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ARTICLE

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

Some Musings on Iterations and Encounters - Re: CALL CUTTA(s)

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Abstract

This observational text posits the conundrum of experiencing locative media projects first-hand, which are intrinsically nomadic and ephemeral, whereby their traces or archival afterlives are left behind as data, tags, and other textual, aural and image renderings. Likewise many locative media projects are increasingly repositioning these iterative aspects contextually, spatially, or through diverse viewing platforms. I will trace the German/Swiss theatre collective Rimini Protokoll's work *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre* and its tangential offshoots or afterlives as a starting point to muse on the notion of iterations and location aware, urban and mobile manifestations that resonate and amplify various aspects of our globalized condition.

Keywords

locative, mapping, archive, iteration, ephemeral, subjectivities, liminal

Resumen

Este texto de observación plantea la cuestión de cómo se experimentan directamente proyectos hechos con medios locativos, que son intrínsecamente nómadas y efímeros, y cuyos rastros o archivos de vidas posteriores quedan en forma de datos, etiquetas y otras representaciones textuales, sonoras y de imágenes. De manera similar, muchos proyectos de medios locativos se replantean cada vez más estos aspectos iterativos de manera contextual, espacial o a través de diversas plataformas de consulta. Haré el seguimiento de la obra CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre del colectivo teatral germano-suizo Rimini Protokoll y sus derivaciones tangenciales o vidas posteriores como punto de partida para reflexionar sobre la noción de iteración y sobre las manifestaciones urbanas y móviles locativas que amplifican y remiten a diversos aspectos de nuestra condición globalizada.

Palabras clave

locativo, cartografía, archivo, iteración, efímero, subjetividades, liminar

Prologue

The opportunity for one to encounter most so-called locative media projects could indeed be qualified as a rarefied occurrence. The sheer prospect to be here and there; to participate, survey, critique, activate and annotate such projects that appear, disappear, travel and mutate, would invariably be expensive, impractical, not to mention a paradox, leaving traces of one's own global environmental footprint. Such traversals are likened to the proliferation and sprawl of art biennales, art fairs and festivals, which are spread across complex temporal and spatial maps. Clearly to experience these works first-hand, albeit ephemeral, material or enduring, one needs to travel to distant locales to experience *live*, that which is situated under unique circumstances, often being absorbed, contextualized, and marketed by large-scale city events and festivals. This, one could speculate, adds an element of *aura* as it posits the notion of a singular iteration within a unique location aware context. It also conversely makes a distinction between the work as a whole and the several layers embedded within the work itself, forming endless iterations and multiple subjectivities, contingent on complex, serendipitous and sometimes awkward triangulations between locational contexts, technological configurations and viewers/participants.

Locative media require a certain set of conditions, not only technological or location specific, but often (although not always) predicated within larger locational constellations, through festival, lecture or event-like structures whereby the technological platform (GPRS and 3G-enabled mobile phones, PDAs, etc.) becomes parceled out via galleries, libraries or other such institutions. Often because of these authored and configured technological platforms, only a limited number of users at any given time can access the work, while other projects have both short street lives and limited user/participant capabilities, due to the budget, exhibition or other circumstances. As a result, locative media have become seemingly more accessible through the circulation of texts on the internet that postulate, define, re-define and basically map out (perhaps even mapping by Braille) the somewhat uncharted and fuzzy territory of locative media.

Likewise, other locative projects are also reliant on web-based interaction, which may include post-hoc renderings, both fixed or generative archives with web applications, visualized in Google Maps or other so-called mash-up applications, while some projects are seemingly discarded, abandoned or have fallen off the map entirely. As the very appearance of locative media is in flux and still being defined, and as Drew Hemment founder of the *Futuresonic* festival in Manchester saliently notes, "Locative Media is in a condition of emergence, its own territory still being mapped" (Hemment, 2004).

However what returns in some locative media works are not the works or iterations themselves, but the lingering trail or what I consider

as *archival afterlives*. These afterlives – accumulations, meta-data, tags and databases – are reminiscent of media and culture scholar Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's concept of the "enduring ephemeral", with regard to digital media having the potential to perpetuate memory – the "undead of information" (Hui Kyong Chun, 2008).

Act I

In the following abbreviated passages I will make speculations and observations based on works which traverse the borders of locative media and their iterations, as these distinct manifestations augment the notion of a work as singular, partial and multiple. I will also consider how locative media implicitly and explicitly posit the inescapability of what would also in turn be dis-locative – and tease out a few points, albeit partial renderings.

In August 2008, I ventured to the northern tip of Holland to the city of Groningen for the Noorderzon Performing Arts Festival to see *CALL CUTTA IN A BOX. An Intercontinental Phone Play* (2008) by Rimini Protokoll, a German/Swiss theatre collective consisting of directors Daniel Wetzel, Stefan Kaegi and Helgard Haug. This work is the latest iteration currently on tour, originally inspired by the work *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre* between Calcutta and Berlin, which was produced in 2005.

It is important to first contextualize *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre*, which uses the backdrop of an actual call center located in Calcutta (Kolkata), India, where phone operators double as outsourced customer service representatives for various global enterprises, but have also been cast by Rimini Protokoll as aural tour guides or "experts", leading local and distant participants through somewhat pre-mapped choreographies: staged, scripted, adlibbed and spontaneous encounters, taking place in the streets of Berlin and Calcutta respectively. This performance involving semi-scripted



CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre. © Rimini Protokoll

conversations with non-actors at a call center in India and walkers in the streets of both Berlin and Calcutta becomes an aural and visual performance of self-made inner and outer maps reliant on human contingencies that no algorithm or authoring system could envision or predict.

The strength in the work is the ability to stimulate a heightened awareness of our increasingly outsourced society by re-framing such anonymous call center scenarios, which provide customer services to international companies. In its place, these anonymous encounters enter a détourned aural and spatial relationship, blurring the fictional and factual to connect the proximities between the urban participants and call center performers. The press materials and the related documentary by filmmaker Anjan Dutt continually emphasize, through the characters and protagonists, life in a “parallel universe”. Today’s mobile location aware technology and such manifestations as *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre* posit the multi-focal temporalities in our current globalized condition. The mobile phone can potentially bring us closer to the proximate and the elsewhere.

When looking closer at connectedness and *glocal* networks, artist/writer Coco Fusco problematizes this thorny terrain in her essay, *Questioning the Frame: Thoughts about Maps and Spatial Logic in the Global Present*. She comments on our current epoch’s mapping impulse and contends that “[i]n the name of a politics of global connectedness, artists and activists too often substitute an abstract ‘connectedness’ for any real engagement with people in other places or even in their own locale [...] What gets lost in this focus on mapping is the view of the world from the ground: lived experience” (Fusco, 2004). Since Fusco wrote this in 2004, projects such as Rimini Protokoll’s *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre* and *CALL CUTTA IN A BOX* have attempted to bridge this schism between abstract connectedness with a layering of subjectivities, role-playing through the power of the voice and performing atypical mobile telephony strategies.

Yet the closer one comes to *CALL CUTTA* these same potentialities of digital networks are also what make the work difficult to digest. As such projects rely on the manipulation of identities, further convoluted layers in a mobile context emerge, issues which are addressed acutely in curator Miya Yoshida’s illuminating text, *The Invisible Landscapes: The Construction of New Subjectivities in the Era of the Mobile Phone*. Yoshida scrutinized *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre* and posits a “flattening out of subjectivities” and contends that “[i]mplicitly it is commodifying the Indian operators’ personal subjectivities that is enacted on top of their profession as call centre information mediators working as cheap labour” (Yoshida, 2006).

This constellation is also central in the iteration *CALL CUTTA IN A BOX* (2008), yet this rendition takes place in a closed room for an audience of one, without the polyphony of the city as ambient soundscape, nor the spatial dis-orientations that come from walking the city. What unfolds is similar to the mobile phone theatre, still

utilizing this notion of bi-localities: connecting the outside locale (via the window) and the set design of the room, which is molded after an office similar to that of the call center in India. There are pictures on the wall of the office building situated in a nondescript industrial park, called Infinity Tower in Salt Lake, Calcutta. A call center working in collaboration with Descon Limited.

I purchase my ticket (for an appointment) and am instructed to go to a room, which is in a now defunct church used for various musical and theatrical events. The room consists of a telephone, a computer, printer, a hot water boiler, and packets of tea, *Indian Spice*, Ceylon, etc. I walk into the office and the phone is already ringing, it’s Dicky Banerjee on the line. He tells me to sit down and have a cup of tea, and the electric water boiler gets automatically switched on, and more of these *synchronized* surprises happen throughout the forty-minute theatre piece.

Dicky sends me a print out (simulated as a fax) of some of the workers who do other jobs at the call center; cleaning, gardening, etc., and he describes their working schedule and conditions. Before I can dwell too much on this, the script takes another turn, and the photo of the workers becomes just another discarded prop on the table, this is somewhat bewildering. Labor is reconstituted in *CALL CUTTA*, as Yoshida reminds us “to focus on the different starting points of the audience members and of the call agents. For the audience, *CALL CUTTA* is a participatory art project that they enter out of a private interest, and in their leisure time, while for the agents, it is a ‘job’ by which they support their lives.” (Yoshida, 2006).

The most revealing moment, and most choreographed, is when you are asked to lift up a potted plant on the left side of your desk, underneath is a miniature stage construction resembling a theatre in a box. Dicky gives an aural cue, and the tiny red velvet curtains opens exposing a camouflaged web-cam, and the page on my computer suddenly becomes a video chat browser.

I see Dicky in his office chair, and office cubicles in the background; he sees me, and voilà – the moment of mutual recognition. I gasp both in embarrassment and surprise, as I was duped and implicated in this orchestrated maneuver even knowing that this was one of the narrative devices *CALL CUTTA* capitalizes on. After the session is over, I am curious as to if my image and own uneventful “performance” have been recorded.

This iteration enclosed in an office or box draws out the routine or quotidian aspects of office work, translated as theatrical acts, roles to embody. Simple tasks in an office context become punctuated markers within the performance’s diegesis as supported by the stage location and design. Rimini Protokoll’s Helgard Haug addresses the site-specificity of their nomadic theatre works to note that “[t]he most fascinating thing theatre can achieve, where it makes sense, is when there’s a shared experience in a space, [...] where does it strike a chord, where does it set something off? Maybe a gallery could achieve the same, or we could invade a museum. It comes down to knowing



CALL CUTTA IN A BOX by Rimini Protokoll (Haug, Kaegi, Wetzel).

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the conventions of a space: then it's fun to attack them, reformulate them, manipulate them, or even to respect them." (Boenisch, 2008). I can't help wonder how this reformulation of space is played out on the other side of the phone line, a space which is not a fleeting encounter, but enduring, repetitive and lived.

I am asked to look out of the window, as Dicky Banerjee tells me a bit about the location's past and present situation. As I stare out of the window-frame, I am unmoved, detached as I gaze out through the glass. Indeed, I could be anywhere, and I connect through the voice on the phone and to the tasks at hand. This immobile adaptation of *CALL CUTTA* from street to box translates some of the key points that *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre* evokes, albeit my second-hand interpretation from its hovering afterlives. Yet I can ascertain from the script of the first *CALL CUTTA* that this pared down iteration *IN A BOX*, does not incorporate many plotlines which are woven into the mobile phone theatre script; merging/diverging aspects from Indian and German history, the re-visiting of public buildings, monuments, getting lost in the city, etc. Yet I still can only hypothesize how one, or rather how I might encounter *CALL CUTTA* in urban space via a human simulated GPS, which is operated by so-called mutual trust, located thousands of kilometers away. I am intrigued and conflicted, as I still feel that I have not fully experienced the work, as the contingency factor *IN A BOX* was too controlled, I wanted to experience the disorientations that the mobile phone theatre presumably suggests. I leave the theatre venue with Dicky Banerjee's business card in hand, and ponder our encounter – yet another iteration this time through the streets of Groningen.

The paradox in both *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre* and *CALL CUTTA IN A BOX* is that they thematize the outsourcing of technology. Instead of a locative project reliant on GPS technologies that can pinpoint coordinates, with unwieldy and over-constructed authored context aware platforms, Rimini Protokoll hones their mapping to

form an almost analogue construct. At once scripted, manipulated and manually activated through live performances, which simulate the technology itself, as a human mediated GPS by proxy. This echoes the flaws and failures inherent in GPS and other, if not all, technologies, real and simulated. The dramaturgy incorporates this fuzziness, allows for diversions to emerge, and, sometimes more successfully than others, takes us off course, where routine can become epiphany, discovered together in real time. Having only begun to scratch the surface, it would be interesting to map out more extensively the iterative, relational and dis-locative qualities across all the *CALL CUTTA* works.

Act II

After experiencing *CALL CUTTA IN A BOX*, I am torn between my desire to experience *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre* as a participant and my observations as a passive viewer of the reworking of both documentation and documentary re-staging on film.

The iteration of *Call Cutta* (2005), the documentary by Anjan Dutt, has been described by Martin Walde, director of the Goethe-Institute, as "the only enduring outcome of the theatre project" (Gupta, 2005). Indeed this iteration among a surplus of press materials on the web was the closest I could come to the supposed original or initial *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre*, which I never did participate in. Yet from the outset I am skeptical of Walde's statement that the only "enduring outcome" is the documentary.

After watching the DVD a few times, I am troubled by one scene in particular, as there was a certain detachedness in the documentary's stylistic, which echoed the problematic nature of the *CALL CUTTA* script(s), which swap, fake, superimpose and enact identities. The scene goes like this: a player/listener moves through city streets, camera and microphone are documenting either one or both sides of the conversation. A gentleman who is on to his mobile phone is directed to a rundown building. He is told that this house had once belonged to the phone operator's family, and that the woman living out "on the pavement" is his grandmother. This, like other narrative plot lines, is questioned, as the piece continually weaves threads of fact and fiction sometimes more successfully, sensitively or believably than others. The street player continues the conversation as if the woman is not there, and then he becomes the interrogator, questioning why the guide on the other side of the line is not taking better care of his grandmother, his role as grandson and provider.

What is disconcerting in this scene is the woman in question is less than three meters away when this conversation takes place. The participant is fully engaged in the story aurally, we hear in his voice the empathy and horror from such a circumstance, of an older woman forced to live on the street. She is in the frame as she prepares her makeshift surroundings "on the pavement". Yet it is as if she

were a mirage, an ambient back projection. And when assembled within a documentary film, we witness the moment in its presence and distance, the woman portrayed as an unseen, invisible, and unvoiced character. Perhaps a camera or editing approach which is more intervening would be just as problematic. Granted to capture the essence and individual threads of *CALL CUTTA* on location through a documentary is not something necessarily plausible, translatable or even necessary.

Although this moment only lasts for a few seconds it somehow becomes amplified, hence echoing Fusco's critique of new media and mapping projects that reverberate a certain disconnectedness of on-the-ground encounters. In documentary form, this unsanctioned approach of those *in the frame* becomes even more apparent and cumbersome. Moreover, it illustrates the role of problematic subjectivities in such a mobile constellation, as put forward by Yoshida, and in this case both views are evoked in Dutt's rendering, vis-à-vis Rimini Protokoll.

Yet I am curious to know what footage Dutt captured from this or other such moments. Is there an interaction? Does the woman on "the pavement" get a name, does she confront the camera, and does a conversation occur? How do these multiple layers resonate with residents from Calcutta in their own locales? How are the local subjectivities (in Calcutta) positioned within the work's central emphasis on bi-localities?

The rendering of this moment is knotty and one can imagine that there must be more like it shelved in a digital folder somewhere. Or even still, a played out encounter that lingers as unresolved for the participants, both active players as well as the bystanders in public space who become implicated in the "script" sometimes obliquely, such as the "woman on the pavement". I am again reminded of Yoshida's words, when she urges that "[w]hatever happens to the layers of meaning which cannot be encoded into digital data, which cannot be transported, where do they go [...]?" (Yoshida, 2006).

Likewise the role or the voice of the filmmaker, Dutt, is both invisible and clumsy. In my opinion, this work rendered as a documentary did not situate the counter-cartographies well: the nuances, or the moments of interaction, dislocation or revelation that are perhaps intrinsic in a work such as *CALL CUTTA*. At the same time, I am curious to know how similar issues or moments in Rimini Protokoll's mobile phone theatre were negotiated in urban space, as viewing of Dutt's documentary gave a heightened awareness of the distancing effect from on-the-ground encounters that the mobile phone theatre in part tried to counter.

I am nonetheless preoccupied with the moments which fall somewhere between the cracks, which was part of the interest I had to experience or witness *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre* first hand.

Epilogue

Recently, I had the opportunity to see the world premiere of *.In For Motion*, a documentary by Anirban Datta. Its log line describes it as "a road film cutting through the conflicting history of Indian IT". Datta's documentary essay juxtaposes the disconnections between the region's agrarian roots and the first/second generation computers made by Bengali computer scientists, extending to today's outsourcing boom in Calcutta, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Cyberabad, Gurgaon, etc. The filmmaker's voice-over asks us to "[i]magine if India continued with its early computer building activities, today's IT would've definitely appeared less mythical, partly homegrown, and maybe far more accepted". I ponder on Datta's lucid trajectory with the *CALL CUTTA* iterations in mind.

Neither *CALL CUTTA Mobile Phone Theatre*, *CALL CUTTA IN A BOX*, nor Dutt's documentary, *Call Cutta*, thematize or map the complex, conflicting and shifting terrain that Datta's documentary so carefully revealed – granted this was not necessarily the intent. In the case of the *CALL CUTTA(s)*, perhaps the plethora of information and gestures that extend toward oblivion, beyond real-time, offers yet another *appearance* of *CALL CUTTA* both in its presence and absence. Here I use appearance as both a referent to the multiple forms of a work with iterative qualities, which also resonate as acts of becoming or arriving, and the readings of such appearances in a phenomenological sense.

These multiple modes, nodes or entry points: mobile, fixed, mapped, documented and staged can be useful to leverage such observations. Nevertheless these liminal spaces and afterlives, which initially sparked my interest, have eventually become eclipsed by ambivalence, which I am still trying to articulate. Datta's voice-over bridges my misgivings: "A thought kept chasing me, about an information hole. Things one would never informatize, like the hunting tribe (in northern Orissa) we didn't record. One day, there may be an intrusion of a ghost, who lives inside this information hole. The other India!" Datta alludes to an unmappable "other India", a phantom. It thus becomes a challenge for projects like Rimini Protokoll's *CALL CUTTA* to articulate and negotiate such traces. Granted the Rimini Protokoll works have been formulated and produced in a somewhat more cognizant manner to navigate this complex terrain, unlike the documentary by Anjan Dutt, which has one asking more questions than it answers.

However, I am still cautious that such performative works balance a fine line with tendencies found in the "creative industries". The creative industries or new-media developers are positioned to exploit projects, which traverse fiction, documentary and cultural heritage, as is reflected in their recurring vernacular: source material as being *harvested* – oral histories and intimate encounters which become *data*, or *content threads*, that are then to be *filtered*, which evoke Fusco's reading of mapping tendencies as being biased, and at a "safe distance".

Is there a potential for another lexicon to emerge amongst the ceaseless afterlives, a phantom archive? Or a cinematic language in which to collide and expand upon such locative manifestations that also resonate with lived experiences? An opening in which to

develop more experimental documentary or cross-media forms that position these slippages, rather than becoming merely illustrative, as in the case of Dutt's documentary. Still, there is ample room for future navigation.

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CV

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Tina Bastajian is a Los Angeles-born film/video artist and curator who has exhibited internationally in festivals, galleries, and museums. Currently she is a PhD researcher at the University of Amsterdam's School for Cultural Analysis where she is a member of the Imagined Futures (iFut) research group, which interrogates the triangulation of the avant-garde, the academy and popular applications of media technology. Her research has focused on strategies of documentation, preservation and re-presentation of filmic performative works (Expanded Cinema) as well as dis-locative tendencies in locative media. She is interested in the afterlives produced: performative, archival, and documentary elements as new connections surface with the passage of time and through the migration of sound and image. Themes of the fragment, translation, the trace and returns are also intrinsic to her own work within experimental, exilic and diasporan film. At present she is teaching film studies at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam while developing other projects, such as her locative media work-in-progress, *Coffee Deposits: Siting Maps in Cups*.

