

9 Spools, loops and traces: on *etoy* encapsulation and three portraits of Marilyn Strathern

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This chapter is rooted in the circumstance that new digital technologies for communication and networking continue to be understood in inherited and long-standing moral terms. A range of media practitioners – Internet users, developers, and media and culture theoreticians – have expressed their delight and fascination with the idea of sharing private and professional data via MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, Fotolog, Habbo, LinkedIn, V kontakte, BlackPlanet and a number of other social-networking sites.¹ Touting these virtual communication platforms as ‘social utilities’, their enthusiasts see them as bringing together new communities of communicators in a world ‘where’, contrarily, ‘disconnection and the value of individuality predominate’ (McLard and Anderson 2008). Harnessing a measure of innovation and activism, new media platforms are presented as the ‘conceptual technologies’ of contemporary social thought.² At the same time, another group of users and commentators are considerably more sceptical about the possibilities for meaningful social interaction offered by these technologies; after all, networked socialising supposes the same values of individuality and separation critiqued by the new media enthusiasts.³ Media sceptics claim then, astringently, that digital technologies are superficial media that, rather than enhancing social experience, in fact degrade it, trivialising

¹ Twitter, ‘a free social messaging utility for staying connected in real-time’ is advertised with the following words: ‘Real life happens between emails and blog posts. Find out what your friends are doing via twitter. The updates are very short, under 140 characters.’ <http://twitter.com/>

² See Palmas and von Busch 2006.

³ There is a range of moral opinions on the matter of new media. For ethical and philosophical dilemmas that new media raise see Hayles 1999; Manovich 2001; Thacker and Galloway 2007; van Dijck 2007.

communication and deepening loneliness. In a recent article published in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (2009), for example, Facebook is described as an ego trip for its users, lacking in reflectiveness and nuance, with the potential to seriously fracture society.⁴ Facebook users, it is suggested, are narcissists bombarding their readers with trite detail in the hope that they will thereby secure some kind of intimacy.

The aim of this piece is to reflect on contemporary modes of self-representation and self-extension in electronic spaces and informational economies.⁵ My analytical attention is given over to the moral discourses noted above, but also more generally to an anthropological analysis of portraiture and social software. Ethnographically I focus on a few portraits, and on a particular artistic project known as the *etoy Mission Eternity Project*, which claims to challenge communication and memory culture by hacking into and morphing traditional concepts of informational archives and memory spaces. The chapter analyses different instances of how people compose and circulate extensions of themselves, and discusses the moral issues that arise when these extensions are also responses to mortality, feelings of proximity and sharing.

etoy's Mission Eternity Project

In early 2007 I started working on and collaborating with *etoy*, an international art collective and dot.com art brand. *etoy* is a fifteen-year-old and twenty-plus person community of media theoreticians, architects, disabled-persons carers, coders, designers, squatters, medical doctors, economists, fashion advisers and engineers, based in Zurich and organised as a form of corporation. *etoy's* digital and internet art projects, carried out alongside their members' 'day jobs', have won plaudits from media, conceptual and system-based artists and art historians; the group most notably catapulted itself into media consciousness with TOYWAR, a web project through which they successfully defended the URL name *etoy* from capitalist speculation, by amongst other things mobilising an unprecedentedly sizeable cohort of global hacktivists (see Grether 2000; McKenzie 2001).

⁴ See Deborah Rogers in *Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)* 18 June 2009.

⁵ See the excellent article by Adam Reed (2005) on how new media can function as extensions of the self.

However, it is their most recent undertaking Mission Eternity (M_{∞}), which projects an understanding of the dead as a form of social software, that has come in for the most prestigious awards, while also attracting a number of especially noteworthy public responses. *etoy* members found the cremation of a friend and *etoy* collaborator ‘uncomfortably ordinary and unsatisfying’, and were moved to rethink ways of dealing with and memorialising the death of their loved ones. Enquiring into the notion of the afterlife artistically, technically and affectively, the group’s interactive and multimedia M_{∞} memorials seek to address the trauma of the friends and relatives of the dead and dying. This ultra-long-term project, initiated in 2005, has set out to record the lives of volunteer participants facing death not through conventional likenesses or tombstones (what they consider ordinary forms of commemoration) but rather through the compilation of digital archives of the informational traces left by subjects over the course of their lives. The project thus approaches questions of death and dying through themes of memory and storage.

The project’s premise is that after death people leave behind both their mortal remains and a massive body of information that individuated or specified them. *etoy* artists argue for the continued existence of the dead both as biomass and as traces in global memory, for example in governmental databases, family archives and the brain as the electrical bio-memory of human social networks. Yet for these artists, the usual practices of disposing of the dead promote immobility, exclusion and disconnection of the deceased from those emotionally attached to them. Challenging such practices, while simultaneously avoiding being drawn into the orbit of conventional religious or profane mortuary beliefs, the *etoy* collective puts into practice a multi-modal post-mortem activity plan. Aiming for better ways of remembering and staying in contact with the dead, the project sets out to unite usually distinct communities of the living through orchestrating the engagement of different social groups with a storage system of the data of dead persons. In terms of the project’s vision, the dead are linked to the living by a network of M_{∞} figures dubbed *Agents*, *Pilots* and *Angels*. The *Agents*, the project’s creators, have designed a digital communication system known as the *Arcanum Capsule*, namely, a unique interactive, digital portrait of the *Pilots* or artistic subjects who have died or are approaching death.

Having chosen to participate in $M\infty$, Pilots offer up selected biodata, consenting thereby that their ‘informational remnants’ cross over into a digital afterlife. Capsule data, including pictures and photos of the Pilots, voice samples, mappings of Pilots’ intimate social networks, forms of biodata such as signatures of their heartbeats and eyelash measurements, with any personal messages they wish to send on into the digital afterworld, are assembled with the explicit intention of being showcased after the Pilots’ death. In providing such information, Pilots undergo a process of encapsulation producing digitised audio, visual and textual fragments of their lives. These carefully standardised, controlled and curated digital remains are taken to form an ideal portrait co-created by the members of the $M\infty$ community.

In order for Capsules, understood as infinite data particles, to circulate around the global infosphere, Capsule data are designed to be hosted by what are known as $M\infty$ Angels. In the project, an Angel is simply an ordinary computer user willing to share at least 50MB of his or her disk space (on personal computers and mobile phones) to host the Arcanum Capsules. In order to distribute Pilots’ eternal memory, *etoy* has created an open source software *Mission ∞ Angel Application*, scattering Capsules’ data among Angels’ filespace.⁶ Running on personal computers and servers as a peer-to-peer network, this application provides $M\infty$ with secure, transparent, affordable and ultra-long-term storage, while also constituting the project’s social spine.⁷ Because it is open source the software provides both the material and the social conditions for Pilots’ perpetuation, particularly in the sense that Capsules are entirely dependent on Angels’ provision of sufficient memory. Indeed, the philosophy of sharing underpins this project and fundamentally characterises *etoy*’s methods and social ethic.

⁶ The open-source software and code created by *etoy* is not in the public domain, because of a number of rules that regulate copyright issues. *etoy* source code is copy-lefted, in order to grant users more rights on the work. *etoy* uses the GPL for source-code (executables), and the CC-NCND 3.0 for ‘static’ data, e.g. the content of the Arcanum Capsules. The rest of the project is copyright *etoy*. <http://missioneternity.org/licenses/>. It is foreseeable that *etoy*’s work (including the source code) will automatically go into the public domain after a certain period of time (that will differ across different countries), most likely in fifty to a hundred years’ time.

⁷ In February 2007, *etoy* pre-released a functional prototype for alpha testing. The tool and the source code are available under the GPL: <http://angelapp.missioneternity.org/>.

The project thus draws together three types of community members or actors: Agents, who work on the implementation of $M\infty$ strategy and facilitate community interaction and integration; Pilots, who provide the data to be assembled and stored; and Angels, who contribute a part of their digital storage capacity in support of the mission. At the same time, and alongside the Arcanum Capsules storing the digital remains of the dead, *etoy* agents have created another art object to handle physical mortal remains. The $M\infty$ *Terminus*, a plug-shaped repository sculpture, is the final resting place of the Pilots' cremated ashes. Between January and June 2006 *etoy* constructed another essential installation, the *Sarcophagus* or mobile sepulchre for users who prefer to be buried at an indeterminate geographical location. The tomb's physical location differs from the standard disposal solutions (such as graves, cremation urns and columbaria) that operate in defined (if sometimes multiple) geographical locations. Built in Zurich, the *Sarcophagus* takes the form of a mobile cemetery tank fitted into a twenty-foot ISO standard white cargo container (6m long, 2.4m wide, 2.6m high and weighing 4 tons). *etoy* theorises that the complexity of the multimedia portraits and artefacts answers to the dangers and burdens of the memorialisation process in situations of loss. With 17,000 pixels immersively covering the walls, ceiling and floor, the *Sarcophagus* serves as a bridge between digital and physical data storage, displaying interactive composite portraits on its surface. While rendering Pilots' private and psychic lives visible in the form of digitised information on a computer screen, the *Sarcophagus* is also conceived as a real burial place.

$M\infty$ Agents stress that their project should be understood primarily as an art installation intended to provoke people to think about death and disposal-related practices. The *etoy* post-mortem plan was not devised to provide metaphysical solutions to situations of loss and is not a commercial service to be made available in the marketplace. *etoy* Agents are not high-class undertakers. Rather than seeking to displace the dominant forms of mortuary commemoration in Euro-American cultures, the project's goal is to explore and possibly reconfigure the ways in which information societies deal with memory, time, death and sharing.

Thanks to the Angel Application software, *etoy* has been able to operationalise its vision, with currently sixteen active Agents, two $M\infty$

Pilots (Timothy Leary, a 1960s counter-cultural icon and information society figure, and microfilm pioneer Sepp Keiser) accepted for encapsulation, one completed mortal remains transfer, two Test Pilots and more than 1,100 signed-up Angels. The Angel Application system is now running on hundreds of alpha test computers.⁸

Stowaway Encapsulation

After three years of intensive work, with Pilot Mr Keiser collecting data for his Arcanum Capsule and portrait, Mission Eternity has now moved to a new phase of its project. Whilst continuing work with existing Pilots and recruiting new ones, the Agents have also devised an open documentation subproject called *Stowaway Passenger Encapsulation*. In order to enhance the process of encapsulation in a way faithful to the original idea of sharing capsule content through open access, *etoy* has started organising workshops not just for carefully chosen Pilots, but for all interested participants willing to undergo encapsulation by allowing their ‘memories’ to be recorded, digitised and stored.

So far the Stowaway Encapsulation workshops have been held in Amsterdam (Holland), Abruzzo (Italy) and Heiligkreuz (Switzerland). I worked with *etoy* as an ethnographer and an Agent both in Abruzzo and in Heiligkreuz. Before materials were encapsulated, local organisers advertised the workshop, suggesting to potential Stowaway Passengers the kind of thing they might like to bring along: digital files (such as simple.txt data, file systems, still images, movies, sound files, and so forth) on their own computers or USB sticks. Alternatively, Agents at the workshop could digitise whatever Passengers had set aside for the capsules. Participants were advised that they should only submit data they would never regret seeing anywhere on a public network – as these digital memories, although unidentified and scrambled, would become available to anyone willing to search for them. Furthermore, Passengers were advised that they could not violate copyrights or the privacy rights of other people or organisations. In helping Passengers create and curate

⁸ An extended version of this M ∞ project description is published in Petrović-Šteger (in press).

their own *Mini Arcanum Capsules*, M∞ aims to deepen its understanding of electronic memory culture – why and how it is important, and how it goes about collecting, storing, passing on or forgetting information. The following passage is an excerpt from my diary on the Abruzzo workshop.

From Abruzzo Stowaway Workshop Diary

May 2009. Twenty-five-plus balmy degrees. Agents are arriving at the Pollinaria residence that nestles in Abruzzo, recently earthquaked land of boars. They come with their suitcases, cables, expectations, ties, screens, orange shoes, pencils, computers. They come with their regrets for the wine they have had confiscated and DVDs they have forgotten. The house is cold, but the welcome warm. It smells of apple and fresh pasta. Greetings and Montepulciano flow. And the first little capsule is formed, albeit in passing. Describing himself, somebody utters that he had 'a very ordinary childhood, you know ... I started playing with other kids when I was 6 years old or so ...' (Gaetano). Unguarded giggling runs through the evening. The memory is welcomed. Treasured. The night skies observed. The value of value, and the meaning of political demonstrations that are choreographed, discussed. The flower paths made by a friend, a guerrilla gardener, lit again. Risk, fear, security, and order are all broached. I fall asleep on a bed bearing a transgendered image of a (wo)man wearing a 19th century bonnet.

The following morning feels stiff, even starchy, with expectation. Breakfasting, walking barefoot over warm terracotta, agents rehash yesterday's discussions about guerrilla gardeners, friends, the pharmaceutical industry and cyborgs. Then we descend down into the vaults, mise-en-scèned as a workshop space. Setting an experimental artwork on the technology of memory in the

Pollinaria vaults insists on its own rhythm. The cameras are set, the ECG calibrated, chairs unfolded. Pencils sharpened. The beaming equipment attains a somewhat solemn veneer against the chamber stones. Or maybe just the reverse: the curved stone walls themselves become shiny. The people who are soon to become Stowaway Passengers start dotting the courtyard. Some are grey-haired and straight-backed, others smiling and paunchy, others still rich-voiced, scarred, star-daubed, authoritative, shy. Kids run round. There are children on the benches, in wombs, and in computer files waiting to be shared. There are dogs sniffing, stretching, stealing into the workshop vaults. The cats are on USB sticks only. There are hushed voices and quick glances stolen in the heat of noon. We observe each other and are observed through the glass doors and windows.

Explanations and introductions about *etoy* begin after food has been shared. There are films and stories, *etoy's* philosophy, history and goals. What is it to share? To share time, risk, ideas, financial investment, knowledge and excitement? Mission∞ project is elucidated as an open-source, open-ended project that challenges ideas of the afterlife and of technology by exploring the retention practices of storage systems and cultural commons. What lies beyond infinity, beyond mission eternity? How and why should data be preserved? Some of *etoy's* image repertory and inspiration are taken from astronomy. But the point is made that *etoy* does not collapse, or seek to infuse, the age of Space and Infinity with New Age-ry. On the contrary. M∞ explores a space of a different kind. An intimate space of memory. Of human traces. And the space of imagined afterlife. It is not some naïve attempt at creating a 2.0. web graveyard. It does not promise to provide death or dying-related services. Rather, it is a project that celebrates accessibility, research, innovation, experience and time by delving into what

can be left after life. What can be stored in open formats? What integrated? M∞ challenges memory culture. Believes in biomass. Gathers dust and noise. Admires electrical data. Experiments with and records the electricity on which M∞ and our bodies run. M∞ *encapsulates*. Its encapsulations set the parameters and conditions for future connection and communication - beyond the spaces experienced and known.

The talk electrifies the audience. The evangelisation of memory, after death, is met by wide-open eyes, practical questions, some sidelong criticism, histrionic remarks. By smiling and the irrepressible body language of excitement. But also by caution, even refusal. What visions and images did the audience form in their mind? Did anyone recall J.G. Ballard's melancholy future where dead astronauts orbit the earth in beeping satellites, entombed in their lost capsules? How do the passengers imagine capsules? What data did they bring? How will they curate their profiles? What thoughts, scopic traces, objects, images, body parts will stand for participants' imagination, their aspirations regarding self-portraiture? What stories will the Stowaways, these architects, DJs, political scientists, farmers, graphic designers, students of sociology and semiotics be willing to share?

The process of self-encapsulation begins. The Stowaway Passengers are sent to an agent who assigns each a Capsule ID number. Then some are invited to measure the electric beats of their hearts. The sun stencils naked electrocardiographed bodies behind the orange paravan. Others go in for photo and video sessions. Tattoos of scissors and zippers are recorded. Fingerprints taken. Pimples and pustules scanned. Others allow their encapsulation code numbers to get attached to, what seem, tantalising, forgiving, revoking, and conspiratorial images brought in on USB sticks and laptops. In the interviews and on the

screens, dead parents, past lovers and estranged sisters are evoked. Adopted grandfathers such as Mr Keiser are remembered. Political programmes on D'Annunzio's birthplace, Pescara, find their way into the capsules. Musical compositions, websites are crammed in. The atmosphere warms up. The Stowaway Passengers and Agents are now seating closer to each other, laughing with each other, exchanging jokes and mp3s. Some kind of non-intrusive, respectful intimacy swells. Technology is not substituted for liturgy, but the practices are getting ritualistic, repetitive.

Conversations follow on how Stowaway Passengers conceive surveillance and representation. What do they think of self-curation, self-portraiture and self-management? How do they think bodies, death, decay? What do they think of the project? Some say it is courageous. Others see it as pure experiment and fun. For another group, it will stand as an eternal memory. They believe that sharing is fundamental. An Agent intervenes and explains that the project should not be understood as some sort of facebook (that is, as a social networking site); it aims at a different kind of sharing. Some nod, others glance away. A woman suggests that this workshop is a perfect way of leaving certain memories behind. Away of parting with them. Getting rid of them. Forgetting them.

The Capsules get filled with people singing, swimming, dancing. Somebody posts dozens of shots showing an ex-girlfriend's eye. Another capsule stores a short movie depicting a random day in a Stowaway Passenger's friend's life. A third commemorates a local communal project. A fourth encapsulates a finger-print drawing of a futuristic industrial landscape, with fires, suns and architectural suggestions. The same capsule holds a scan of a military card. Was it important that this Stowaway Passenger operated radar equipment for the army, I ask:

No, not really ... but I found the card in my bag today ... so I thought that it should go into the capsule.

Somebody explains smiling:

I've encapsulated a paper that I wrote on digital memory ... and am looking forward to coming back to it in a couple of years time to see what was I thinking, how was I thinking in 2009 ... It was hard to choose what material to encapsulate, though. We Italians do not like to part from things, we like to keep and store everything.

Another:

If I could put it in the capsule, I would store my hair ... Whenever I feel that I need a change in my life, I change the colour of my hair. Hair is really me.

Meanwhile, warmth seeps in from the terrace above. Sun marks the skin. Cooked boar and lunchtime salad. Post-meal cigarettes. People surprise themselves with what they say. Some harsh words are uttered. Some thoughts are realigned. Feelings bruised. But also gifts are bestowed. A couple, soon to be married, brings images of a cytoblast, an mp3 of the music they have composed, and a photograph of the bride's grandmother.

For us, she is the future. She holds the future. She is 100 years old... You would understand what we mean if you knew her.

Capsule e20c5C2413287908:

My capsule holds a planet version of myself. Recently I have discovered that an asteroid, that bears the same name as I do, was found exactly on the

day of my birthday, 69 years ago before I was born. It is called 699 Hela. The planet is orbiting the Sun and is composed mostly of iron, magnesium, silicon ... And the funny thing is that my recent biochemical analysis have shown that I have apparently extraordinarily high levels of iron for a woman. This really amuses me ... I scanned the analysis, collected the correspondence I have had with NASA, brought some pictures ... And here it is - my capsule.

Capsule e20c6d896032860:

I brought only one thing. A photograph of my youngest friend, first kid friend ever, a kind of virtual son of mine. The photo shows him looking at a painting, or rather print in one of the exhibitions we visited last year. You cannot see his face. Only his legs. Sebastian's trunk is covered by the print that hangs from the ceiling ... I love this photo. It reminds me that there is a hope for the future of art in Italy ... of course there is, if a 4 year child enjoys it so much ... True, here he is standing in front of a sex scene. The print shows a couple copulating on a table, in a sort of funny position ... But that is a truly beautiful painting. There's nothing obscene about it. And he was mesmerised by it ... So I wanted to encapsulate that very moment. He will outlive me. And will be, actually is already, a connection between things that mark my life and those that will exist after my death.

Then a family comes with a box filled with photographs. They borrow a shovel, and go to the woods. A tree is chosen, a hole dug in front of it, and the box with the photos planted. The Capsule that the family sends away holds only GPS coordinates of the box and a beautiful video made by an Agent that records the box's burial ...

What did the juxtaposition of *etoy*'s performance, equipment, panels, measurements and sharing of memories, food and time achieve? How were memories acted upon? What, if any, art forms were produced? What happened? The realisation that most Stowaway Passengers independently use open software programs and subscribe to open software ethics proved an important starting-point for *etoy*, in that it allowed Agents to understand themselves as doing no more than lending their labour and infrastructural capabilities to bequeath certain Passenger memories into the future. Encapsulation severed memories, made them into digitised, numbered and stored objects. Reifying, untying, sending away, dismembering, did not, however, sever or diminish, but rather strengthened the memorial process. Passengers' trivia, their hopes, fears and holographic details were transposed and broken up to form some other, experimental entity. The experience opened up and augmented new phantasmagoric possibilities, enabled previously unthought ways of morphing, while attempting to erase and forget certain images. The workshop explored different forms of digital self-representation and portraits. The files and capsules that Agents organised and protected with Angel Application 0.4.2. became swollen with hyperlinks and with the promise of eternal access. Encapsulation felt arcane not only because of the scrambling but because of the relations and proximities that were knitted.

Three portraits of Marilyn Strathern

In 2001 Girton College commissioned Daphne Todd to paint a portrait of Marilyn Strathern in her role as the Mistress. The conversation between the painter and the sitter discussing what kind of portrait could be made for this occasion, or rather its recollection, has generated an unusual level of media interest.⁹ In order to find a way through the skein of chance encounters, and to make a point of contact, we read that Strathern gave Todd her own work, 'Pre-figured features: a view from the New Guinea Highlands' (1999), that had been stimulated by a

⁹ See *THES*, 10 August 2001 and the Girton Annual Review 2002. Sitter, artist and portrait also featured on a Channel 4 programme on portraiture 'In Your Face' made by Bruno Wollheim for Coluga Pictures in 2002.

conference on *Portraiture and the problematics of representation*.¹⁰ Strathern's paper was offered as an example of how an anthropologist may think representation and portraiture through an analysis of visual identity in Papua New Guinea. Todd, who later won the Royal Society of Portrait Painters' Ondaatje Prize for Portraiture 2001 for this piece, wrote:

Anyway, giving Marilyn two heads seemed appropriate. I cannot remember precisely what led to it – although it would not surprise me to discover that the seed was sown deliberately by the sitter. The painting developed in a straightforward way. (Todd and Strathern 2001)

Apart from this institutional portrait, there is at least one more professional portrait of Marilyn Strathern. *Without action there is no reason* is the title of the piece by Issam Kourbaj made in 1999 and commissioned by Strathern. Although conceptualised as a portrait, Kourbaj's installation does not feature a face. Instead all an observer sees are hands. Eight acid-etched zinc plates showing reliefs of protruding and depressing palms are held together by a petroleum-green coloured wooden panel. The memory behind this piece, as Mr Kourbaj kindly retold to me, is also Papuan. During one of their sessions, Strathern presented a Kina shell to Kourbaj. The ochre-coloured pearlshell, put together with wood, bamboo, mud and a gold-lip shell, inspired Kourbaj to translate Strathern's explanations of Kina ceremonial wealth exchange into images of hands as symbols of giving and taking. Kourbaj recalled a Syrian saying that when a person feels an itching in their right palm, he or she knows that something must be given away. If the itching is felt in the left hand, however, the person believes that they will soon receive unexpected gifts. This image prompted Kourbaj to paint Strathern's hands with ink, and through the printmaking technique of sugarlift etching produce a hollow relief of Strathern's left and a proud relief of her right hand. He then juxtaposed the sequences of left- and right-hand reliefs on the plates, arranging them so that within each plate the hand prints would point in two different directions, forming ceremonial lines suggestive of the motion of Kina exchange events. Sinking the plates into acid to attain an effect of weariness and mimicking Kina shell directionality, Kourbaj intended to stress that there is no absolute giving and no absolute taking.

¹⁰ See *THES*, 10 August 2001.

Following Strathern's explanation that Hageners used to count in twos, and a 'hand' of eight shells represented one unit in ceremonial exchange, the piece takes the form of eight plates. The wooden panel holding the plates together was painted numerous times until it took on the perfect petroleum green shade best satisfying both Strathern and Kourbaj's visions.

If Todd's portrait captures Strathern in her office role, Kourbaj's portrait invites associative thought – processes and a mulling over her personality as expressed through her work, creativity and professionalism. I read this portrait as a portrait of her as a maker, writer and even sculptress. Recently Strathern herself has conceptualised a piece that might be thought of as another portrait of her, or rather of her work. It is a portrait, one could say, of ethnography in general, and of her work in Papua New Guinea in particular.

To wit, for the *Assembling Bodies: Art, Science and Imagination* exhibition, which has set out to explore the technologies that make bodies visible, Strathern has conceptualised, and the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology has executed, an installation of netbags entitled 'Bilum Tree'.¹¹ A couple of dozen looped string bags, or *bilums*, collected across Papua New Guinea in the period from 1922 to 2005 gleam in front of visitors' eyes in shades of yellow, brown, ochre, purple, red, blue, green, orange and black. Looped from a white wooden pole they suggest a form of a tree. Exhibition signage describes the netbags as made exclusively and usually worn only by Papua New Guinea women using a distinctive looping technique.¹² Bilums, these durable, versatile articles are today worn as widely as ever. Stuffed with brown paper, the bags on show at the exhibition mimic bilum's typical body-like shape – their swelled contours filled with food from gardens or marketplaces, or with babies they cradle or caches of money they conceal. Strathern describes bilums as ever-changing artefacts, especially when compared with the mounted pearlshells exhibited next to the Bilum tree. The pearlshells, objects traditionally handled and transacted only by men, are, by

¹¹ The exhibition at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology opened in March 2009 and was curated by Anita Herle, Mark Elliott and Rebecca Empson.

¹² Strathern documents that Telefol and Umeda men sometimes also wear string bags ([1991], 2004: 86).

contrast, historical objects coming from a very specific time and area of Papua New Guinea.¹³

Both objects are exhibited in order to suggest to visitors different ways of conceiving of bodies. This proposition – of thinking bodies through bilums and pearlshells and their capacity to produce and reproduce – is not new to students of Strathern's work. Bodies and bilums, likened to each other in Strathern's analysis, are analysed through their capability of growing things inside themselves, standing for collectivity (in that they combine elements from maternal and paternal clans) or for an assembly of persons who together produce something (see Strathern 2009: 64). As intimate articles of apparel, bilums are identified with the personal capacities and gender status of their wearers. Men usually wear smaller bags. As Gell (1975) describes, a man and his bag are as inseparable as a man and his dog, in that his bag is said to contain his most personal possessions, existing as a kind of shadow spirit (Gell in Strathern [1991] 2004: 86). Indeed, men's bags have been taken to function as a kind of exterior bodily skin (Strathern [1991] 2004: 87). By contrast, the larger bags that women carry evince their public role in a society and express a more material presence (86).

Why do I suggest we see the Bilum Tree as a portrait of Marilyn Strathern? On Papua New Guinea it is believed that the gift of a netbag helps the recipient recall an image of its maker. Telefol women, Strathern writes, like to picture the face of the recipient of their string bags as they do the looping. Although not depicting faces, the bags carry a permanent trace of their makers' features (Strathern 2004 [1991]). To loop a bag is therefore in some sense to compose a portrait – both of the maker and of the social relationship that the bag represents. Not only bags but also the empty space enclosed by bags (Strathern writes, after Battaglia) evoke persons. Women looping the bags anticipate the personal objects that men will place

¹³ The pearlshell label in the exhibition explains the use of shells in wealth exchanges as documented in 1965 Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea: 'Mounted on resin boards painted with ochre these prized shells have utilitarian handles of old meshing or calico, strong enough to carry heavy items between exchange partners. The valuable is the pearlshell itself, carefully worked to show its colour. A pair, because people count in twos, and a "hand" of eight shells was a unit in ceremonial exchange – the bamboo slats mimic the tallies donors wear. And what is the focus of such concern with wealth? Reproduction! Out of a body (a clan group) comes a body. Look at the shell again, and you see a foetus curled up inside its mother's womb.'

in there. The string loops are made to hold something besides themselves (Strathern [1991] 2004: 114). Bilums, then, are looped with memories and the anticipation of social alignments. Looping bags tie relationships.

If one wanted to develop this perspective further, rather than representing a portrait of Strathern, or of her Papua New Guinean friends and informants, the Bilum tree may be seen as a portrait of relationships. The installation suggests not only an indigenous body in the making, but anthropological analysis in the thinking and writing.

Moreover, further looping of this image – of bilums, dense with relations, genealogies, and of the Bilum tree as a portrait – with an image of *etoy's* $M\infty$ practices described above, invites consideration of the parallel between netbags and Stowaway Capsules. Bilums are like both wombs and data ports.¹⁴ Both capsules and bilums are produced as vessels for nourishing people's relationships through storing their past and future selves and relationships. Recall the capsule holding a photograph of a child observing an art exhibit of a couple procreating. The capsule's content could be thought of as an indexical portrait: in the workshop participant's own words, the encapsulated image is her own portrait, phrased as the image of a child who will survive her and so partake in future of the life-force of the capsule maker. The capsule is envisaged as a medium to future-proof and guarantee memories, gathering-in the maker and the portrayed child in a 'looped' relationship. Further, the relationships knitted by the artefact extend beyond the familial to a form of projected community in that the child is symbolically, rather than biologically, related to the 'sitter'.

Capsules, portraits, bodies, and the notion of sharing

Memory is a structuring concern in *etoy's* exploration of borders and spaces beyond body, time and death. How do Encapsulation Passengers want to be remembered? Why would they want to preserve their memories in bytes? Mini Arcanum Capsules are imagined and sculpted as wombs, as places to store hopes for a prosperous marriage, as containers for concentrated, raw, emotionally charged, fattened and fattening, or

¹⁴ The bilums are often likened to a womb, for their potential for expanding like the uterus (Mackenzie 1990 quoted in a Strathern 1991 [2004]: 86), and Strathern described Hagen pearlshells as 'organs' already in her 1979 text 'The self in self-decoration'.

painful incisions into people's lives. The capsules, in which passengers have stored their chosen digital selves, sometimes resembled armour, sometimes mirrors, sometimes traps. They were equated with the people (or parts of the people) submitting to encapsulation, and experienced as storage for their physiological bodies and multiple agencies.¹⁵ One workshop participant chose to describe herself as somebody who paints on her personality, regretting that her hair could not go into the capsule. Other Stowaway Passengers went about putting together their capsules with images of cytotblasts and asteroids. The capsules were imagined as objects capable of holding the future, and materially extending formative relations in people's lives. They were conceived (or played with) as if able to prosthesis (Stelarc 2005) remembered, existing, lost, feared and desired relationships of passengers, jacking these into virtual terrains. These acts of imagination and encapsulation rendered digital information corporeal. Moreover, another kind of body came into existence in the encapsulation of memories. The metabolic quality of all the exchanges that took place in this workshop suggests that activities of sharing may convene a space that acts like a body, a space that incorporates, excorporates, produces and reproduces, if not people, then digital versions of them.

Conclusion

To engage with the question of what, if anything, comes after death is to engage with the most virtual of all questions. *etoy* has approached these questions not from a religious or moral(ising) angle but by framing a problem in the management of an archive. The project considers death,

¹⁵ I should note that it would perhaps be more anthropologically intuitive to draw a parallel between capsules and Malanggans, rather than capsules and bilums. The imaginative force of passengers is released into the capsules, in a similar way to which the life-force of the dead is released from its container when a Malanggan is destroyed. Likewise, Malanggans are said to convert existing relationships into virtual, matter into energy, and living into ancestral agency, heralding the reversal of these transformations at a future stage in the reproductive cycle (Strathern 2005a: 98). Moreover Malanggans are seen as transmitters or conduits (Strathern after Sykes 2000 and Küchler 2002), able to capture, condense and then release power back into the world. However, there are striking differences also between the Malanggan and the capsules, not least that the former is destroyed and the latter is not. The capsule has a potentially infinite shelf-life. By severing, unmooring, disconnecting, sending-away memories, embodied in things and digitalised in archives, the capsules feed immortality.

memory and practices of self-extension philosophically from the perspective of technology. How to organise storage places in the long run? What might a data retrieval system look like? The question, though, that an anthropologist might pose is why are death and memory framed through images of ‘rescuing’, ‘preserving’ and documentation in the first place?

In seeking to store memories, Mission∞ notably avoids reliance on hi-tech technologies, instead aiming to put together a human network of people interested in the project and willing massively to share, distribute and lend their gadgets’ memory space to memorialisation. The capsules, that is, infinite data particles, are hosted on the memory of thousands of computers and mobile phones. The nurturance of these devices’ users is crucial. Capsules and digital remains may orbit as long as they are sustained by open software and virtual kinship and networks.¹⁶ Filled with and enacted through the contemporary vernacular and by practices of sharing and *kopimi* values (that reflect on questions regarding information infrastructure and digital culture), the capsules are not imagined as rigid memory artefacts but as vessels of communication.¹⁷ A buried box stashed with photographs serves not as a tombstone or memorial, but as a fertile ground for future communication. Encapsulation, performed by severing memories, makes them into objects ready for digitisation, numbering and storage, to be conceptualised and experienced not only as a metaphorical thing, but as a cultural practice. Untying, dismembering, sending artefacts away did not attenuate but strengthened memories’ potentiality, as the hopes and fears passengers wanted to preserve broke up, as it were, into a higher life. By predicting, releasing and rehearsing future desires, *etoy* project is concerned not only with the preservation, assembling and archiving of memory through an elaborate digitisation of its forms, but with the values of future sharing and communication elicited out of electrical traces of our bodies and our lives. Similarly to Telefol string bags, which ‘do not exist apart from the relationships out of which they are made and for which they either bear women’s produce or men’s personal paraphernalia’

¹⁶ For an analysis of Internet and open source software as a social form, see de Landa 2002; Benkler 2006; Kely 2008.

¹⁷ *Kopimi* is a copyright alternative, invented by Piratbyrå, a Swedish think tank that promotes and infrastructurally enables the free sharing of information and culture. For their highly important contribution to the on-going conversation on copyright, file-sharing and digital culture, Piratbyrå received an award of distinction at 2009 Prix Ars Electronica.

(Strathern 2004[1991]: 102), the capsules are equally made from and dependent on relationality and networks of sharing. Moreover, their existence is enabled through the notion of proximity. Although concerns such as virtuality, interactivity and dematerialisation are most often cited as the preoccupations of digital art, the capsules described here are imagined as enabling life experiences to be acknowledged, through communicating their value to those around them and those who may come to be around them.¹⁸ *etoy* appears productively to challenge typically polarised moral opinions about new media and ironises commercial memorialising practices and dying-related services, setting up an open-source enabled ethnographic conceptualism to prompt people to think about the social dimensions of death and sharing.¹⁹

My analogical reading of bilums, portraits and *etoy* capsules has sought to describe a mode of contemporary portraiture. The essay suggests seeing and thinking bilums, portraits and capsules as bodies, as composite figures produced collectively. As bodies co-created, produced and curated by Todd and Strathern. By Kourbaj and Strathern. By Papua New Guineans, the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, and Strathern. By *etoy* and Stowaway Passengers.

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¹⁸ Münster (2001) suggests that one should look at relations of proximity that operate at a number of levels in the digital arts. She invites commentators to pay attention to the closeness digital media continue to maintain and develop with other media such as cinema and photography, to the redistribution of spatial and temporal relations in an experience of virtual nearness, and to the kinship of the immateriality of informatics with the material strata of organic and inorganic bodies.

¹⁹ Ethnographic conceptualism is a term introduced by Ssorin-Chaikov and Sosnina to explain practices in which generating and stimulating an audience's response to a curatorial, ethnographic concept becomes the goal of ethnographic exploration (see Ssorin-Chaikov and Sosnina, forthcoming).