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Uncertain Spaces: Artists' Exploration of New Socialities in Mediated Public Space

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"Contemporary life is dominated by the pervasiveness of the network…The 'always-on, always-accessible', network or at least the promise of that condition produces a broad set of changes to our concept of place, linking space to network to create networked place." (Varnelis and Friedberg, 2006: 1)

In many ways public space has become a distributed network of media events, as well as a highly dynamic space. The idea of public space as merely streets and parks is seen as too limiting for our contemporary situation. That is, in the networked world where we live, space has become 'hybrid'. Scott McQuire notes:

> The public domain of the 21st century is no longer defined simply by material structures such as streets and plazas. But nor is it defined solely by the virtual space of electronic media. Rather, the public domain now emerges in the complex interaction of material and immaterial spaces. (McQuire, 2006: 1)

McQuire calls these hybrid spaces "media cities".

With the introduction of wireless networks and other mobile media technologies into the public spaces of "media cities", a new kind of sociality or social experience can be discerned. But what is this new sociality? And how can we think about it? How are our traditional notions of public space being reconfigured as the invisible borders of connectivity further blur the public and private divide? What are artists doing here?

In the last few years many artists working with the new technologies have seen a shift in attention away from the virtual spaces of the Internet and out into a networked mediatised urban space. This is in contrast to an earlier focus on the virtual spaces of the Internet with concepts like cyberspace and virtual reality. "These terms focused on the ways in which the new media seemed able to constitute spaces or places apart from the rest of social life." (Ito, Okabe, Matsuda 2005: 8)
The new mediated public spaces are being reconfigured in differing ways. In particular the sharp division between public and private has become not only blurred but possibly untenable. In this paper I will argue that in this dynamic context artists are not only responding to these mediated public spaces but are also helping to create them. I will focus on how contemporary media artists are working with what I identify as different discourses which describe public space as either relational, mappable or hertzian. Through shifting our perceptions, or engaging us socially, emotionally, conceptually or sensually, they enable us to encounter these new mediated spaces.

Before exploring how artists are working with, and indeed helping to shape these new spaces of the mediated city I'll turn briefly to the emergent public spaces of modernity and the discourses that shaped them, since many of the tropes figure or are refigured in current discourses.

Public Space and Public Sphere

Theoretically there are various and confusing meanings and approaches to public space.

The ancient Greek polis is typically seen as the origin of the public sphere, where "private citizens could meet in the public space of the agora." (Sheller and Urry, 2003: 114) This origin story highlights the conflation in thinking that occurs between the idea of public sphere with public space. For Habermas, and many theorists and historians writing after him, the

bourgeois public sphere emerged in Europe, and in particular Paris, in the early 18th century with the advent of the coffee houses. These spaces became meeting places where men of different classes and background gathered to discuss and debate critical issues of the day – especially the news as presented by the latest leaflets and pamphlets. This was the age of revolution and the new "imagined communities" (Anderson) inspired by the printing press. Later in the 19th century with the flourishing of consumer capitalism and the growth of department stores, arcades and boulevards another sort of public was being formed; on the one hand, that of the shopper and on the other, the flâneur. These two different forms occurred in separate public spaces, the department store for women and the streets and boulevards for men. (For a more comprehensive discussion of how gender and public space are figured in the literature of modernity see Janet Wolff's "The Invisibile Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity" in Theory Culture Society 1985: 2: 37) But both engaged with the city as a form of spectacle.

Shelley and Urry argue that it is this spatial history of civil society necessitating the sharp division between the public and private that has dominated much theoretical thinking over the last century. In this history civil society is thought of as located at a specific place. This conflation of public sphere and public space is the cause of much anxiety as public space is seen as the abode of democracy itself and any shifts or instabilities in public space, especially the so-called blurring of the public and private, is lamented as a severe erosion of civil society and democracy. For Sheller and Urry this conceptual model is too static and regional for our current situation of network flows and mobility.

> But such spatial models of civil society do not attend to how people (and objects) move, or desire to move, between the supposedly private and the public domains. Indeed, it is often argued that the very freedom of mobility holds the potential to disrupt public space, to interfere with more stable associational life and to undermine proper politics. But focusing on movements within and across public space brings into view subaltern publics that have potentially disruptive politics (Ryan, 1997). (Sheller and Urry 2003: 114)

Public space today is replete with mobile people on their mobile phones. And like the flâneur of the 19th century Parisian boulevards, this figure is usually alone and often walking. Unlike the flâneur, however, they are not observers of the crowds or spectacles nor of the urban spaces that they traverse. Rather, this figure seems somewhat cut off from their immediate surroundings, a figure which most of us find highly invasive, if not offensive as they discuss what they had for dinner last night. Nevertheless, it is this figure that I think will help us to understand the relational dimensions of the new mediascape we find ourselves in, where sociality does not necessarily mean close and personal, nor the gathering of large crowds. What I'm interested in here is the pervasiveness of this figure rather than the invasiveness. I argue that the figure shifts our expected and customary ways of moving through public space; and this happens in several ways.

First, the mobility that these devices allow refold what is public and private. Secondly, their connectedness to other spaces, in other places, creates a co-presence with others at a distance. Thirdly, their pervasiveness is significant: everyone has a mobile. And as the mobile becomes smaller its capabilites grow larger. People are now taking photos, movies, sharing music and uploading all of this onto the internet, where they are instantly shared with other people on one of the social utility sites like MySpace or FaceBook: an ever present reminder of public space as networked and mediated.

In studying mobile phone use in Japan, where mobile phones are called keitai, Ichiyo Habuchi acknowledges that keitai use is complicated and complicates notions of urbanisation: "…keitai is a medium with contradictory connotations that reflects the characteristics of particular users. " On the one hand keitai can increase the encounters with strangers and yet on the other hand "it is used to strengthen ongoing collective and social bonds. Keitai do not allow the entry of strangers into such collective cocoons." (Habuchi 2005: 167) Ichiyo Habuchi has described this phenomenon - mobile phone users who create a virtual networked space of friends and intimates - as "telecocooning" which he describes as "the production of social identities through small, insular social groups." (Ito, Okabe, Matsuda 2005: 10) Habuchi's original research was based on how Japanese youth use their mobile phones, but it is a practice that can be seen across all age groups as well as across cultures.

In this dynamic context of mediated cities, there is also a dynamic context of discourses addressing and shaping mediated

public space and spatial practice. To focus on artists practices here, I identify three categories: relational, mappable, and visible/invisible spaces. Relational space is a term used by Scott McQuire to describe the new mediated spaces of the city. For McQuire, “relational space can only be defined by the temporary position occupied by each subject in relation to numerous others….” (McQuire, 2006: 6). Mappable space – including psychogeographical mappings -- refers to a broad group of media art practices called Locative Media - art practices that use GPS and other portable devices. Many locative media practices claim psychogeography as both a precursor and methodology. Psychogeography was a practice initiated in the 1950s with Guy Debord and the Situationists International, to intervene in the rationalised urban planning of that era. My third category focuses on the visible/invisible space of electromagnetic fields or hertzian space. This term was coined by industrial designer Anthony Dunne to describe how electromagnetic devices such as mobile phones and PDAs emit invisible electro-magnetic radiation, creating a sort of electrical aura that extends around the object’s physical space.

Relational Spaces

In his paper “The Politics of Public Space in the Media City” Scott McQuire describes the modern city as “…a media-architecture complex in which the mediatised production of urban space has become a constitutive frame for a new mode of social experience.” McQuire characterises this social experience as one lived in relational space and describes it as a space

> stripped of inherent qualities, such as stable dimensions and appearances… but is increasingly experienced as shifting, variable and contingent. Relational space can only be defined by the temporary position occupied by each subject in relation to numerous others, which suggests that relational space is not easily unified since every subject belongs to multiple matrices or networks that overlap and interpenetrate. (McQuire, 2006: 6)

McQuire provides a valuable introduction to relational space as determining and determined by political and social relations. His focus is the appearance of screens, large and small, on multiple surfaces around the city. He sees these screens as creating a new relationship to public space and possibly a re-emergence of public life after decades of suburban privacy and isolation.

In Doug Aitken’s video work, Sleepwalkers, public space is explored and constituted in just this relational way where public space becomes a surface for an expanded cinema and where the ideal viewer is a pedestrian moving freely between large outdoor screens.

Sleepwalkers is a non-linear film project specifically commissioned to be projected onto the exterior walls and surfaces of the Museum of Modern Art. It was installed in January 2007 and comprised 8 large scale projections onto different facades; 3 outside where pedestrians paused and watched the film sequences as they passed by – and 4 other exterior surfaces inside the Sculpture Garden of the Museum.

The project was filmed in NYC using 5 characters as archetypes of the city itself - a postal worker, a businessman, a bike messenger, an electrician, and an office worker. And to quote Doug Aitken from the catalogue, “These characters provide a blueprint for the metropolis as a living, breathing organism fueled by the desires, energies, and ambitions of its inhabitants.” (Aitken: 2007) The projections began at dusk as the sun went down and played until 10pm each night. In each sequence you see one of the characters wake from sleep and then go out into the city -- the 5 characters are all shown separately in their own world. They never meet or interact. At specific moments their bodies are choregraphed to move together. For instance, the position of an arm or the close-up of an ear are shots repeated with the 5 characters simultaneously. By choregraphing the movements of the actors in this way, Aitken captures the sense of living in urban space where one is both alone in the city, but also moving in sync with others. There was no specific soundtrack created for the projections but the raw sound and noise of the city itself played constantly in the background. “With this exhibition Aitken pioneers a site specific cinema expanded into the urban landscape and keyed to the pedestrain experience.” (Aitken: 2007)

In Aitken's expanded cinema the ideal viewer is the pedestrian, who, on walking past these giant projections pauses to look up at the silent figures as they move through their day. As the viewer moves around the building to view the different projections they too become another body that also moves through the city as if tracing Lefebvre's 'rhythmanalysis' where the rhythms are both linear and cyclical. In Sleepwalkers the city is a place of movement rather than connection. In fact no-one is connected. The characters are alone, isolated and mute. The project seems to exist in a tension between the new social and relational spaces of the city, where pedestrians gather to watch together, and the older trope of alienation and isolation. That is, the act of watching outside in a public space, and therefore outside the cocoon of the cinema, suggests the new kinds of sociality that are beginning to appear, in this way the film creates a relational space. But the content of the film which shows lone, silent figures traversing the socially empty spaces of the city is a reminder of a Modernist past where heroic figures lived and loved alone and alienated - distant and implacable, with an inner life that can be only guessed at. The connections that are made in Aitken's expanded cinema are made by the viewer/pedestrian as they watch the multiple screens. And like a performative montage the viewers walk or stroll around and between the 8 screens putting together the separate lives of the city.

Aitken's use of the city's surfaces to project his images is exemplary of McQuire's idea of relational space where projected images creates relational spaces traversed by pedestrians and viewers. However, Aitken also disturbs this idea with the reminder of the lone unconnected figures moving through the empty spaces of the city.

Mappable Spaces

Since 2003, a new field of artistic practice has emerged, quickly named locative media, and initiating an explosion of artwork that explores the networked, media spaces of the city itself.

According to Marc Tuters and Kazys Varnelis, "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." (Tuters, Kazys, 2006: 1). The term locative media arose from a media art workshop in Lativia in 2002, where 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." (Tuters, Kazys, 2006: 1)

Focusing on the geospatial rather than cyberspace, it utilises satellite mapping and digital technologies to explore the intersection between the social and networked spaces of the real world. Drew Hemment has defined locative media as a media that "uses portable, networked, location-aware computing devices for user-led mapping, social networking and artistic interventions in which geographical space becomes its canvas." (Hemment, 2004: 1)

However, from the beginning locative media has attracted much criticism as well as enthusiastic uptake. Its practices have been seen as problematic in relation to the commercial enterprises that own and develop the technologies, as well as the close association that these technologies have with the military. More than previous digital art, locative media is associated with commercial and industry developments where artists are recognized as important contributors to the reconfiguring of mediated and networked public space. In recognizing the role that artists play Industry has enthusiastically sponsored projects - wanting art input for R & D. This has led to a reaction by artists. In a post on the iDC list discussing the ISEA event in San Jose in August 2006, the artist Kanarinka encapsulated some of these qualms succinctly.

> …is psychogeography/locative media work simply R&D for a new generation of entertainment spectacle? Or, what are we actually trying to do with these ideas of "play" in urban space? Who gets to play? And what about the interactive cities in Iraq and Lebanon and elsewhere? Why didn't we address war, security,

> militarization and terrorism as aspects of the contemporary interactive city? For me, running around making the city into a sandbox, a playground or a playing field feels increasingly irrelevant and irresponsible. (Kanarinka, 2006: website)

A not altogether different concern associated with “collaborative mapping using locative technologies” (Sant, 2006: website) is the continued use of the Cartesian grid or basemap to define and imagine the parameters of urban space. For Alison Sant, this continued use of the basemap limits the possibilities of imagining the city to the “predefined foundations of the map they overlay.”(Sant, 2006: online)

> However, embedded in these everyday references is a set of assumptions that order our perceptions of physical space… The cartographic conventions of the base map are an expression of a singular notion of urban space – one that favors the street over the route, the static over the temporal, and the formal over the subjective. As locative media projects are created that build upon the datum of common base maps, they are structuring a collaborative notion of space within this predefined conception of the city. (Sant, 2006)

According to Tuters and Varnelis, locative media can be organised into two different types of mapping “…annotative – virtually tagging the world – or phenomenological – tracing the action of the subject in the world.” (Tuters, Varnellis, 2006: 4) Annotative projects are usually concerned with place. They use the network to add data, like stories, to a particular place in order to change the perception or knowledge of that place. These projects seek an alternative story or history to a place, one that is collaborative, democratic and local. It is a social knowledge rather than an abstract institutional narrative.

[[Murmur]] is one such annotative project. It is a project begun in Canada in 2003 and now spread to several different cities across the globe. It is described by its makers as a “documentary oral history project that records stories and memories told about specific geographic locations.” (Murmur website) That is, people living in a specific area are able to record their own stories and memories, no matter how trivial or seemingly inconsequential. A sign with a phone number is then left at the place where the story was told so that anyone can dial the number and hear the story “…while standing in that exact spot, and engaging in the physical experience of being right where the story takes place.” (Murmur) [[Murmur]], like the many other spatial annotative media projects – Urban Tapestries, Yellow Arrow - create collective and local narratives that overlay the usual or institutional narrative. Spaces, both urban and otherwise become a palimpsest of layered stories creating a multiplicity of social and cultural meanings by appealing to a sense of the Real rather than the made up. These, we are told, are real stories by real people. And it is important to note that spatial annotation, like other locative media projects, is not only concerned with the urban or the metropolis - space outside the city limits is also mapped and annotated. In an article posted on the Rhizome website by Ryan Griffis titled For an Art Against the Cartography of Everyday Life Griffis suggests that locative media practices are “a response to critiques of archival and documentary models, by Rosler and others, like artist and theorist Alan Sekula.” (Griffis) For Griffis this is especially so for projects like [[Murmur]] which he sees as creating an “alternative archive” for the places that it inhabits, and an answer to Sekula’s dictum “that the archive has to be read from below, from a position of solidarity with those displaced, deformed, silenced or made invisible by the machineries of profit and progress.” (Griffis)

In contrast to the realism and alternative archive project of works like [[Murmur]], Jeff Knowlton, Naomi Spellman and Jeremy Hight have created a spatial fiction situated in downtown Los Angeles and called 34n 118w. Participants are able to access stories as they walk around the area, armed with a Tablet PC and GPS device. In spatialising fictions that are site specific the project explodes the parameters of expanded cinema, enabling viewers to become participants walking through the fictive space and thus mobilising a relationship that is usually sedentary or stationary.

The second type of locative media project mentioned by Tuters and Varnelis is phenomenological. This category refers to the subjective experience of a pedestrian as they traverse the city. One of the most often quoted terms for this sort of project is psychogeography. This term was originally coined by the Situationist International (SI), who, according to Kanarinka “…sought to revolutionize art, politics and everyday life and played a major role in the 1968 student uprisings in France and across Europe.” One of the most prominent figures associated with psychogeography is Guy Debord. He was particularly

concerned with overthrowing the then current rationalist ideas on urban planning and saw the need to reimagine the the city as a place of emotion, relationship, imagination and play. One strategy associated with pyschogeography is the dérive. “In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.” (Knabb, 1995: 50) and it is the dérive that has inspired many locative media projects.

Kanarinka is an artist whose psychogeographic projects are attuned to both the social and political potential of urban space, and in particular that of Boston where she lives. She has produced a series of works that mix a sort of scientific investigative and always mobile research with a poetic and fanciful methodology. In her many seriously whimsical projects Kanarinka uses a form of microperformance.

> Microperformance refers to actions that have been disentangled from the representational structures of the traditional performing arts such as performers, audience, stage, specific duration, script, etc. Microperformance allows no outside and affords no audience – it always requires participants (everyone) to enact a politics, an ethics, and a sociality squarely within the real. (Kanarinka, website)

The idea of the invisible as a space of “radical potentiality” is a recurring theme in many of Kanarinka’s projects. That said, she is not interested in revealing something that is hidden but rather in its potential for transformation. For instance, in an early work titled Public Alley 818, the Internet was used to invite people to submit instructions for projects that could be performed by Kanarinka in the eponymous alley. As with most of Kanarinka’s work, participation through instructions is a key element of the work. Examples of instructions were: “stretch a length of string from your studio or residence to the nearest place you can buy string.” Or “tend the weeds. Help them breathe.” Or “Bring a camera. Ask whoever passes by to take a picture.” In this piece and others she demonstrates her indebtedness to the early Fluxus movement and in particular Yoko Ono’s instructional work which sought to value the human capacity for imagining.

Although not all projects that could be categorized as psychogeographic are quite as concerned with social and political “transformation” as Kanarinka - dotWalk, or .walk created by the Amsterdam collective SocialFiction in 2003 is a work that asks participants to walk the streets of the city using a simple code that would generate their drift (dérive) through the streets. In this case participants act as if computers, calculating their direction through a code rather than through any (social, commercial, emotional) need to walk from A to B. Below is one of several different codes that can be used, ranging from simple to complex.

```
// Classic.walk
Repeat {
1st street left
2nd street right
2nd street left
}
```

For the SocialFiction collective this project was seen as an example of a “generative psychogeographical algorithm”. (Social Fiction, website)

While Kanarinka’s projects are low-fi, collaborative and concerned with the political content and contexts of place. Australian artist Hugh Davies, intervenes in public space with a gentle work that reminds us of the simple pleasures of social interaction when asking directions from others. In his ongoing project Analogue Art Map he uses non digital media to “address issues of digital technologies” and in particular those related to mapping spaces. “Through architectural interaction, mapping social networks and psycho-cartography, the group [Analogue Art Map] seeks to both record and generate connections between creative individuals and the spaces in which they live - while using only obsolete technology.” (Davies, website)

In 2006 Hugh Davies made a work in Brooklyn NYC titled Mud Maps. In this project, "working with only a biro and a camera, and with no knowledge of the area," he asked people that he met on the street to draw a simple map showing where a particular place was. The term 'mud map' is a reference to the simple maps a farmer draws on the ground for a passing traveller.

Visible/Invisible Space: Hertzian space

Along with this geospatial turn there is an accompanying interest in the space created by electronic devices, both stationary and mobile. Anthony Dunne has called this sort of space hertzian space. (Dunne, 1999) It is a space that is neither relational nor virtual, but an actual phenomenon and refers to the invisible electromagnetic waves that all electronic devices -- such as mobile phones and PDAs emit – creating a sort of electrical aura that extends around the object's physical space.

> Whereas cyberspace is a metaphor that spatialises what happens in computers distributed around the world, hertzian space is actual and physical even though our senses detect only a tiny part of the electromagnetic spectrum. Images of footprint's of satellite TV transmissions in relation to the surface of the earth, and computer models showing cellular phone propagation in relation to urban environments, reveal that hertzian space is not isotropic but has an 'electroclimate' defined by wavelength, frequency and field strength. Interaction with the natural and artificial landscape creates a hybrid landscape of shadows, reflections, and hot points. (Future Farmers, website)

Hertzian space is interesting in this context of the shifting sociality of public spaces as its presence can have a significant effect on the way we occupy actual public space in the city – that is, as we look for hotspots, avoiding 'deadzones' and looking for places which give a strong signal, this means that the space of the city is increasingingly occupied according to its Hertzian space.

> Sky Ear is a project by Usman Haque, one of the first architectural interventions existing in both hertzian space and the urban environment at the same time. Sky Ear was a one-night event, at the Maritime Museum in Greenwich London, in which a glowing "cloud" of mobile phones and helium balloons was released into the air - people could dial into the cloud and "listen to the electromagnetic sounds of the sky (including whistlers and spherics)" (Sky Ear website)

Sky Ear is a non-rigid carbon-fibre "cloud", embedded with one thousand glowing helium balloons and several dozen mobile phones. The balloons contain miniature sensor circuits that respond to electromagnetic fields, particularly those of mobile phones. When activated, the sensor circuits co-ordinate to cause ultra-bright coloured LEDs to illuminate. The 30m cloud glows and flickers brightly as it floats across the sky. (Sky Ear website)

The mobile phone calls also changed the hertzian topography. That is, the phone calls effected the electromagnetic climate of the cloud which was reflected in the changing colours of the balloons. As people watched from below the huge shimmering and undulating balloons shifted and changed colours. This project not only allowed people to experience the full busy-ness of the invisible waves, but also its ungraspable shifts and movements. It was both a mass of things and an ephemeral spectacle of light and sound.

In a Cell Phone Disco Ursula Lavrencic and Auke Touwslager use electromagnetic detection of mobile phone activity to light up a wall of coloured LEDs. And in Electromagnetic Fountain a small portable fountain responds to the Em waves creating "an ever-changing aquatic choreography." (Electromagnetic Fountain website)

The dancing water of the Electromagnetic Fountain is neither predictable nor random. It draws on data derived from the detection of electromagnetic activity in its immediate surroundings (wireless technology such as mobile phones and surveillance equipment, tram lines, traffic lights, antennas, etc) to control the dynamics of the rise and fall of its water jets.

In other words, it is the electromagnetic nature of the city that is reflected in the fountain. Like the wind, it is invisible. Unlike the wind, it is not often perceived or reflected over. By gazing at the fountain, the ethereal body of the invisible twin-city is revealed in a poetic and enigmatic way.

This work like Sky Ear and and Cell Phone Disco work with making visible the invisible, however in Electromagnetic Fountain Amanda Steggell is concerned with not just its aesthetic appeal but "highly fought over private, commercial and political territory" (Steggell) as well as still unknown environmental and health issues.

Conclusion

This can only be a tiny survey of the many projects that are now proliferating around cities and into public spaces. In recent years an increasing number of artists have left their studios to explore the public spaces - both visible and invisible, audible and inaudible - that make up the contemporary spaces of our mediated environment. Some are bringing their studios into public space through Internet practices: in so doing they are exploring, playing and experimenting with the shifting contours of a new sociality – a sociality that may shape the new spaces of the mediated networked city of the future.

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