of Fine Arts. A global university, Carnegie Mellon has campuses in Silicon Valley, Calif., and Qatar, and programs in Asia, Australia and Europe. *For more, see : www.cmu.edu*

The Mattress Factory is a museum of contemporary art that presents “art you can get in to” room sized environments, created by in residence artists. Located at 500 Sampsonia Way, on Pittsburgh's North Side, since 1977, the Mattress Factory is hailed as the best facility for installation art in the United States. *For more, see : www.mattress.org*

The Sprout Fund is a nonprofit organization supporting innovative ideas and grassroots community projects that are catalyzing change in Pittsburgh. Founded in 2001, Sprout is designed to facilitate community-led solutions to regional challenges and supports efforts to create a thriving, progressive, and culturally diverse region. With strong working relationships to many community organizations and regional stakeholders, The Sprout Fund is one of Southwestern Pennsylvania's leading agencies on issues related to civic engagement, talent attraction and retention, public art, and catalytic small-scale funding. With ongoing local support and continued appreciation by the communities it serves, The Sprout Fund will continue to provide an entry point for young people to become involved and active in their communities and support projects that have the collective power to shape a new culture and vision for the region. *For more, see : www.sproutfund.org*