Tracing Things:
Beyond Locative Media

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Locative media provides a democratic conceptual framework, by which to examine the certain technological assemblages and their potential social impacts, striving, at least rhetorically, to reach a mass audience by attempting to engage consumer technologies and redirect their power.

The Internet of things

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), we are entering into a society of ubiquitous networked objects.[1] Soon, the ITU observes, objects will be the most prevalent users of the Internet, relentlessly communicating various kinds of data to each other. What does this mean for what the ITU calls the "Internet of Things"? Bruno Latour suggests that things are a focus for our time, in particular, a focus that demands the attention of the arts:

> "'Things' are controversial assemblages of entangled issues, and not simply objects sitting apart from our political passions. The entanglements of things and politics engage activists, artists, politicians, and intellectuals. To assemble this parliament, rhetoric is not

enough and nor is eloquence; it requires the use of all the technologies — especially information technology — and the possibility for the arts to re-present anew what are the common stakes."[2]

We can get a sense of what Latour means by this by looking at "MILK," a project by Ieva Auzina and Esther Polak exhibited by Latour in his "Making Things Public" exhibit at ZKM that also won the 2005 Golden Nica at Ars Electronica.[3] The work of a group of Latvian locative media artists, MILK is clearly indebted to more traditional aspects of the movement in that it uses GPS trace-routes. But instead of seeking a phenomenological regrounding of the self, the MILK team traced the path of milk from its origins in the udder of a cow in rural Latvia to a cheese vendor in the Netherlands. To be sure, this project is still more suggestive than fully realized: MILK's artists are not terribly interested in Latour's reading and instead see their work more as a form of romantic landscape art. Nevertheless, MILK suggests a powerful vision of how locative technologies could allow one to more fully understand how products are commodified and distributed through the actions of global trade, thereby making visible the networked society.

Milk Project installation at ZKM, project by Esther Polak & Ieva Auzina, installation design by Ivar Van Bekkum, Mikelis Putrams and Mara Skujeniece.

Recently media artist Coco Fusco set off a debate of the net time and locative mailing list when she launched a headlong attack on new media practices associated with networks and mapping, claiming: "It is as if more than four decades of postmodern critique of the Cartesian subject had suddenly evaporated."[4] Fusco minced few words: "In the name of a politics of global connectedness, artists and activists too often substitute an abstract 'connectedness' for any real engagement with people in other places or even in their own locale." Here, however, Fusco's anti-mapping diatribe runs aground, for when tied to a materialist vision, the recent turn to maps is among the strongest critiques of globalization available to us. Recognizing this, philosopher Alain Badiou referred to the maps of power drawn by artist Mark Lombardi[5] as "the creation of a new possibility of art and a new vision of the world."[6]

In his book Shaping Things, Bruce Sterling suggests that we détourne the Internet of Things itself to become more fully aware of the ecological role of objects in the world.[7] Sterling coins the neologism "Spimes" to refer to future objects that could be aware of their context and transmit "cradle-to-grave" information about where they have been, where they are and where they are going. Cory Doctorow has called Spimes "the hactivist's ultimate tool — an evidentiary rallying point for making the negative outcomes of industrial practices visible and obvious so that we can redress them.[8] Similarly, even if it is not so much locative as suggestive of such practices, Natalie Jeremijenko's How Stuff Is Made project is something of a response to Sterling and Latour's theories, comprising a visual encyclopedia of photoessays produced by engineering and design students that to document how objects are manufactured and investigates both the labor conditions of that manufacture and its environmental impact.

Technology fetishism

If Spimes and their kin make it possible for us to envision new forms of cognitive mapping, we need to guard against using that mapping to only place ourselves, thereby reducing objects to a subservient position in regard to humans. After all, the ITU's prediction of tens of billions of objects connected to the Internet leaves human users as a distinct second. Here, it may be worthwhile revisiting our standard theoretical frames for interpreting technological fetishism.

If Marx considered the object as the result of alienation of the product from its production and, by extension, its origins, Freud understood it as symbolic replacement for an irrecoverable object lost in a primordial trauma. For both Marx and Freud, the aliveness of objects is nothing more than an illusion, and object fetishism merely a substitute to avoid. But, as Steven Shaviro notes, the fetish object is always more powerful than what it is thought to stand in for.[9] As an art practice, to date,

locative media seems fundamentally tied to discourses of representation centered on a human subject, privileging the experience of the human in space (tracing) and time (annotative). To turn Fusco's argument on its head: in both locative media and much of the criticism launched against the movement, it is as if more than four decades of postmodern critique of the humanist subject had suddenly evaporated. Even MILK's project is not about milk, but rather about the people involved in the production and distribution of milk as it transforms from Latvian biological fluid to Dutch product.

In contrast, Sterling provides us with a darker, more idiosyncratic vision. Humans don't control Sterling's world of Spimes. On the contrary, it is an unruly object world in which people are, at best, "spime wranglers." At the dawn of the Internet of Things we have to wonder if we are not entering a world in which the object becomes sentient, thereby finally liberating itself from human bondage. If, in the Enlightenment, we learned that nature — in its role as background to human activity — had been replaced by human second nature, then today we are perhaps at the threshold of a machinic third nature. It is the task of whatever remains of art after the locative turn to get involved in the messy business of this new world of objects, even if the Utopian and critical moments that can emerge as a result are only temporary and contingent.

1   International Telecommunication Union, Report 2005: "Internet of Things" <http://www.itu.int/osg/spu/publications/internetofthings/>, last accessed 12/08/05

2   Latour B. 2005. "Making Things Public." In *MITPress.*

3   "The MILK Project" <http://www.milkproject.net/>, last accessed 07/03/07

4   Fusco C. "Questioning The Frame." In These Times, 16 December 2004 <http://www.inthesetimes.com/site/main/article/1750/>, last accessed 17/12/05

5   Global Networks, a traveling retrospective of 25 works by Mark Lombardi <http://www.pierogi2000.com/flatfile/lombardi.html>, last accessed 07/03/07

6   Badiou A. <http://www.lacan.com/frameXXIII7.htm>, last accessed 07/03/07

7   Sterling B. 2005. "Shaping Things." In *Mediaworks Pamphlet.* MITPress.

8   Doctorow C. <http://www.boingboing.net/2005/10/26/bruce_sterlings_desi.html>, last accessed 07/03/07

9   Jeremijenko N. <http://xdesign.ucsd.edu/howstuffismade/index.html>, last accessed 07/03/07

10 Shaviro S. <http://www.dhalgren.com/Doom/ch02.html>, last accessed 07/03/07

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