

## SATELLITE STORIES: IMMERSION IN THE LARGE- SCALE PROJECTION OF GOOGLE EARTH AND PUBLIC STORYTELLING

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### Abstract

This is about an event that uses the visualization, Google Earth and is about exploring ways to extend its potential, as well as celebrate this new, spectacular image of the earth. It is a very literal immersion and part of the reason it works maybe because there is no technological puzzle. The focus is on the person and their story. The paper also describes other projects that draw stories from spacecraft technology and some workshops with children that use the projection of Google Earth.

When the view from above became part of the public domain, in the form of Google Earth, we the public gained a significant new visual spectacular. At first it felt shockingly invasive, because this is the viewpoint of the state satellite, the police helicopter, but then the image softened, as we looked at it in our homes, with our friends and with family. The image became a language of sharp bursts of recognition, of slow searching and of memory. People began telling the meaning of the image. Google Earth, among many things, is a medium with which we remind ourselves of who we are and invariably we do this in a public way because it feels good to show other people where we are from.

The project described here uses a large-scale projection of Google Earth to draw out people's personal stories in a public way.

The idea came about during an evening at home with friends in Vancouver. We had Google Earth running and as we talked about places, we found each other's narratives surprisingly compelling. For me it was the first time, in the six months since I'd arrived in Vancouver that I was able to tell people I'd met there about where I was from. For those moments I was deep within my own culture and the tiny world of my first eleven years. I showed them Coningsby Drive, Kidderminster, England, UK. My walk to school with my brother when I was four and the special route I went on my own when I was seven, imagining things about the gardens all the way. The gate at the top of the road which was as far as I got when I tried to run away from

home. The field at the back where we found Molly, our cat, after two days of searching and the faint white mark in the hedge that I use to stare at from my Mum and Dad's bedroom window, convinced it was a ghost. On and on, I could plot the minor incidents of my childhood to absolutely specific places in the image.

### The GoogleTime Museum

The friends said we should do this as a public event. I staged it first at the World Urban Festival in Vancouver, a parallel event to the World Urban Forum of 2006, which is an inclusive meeting for discussing urbanization, established by the United Nations. At the time I was Artist-in-Residence at the Great Northern Way site of the University of British Columbia, where the festival was being held. Using my studio and a BC Transit bus, I worked with CD Evans to put together what we called "The GoogleTime Museum".

The bus was a way to draw people to that part of the site. I'll talk about it here because, the immersive part of the piece, the Google Earth part, works well with a mobile audience and an audience that is being immersed in a particular mind space, an issue-based environment. I acquired surplus vinyl transit posters and for the five-day Festival visitors could collage the outside of the bus, by cutting up the posters. They created an amazing display of world-view-environmental-peace-

conscious messages, inspired by the philosophies of Vancouver and the World Urban Forum.

From the bus, you could visit the Google Earth recording studio and have your story videoed: a memory from somewhere in the world. We would start people off in a reception area with a clipboard and take notes of where that person wanted to go. I asked for a happiest memory and a place you would like to go to but had never been.

### The set up

In the studio, I projected a wall size image of Google Earth across one wall. From charity shops I'd bought various white overalls, which participants put on and then they stood in the projection, holding a microphone, camouflaged by the image.

For navigation we had tried various solutions: joysticks, wireless mouse and we started to go down the route of gestural devices for navigation. It always came back to what actually worked, what made people feel comfortable, what helped them tell their story. So in the end we used our voices, "go that way...up a bit...zoom out...I can't tell..." One of us would be the navigator, at the computer keyboard at the back of the room taking direction and asking for clarification. Navigation was a combined effort and the storytelling would drift from conversation to monologue to questions and

**Fig. 1. A couple recording a memory at The GoogleTime Museum, World Urban Festival, Vancouver (© Joanna Griffin.)**



comments.

The sound was important too. We would consult on what kind of background music the storyteller wanted. Sometimes we had musicians come in and improvise. It was nice to hear how the voice and music worked together. It gave the speaker a pace and the musician, a rhythm and emotion to work with. The musicians liked being left to play also with the huge image panning slowly across the Pacific Ocean and lagoon islands.

It wasn't that it was an easy set up, but it was easy to see what was going on. The technology was very visible, a projector, a microphone, some music. Nobody had to feel they couldn't figure out how to use the mouse. It was a performative set up and the way we worked as a team meant that people didn't feel nervous about standing up in the projection and talking.

### Memory trigger

Mostly the lack of self-consciousness came about because of each person's absorption in what they were seeing and saying. We like to talk about ourselves. Here, though, in the connection with the image, something else was happening. We were watching and listening to the image *bring* memory. The image pulled out the story with no need for rehearsal.

It was the happiest memories that worked best. This is an excerpt from Ruthie's story:

*"Maybe this is it...yeah that would make sense...so would have been right here...far out. So how old are like the images?"*

*– Looks like that one's 2006. So tell me what happened.*

*– Tell you what happened into the microphone?"*

*– Yes*

*– Well, I would have been riding a horse, probably right around here. Its like eleven acres in total and then this is just like a big hill and I remember I was coming down the hill on the back of the horse. I think I was five, but maybe that's just my imagination, but I remember being really young and then falling off of the horse. At first I told my Dad, oh, let me go alone, but then as soon as he let go, the horse took off, so we were coming down the hill and the horse gained speed and I fell off and then he caught me. So I just remember being really happy, my Dad caught me...There were not many neighbors. This is where my house is. This is where the neighbor's is. If it's a quiet night you could call out. So*

*I use to climb these trees by the road. A few other near-death experiences..."*

When I first looked at the place where I grew up on Google Earth, it felt like I was looking at the images from my dreams. Kidderminster was uncannily clear and I found the roundabout at the top of the estate almost immediately. These places would often come up in my dreams. Usually the focus would be the junction at the end of the road that I never went beyond by myself. It seemed that those dream images always had a hovering quality too, that when you dream you float back over the memory. I thought there was an affinity between this satellite image and the way we hold images of places in our memory, or at least that we shift perspective and bodies in dreams and with the view from above, likewise, we have no standing place, no specific body.

### Satellite Stories elsewhere

The second space I put this on was at Dartington College of Art in the UK, a rural and innovative performance-driven art college. I ran an evening event for International Sputnik Day, October 4 2007 so the theme of the stories, became related to interstellar phenomena. I worked with four students here - Liddy Eyland, Merlin Porter, Kelly Mitchell and Charlotte Bean. Liddy videoed, Bean was navigator, Kelly worked the iTunes and Merlin had the clipboard. There was a ready supply of takers, with people drifting between the stories, the BBQ, badge making for forgotten satellites and data printed on twelve A0 size

posters of currently orbiting satellites. Someone took us to the place he saw his first satellite and had his first cigarette. In another story we zoomed in from the whole earth image to a field and a story about blades of grass.

The next day, I started to have families come in and it became something like a family portrait session with recollections of holidays being videoed. My Mum and Dad visited, seeing Google Earth for the first time and we retraced our journey to the geezers in the Atacama Desert. They decided they wanted to do this in their village for Arts Week. They used the village school's white board and their friends came along to tell their happiest memories, some of travels, some of childhood memories, some awkward and meandering, some poignant with emotion of long-forgotten, dearly held memory. They took the videos for their village archive collection. Bit by bit I also put the stories on Youtube with the tags 'googletime' and 'satellite stories'.

It is not a proprietary artwork. My hope is its something people could do in their living rooms, if they could borrow a projector for an evening. It would be nice if the idea spread. For me it is about how you feel in relation to the image when it is bigger than you, when it becomes a kind of landscape again. It is this experience of being physically covered by you memory that I want people to have, which is different from looking at a computer screen. It makes it a public performance of private memories and an evening's entertainment.

Fig. 2. Google Earth storytelling in a village school in UK (© Joanna Griffin.)



Fig. 3. “Satellite Stories” at UCL Mullard Space Science Lab, UK: a sunset storytelling tour led by the scientists for local people, talking here about launches, produced by The Arts Catalyst (Photo © Kristian Buus).



### Stories of the Satellites

Much of my work over the past years has been about the architecture of satellites and voyaging spacecraft. The built environment in space we have created is of mostly unmanned probes, distant structures in daily contact with people on the ground in mission operation centres, watching them, checking them, thinking about them. My work has been about drawing out the mind spaces produced by this architecture and the stories. Part of it has been about talking to people who work closely with satellites about their experiences – the places they have been to because of the satellite, such as launch sites and also the places in space that are in their head because of their familiarity with the satellite. At the University of British Columbia, for instance, Mark Halpern described the satellite in his head to me.

*“Can I just explain our orbit to you, it is a fun orbit...WMAP is essentially in a solar orbit...wherever the sun is our satellite is the exact opposite side of the earth...so any sunny day I can point to our satellite, because I see the sun I*

*point to the earth, I point to the shadow of my eyes...the way we communicate with it is at midnight its overhead and we point the telescope up and we get an hour’s worth of data. So this spacecraft is doing this wonderful thing...we’re doing this little dance around the shadow of the earth so we get the sun’s energy...”* [1]

He showed me the image of the satellite printed on his coffee cup. It looks at the very beginnings of time.

While the stories that began with The GoogleTime Museum focus on the viewpoint from the satellite, this other body of stories are drawn from looking at the satellite itself, albeit the image of the satellite in a person’s head. The stories elicited from Google Earth are about looking down whereas with this other body of the stories, the feeling is of looking up.

I do a performance where I describe where satellites are, drawing pictures in people’s heads using the descriptions scientists and engineers have given me, as they explain their personal connections to satellites. Another version of Satellite Stories was a collaborative

event with the Mullard Space Science Lab in the UK that happened one winter evening at sunset [2]. We went on a walk round the house and garden with people from the Lab and local visitors so that instead of me relating stories, people were hearing from the scientists first hand. We began by watching the setting sun and talked about the sun-watching spacecraft SOHO, directly between us and the sun. My idea was to embed information in people’s minds using the texture of the human voice, the narrative thread and the location’s intensity – simple and ancient techniques for remembering [3].

### Other Google Earth projects

With children I make quick, one-day installations to visualize the orbital environment. We use scrap material to make surprisingly convincing satellites and set them into orbit above a spinning projection of Google Earth on the floor. It’s magical and you can use it to make stunning videos of your spacecraft in flight.

You can also use the zoom function to launch your satellite. In India we are using the Sriharikota launch pad in And-

hra Pradesh from where Chandrayaan-1 launched to the moon last year. Place your spacecraft on the launch pad and zoom out till the earth is far away and you reach your required orbit. Another variation is to make collage satellites, scan or photograph them into the computer and then use the 'image overlay' and 'altitude' functions to lift them off the earth. I did this with a group of children from Kidbrooke School in London, UK for a climate change day. They made a constellation called "Satellites to Measure Changes in my Sense of Self". The satellites are flat, but its fun and the children I worked who had emigrated from different countries, became very intent on the country their satellite would hover over.

I've used the projection in schools for storytelling also. With another group from the same school, they took turns to tell everyone about a journey round their neighbourhood. I heard about where dens were, homes, cycle routes. From what I have seen, Google Earth is used extensively in schools in the UK. In this school where you knew the stress in the school corridors was nothing compared to the stress of the streets where these children lived, taking a safe viewpoint and talking about those streets felt like it could go some way to unifying the distinction between home and school life, some way to talking about problems. It was a very simple platform for sharing.

## Grounding

The technology we make is always an extension of our bodies, however distanced from it we feel. This project in creating and unearthing memory with landscape, voice and the distributed architecture of satellites is about recalling our seamless connections to tools and information. Chris Speed, in a forthcoming paper examines the cartographies of the 'overview' and what he calls the 'underview' with far more analysis than here, but his conclusions as to the way we shape meaning from the mappings of satellites, similarly rests on the need to ground the data from satellites in a social and tangible experience: our relation to each other [4]. I like to think satellites can help people with their lives. For this to happen I try to make spacecraft part of the spoken world.

## References and Notes

1. An interview with Mark Halpern, University of British Columbia 2006.
2. Produced with The Arts Catalyst and with funding from UCL Beacons of Public Engagement.
3. The Roman practice of Loci and the Aboriginal songlines are examples.
4. Chris Speed "Looking for the planet in Google Earth: The Overview Effect and Locative Media" (forthcoming paper).

## Author Bio

Joanna Griffin is an artist from the UK where she has held teaching posts at the University of Southampton, University of Wolverhampton and also at Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology in Ireland. She has an MA in Fine Art from Edinburgh University and an MA in Hypermedia Studies from the University of Westminster. Her work has been shown internationally in galleries and film festivals including the International Film Festival Rotterdam, but has more recently taken place in public contexts such as radio, participative events, education and project leadership. Her

research into the material and immaterial manifestations of satellite networks has been carried out at the University of British Columbia and during an International Arts Council England Fellowship at the Space Science Lab, UC Berkeley.

Recently she has worked with the UK-based art/science agency The Arts Catalyst on an event called "Satellite Stories" made in collaboration with the Mullard Space Science Lab and a UCL Beacons of Public Engagement project. Other projects have included an award winning 'Universe Gallery' made with school children in East London. Currently she is in India as Visiting Artist at Sriшти School of Art, Design and Technology, working with the Indian Space Research Organisation on a series of artist projects and experimental education initiatives for children and the public, under the project title 'Moon Vehicle'.

<http://www.aconnectiontoaremoteplace.net/>

**Fig. 4. Still from video of installation made with pupils from Lambeth Academy, London as part of "Space Day" organised by The Arts Catalyst. The installation uses Google Earth and recycled materials (© Joanna Griffin.)**

