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Swimming In The Grey Zones - Locating The Other Spaces In Mobile Art

Swimming In The Grey Zones - Locating The Other Spaces In Mobile Art

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grey zones, heterotopia, border-crossing, shifting boundaries, ghosts, liminality, non-place

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses work that addresses a shifting or indeterminate kind of public space - liminal spaces, haunted space, and spaces and zones that are often 'misread' by locative technologies - referred to here as 'grey zones'. As artists explore these spaces with works using locative and portable media, what are some effects of locating and properties of these spaces that emerge? How do these works add to existing critical dialogue around the slippages of location, meaning and subjectivity in public space?

GREY ZONES

"Grey zones" are spaces or places of alterity. They could be Michel Foucault's 'heterotopias', or Marc Augé's 'non-places', or Edward Soja's 'thirdspace' (just to name a few) [1]. They exist as real spaces and places we know and are also new spaces created by the use of technology. As artists begin to explore these spaces with locative media, what are some effects of locating and properties of these spaces and what might be their correlates in other discourses around space?

The field of research and practice of locative media is abuzz with new work and ideas, especially with work that deals with specifics of a data- or narratively-described place implied in 'locating'. With much focus on the specific, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that there do exist ruptures in locating and its related technologies. In the process of locating, boundaries shift, errors occur, things are read as something else, signals get lost. These are some of the effects or properties of 'locating' that make evident the slippery boundaries in locating, revealing spaces that can be defined in some way as 'other' and that shift over time to occasionally blur the pinpointing of a locative 'moment'.

I would like to read this slippage as suggesting possible 'grey zones' — spaces of alterity that locative practice can explore as a discursive 'other' and to be considered along with social and historical contexts as another means of understanding the effects of locating on space and subjectivity.

BOUNDARIES SHIFT

In vision-tracking systems (i.e., software analyzing data fed in from networked surveillance cameras) [2], there is an effort to define 'edges' of the object being tracked by surveillance cameras. One intention of this edge-defining or 'border-seeking' is to produce a descriptive outline of the object, which could ultimately be fed into a database to compare to similar 'objects', such as a documented body that is known to walk in a particular way (i.e., a [un]usual suspect, 'Verbal' Kint). One problem a tracking system has is to deal with movement, light and shadow. Matter (i.e., physical bodies) can appear to merge into the non-matter of shadows, especially as the object moves — producing a 'grey' area that has to be sorted out by algorithms to determine what exactly is matter and what isn't (in order to make a

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match).

This indeterminate space in edge-definition could be considered a space of alterity. A shifting boundary of thresholds, it resists definition as the space of the documented subject: not located in territories (i.e., of self/other) but falling somewhere in-between. How might these threshold/grey areas be manifested or addressed in a mobile project and what might it say about our shifting relationships to space and matter?

Drift, by American artist Teri Rueb, is a work employing Pocket PC, GPS and headphones to call up a soundscape that shifts according to location and time [3]. The work recalls Marc Augé's non-place of the beach [4] and carries with it inherent edge-blurring and boundary shifting: on the beach, water flows into sand, sand ripples as if water, boundaries of water and sand merge and shift with the tide, horizons of water and sky shift with the changing light of day, and tides force a shift towards land.

In *Drift* Rueb has created a poetic merging of place and sound that is entirely about thresholds, flow and shifting of border. According to Rueb, "The Watten Sea becomes a metaphor for Hertzian space as visitors are invited to wander among layered currents of sand, sea and interactive sounds that drift with the tides, and with the shifting of satellites as rise and set, introducing another kind of drift". Rueb's reference to Hertzian space [5], elsewhere referred to as "soup" [6] evokes a fluid mélange of sound and noise, flows and rupturing glitches that offer us another space

"... that sound allows: A space that's more permeable and doesn't suggest the same kind of hard and fast boundaries of a visual construction of space. ...

"Hertzian space is another level on which we can think of our notions of space. ... the idea of this space is ... a kind of continuum of wave lengths. It stands in contrast to our typical idea about space being defined by concrete form, and material, that's more visually determined. I think, this isn't necessarily the only way of thinking about space. Sound and wireless media space, generated through Hertzian space, offer us this kind of alternative experience. That I think is ultimately important because it reflects back on our own understanding of a relationship of self to other but also to the world around us" [7].

There is another aspect of non-place implied here: the place of border-crossing. This is a place of longing — particularly the longing to cross into that space that is beyond the edge of the horizon. While Rueb's work doesn't specifically deal with the politics of 'lost', it cannot help but suggest the nomad, the wanderer and by extension the refugee, and suggests instead a poetic referent for the lost within [8] that takes us back to Augé's non-place: a place where one's awareness of the 'here' is lost in the 'there' of longing. In Augé's case, whether that longing is reverie or anxiety might be dependent on how that edge is seen – as a wall that can only be traversed with difficulty and risk, or as an imagined space to be explored, even colonized [9]. Getting 'lost' in the case of the beach can go beyond the poetic to unimaginable terror, but for those who must cross that edge (i.e., the refugee) 'lost' is a risk that is more tolerable than the knowledge of knowing where one is [10].

THINGS ARE READ AS SOMETHING ELSE

Belgian artist Francis Alÿs has created numerous works around walking in his home of Mexico and in Europe, exploring spaces formed by our social, physical and mental negotiations with urban space. For instance, in *Narcotourism*, (artist's walk, Denmark, 1996), Alÿs walked in the streets of Copenhagen, "over the course of seven days, under the influence of a different drug every day. [his] trip ... recorded through photographs, notes, or any other media that becomes relevant" [11]. These walks lasted up to 14 hours under the influence of a range of mostly illegal drugs that produce a range of states and mental spaces: hallucination, paranoia, delusion, hyperactivity, aimlessness, etc. [12]. In addition to filtering real place through these mental states, Alÿs would have experienced these places through the in-between state of 'coming-down' — when drugs are still present in the body but their effects are wearing off. In either case, Alÿs was occupying space not as one normally approaches it, but in a double of that space that appears through a filter of mental space.

Alÿs' other works also focus on non-normative ways in which we understand or create space: consuming metal waste in the form of a magnetic 'pet' until the pet (and Alÿs as consumer of detritus) is satiated (*The Collector*, artist's walk, México City, 2001), following the shadow of an obelisk as the only place in a public square that actually 'gathers' a public — not as the declarative political gathering expected in this space but as public 'hiding' — from the glaring sun (*Zócalo*, single-screen DVD

projection, México City, 20 May 1999). The spaces Alÿs focuses on are primarily spaces of the forgotten, the unnoticed, the discarded, and especially spaces that manifest negotiations of social, political or personal relationships. Within the spaces brought forward in these works are subversions of the norm that pose questions about why we gather, who is monitored, and what is neglected.

ERRORS OCCUR, SIGNALS ARE LOST

I am exploring the variable form of the ghost [13] in my own research in two separate works-in-progress: *The Spell of the Haunted Handheld*, a site-specific ghost narrative designed for GPS-enabled cell phone and commissioned by Art Center Nabi in Seoul, which will take place along the Cheonggyecheon stream in Seoul, Korea [14] and a project called *Passing SG 7777* for the exhibition *The Blur of the Otherworldly* [15], a piece based on Guglielmo Marconi's early trans-Atlantic wireless transfers from sites in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, Canada, and Wellfleet U.S., using Bluetooth as a means of creating a séance space.

The 'ghost' is one of those liminal forms that raises questions about embodiment and subjectivity and has a peculiar affinity to being picked up by the machines of technology. In the project for the Cheonggyecheon in Seoul, I am creating four separate narratives using night-vision and other footage shot on location in Seoul. In the narrative, the ghost is dug up by well-intentioned development, stirring up memories of place, colonization, and a Brechtian world of grey markets and grey activity. This ghost also inhabits streams – streams that flow down from the mountains and streams of data, searching for places to rest or to haunt, looking for things to play with and taunt. In particular, this ghost longs to haunt our devices of transmission, to produce in these devices an abject space that is uncomfortably close to our bodies. Ghosts are often mischievous; here the ghost also wants to play with errors of signal inaccuracy produced by satellites (usually compensated for by differential error cancellation in GPS), or to get the user to confuse the GPS to produce moments of dis-location.

The ghost itself is always an abject thing – signifying the cast off and suffering. This abjection can spill into the form or space it inhabits, creating a new monstrous space. I have written elsewhere about data space as a new monstrous [16]; in the case of the ghost, the monstrous is conjured by machines of vision and sound and varies according to the nature or properties of transmission: spirit photographs of the nineteenth century, or early telephones and radio seen as the 'devil's instruments', recent technologies such as night-vision cameras that detect the undetectable, or technologies of transmission that transfer the formless as data and signals.

In my work *Passing SG 7777*, I am recreating the abject space of the séance to conjure and distribute via Bluetooth variable forms of a signal lost by Guglielmo Marconi in one of his first attempts at trans-Atlantic wireless transmission between Poldhu, U.K. and Signal Hill, Newfoundland, Canada. The title of the work refers to Marconi's wireless patent, but also to another kind of ghost – a sensor ghost. 'Sensor ghost', or 'radar ghost', originated as a military term to describe 'false' signals picked up by a ship's radar. Such deceptions are as inherent to the history of wireless as they are to military research that presupposes an enemy 'out there'. For instance in the 1940s, University of California Division of War research scientists (based at the Scripps Institution in San Diego, California in the nascent field of Oceanography) "used sound waves to detect distant objects ... amidst the sea's noisy garble. Odd, perhaps electronic chattering picked up by detectors turned out to be vast schools of snapping shrimp; the creatures were soon pressed into secret service hiding American subs" [17].

A number of artists are beginning to explore locative media for its potential to critically explore space through narrative (Kati Rubunyi's *The Gambit* [U.S.A.], Rachel baker's *Platfrom* [U.K.], Kate Armstrong's *Pattern Language* [Canada]), tactical media works (IAA's *ISee* [U.S.A.]), as well as the earlier examples of the evocative poetics in Rueb. In my mobile class at Indiana University Bloomington, graduate student Christopher Lowther is exploring the ways in which one negotiates space while also negotiating ones' sexuality and sense of belonging. His project *Out of the Light* (2005) sends the audience into back streets and alleys at night, armed with a PDA and the simple objective of traversing a path without being seen. This is not as easy as it sounds. A voice on the PDA suggests certain behavior or movement, heightening one's paranoia, or coaxing one into 'safe spaces' that do not necessarily seem safe. As bodies or vehicles approach, one tries to slip in the shadow without drawing attention. For Lowther, it is a re-reading of coming out as a young gay male without feeling safe at all about doing so — finding security either in invisibility, in passing, or in the discovery of spaces where one might belong. While cruising is implicit in this work, it is not even a tentative option. Contact — even visible contact — is avoided:

see but don't be seen. The effect of growing up in a homophobic place is suggested in a skittish dance (of coming out), where one risks plenty by being 'out' in heterospace. Don't ask, don't tell.

CONCLUSION

What might artists ask — or tell — about space and subjectivity as we continue a practice of mobile art that stems at least as far back as walk-works by Vito Acconci and Hamish Fulton and engages current communicative and locative tools and culture in doing so? For one thing, we need to find our way out of the mainstreamed spaces of distraction so prevalent as popular media fills our real and communication spaces, and into those slippery borders and spaces of the grey zones.

How do we find these, what are they? We can look to 'other spaces' outside of the mainstream, as well as to the inherent communities and histories of particular spaces, as Shawn Micallef, James Roussel, and Gabe Sawhney have done with their **Murmur** projects in Canada [18]. As we do so, we need to be wary of filling 'uncomfortable' grey zones that are often established as such by social, political and economic terms with new-media versions of whitewashing, a process familiar to anyone whose space has undergone gentrification. It may be precisely in the discomfort of a space's history or physicality, or in finding those spaces with ruptures in connectivity, or deemed necessary OR unnecessary for surveillance that important narratives about spaces of alterity exist. It may also be in the technologies themselves, approaching these not only with the sly dexterity of the hacker, but also with the what-happens-if-I-press-this approach of the novice user or the untrained eye of a non-programmer, as well as allowing technologies to show us other models of the grey zones of space (i.e. shifting borders).

One point of locating this 'other' space, this space of alterity – would be to ensure that we don't allow our spaces to become completely controlled and colonized by the commercial and political uses of those in control of communications technologies. This requires of artists an active engagement with space and technology – being aware, being disturbing, being sensitive, researching the space. Another point might be to engage technology as a means of redefining what we imagine our spaces to be.

Perhaps I raise more questions than I answer here – but that is exactly how I imagine a ghost might deal with technology and space — as something to play with, to pass through and occupy, to recall what has happened, and to elicit a few raised hairs that make us wonder what is there and how or why it is we detect it.

NOTES

1. See Michel Foucault, "Heterotopias", in Neil Leach (ed.), **Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory** (London: Routledge, 1997); Marc Augé, **Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity** (London: Verso, 1995); and Edward Soja, **Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places** (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).
2. This work in vision tracking was brought to my attention by researchers at UCSD's Computer Vision and Robotics Research (CVRR) laboratory.
3. Teri Rueb's **Drift** took place at the Watten Sea as part of the exhibition **Ohne Schur**. See <http://www.terirueb.net/drift/>.
4. See Augé, **Non-places**.
5. Teri Rueb, "Syncopated Space – Wireless Media Shaping Human Movement and Social Interaction", in **Receiver #10**. Published by Vodafone online at <http://www.receiver.vodafone.com/10/articles/index00.html>
For more on "Hertzian space", see Anthony Dunne, **Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience and Critical Design** (London: CA Computer Related Design Research, 1999).
6. Rueb, *ibid.*
7. Rueb in conversation with Sabine Breitsameter online at http://www.swr.de/swr2/audiohyperspace/engl_version/interview/rueb.html
8. Julia Kristeva, **Strangers to Ourselves** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
9. Augé explores this referent to the colonizing aspect of travel in his writings on the non-place of the airport or the boat. See Augé, **Non-Places**.
10. Thanks to Ryan Mandell, a graduate student at IU Bloomington for his 2005 video

Airport/Beach, a response to Augé's *Non-Places*. This and Anne Galloway's article "Mobility as World-Building/Technologies at Play" brought me back to reading Augé within the context of locative media. See Anne Galloway, "Mobility as World-Building/Technologies at Play" in *The Receiver, #10: Connecting to the Future*. Published by Vodafone, 2004. Online at <http://www.receiver.vodafone.com>

11. Stuart Horodner, *Walkways*, Independent Curators International, 2002.

12. <http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2000/01/28/26490.html>

13. My work on the ghost as a variable form of data was partially inspired by Lev Manovich's writings on variability in his book *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

14. *The Spell of the Haunted Handheld* was commissioned by Seoul's Art Center Nabi after my proposal won their International Wireless Art Competition. On-site research and photography took place in Seoul and the project will launch upon the re-opening of the Cheonggyecheon stream late in 2005.

15. *The Blur of the Otherworldly: Contemporary Art, Technology and the Paranormal*, a traveling exhibition curated by Jane Marsching and Mark Alice Durant opened October 2005 at the Center for Art and Visual Culture at University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) in Baltimore.

16. I presented my writing on data-space and vertiginous space in film as the new monstrous in the paper "For a Blobbing in the Networked Zone", at the Life by Design: Everyday Digital Culture conference at University of California, Irvine in 2003.

17. Nancy Scott Anderson, *An Improbable Venture: A History of the University of California, San Diego* (La Jolla, CA: UCSD Press, 1993).

18. See <http://murmurtoronto.ca/>

GLOSSARY

Vision-tracking systems - Vision-tracking systems, also referred to as machine vision, use a combination of software and networked surveillance cameras to monitor and track spaces and objects in space. Data of what is captured visually on camera is then sent to software for analysis to be read or to trigger action by other devices, i.e. robots. Typically, data is analyzed in order to identify forms, shapes, movement, and behavior and compared to similar information in a database.

Hertzian space - According to Rueb, Hertzian Space is "... a kind of continuum of wave lengths [that] stands in contrast to our typical idea about space being defined by concrete form, and material, that's more visually determined." (see footnote 7, conversation with Sabine Breitsameter). The term "Hertzian Space" was originally defined by Alan Dunne in *Hertzian Tales* who suggested that architects and designers could be inspired to create "material responses to immaterial electromagnetic fields". The term is derived from the work and theories of nineteenth century German physicist Heinrich Hertz, whose theories about electromagnetic waves inspired further research in wireless by Sir Oliver Lodge, Guglielmo Marconi, and others.

Heterotopia - The term 'heterotopia' is here used in reference to the work of Michel Foucault and his writing on 'heterotopic' spaces – real, socially-defined spaces that stand in opposition to 'utopian' spaces and also function outside of all other places, as 'other' space. In his article *Of Other Spaces* (1967), Foucault gives examples of heterotopias, principles for their existence and and discusses the relation of space and time in heterotopic space.

See footnote 1 and the following online link: <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Leslie Sharpe is a Canadian artist living in the United States where she is Assistant Professor and Head of the Digital Art Program in the Hope School of Fine Arts at Indiana University, Bloomington. She works in Digital Media and Installation, with a focus on Mobile and Wireless Technologies. Sharpe's recent work employs the genre of ghost narrative in projects using cellphone and PDAs to explore questions about subjectivity, embodiment, social networks and place.

Prior to joining the faculty at Indiana University, Bloomington, Sharpe was a Faculty Fellow at University of California, San Diego. She received her Masters of Fine Arts in Visual Arts/Computing Arts at University of California, San Diego and her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting at University of Alberta in Canada. Sharpe previously taught at Pratt Institute in New York and as a Summer Teaching Fellow at UCSD. She has been an artist in residence at P.S. 1 Museum/Institute for Contemporary Art in New York,

Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York, and The Banff Centre in Canada. Sharpe's work has been exhibited at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Finland, in New York at P.S. 1 Institute of Contemporary Art, Exit Art, The New Museum, Artists Space, and Franklin Furnace, as well as other venues in the U.S.A., Canada and Europe. Sharpe was recently named winner of the Nabi Prize for ResFest Korea and Art Center Nabi's international Wireless Art Competition.

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