Technologies of Location:
Affect of Place in Artistic Uses of Mobile and Social Networks

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In her essay *Cinema and Embodied Affect*, **Anne Rutherford** refers to Foucault's notion of anatomy as the "techniques of the corpse". The human body on the dissection table is "robbed of life, severed from its connection to the lived experience of that body." In a morgue, bodies are lifeless. From a satellite perspective, analogous to the ways anatomy configures embodiment, places are lifeless.

Taking embodiment and an effective experience of a place as a starting point, I want to reverse an often-used perspective on geolocation. Places become meaningful through individual and shared acts of signification, not because they register as location data. How do artistic practices using various technologies of location construct living places? Is effect of place, rather than effect of technology relevant to location based media arts practices?

My current research project Technologies of Location paraphrases **Jonathan Crary**'s classic book *Techniques of the observer: on vision and modernity in the nineteenth century*. It can be argued that technologies of location and networked surveillance have extended the project of modernity. Use of technologies like GPS is, according to **Caroline Bassett,** about remote sensing, "which suggests profound transformations in human sense perception, part of a broader series of (technologically influenced) shifts that are having an impact … on everyday life".

"Remote sensing" seems to suggest that it is possible to be in a place and experience it from the outside at the same instant. In fact, using any networked media would imply that one is "remote sensing". Nevertheless the term points towards the challenges artists and designers have designing with location based media. The users are experiencing their immediate surrounding, while through audio or tiny screens, they access a representational layer about the same location. Remoteness, however, is coincidental, as GPS, WiFi or mobile phone network cell locations as such are meaningless. What does matter is what is made visible to whom and what remains hidden.

In **Blast Theory** projects *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003) and *Can You See Me Now?* (2002), places are part of a game scenario. Usage of street and remote players creates a tension between performing in place, and being able to remotely take part. Even though GPS coordinates are relevant from a functional design perspective and perhaps contribute to a location based imaginary, in these works affects of the social and playability are more central than affect of place.

Rather than talking about a more permanent sense of a place, following Pierre Mayol's concepts of the neighborhood, in these Blast Theory projects a pedestrian temporal experience becomes momentarily sharable. Participation is the key, without which these works are not accessible. In a more recent work titled *Rider Spoke* (2007) Blast Theory experimented with asynchronous participation, where "players" were able to record and share one's impressions of "places to hide". Without a motivating game scenario, Rider Spoke was not successful in socially bonding different participants. Its format, a bicycle ride guided through a small PDA screen and small headphones in busy London traffic was a sensorial overload, a good reminder of how hard it is to design audio-visual interfaces to public spaces.

Miwon Kwon, in her book *One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity*, describes how early site specific art was concerned of the material conditions of urban sites. More recently, site specificity has meant increasingly relations between people, practices, and places. She speaks critically of artworks, which are able to move from one place to another, forming **temporal intimacies**. A more responsible role by an artist is to form longer-term commitments to places through **sustaining relations**.

In Urban and Social Tapestries by Proboscis, location based media becomes a tool and a platform for experimental ethnography. Much in the tradition of community arts, collective narration of places becomes a way of not only writing or making media about them

but for creating a new kind of sociability between the participants as co-authors and co-readers.

Ann Rutherfood moves beyond Crary to Glen Mazis's work, understanding affective aesthetics as a combination of tactility, embodiment and movement. In location based media, affect of place is at the same time constructed through an immediate as well as remediated sense of place. Seen often as an individual exercise, a sense of place in location based media arts can, if only for a transient moment, be socially mediated and constructed.

Somehow, this social constructedness of place turns architectures naked. Perhaps the dead corpse on the urban dissection table is the concrete city itself, which like a hard drive is continuously written onto (representations and memories fade and are erased by new ones). If cinema is able to suggest a kind of nostalgic permanence as an imaginary of a city, location based media arts form more like asynchronous platforms on which to perform both individual and social urban practices.

The emphasis on practices coincides with the growth of social uses of computer mediated networks. Like anatomy is unable to understand embodiment, Human Computer Interaction theory is not able to describe let alone grasp varied networked practices. Recent network theorization based on HCI, for example by **Tiziana Terranova**, instead extends biological and technological systems to the realm of the social in the tradition of cybernetics.

If the system theory positioned users as structuralist actors in a feedback loop in logical and geometric schemas, what follows from a similar approach with regard to geospatially driven media? The user position is that of a dot, and over time, that of a line. In GPS drawing works by The GPS Drawing Project, in Amsterdam maps by Esther Polak and beach walks by Tery Rueb the resulting spatial imaginary is reminiscent of 1960s generative computer drawings inspired by cybernetics. Only this time, the human agent has become an actor within the system schema. This "pin point" position or spatiality is "unlivable". The geolocation dot does form a trace, but it remains an ephemeral signifier often unable to grasp the affect of sociability, mobility, and place that participants in network practices experience. Like the time code that marks video and film, that dot becomes relevant only insofar the play or interaction around it, the media or the narratives attached to it are able to create an affect of place, or an affective situation, oscillating between sustainable relations and temporal intimacies.

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