Urban fiction: between map and landscape

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Introduction

Urban space is a densely woven fabric; a multi-layered tapestry of different actors and institutions, cultures and political agendas. Living in the city means to co-inhabit a multiplicity of real and virtual spaces. Locative media's potential to turn the urban fabric into a canvas promises to open up a playground for probing into subjectivities and multiplicities that conventional mapmaking practices are blind to. The playground of locative media arts practices however also links critically to the technologies and politics of spatialisation and the historicity of cartographic practices. Probing into the fluid and fragile anatomies of the physical and social spaces we inhabit thus involves a critique of maps and mapmaking practices as social constructions of the world. After all, as John Harley argues, maps redescribe the world in terms of relations of power and cultural practices, rather than providing a representation of nature (2001).

This paper will look at the potentials for the map to become a tool of intervention itself. It will introduce the performative map-making practice of my work *Impossible Geographies 02: Urban Fiction*, a locative media and installation environment concerned with the multiplicity of spaces, lived and mapped, and the connections and fissures they produce in the urban fabric. The exploration is situated in a critical discourse involving John Harley's deconstruction of the map, and feminist, postcolonial and visual culture perspectives. The discussion involves a critical account of locative media practices with regards to linking geographic locations (and relations) to social positions (and relations). In summary, the argument of this paper is that we are still far from probing and mapping Debord's 'lived space' (1977).

Art is back on the map

In his notorious essay 'Deconstructing the Map', John Harley argues that '[m]aps are too important to be left to cartographers alone' (Harley 1992). And yet, according to Harley, art has been continuously edged off the map. In fact, '[a] "scientific" cartography (so it was believed) would be untainted by social factors' (ibid). A belief that, as of today, has not disappeared from what Haraway (1991) calls the 'agonistic powerfield' of, in this particular context, cartography. It is believed that through science - and may I add technology - 'ever more precise representations of reality can be produced' (Harley 1992). Locative media has put art back on the map and conspiring with critical and feminist cartography, it has brought with it the politics of mapping and spatialisation (see Kwan 2002).

According to Irit Rogoff, mapping is a cultural, political and epistemological activity, and has always been a powerful instrument for masking difference, making borders, and producing coherent identities (2000). Harley puts it succinctly: 'Cartographers manufacture power: they create a spatial panopticon' (1992). The subtitle of this paper alludes to what is probably cartography's most powerful deceit: dissolving the difference between map and landscape. Theodore Roszak (1972) writes:

The cartographers are talking about their maps and not landscapes. That is why what they say frequently becomes so paradoxical when translated into ordinary language. When they forget the difference between map and landscape - and when they permit or persuade us to forget that difference - all sorts of liabilities ensue.

Assuming that all we can ever produce are fictions of our reality (that nevertheless have a powerful influence on it's evolutionary path), artistic and other critical fictional lenses probing our urban habitat distinguish themselves from the cartographic science fiction by their desire for the ambiguous, the dissimulating, and the paradoxical. While locative media technology certainly brings about the paradoxical, its reliance on precise and categorical location (as in GPS coordinates) is contagious. Like our scientific colleagues and everyone who has ever consulted a map's view, for that matter, '[w]e are prisoners in its spatial matrix' (Harley 1992). And therein lies the crux. And the challenge.

Beyond the grid

Mobile technologies, advanced with a capacity for tracking surveillance, have established an oxymoronic ground for an alternative production of knowledge. One could argue that locative media art is marked by the tensions between a political agenda to break out of cartography's epistemological imprisonment and the impossibility to do so by deploying a military technology that endorses the Cartesian way of seeing the world (see Fusco 2004, Hemment 2004, Holmes 2004, Sant 2006).

The Situationist maps with their torn apart and re-stitched pieces, often serve as the most interventional, radical examples of an alternative urban geography or departure from the grid, as referred to by Alison Sant (2006). In fact, the method of the *dérive,* which underlies these urban remappings, has had a roaring revival since the first arrival of locative art practice. Most artworks using the GPS system are, according to Holmes' critical view, 'premised on the idea that it permits an inscription of the individual, a geodetic tracery of individual difference' (2004). The maps they produce however don't necessarily challenge the rigid nature of geodetic tracery and question the limited, normed sense of individuality they - even if gracefully - may trace. Holmes continues, '[t]he aesthetic form of the dérive is everywhere. But so is the hyper-rationalist grid of Imperial infrastructure' (2004).

For the map to become a tool of intervention itself (and map making to become performative), it needs to depart from a notion of location that is bound to a fixed reference point. The dominant system will always favor the known as the centre and hierarchize difference in relation to it. Feminist discourses on spatialization and subjective heterogeneities can inspire alternative cartographies that emerge from the situated, partial and interpreted knowledge of the terrain (Haraway 1991). What if our maps allowed for ambiguity and multiple readings - mapping the multiplicity and heterogeneity of spaces that we co-inhabit? According to Irit Rogoff's concept of 'multi-inhabitation', we constantly inhabit multiple co-existing spaces 'through bodies, social relations and psychic dynamics' (2000). This form of inhabitation cannot be mapped in homogeneous ways that serve a single perspective. Introducing the heterogeneity of multiple, moving perspectives into the map means more than simply depicting or summarizing these alternative views. Rather, it is a performative act in which the map differentiates itself and produces new knowledges in-between. Homi Bhabha's postcolonial writings of the insight that heterogeneity is performatively counter-hegemonic, opening up spaces between binary opposites from which other positions can emerge (1994).

Figure 1. Urban Fiction gallery installation, showing layers of 'skin' extracted from the urban fabric.

Impossible geographies and urban fictions

The work *Impossible Geographies 02: Urban Fiction* used mobile phones as 'lenses' through which to look at the city in ways that afford a reading outside of known and fixed relations. 'Impossible' here refers to what is commonly not seen and, in the context of cartography, what is commonly not mapped. The term 'geography' is concerned with cultural practices and differences in relation to space (Rogoff 2000). It interprets 'space' as a fluid, migrational construct, which we always only temporarily belong to, rather than as something geographically fixed and bound (Gemeinboeck et al 2007).

Participants were equipped with mobile phones and tracked using Global Positioning, whereby their location data served as hyperlink between the physical and a second, virtual landscape. These custom mobile 'lenses' transformed the cityscape into a thick layer of foam bubbles. Wading through this foam, the bubbly shapes got more irregular, messy even (Figure 2). If the participants crossed paths, an increased amount of bubbly displacement occurred, and the system registered an 'encounter'.

Back inside the gallery, these movements and encounters were networked to drive the fabrication of an urban fiction: weaving threads, causing whorls and adding stitches; producing a result similar to the embroidering pulses of a heart rate monitor (Figure 1).
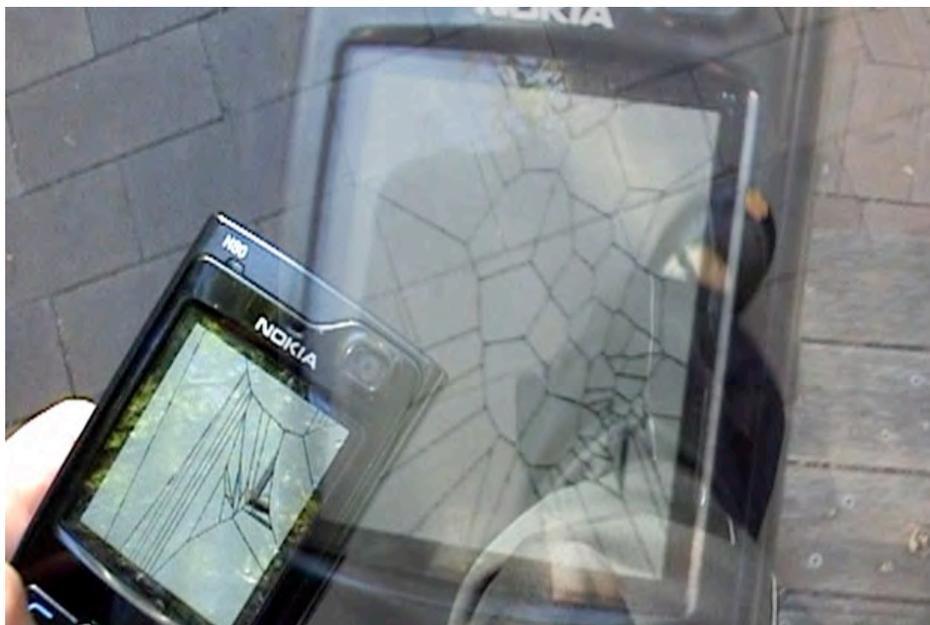
Figure 2. On the street, participants' introduced movement and displacement to a landscape of what appeared to be foam bubbles.

The customised mobile phone platform and the indoor gallery installation together interpreted and presented the participants' paths and encounters as a filigree of imaginary spaces spun by our everyday lives. The imaginary in-between spaces emerged from the tensional spatial dynamics between participants' encounters (lived, unknown) and demographic data (fixed, mapped), and how they mutually affected and interacted with each other. The participants' movements were translated into virtual turbulences that fluidly transformed a digital counter-fabric of the urbanscape. Adding threads and pulling them across the virtual fictional landscape, actuated and influenced virtual force fields, and perpetuated the fluid transformations of the map. Demographic data of the terrain was seen as text through which to read the production of spaces and zones and used to specify the varying degree of elasticity of the digital fabric (Figure 3). Dependent on the underlying demographic data, the virtual terrain was more or less permeable to the participants' distorting influences - resulting in continuously evolving connections and fissures (Figures 3 and 4).
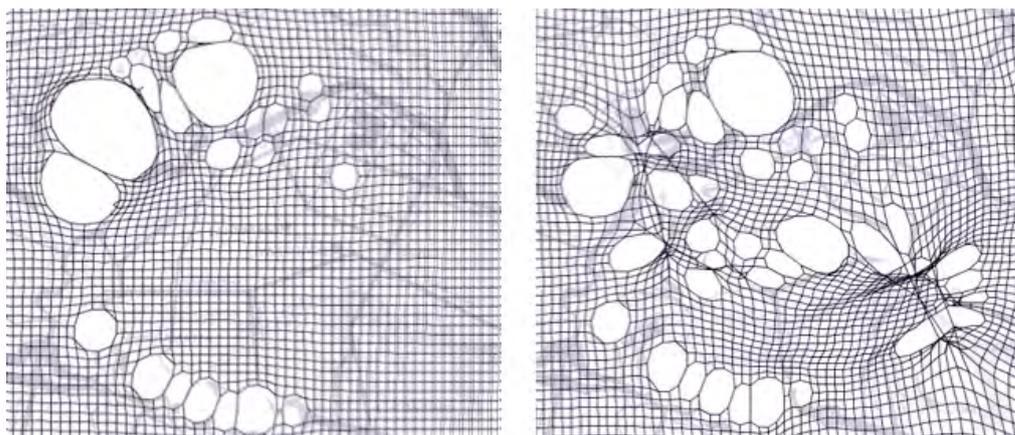
Figure 3. Snapshots of the computational process transforming the digital fabric. Demographic boundary lines become break lines along which the fabric tears apart.

Conventional representations of the city are blind to our everyday social encounters and the changing spaces and relations they produce. They display a fixed landscape of rules and regulations that if anything, constrains this dynamic play. This project's objective was to make the interplay between the lived and the mapped visible and tangible as a cartographic performance. *Urban Fiction'*s spacings and webbings emerged from the contact surface along which these two spatial ontological positions are negotiated and eventually transform the urban map (Figures 1 and 4). The project's performative mapping practice sought to problematise the authority of the hegemonic cartographer by unfixing the knower and the known. In this 'performative geography', different actors iteratively and collectively produce a dynamic history of imaginary spaces, for which the social imaginary is, as according to Appadurai (1990), a social reality.

As we have seen in the Situationist maps, the rupturing, displacing and stitching of geographical zones destabilises the predefined geographical order and implies injury and loss (of the familiar). Donna Haraway opens up a potential for 'location' that starkly contrasts the one offered by the Global Positioning System and its underlying desire for clinical precision and high resolution (see Hemment 2004). According to Haraway, 'location is about vulnerability', resisting the politics of closure but rather 'insatiably curious about webs of differential positioning' (1991). Such a map counters the dominant hierarchies of Cartesian cartography by abandoning the uniformity of the grid, and allows for unscripted and impossible relations to be read between the lines.
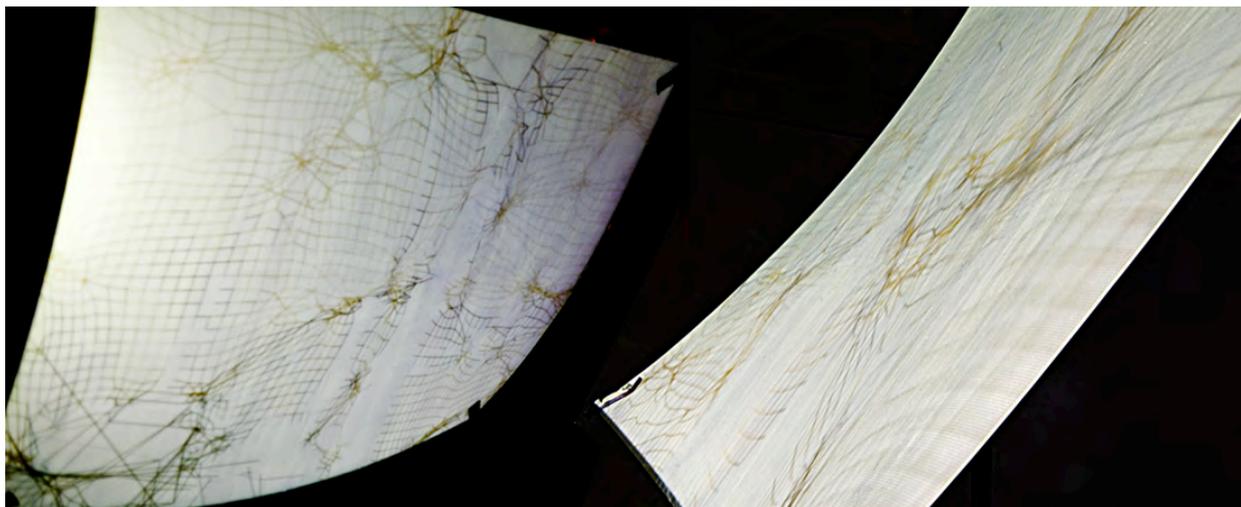
Figure 4. Snapshot of gallery installation, showing ripping and stitching processes illustrated in Figure 3. The result alludes to Haraway's constructs of partial knowledge, 'imperfectly stitched together' (1991).

Parting thoughts - or critical fictions about a beautiful, uncapturable mess

It cannot be assumed that artists' maps provide a more true or 'real' account of the urban landscape and the beautiful, uncapturable mess of its inhabitants' lives. What locative media art can do is break-up and disperse the hegemonic position of the map-maker: making the map becomes a process, rather than a dictum; situated, rather than stripped of any context; participatory, rather than dominant; subjective, rather than allegedly objective. These map-makers have a face (not a disembodied authority), a life, a culture, and a past. While - fortunately, we might say - our map making technologies cannot sense and capture the particularities of what constitutes belonging (as of yet), they can open up a space for inquiry ... and critical fiction.

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