Location! Location? Location!!
Can Location Neutrality Exist in Artworks?

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Introduction

This paper examines the notion of location neutrality, briefly comparing artworks that feature a locative media or location independent aspect. By examining recent artworks I will go someway towards an answer. The works examined enable the re-imagining of a place and a de-familiarisation of the familiar. Artists have used psychogeography (Debord) and technology (such as GPS and networks) to explore the theme of locality, therefore enabling a novel way of traversing these spaces. Potentially, these works can be without location and sited-specific. The problematic element in these artworks lies with the fact that they are attempting to engage simultaneously with the local (specific) and the global (neutral). The challenge these works face is to maintain generality alongside specificity. In practice, some skewing towards one or the other occurs in order to maintain legibility (i.e. Bold Street was to the local, Joyce Walks the general).

Body

In order to address the problem of location neutrality it is necessary to consider artworks that have a specific site or local-focus. These do not necessarily involve locative technology, but reference the underlying "quality" of location. See table 1 for works in an exploratory framework — from complete installation speculations to concrete spaces.

The recent work, Joyce Walks by Conor McGarrigle (using locative and web 2.0 apps) allowed users to remap Blooms (Ulysees, James Joyce) walk through Dublin onto their own city. Surprisingly it is initial issues with the application programming interface (api) that takes the works site specificity and location-neutrality to an abrupt intersection. At the launch date, due to copyright issues between Ordinance survey data and Googlemap api, users could not use the interface for generating maps for UK cities by name.

"The problem with the UK ordnance survey data — which was really between google and the ordnance survey rather then with me — affected geocoding in the api — i.e. if you searched using the Googlemap's api you couldn't find any UK city. If you knew the co-ordinates, it was ok" (McGarrigle).

Clearly, this illustrates that technology was the stumbling block to the work achieving location neutrality. Although McGarrigle considered a work around using geocoding tools, as well as complicating the work it proved to be unnecessary, as the issue was resolved by the two companies involved. (A similar problem also happened with the YASMIN mailing list for UK based researchers)

A contrasting work that can be seen to be location neutral is Agnes Meyer-Brandis's SGM-Iceberg-Probe. It connects with an imagined subterranean landscape that underlies our own. In her works, location is neutral upon a facility (e.g. ice rinks) rather than a physical location. This subterranean world is seen to be contiguous, though only through the use of imaging and drilling accessible to us. The works explore the interconnected underworld, searching for life in coresamples, icecores and atmospheric moisture. The artist pushes this to a playful extreme, producing visual evidence of icebergs in Brazil (biorama talks, DRU Huddersfield, 2007).

Tanaka's and Gemeinboeck work Net_Derive is based upon mobile phone and locative technologies in which participants relative and absolute locations in the city generates a unique musical and visual score. The artwork, generated from outside the gallery, uses the urban landscape as a musical canvas.

Blast Theories works use the city as their stage, tuned to the locality and using technology, yet still orchestrated to evoke the universal themes of angst, trust, loss and awe.

GEOcaching is a social mapping activity that considers the world as a giant treasure hunt.

Beatrez Dacosta's PigeonBlog and Proboscis's Participatory Sensing works use technology for data

collection about levels of pollution for the purpose of raising public awareness and involvement.

Discussion

Locative technology is systematically flawed even in attaining its modest proposal for an indexical idea of location. "For example GPS signals are shadowed by buildings and imperfect seams between technological

if the local environment location is the music generator what new spaces could be discovered?

Location aware technology may actually be the problem, promising what it cannot give, a pure sense of place. Works that rely lightly on technology are often more successful in maintaining a neutral focus in the way that a book is sometimes more vivid than a movie.

Table 1: Types of locative works

Type	Locative Narrative	Community Storytelling	World	PsychTours	playing
	Rider Spoke (2007) Blast Theory	Theirwork.org (2007) Connolly& Williamson)	Fo.AM — TRG(2004)	Shadowed Spaces (2007) Arika	Net-Derive (2007) Tanaka/ Gemeinboeck
	Day of Figurines (2006) Blast Theory	bold street (2007) FACT	Times Up! — Sensory Circus(2004)	Report on an Unidentified Space Station (2007) McHugh	Bio tracking (2007) Dimitriu
	I like Frank (2004) Blast Theory	PigeonBlog (2006) Da Costa	SGM — Icebergprobe(2006) Brandis	TTS / PVI (2002-2005)	Active Ingredient-Ere be dragons (2007)
		Participatory Sensing (2007) Proboscis	The lake(2005) Freeman		Joyce Walks (2007) Conor McGarrigle

Locative-narrative — a story that traverses the city; Community storytelling / authorship — locative technology used to tag space; Psych tours — psychogeographical tours of the space to enable a new mapping of a hybrid space across time or literature; World Growing — facilities created that refer to another location; Playing the city — using as an instrument (references for table can be found on www.transitlab.org/papers/ loc_loc_loc)

systems often impact on the work" — Benford (Performing Space workshop Nottingham). Moreover, this indexical notion of space, without reference to the whole, is an experiential failure in locative technologies. Artists attempt to weave back non-indexical notions of location into the works despite the failure of the technology. Locative media is useful when used as an enabling media, to embody knowledge and insight into the local environment. Proboscis is using these technologies as a way of weaving knowledge back into the environment.

Net_Derive works to generate a site-specific language of music, rather than simply listening to pre-recorded music. It is known that walkman music listeners construct a space around them (Du Gay et al., 1997), but

The move to open standards e.g. openstreetmap, may get around some problems with closed systems as APIs are limited in the control they enable. "But it does highlight the problem of basing a project on google maps in the end it is a proprietary system and you have to hope that it continues to fit their business model to give api access to everyone. McGarrigle (*pers comm.*)

In conclusion location neutrality does exist in some works, but that these are a special case, and overwhelmingly location is still a significant component. Technology has given us seams between the systems that need to be traversed in order to make work. It is up to artists and researchers to decide whether they ignore, engineer out, or work creatively with these seems.

Gemeinboeck, Petra.,Tanaka, Atau., Dong, Andy. 2006. "Instant archaeologies: digital lenses to probe and to perforate the urban fabric." In *Proceedings of the 14th annual ACM international conference on Multimedia table of contents.* New York: Association for Computing Machinery, pp. 279-286.

Du Gay, Paul, Hall, Stuart, Mackay, Hugh and Negus, Keith. 1997. *Doing Cutural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman.* London: Sage Publications, p. 105.

Works

Because of the size constraints, weblinks to the works referred to are made available online at the page transitlab.org/papers/loc_loc_loc. html