

Intersections: Media — Action — Place

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Abstract

In this paper we trace the intersections of community action, media and embodied experience. A performative and interactive situation that mediates these intersections is referred to as situated media. The concept of situated media is focused on the interactive media events that are contextualized within a cultural and local knowledge, crafts and traditions with a potential to reflect a variety of approaches in new media, such as media performance, activism and culturally reflective interfaces.

Meeting place

Places allow cultures to intersect and give rise to novel hybrid performances, practices and structures. Places are socially constructed, politicized, culturally relative and historically rooted with local and multiple constructions. Places provide an articulation of cultural identity, and their uniqueness is defined through social interactions weaved together at a particular locus. Within the landscape of globalization the understanding of the identity of place is found in the context of its relations with the surrounding world. Doreen Massey (1994) takes a progressive view of place as a process that is continually changing, where multiple identities and histories intersect as well as different stories and experiences come together and become intertwined. If we turn to the concept of place as meeting place (Massey 1994), its identity is no longer simply an enclosed territory with essential characteristics; rather it is unique and particular point articulated through networks of social relationships and understandings: global, local, historical, social, etc. As a practice of daily negotiation we can understand it as the beginnings of democracy. A healthy democracy is an ongoing process that requires an ability and place to participate and negotiate with a mutual respect and an open recognition of difference.

Situated media as an interactive system

We consider the concept of democratization through media situated at the intersections of community action and embodied experience. The idea of situated media emerges within the post-traditional order as a form that intersects media, social interaction and physical location with a potential to reinforce a sense of place. Situated media can act as meeting place incorporating spatial, temporal and contextual considerations into the media design. The design of a situation where media is linked with place is inspired by the Balinese concept of 'desa, kala, patra' (space-time-context) (Herbst 1997). This concept is important to Balinese artists and it is discussed in both a philosophical and practical manner to aid development of the artistic work. It is a way of putting human activity into the context of the world and nature, intersecting with forces greater than those of human design. 'Desa, kala, patra' fosters a sense of place on both social and metaphysical levels. The socially expressive ritual of Balinese arts is situated within the place, time and context of performance, ritual and daily life. Following Artaud's curiosity in the Balinese dance theatre and Bertolt Brecht's approach to art, not as "a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it," the search for a ritualization of society began within the exploration of liminoid phenomena (Turner 1982), a specially designed process that contribute to social transformation and regenerative renewal of culture. In contrast to collective liminal practices of integral cultures, the liminoid practices of post-traditional societies are expressed in spectacle and distance. A collective ritual, that acts as self-representation of shared and common values, transforms into professional arts, which is an individual and optional activity.

In the domain of media activism the transference of the role of the viewer as media consumer to that of active participant and media creator enables the liminoid phenomena to emerge. Donald Snowden introduced the use of documentary film for enabling community transformation. In 1967 he devised the Fogo Process — a people-centered community development approach — which via media tools assists communities and individuals to discuss poverty, issues and opportunities from the perspective of those who experienced them (Williamson, 1991). By giving control of documentary filmmaking to the participants Snowden facilitated an opportunity for the communities of Fogo Island to represent themselves both to each other and to the world. The significant byproduct of this process was a community-produced vision of common needs and realities that was made possible through a combination of documentary media reflections and constructive discussions in follow-up meetings within the place of Fogo Island.

The work of Surajit Sarkar and Catapult Arts Caravan provides a contemporary example of situated media performance that brings together the creative abilities of local artists, digital media and public participation. Their media performance initiatives in North East and Central India have acted as a catalyst for public participation and debate in rural areas, articulating issues and ideas of common interest through media performances set in public spaces. Documentary media process is employed to collect local knowledge and testimonials while the media performance setting allows them to create dialogue among community members. This public situation enables people to observe themselves in their own setting through media images — seeing themselves and their neighbors — mixed with live performances of musicians singing in their language and dialect. Here aesthetic virtue and creative abilities of the local artists are used as a strategy to inspire people to engage in a further dialogue during the public performance. In this context situated media performance presents a form of social ritual, intentionally ‘scripted’ to provide a

process for reflection, participation and democratization. The production method shifts from working towards final product and outcome towards the development of processes in which performers, participants and media can interact, transform, improvise and imagine new communal realities.

Ritual interface

The situated media performance is a process that embodies ideas comparative to that of ritual performance. Ritual constitutes one way people communicate wisdoms, processes and information that are a part of the cultural group. It separates a person or a group from the state of conventional daily life and puts them into a place for free play, where convictions are suspended and converted, where they can transform, transit and finally be reincorporated into normal life. The ritual subject experiences a modulated belief system and, on the most basic level, experiences altered identity. Turner (1982) regarded performance as a genre in which modern peoples reflexively symbolize the critique, norms and conventional roles that govern their ordinary lives, and provide contemporary surrogates for religious ritual in traditional societies, with a great potential for creativity and change.

In the work of the Catapult Arts Caravan transformative interaction happens on the trajectory across participant and media. The ability to see themselves as a media image — as the projected self on the screen — allows the participants to transform and recontextualize their existence into new modes of being. They are at one time both the media image and performers. It is through the projected self on the screen that social boundaries (such as class, ethnicity, etc) among people within a given community disappear. People can see themselves as equally important within the media image, provoking a discussion about the conditions and realities of that community among the plurality of local participants. The projected media image becomes a place for negotiation where democratization happens. The media image in this

context acts as a liminoid technology — a ritual interface — that enables participation, personal transformation and empowers dialogue. Media performance situated as a ritual interface becomes an instrument for social action and a place for the cultural articulation. Ritual interface provides a boundary between who I am as a person and who I might become. Using the familiar metaphor of broadcasting this ritualized interface becomes the threshold — an interface to another world — where equal negotiation and communal transformation is possible through public engagement, interaction and exchange.

Situated interface as cultural articulation

An interface is a membrane through which we think as much as act, functioning as it does as a nexus for not only sensations and feelings but also philosophical concepts and understandings of the world that it mediates. The interface defines how we perceive, navigate and understand content. It characterizes not only how we perform while engaging with it, but also how we feel during the interaction. In the context of interactive media, culture becomes something we perform while engaging with the interface. The interface enables media to become corporeal and empirical, through the use of familiar metaphors. It is important to recognize that familiarly with metaphors is culturally specific. Every interaction performed within a given culture has some form of cultural encoding embedded in it and

thereby carries cultural information. One ramification of this is that cultural codes perform differently and elicit different responses when used outside their native cultural context. These differences constitute a form of cultural information, after Gregory Bateson's (1972) definition of information being a difference that makes a difference. To embed cultural information into an interface means to situate it within a culturally specific expression and metaphors. From this perspective it is essential that interfaces evolve into systems in which technology animates a particular cultural form. This entails the integration of culturally reflective processes in media technology design and interaction.

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