TRACING THE CITY: EXPLORING THE PRIVATE EXPERIENCE OF PUBLIC ART THROUGH ART AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Martha Radice, Kim Morgan & Solomon Nagler

What happens when the private experience of art is disrupted or reframed by the chance encounters and events of urban public life? Conversely, what happens when modes of production of art are opened up for the public to intervene in artistic creation? We draw on Lefebvre's sociospatial theories to present the framework for our interdisciplinary research-creation project, and use it to interpret an art installation on a public city bus route.

Fig. 1. Time Transit, 2006, Kim Morgan (artist), Craig Gelowitz (engineer), TRLabs Regina, mobile media art installation on Regina city bus route #4. © Kim Morgan.
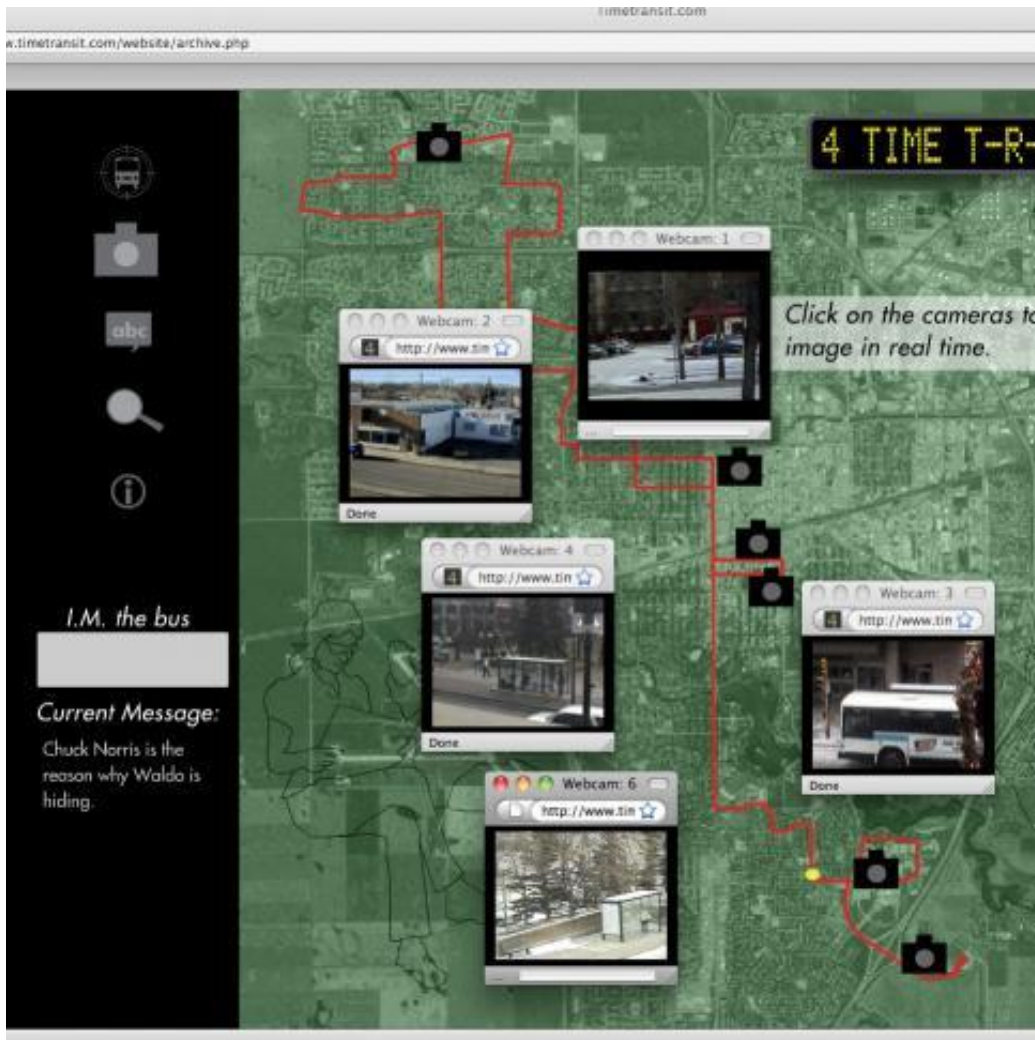
Fig. 2. Time Transit, 2006, Kim Morgan (artist), Craig Gelowitz (engineer), TRLabs Regina, camera page from website (http://timetransit.com/). © Kim Morgan.

Whatever its form and setting, contemporary art tends to privilege a one-on-one relation between the viewer and the art. In the gallery, people encounter artworks within the bubble of their own personal space. In the cinema, they watch films ensconced in the dark, in a comfortable chair. People feel emotional reactions to art within their own bodies and express them to only a small circle of companions. Their experience of art takes place in a social context, but is typically privately contained. This paper – written by an urban anthropologist, a multi-media installation artist and a film-maker, respectively – presents the premises of an interdisciplinary research-creation project that questions this one-to-one relationship. We posit that the public space of the city can challenge – and indeed can creatively be made to intervene in – the private space of engagement with art. We ask, what happens when the private experience of art is disrupted, unsettled or reframed by the chance encounters and events of urban public life and space? Conversely, what happens when modes of production of art are opened up so that the public can intervene in processes of creation?

In our individual practice, we are each driven by a concern to investigate the sociospatial dialectic: the idea that the organization of society is necessarily expressed in and constituted by the organization of

space, such that transformations in the one effect change in the other. Our collaborative project explores the urban sociospatial dialectic through a combination of creative processes in the visual and media arts, principally film and site-specific installations, and empirical qualitative research in the social sciences. [1]

The sociospatial dialectic and new media art

We draw on Henri Lefebvre's conceptual triad of the social production of space to theorize our work. [2] *Spatial practice,* or *perceived* space, consists of people's perceptions of society through space that arise in their ordinary activities and routines, and the material settings and objects involved in these – the commute to work and the bus, the weekend movie and the cinema, grocery shopping and the supermarket. *Representational space* is the realm of symbols and images, also called *lived* space, because spatial symbols can be 'lived,' non-verbal, ineffable or clandestine rather than explicitly articulated. Here, space can be invented and imagined, and critiques of society and culture are possible. The visual, rhetorical and performing artists, the chefs and the artisans, the urban shamans, priests and diviners work in this kind of space, adumbrating the meanings that attach us to cities. In contrast, *representations of space* are consciously codified by those who have the power to shape and define society, such as urban planners, technocrats and scientists. Also called *conceived* space, this is the view from above; representations of space contribute the kind of knowledge that makes the city immediately or potentially knowable, productive and 'useful'. For instance, an anthropologist makes representations of space in order to understand it more accurately. Of course, anthropological research also involves observing and invoking spatialized routines and symbols. Each kind of space cannot be fully understood in isolation from the others, but together they refract the nebulous concept of 'space' in useful ways.

The sociospatial dialectic has evolved in ways that Lefebvre could not have foreseen, thanks to new information and communications technologies (ICTs) that collapse time and distance: cellphones, GPS, social media, GIS, and Web 2.0 protocols, which allow us to track and construct complex representations of geographical and social data. This spread of virtual space and its intersection with the material alter our conceptions of what 'space' really is, challenging "three deeply embedded assumptions [...]. First, that space is three-dimensional and shared between actors. Second, space is either solid or void. And third, you can only be in one place at one time." [3]

The collapse of the virtual and the material also blurs boundaries between public space and private space. In urban anthropology, the distinction between public and private space is not based on ownership or function, but accessibility and visibility. Space is public when it brings strangers from all walks of life into view of and into contact with each other, as individuals and groups. [4] Private space, in contrast, implies invisibility and interaction with an already known, even intimate circle of friends and family. New ICTs bring the private realm into public space – as you hold an intimate telephone conversation with your sibling on the bus – and the public sphere into private space – as you post comments on a newspaper website in the comfort of your living room. What results is an expanded idea of presence in space, and a sort of open border between intangible and material space.

This open border has been extensively explored by artists. However, we have two criticisms of many of the artworks that we have reviewed so far. Firstly, artists often incorporate locative media technology in ways that shrink public space into the personal world of the cellphone or computer screen. For instance, dialling a number posted on a wall or even, thanks to GPS, simply approaching a site with a cellphone can deliver a lyrical representation of that location through the phone to the listener, but it's for that

listener's ears and eyes only. Our second criticism relates to public participation. The new layers of the sociospatial dialectic seem to have integrated seamlessly into our everyday lives, and yet this very seamlessness conceals the authoritarian nature of the media. GPS and GIS were developed primarily as tools for making representations of space (conceived space), to better survey, know and control territories and their inhabitants. Interactive art projects – representational spaces – make earnest attempts to use ICTs to place authorship in the hands of the users. However, they often retain a hierarchical relationship between the artists and the public participants by selecting and therefore censoring interactive content according to non-transparent protocols, even when there is no technical requirement to do so.

Time Transit

In contrast, we aim to build on work that uses ICTs to broadcast over a wide swathe of the city and to decentralize authorship. One such example is co-author Morgan's *Time Transit,* a temporary mobile art installation that combined art, engineering, public transit and digital media in order to explore the impact of ubiquitous technology on our daily lives, and its potential to generate both interconnection and alienation in urban public space. [5] The installation site was the City of Regina Transit bus route #4 (Walsh Acres/University), a route which, significantly, traverses neighbourhoods that vary greatly in class and culture, from the university through to the impoverished north central ('the hood') to wealthy new suburbs. The installation had three principal interactive public components: an operating city bus; six major bus stops along the route equipped with cameras that constantly filmed them; and a website with text messaging and email (http://timetransit.com/).

The bus was fitted with a GPS system, four flat-screen monitors, a computer and a wireless network connection. Two monitors were mounted near the front of the bus and two near the middle of the bus. Each set of two monitors displayed the same content, which meant all the riders could experience the installation more or less equally as they rode the bus (Figure 1). The monitors displayed images captured from the cameras that were focused on the six major bus stops along route #4. The right-hand screens showedreal-time images of the next filmed bus stop along the route (i.e. where the bus was going). The left-hand monitors displayed images from the most recent major bus stop, and these images were translucent stills layered on top of each other, to represent the cumulative, collective memory of gestures and activities from where the bus had been. The passengers were thus able to view what had happened at the last stop and what was happening at the next stop on the screens. The website (Figure 2) showed the real-time location of the bus as well as film from the bus stop cameras. More importantly, it allowed users to communicate with the bus by typing a text message into a sidebar textbox, which would be displayed as scrolling text on the monitors of the bus. The message could either be displayed in real time or be dropped at a particular zone along the route, in which case it would show as soon as the bus reached that location. In addition, people could send messages to the bus via cellphone text message or email. A display hierarchy was set up to give these latter messages priority over ones from the website.

Time Transit made plain the ways in which ICTs fold time and space in on each other. Firstly, the installation existed in virtual and real space simultaneously. People could experience it by riding the bus, by appearing at the bus stops that were monitored by cameras or by browsing the website where they could either view or interact with the installation in real time. Secondly, *Time Transit* cumulated past, present and future: riders could see where they had been and where they were going. They could watch themselves board the bus or see friends waiting for them at their destination. Thirdly, *Time Transit*played

with conditions of surveillance and anonymity. Using their private cellphones, riders could send messages to unknown others that would be displayed publicly on the bus screens. Website users submitted messages to known passengers: "Larry bring home milk." The installation thus permitted privacy and even intimacy to dwell in the very public space of the bus. As one art critic wrote, "*[Time Transit]* not only prompts up to consider the city and its citizens but prompts subtle shifts in our understanding of how we occupy and experience the city and how we shape it – and it shapes us." [6]

While *Time Transit* pointed to the ubiquity of surveillance technology and its effect on our perceptions of private and public space,[7] it also challenged our paranoia about such issues. Here the users controlled the content and data collected by the equipment. They could appear before, perform for or hide from the cameras, remotely operate them, watch and be seen on-screen. They could publish their own stories and read those of other passengers – tales of their day or experiences of the public transportation system, shout-outs to friends or cheers for local sports teams. Regulars posted stories as serials, in daily instalments. Poetry often scrolled across the bus monitor screens... and so did profanity. Following a series of pointed insults, and at the request of the bus company, the project engineers added filters to censor profanities, but riders could also put their considerable creativity to work in finding ways to curse without using the forbidden words, circumventing authorial regulations. In this way, members of the publiccontributed to the installation not only by precipitating the activity (using the bus, viewing the screens), but also by creating its content.

To use Lefebvre's terms, *Time Transit* used conceived space – surveillance technologies and new ICTs – to create a lived space – an art installation – by means of perceived space – the everyday bus journey. The representational space had the unexpected side-effect of creating a new practical representation of space, in that this interdisciplinary artistic inquiry led the project engineers to develop an open-source application to track the real-time location of buses in city transit systems. *Time Transit* will acquire another layer of conceived space when we use urban anthropological research methods to analyze and interpret the text messages that were collected over the life of the installation. What kinds of content did the installation prompt users to create? How did it vary over time? What were the recurrent or one-off themes and modes of communication?

Tracing the City through Art and Anthropology

Our *Tracing the City* project will similarly create and trace public, interactive art installations through new avenues of anthropological and artistic inquiry. We aim to use locative media (GPS and GIS), cellphones and Web 2.0 interfaces to engage 'the public' – understood as people *and* places/spaces – in artistic creation. By layering dynamic data over physical space – for example, an architectural plane – we will create an augmented spatial environment that then becomes a tangible interface for the public, who collaborate to create the ultimate meaning of the work. The resulting artworks will be exhibited (installed, projected) in outdoor and indoor public spaces, becoming part of the sensory experience of the city, and will also have a virtual presence on the web. The project therefore engages with 'the public' in terms of both space and society. One site we are particularly interested in is Halifax's downtown public library, not only because it is a quintessential urban public space, but also because, like Regina's bus #4, it already has a public membership, a set of regulars, and is well integrated into spatial practice.

The anthropological component of the project consists of building in feedback loops that will both investigate how members of the public experience our artworks, and generate material for creating subse-

quent artworks. The research-creation process will be enriched by the contributions of three collaborators whose practices are connected to our own: Ellen Moffat, a sound installation artist based in Saskatoon; Christopher Kaltenbach, an interdisciplinary designer based in Halifax (NSCAD University) and Tokyo; and Erin Wunker, a cross-genre literary scholar at Dalhousie University. We are keen to find out how both the interdisciplinary collaboration among the research team and the interactive collaboration of the public will affect the structure and content of the artwork.

To come full circle back to Lefebvre, we will be engaging perceived, lived and conceived space in particular ways. We want not only to emphasize but to amplify the interdependence of imaginative space and everyday space: we want to bring spatial practice (perceived space) into representational spaces (lived space), making quotidian, routine experiences of the city alter and interfere with its resonant artistic symbols. This means bringing the banal events and objects of urban public space, both routine and haphazard, into the imaginative but typically personal world of art and culture. Moreover, by doing interdisciplinary 'research-creation', we want to draw on representations of space to make representational spaces – and, indeed, vice versa. Dialogue between artists and social scientists should enable the latter to creatively explore the conduct and consequences of arts-based inquiry, and the former to conduct rigorous research, particularly with respect to public interaction with and experience of their works. We recognize the paradox of, on the one hand, working to subvert and decentralize creative authorship, and on the other, turning creative processes into 'objects of study' and 'sources of data' that potentially nourish the commodification of urban symbols. But however codified and commodified they may be, representations of space still provide the knowledge that underpins our understanding of spatial practices and representational spaces. We take the opportunity of interdisciplinary collaboration to try working in the interstices between perceived space, lived space and conceived space. In these ways, we aim to make the public space of the city creatively intervene in the private space of engagement with art.

References and Notes:

1. Tracing the City: Interventions of Art in Public Space is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Research-Creation in the Fine Arts award no. 848-2010-0019.
2. Henri Lefebvre, The Social Production of Space, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
3. Mike Crang, "Urban Morphology and the Shaping of the Transmissable City," in City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action 4, no. 3 (2000): 303-15.
4. See e.g. Lyn H Lofland, The Public Realm: Exploring the City's Quintessential Social Territory (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1998); Sophie Watson, City Publics: The (Dis)Enchantments of Urban Encounters (London: Routledge, 2006).
5. The Time Transit Project Team were: Kim Morgan (Artist in Residence, TRLabs Regina); Craig Gelowitz (Research Engineer, TRLabs Regina, University of Regina); Bill Friedrich (Computer Programmer, Co-op Student SaskTel, U Regina); Lee Henderson (Media Artist, Research Associate); Jane Uttaranakorn (Graphic Designer, Graduate Student, U Regina); and Laura Wiley (Student Engineer, U Regina).
6. Kim Morgan, "Artist Remaps City in New Ways," Leaser Post (Regina), November 29, 2006, http://www.canada.com/reginaleaderpost/news/arts_life/story.html?id=19e2dcd6-a7c6-4caf-9704-1ad2ecd65135 (accessed June 7, 2012).
7. See Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).