

Paysage technologique, théories et pratiques autour du GPS
 Andrea Urlberger | 2005 – 2007 |

Technologie

Théorie

Art

Texte

Entretiens

Documents

Texte

Entretiens

Bibliographie

Texte

Entretiens

Œuvres

[Art — Entretiens](#) | [Blast Theory](#) | [Masaki Fujithata](#) | [GPS Movies](#) | [Esther Polak](#) | [Hendrik Sturm](#)

Esther Polak : Entretien avec Andrea Urlberger

Amsterdam, 8 février 2007

Esther Polak,

Artiste hollandaise née en 1962, elle a étudié les arts graphiques à Amsterdam. À côté de ses activités d'artiste, elle a travaillé comme critique d'art pour différents magazines. Elle vit et travaille à Amsterdam.

Esther Polak — Description of 3 GPS Projects

Amsterdam Real time, 2002

Amsterdam Real time is a project that I developed with artists and Waag society in Amsterdam and it is a project where we had about 60 people for 6 or 7 weeks carrying a GPS device with them in combination with a GPRS (mobile phones transmission). They just walked through the city doing what they usually do. The device transmitted the GPS data, it was also sent to the exhibition space where there was a big beamer that was beaming all the traces together and the map of Amsterdam emerged out of it. One specific aspect of the project was that we didn't just have the combination of all the tracks but also the individual tracks of each person on a separate print out.

[Amsterdam Real Time, 2002](#)

Projet qui a impliqué environ 60 personnes, lesquelles ont porté pendant 6 ou 7 semaines un récepteur GPS. Elles marchaient dans la ville comme d'habitude. Dans l'espace d'exposition, un grand projecteur a projeté tous ces tracés de parcours en même temps. Une carte d'Amsterdam a ainsi émergé.

Milk Project, 2004

[Milk Project, 2004](#)

In the *Milk Project* the approach was similar but we did it differently. There, we investigated on dairy transport, from the cow to the consumer's mouth. The cow was in Latvia and the consumer in the Netherlands. We followed everyone involved in the transportation with a GPS, all their lines combined to one very long line and they all told a us about their daily life based on their own GPS tracks.

En retraçant par différents moyens, notamment le Global Positioning System, le parcours d'un fromage de Lettonie, le Rigamont, de la production de lait dans les fermes lettonnes à sa consommation à Amsterdam, *Milk Project* propose des

investigations et des représentations territoriales à travers une exploration tout à fait spécifique de l'économie globale. Constitué de représentations à partir de coordonnées GPS, de récits et de photographies, MILKproject forme une figure riche autour d'un événement qui intègre à la fois un espace global et local.

Nomadic Milk, 2006-2008

Now I'm developing with a new team another project on milk in Nigeria, but in a totally different situation. There is a double dairy economy there, one is controlled by the nomadic Fulani people who travel around with their cows because one part of the country at a certain period of the year is too dry and hot and then the other part becomes too moist, so they need to move constantly in order to keep their cows healthy and away from diseases. However, the average Nigerian consumes condensed milk cans or powder milk that they can get from any shop which is good for the global market, it comes in Lagos from the harbour and then through different distribution networks finds its way all over Nigeria and people can use it for their dairy consumption. We found out that these two economies were both involved with mobility and with milk so we wanted to make a double portrait of it.

[*NomadicMilk, 2006-2008*](#)

Nomadic Milk – Esther Polak – Michiel de Lange. Ce projet, actuellement en préparation et dont la réalisation est prévue pour 2008, a lieu au Nigeria. Conservant l'idée d'exploration spatiale à travers des parcours laitiers, il ne s'agit plus de suivre le lait de sa fabrication à sa consommation, mais plutôt de saisir grâce au GPS, deux différentes formes de distribution et, à travers celles-ci, émerge une partie du paysage contemporain africain.

L'entretien

Andrea Urlberger :

Can you explain your GPS projects from Amsterdam *Real Time to Milk*?

Esther Polak :

Back in 2002, I went on a trip with a couple of friends on a lake in the region of Friesland, Netherlands. I had never seen a GPS before and my friends were using it for sailing. So we went for a boat trip on the lake and at the end of the day they showed me the whole journey on screen, which was entirely recorded. It was a very rough drawing, with some scratches on it but it showed very different things although it looked very simple. We could see the form of the lake as if we had scratched it, as a child would do by filling a drawing with colours. It obviously showed the direction of the wind, and the very specific decisions we made would appear through the scratches, such as the place where we stayed for lunch, the tours and detours we chose. Very personal decisions came out of it. There were actually three layers of reality, including our landscape experience. So, I found it immediately very fascinating. A couple of weeks later, I was biking through Amsterdam and realised that if we gave all the inhabitants of the city a GPS, they wouldn't be able to get an order of image that a map could provide, since we can only walk the streets. You never realise that you are always forced to walk the map of a city.

So, I started to think of a possible way to combine a GPS with a mobile phone and make it phone through its data all the time. Then, people would be able to draw a map in real time, as when you see a plane leaving a white line in the air. That was the starting point of my project, and with that idea in mind, I went to the Waag society in Amsterdam which is the institute for all the new media, and asked them whether they would be interested in developing this project. They accepted it and we made it in less than a year, it went really fast. The project was then invited by Rixc and Riga to be in one of their conferences, and I had to present it. This is how I met Ieva, who was first very sceptical about the whole technology used and found very annoying the idea that people can follow you all the time. But later, she had an experience of it herself and was captivated by it and came up with the following idea: Could we investigate this as a tool to do something in the daily life? That triggered me and I found it a very good idea to try out

suggested me and I found it a very good idea to try out.

We had an opportunity to do a workshop in Latvia a couple of weeks later. After some brainstorming we came up with the idea of the milk collector who goes from a farm to another and we thought that it would give us a very interesting pattern. It could have been a postman in the city. We were interested in how the milkman connects all the farms. From there, we developed this milk project step by step and I have to say it was very successful but also inspiring. Indeed, in Amsterdam we had this concept in which participants would have a print out of their own route and we realised it. Sort of unexpectedly, people had very strong emotional reactions. There's this guy who was looking at the print out of his own route, who was so impressed of watching himself in 2002 that he was thinking of showing it to his grand children. He was only 24 at that time; he didn't even have children yet.

This anecdote illustrated very well people's experience of their own routes' print out as if it was a portrait; a very personal and subjective one, very connected to oneself. In the Amsterdam project, we did not have anything to incorporate people's reaction, so we decided in the milk project to really focus on this aspect. We had this workshop situation concept where everyone that had participated would be gathered (even their families were welcome). It took a whole evening to watch their routes and get them to comment on them. We reported the reactions associating them to their tracks on the basis of a portrait. Therefore, we can say that it is as much about people's reaction as interaction and investigation on how can new visualisations of GPS be used as a storytelling tool. The question raised was: does it evoke all the stories of daily life as much as if I had come up with a microphone asking "what do you do every day?" or "What time do you get up?" or "What is it like to be a milk man or someone that everyone gets their cheese from?" And of course it's very different, the tracks speak for themselves, it is very much about reflection and mediation in a very human and simple interactive way.

Andrea Urlberger :

What about the Amsterdam project, did you get this interaction without the GPS?

Esther Polak :

Not really, I was working completely differently there. I trained as a painter so I have this very eclectic art background. I was never really into new media, that's why I used my own skills and my interest in depiction. I've always been fascinated by landscape depiction, experiences of space and by the history of visual arts, which has always been an important issue. So I have a strong awareness of the history of landscape painting, depiction of space and conceptual art from the seventies. The latter is a very important reference. "Reference area" is something I always fall back on because of the various experiences of space that took place in the 70's with mapping, the Land Art pieces of Richard Long and the big earth works of Robert Smithson for example and how he takes rocks out of landscapes and brings them into galleries showing us the difference between the real outdoors and how he represents it indoors. All these kinds of experiments that have been taking place are sort of a path for me. Sometimes, when I get stuck on how to continue I'd rather go back to this background than rely on media theories. That is more my theoretical background.

This influence is a solid ground to work on. In Nigeria for example, there are very interesting landscapes to investigate on for an autonomist artist because Africa evokes many social economic questions. We planned in our project there to mainly experience space with people, which gave us a sort of freedom. Working that way sets up a very equal relationship with people from Africa or Latvia or wherever because you're not there to solve a problem. We were just joking and having fun with the farmers. Some of them thought we would bring them medicine for the cows or new technology to enlarge the amount of milk that they produce. To which we responded that we were just there to have a good time and get something interesting out of this experience. There was a family who refused straight away,

and were not interested in working with us if we were not going to give them something back, which was fair enough.

It was very equal, we were clear about our intentions by telling them that the only thing they would gain from collaborating with us would be to show the way they live to a big audience. We told them that they should be curious about it, it would give visibility to their lifestyle, and that there were advantages and disadvantages. When some of them agreed it was already a success for me, a good start.

When you look at a specific kind of landscape you get a certain image that doesn't necessarily tell you anything about the reality of the space. It's very interesting for me to try to make visible the mobility that is expressed by the landscape as a very strong reality, and the economic power behind it. Like this example that I often use, in Netherlands, they have been keeping very carefully meadows where sheep used to go since the 18th century even though they tarnished because they were very poor grounds (German speaking). Painters painted those landscapes and brought them to city houses and suddenly they gained in aesthetic value and now people still try to keep those landscapes as they were in paintings as a sort of moment.

Now the whole economy behind the landscapes has changed because people from the city now have to pay in order to keep those landscapes intact and not have them economically developed, they are only there as a painting, as an aesthetic thing that people can recreate. There even are subsidies to keep the sheep there because they are needed to maintain the landscape. So this is a very interesting turnaround, the economic reality behind the landscape is also very important to me but not as a social economical activist point of view but just as an artistic work.

Andrea Urlberger :

But your picture of the landscape the one you have just described isn't really similar to a painter's one, we can't see everything such as details or colours?

Esther Polak :

That's exactly the point. We live in different times; the ways to describe landscapes are endless. If it was still possible to go out there with a box of oil paint and your canvass and sit down and paint nicely as others did in the past, that would be much easier than developing all these new technology tools. But let's not forget that going out to the fields and paint the landscapes like impressionists did, is also very technological because this was only possible when they invented the tube. So, when GPS was invented a new way of depicting landscapes aroused.

When paper was invented, going out to do sketches and go back to the studio and paint it afterwards was new. When travelling to Italy for example and going back to north of Europe to paint what they had seen, the feelings for the landscape and the light had already changed.

First you get the evolution of technology and then the artists follow and they are able to make a new depiction of landscape.

Andrea Urlberger :

In your representation of the landscape, is it more a type of writing, narrative media or media with which you can produce maps?

Esther Polak :

Well the thing with GPS is that it is still very new and many artists exploit all the different possibilities in very different ways. That is what is interesting about it. Personally, I like to make maps, moving maps, maps that don't just show static landscapes as a fixed reality but as a changing one. New technology and especially GPS brings about the possibility and even the need to show that time is changing. A painting makes you feel that the landscape is still there. Thanks to new technologies it seems like everything is very flexible. Especially in the

Netherlands, the landscapes change so fast because of the weather and we are very aware of it, so it's a combination of possibilities and what really happens around you. Landscapes do change all the time alongside the changing economy.

Andrea Urlberger :

So you like to tell a story with your work, thanks to the directions for example?

Esther Polak :

This is not my aim, it's not like an art piece that you would see in a museum and enjoy for a couple of minutes. I could do that but what we like to do is get a device and experience the landscape through it.

Andrea Urlberger :

You're recording mobility.

Esther Polak :

Yes, I'm more of the recording type (laughs), I like to record and see what I can do with a new way of visualising. In the new project in Nigeria for instance, I developed this totally new visualisation tool because we were confronted to the fact that in Africa people are not so used to maps as we are in Europe. And I found out that they were more likely to communicate their routes by drawing on the ground with sticks. So, now we are developing a robot, and the idea is to upload the GPS data to the robot and it will just write the route that you took both in space and in time. For example, you get up, you leave your house at 9 am, you go to the bakery to get some bread, you go to your work place, you stay there for a couple of hours and on the way back home you go to see some friends and finally go home. You give me the device, I will take the GPS data out of it and upload it to the robot and it will draw the exact form of your route, the specific detours that you made when you were outdoors or inside a place...

The robot has a bottle integrated in it, we will fill it with white sand (it works like a sand glass, it is always pouring) and it will draw your route, so if you were walking slowly, it will draw a thicker line, if you are in your office and stay there for a couple of hours, the robot will just stand there and pour a lot of sand until you get big heap of sand. So there will be a very clear and simple pattern at the end. This is what we are now developing for the Nigeria project. Those are the means we are going to employ to communicate with people. In Latvia we had projection screens and the visualisation was very elaborated, we could project in people's kitchens or wherever, whereas in Nigeria, because we were mainly working with Nomads who lived in huts it was more appropriate to draw thanks to the GPS on the ground.

Actually it is like a printer on the ground. In different circumstances you have to use different visualisation tools and when a situation is new, you can still invent it yourself. It's not like photography when you just have to buy a very expensive camera that is already developed by Canon or Nikon. Here, you can still make the tool yourself. All I hope is that my idea is new and that no one has thought of it before since it is so simple, but I did my research on the internet before anyway (laughs). [German speaking]

In Nigeria we couldn't test the robot because it wasn't very developed yet, but we brought the bottles and filled them in with very nice white sand and let people explain their route that we drew afterwards on the ground. It was a good test to see if it was the best way to communicate.

Andrea Urlberger :

Why have you chosen nomads to work with?

Esther Polak :

My nephew who lives in Abudja triggered the whole idea, by telling me that he could see groups of Fulani people in their couch from his office window, just

passing by through the big city of Abuja and that they trade everywhere in the northern frontier. He asked me ironically: "Can you not think of a project because I would be interested in following these people for a couple of days?" he was joking because I had asked before, if he could think of a project that would make me come to Nigeria so I could have an excuse to come with my team. And that's how everything started. It was very interesting to have an anthropological and even sentimental approach and see how these people can still live in old ways. We found out later that milk consumed by average Nigerians isn't the one produced by the Fulani. They buy powder milk or European milk that is available all over Nigeria. We looked at the package and it was written Friesland!!! Fifty percent of the products come from this Friesland farm; there is actually still cooperation with the Netherlands through milk. So, basically they get the cheapest milk they can get from markets. They have a very interesting distribution system, so we decided to start thinking of the mobility pattern of the Fulani's routes and the distribution companies' one.

Andrea Urlberger :

Do you have a critical position on the fact that they import milk from Europe?

Esther Polak :

No, and it's not the aim of my project, there are enough people in the world investigating on this issue. I'm more interested in people's daily life and experience. For example, there was a driver whose grandfather was a Fulani and he had many theories on how to judge the quality of the Fulani milk on the market. They would never sell him bad milk but he liked both Dutch and Fulani milk. When you know about globalisation and its consequences in Africa you're bound to have prejudice but I came with an open mind and all I was interested in was the way it is produced and have people's opinion on the situation and how they find it. The classical artist point of view is from the people they meet and their experience of space, which gives them a goal and they can only be open minded.

Andrea Urlberger :

So the project was about linking economy and landscape?

Esther Polak :

Exactly, it was also about the experience of space. Getting milk from a cow has always been very technological, making it and getting cheese out of it is also a whole process. You need to get specific products to obtain all this, and make the cheese good quality.

Andrea Urlberger :

Isn't the difference great between digital technology and milk production?

Esther Polak :

Yes and no. As soon as they can, the nomads get mobile phones in order to keep each other informed when they split up. It's a great communication tool for them it speeds up the whole process but it also enables them to have a good knowledge of the landscape I guess. They already use mobile phones, so we are thinking of combining them with GPS, we are wondering about the devices we could use.

Andrea Urlberger :

Could you work with other technological tools than GPS?

Esther Polak :

Yes, I worked with fold cast and sound recorders before, but I wish to continue with the GPS. Every time you start a project something new comes out of it, as in the Amsterdam project when we would get interesting reactions that made us even more curious and willing to make it sharper. In the *Milk Project* we found out that the visualisation was important so we wanted to develop new ways of visualising

the visualisation was important, so we wanted to develop new ways of visualising.

Andrea Urlberger :

Why did the new project stop ?

Esther Polak :

Yes, the basic concept was that we wanted to find transportation from Latvia to Netherlands, but there, most of the transport means would take us to Italy. By the end of the project, the roads to Netherlands were cut off for all sorts of reasons, but partly because Latvia joined the EU. The importation and exportation rules had changed and factories in Latvia did not need to use certain roads for imports anymore and exports had become much easier.

We had already planned to stop the project as soon as we would connect Netherlands to Latvia. A lot of changes can happen quickly so we can't plan everything, since researches and recordings take about a year. For example if you want to make a documentary on economic issues, the project has to be flexible because of all the changes that can occur. The fact that our project stopped is also interesting, it makes it even more real and challenging. We don't want to give the impression that the nomads still live in very ancient ways and that they haven't evolved.

Andrea Urlberger :

What do you think about the GPS and locative media ?

Esther Polak :

It's a subject that I never dealt with in my project because there are already many artists covering this area. It is also important to have non-critical projects because they still raise awareness. For example in Amsterdam real time, the image is so strong, you immediately internalise this possibility and then maybe a year or two later, you realise that your mobile phone always covered where you were. But for me having done this project I will always know the effect of reality. The *Amsterdam Real Time project* is abstract in a way, but what we did is taking place all the time. Mobile phone companies do have those data, not as precise but it does exist. It is being collected as long as you keep your phone turned on.

Andrea Urlberger :

Do you think it changes our lives ?

Esther Polak :

Yes, of course. It will have even more effects on our lives. Now, the whole combination of GPS in phones is going to be available for consumers. The prediction is that in the next year a lot of functionalities for combinations of GPS will be included in mobile phones for commercial or entertainment use or for just finding a route, some people will have a device others a GPS. I'm very curious of what is going to come out of that.

Andrea Urlberger :

No one could read maps anymore?

Esther Polak :

That is what's predicted, people won't have the skill of map reading. It would be interesting to know if it will turn out to be true. On the other hand we would be able to move faster we would never get lost. We never know; if the economic crisis finds it way through the big growth of new technological developments that will happen in 20 years.

Andrea Urlberger :

Do you think that the possibility of controlling everything will change something?

Esther Polak :

Esther Polak :

It's already changed, look at truckers, they used to be free, nobody could see what they were doing, they could have some extra smuggle, or business or make detours via someone they would want to meet, they could have their own life in a truck, they could sleep whenever they wanted, now they have those radio work times so they need to stop sleeping, which is not safer, so they're totally controlled. You should ask them because they live the change everyday.

Yes it will happen. In the past you could disappear for hours. I did change our lives. In Nigeria, the traders could lose businesses. Even if the competition now is harder, mobile phones made it easier for them. One man told me how convenient it was for his business because he was reachable at any time.

Andrea Urlberger :

Are you working with engineers or do you handle the technical part by yourself?

Esther Polak :

No, I always collaborate but for the visualisation in the Milk project I designed everything on my own but had a close collaboration with software developers and always asked them about all the possibilities and for advice. I'm always looking for partners to work with, because it has to be teamwork. I could not realise these projects on my own, it would be boring. One of my partners is very into "the mobile phone anthropology", and more generally into the philosophy of technology, he has a social anthropology background. He's collaborating with me on this stage of the project.

Andrea Urlberger :

Are you working with people that are only interested in the technological part?

Esther Polak :

I try to find people that have skills that I haven't got, but also who are committed to the project and have a personal enthusiasm. There are people I work with more often for totally different tasks and projects. I don't always plan or have a specific team.

Andrea Urlberger :

Is it easy to work in a team and with different artists?

Esther Polak :

It depends on me, it's my responsibility to care of the team, to have an eye and an ear on their approach so that they can also perform the best of their capacities. This is something every manager faces and I have never been trained for that. But I like working with people in general even if sometimes we can disagree on important sides of a project. There is always a balance that you need to keep as well as the sharpness of the project. People who are involved can always give their opinion, because even the artist can drift off the original idea.

Andrea Urlberger :

Is the *Milk Project* a work on public and private space?

Esther Polak :

I have never really thought of it. It's a very interesting approach. So, you mean that the fact that the milk is consumed and also produced inside a body is more intimate than a GPS? Everyone can bring ideas on your own project. I have never analysed this aspect of internalisation.

Andrea Urlberger :

GPS is working like milk?

Esther Polak :

Both get into your body and come out of it, especially when you're a cow. When we presented the milk project in ARS Electronica, Ieva was still breast-feeding and during an interview she said she had to go and breast feed (laughs), it was a very funny situation. In one of the recordings from Nigeria I was watching a Fulani woman making butter out of the milk, with her kid on her back who was expressing somehow the need to have milk, then she started breast-feeding him and carried on doing the butter. Even Dutch women in farms breast-feed.

Andrea Urlberger :

Have you thought of the self-observation part of the GPS?

Esther Polak :

Someone else can observe you and control your movements. You're looking at the display, the representation of yourself in the world. That is an important part of the project. The basic emotion that you have when you see yourself for the first time from out of space, from above and leaving a trace. That is my fascination; I like to articulate this feeling in an artistic manner. As you describe it, it has very rough material, just basic astonishment (wow this is me!), I try to form this experience to articulate it. That's what projects do, they articulate.

They do different things, I think it's very comparable with the people that saw the first photographs. When I do a presentation of my project, I show the very first photo that has been taken and tell the audience to imagine what it's been like to see a visualisation of reality that hasn't been made by a person by drawing or painting. It is a sort of objective and technological print of reality. That's what we do, it is very comparable with photography.

Retranscription : Nadia Hilali