

**Migrating Practices:
Possibilities for Global Locative Media**

Presented to
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The practice of mapping provides a visual representation to complex ideas and relationships. Traditional cartographic practices evoke images of long scrolls of paper, spinning globes and precise measuring instruments. Today, GPS systems and google maps allow amateurs to create personalized maps within a few clicks. However mapping has long since fallen from the hands of cartographers interested in representing the earth's surface; the trend toward mapping metaphors and locative media practice has been taken up by artists and researchers to further provide rich visualizations and deeper critical investigation of the networked intersections of community, place, identity and experience in the 21st century. This embrace of human geography has further opened up possibilities for understanding people in places as defined by social and economic factors. This in turn, has been the source of great interest not only for geographers, but city planners, architects, and sociologists who regard urban spaces as the confluence of many distinct and interconnected factors. While much of locative media projects have focused on new technologies, such as GPS, the potential of locative media lies not in the technology but in the conceptual framework, and its ability to investigate and visualize the relationship between the local and global in the context of the changing global economy and postmodern geographic practices. While there may be a naïve embrace of the power of technology to build community, locative media practices have the potential to speak and function across borders. Whether this communication engages migrants that already navigate transnational identity, or whether it engages new audiences sympathetic to building relationships across distance for educational, political or social endeavors—the conceptual undercurrent of locative media has much to offer.

In 2006, the Leonardo on-line journal dedicated an issue to define the current theories and practices of locative media. Julianne Bleeker suggests that “At its core, locative media is about creating a kind of geospatial experience whose aesthetics can be said to rely upon a range of characteristics ranging from the quotidian to the weighty semantics of lived experience, all latent within the ground upon which we traverse.” To date, much of locative media has used GPS systems to deliver content specific to a precise geographic location. Locative (located) media has come to invoke new technological practices and awareness enacted in space. “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.”¹ For projects that do not rely on an onsite media device to deliver content, perhaps the term locative practices are more suitable. These projects continue the tradition of social and artistic inquiry around one’s relationship to the mediated landscape as it continues to develop and rapidly change. Locative projects engage technology to bring attention to new cultural, social, economic, and historic layers, as they affect our movement and presence in space. While many projects focus on their site-specific component, almost all of them also have a web presence, allowing them to be viewed by audiences beyond the immediate locale. Some projects use high tech visualization systems to create artistic representations of place, such as Christian Nold’s *Biomapping*, which connects participants’ emotional responses to a specific geographic locale in the UK. Others focus on walking and storytelling via psychogeographic explorations. However despite the local-centric, often experiential quality of these projects, many projects would further benefit by articulating their local relationship to the global. Several projects, like *Yellow Arrow*, have spread from city to city; this comparative storytelling technique remains useful and starts to create community through the shared cultural experience of ‘tagging.’ If one is to consider the implications and scope of the “geospatial experience,” one must further consider the spaces in between the identifiable points of interest. The intersections and experiences that emerge from and within existing social circumstances. Toward this end, it is useful to reflect on how changes in geographical discourse have affected our sense of place and lived experience.

Conversations about the compression of time and space have certainly been heightened by the presence of the Internet and mobile technologies. However this conversation has its roots beyond the current medium. As Michael Curry suggests, “if one wishes to deal with these more complex questions one needs to see that in every era there has been a close interconnection between the technologies available for communication and representation and the ways in which people have conceptualized space and place.”² One current shift in geographic discourses has emerged from the conversations between social theory and cultural studies as they inform spatial relations and practices. In geography, there has been a historic shift away from positivist

¹ Tuters, Marc and Kazys Varnelis. “Beyond Locative Media,” *Networked Publics*, <http://networkedpublics.org/> (accessed April 10, 2008).

² Curry, Michael, “Discursive Displacement and the Seminal Ambiguity of Space and Place,” in *The Handbook of New Media*, eds. Leah Lievrouw, Sonia Livingstone (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 503.

Euclidian geometry that posits space as an absolute container toward approaches that reflect historical and geographic materialism.³ David Harvey remains a strong proponent of this position, and asserts, “The supposed neutrality of geographical knowledges has at best proven to be a beguiling fiction and at worst, a downright fraud.”⁴ By extension, borders and distance also become sites of negotiation. The importance of the “geospatial experience” has political implications. It becomes important not only that projects bring attention to individual sense of experience, but also that one creates opportunities to understand the geospatial experience of other people. Cosmopolitan education, as proposed by Martha Nussbaum addresses the false fission between local and global perspectives, and the political imperative that demands redress.

“The air does not obey national boundaries. This simple fact can be, for children, the beginning of the recognition that, like it or not, we live in a world in which the destinies of nations are closely intertwined with respect to basic goods and survival itself. The pollution of third-world nations who are attempting to attain our high standard of living will, in some cases, end up in our air. No matter what account of these matters we will finally adopt, any intelligent deliberation about ecology -- as, also, about the food supply and population -- requires global planning, global knowledge, and the recognition of a shared future.”⁵

Where schools and other institutions may find it difficult to advance these conversations, artists and media makers can use the available technology to further humanize and facilitate an analysis and understanding of global events and daily life. Harvey adds, “A recent poll in the US showed that the more knowledgeable people were about the conditions and circumstances of life in a given country- the less likely they were to support military interventions or economic sanctions...”⁶

The trend toward mapping projects provides an entry point into many of these difficult and overwhelming conversations by offering visual representations of global citizen engagement and networked concerns. “How urban life is practiced and experienced, for example, has much to do with how we form and reform mental maps of the city... changing the map of the world can change not only our modes of thought about that world but also our social behaviors and our sense of well-being (much as the depiction of the earth as a globe from outer space is often credited with affecting the way in which we think of global problems or even of globalization

³ Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin and Gill Valentine, eds. *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*. (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 5.

⁴ Harvey, David. *Spaces of Capital*. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 231.

⁵ Nussbaum, Martha. *For Love of Country*. (Beacon Press, 2002),11-12.

⁶ Harvey, 211.

itself).”⁷ Locative media practices, due to their relationship with technology, provide a contextual experience, beyond that of other cultural forms like photography or filmmaking. At the core, many of these projects retain a deep commitment to reenergizing the public sphere and reappropriating commercial technology toward more open, democratic use. “When tied to a materialist vision, the recent turn to maps is among the strongest critiques of globalization available to us.”⁸ Like the “flat world” metaphor popularized by Thomas Freedman, new cartographic practices can advance a vision of the world that is networked—that lives simultaneously on the ground and online—where the action of one person affects that of another. If we can create this holistic representation of society, in the same way the globe has done for physical space, cartographic practices can provide a new vision of the world in which collective responsibility is shared by all.

Mobility of people and goods is a defining characteristic of the 21st century global economy. In order to create engaged citizens, one must have an understanding, albeit general, of the systems that support this movement. Politically, it has become increasingly important to identify these systems and how they work, as a way to fight against the fragmentation and isolation upon which these systems also depend. Doreen Massey suggests a useful perspective for this convergence: “a global sense of the local, a global sense of place.”⁹ There are several examples of projects that use the local/global lens to frame these ideas. Currently many of these projects focus on building deep layers around a particular site(s) within a specific geographical area. Both limitations of production and implementation may hinder locative media projects that compress spaces, or draw connections between distant areas, but this direction holds strong potential. Current interest in mapping these global connections can be approached in three general areas: Object mapping, people mapping and conceptual mapping. Within these projects the levels of interactivity and site specificity vary greatly.

Object mapping projects serve to trace the life of an object as it circulates around the globe. The often cited, *MILK* project, by Esther Polak championed the use of GPS systems to trace cheese production from the cow in Latvia to the consumer in the Netherlands. Audio and

⁷ Harvey, 221.

⁸ Tuters, Marc and Kazys Varnelis, “Beyond Locative Media.”

⁹ Massey, Doreen, “The political place of locality studies,” *Environment and Planning A* 23, (1991): 267 – 281.

Visual documentation of this process by the participants provided a rich narrative account of this otherwise invisible process. *How Stuff is Made*, by Natalie Jeremijenko uses the open source wiki platform to create a visual encyclopedia of the lives of products, ranging from eyeglasses to US flags. Users can upload new entries in the form of photo essays and tag them with specific location and contextual information. Many of these users are current students studying Industrial Engineering, Labor and Design practices who use the site as part of their curriculum to investigate the intersections of these areas with information and communication technology. As the site grows, one valuable contribution would be the ability to hyperlink between posts, so that product lives do not remain isolated but can articulate a larger web of relations. This larger web of consumption is well illustrated through the interactive movie and website, *The Story of Stuff*, featuring Annie Leonard. The Flash-based animation leads the viewer through the process of production, consumption and disposal, connecting the destruction of natural resources in the developing world to the economic imperative of first world consumption. Although not considered locative practice, this project does connect the dots in a way that remains accessible and engaging for a mass audience. The “learn more” option directs viewers to countless links of national and international organizations supporting sustainable development work. Furthermore, when partnered with locative projects that use new technologies to trace specific objects through these cycles, powerful new ways of understanding the world can emerge through concrete personalized example.

While objects are easily removed from their genealogy, the movement of people carries with it visible traces in the form of continued communication and cultural exchange. Several successful projects that reach across borders in this way have resourcefully used available web 2.0 tools such as video blogs, and skype to document this exchange. Artists and new media practitioners have much to learn from these projects, and also have much to offer by facilitating these exchanges. One such program entitled the YouthLab, started by Mindy Faber uses participatory technologies to connect youth in Barbados and youth in Chicago; through media production exercises they develop a rich dialogue about histories of migration. This project emerged from Faber’s own questioning of these issues: “As youth media educators, how can we

create a different kind of pedagogical space where young people from around the globe can use the tools of participatory media (blogs, wikis, social networks, digital sharing sites, etc.) to connect politically and socially? How do we learn to “listen across borders”—the first step in creating a youth platform for global social justice?”¹⁰ Faber’s choice to use mapping tools speaks to the importance of imbuing this new “pedagogical space” online with contextual information, which can provide a deeper understanding of relationships as they are informed by geographical forces. New media artists concerned with the effects and impact of globalization must position themselves to inform and shape how these new relations are understood, and use their position of power within this technology to offer creative ways for negotiating, not only geographical distance, but cultural and social divides. Another model which engages existing tools can be seen through the work of *Vlog International*. Vlog or videolog refers to brief video broadcasts that can range from diaristic to journalistic accounts. *Vlog International* members decide on a theme, and the participants, all of whom reside in distinct countries, respond with an uploaded video, which is then edited together and posted as a polyvocal international response. Each segment begins with the location of the maker, followed by their segment. This model of contextual response to a given topic is an interesting one yet to be fully explored by locative media practitioners.

In addition to mapping objects and people, many artists are investigating the power of mapping driven by conceptual ideas. *Shadows From Another Place* by Paula Levine transposes maps of Baghdad and San Francisco to question the impact of war on familiar ground. Using the same GPS technology of military operations, the maps not only provide a digital overlay of the corresponding SF coordinates where Iraqis had been killed, but provides a physical marker in the streets with their names, in relation to this map coordinate system. By mapping this hypothetical experience not only online, but in the streets, US residents are able to reflect more immediately upon how a war would impact their physical environment. This confluence of online mapping overlaid in the physical world reaches across some of the limitations of access to new technologies, and serves to “ground” the concepts in lived spaces. Radio-frequency Identification tags (RFID) have also been hijacked by artists who use these commercial tracking devices to provide objects and people with narrative layers of information. The *Exchange Project* by Nancy

¹⁰ Faber, Mindy. “Listening Across Borders: Creating Virtual Spaces for Youth Global Exchange,” *Youth Media Reporter*, November 2007.

Nisbit adapts the currency of stories and community solidarity to support her trucking road trip through the US, Mexico and Canada, in order to make a statement about NAFTA and the ways in which technology and economics are dictating new relationships in regards to the circulation of people and goods. The awareness of who can travel, how quickly, at what cost, both literally, culturally and socially, must remain foregrounded during discussions of border crossing, migratory practices and media use. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, distance is “a social product: its length varies depending on the speed with which it may be overcome (and in a monetary economy) on the cost involved in the attainment of that speed.”¹¹ Access to the web and new technologies requires not only economic resources, but also a literacy that supports the value and understanding of these mediums of communication. However it is often the rhetoric of the “digital divide” which perpetuates a false understanding of who is using new technologies and how. The presence of globalvoices.org, an aggregate of international citizen journalism blogs remains at the fore of documenting and supporting emerging practices—where attention to translation and accessibility remain primary concerns. Stories of innovative technological development and use paint a hopeful picture. “For migrants, both the politics of adaptation to new environments and the stimulus to move or return are deeply affected by a mass-mediated imaginary that frequently transcends national space – media are thus central to the story of diaspora.”¹²

Certainly commercial communication companies recognize the rapid adoption of new technologies, and often partner with artists to fund research and creative applications. Artists’ relationship to these technologies has always been one of contention, in relation to their origins as commercial or military apparatuses. “Stefana Broadbent, an anthropologist who leads the User Adoption Lab at Swisscom, Switzerland’s largest telecoms operator, has been looking at usage patterns associated with different communications technologies. It is migrants, rather than geeks, who have emerged as the “most aggressive” adopters of new communications tools, says Ms Broadbent. Dispersed families with strong ties and limited resources have taken to voice-over-internet services, IM and webcams, all of which are cheap or free.”¹³ There are many lessons to

¹¹ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 12.

¹² Arjun Appadurai quoted in Mark Foster “Postcolonial Theory in the Age of Planetary Communication” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24, 6.

¹³ Mellor, Belle. “Home truths about telcoms,” *The Economist*. June 7, 2007.

be learned about how individuals, families and communities are adopting and familiarizing themselves with new technologies. Artists can learn from existing cultural practices, and offer creative ways to maximize the existing needs and desires for new populations of technology users.

Furthermore, locative media projects can offer a unique vision for people who straddle a specific place, either literally, cultural or figuratively. A more recent follow up to the *MILK* project, titled *NomadicMILK* traces both the movement of nomadic herders in Nigeria as they raise their cattle, and deliver fresh milk to markets, and the commercial transporters of the brand Peak milk as it arrives in Nigeria from factories abroad and gets distributed through a more commercialized process. The project uses new technologies to map the patterns of mobility enacted by both of these economic systems. Tracking migration was also the object of study by the team at UCSD who created the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*. This GPS system was built into a cheap mobile phone that uses iconic and visual clues to help immigrants navigate while crossing the US/Mexico border. The phone alerts the user to water sources, and transportation routes, as well as suggesting more aesthetically pleasing routes to take. Migrants not only live in between places while en route, but often their identities are shaped by the constant negotiation of place and ideas of home. One result of these new patterns of migration can be witnessed through the growth of transnational communities. When thinking about transnational communities the concept of “meshworks” remains a valuable metaphor. Meshworks refer to the networks between one’s country of origin and their current home. “Meshworks tend to be non hierarchical and self-organizing... they are created out of the interlocking of heterogeneous and diverse elements brought together because of complimentary or common experiences... Meshworks involve two parallel dynamics: strategies of localization and of interweaving.”¹⁴ This concept can be very instructive when thinking about the role of new media to represent, document and approach these hybrid spaces. The difficulty of orchestrating projects that literally straddle borders often requires that the artist connect with existing networked organizations and institutions. The new initiative

¹⁴ Harcourt, Wendy. “The Impact of Transnational Discourses on Local Community Organizing,” *Society for International Development*, 46, 1. 2003.

by the New Museum in NY, entitled, Museum as Hub uses creative strategies to engage their international partners in Amsterdam, Cairo, Seoul, and Mexico City in questions of artistic practices across borders, addressing issues of landscape, environment, identity, neighborhood and community. These initiatives can provide infrastructure to artists seeking to develop international partnerships and collaborations. This infrastructure is crucial to establishing personal relationships that allow projects to flourish without the barriers that high tech projects entail.

In conclusion, locative practices have much to contribute to one's understanding of networked geographies, and the interplay of economic, political and cultural forces driving mobility and migration in the 21st century. Locative media artists have a crucial responsibility to reengineer technological devices as they become increasingly ubiquitous systems of control. While artists are quick to hack high tech devices, attention must also be paid to applications like web 2.0 programs that remain accessible to mass audiences online. Likewise, artists must creatively think about how to use technology to bring attention to the very nature of mediation in our daily experiences, in particular in relation to our sense of place and identity. Ultimately, this challenge transcends the medium, and continues the struggle to re-imagine new way individuals relate to the world around them.