Current location technologies have become tools used by contemporary artists, theorists, designers and scientists to reformulate our understanding of social engagement within an enlarged concept of place. These new mobile networks have altered the way people exist in and relate to spaces where the real and virtual world blend, blurring the lines of traditional spatial definitions and frameworks. This special issue provides a variety of perspectives and practices on the meaning and interpretation of today’s locative media.
An interview with JENNY MARKETOU

by

Mimi Sheller & Hana Iverson

MS/HE: Jenny, your work draws on so many interesting influences; could you tell us about the origins of your artistic practice and how you incorporate digital media?

JM: For the past ten years I have researched and developed site-specific and site-responsive art projects in a variety of contexts. My practice has been in the realm of the experiential. It bridges various modes of action, documentation and visualization and it can be called mobile network installations, performance, situation, event, video, photography, web projects – this is up to the audience to decide. My artistic research has been rooted in current politics and in the creation of a civic space through art and technology. My approach to using digital media is usually a commentary on the media itself, the context in which this media can be found, and the way in which it affects community structures, patterns of communication and the politics of space. Projects aim to generate discourse, and often function as live public experiments.

As the French Philosopher Bruno Latour suggests, we do not search for democracy only in the realm of professional politics, but we should also draw attention to the complex sets of technologies, interfaces, and platforms that allow things to become public. So we go back to the things of nature or of art that constitute the political. And we ask what things actually are, how things come about to become public: what are public things?

MS: How did you begin your work in this area?

JM: In the late 90’s, during a long-term residency at the Media and Visual Art Department in Banff in Canada, I was introduced to Internet communication, which was characterized then by the exciting experimentation with personal identity. During that time I created many highly recognized works which got a lot of press and success, having been shown world-wide. These projects, such as Smell Bytes, taystes.net, were included in Hacking the Borders, Open Source / Art Hack at the New Museum with Steve Dietz. However, despite their success I was very disappointed with the vulnerable and obsolete medium of the Internet and the fact that the viewer had to experience the work via computers.


I took a break from making web based projects and I started researching and creating works that I conceive of as gateways, which link the virtual world with the real world. Especially after 9/11, I was very interested in doing highly politicized works to explore the rapid changes of the urban environment. Where public control over who could enter or exit has been more reliably exercised in the past, I started exploring the city as a space where art and technology can be used as tools for social activism, ranging from public intervention, to street action games, to a series of installations and real time video streaming.

“Flying Spy Potatoes” (2003 to 2005) is a long-term project, which was developed during my residency at Eyebeam in New York City. As its name implies, it is a public performance during which I was holding a tethered red weather balloon with a camera from Eyebeam Gallery. Through written instructions each participant, while holding the mobile balloon/cam, is allowed to leave the gallery with the balloon apparatus and to go on individual spying missions on 21st Street. During those missions he/she should reveal and capture the balloon Godzilla-cam perspective low-resolution aerial streaming images of the security cameras as well as recordings of the people caught within those bounds in the terminal. Those streaming images saved digitally as video have a glitch-techno aesthetic of sound and image with a post-MTV reportage feel that shifts perception of everyday reality by making visible the invisible wavelengths and charges of the space.

Wandering around Grand Central Station in New York to locate CCTV cameras and capture the daily routine of the commuters may seem like a techno-fetishist performance, a cyber flaneur’s stroll, but considering the creeping authoritarianism of the orange alert and the new laws of homeland security during the Bush administration, “Flying Spy Potatoes” is an act of protest against a specific law and a reversal of the assumptions of our seemingly unstoppable surveillance culture. Also, the fact that I was arrested for suspicious and terrorist behavior by the Port Authority undercover police during the performance is another example of the control culture.

In an effort to expand the aesthetic playful experience into a greater urban experience, allowing participation of the public, I collaborated with Katie Salen, a game designer. We designed a mission based street game called “Flying Spy Potatoes: Mission 21st Street, NYC” in which participants, in order to play, had to sign out a red helium balloon with a camera from Eyebeam Gallery. Through written instructions each participant, while holding the mobile balloon/cam, is allowed to leave the gallery with the balloon apparatus and to go on individual spying missions on 21st Street. During those missions he/she should reveal and capture with the mobile balloon/cam hidden territories that render sections of the Chelsea neighborhood around Eyebeam visible. The missions, while recorded, are simultaneously broadcast and projected via internet on the floors of Eyebeam Gallery. The game ends when the “game board” of 21st Street has been collectively captured and revealed.

“Flying Spy Potatoes: Mission 21st Street” draws from cues offered by the architecture of 21st Street in Chelsea, the discursive space of Eyebeam, and presents a platform for considering collective memory in the public sphere.

Visitors playing the game submit themselves to video surveillance and they point our attention to the complex social issues surrounding locative media and public surveillance, which has filtered uncontested through our daily life. By adopting a kind of endless surveillance and by objectifying the workings of the network system of control, my aim was to provoke our perception of the moving image as a medium to record, process and reevaluate daily life in real time. Another interesting aspect of this work is that in the networked post-industrial society, the aesthetic object not only becomes “open artwork”, but the work as such disappears and it is replaced by instructions for enactment and options for actions. Similar to the type of associations in relational art, it creates new alliances between author, work and participant.

MS: This seems very relevant to the general strategy of much recent mobile art, which often involves a collaborative and relational “open” interaction between artists and participants. Does this also have a relation to elements of mobile gaming?

JM: Mission 21st Street was followed by another game, also a collaboration with Katie Salen, called “99 Red Balloons: A game of flying perspectives”. This time the project, sponsored by the Tech Museum of Innovation, was designed as a site-specific street game for Plaza Chavez as part of the Interactive City during Zero One in San Jose, California. 99 Red Balloons is a live action street game in which players control large red balloons equipped with wireless cameras that are designed to capture and record the game play. Each game is recorded and broadcast simultaneously on five flat...
screens located in the headquarters and lounge of the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, CA.

99 Red Balloons takes place in and around the grounds of the popular Cesar Chavez Plaza dedicated to community activities. The game requires players to redesign a set of fantastical mini-games in collaboration with members of the public. Nine teams with two leaders participate in each round: one plays the role of the Spy Fairy and the other that of the Aerial Navigator whose first move in the game is to convince members of the public to join their team.

Players must use their imagination to create the most transgressive version of classic street games – from massive multiplayer to spy and hide-n-seek in the sky games – and then convince as many people as possible to come and play. This open structure was a deliberate choice in order to broaden the scope of the project by involving artists and the public of all ages who were interested to join in and play.

MS: That sounds really fun! Although it also reminds me of the power of the “aerial gaze,” which Caren Kaplan has discussed in some of her recent work on ballooning and air power, which of course has military origins and leads into drone warfare today.

JM: The game is recorded live by Spy Fairy cameras attached to nine of the weather balloons that broadcast the footage back to the Game Headquarters, located in the Tech Museum. At the end of the play session (45 minutes in length), all players return to the Headquarters to view footage of the games, and to vote for the Spy Fairy and Aerial Navigator team with the best solution.


Figure 5. Red Eyed Sky Walkers, Jenny Marketou, 2008. Nine channel video projection with sound featuring live streaming from nine wi-fi surveillance video cameras attached under silver mylar balloons mixed with clips from you tube. Star Plaza, Old Theater Square, Cleveland, Ohio. Screenshot by the artist. © Jenny Marketou, 2008. Used with permission.
What have been wonderful about the “aerials” captured from the flying and bouncing balloons out in the open space are the particularly disorienting views of space, body, architecture and urban space. The flying perspectives and unfamiliar angles captured by the balloon/camera transform realistic imagery into abstract cartoon-like images and evoke an alternative, fluid sense of space and time. The work also investigates, in a humorous and playful way, how inverted surveillance designed to control our behavior and gather information can be used to create our own apparatus. Made out of everyday gadgets and objects, this allows people to share and engage their own investigation and sense of wonder in the public domain through game and play. With this project I was very interested to continue my investigation with locative media as a tool to create public art and social space. In particular we were interested in the following questions: How are artists, technocrats and citizens of the city of San Jose perceiving public space through locative media? What can they tell through playing this game about their experience of the public space? How can works of mobile art become part of the public sphere? What images of public space are being established looking through the vertigo of the mobile balloon cam? We ask questions about how art can be exhibited and perceived: instead of a conventional visit to a museum or gallery, participants use mobile technologies to rediscover the public realm as an exhibition space.

HI: These are great questions for all forms of mobile art... and exactly the kinds of questions Mimi and I were trying to address with the LA Re.Play show.

JM: It is important to note at this point that the Internet and the mobility of the wireless cameras have played an important role in the organization and implementation of the above works and have enabled me to broaden the scope of the projects as a discursive experience. But can we believe that the Internet promotes democracy? Or does it help mobilize like-minded people? Mobility and connectivity are the main aspects and characteristics of the modern network society. Laptops, smart phones are the dominant accessories of our culture that promise connection and access. The continuing uprisings and political protest in Greece, Italy UK, Spain and spreading across North Africa and the Middle East have been inherently associated with the increasing entanglement of internet, social media, or digital networks in general, with everyday life. The multiple uses of technologies – cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, the Internet – by local participants and by global supporters and observers, and the counter-measures of blocking access and shutting down communication channels by the toppled or still surviving governments, have gained global attention. So the question is whether the mobile technologies have opened new organizational structures of revolts and new political possibilities that allow us participation in democratic processes that link and mobilize people. And what might their drawbacks be? Media theorist Peter Weibel, speaks of a “performative democracy” imposed by new technologies. The more traces of data we leave behind in digital space the easier it is for others to draw conclusions about our behavior and our activities and our lives. The boundary between private and public space has been dissolved and for Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, privacy is an old convention, seemingly out of date.

MS: Yes, exactly. And isn’t one of the aims of some mobile art precisely to make us all ask more questions about the relation between public and private, and to critically examine the pervasive but often invisible relation between communication and surveillance? I have long been interested in the blurring of the line between public and private.
proliferating in privatized once-public spaces, how can we make technology serve more democratic purposes?

**JM:** My installation series “Red Eyed Sky Walkers” engages the public to participate and to become a co-author of the work. It as a good example of a work of art which is dismantling the divisions separating public and private, art and everyday life, and prioritizes visual information and action by creating open and democratic systems and by modifying communication and network technologies.

The work applies web and networked wireless technologies which actively engages the viewers to participate in exploring the potentiality of what the new architecture and the protocols of wireless network does in public surveillance, data mapping, knowledge information and social-communication.

**Hi:** So as more people have participated in your work, how would you say that the work itself is changing?

**JM:** The work has evolved over the years and I have shown different versions of it depending on the needs of the project and the venue. Since October 24, 2007, when for the first time the work was launched in the Theater Platz among the public works of Serra and Paul Klee between the Theater and the Kunsthalle, and simultaneously remotely through video streaming with the Dreispitzhalle, Basel (commissioned by Plug IN Gallery and the Shift International festival); it has also been presented as a series of outdoor and indoor networked installations in the Historic Playhouse Square Center and simultaneously on the public screens in the city of Cleveland. Soon after it was reincarnated in a version made for the departure and arrival terminals at San Pablo airport for the 3rd edition of the Biennial in Seville (October 2008); after that, for the outdoor courtyard and the project Room at EMST in Athens (2010), and most recently for the courtyard of Kuku Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia (2011).

The main components of the installation are always included in each presentation of the work – the fluid and shifting, ephemeral ecology of the 99 large red latex weather balloons, which are attached to the ground by several tethers and networked with nine wireless video cameras, each attached underneath a balloon. With the help of a computer, they broadcast in real-time, streaming video displayed as nine single-channel video projections.

What have changed are the spatial and visual arrangements of the balloons, which each time are refigured in response to the architecture as well as to the current weather conditions. But what has really evolved through the series is the reverse practice of observation of the viewers. At first it was conceived as a network of all the cameras, which, through the Internet, were remotely broadcasting all the aerial activity between visitors and the environment. And thus visitors were engaged in a game of performance and surveillance.

**Hi:** So the technical apparatus of this work has also changed over time?

**JM:** The original installation is comprised of two components. The first is an outdoor cresting floating cloud made out of the playful beauty of 99 red spherical weather balloons inflated with helium and rising as high as three meters and as low as one meter above the ground. The set up is designed to produce an aesthetic experience, which reflects on the interaction of networked technologies, media, and experience. Because under those balloons are attached wireless networked surveillance video cameras and their util-


urban public places around the world. The manipulation of data, which enables the real-time streaming of surveillance data and YouTube videos to interplay, has been achieved through custom software specially designed for this project by Christian Rohner, my assistant and programmer.

This interplay results in an augmented visual experience which shows how human knowledge, information and the social-communicational aspects of this world are being fragmented, represented and processed in new ways by both the viewing and the interacting public.

The aesthetic experience of a unique moment and a fleeting presence of art objects, that make those images as they blend together, become a “work of art.”

In this case art expands from object and becomes a practice, and through the practice it expands its field into new areas occupied only by social and natural science.

MS: Would you say, then, that this kind of art is based on a networked practice rather than necessarily involving any particular technologies or “new media” interfaces? For example, engaging a mobile interface, which is a key concept in recent social theory?

JM: What if everything was connected to everything? These aspects of networking are not only reflected in the work but are also made tangible because it connects the outdoor with the indoor museum gallery and thus by linking the two, creates a gateway. Here art is used to enable new transitions between virtual and physical spaces, and thereby generates new perceptions and visual experiences, as well as opening new spaces for action aside from commerce and entertainment. It is fairly obvious to say that digital interfaces and social and mobile networking activities have affected the way we think and communicate, in turn affecting the way we relate to time, geography, space and one another.

MS: How exactly do you think your work transforms participants’ sense of time, space and place?

JM: Red Eyed Skywalkers reflects upon the ambivalence of technology controlled public space and the desire to be watched. The helium balloons bring out the playful side of the public and we do not notice that the cameras are watching; only inside the exhibition space does it become clear that actions have been recorded, projected and combined with material from the internet to show the extent to which urban space has become monitored space.

Most recently, “Red Eyed Skywalkers” has been shown at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, Greece and as “Silver Series” as part of the exhibition Gateways: Art and Networked Culture at Kumu Art Museum, Tallinn, Estonia and finally in Plateia Kotzia in Athens this September. In all these versions, although in different locations, I decided that rather than triggering the participation of the audience, I wanted to implicate them in the spirit of transparency and of the “technology of consciousness.” Roy Ascott, a pioneer of Telematic Art, calls this relocation of ourselves and things in a speed that exceeds any human power. I wanted to examine how the display video broadcast from the mobile cameras juxtaposed with those transported from distant public spaces can create a zone around which the reality and fiction of images meet. It functions as a middle point between the audiences, which creates a new reality which is not local. This new condition of multi-locality changes the environment and the people in it, liberating them from the sense of locality and ties with geographical places and physical bodies. It creates an empirical new environment, the freshness and novelty of which, however, has become the norm through Internet and mobile communication.

I like to reflect upon the consequences that this increasing interconnectedness has on our actions, our perception and our experience of the world. I believe as artists we can create and offer alternative models to a mainly consumer oriented society. In his book You Are Not a Gadget, Jaron Lanier calls for a more humanist approach to the way we participate in network culture. [4]

The aesthetic experience of a unique moment and a special feeling in “Red Eyed Skywalkers” is replaced by the emergence of something new and unexpected, a precarious experience, so to speak, which is the criterion for every creative activity.

MS/HI: Thank you for speaking with us about your work, which for us opens up a whole set of new questions, which we leave open for others to answer: What is the relation between locality and multi-locality in mobile locative art? How does it offer new ways for us to blend localities or enact multi-localities? And in what ways can we distribute our bodies/presence across multiple locations at once; and how might these change modes of political communication, political participation and democracy?
REFERENCES AND NOTES


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