Today I’m going to present an ongoing research project which I have undertaken as part of my mandate as W.P. Scott Chair for e-Librarianship at York University: a rotating, project-based appointment designed to facilitate innovation within librarianship. The project is an online catalogue raisonné of the work of Canadian conceptual artist IAIN BAXTER& (formerly Iain Baxter): the IAINBAXTER&raisonnE (or IB&raisonnE for short). I call it a “raisonnE” because, taking advantage of its online format, the project seeks to transform the traditional catalogue raisonné (which is generally a very cumbersome tome, and, even in the online environment, tends to stick to a conventional database structure) into a collaborative scholarly communications and learning zone. This prototype raisonnE further breaks with the linear, hierarchical and static structures of traditional catalogues raisonnés by adding content in direct response to the evolving creative, research and teaching needs of a diverse and international clientele of artists, scholars and students currently researching IAIN BAXTER&, and by providing a dynamic forum for the discussion and distribution of research findings in real time. So, if you’ve heard of “patron-driven acquisition,” the IB&raisonnE is researcher-driven acquisition in action.

For this project, I work in collaboration with the artist and an international, multi-lingual team of editorial advisors and institutional partners, including the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), through iterative cycles of observation, dialogue, planning, rapid prototyping, reflection, and change informed by the principles of action research and soft systems methodology. This approach is intended to support the growth of a digital project that in both form and content is for the web.
If you haven’t already done so, I encourage you to visit the site (and you see the address at the bottom of this slide – or just google “AIN BAXTER& raisonE”). Although it’s still very much a work in progress (again, what you see is a prototype), it’s also very much online and growing all the time with new content from the artist, myself and a range of collaborators. Content is accessed through the “clouds” on the main page. Some of the clouds link to image records; others link to essays, interviews, videos, a blog, digitized artist’s books and exhibition catalogues, etc. One cloud that I would like to draw your attention to is the “exhibitions” cloud located in the very centre of the raisonE’s info-landscape, as BAXTER& would call it: the exhibitions cloud links to an online exhibition commissioned by the raisonE with research funds from YUL and guest curated by Vancouver-based scholar David Bellman of CAUSA. The project is entitled “Frameworks for an Intervention.” And I would just note that David has recently added a new instalment to the project that explores a bibliographic network of reflections on the function of “regeneration” in conceptual art – a theme very germane to a discussion of the IB&raisonE’s user-driven restaging of the work of BAXTER&. <http://frameworksforanintervention.wordpress.com/author/frameworksforanintervention/>

The project’s development is very much a reflection of the needs of its clients – who are all currently researching the art and career of IAIN BAXTER& (and you see in this slide a “research recruitment” posted developed by BAXTER& and myself that puts out the call for papers and other creative and research-based contributions to the raisonE).

The IB&raisonE documents its own process of emergence through a combination of scholarly papers and presentations as well as more ephemeral and creative interventions such as the project blog and an online graphic novel conceived by IAIN BAXTER& and illustrated by artist Victor Romao in dialogue with BAXTER& and authored by myself. In these panels, excerpted from the graphic novel, we see how I met IAIN BAXTER& while working in the slide library at the University of Windsor in 2006, which IAIN had effectively claimed as his own (since his own “office” is filled to the brim with research materials).

A primary objective of the IB&raisonE is to document and study the unique information behaviours of IAIN BAXTER&, a pioneer of information art since at least early 1967. Moreover, through an original study of the information art of the N.E. Thing Company, the critical company which BAXTER& created and founded in 1966 and co-administered with his then wife, Ingrid Baxter, from 1969 to 1978, I am trying to better understand BAXTER&’s creative reworking of information theory under the influence of media thinker Marshall McLuhan – and you can find this essay in draft form under the “essays” cloud on the homepage of the raisonE. In a nod to Gilles Deleuze, it’s called “The Logic of Sensitivity.”<http://archives.library.yorku.ca/ian_baxterand_raisonne/>
It’s currently in its 3rd draft, but I’m very close to finishing a revised and much-expanded fourth draft – which I hope to post to the raisonE within the coming month. It is this study which has inspired today’s talk. BAXTER&’s use of information as a medium – which began with N.E. Thing Co. but continues up to the present day – challenges us to re-think conventional representations of information as something quantitative, linear and context-free. For IAIN BAXTER&, information is the stuff of sensation, dialogue and, in short, what the environment at large is made of.

[5]

Under the impact of Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s writings—which were a major influence on curriculum developed by fellow artists at the Centre for Communication and the Arts (notably composer R. Murray Schafer), where BAXTER& taught and was head of the visual arts division at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver from 1966 to 1971—BAXTER& began to think of art as information. The N.E. Thing Co.’s decision to use the term “visual sensitivity information” instead of “art,” and to sub-classify all the arts under the inclusive rubric of “sensitivity information” echoed McLuhan’s observation in Understanding Media that, “in this electric age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information” [UM 57].

[6]

The informatic business model developed by N.E. Thing Co.—or NETCO—which traded in the dematerialized commodity of “sensitivity information”—was showcased through several interventions in the contemporary business world; notably, the Company’s participation in the 1970 conferences of the Data Processing Managers Association, or DPMA, in Vancouver and Seattle. The Company purchased a booth and set up shop at the conference amidst such legitimate multinationals as IBM and Xerox. The booth included an oversized inflated computer card, which you see in this slide, and BAXTER& wore a button that read “My Computer Likes Me.” This impulse to humanize the information industries under the influence of McLuhan’s qualitative reworking of information theory, it should be noted, dates from several years before the emergence of Apple and, indeed, personal computing as a whole.

[7]

After the dissolution of the N.E. Thing Co.—and his marriage to Ingrid Baxter—in 1978, BAXTER&’s art moved in several new directions, which I unfortunately can’t cover here. (For those of you who are interested in exploring BAXTER&’s career further, there is a 50-year retrospective of his work currently on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario.) The theme of information began to re-emerge in BAXTER&’s art practice in the late 1990s. In a work from 1999, he proposed a park to be dedicate to Marshall McLuhan that, if realized, would be filled with giant zeros and ones. Another work, from 2000, explored the binary structure of digital code through the punning phrase “OFF AND ON.”
But the full flowering of BAXTER’s recent information art had to wait until 2005. In that year he legally changed his name from Iain Baxter to IAIN BAXTER: appending an ampersand – the “&” symbol – to the end of his name to acknowledge the endless connectivity of the information ecology in which we are all immersed. The artist, who has recently dubbed himself “the&MAN,” later tattooed ampersands on his hands, since, yes, hand also contains the “&.”

In designing the IB&raisonnE I have worked with the artist to ensure that these creative information concepts—as well as his own information behaviours—inform all facets of the project’s design process. In this respect, the project resembles Athanasios Velios’s concept of “creative archiving”—as outlined in a recent issue of Art Documentation. However, contrary to the principles of creative archiving outlined by Velios, in the mixed methods approach adopted by IB&raisonnE developers, it is not the archivist who is at the centre of the design process but, rather, the artist. In some respects, the artist-centred approach proposed by the IB&raisonnE is closer to the perspective promoted by scholars “personal information management,” who emphasize the advantages of adapting to the information behaviours of users. If any of you happened to hear my talk on the raisonE at last year’s ARLIS conference in Minneapolis (or read the Art Documentation article which resulted from it), you will know that a primary inspiration to the IB&raisonnE has been early-eighteenth-century catalogues raisonnés that, in their user-centred characteristics, serve as compelling precursors to social production methodologies currently being explored by librarians and library and information scientists. However, rather than revisiting these themes, I would like to complement them in my remarks today by exploring in greater details some of the techniques applied by developers to study the personal information management strategies of IAIN BAXTER&, and what we’ve learned.

For starters, in the spring of 2010 I began to make site visits to the studio and home of the artist in Windsor, Ontario. During these site visits I created video recordings of the artist interacting with his studio area and discussing his information concepts in a series of semi-structured interviews – all available online through the IB&raisonnE under the “interviews” cloud. According to the artist, his studio is “in his head” – in keeping with this claim, I have been careful to record him on his daily walks and using his swimming pool as a “canvas.” However, it is also true that the artist maintains a large studio, or “creative compost,” as he prefers—in which he tends to “pile” his research materials in a fashion recalling the subject matter of the well-known N.E. Thing Co. work, Portfolio of Piles (1968).

In addition to these interviews and recordings, in collaboration with a colleague at York University Libraries, Marcia Salmon, I also asked the artist to contribute keywords to
describe the image records contained by the *raisonnE* – and you see those, in the form of a tag cloud, here. Marcia and I are currently in the process of writing up our findings on this exercise as an article.

[11]

Such tags are intended to provide access and give shape to the artist’s works, which have deliberately been described using a modified Dublin Core structure without regard to such traditional genre and media categories as “painting,” “sculpture,” “sketches,” etc. in keeping with the flat, *informational* framework espoused by the artist since the days of the N.E. Thing Co. and consistent with the artist’s own piling behaviours: the *raisonnE* transforms the categorical organization of traditional reference materials into one gigantic “pile.”

[12]

However, the artist’s most concentrated contributions to the *raisonnE* take the form of digital sketches—created in dialogue with Windsor-based illustrator and artist, Victor Romão—describing the free-form, *informational* organization of his own *oeuvre* (notably the website’s landing page and “campsite”—a directory of the artist’s current inspirations in the form of a park shaped like an ampersand), as well as the online, in-progress graphic novel conceived by BAXTER& and illustrated by Romão (authored by myself), which recounts the development of the *raisonnE* in real time. Such creative contributions by the artist are integral components of the experimental design of the *IB&raisonnE*, which seeks to develop a responsive framework for collaborative design and real-time scholarly communication.

**Notes**

The *IAINBAXTER&raisonnE* is being developed in partnership with IAIN BAXTER& and Louise Chance Baxter and in collaboration with an interdisciplinary team of scholars including Paris-based curator and writer Rose Marie Barrientos, Montréal-based curator Vincent Bonin, Paris-based professor, curator and writer Christophe Domino, Virginia Commonwealth University-based scholar Dennis Durham, doctoral candidate Isabelle Hermann (art history - Paris 1), and Windsor-based artist Victor Romão as well as York University Libraries, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and the Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art (ccca.ca).

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