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ARTICLE

NODE "LOCATIVE MEDIA AND ARTISTIC PRACTICE: EXPLORATIONS ON THE GROUND"

Augmenting Public Space and Authoring Public Art: The Role of Locative Media

Anthony Townsend

Abstract

Locative media remain a useful frame for understanding how collaborative sensing will broadly empower groups to author alternative narratives of urban public space. The case of Olafur Eliasson's New York City Waterfalls is used to describe this process in the context of a recent large public art work.

Keywords

urbanism, cities, Waterfalls, public art, social media

Resumen

*Los medios locativos (*locative media*) siguen resultando un marco útil para comprender cómo, gracias a la percepción colectiva, los grupos incrementarán notablemente su capacidad de generar narrativas alternativas del espacio público urbano. El caso de las Cascadas de la ciudad de Nueva York de Olafur Eliasson se emplea para describir este proceso en relación a una obra reciente de arte público a gran escala.*

Palabras clave

urbanismo, ciudades, Cascadas, Waterfalls, arte público, medios sociales

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The End of the GeoWeb

In September 2008, the last plank of the geoweb fell into place. The GeoCommons, an open repository for geographic data, with thematic mapping tools to match, came online in Arlington, Virginia. With financial backing from the CIA's own In-Q-Tel venture fund, GeoCommons could be the final chapter in a story that began decades ago with the deployment of the Global Positioning System (GPS). What once had been the sole purview of military men, their primary strategic and tactical upper hand, had been broadly and democratically disseminated. Mapmaking now existed as just another freely shared lens on the web's sprawling mass of sensory data. Over a decade after the U.S. government turned off Selective Availability, thereby dramatically improving the accuracy of GPS, locative media as a subject of critical and artistic inquiry could be called passé.

Yet locative media still serves as a useful frame for at least two reasons.

First, locative media focus our attention on space and geography, providing an anchor for critique of the "space of flows" that Castells argues is a key structure of network societies. While network analysis focuses our attention on the symbolic relationships between actors, locative media permit us to also evolve and root our discussion in the physical and tangible relationships. For instance, power relationships may shift in more networked political systems, but what does this ultimately mean in terms of territory and space? Locative media permit us to chart the terrain of conflicts.

Second, locative media provide a solid basis for investigating the larger implications of collaborative sensing and sensemaking. Considering projects like OpenStreetMap, in which GPS users constructed alternative, open-source base maps of the world's road systems, we see the enormous potential of this framework for transforming public discourse. As citizen environmental and ecological sensing become more widespread and more collaborative, today's experiments with social locative media will provide valuable lessons and insights for how these structures should be designed and governed.

The real story of locative media, then, isn't about what artistic elites are doing in the name of provocation. Rather, it's the commoditization of locative media, geospatial data, and geoanalytical techniques and thinking that require investigation, observation and critique. As Alex Pang argues, there are few things anymore that can be said to exist solely in cyberspace or physical space. "The end of cyberspace" as a useful metaphor for explaining computationally-mediated experiences is near. While we're at it, we might as well declare the geoweb dead as well. It's really just the web, and geography is one of its many metadata such as date, author or tags.

A cursory review of how sensory geodata is inundating the web hammers this point home. During the writing of this article, in October 2008, some 2.7 million photographs were geocoded on Flickr. Several personal navigation devices, such as the Dash and TomTom, now allow users to input data into a collaborative database about the world, rather than just receive canned content. The proliferation of wireless positioning systems in all kinds of mobile devices points towards a not-so-distant future in which all data created on personal devices is location-stamped, just like it is time-stamped today.

The New York City Waterfalls: Locative Media and Participation in Public Art

Two years ago, I argued that the shift from desktop to mobile computing that is now underway will drive a greater emphasis on context in computing. Played out in urban public space, the evolution of context-aware mobile computing will be characterized by the interplay between top-down systems of command and control versus bottom-up systems for collective action (Townsend, 2006).

Public art provides an interesting case study through which to consider how locative media, as one particular set of context-aware mobile computing, is driving this interplay in urban public spaces. This article therefore looks at engagement with public art through locative media and geodata as a way of understanding this evolving dialogue between professional artists and curators on the one hand, and mass publics on the other. The basic premise is that locative media, combined with the social media outlets of the web, are unleashing public participation in public art.

As one of the most recent large public works, the Waterfalls public art exhibition in New York City provides a lens on this explosion of participation in public art through locative media. Designed by Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, and exhibited at four locations along the East River waterfront from 23 June through 13 October 2008, the Waterfalls evoked a frenzy of user-generated digital media.

According to a government report on the economic impact of the Waterfalls, public participation in public art through digital media production is now a primary objective of sponsors:

> "Equally important to the artist's inspiration is the response of viewers, who may specifically seek out works of public art or come across them unexpectedly. Judging visitor response and engagement is difficult, but the existence as personal technology – including digital cameras and camcorders – make it easy to record images and experiences of large installations and then publish, share and discuss them through web-based social media." (*The New York City Waterfalls: The Economic Impact of a Public Art Work*, 2008)

The Waterfalls generated an outpouring of social media products on the web including 6,000 photographs on Flickr, 1,200 blog posts, and over 200 videos totaling 3 hours in length on YouTube.

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Figure 5: Points of interest in Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn based on the number of Flickr photographers active at each site

2006

2007

2008

Source: MIT SENSEable City Lab

Because it is one of the more accessible locative media platforms on the web, and leverages a widely diffused base of digital cameras, the corpus of geocoded work on Flickr is particularly interesting.

As one Los Angeles-based artist, Caryn Coleman, wrote on her blog:

"…traveling for fun this summer is out of the question even if it is art related. But that's what we have Flickr for – a way to see the same thing in numerous versions from the differing eyes of others. With over 1,000 images of Eliasson's *The New York City Waterfalls* (it just opened on June 30) it's the next best thing to being there." (*The New York City Waterfalls: The Economic Impact of a Public Art Work*; original source: Coleman, 2008)

But Flickr's geo-located photos were not merely useful for casual off-site browsing of the Waterfalls from remote locations. MIT's SENSEable City Lab analyzed the location and vantage point of thousands of geo-referenced photos in Lower Manhattan from 2006 to 2008. From this analysis, they were able to demonstrate that the Waterfalls were a significant attractor of visitors, drawing away from other local attractions such as the World Trade Center.

"During the summer of 2008, Battery Park and South Street Seaport – both official Waterfalls vantage points – became more significant destinations for photographers. More importantly, the Flickr data suggests that many more photographers traveled directly between the two waterfront sites." (*The New York City Waterfalls: The Economic Impact of a Public Art Work*, 2008)

In fact, from an urban manager's point of view, the artist is largely an attraction around which tourism and related economic activity is clustered.

Public Art without Artists

The early lessons of the New York City Waterfalls suggest that locative media and public art will become increasingly intertwined. Even if not deliberately used, locative media will be a vehicle for ejecting, launching public art into the online social discourse, which will itself be re-injected back into place through mobile devices and in-place displays. It is entirely possible that we will continue to see the volume, quality, audience and cultural impact of user-generated, locative and immersive media about public art overwhelm that of the public art itself. This begs the question then, why bother with the public art at all? With most public art projects today being organized and financed on the basis of achieving net positive economic impact, what good are the artists who create public art when they form a diminishing part of the experience, and in fact are seen by sponsors as an expense, rather than a positive outcome?

Things don't look good for the artists. Historically, deep engagement and co-production of public art have not been major motivators. All

too often, public spaces are treated as living museums for the public to admire the aesthetic or symbolic qualities of the work, and its architectural interactions with the site. Eliasson's own comments on the visitor-generated media of the Waterfalls suggest extremely limited intellectual engagement with the phenomenon:

> "When the Waterfalls began flowing in June, Olafur Eliasson said, 'it's not my work of art anymore, it's your work of art… This piece of art is now a part of the city. It belongs to the people of the city.' It is not surprising then that Mr. Eliasson was delighted with the number of photographs of the Waterfalls that users have posted to the on-line photo sharing site, Flickr.com, noting, 'I see the waterfalls as a co-producer of the time and place in which they take place. I suppose, in that way, the work filters into questions about society and democracy.'" (*The New York City Waterfalls: The Economic Impact of a Public Art Work*, 2008)

At the same time, the ability of large, loosely coordinated, highly participatory "flash mobs" and public performance groups like Improv Everywhere to co-opt public spaces for exhibitions, on an increasingly ad hoc basis, challenges both the conceptual and practical high ground of traditional capital-intensive, professional-curated public artwork (see, for instance, Todd, 2008).

The Waterfalls experience indicates that, in the future, artists will need to rethink how they engage the public as co-producers of public art and public space. Because the public authoring of public space is largely a passive activity today, consisting of sensing and recording physical and social phenomena. However, the next step of urban computing will be the development of platforms for making sense of these pools of user-generated data, and visualizing them in place. At some point, the need for a central piece of professional-designed public art as a gathering point for citizen-driven digital authoring may be greatly reduced or eliminated.

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Technology forecaster and urban planner with the Institute for the Future,
an independent research organization founded in 1968 and based in
Silicon Valley, California. For the last decade, his scholarly research and
advisory services have focused on the intersection of digital media and
communications technologies with the built environment. In 2009, he will
launch BREAKOUT!, an exhibition of mobile co-working. In partnership
with workplace designers DEGW, and sponsored by the Architectural
League of New York, this installation will challenge the relevance of
office buildings in an age of electronic freelancers, and explore how
mobility and situated technologies are bringing knowledge work back
into urban public spaces.

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