

Mapping The Locative Arts

Genevieve Tremblay: April 2007

At midnight on May 2, 2000, President Clinton announced the discontinuation of “selective availability” of the Global Positioning System (GPS) signals, making navigational signals available to the public (White House Press Release, 2000). This single presidential directive was a watershed moment. It instantaneously enhanced the public’s ability to pinpoint locations on the globe using GPS, and forever changed our individual and collective perception of the world – much like the first time an image of Earth was transmitted from a NASA spacecraft in 1966.

Today, this newly enhanced view of our world offers fresh perspectives and as yet untapped possibilities for artists, writers, designers, scientists, urban planners, architects, educators, scholars, activists, and other visionaries to create new meaning out of our deepened knowledge and new awareness. Prompted by this public adoption of GPS as a global utility, an emerging community of interdisciplinary thinkers is yielding a new, global-scaled artistic discipline called Locative Media Art. Artists and others are responding to the possibilities of location-aware computing devices that incorporate mapping technologies and social networks. The advent of open-source programming, reference applications, game and media sharing, and portable devices – including mobile phones – offer an unprecedented level of engagement, altered perception and new interpretation of culture. Because this art form is in its infancy, and because the pace of adoption of new technologies is so rapid, now is exactly the right moment to begin to share emerging developments in the field, and to identify their broad impact on arts and humanities.

Artists have historically interpreted landscape and natural forms and framed our perspective. As our tools for visualization and classification have become enhanced, so are the ways in which we frame that view. Today, pioneering artists are applying new technologies and data to shift our perspective and to offer unexpected views of our world. Currently, those who are making significant marks – both figurative and literal – are mining data and finding poetic ways of expressing it. Maya Lin, renowned Vietnam Memorial artist/designer, is an example of an artist who is blurring the boundaries between art and design, and public and private, by blending a scientific approach with an intuitive process. She employs an array of digital mapping technologies as tools to visualize, classify and systemize data that interprets the landscape, then translates that technologic view into sculptural form (Maya Lin: Andrews and Beardsley, 2006).

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Interdisciplinary thinkers are developing a mastery of the ubiquitous, un-mined resource of data and using it to tell stories, paint a landscape, elucidate through metaphor and express it as masterfully as if it were paint or clay. The breadth, depth and connected nature of our new understandings of our world not only redefines "artist", but re-defines "community." These "hybrid thinkers" are embracing new vantage points and creating even deeper connections, noting patterns, landmarks. At the same time, they are also identifying and creating social networks and conceptualizing systematic relationships on all scales to bridge the gap between the man-made world and the natural one. This connection to nature, Lin believes, is an essential component of our humanity (ibid).

Other trailblazers are now working in open-source applications with environmental and community mapping, social networked gaming, virtual theater, and web logs (blogs). For example, Nathan Martin and Jeff Maki at Carnegie-Mellon University's STUDIO for Creative Inquiry, launched an "audible map" of Pittsburgh featuring site-specific sounds of daily life entitled "Making Things Public—Atmospheres for Democracy." Sounds for the sites could be gathered by residents and contributed via mobile phone (http://www.cmu.edu/PR/releases05/050216_sci.html). In projects such as these, our urban street grids, bodies of water, or mountain trail systems become a stretched and primed "canvas" for expressing a landscape.

The humanistic and community-centered trend of open-source technologies has generated a wondrous ripple effect and marks a migration from isolated, silo-ed, professional realms to a spirit of shared experience and respect for community. This new paradigm is impacting the way we relate, communicate, do business, educate ourselves, steward our earth and define our place in the world. It is what is driving the development of the new humanities field of Locative Media Arts.

My research to date points me towards groundswells of "locative" interests in my own backyard of the Pacific Northwest. I have already identified hotbeds of activity in other cities worldwide. However, the more deeply I look into these activities, the more I find that they are often decentralized models with participants scattered around the globe. Thus, not only is this art form an ephemeral one, but its creative body, elusive. No matter the discipline, "exposure to the developments in locative arts offers potential for transformation and engagement" (Drew Hemment, http://www.drewhemment.com/2004/locative_arts.html).