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Beyond Locative Media

by Marc Tuters and Kazys Varnelis

Abstract

Locative media has been attacked for being too eager to appeal to commercial interests as well as for its reliance on Cartesian mapping systems, yet if these critiques are well-founded, they are also nostalgic, invoking a notion of art as autonomous from the circuits of mass communication technologies, which we argue no longer holds. This essay begins with a survey of the development of locative media, how it has distanced itself from net art, and how it has been critically received before going on to address these critiques and ponder how the field might develop.

At the 2004 Transmediale festival in Berlin, a locative media project titled .walk (dot-walk) received an honorable mention in the prestigious festival's Software Award. Developed by Utrecht-based arts collective Social Fiction, .walk combined computer code and "psychogeographic" urban exploration. Participants of .walk left the doors of the gallery to follow a randomly generated path through the city, thereby, according to Social Fiction, "calculating" the city as though it were a "peripatetic computer." The success of this simple project is representative of a larger event taking place in the media art world, in which, having left behind net art, locative media escaped the bounds of the screen to enter the city at large.

Locative media emerged over the last half decade as a response to the decorporealized, screen-based experience of net art, claiming the world beyond either gallery or computer screen as its territory. Initially coined as a title for a workshop hosted by RIXC, an electronic art and media center in Latvia during 2002, the term is derived from the "locative" noun case in the Latvian language which indicates location and vaguely corresponds to the English prepositions "in", "on", "at", and "by." A report produced during the workshop outlined the scope for locative media: "Inexpensive receivers for global positioning satellites have given amateurs the means to produce their own cartographic information with military precision... As opposed to the World Wide Web the focus here is spatially localized, and centred on the individual user; a collaborative cartography of space and mind, places and the connections between them." In what is in many ways the ur-text for locative media, the 1999 Headmap Manifesto, Ben Russell described an incipient "new world":

location aware, networked, mobile devices make possible invisible notes attached to spaces, places, people and things.

[...]

computer games move outside and get subversive.

Sex and even love are easier to find.

Real space can be marked and demarcated invisibly.

"[w]hat was once the sole preserve of builders, architects and engineers falls into the hands of everyone: the ability to shape and organise the real world and the real space.

Real borders, boundaries and space become plastic and maleable [sic], statehood becomes fragmented and global.

Geography gets interesting.

Cell phones become internet enabled and location aware, everything in the real world gets tracked, tagged, barcoded and mapped.

Overlaying everything is a whole new invisible layer of annotation. Textual, visual and audible information is available as you get close, as context dictates, or when you ask.

The related free networks movement is similarly interventionist. Here any distinction between artist and hacker disappears in an attempt to create wireless networks that would provide free connectivity while also eluding both government surveillance and commercial control on the Internet. Emerging out of a Do-It-Yourself punk culture, projects like the London-based "Consume the Net" sought to build a nation-wide peer-to-peer infrastructure of free wireless nodes throughout the United Kingdom. Similar grassroots projects helped catalyze communities of artists globally from Berlin to San Francisco. In suggesting that ubiquitous Internet access would change our relationship with place by overlaying a second virtual world over the physical one, the free wireless movement was a seminal source for locative media's ambitions. Moreover, in the United Kingdom, the government's ownership of virtually all geographic data encouraged

participants in free wireless, who sought to make information freely accessible, to move into more mapping-based practices when these became available. It was in this context that much of the initial locative media work emerged. Since its inception, then, locative media's practitioners have claimed an avant-garde position, insisting that their work is capable of not only creating a paradigmatic shift in the art world, but also that it can reconfigure our everyday life as well by renewing our sense of place in the world.

Locative media's recent rise to prominence came at an opportune moment, just as the net art movement showed signs of exhaustion. On March 31, 2004, in response to the disappearance of an "Internet Art" section from that year's Whitney Biennial, Ben Sisario, an art critic for the New York Times, declared that having lost its initial novelty, the net art boom had come to an end. Net art would continue, he concluded, but its earlier sense of purpose or distinctiveness was gone.[1] In response to Sisario's article, net art practitioner Patrick Litchy observed, "this is not to say that net art is 'dead' per se, but at least in institutional discourse it has been chiseled into art history and so has been drained of its dynamism." Only if net art could "morph into hybrid forms" he suggested, could it still retain its oppositionality. During the last two years, a new set of practices which Turbulence.org director Jo-Anne Green collectively refers to as "Networked Performance"—among which locative media is a key player—has come to displace the hegemony of net art within media art circles, with the term "locative media" now becoming common currency in art establishment venues such as ArtForum. In 2004, Leonardo Electronic Almanac would recognize locative media's rise with a call for papers. In December 2005, Rhizome.org editor and curator-at-large Marisa Olson proposed that the long-established "Net Art News" mailing list be renamed to "Media Art News" to encompass "software art, performance, sound art, data visualization, technology-enabled social sculpture, locative media, video, and the myriad other branches of new media practice."

Where net art sought to maintain its autonomy in order to claim art status, locative media has been far less interested in this such claims. On the contrary, as Saul Albert observes, the fundamental manifestations of locative media—maps—and the typical site—the handheld PDA—are ubiquitous and easily understood. In reaching beyond art, locative media has been welcomed with often remarkable claims, in particular by computer industry pundits suggesting that it will be "the Next Big Thing." Mike Liebhold of the Institute for the Future (IFF) understands "geohackers, locative media artists, and psychogeographers" as key players in constructing the "geospatial web," in which the web becomes tagged with geospatial information, a development that he sees as having "enormous unharvested business opportunities." Even more emphatically, in another essay in Leonardo, Anthony Townsend, who works with Liebhold at the IFF and was formerly one of the most outspoken advocates of the free wireless movement, states: "[The IFF's] forecast for the next decade is that this context-aware computing will emerge as the third great wave of modern digital technology." [2] While it is important not to overstate locative media's influence in the geospatial web, the fact remains that the IFF and others look to locative media artists as prime movers within this space.

Nor is this lost on locative media practitioners. Net art often promoted its uselessness as a means of affirming its own autonomy as art, but the practitioners of Locative Media often seem less preoccupied with these concerns and indeed often embrace the possibility of commercial application. And if some net art projects such as *Carnivore* by Alex Galloway claimed autonomy through oppositionality and resistance by developing a radical political stance against the libertarian-entrepreneurial "California Ideology" that, spread eagerly by *Wired Magazine*, so dominated the discourse on the Internet in the 90's, it appears that for the moment a fair number of locative media producers seems content to collaborate with industry and government. Unlike net art, which largely sought to emphasize its autonomy from the dot.com boom, this new media art practice is often eager to blur distinctions between art and capital. It is no coincidence that one of the most important media art blogs today goes by the name "We Make Money Not Art."

Broadly speaking, locative media projects can be categorized under one of two types of mapping, either annotative—virtually tagging the world—or phenomenological—tracing the action of the subject in the world. Roughly, these two types of locative media—annotative and tracing—correspond to two archetypal poles winding their way through late 20th century art, critical art and phenomenology, perhaps otherwise figured as the twin Situationist practices of *détournement* and the *dérive*. Annotative projects generally seek to change the world by adding data to it, much as the practice of *détournement* suggested. The paradigmatic annotative work is the *Urban Tapestries* project by Proboscis. In a series of trials in 2003 and 2004, participants used Global Positioning System (GPS) enabled 3G mobile phones and handheld PDAs to annotate areas of London, thereby embedding social knowledge in the landscape of the city for others to retrieve later. In their project *34n 118w*, Jeffrey Knowlton, Naomi Spellman, and Jeremy Hight had users take Tablet PCs with Global Positioning Devices and headphones to a vacant lot in downtown Los Angeles adjacent to an old railroad depot now used as an architecture school. As participants walked around the site, they would hear fictional statements purporting to recount the history of the place played back to them. The result, Hight claims, "creates a sense that every space is agitated (alive with unseen history, stories, layers)." Similarly, in adopting the mapping-while-wandering tactics of the *dérive*, tracing-based locative media suggest that we can re-embody ourselves in the world, thereby escaping the prevailing sense that our experience of place is disappearing in late capitalist society. For examples of this type of work we might look to Christian Nold's 2002 *Crowd Compiler*. Here the artist generates time-lapse images of crowds in public space to understand the movement of all the individuals in one place over time simultaneously. More typically, these projects resort to the map, using high technology to reproduce the famous diagram created for urban sociologist Paul-Henry

Chombart de Lauwe to trace the daily movements of a young woman living in the XVII^e arrondissement of Paris over the course of one year, a map of great importance to the Situationists. Where annotative projects seek to demystify, tracing-based projects typically seek to use high technology to stimulate dying everyday practices such as walking or occupying public space. In this spirit, Jo Walsh and Schulyer Erle's London Free Map marks the paths of participants in the street through paths downloaded from GPS units, thereby locating participants in the world while also producing copyright-free maps of London. .walk, which we cited earlier, is another such project, seeking to get people out of the gallery or conference room and into the streets in order to create a "generative psychogeography."

Social Fiction's invocation of "generative psychogeography" is no accident. Situationism is frequently claimed as a precursor to the locative media movement. That said, it is worth observing that over time Situationism increasingly turned to code. Situationist leader Guy Debord steadily whittled away at art practices, finally leaving the movement as a series of programmatic texts that advocated intervening in the city with only minor modifications, such as adding light switches to street lights so that they could be turned on and off at will and allowing people to wander in subways after they were shut off at night or even abandoning that degree of interventionism and simply turning to a ceaseless repetition of the *dérive*.^[3] Locative media, too, is virtually unthinkable except as a question of code. The .walk project represents this reliance on code, turning individuals into processors. Virtually all locative media projects rely on programs for their execution. The resulting product is generally either delivered live to a user in the field who then performs the piece or, alternatively, crystallized as an indexical trace of the event, later displayed at a gallery or on a web site. But if the work itself resides in the pure code itself, what is the difference between locative media and software development?

This is a central question for locative media today, as it is for many contemporary artists today who are using research and development, or at least research, as models. Raised on a steady diet of institutional critique, this generation sees art's purview as transdisciplinary and eagerly pursues projects that could be classified as research (Center for Land Use Interpretation or Multiplicity) or design and development (Andrea Zittel or Jorge Pardo). In the case of locative media, this means that artists adopt the model of research and development wholesale, looking for corporate sponsorship or even venture capital. Proboscis, for example received sponsorship from Orange, a 3G cellular network, computer hardware manufacturer Hewlett-Packard and had proprietary geodata donated to it by the Ordnance Survey for their Urban Tapestries project. Blast Theory, a locative media group composed of several London-based avant-garde theatre artists have gained renown for projects such as *Can You See Me Now* (2001), *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003), and *I Like Frank* (2004), in which they used location-aware mobile mapping devices to coordinate interactions of audience and performers in both real and virtual space. Their performances and installations have been supported through corporate sponsorship, public arts funding, and through a six-year collaboration with the Mixed Reality Laboratory at the University of Nottingham. The group's own web site claims "Blast Theory has a history of working with corporate clients to deliver innovative marketing strategies," thereby creating "commercial projects that draw global audiences to compelling, high adrenaline interactive experiences. The team of artists and scientists has worked with blue chip clients in the television, apparel and telecoms sectors to launch products, build profile, inspire staff and engage customers." Anthropologist Anne Galloway, who studied Urban Tapestries for her dissertation, has critiqued this model of hybrid arts/researcher and community organizing for not yet having developed a mature sense of accountability, professionalism and ethics.^[4]

The reluctance of many locative media practitioners to position their work as political has led some theorists such as Andreas Broekman (director of the Transmediale Festival in Berlin) to accuse locative media of being the "avant-garde of the 'society of control'," referring to Gilles Deleuze's description of the contemporary regime of power. Broekman suggests that since locative media is fundamentally based on the appropriation of technologies of surveillance and control, its practitioners have a duty to address that fact in that their work. Instead, however, Geert Lovink claims that the movement has turned the media art conference circuit into a "shopping-driven locative spectacle." Media artist Coco Fusco also launched a headlong attack on new media practices associated with networks and mapping, declaring: "It is as if more than four decades of postmodern critique of the Cartesian subject had suddenly evaporated." Fusco minced few words: "In the name of a politics of global connectedness, artists and activists too often substitute an abstract 'connectedness' for any real engagement with people in other places or even in their own locale." Instead, she suggested a return to the kind of art practices made famous at the 1993 Whitney Biennial: "Socially conscious artists and activists, rather than embracing tactics that rely on dreams of omniscience, would do well to examine the history of globalism, networks, dissent and collective actions in order to understand that they are rooted in the geopolitical and cultural margins." Artist-theorist Jordan Crandall would similarly indict the locative project for enslaving us to a new Cartesianism, condemning the "resurgence of temporal and locational specificity witnessed in new surveillance and location-aware navigational technologies." In "Drifting Through the Grid: Psychogeography and Imperial Infrastructure," Brain Holmes discusses locative media's recuperation of Situationism, stating "All too often in contemporary society, aesthetics is politics as decor... the aesthetic form of the *dérive* is everywhere. But so is the hyper-rationalist grid of Imperial infrastructure. And the questions of social subversion and psychic deconditioning are wide open, unanswered, seemingly lost to our minds, in an era when civil society has been integrated to the military architecture of digital media." According to Holmes, since the United States Army controls GPS satellites, in using them we allow ourselves to be targeted by a global military infrastructure and to be "interpellated into Imperial ideology." These critiques are well-founded, but their antagonist

tenor often seems to be an inversion of the boosterist claims made in favor of locative media. There's something peculiar, even comical, in how the movement is, on the one hand "the Next Big Thing" to some, a capitalist apocalypse to others.

But perhaps this shouldn't be so surprising. In "Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism," Fredric Jameson, writing of Vincent Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes, notes how the work simultaneously represents the peasant's brutal world of labor and toil while creating a Utopian gesture, an "act of compensation" through the "glorious materialization of pure colour in oil paint." But so much is a redemptive re-reading of Herbert Marcuse's writings on the affirmative nature of art.[5] What makes Jameson's observation important is a third, darker side, this "whole new Utopian realm of the senses" becomes "part of some new division of labour in the body of capital, some new fragmentation of the emergent sensorium which replicates the specializations and divisions of capitalist life at the same time that it seeks in precisely such fragmentation a desperate Utopian compensation for them. The artist's role is only temporary then, and already flawed from the start. But even if Jameson suggests that the process of absorption is inescapable, he also vehemently rejects any suggestion that we should abandon art. In the world of late capital, Jameson argues, the drive to envision Utopia is still important and, above all, the task of cognitive mapping one's place in postmodern hyperspace is crucial, a claim that locative media has certainly embraced. Deleuze, too, agrees, writing expressly of the society of control: "There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons."

We suggest that locative media offers a conceptual framework by which to examine the certain technological assemblages and their potential social impacts. Unlike net art, produced by a priestly technological class for an elite arts audience, locative media strives, at least rhetorically, to reach a mass audience by attempting to engage consumer technologies, and redirect their power. Today, this is more important than ever. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), we are entering into a society of ubiquitous networked objects. Soon, the ITU observes, objects will be the most prevalent users of the Internet, relentlessly communicating various kinds of data to each other like some flock of Hasbro "emoto-tronic" Furby dolls. What does this turn to what the ITU calls the "Internet of Things" mean, though? Bruno Latour suggests that things are a focus for our time, in particular, a focus that demands the attention of the arts: "'Things' are controversial assemblages of entangled issues, and not simply objects sitting apart from our political passions. The entanglements of things and politics engage activists, artists, politicians, and intellectuals. To assemble this parliament, rhetoric is not enough and nor is eloquence; it requires the use of all the technologies—especially information technology—and the possibility for the arts to re-present anew what are the common stakes."

We can get a sense of what Latour means by this by looking at "MILK," a project by Ieva Auzina and Esther Polak exhibited by Latour in his "Making Things Public" exhibit at ZKM that also won the 2005 Golden Nica at Ars Electronica. The work of a group of Latvian locative media artists, MILK is clearly indebted to more traditional aspects of the movement in that it uses GPS trace-routes. But instead of seeking a phenomenological regrounding of the self, the MILK team traced the path of milk from its origins in the udder of a cow in rural Latvia to a cheese vendor in the Netherlands. To be sure, this project is still more suggestive than fully realized: MILK's artists are not terribly interested in Latour's reading and instead see their work more as a form of romantic landscape art. Nevertheless, MILK suggests a powerful vision of how locative technologies could allow one to more fully understand how products are commodified and distributed through the actions of global trade, thereby making visible the networked society. Here Fusco's anti-mapping diatribe runs aground, for when tied to a materialist vision, the recent turn to maps is among the strongest critiques of globalization available to us. Recognizing this, philosopher Alain Badiou referred to the maps of power drawn by artist Mark Lombardi as "the creation of a new possibility of art and a new vision of the world."

In his book *Shaping Things*, Bruce Sterling suggests that we détourn the Internet of Things itself to become more fully aware of the ecological role of objects in the world. Sterling coins the neologism "Spimes" to refer to future objects that could be aware of their context and transmit "cradle-to-grave" information about where they have been, where they are and where they are going. Cory Doctorow has called Spimes "the hactivist's ultimate tool—an evidentiary rallying point for making the negative outcomes of industrial practices visible and obvious so that we can redress them.] Similarly, even if it is not so much locative as suggestive of such practices, Natalie Jeremijenko's *How Stuff Is Made* project is something of a response to Sterling and Latour's theories, comprising a visual encyclopedia of photoessays produced by engineering and design students that to document how objects are manufactured and investigates both the labor conditions of that manufacture and its environmental impact.

By geotagging objects instead of people, and having these objects tell us their stories, we might finally realize a thought experiment expressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau at the very dawn of industrialization. In *Emile*, his book on the ideal education of a child, Rousseau wrote of "A problem which another child would never heed [that] would torment *Emile* half a year." *Emile* and his instructor would go to an elegant dinner hosted by wealthy people where the two are dazzled by the many guests, servants, dishes, and elegant china. In *Emile*'s ear the instructor whispers "How many hands do you suppose the things on this table passed through before they got here?" The virus or the Trojan horse, is successfully implanted in the child's mind and the result is a crisis:

In a moment the mists of excitement have rolled away. He is thinking, considering,

calculating, and anxious. The child is philosophizing, while philosophers, excited by wine or perhaps by female society are babbling like children. If he asks questions I decline to answer and put him off to another day. He becomes impatient, he forgets to eat and drink, he longs to get away from table and talk as he pleases. What an object of curiosity, what a text for instruction. Nothing has so far succeeded in corrupting his healthy reason; what will he think of luxury when he finds that every quarter of the globe has been ransacked, that some 2,000,000 men have laboured for years, that many lives have perhaps been sacrificed, and all to furnish him with fine clothes to be worn at midday and laid by in the wardrobe at night.[6]

In other words, we suggest applying the strategies of locative media to create what Rousseau suggested, an awareness of the genealogy of an object as it is embedded in the matrix of its production. This genealogical vision would embody an awareness of the history that Walter Benjamin reminds us is always there, no matter how suppressed:

[T]he cultural heritage we survey has an origin that we cannot contemplate without horror: it owes its existence not merely to the effort of great geniuses who created it, but to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is not a single artifact of culture that is not simultaneously an artifact of barbarism. And just as no artifact is free of barbarism, so too the process of its reception, by means of which it has been passed on from one recipient to the next, is equally fettered.[7]

If Spimes and their kin make it possible for us to envision new forms of cognitive mapping, we need to guard against using that mapping to only place ourselves, thereby reducing objects to a subservient position in regard to humans. After all, the ITU's prediction of tens of billions of objects connected to the Internet leaves human users as a distinct second. Here, it may be worthwhile revisiting our standard theoretical frames for interpreting technological fetishism. If Marx considered the object as the result of alienation of the product from its production and, by extension, its origins, Freud understood it as symbolic replacement for an irrecoverable object lost in a primordial trauma. For both Marx and Freud, the aliveness of objects is nothing more than an illusion, object fetishism merely a substitute to avoid. But, as Steven Shaviro notes, the fetish object is always more powerful than what it is thought to stand in for [49]. As an art practice, to date, locative media seems fundamentally tied to discourses of representation centered on a human subject, privileging the experience of the human in space (tracing) and time (annotative). To turn Fusco's argument on its head: in both locative media and much of the criticism launched against the movement, it is as if more than four decades of postmodern critique of the humanist subject had suddenly evaporated. Even MILK's project is not about milk, but rather about the people involved in the production and distribution of milk as it transforms from Latvian biological fluid to Dutch product.

In contrast, Sterling provides us with a darker, more idiosyncratic vision. Humans don't control Sterling's world of Spimes. On the contrary, it is an unruly object world in which people are, at best, "spime wranglers." At the dawn of the Internet of Things we have to wonder if we aren't entering a world in which the object becomes sentient, thereby finally liberating itself from human bondage. If, in the Enlightenment, we learned that nature—in its role as background to human activity—had been replaced by human second nature, then today we are perhaps at the threshold of a machinic third nature. It is the task of whatever remains of art after the locative turn to get involved in the messy business of this new world of objects, even if the Utopian and critical moments that can emerge as a result are only temporary and contingent.

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