

FUTURE GUIDES FOR CITIES

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Participation on social networks through location-aware devices has created an intriguing relation between online information and physical location. However, does this potential invade our homes or create the possibility of a more playful, chance encounter? My presentation investigates this question by probing city maps created through online videos people produce and upload.

Above the earth, I am scanning. I travel a landscape of images, formed by the occupiers of the city of E-Maps created by amateurs. I have a bird's eye view of a neighbourhood and search for moments of video wedged into the terrain, video fragments that tell me where to go. Weightlessness leads to orientation. I'm looking for something, I am looking for someone to meet.

I start this essay with a personal experience, observing a private moment now made public. Starting with a personal experience, this text examines private narratives in public spaces and the relation of information to city. The text and my experience explore the spatial and social constructions of the relationship between private and public, the notion of stranger and strangeness, and how social and spatial homogeneity are constructed and mediated by the potential social impacts of disclosing information online. The critical locus of this project emerges from my role as an artist working with media and performance over the last decade, creating site-specific performance and urban interventions that explore the relations which occur during the self-production of media and city.

I sit in front of a computer screen and observe the physical construction of a house. From an apartment in Berlin, I watch a collection of 24 YouTube videos of an event that takes place in a different city, in another part of the country. A woman and a man, Antje and Carsten, begin to build a life together. The creation of a home, and what eventually takes place inside it, is dutifully recorded on camera and put online for a global audience. The videos are superimposed on a satellite image of the city, which is how I have found the videos and now watch them. Over the course of a year, a house emerges from a vacant lot on the edge of the city, and is eventually painted and then furnished. Parties take place there. Friends are invited inside. I observe the social construction of a home. I am in the home, and they invite me inside by making and posting these videos. It is a publication of privacy, a state of being private in a public, digital space. As I watch the house go up, I wonder where the house is and what it would be like to live there. I wonder how it would feel to be invited into this space, what it would be like to meet them.

I am now in the house.

video title: House of C & A is rapidly going forward. Work is being done on the heating, plumbing, walls and electricity[1]

He walks, breathless. The walls are up but still lack drywall and paint. The floors are wet from the rain; there is no glass in the windows. She is alone, all of the men have gone. She takes over the camera, records abstract forms and cavities that will soon be a home. A stairway goes to the next floor. We are

now on the first floor in the children's room, next to the hallway, near the stairs that lead up to the attic. Below is the ground floor. Next we come to the bedroom. From the long hallway we end up in the bathroom. There's the toilet. A moment later we are in small guest room, still without a floor.

The exponential surge in the production of online video and their migration from private to public archives began in the very recent past. The availability of affordable cameras, bandwidth, production and distribution technologies have made it relatively simple to create, publish and distribute moving images online—generating an immense and ever-increasing collection of personal narratives, self-representative acts and both conscious and unconscious performances that emerge through the self-production of media and are available to anybody with an Internet connection. Depictions of birthday celebrations, fondue parties, the construction of new homes, barbecues and birthdays, feeding babies and holidays, performances, speeches and other testimonials take place in the private home, and yet can and do now have a global audience—of strangers. The willingness of people to publicly broadcast themselves suggests different social phenomena. On one hand it creates an inquiry into the kinds documented actions that emerge through self-produced media. On the other, it points to the shifting boundaries between the public and private realms, creating a tension between the public archive and private experience, between the 'boundaryless home' and outside world.

The tension between the private and the public is made even more evident through the contemporary practice of geotagging information. Videos found on the information space of the web, and associated with a URL, are now finding themselves in the real world as well. This happens through the process called geotagging, or attaching spatial coordinates to pieces of data, such as a video clips and photographs. Geo-tags can be used to explore a city, in much the same way that search engines are used to explore the virtual, digitized space of the Web. Spatial coordinates can be added to data deliberately by the user; however, many times people do not even realize that location information is added to their files. For example, current generation Apple 3G iPhones automatically embed highly detailed geo-coordinates whenever an image or video is taken with the camera. Concurrently, Public APIs—Application Protocol Interfaces—provided by YouTube, Twitter and Flickr, make it relatively easy to call up, compile and categorize publicly available data that is generated by these software platforms.

Several articles and research projects by concerned computer security experts and hackers have addressed the potential dangers of—deliberately or inadvertently—adding location information to data. Please Rob Me[2] I Can Stalk U[3] and Creepy[4] are examples of software projects that illustrate how easy it is to collect location-specific digital data and display it on a map—providing useful information, such as a person's daily routine, for the would-be stalker or home robber. In "Cybercasing the Joint: On the Privacy Implications of Geo-Tagging", [5] Gerald Friedland and Robin Summer try to raise critical awareness of emerging privacy threats that they term 'cybercasing' in which geotagged information can be used to lead to real-world invasions, stalking events, or attacks. In one cybercasing scenario, they attempt to identify the home addresses of people away on vacation. Working with a script they wrote using a YouTube API, they used a keyword 'kids' to locate home videos that people publish of their children. Using a sampling site of downtown Berkeley, CA and a radius of 60 miles (approximately 96 km), they were able to find 1000 videos of children—the maximum number allowed by YouTube. Expanding the vacation range to 1000 miles (approximately 1600km) they increased the initial amount to 50,000 videos. By comparing the two data sets and identifying only those videos made by corresponding users, they were able to find 106 videos that showed people who were away on vacation. From the 106, 12 videos looked like suitable candidates for 'cybercasing' and potential home robbery. One video was uploaded by a man vacationing in the Caribbean, who had posted several videos from a beach within a period of several days. When not vacationing on the beach, he lived with his children in Albany, CA. [6]

The scene of a home invasion that Friedland and Summer describe plays out a recurring image where a contested space which is emblematic of the tension between the private and public is made evident. A stranger comes to someone's home with nothing but bad intentions. The public, as something external and unknown, is thus, or at least potentially, a malevolent entity and threat to the private domain. Anthony Vidler refers to this as an uncanny moment, where the home which "pretends to afford the utmost security, opens itself up to a secret intrusion of terror". [7] To understand this fear, it is perhaps useful to first provide a historical analysis of where this fear comes from. For this we must return to the 19th century. Scenes of home invasion make their first appearances within the uncanny stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann.[8] In a recurring theme a secure, intimate domestic environment is invaded by a foreign and threatening presence, rendering a familiar setting now unfamiliar and strange. Hoffmann's stories, written in the late 19th century, mirror the socio-economic traumas experienced during the rise of Industrial Capitalism and subsequent emergence of modern cities, which occurred in throughout the 18th and 19th century. The transition to Capitalism created an emerging bourgeois class, "the by-products of industrial capitalism", [9] who were still insecure in terms of their social identity and position, [10] as well as a working class with whom they had an adversarial relationship. The transition to a capitalist system introduced new forms of buildings and involved a fundamental change in how public and private lives were both lived and perceived. [11]

European capitals were being physically transformed in the latter half of the 19th Century, reorganized to reflect new bourgeois values: the control of flow, and visibility of people and public display based on public spectacle of the commodity. [12] The total redesign of Paris, which was carried out by Baron Haussmann and Emperor Napoleon III after the revolution of 1848, defined by the building of straight, wide boulevards, [13] was carried out to promote the flow of people, traffic and commerce. But this was undertaken also to control the working class and assert the power of the state through the monumental architecture to "celebrate the values of the new bourgeoisie by prominently housing this class along the boulevards". As Richard Sennett notes, [14] the "right to the city" was defined as something for the bourgeois class, who shopped in department stores, sat in cafes whose windows faced the street, and strolled down Haussmann's expansive boulevards. Public spaces were therefore redesigned to promote a certain type of display and homogenous mix of people, and to make it very clear that some individuals did not belong within the new 'public'. The commodified world became one of appearances, where interactions in public space were not continuous, but based on silent observation. Sennett [15] describes the middle class 'public' experience of this time as one of being within crowd of strangers that are of the same socio-economic class and yet observe each other in silence, without interaction.

Faced with a complete erosion and radical shifting of the parameters of public life, the private, middle-class, home became increasingly seen as an idealized refuge, as well as a morally superior space compared with the impersonal and threatening outside world of strangers. [16] The bourgeois home became a protected domain of domestic intimacy from where the first 'real' relationships originated, which made both the transgression and potential invasion of the private home by the outside world as an ever-present source of anxiety and fear. As Sennett concludes, "By contrast, 'private' meant a world where one could express oneself directly as one was touched by another person; private meant a world where interaction reigned, but it must be in secret [. . .] In the spectacle, few men play an active role". [17]

The social and economic construction of the identity of places has have been further challenged by the emergence of the global economic networks within local geographies. The precariousness of work and identity of the worker, generated by the post-Industrial traumas of the late 20th century, has created a renewed value for place, but in a manner that follows the logic of exclusion and intolerance. [18] This creates new architectures and social formations and paradigms that are based on design paradigms of

sameness, and that impede and possibly prohibit mixing with strangers. Modern fear plays out in home security systems, gated communities and public surveillance as well as “unending reports of danger emitted by the mass-media”. Nan Ellin [19] also suggests that “retribalization” and “nostalgia” are modern responses to this fear. Retribalization is a “desire to preserve (or invent) differences”, through the formation of distinct groups that identify with each other and have similar intentions and interests, be they regional, ethnic, cultural or ideological. These formations have been “assisted by transnational culture flows of products, capital, people, and ideas, as well as media”. Ellin further elaborates that an accompaniment to retribalization is a sense of nostalgia, a return to the past, to the womb, to the mother, manifested in a renewed interest in architectures that represent the return to 'traditional' values and institutions, such as the return to domesticity and the single family dwelling, a reconstruction of the notion of home. The establishment of a community based on shared interests and desires and a growing 'privatism' therefore conspires to produce homogenized social spaces, in which individuals do not mix with others.

Eli Pariser [20] elaborates on these paradigms of sameness when he describes how personalization works in determining what kind of information we become exposed to on the Web. Google, news sources, and social media platforms utilize algorithms that tailor results according to 'relevance' based on previous user habits, creating 'gated communities' of information by filtering out access to new ideas, people and information. This creates a shift in how information flows online and generates “your own personal unique universe of information that you live online”. Faced with digitized information gatekeepers it is difficult to have any sense of public life, because the possibility of encountering people and phenomena that do not necessarily fit into what a search engine decides is one's worldview is hindered, and perhaps denied.

Friedland and Summer's cybercasing study, though developed to promote public awareness, has the unintended effect of perpetuating an 'architecture of fear' (from Nan Ellin), bringing the 19th Century uncanny experience of the home invasion into a 21st century unease about the revelatory power of technology, the risk of personal disclosure and insecurity over identity, the notion of borders and a general sense of place. By making people fear each other, what occurs is reemphasis on the problematic notion of a public that is a strange and malevolent threat to the individual and private domain.

Media theorist Geert Lovink, [21] when recently asked to comment on the future of Net politics, both challenges social and informational homogeneity and actively seeks out the foreign and strange when he says: "Let's dream up unlikely relations, spontaneous encounters (and how to solidify them) and technologies that actively derail everyday routines [...] What's missing is the 'sweet stranger' element [...] What's out there are random encounters with a cause. Networks are not just replicates of old ties. They bear the potential of something other, of becoming society. Let's leave the remediation age behind us and start to fool around with dangerous design". By taking up this position, Lovink embraces the potential of the uncanny within a networked society, by looking at the experience of disorientation upon encountering something that resides outside the comfortable notion of the everyday. Spontaneity, randomness and even elements of danger can possibly lead toward something that is unlike the self as well as the communities of which people are part.

Thinking about Lovink's statement, I cannot help but imagine how dangerous design could be mapped onto cities. Going back to the contemporary practice of geotagging media, if online information is becoming ever more merged with physical geography, and being produced by people actually living in the city, how could unlikely encounters be experienced in urban space using this media? If media is now connected back onto the city, what could future, alternate ways of exploring urban spaces be?

Perhaps mapping information on the web and transposing or layering back onto the city can lead to unexpected journeys towards places and people, and in way that embrace the risk, subversion, playfulness and the potential of something other these potential encounters could entail. This could be described as a type of dangerous design—media that acts as guides towards strangers.

At the risk of leaving these questions hanging, and possibly lead to even more, I want to return to a personal experience of traveling through a city and trying to find the house that I have watched being built. Having already—virtually—been in the home, I am now traveling towards it. I have a computer on my lap; the satellite imagery and video tell me where to go. After a few dead ends, a wrong turn down a road, a false ending at a cow pasture, I finally end up at the geotagged, recently-constructed family house. The house is now completely finished, lace-curtains fitted within the windows, the outside façade painted a cheerful color of yellow. There is no car parked outside but I am hoping that they are at home. I deliberately transgress the ethical, critical, geotagged space by standing at a threshold of the most contested space of conflict between private and public space, the social and physical border between the private family home and the outside world. Following Friedland and Summer, I have become a 'cybercaser', but this time I am benevolent. I am standing on the threshold and ready to transgress it.

I stand on the doorstep and ring the doorbell.

References and Notes:

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