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Network Landscapes: Landscape, Public Space & Mobile Music... Molecules?

Teri Rueb

When I arrived for the workshop yesterday the neighborhood was filled with the sounds of a public outdoor concert. Meanwhile, indoors my acoustic landscape shifted from Buddy Holly to Roy Orbison to Johnny Cash as a beautifully preserved 1950s jukebox pulsed with the last nostalgic selection made by a stranger. Regardless of my musical preference, these moments held meaning for me on a deeper level as they signaled something important about sound and public space. The message was in the medium, not just the content of the sounds. The act of social gathering for shared listening, individuals suspended in the connective tissue of sound—whether individually or collectively programmed—serves as a powerful catalyst in the formation of political identity and the claiming of public space. A public live performance offered as a free concert constitutes a mobile location-based networked technology quite different from the mobile sound platforms that have become the default technology referred to and used in artistic practice and cultural studies in mobile sound.

Where does this shared public space go when we adopt the personalized space of mobile music interfaces to the city? What are the consequences of the spread of mobile music devices that would inscribe us within personalized bubbles of sound? Is this kind of sharing a form of personal or collective expression, or are we merely conforming to a system of social interaction and exchange that has become an even more intensified interiorization of control space? What is the space of compromise and negotiation of meaning akin to “public space” in this moment of dual movement between global homogenization and expanded cosmopolitanism? Have we abandoned the constantly shifting landscape that would take us outside or beyond the comfort zone of our factionalized cohort? As cultural producers, critics and consumers – as citizens – we have an obligation to question “off the shelf” technologies that appear as “natural” or “liberating”.

If we brush against the grain of mobile media forms, what might we discover as the underside of this condition and how will we respond? As a society we have become atomized, but the question remains “Can we form molecules?”¹, and what might they look like?

As individuals linked through mobile technologies we have become mobile nodes in a complex network in flux. Beyond the classical figure in a landscape, we have become the very material from which this “network landscape”² emerges as the interaction of natural, social, technological and biological networks.

J.B. Jackson, the great historian of the vernacular landscape, argued that we must see landscape ultimately as a “shared three-dimensional reality” and therefore a question of public space. This appeal must also be made in light of how we understand the “network landscape” of mobile network society. As actors in this landscape, how can we resist being framed as passive consumers or controlled and surveilled subjects, and instead embrace our agency as creators and participants in the shaping of this new public sphere?

Rather than choosing to create network landscapes that foster escape or deferral of this challenge, we must seek to create evermore charged spaces of socially, technologically and ecologically mediated encounter. The various works I will share in this talk trace a ten-year exploration around the question of landscape, public space, identity and network—in particular, the cybernetic landscape as produced through and framed by sound.

1. John R. Stilgoe posed the question “Can we make molecules?” in reference to the atomization of the public sphere in the context of his seminar “Modernization of the North American Built Environment”, taught at Harvard University in Spring 2007.

2. Since 2006 I have advanced the term “network landscapes” to indicate the extended landscape of natural, social and technological networks that combine to form the ground of a new landscape condition that I argue is peculiar to mobile network society. This conception builds on J.B. Jackson’s etymology of the word “landscape” as linked to the medieval German *landschaft*, from which he proposes the definition “man-made systems overlaid upon the land” (“Discovering the Vernacular Landscape”, 1986). Accordingly, I argue that wireless networks constitute a component of the magnetosphere that is shaped by man as a system overlaid upon the land.

BIO

Rueb’s large-scale responsive spaces and location-aware installations explore issues of architecture and urbanism, landscape and the body, and sonic and acoustic space. In 1999 she pioneered gps-based interactive sound walks with “Trace”, set along a network of hiking trails in the Canadian Rockies (funded by the Banff Centre for the Arts).

She lectures and exhibits world wide at venues including Transmediale (Berlin, 2004), SIGGRAPH (San Antonio, 2002), The International Symposium on Electronic Arts (Nagoya, 2002; Paris, 2000; Helsinki, 2004), Consciousness Reframed (Perth, 2002), The New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York), the Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington D.C.), The Banff Centre for the Arts (Banff), Bell Laboratories (Holmdel), Interval Research Corporation (Palo Alto), and The Fraunhofer Institute/GMD (IRCAM, Paris, 2002; Glasgow, 2001).

She has received grants and commissions from the ICA Boston / Vita Brevis, LEF Foundation, Artslink, Turbulence, and various state arts councils. Rueb’s work has been featured and reviewed in diverse publications including “Second Person: Storytelling and Games in Playable Media” (edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fuini, MIT Press, 2006) and “Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science and Technology”, (edited by Stephen Wilson, MIT Press, 2001). She holds a B.F.A. in Art and Literary and Cultural Studies from Carnegie Mellon University and a master’s degree in Interactive Telecommunications from the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. Rueb is an associate professor in the Graduate Department of Digital Media at the Rhode Island School of Design. Rueb is also pursuing doctoral research at Harvard Graduate School of Design and is founder and principal of Open Air Studio, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

FIGURE

Teri Rueb’s “Core Sample”, part of the exhibition “Art on the Harbor Islands” with the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art, 2007

