

# PERFORMATIVE ENCOUNTERS IN MEDIA ART: AN UNSITELY AESTHETICS

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Traditionally public art has been associated with work that is, to quote Claire Doherty “permanently sited, monumental and commemorative.” I present work that is made for and in public space but in contrast is neither monumental nor fixed. They work simultaneously across a number of sites, both online and offline, and utilize a range of media strategies. These practices create a different aesthetics that I call unsitely.

Traditionally, public art or art in public spaces has been associated with work that is, to quote Claire Doherty “permanently sited, monumental and commemorative.” Today I will present and discuss work that is made *for* and *in* public space but in contrast to these descriptions or definitions is neither monumental nor fixed. Rather the practices I am concerned with play out in public spaces, including the internet, but are not considered public art. They work simultaneously across a number of sites, both online and offline, and utilize a range of media strategies and interventions. They are ephemeral, networked and performative and through their mobile and ephemeral nature they create a relationship to their audience that is profoundly decentred and asynchronous. In presenting us with such different forms of engagement they are, of course, creating a different aesthetics - an aesthetics that I call 'unsitely.'

Before presenting the artworks I will briefly outline three of my key terms, these are: unsitely aesthetics, network culture and performative space.

## Unsitely Aesthetics

In my PhD research I developed the term unsitely aesthetics to refer to recent work that plays simultaneously across sites, both online and offline. Unsitely refers to works characterised by their disruption of traditional approaches to site and by their unsightliness. They can often utilise a DIY approach unconcerned with issues of beauty or traditional notions of spectatorship – sometimes inciting laughter and humour to get at something else. In this sense it is a pun, referring to both the unsightly or unspectacular nature of the work while at the same time pointing to the rich history of site specificity in contemporary art. That is, unsitely pivots on the traditional history of site – from the site/nonsite of Robert Smithson’s “Spiral Jetty” to the decades long experience of site-specificity – Miwon Kwon’s book “One Place After Another: site specific art and locational identity” is an exemplary guide through this tangled and contradictory history. [1] In this way site-specificity is folded into the notion of unsitely, both acknowledging its importance and unfolding a new moment as network culture disrupts our common notions of place and of being in one place at one time. Unsitely refers to the paradoxical multi-sited-ness and situated-ness of these uncertain practices – thus calling attention to their lack of presence in any traditional sense, but rather calling upon a more “horizontal logic.” [2]

The ‘un’ in unsitely resonates with Freud’s notion of the uncanny or the *unheimlich*, in particular the uncomfortable and the ‘not at home’ feeling, which some work evokes, and that can provoke the question of ‘where’ is the work as well as ‘what is the work?’ This sense of the *unheimlich* can produce

both unease as well as an attendant laughter. Following John Dewey and his notion of art as *an* experience, unsitely/unsightly suggests a shift away from a focus on the visual to work that invites participation or engagement through media. [4]

## Network Culture

The second important term is ‘network culture,’ a term I have borrowed from Kazys Varnelis. [3] With the growth of the internet and mobile telephony across the world we are witnessing new configurations of public space and public culture. In his conclusion to the book “Networked publics,” Kazys Varnelis describes this new state of affairs as “network culture” and argues that network culture has replaced the logics and periodisations of both modernism and postmodernism. For Varnelis, network culture describes a world where there is a simultaneous superimposition of real and virtual space, many-to-many distribution, peer-to-peer social networks and participatory media. These are the salient conditions of network culture, a paradigm shift away from the commonly understood idea of the information age. As Varnelis argues, today “the network has become the dominant cultural logic” replacing the digital abstractions and reductions of pure information with networked relations. [5] Following Varnelis I consider network culture as the context for the uncertain art practices I will present – as well as the context for the performative tendencies that characterise unsitely aesthetics.

## Performative Space

The last term that I will briefly describe is ‘performative space.’ In his book “Loving Big Brother” John E. McGrath outlines an alternative way of understanding surveillance than the traditional account of crime prevention or the traditional critique which posits surveillance as either an invasion of privacy or part of the apparatus of a spectacularised society intent on total control. [6] Instead, McGrath proposes a surveillance space – this is in contrast to the common idea of the surveillance image – where public and private are no longer appropriate terms and our relationship to it is performative. Following McGrath’s argument for a more productive understanding of surveillance through the notion of performativity I’d like to suggest that our current condition encapsulated in the term network culture is creating a performative space of encounter.

## The Projects

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### MTAA

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The first project I will present is MTAA’s “One Year Performance Video (aka samHsiehUpdate)” from 2004. This work shows immediately the enormous shift in practice and aesthetics from traditional performance art of the 1960s where the presence of the body was of supreme value, to the layered and networked sense of ‘presence’ we live with today. As James Meyer suggests, it was the expansion of telecommunications and increasing mediation that brought forth the well-known 1960’s obsession with presence.

Presence became an aesthetic and ethical *cri de coeur* among the generation of artists and critics who emerged in the 1960s, suggesting an experience of actualness and authenticity that would contravene the depredations of an increasingly mediated, “one-dimensional” society. [7]

MTAA's elegant and humorous project demonstrates this shift not only in art practice but also in the larger social world where the idea of presence and what is "live" have become blurred, extenuated and layered. Media is now part of the everyday to such an extent that the once easy separation between (authentic real) life and the mediated is quite impossible.

In the early noughties MTAA (M. River & T. Whid) made a series of works called "The Updates." These works riffed on seminal performance art from the 1960s and 1970s, "updating" them for our current networked era. The update "One Year Performance Video (aka samHsiehUpdate" reworks Sam Hsieh's "One Year Performance 1978 -1979 (aka Cage Piece)." Like the logic of Liam Gillick's 'What if' scenario-thinking it asks, what if Tehching Hsieh made this piece today, in the public space of the Internet? [8]

In the original work by Hsieh, the artist lived in a cage for an entire year. The cage was built in his downtown New York studio. Hsieh committed himself to a regime of extreme deprivation where for the entire year he didn't talk, read, listen to the radio or watch TV. To pass the time he took photos of himself and marked the wall of his cell – like a prisoner in solitary confinement. His physical needs - food and sanitation - were attended to by an assistant "with whom he did not exchange words." In contrast to MTAA's Update, the work was enacted in an essentially private space, that of the artist's studio, with no audience. MTAA's update was commissioned by Turbulence in 2004, and has been available online since then. However, whenever you access this work the artist statement announces the date you logged on as the start of the work. In other words, the work begins when each viewer commences to view the work.

For MTAA, the work has shifted from the "act of living in a cell" to "images of ourselves living in a cell."

We've transferred the onus of a 1 year commitment to the work from the artist to the viewer. The piece will be realized fully only when a viewer runs it for one year. ... In the work, we mimic endurance without doing the labor. We also know the audience can just close the browser and walk away. No one needs to suffer on this one. [9]

This is a crucial shift – but doesn't necessarily mean that mediation is merely the viewing of images. If McGrath is right, rather than images this performance creates a performative space between the viewer and screen events – one that is open to possibilities, just like Austin's happy performatives. This sort of media artwork accessed and experienced through the internet can be understood as creating a performative space. This is distinct from previous understandings of the internet as cyberspace, where the internet was a separate space apart from everyday life, a space that took you into another realm. Instead MTAA's updates operate as a constantly dynamic space of play, and one which sits beside or even inside the everyday domestic and work spaces of one's life. As McGrath points out in relation to "uptake" and surveillance space, there is a productive gap between the work and the person experiencing the work, thus allowing for an open and dynamic relationship rather than a closed work of set meanings or merely documentation of past events. It is this gap that is productive, as it creates the possibility for a space of performativity "a space between the possibility of sense and the possibility of tyranny of sense." [10] In other words it brings a sense of freedom from the tyrannies of representation that call for absolute truth.

With MTAA's straight-faced performance new questions arise. What is the relationship of audiences to online distributed work? What is the value and importance of documentation historically and today as it is being reconfigured with online performance? And crucially the work throws out a challenge - is this a documentation or a 'live' performance? What can 'live' mean in such a mediated situation where the

time of the performance is totally separate from the time of the viewing? The dislocations and performative nature of the work that these questions imply also make this work unsitely – its existence dispersed across time and space.

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## NEVER BEEN TO TEHRAN

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In the project “Never Been to Tehran,” Andrea Grover and Jon Rubin invited twenty nine international participants to contribute photographs of the city of Tehran as they imagine it to look – on the condition that they themselves had never been to Tehran.

Imagine a city that you've only seen in reproductions or perhaps have merely heard about. A place, like many others, that only exists for you through indirect sources & media; the nightly news, hearsay, literature, magazines, movies, and the internet. Using these second-hand clues as firsthand research materials... Contributors will upload their photos daily to an on-line photo-sharing site, which will be projected as a slideshow simultaneously in galleries and public spaces around the world (including Tehran). [11]

This project utilises a sort of reversed site-specific logic where participants imagine a place, a specific place that they themselves have never seen or visited, through another place, which is their own. In contrast to the previous work where the visibility of the artist was a central pivot of the work, the artist is not visible in these photos. Rather than the artist's body as a phenomenological body of presence, this project works from and through the many different artists' global positions that make up the mosaic of images. The photos, all 408 of them, evoke a place through landscape, decorative motifs, ephemeral objects from daily life, the flotsam and jetsam of the everyday as well as the monumentally built environment. It is a networked collaboration that creates a dynamic shifting mosaic of images of not just an imagined Tehran, but conversely, of the people and places that participated. The specificity of where-in-the-world each image was taken is highly significant. In the work, Tehran can be the stony mountain landscapes of New Zealand, the deli windows of Brooklyn, the carpet sellers in Italy, the diamond-shaped paving stones in Denmark, or stacked supermarket shelves in Japan. This very tension between the pictured Tehran, the imagined Tehran and the 'real' Tehran can create, for viewers not in Tehran, a range of responses – at times the images evoke a sense of the absurd, they can seem uncanny, artful and inventive, wistful, melancholic or simply delightful and oftentimes they provoke a laugh out loud response. In this way the images are obviously not 'real' representations of Tehran, rather they perform the place called Tehran by calling forth images and scenes from the immediate world of each artist, in a non-stop kaleidoscope one could call 'performing Tehran.'

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## SEARCHING FOR RUE SIMON-CRUBELLIER

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The last work is a work I made in collaboration with sound artist Norie Neumark called “Searching for rue Simon-Crubellier.” It is the first project in a trilogy of work exploring actual and imagined relations to place and in particular mediated, networked public space through performative encounters. It was begun in Paris in 2004 while on a residency at the Cité International des Arts.

“Searching for rue Simon-Crubellier” takes as a point of departure the experience of being Australians in Paris and reading George Perec's book “Life a user's manual.” In this book Perec creates a puzzle of a novel set in a building located in the 17th arr. at number 11 rue Simon-Crubellier. Early on in “Life a

user's manual" Percec describes in detail exactly where this street would be. [12] Following Percec's directions we set out from the Cité and began our search in the 17th arr. In the first part of the work we 'performed' the encounters of Australian travellers in a foreign place looking for a particular street by stopping strangers in the street to ask directions. We were directed to one official location after another – the local council, the national archives, the library of maps, the planning department etc, until a month later, we ended up at Boulevard Morland, one block from the Cité, at the Commune de Paris in the department in charge of map-making for all of Paris.

In the course of this project – it was a month long process – we came to understand our ongoing activity as “performative encounters,” rather than performance art or conceptual art, and the video and audio material as no longer to be considered material just to make a work later – it too was the work. In a sense we were not documenting a separate event. The documenting was the event. It was at this point that the significance of media in public places became apparent. We realised that the media we carried was essential to having these sorts of encounters, and the audio and video apparatus created a performative space of encounter. For McGrath, non-performative representations allow the viewer an external relationship to the represented via representation, performative space brings the viewer into the space constructed. As in performative language, ... the space does not exist without the viewer/auditor's implication.” [13] And so it was with us.

This project has been exhibited several times, displaying the accumulated artefacts of its ongoing search, which makes each exhibition of the work distinct, prompting the question ‘where is the work?’ Is it the performative encounters on the streets of Paris? Is it the online Google searches that are undertaken for each exhibition? Is it the exhibition of the accumulated artefacts? The performative encounters invited people to play for a moment. It was an intervention into public space, yet we didn't consider it a participatory project. Rather our interest was in the possibilities of encounters with strangers – thus performing our own sense of Paris, in other words *performing Paris*.

## In Conclusion

In using the art historical term “site” to understand these works that are now playing out across public space, including the internet, I want to point to a paradox that looms into view in both current practice and our actual lived experience – the paradox of being in a place and not in a place; of being located and elsewhere at the same time. I have used “site” to focus on this paradox as on the one hand it foregrounds the lived experience rather than the technology, and on the other it troubles the notion of “place” as it is used by writers intent on a singular or essential relation with place. Although site suggests a fixed place, I am using unsitely to unhinge this fixity and to suggest a troubling and opening of the place of the work of art. Hence I use unsitely to evoke a space of tension, ambiguity and potential.

## References and Notes:

1. M. Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*(Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).
2. For a discussion of a 'horizontal logic' in art see B. Clavez, "Fluxus – Reference or Paradigm for Young Contemporary Artists," in *Visible Language* 39, no. 3 (2005).
3. K. Varnelis, ed., *Networked Publics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008).
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6. J. E. McGrath, *Loving Big Brother: Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space* (London: Routledge, 2004).
7. J. Meyer, "The Functional Site; or, the Transformation of Site-specificity," in *Space Site Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. E. Suderburg, 26 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
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9. MTA, "1 Year Performance Video (aka samHsiehUpdate)," Turbulence's official Web Site, <http://turbulence.org/Works/1year/info.php?page=bg> (accessed August 1, 2011).
10. J. E. McGrath, *Loving Big Brother: Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space* (London: Routledge, 2004), 51.
11. Andrea Grover and Jon Rubin, "Never Been to Tehran - Intro," Never Been to Tehran's Web Site, <http://www.neverbeentotehran.com/intro.html> (accessed August 1, 2011)
12. G. Perec, *Life: A User's Manual* (London: Vintage, Random House, 2003).
13. J. E. McGrath, *Loving Big Brother: Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space* (London: Routledge, 2004), 142.