

Christopher O'Leary and Casey Alt discuss Future Times

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Casey Alt

We began working on the **Future Times** data sculpture about a year and a half ago; do you recall some of the main issues that framed how we approached the piece?

Chris O'Leary

As I remember, it took us quite a while to finally conclude with the piece we made--months, in fact. Thematically we were considering notions of remembering and forgetting, in particular how ideas replace each other over time. We were both particularly interested in putting a body of data into a physical form in such a way to extrude these changes three dimensionally. I think this is what led us to a piece that stacked layers of data.

It was a challenge choosing our data set for the piece. Do you remember how we chose **Future Times**?

Casey Alt

Yes, we wanted to visibly render data that had passed out of cultural memory, data that was somehow significant at some point but had been largely lost over time. In discussing ways of approaching this, we became fixated on represented forgotten predictions about the future, particularly in terms of which objects and issues people were making predictions about and when. While these future predictions always carry a disproportionate rhetorical power when they are made, they are often very transient and fleeting. We found it a compelling challenge to try to give some material expression to this conceptual ephemerality.

Chris O'Leary

I was always fascinated with the idea that the trail of these predictions over time was waiting for us across the Internet. By its nature, a data sculpture takes the shape of the underlying architecture of information. When considering solid material, I think a big breakthrough was representing the data as holes, as "forgotten gaps" of these future predictions. By stacking a representation we were hoping to see these tunnel-like holes align, widening and contracting with waxing and waning interest. We saw this as a metaphor for the shifting planes of focus of the frenetic history of the last century.

Casey Alt

The idea to materially represent these lost futuristic predictions as holes is really what got us excited about the piece. We realized we could recover some approximation of these forgotten predictions by data-mining Google's news, blog, and scholarly article archives for terms associated with the phrase "In the Future" and choose the most frequent terms from each year to be represented as different sized holes in each sheet of acrylic. While it took a lot of development and testing to code a system that would give us visually meaningful data, we eventually arrived at a solution that would allow us to fabricate the piece from our digital templates.

Chris O'Leary

Once we had committed to this idea, the process was quite mechanical. We followed strict procedures to source and map the data, and to drill it into the plexiglass. What was quite a surprise to me was the first time we lit the piece. After weeks of very technical work I remember that something much more elegant emerged than I could have ever anticipated. Light became the vehicle that brought the piece to life. It truly transformed the material, and I think it made us re-assess our interpretation of the project as a whole.