

Risky approximations between site-specific and locative arts

I'd like to address the term 'site' as a field of semantic migrations, as migrations that occur due to cultural dislocations, linguistic operations, technological influences, poetic licenses or theoretical digressions.

We usually share definitions that could be applied to a number of artistic works that are established in dialogue with their surroundings: as in site-related, context-specific, context-related... site-oriented... . These are the 'places' of the word, in its range, differences and associated connotations that both imprison and cause reverberations at the same time.

These denominations, beyond mere word choice, that define the qualities of the 'site' are complicated by debates seeking confluences and frictions between art and communication.

For those that do not have English as their native language, such a complication – the semantic exceptions of 'site' and its related dis-locations – originates with the use of the term 'site-specific'. When translated literally to Portuguese, it accumulates even more linguistic risk. In the text-project "site-specific and (un)translatability", artists Jorge Mena Barreto and Raquel Garbelotti (2008) suggest that the use of the term in the Brazilian context "should experience further elaboration, translation or cannibalization in order to avoid depleting the term's critical and reflexive content". In fact, a literal translation like 'lugar específico' (something like 'specific site') is inaccurate and wrong, because it shifts the placement of the term 'specific' – from relating to a quality of the work onto meaning a state of the physical place instead.¹

The appropriation of this thought is due to a common desire to pull the term 'site-specific' apart, expanding it further through the relationship between the work and its political, economic and social context. This involves extending it beyond the internal relationships that, in the more conventional fine arts realm, would be attributed to formal elements related to color, texture, composition – or yet depth of field, editing, narrative, rhythm or construal of the diegetic space, in an audiovisual medium.

What matters here is not 're-searching' another discussion on 'site-specific', but emphasizing aspects concerning the exteriority of the work of art, in surroundings that include the publicness of shared outside spaces. As Barreto and Garbelotti suggest, "it is through its relation to context that the work starts to build its meaning and its complexity. It's by dealing with its surroundings that the object or artistic installation reaches its potential."

¹ Adopting the simplicity of Barreto and Garbelotti's explanation: "in English, the expression *site specific* is used as an adjective to define the specificity of the work of art. An expression such as "sítio específico" in Portuguese qualifies the physical place as being specific and not the work. It functions as a substantive", not really suggesting the work as specific to the qualities of the place.



[fig. 1] Fulcrum (1987) 'site specific' sculpture by Richard Serra, commissioned for one of Liverpool Street Station's entrances in London.

Revisiting artists like Richard Serra, or Robert Smithson, we face the same huge physicality to which their works relate and present themselves. We understand that in these works, such magnitude has a reason, especially when they relate to exterior elements of large scale. Since the 70s, artists like Hans Haacke have explored through their work a similar and yet distinct aspect: the way public space is transformed through the influence of mass communication media and private commercial interests.



[fig. 2] Hans Haacke, *News*, 1969: dealing simultaneously with physical and informational spaces

I'm referring to a supposed movement of de-materialization of the notion of 'site' that, from the 70s on, begin to include works in which "sociological mapping is explicit" (Foster, 1996). In this context, site is no longer strictly physical, rather, it is impregnated with meaning that is both social and discursive.

As Miwon Kwon reveals in "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," the term 'site' is not defined as a pre-condition but "discursively determined" (2000).² Quoting James Meyer, Kwon discusses location in its functional aspect ('functional site') as a process, as an operation that happens between sites, defining location as a place that also overlays information.

For these authors, location becomes functional when it gets defined as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange or cultural debate (including the eventual confrontation of the subject/artist in space, immersed in information such as text, photos, videos, data, physical elements and objects). This is the theoretical space that allows us to review location in the current mobility climate, under the influence of global positioning and geo-localization technologies.

Informational environment and the 'communicatory' location

Making use of 90s media aesthetics, and drowning public space with a mix of architecture and communication, the work of Barbara Kruger and more so that of Jenny Holzer demonstrates a presumed dis-location and de-materialization

² Kwon's texts on site-specificity have been very referred to recently by artists and researchers, that reveals a presumed revival of the study of the place of location in art.

of the site in light of information and visual communication.

Krzysztof Wodiczko's large-scale projections also point to how immaterial information can structure urban public space as much as physical, built architecture – particularly with regard to a common space construal.

The political aspect of these works occupies a hybrid position, traced to the power generated by the meeting of their immaterial presence with the physicality of circulation spaces. Dan Graham's architecture-related video projects (designed for social interaction in public spaces) are landmarks given the manner in which social and architectural space, along with immaterial imagery, fuse together.

Nevertheless, every time we think about physical space, we tend to fall upon nostalgic notions of place. As we walk in the streets, gardens, parks or come closer to sculptural or architectural constructions located in public spaces, we would say, 'nothing compares to the physicality of the space', when observing or feeling the ambience produced by such constructions ... These are nostalgic means for the reading of space, of location, of intimacy – a sense of physicality that nowadays gets mixed with the stimuli we receive from information connected to these places. It's no longer simple to differentiate architectonic formations from the semiotic idealization of a space, a place or the city itself.

These would be the efficiencies of the so-called corporative 'semiotic' capitalism, as described by Maurizio Lazzarato, in which cognitive worlds are "constructed through a statement arrangement, through a sign regime" (2003), within spaces marked by global capitalism. It's left for us, users or artists, to understand how these relations come about – something that advertisers also do, most of the time under better conditions. Strategies of representation play an important role in defining what could be a new form of alienation in contemporary society, as a result of the semiotic force of a capitalism deeply nested within communication networks.

Amidst this illusionary settlement, it is worth understanding how physical places and spaces complement the feeling of emptiness that certain technologies may cause. As an example, one could understand that the euphoria around virtualities at the turn of the century just kept us tied to computer screens and exclusively technologic networks. While being aware of certain *dystopias* that sometimes evolve when technologies define patterns of relationships, what is at stake here is to foresee how new wireless networks can allow processes of sharing and exchange, leading to interesting social unfoldings.

During 2004 Sonarsound, a branch of Barcelona's Sónar in São Paulo, I had the opportunity of curating a show that allowed for the creation of an emblematic work concerning the occupation of voids, and connecting distinct and contrasting spaces.



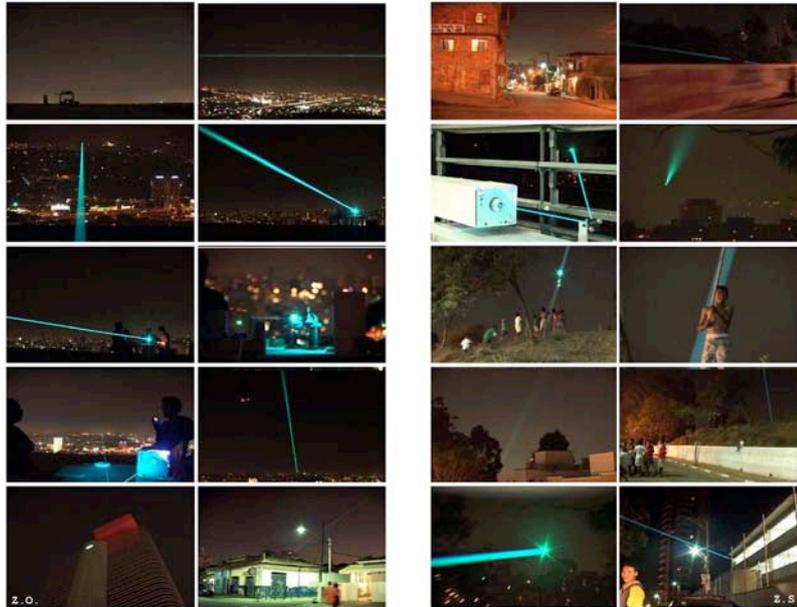
[fig. 3] *The project Infinite Column II – Opposites*, by Daniel Lima: connecting São Paulo's west and south zones

The work “Infinite Column II – Opposites” by Daniel Lima consisted of two laser beams projected from two distinct places in São Paulo. One of the beams was placed at the top of the Tomie Ohtake Institute, wherein the multimedia exhibition housed the project, and pointed to São Paulo's south zone. From its ‘target place’, a public school in the neighborhood of Paraisópolis, another laser beam was sent back to the Tomie Ohtake Institute. Between both points there are more than four miles of non-contiguous spaces, of urban areas that are connected by streets and lanes and yet share few common aspects – in other words, there is a huge social gap between the two neighborhoods. For three days, this horizontal light axis ‘physically’ connected both spaces (taking into account that light is also matter). Although the work took place primarily outside the exhibition space, audiences both within the exhibition and at the public school had access to live video transmissions of the immediate context of their surroundings. During the three nights of the event, the light beam oscillated between the concrete and the ‘immaterial’, projecting itself as a reaction to the social isolation inflicted by the metropolis (a sort of making the invisible visible), and acting like a possible confraternization, a temporary symbolic bridge bringing together isolations and exclusions imposed by the city. Art curator and critic Daniela Labra describes the work as follows:

There's nothing new, but the children living in Paraisópolis who went all the way up to the top of the building and witnessed how the light was reaching their neighborhood, found out that São Paulo is really huge and has infinite lights that had never illuminated their surroundings. For people who saw the community from the top of such a distant building, the destination point of that light beam was like an explosion, a huge point giving back all the energy of that intense beam, coming from the sky with great violence.

A question is posed here: what is specific about this work? Surely neither the laser beam, nor the technology used and its particular qualities. Which space

is it relating to? What is the work's place? Certainly not the Tomie Ohtake Institute building or the public school in Paraisópolis, but maybe that void in-between and what remains connectable between them.



Different reactions: from the top of Tomie Ohtake Institute exhibition, visitors could observe the laser beam pointed towards remote neighbors of the vast city; in Paraisópolis kids were willing to reach the laser beam with broomsticks.

If technologies, taking into account their mobility and ubiquity, are now getting back to outside physical space, then one should seek out new ways to relate with space and its publicness, including experiences that can take advantage of such mediation possibilities.

locative media

The term 'locative media' is new, strange (unfamiliar?) and often strongly contested in ways that are not always constructive. Perhaps "It is a concept that can be misleading or, at least, imprecise" (Bastos & Griffis, 2007).

In technical terms, locative can mean locatable, traceable, tending to be intrusive, and/or serving surveillance purposes, with disciplinary vocation. But deviations are possible, and it is interesting to understand the technological deviations/approximations in the urban space. The so-called locative arts (as defined by Drew Hemment) "are simultaneously opening new paths to worldly dissemination and mapping its own domains and geopolitics".³ Hemment

³ http://www.drewhemment.com/2004/locative_arts.html

proposes understanding the term in an inclusive manner, instead of an exclusive one. This can sometimes imply the risk of non-differentiation between locative media and other forms of space-mediated involvement. But it also lead us to face the context, instead of prematurely putting the field in a drawer.

Lately the only options available for people worried about some of the implications brought by new networking technologies is to either turn them off, or never start making use of them to begin with. New mobility politics will arise somewhere between turning it on and turning it off. (*Drew Hemment, 2006 lecture at arte.mov symposium*)

The construction of a reconfigured idea of 'site-specific' in the terms presented until now configures 'site' as a space of non-material possibilities, while pointing to actual spaces.

When curating and designing the exhibition "Dislocations: detours of technology in public space" (arte.mov 2007), it was possible to think about a group of projects pertaining to the 'locative' approach that presented, as a common element, an inversion of the military procedure of localization, exploring the possibilities that arise in the space between mobile networks and urban space. The projects took into consideration the specific characteristics of the city of Belo Horizonte, and its Municipal Park (which served as a kind of laboratory for the locative installations). Thus, works originally created in other contexts, like "Tactical sound Garden" by Mark Shepard, "Air" by Preemptive Media, or "Motoboys" by Antoni Abad, had some components carefully adapted for the new situation.

"Invisibles" by Bruno Vianna was developed with a commission that resulted in a very specific work, related to specific spots at the Municipal Park, involving its stories, visitors and the environment. The project integrated concepts of mobility, portability and augmented reality via an exploratory stroll in the park, which involved an expedition in search of characters intrinsically related to that space. Users or participants received cell phones that were pre-loaded with a specific application that filtered live feeds from the camera using masks and overlays. It would superimpose previously taken pictures of park visitors onto to the real-time images seen on the cell phone screen. An image recognition algorithm allowed those images to 'float' in fixed locations, offering the feeling of a virtual presence in that place.

Visitors were encouraged to explore unknown paths in the park, which is not a typical occurrence, since the park is normally used as a throughway between two major avenues as opposed to a leisure space. Once cued into this exploratory mode, the visitor was to look for 'active' places, as recognized by the software application (network-based and GPS hotspots in further versions). This software was designed to identify visitors' positions and insert different anonymous characters on the screen (from the internal image database), that appear sitting on benches, lying on the grass or near easily-recognizable reference points. Participants who own a Symbian S60 cell phone – such as Nokia's NSeries – could install the software on their personal

cell phones and explore the park independently. As part of the **arte.mov** Festival, the project was linked to an exhibition space in a gallery, where the viewers could obtain not only the mobile phones and the software, but also the instructions to explore the work in the park outside.



A recurring concern in similar projects, both curatorial and artistic, has been to emphasize the possibilities of re-orienting individuals within the shareable urban space, often through the ludic dimension of the events created. As in a game, people participating in these projects tend to relate to each other in a less defensive fashion. Also, the fact that these projects are very often organized for collective experience suggests the communal potential of wireless technology usage. Spontaneous communal action is growing less frequent, however, due to the need for mediation in big cities such as São Paulo or Belo Horizonte – where these projects have been performed.

Artists working with communication media often use these technologies as a way of making aesthetic, social or political conditions explicit. They attempt to bring to the surface capabilities embedded in existing systems as another relevant strategy (as in a kind of ready-made), which sometimes also reflects conflicting conditions. Curator Steve Dietz comments on this process, and echoes a key question about the pertinence of networked art, when he agrees that the Internet is more interesting than most net-art works (2001). The condition of the new wireless and mobile networks has been increasingly revealed in its depth through this kind of artistic view.



[fig. 4] *Degree Confluence Project* web site: the goal of the project is to visit each of the latitude and

longitude integer degree intersections in the world, and to take pictures at each location. The pictures, and stories about the visits, will then be posted here.

The project “Discontinuous Landscape” by Fernando Velázquez is a contribution that points to this kind of thought, while simultaneously deconstructing the Cartesian or didactic perspective that begins to get associated with certain mobile technology projects.

In the project, participants choose the locations they want to visualize from a coordinates menu by sending an SMS to a server. The available locations are mapped using the Degree Confluence Project’s web site (www.confluence.org). This site has received a lot of attention, and users who own a GPS device are invited to visit confluence integer points across the globe and take point-of-view photographs. Degree Confluence aims to offer “a geographically mapped sample of the Earth,” mathematically organized in a supposedly precise way. Like other collectively constructed projects (like Google, YouTube, Dailymotion, 12 seconds), it provides an opportunity for users to act as contributors to the project, by posting their testimonies (texts and images) of how they arrived at the specified points and how they registered them.



[fig. 5] Discontinuous Landscape is an interactive installation that uses the confluence.org database and SMSs to make collective landscapes. The picture shows the installation in the arte.mov Festival – nov.2008, in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

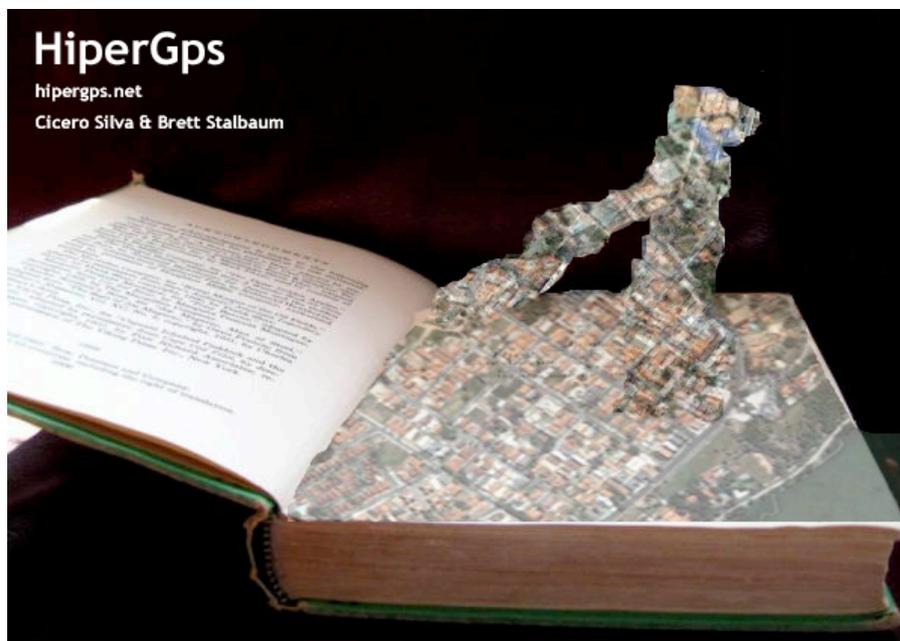
Velázquez’s project interacts with this device, searching for images of existing points at Degree Confluence and bringing them to the exhibition context. There is local interaction at the exhibition space and its surroundings, but the project is in fact remotely located (at Degree’s server) and refers to even more remote points. The visitors can also search by themselves for a coordinate confluence in the setting where the work takes place, in order to introduce a

more local or directly contextual landscape to the work. One way or another, the project approaches the question of location by denying its math, by taking over someone else's view, by 'smuggling' coordinates from one space to another, by introducing subjective elements and by scrambling the specific.

The idea of place is ever-present in the process, even literally. But what specific 'site' does such a work relate to? Certainly not that of the coordinates. What context does the work dialogue with? Presumably with the web context, the yearning to progressively map the planet and, not any less interestingly, it relates to the disposition and mobility of the many individuals that remotely collaborate with the project.

The results are visualized in a group of four projections that form an imaginary landscape; it is discontinuous, but capable of expanding the notions of place and space as fixed territories, destitute of subjectivity.

Another project that inserts the city in the exploration ethic, bringing together physical and informational elements, is "Hiper GPS". Created by Cicero Inácio Silva and Brett Stalbaum, it applies a hypertext context to the city structure. Walking along the city streets, participants can access, with the aid of GPS-enabled cell phones, a mix of texts, images and pre-recorded sounds in the system. Although not yet implemented and still a work-in-progress, the project moves toward thinking the city not as mesh of geographic coordinates and numbers (latitude and longitude spare data do not mean much to most people), but as sensitive points and regions that can lead people to share stories and eventually discover things in common.



The accessibility and the adoption of the commons (commons as delimited by private interests) are vital elements in the tenuous practices related to mobile technology. By these means, the mobile device has the potential to become less of a new mediation gadget and more a tool of approximation to social

reality.

As such, we see an evident yet tentative proliferation of works that deal with great scale and magnitude (i.e. parks, cities), which simultaneously present themselves as almost invisible interventions in physical space. Their configurations affiliate such works with unstable and uncertain categories, just like the concepts related to locative media, but they suggest a possible appropriation of 'site-related' or 'context-specific' ideas – devoid of physicality, and because of that, so reliant upon it.

Premonitions do not matter that much, but it is worth saying that this is a technology that gains support and legitimizes itself through the popularization of its usage and application. No other technology has spread so rapidly as mobiles have been, managing to root themselves in the most popular layers of society.

So, the place of 'locative' that really matters to us is not a slogan pushing platitudes like *anytime, anywhere, everywhere*. Rather, this place begets ideas around the approximation of very powerful practices in the art field, and debates that involve physical spaces and their particularities, tensions and conflicts. It might be a risky approximation to equate works so thoroughly discussed in the art field with others that are not yet really considered as art by the main art circuits. Only time will allow us to discover how to juxtapose, in the same field, the physicality of some with the total immateriality of others. Thus, 'locative' is a concept with only tentative and risky affiliations with some of the most relevant work that has been produced under the concept of 'site-specific', those of *functional sites*. For us, it remains to wonder what kind of works will yet appear in this new and muddy 'site' that is taking shape in the world.

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