

BUILDING COMPLEX REALITIES: ARTISTIC USES OF LOCATIVE MEDIA AND AUGMENTED REALITY

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This text intends to analyze the artistic uses of LM and AR systems as indexes and catalyst of a paradigm shift in the relations between real and virtual spaces. This paradigm, articulated around notions as mobility or hybridization and concreted in “augmented spaces”, is understood both as a result and materialization of the epistemological paradigm of complexity that regulates the social construction of reality since postmodernity.

Throughout the 20th century the artistic realm underwent a progressive transformation due to its increasing intersections with technology. This caused a redefinition of the artistic object’s aesthetic basis and its relation with the spectator, but also meant the multiplication of genres and typologies linked to the new production, visualization and communication devices. However, in the last three decades and due to the Internet’s expansion, the aesthetic boundaries of art have rapidly extended beyond its limits thanks to a whole new set of technologies related to the Internet and based on different types of information processing which, every time more infiltrated within the socio-cultural environment, fluctuate between everyday uses and artistic applications.

Thus, after the development of Net.Art and the improvement of the Virtual Reality (VR) systems in the 90s, we have witnessed – since the beginning of this century – the development of new artistic forms related with the Locative Media (LM) devices and the Augmented Reality (AR) systems, which in turn are frequently combined and closely related to the development of wireless interconnection networks.

Without focusing on the debates that question the aesthetic specificities of LM and AR or, especially in the case of LM, its status as an artistic avant-garde, we are interested in analyzing their “artistic uses” as indexes and catalyst of a possible paradigm shift in the relations between reality and virtuality, a role that can be played thanks to the reflexive and experimental way in which the artistic practices use the new technologies as creative tools, therefore expanding – at a phenomenological and imaginary level – its potential uses and interpretations. This change in paradigm is articulated around mobility, reterritorialization and hybridization of spaces, and, at an epistemological level, signifies overcoming a dual and exclusive model of reality to give way to a model based on integration, multidimensionality and complexity.

Comprised in the term LM are all those communication technologies which involve localization; that is, that “provide a link or information related to a specific place by means of GPS devices, mobile phones, PDA, as well as portable computers or wireless networks.” [1] On the other hand, the term AR alludes to a data visualization system that involves “the laying of dynamic and context-specific information over the visual field of a user.” [2]

One of the novelties of these systems – in comparison with the technologies used in Net.Art or the VR – is that they enable new mobility logics. While the traditional interfaces for accessing Cyberspace – computers or VR helmets – implied a total or relative physical immobility in relation to the terminal, the LM in general, as well as the smartphones and other AR visualization devices, allow information to be instantly accessed from a fully mobile position. Therefore, to our infinite capacity of virtual mobility

through the immaterial networks and information fluxes – which allowed us to virtually overcome the spatial-temporal barriers in communication – we must now add the capacity for actual mobility. Apart from entailing a considerable increase in the complexity of our perceptive experience, it allows us to control information in our surroundings (now constantly re-defined and implemented with virtual information) and transform our relations with the same. This new relation to information corresponds to what Lemos defined as ‘informative territories’: areas in which the information flow on the intersection between Cyberspace and urban space is digitally controlled. [3] This produces what Manovich defined as ‘Augmented Space’: “the physical space that is overlapped by dynamic and changing information.” [4]

These new interactions with our surroundings through the ‘augmented’ flow of information on reality and the ability to control it, imply new ways of inhabiting, occupying and experiencing physical space; they make up different reterritorialization strategies that seem to challenge the widespread notion in the 1990s that the emergence of a Cyberspace and the potential virtual ubiquity involved a process of deterritorialization of subjects and objects, weakening their relationships with the material space and leaving it practically obsolete. Although some authors like Haesbert have deeply questioned the deterritorialization concept, [5] the truth is that some artistic practices such as Net.Art, VR and all those based on Tele-presence, have contributed to establish within the social imaginary the logic of a progressive exclusion of real space in favor of a virtual space which – as pointed out by Castells – absorbed all our social and cultural logics. [6]

However, the reflections and experiences proposed by the artistic practices based on LM and AR point at the reterritorialization and hybridization of spaces. Far from focusing solely on virtual space and pushing physical space into the background, they reevaluate the latter as a place of action with a geographical location: they make us reconsider our relation with space, redefining it through new potential/virtual narratives and rebuilding it by means of new socio-cultural routines based on physical mobility. In this way, the LM (proposing new pathways and cartographies based on social action over the physical space) and the AR (introducing a new paradigm in regard to Cyberspace where virtual objects are rendered on the physical space) promote a logic of spatial hybridization that reflects, manifests and materializes the complexity of our current technologically mediated reality.

The project *WalkSpace: Beirut-Venice* by Connor McGarrigle, currently on view at the 54th Biennial Exhibition of Venice, exemplifies the abovementioned within the context of LM. The piece consists of a tour through the cities of Lebanon and Venice, interconnected with each other in such a way that the tour through Lebanon is guided from Venice and vice versa. As the artist himself points out:

“The object is not to create a finite discrete work but to create a peripatetic relational space which can evolve and respond to the situation, the desires of its participants and serendipity, with the work being created through the actions of its participants. The space is furthermore overlaid with a hybrid, networked space connecting both cities and augmenting each space with the absent presence of the other.” [7]

The virtual ‘pavilions’ exhibited at the Biennale make up another example of this new relational paradigm between virtuality and reality, in other words, of the ways in which the physical environment is transformed aesthetically and phenomenologically through virtual information. The official project *Invisible Pavilione*, commissioned by Simona Lodi and the extra official projects of the artistic group Manifest.AR, transform the venue’s empty spaces into new AR pavilions, even setting a refugee camp on St. Marco’s Square.

The presence of these projects at the Venice Biennale, but also at many other exhibition contexts during the last years, can be understood as an attempt to demonstrate the new artistic possibilities offered by these media – especially by AR, which aesthetic and critical potential have only recently started to be explored by art. But is also symptomatic of the expansion of a new model regarding space and reality.

In this model, what is real and what is virtual are no longer experienced as two opposed territories in constant tension, but rather, become flexible and osmotic. Whereas, until not so long ago, it was only possible to penetrate the virtual realm, these types of practices have caused virtual information to leak into reality, altering not only our relationship with space and its aesthetic forms, but also creating a new concept of reality based on the synthesis of both elements, leading to an augmented, complex, hybrid and multidimensional reality in which what is real, virtual, imaginary and symbolic become inseparable.

The epistemological paradigm of complexity being developed since the beginning of the 20th century – subsequently spurred by cybernetic and information system theories – and which seemed to reach its full philosophical expansion during postmodernity, is no longer an accurate metaphor to describe a new reality, but rather, through the visual and visualized information accessed ‘here and now’, becomes an aesthetical and phenomenological experience that adopts the shape of an ‘Augmented Space’.

References and Notes:

1. Gemma San Cornelio, “Locative Media y Práctica Artística,” *Artnodes 8*, UOC (2008), <http://www.uoc.edu/artnodes/8/dt/esp/presentacion.pdf> (accessed June 10, 2011).
2. Lev Manovich’s Web site, “The Poetics of Augmented Space,” 2005, <http://manovich.net> (accessed June 11, 2011).
3. André Lemos, “Medios Locativos y Territorios Informativos.,” *Inclusiva-Net, MediaLab-Prado* (2008), <http://medialab-prado.es/mmedia/1835> (accessed June 12, 2011).
4. Manovich, *Op. Cit.*
5. Rogério Haesbert, *O Mito da Desterritorialização* (Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand, 2004).
6. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2000).
7. Connor McGarrigle’s Web Site, “WalkSpace: Beirut-Venice”, <http://www.conormcgarrigle.com/venice.html> (accessed June 12, 2011).