

## ***The Whale Hunt. An online media project by Jonathan Harris.\****

Reviewed by Kate Hennessy

Multimedia artist Jonathan Harris' documentation of an Inupiat whale hunt begins in May of 2007 at his Brooklyn apartment and ends nine days later on blood-stained sea ice in Barrow, Alaska.<sup>1</sup> Three thousand two hundred and fourteen photographs, taken at least every five minutes, tell the story of his travel with photographer Andrew Moore to Barrow and his experiences preparing for the hunt with the Patkotak family, who ultimately harpoon two Bowhead whales and distribute the blubber and meat to the local Inupiat community. Seen by Harris as "an experiment in human storytelling," this stunning photography-based project pushes the boundaries of digital interface design and demonstrates innovation in programming, photographic representation, and visual narrative practice.

While the project is neither explicitly a museum exhibit or ethnographic endeavor, Harris' documentary and exhibitory methodology and creative, thoughtful treatment of visual data speak to the multiple curatorial challenges of documenting, exhibiting, and contextualizing ethnographic photographic collections in analogue and new media contexts. How can the totality of the narrative, its "topography," as Harris describes it, be expressed so that each moment keeps its own place, yet also conveys the many sub stories, emotions, and individual personalities represented within?

Harris' response to these design and representational challenges is dynamic and reflexive. He makes his own physical and perceptive responses to the experience the aesthetic and classificatory anchors for the project, choosing to subject himself to the same kinds of rigorously automated data collection processes that he has used in other Internet-based projects such as *We Feel Fine* (2006) and *I Want You to Want Me* (2008). To take a photograph every five minutes, Harris used custom-made batteries for his digital camera, and a chronometer for photographing during sleep. He then makes this explicitly embodied approach an organizing principle for the visual presentation, the narrative path of the photographs, and the coding of metadata that make user-defined narrative paths possible. In this way, Harris confronts some of the technical limitations of presenting large quantities of visual data in a way that is accessible, functional, intuitive, and aesthetically engaging.

The project's homepage features an image of a whaling skiff waiting on the pack ice. Choosing to "Begin the Whale Hunt" takes the user to the first of three "visualization modes." Mosaic Mode shows all images chronologically and co-present in a grid that reveals patterns in color, texture, and experience. Drawing the mouse through the mosaic makes the image icons burst and flow around the pointer; Harris compares this movement to the flocks of birds, a visual echo of those documented on the Barrow ice. Clicking on any image reveals the time and date at which the photograph was taken and allows the narrative slide show to begin at the point. The slideshow interface features a "heartbeat timeline" that represents the correspondence of the frequency of photographs to the level of excitement at the time it was taken. Timeline Mode,

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accessible from the bottom right of the screen, similarly represents all images in the collection, but manifests as chronological columns, each representing the number of photographs taken in a 30-minute period. Resonating with the heartbeat interface, this mode makes visible both the pace of photography and Harris' experience of the whale hunt in a spectrum of intensity. The third Pinwheel Mode translates the qualities of Timeline Mode into a dynamic circular form, responsive to the touch of the mouse.

The form that the visual narrative takes is designed to be non-linear and responsive to viewer interaction. A number of "filters" can be applied to the slide show, based on metadata that are assigned to each image, including the level of excitement of each image, the place where it was taken, the ideas evoked for Harris in each image, and the individuals pictured in each image. These qualities are respectively categorized as cadence, context, concepts, and cast, and are represented as icons and text on the screen below each image. These meta-categories, or the more specifically named constraints within them, can be applied and changed at any time in the slide show by clicking on the icon of a Bowhead whale. The selected constraints then customize the range of images presented in the newly generated heartbeat timeline.

*The Whale Hunt* is remarkable for its reflexivity in conception and in practice. Harris is often the subject of his own photographs, for example in travel, or in preparation for a day waiting for whales, emphasizing that this is a portrait of his own experience and interpretation of the Inupiat whale hunt. His subjective design and classification of metadata and keywords for images emphasize that the story is being told by a singular author. Moby Dick (read on the plane by Harris and photographed accordingly), or the town of Barrow, Alaska, can be stories of as much significance to the project as the inevitable human-powered winching of a harpooned whale out of the icy sea. The relationship of the project design to the physical body of the documentarian brings the project a degree of self-referentiality that would be difficult to achieve in an analogue exhibit of the same photographs. *The Whale Hunt* points to possibilities for exhibition strategies in museum and ethnographic contexts that engage with, and test the limits of, new media practices in the ongoing project of visualizing and disseminating formerly text-based discourses around voice, representation, artistry, and authority.

## **Note**

1. At the time this review was being finalized (April 28, 2008), *The Whale Hunt* could be found online at: <http://www.thewhalehunt.org/>.

*Kate Hennessy is a Trudeau Scholar and Doctoral Candidate in Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. Her current work with Aboriginal communities in northeastern British Columbia uses methods of participatory ethnography while facilitating collaborative community media projects. Her doctoral research is grounded in the history and trajectory of museum repatriation, and explores the transformative role of new media in museum and academic practice. She connects this concept to issues of ethnographic representation, language revitalization, and the relations of power between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.*