

SITE-seeing: Image Geotagging and the Vernacular

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Tourist Photography's implication of physical freedom is being pushed to a new level by the growing popularity of Global Positioning System (GPS) Image Tagging, or Photographic Geo-referencing. Digital photography and camera miniaturization have continued the "liberation" of snapshots. Furthermore, the intertwining of the visual with the vernacular has purposed the earth as a surface for the inscription of every-day images and texts. In images of this sort, geospatial data often exists in paradox with the sentimental photographic object. Participatory online media projects have highlighted these paradoxes by presenting an unedited barrage of public submissions from all over the world. Many locative artworks have tended to collapse these notions, presenting somewhat singular, subjective, edited and recontextualized expressions of site, history and context.

Historically, tourist photographs have been attached to the notion of registering one's presence in a location, and functioned as a record for the revisiting of memories after the visit. The popularity of GPS tagging may be related to the notion of one's existence being a photographic referent. At the same time, the classic tourist photograph can also be thought of as more a ritualistic enacting of relationships rather than the documenting (consuming) of a site.¹ In many such cases, the site itself is of marginal importance.

Geographic Information System's (GIS) ability to append the photographic document with hard data might be thought to objectively authenticate the subjective experience, while at the same time, such supplemental elements are often divorced from any nostalgic value assigned to the photographic object itself. This divorce in meaning between the photographic image and its augmented geospatial data is clearly evident in *The Degree Confluence Project*, a participatory media project whose stated goal is "to visit each of the latitude and longitude integer degree intersections in the world, and to take pictures at each location."² The *Project's* notion of creating "an organized sampling of the world" is a Dadaist absurdity, an interminable

exercise. Significantly, some of the images submitted are aesthetically disinterested, similar to the documentary-like images of the 1970's New Topography movement in photography, while others are clearly snapshots in the vein of tourism. Plurality of authorship and aesthetic is characteristic of collections of images that constitute *Degree Confluence* and similar online participatory projects. It remains for artists and cultural commentators to parse meaning from the cacophony.

To varying degrees, recent works of locative art have addressed this dilemma. Some techniques used by artists have included real-time GIS and related data tracking, the contrasting of data and/or official and anecdotal accounts of history, mapping, and geotagged photographs, sound and video. In addition, artists are often in the position of accumulating, databasing, and ultimately directing a multitude of voices, locations and experiences in time and space. Teri Rueb's *Trace*, 1999, for instance, collects "sound recordings that commemorate personal loss" in a database which "expands over time as interested participants continue to contribute memorial songs, poems and stories."³ Participants experience these collected sound recordings within the context of a hike through Yoho National Park, located in British Columbia, Canada. This particular setting, along with the use of a hiker's backpack to house the necessary computer equipment for participant use, frames the multitude of voices within a very specific context that is ultimately determined by the artist herself.

Similarly, *talk...the...line*, 2007, an interactive installation by Sala Wong and Peter Williams, collides the at-once touristic, historical and commercial site of Wenceslas Square, Prague. *talk...the...line* examines the drastic socio-economic changes that have occurred within the city of Prague since 1968. Taking the famous Prague Spring as a starting point, participants are asked to re-examine the notion of "historical site" in the context of a tourist industry. Each year, millions of tourists retrace the footsteps of the Warsaw Troops, snapping photographs around Wenceslas Square. In a



Figure 1

sense, the individual tourist's experience is fleeting. However, the unending influx of visitors seems to have forever changed this site and its historical reading.

In *talk...the...line*, Photo Geotagging is used as a means for the recording of Absolute Location (latitude and longitude) alongside images, sounds, interviews of local residents and tourists, and historical documents to reference Relative Location. These two spaces negate and contradict each other, raising questions about history, subjectivity, and the social construction of collective memories (Figure 1). In addition to these conflicting elements, the artists assert their subjectivity through the physical expression of the Site itself (in this case, Wenceslas Square) as an installation in the gallery. The artists' experience of the Site is transported to another space and time. In this way, technology can be thought to have allowed for a metaphorical crystallizing and portable-izing of site-specificity. The physical layout and imagery in the installation is an interpretation of Wenceslas Square itself as a dead-end. This closed-off space can be opened with the sound of the participant's own voice, a gesture which emphasizes the importance of individual agency and social engagement.

The desire to confirm one's existence through mediated references in space and time is amplified by digital photography, geospatial media and collective authorship through the Internet. The tactical presentation and recompilation of these various voices by some locative artworks serves to direct particular interpretations and, at the same time, complicate assumptions about the significance of location to historical and cultural meaning.

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- 1 Larson, Jonas. 2005. "Families Seen Sightseeing: Performativity of Tourist Photography." In *Space and Culture* (8). London: Sage Publications, pp. 416-434.
- 2 Jaret, Alex. 2003. "Goals." In *The Degree Confluence Project*. March 8, 2008 <<http://confluence.org>>
- 3 Rueb, Teri. 1999. *Trace*. March 8, 2008 <<http://www.terirueb.net>>