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New Ways of Seeing: Artistic Usage of Locative Media

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ABSTRACT

People living in urban areas have grown accustomed to the moving visual images surrounding them – displayed upon large screens attached to or integrated in the architecture of the city. In public squares, shopping streets or any other place where people gather, the moving image has become part of everyday public life. The growing ubiquity of mobile technologies in this environment has added another layer of moving image culture on top of the city. Different contexts and spaces, virtual and physical, are overlapping and changing all the time. Theorists and writers describe this development as a new augmented reality [6], responsive architecture [1] or ambient experience design [4]: a new environment that will lead to a different notion of public space, in turn creating new relationships between people and places. Without doubt the way that these media – from electronic sensors, urban screens and CCTV systems, to GPS and RFID tags – are experienced has significantly impacted the way people communicate as well as their practices of physical and affective orientation. But does this lead to the conclusion that public space is no longer determined by city planning and geographical boundaries? Throughout history artists have tried to reconsider, remap and re-appropriate the boundaries of the city, sometimes reviving older methods in order to cope with new technologies. This paper focuses on contemporary artistic practices that use mobile technologies either as platform or tool to reconsider people's relationships to mobile technologies and place. If these technologies really are so influential in shaping one's relation to the city, do such artistic projects succeed in creating a new affect of place?

1. INTRODUCTION

Advanced mobile phones with integrated MP3 allow people to move through a city with headphones on, distancing themselves from what is going on around them. This phenomenon is reminiscent of the 1980s, when Walkmans became hugely popular. The difference is that the Walkman did not connect to other devices: listening to music remained a solitary experience. This changed with the arrival of modern mobile communication devices; while being in contact with distant others, users distance themselves from the people nearby. The capacity to carry on long-distance conversations from portable phones suggests that urban locales have shifted from public spaces to private spaces. By engaging in private conversations and ignoring other people around them, mobile phone users are implicated in the demise of public space, actively occupying the space for personal and private communication. While creating new forms of privacy within public domains, these new modes of communication simultaneously promote new ways of understanding sociability in urban spaces. The addition of GPS technology to mobile devices has further altered people's connection to the space around them.

For a long time the experience of the city has been influenced by various media, information and communication technologies. However, in addition to simply walking through a mediated world, people are now also actively interacting with the space not through tangible cues but by using a range of technologies. With the arrival and popularity of location-based technologies, the way that people navigate the streets of the city has shifted from a reliance on material cues to one on immaterial, virtual signs – forming a new hybrid space that is constantly moving between the virtual and the actual.

2. THE HYPE OF THE SITUATIONISTS

Many contemporary artists working with locative media rely on the technologies' underlying structures and functions without questioning them. By creating geospatial narratives, games or walks – combining performative strategies with new media technologies – these locative media projects evoke (forgotten) histories and memories rather than enforce actions. While remaining in their own established social networks, they succeed at best in making social-spatial relations visible. Only very few projects are critically examined and reflected; the attitude is 'do-it-yourself' and 'just-do-it'. These popular formulations, stemming from marketing strategies, are often used to lower the access threshold for new technologies and to thereby attract new audiences. Yet in many cases the projects neglect to encourage participants to reflect on the tools or the content that is provided – locative media experiences present themselves as foremost about a pleasant walk while discovering new sights or stories in the city. By merely incorporating the new tools, these projects overlook the fact that that these technologies derive from military technologies designed for watching and controlling the other.[1]

Moreover there is talk of a new Situationist movement, spurred on by the use of locative media in art practices. Assertions like "locative media finally give people a means to re-discover the city" render easy connections to the Situationists' urban dérives.

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[1] April 2009 could become an important historical landmark: for the first time in history, the U.S. military decided to use consumer technology. Newsweek reported that in order to help soldiers make sense of data from drones, satellites and ground sensors, the U.S. military looked to employ a handheld device that is both versatile and easy to use: "With their intuitive interfaces, Apple devices—the iPod Touch and, to a lesser extent, the iPhone—are becoming the handhelds of choice. […] The iPod has already transformed the way we listen to music. Now it's taking on war." It will be interesting to see when consumer-made apps make it into the military. B. Sutherland. U.S. Soldiers' New Weapon: an iPod. In *Newsweek*. 18 April 2009. http://www.newsweek.com/id/194623 (accessed August 2009).

The original Situationist movement formed in reaction to a very specific location and political moment, however, which does not necessarily translate to other places in the world. Emma Ota from dis.location states it very clearly:

> Location is not a set of coordinates; it is not something static and easily measurable; it is not a case of physical geography but it is a state which exists through the complex interplay of history, culture, socio-politics, economics and technologies. Location is a multifaceted context, a situation and a state of being and is not necessarily linked to the ground beneath our feet. [8]

Many of the location-based projects are exemplary of a Western way of thinking, where the use of maps is standard, failing to look at other forms of 'navigation' or different relations to place. This is not to say that contemporary walks need to be political acts, but neither can they be just a matter of turning up and walking around. 'Participation' is inherently connected with choice, agency and action, and these are things that need to be taken into account and reflected upon in locative media projects. Many of these projects evolve around an interest in new tools, and without questioning them, they are asserting the aesthetics of the consumer market and affirming the control society.

2.1 Loca

Loca provides an interesting example of an initiative that aims to equip people to deal with the ambiguities of new technology, enabling them to make informed decisions about the networks that they populate. As an artist-led project on grassroots, pervasive surveillance, Loca was developed by John Evans (UK/Finland), Drew Hemment (UK), Theo Humphries (UK) and Mike Raento (Finland).[2] Loca puts forth a clear statement with regard to the uses of locative media, making people aware that they have agency, that they can avoid being tracked by turning off their device, or in this case, switching the Bluetooth option to 'invisible'. The project also sets out to reveal the limit of this agency. For example, during ISEA06 and ZeroOne, the Loca art group deployed a cluster of interconnected, self-sufficient Bluetooth nodes across downtown San Jose, in order to track and communicate with the residents of San Jose (without their permission or knowledge) via cellphones that had their Bluetooth device set to 'discoverable'. Over seven days, more than 2,500 people were detected over half a million times by the Loca node network, enabling the team to build up a detailed picture of their movements. Essentially, people were sent messages from a stranger with intimate knowledge of their movements. Over the course of the week the tone of the messages changed, from 'coffee later?' to 'r u ignoring me?' Loca examined the ambiguity that arises when it is easy for everyone to track everyone, through a surveillance that relies on consumer level technology within peer-to-peer networks. It is an experiment that neither blindly celebrates the technology, nor claims that the technology is inherently bad. It aims to raise awareness of the networks people inhabit, to provoke people to question them, and to help them equip themselves to deal with the ambiguity of pervasive media environments. In other words, their approach to society involves a reconsideration of technology that also serves to renegotiate space.

3. NAVIGATING THROUGH SPACE

> *it's so noisy! uaaaahhh, I walked a square, it's hard to grasp, disconnected from the world, there are these voices that obviously kind of come from above, very funny, how do I know that this thing is actually communicating with the satellites? you are being controlled and watched by some outside alien, that's what you feel, being followed, you're very very self-aware, I would walk around, uh, you know, in the middle of nowhere, uh ok, what do I have to do, I just have to walk there? hehehehehe, sending up a signal, here I am, here I am, here I am, when did you think of getting in contact with satellites? ddzzzzztschdzzzzzzzz dzzzzzztschhhdzzzzzzzz, you envision yourself being connected to a world out there ...*[3]

With the introduction of mobile technologies, different contexts and spaces (virtual and physical) overlap each other and, more importantly, they move in constant flux. This leads to what Adriana de Souza e Silva has labelled a "hybrid nomadic space". [10] It is the term 'nomadic' that is particularly interesting in this respect; De Souza e Silva derives the word from Deleuze and Guattari, emphasising the importance of movement between two points. This in-between space is what makes a path meaningful. According to De Souza e Silva, "Mobile technology users take the nomadic concept one step further, since not only their paths are mobile, but also the nodes [the cellphones]." [10]

This becomes apparent in the project Sun Run Sun (SRS, 2008) by Yolande Harris. Harris is an artist who tries to find the opacities in GPS and satellite technology. By highlighting certain hidden or forgotten aspects of urban space, she encourages participants to see the space as it is, intricate with visible cues and invisible waves. Moreover she creates a kind of affective resonance rather than just play or adventure. Her SRS project investigates the split between the embodied experience of location and the calculated data of position. Harris questions some of the fundamental issues underlying 'efficient' and 'functional' GPS data: what is inside and what is outside? what does it mean to be located? what does it mean to be lost? Whereas the GPS system negates one's relation to the environment, Harris encourages listeners to reassess and to renegotiate their connection with the actual environment. By taking data from satellites and translating them into sounds, SRS delicately treads a path between technical information and actual experience, between the artificial and the natural. The artist's argument is that the ubiquity of positioning systems, GPS included, takes over people's ability to perceive spaces and navigate them. Reality becomes that of the presented data, and experiences are shaped accordingly.

By using sound as a vehicle, Harris attempts to open the lesser-used space of aural experience. Sound has the ability to open up a subjective dimension in listeners, mitigating the coldness and mechanization of reading digitally generated data. SRS does not contain musical meaning or symbolic references, nor is it a usable navigation aid; it functions as a catalyst for subjective experience. Participants describe their walk as a heightened sense of embodied location, as a strong emotional-physical connection to

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[2] http://www.loca-lab.org/ (accessed June 2009).

[3] Transcripts of reactions from participants who came back from a walk with Satellite Sounders, a work by Yolande Harris (2008). http://sunrunsun.nimk.nl/ (accessed June 2009).

locational technologies in the sky, and as a merging of intuitive and rational means of navigating the environment. Returning from a walk, one person said it made her feel small and insignificant, and that this was a revelation to her. People comment that they see and feel the world around them differently, as someone pointed out, "like being on drugs". Others experienced a transformation, with a contemplative sense of body and place temporarily blocking out the cares of an otherwise hectic urban lifestyle: "It's like being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment, reacting physically to everything around me". Using an intuitive navigator, SRS provides people with new experiences not just of space but also of body and mind. Affect of place is constituted here through technology; its relation to the body in movement is what makes its affect felt.

3.1 New ways of seeing

Another artist who develops her projects around the notion of navigation is Esther Polak. By using technologies like GPS and simple robots, her aim is to re-orient and shift perspectives on the issues of cultural and technological development. As in Harris's project, an affect of place is constituted through technology; but whereas Harris focuses on the individual experience of public space through live sound translations of satellite movements, Polak concentrates on the process of walking a route, emphasising memory and experience. This practice recalls the work that came out of Land art and conceptual art. Artists like Stanley Brouwn or Hamish Fulton in particular have had a strong influence on Polak's work. As she explains:

> I've been looking for a long time for a way of presenting my work, based on my fascination with landscape painting. As well as painting I also looked at land art, in particular the first experiments in the 1970s, and conceptual art in the same period. I was able to use some of the steps they made in my GPS experiments. The technology I use is a way of adapting their ideas in to practical projects. For example, the power in Brouwn's work lies predominantly in the conceptual step he made, but the technical tools that I can use in turn raise new theoretical, conceptual and artistic issues. [3]

Locative media can add new layers of understanding to simplistic representations of routes taken by individuals. The primary difference between the two generations of artists is that today there is a massive amount of data available as well as a plethora of cheap, highly sophisticated technology, which expands and changes the content and means of production for artists. For Polak this means that she can depict a landscape in a very contemporary way: "With locative media the economic activity that forms the landscape can be felt. I could never create that experience with drawing or painting." [7]

In her latest project, Nomadic Milk (2006-2009) Polak compares the distribution and sales strategies of two very different dairy merchants in Nigeria. With the help of GPS systems, the routes made by the nomadic 'Fulani' are reconstructed and compared to those of a milk producer called 'PEAK milk'. The tracking of different trade routes can be seen as an important political statement, and although Polak wants to call attention to the international production and distribution of milk,[4] her main focus

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[4] The fascination with milk production is something that Polak relates to her early experience in the Netherlands, where the

is elsewhere. It is the movement of the individual that interests her. The route of a person is tracked by GPS and is shown afterwards as a live sand drawing mapped on the ground by a small robot – appearing before the eyes of the 'traverser' as a kind of drawn 'sand map' on the ground. Polak uses the drawing to enable the participants of the project to discuss and reflect on their performance. Although participants' initial experiences of recognition and surprise are quickly followed by stories and happenings en route, Polak's main interest is in those early moments of bewilderment and excitement. What at first sight seems nothing more than a visualisation of collected data translated into sand drawing becomes a tool for reflection on the meaning of place and traversing. The project brings about new ways of seeing and creates a sense of affect of place that occurs through a revisiting of spatial experiences. Polak regards the data and the sand drawing as tools that do not necessarily reflect the essence of the project. It is the moment of bewilderment and recognition that surfaces when the route is visualised through the robot, and more importantly the discussion that this generates, that is most valuable to her. At the same time the project also reveals the dichotomy between Michel de Certeau's 'concept-city', in which oppressive structures and political authority are imposed top-down upon the 'practiced space' in which the walker decides and chooses his/her own path. By engaging the walker or truck driver with the predefined routes and transport systems that define their daily movements, the Nomadic Milk project shows what happens at the programmed level, only to playfully twist and subvert those programmed movements at the same time. As with conceptual art it is the idea and experience that is most important, instead of the tangible object – yet ironically, when exhibiting her work many curators are foremost interested in 'the robot'.

4. POCKETS OF DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

De Souza e Silva claims that mobile communication technologies "strengthen the users' connection to the space they inhabit, since the connection to other users depends on their relative position in space." [10] Tapio Mäkelä believes that assumptions like these are overstated; during ISEA08 he commented that "places become meaningful through individual and shared acts of signification, not because they register as location data." [5] An affect of the social or playable is, according to Mäkelä, more appropriate than an affect of place. This seems viable because, although citizens connect to each other while in public space, this does not necessarily mean that they are actively involved with other people or spaces around them. Most of the time they move within their own network, 'the bubble' that consists of peers and like-minded people, and they do not interact with those outside of their sphere. This is an insular movement that does not open up public space, but changes it from a homogeneous context into a place that consists of small pockets with different contexts. [9]

Nevertheless some artists do investigate these new forms of connective agency. The trend is most visible in Augmented Reality Games, where people try to intensify a relation with place

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landscape is very much shaped by milk production: "I was fascinated by the way that an economic process can leave such a mark on a landscape. This is where the roots of my interest lie, the combination of nomadism, the experience of space and how technology works." [3]

through technological connections. Exemplary in this respect is Blast Theory's project Rider Spoke (2007):

> Rider Spoke is a work for cyclists combining theatre with game play and state of the art technology. The project continues Blast Theory's enquiry into performance in the age of personal communication. […] The piece invites the audience to cycle through the streets of the city, equipped with a handheld computer. They search for a hiding place and record a short message there. And then they search for the hiding places of others.[5]

In contrast to some of Blast Theory's other works, Rider Spoke does not deal with game play; the city is no longer the playground in which to chase or find others but is turned into a repository of voices and memories.

In this sense Rider Spoke relates more to walks through the city (for example, those of Janet Cardiff) than adventure games. The series of walks by Cardiff initially started as an artistic strategy for spatially and conceptually investigating urban space, while at the same time addressing the problem of apprehending and representing the multitude of movements in the modern city. [11] Cardiff's approach diverges from that of the flâneur: the participant in her walks is all but freely wandering around; she or he is very much directed. Although the narratives here are open-ended and fragmented, the routes are rigorously predefined. The stories help to focus attention to the meaning and context of buildings, hidden places and forgotten histories. As Cardiff states: "The routes are designed to give the participant the physical experience of different types and textures of space." [2]

Blast Theory takes this notion a step further. The Rider Spoke participants cycle through the city, creating a movement and relation to the city different to those of walking. Although some claim that this creates a predominantly sensory overload, it also creates a heightened awareness of traversing in and out of history, memories and the present time. Physical movement combined with the awareness of other people and traffic strengthens this sense of passing through different realities. Riding in between the virtual and the real changes the dimension of the city in which one feels neither as a citizen nor as a tourist. It is the path in-between the different memories and experiences that makes their connection meaningful.

Through fragmented and open-ended stories, Cardiff's work connects the listeners to certain spaces. By addressing the audience as a single person, the narrative enhances a feeling of intimacy as she creates a one-to-one relationship with the walker. This relationship is also sought by Blast Theory but executed in a different way. The feeling of intimacy is achieved through the amalgamation of hidden stories and memories of other participants to one's own. Whereas Cardiff's walks emphasize the complexity and multiplicity of the urban space, Blast Theory's Rider Spoke navigates the boundaries of the new public privacy, encouraging participants to make intimate confessions while surrounded by strangers.

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[5] http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_rider_spoke.html (accessed June 2009).

5. CONCLUSION

Mobile technologies strongly impact the experience of the city. As the projects show, they can change a person's behaviour and relation to the city. In some cases the projects generate discussion and in others, by emphasizing and renegotiating people's positions with and within their immediate surroundings, they provide a space of resonance and meaning. These kinds of projects can and are actually addressing the social dimension of human environments through rendering the communication of interaction visible in the realm of the public/private sphere. Mobile devices predominantly function as one-to-one communication and in some cases one-to-many. It could be interesting to see how mobile devices that are integrated with other 'urban' technologies, for example a network of urban screens, would generate new narratives or gameplay, and consequently if this would lead to a new reconsideration of public space. This could result in a situation where people no longer only circulate and pass through space, but begin to treat space as a place to encounter surprises, connect and experiment with others. Such new kinds of synchronisation of interactive participants could provide new ways of seeing. At the moment, one of the obstacles to this goal is the closed space of technology, upheld by corporate business and developers of mobile devices. Unless they open their platforms, people will most likely be confined to the irregular intervals of art or game projects where artists use custom made hard- and software, in order to create small-scale networks and platforms that open up public space.

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