Into the Locative:
Grassroots Cultural Production and the Digitalisation of Urban Borders

Cecelia Cmielewski
Dualkollektiv
cecylia2@netscape.net

Ilaria Vanni
University of Technology Sydney – Dualkollektiv
ilaria.vanni@uts.edu.au

14TH INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON ELECTRONIC ART

Much research and cultural production in the last ten years have focused on ideas of mobility, liquidity and movement brought about by a new geopolitical model based on the deterritorialized and all comprising networks of Empire, by the erosion of previously stable nation state borders, by migration flows and by seemingly ubiquitous (new) media technologies. A parallel rhetoric on the power of technologies in levelling inequalities and creating social change has led to the fetishization of the idea of movement and technology in the creation of new forms of power and belonging.

At Dualkollektiv departing from ideas of networks, mobility and deterritorialization, we started asking questions about borders, their materialization and dematerialization, their reconceptualization within the city in the form of enclaves and flows. What happens, for instance if we look at the distribution of infrastructures on the territory? Does access to technologies translate in active use of these technologies? Who owns the service providers and what is their relation to mainstream and non mainstream digital media? Can we still make such a distinction? Are we really a 'city of villages', according to one of the City of Sydney branding tags, that suddenly, thanks to digital technologies becomes part of a global neighborhood? Which meanings are given to the city through media arts? Which stories are told with the aid of digital technologies?

We started imagining what would happen if we layered three different imaginary maps over the city of Sydney. The first one maps the city that takes into by social and cultural practices that fragment the urban fabric in enclaves sometimes criss-crossed by flows and sometimes not. The second one is a map of infrastructures: the distribution of diverse kinds of internet networks and the institutions (such as galleries, museums, theatres, universities and arts organizations) active in the promotion, education, production, distribution and audience development of media arts.

The third one maps the borders of media arts. Let's start with the last imaginary map. In 2006, the Australia Council for the Arts, the Australian Federal Government's funding and advisory agency, commissioned a new media scoping study. The report redefined new media as simply media, stressing how artists used a combination of 'existing, new and emergent technologies' (Donovan, Miller and Lally, 2006: 9). The report also highlighted the lack of infrastructure, both at the production and at the distribution and consumption level, which brings us to our second map.

The spectre of the 'digital divide', clearly a border in itself, surfaces in the report in relation to those artists located within 'communities' — those artists who are either Indigenous or of a non English speaking background. Media arts, according to this discourse, have a particular 'enabling' potential. Functioning as a tool of distributed agency and participatory practices in the most disadvantaged sectors, media arts is seen as making better citizens. If it wasn't for the 'digital divide'.

The rhetoric of the 'digital divide' needs to be unpacked and cannot simply be reduced to a matter of access and equality. It needs to take into consideration cultural differences, differences in the way artists and communities use digital media, the professionalization and education in media literacy of practitioners and audiences and the distribution of media arts.

The notion of 'digital divide' needs also to start from very basic data and interrogate the link between the 'enabling' potential of media arts in the making of new senses of citizenship, mainstream media, the high end of contemporary arts — to which much of the discourse on new media is catered — and media capitalism: not all broadbands are born the same. If new studies show that almost 10 million Australians live in ADSL–2 enabled neighbourhoods (CRN Magazine, 2008) not much is publicized about the (non)spreading of optic fibre.

Similarly, while established media artists recognize the need to interact across the institutional spectrum, the institutions themselves, such as galleries and museums, seemed reluctant to engage with the more experimental forms of media arts (Donovan, Miller and Lally, 2006: 17). The problem here appears to be one of distribution, not simply of access. The professionalization of emerging artists should go hand in hand with the professionalization of institutions.

Some arts organizations, notably ICE (Information and Cultural Exchange), a media and community organization at the forefront in the use of creative practices and media in community building, have moved the discourse of the digital divide into the sphere of education and professionalization. ICE, located in Western Sydney, the most culturally and linguistically diverse region in Australia, home to the largest Indigenous population and the third largest regional economy in the country,

provides both access to technology in itself in the form of a multimedia lab, and to forms of training that go well beyond technological training to explore narratives of self and belonging and create situated understandings of the city. Not surprisingly if we look at what is produced by ICE often in partnership with other institutions and organizations, we find works concerned with 'the locative', the microcosm of the embodied realities of Western Sydney, the emplacement of its affective borders, recounted by several voices.

These narratives develop a sense of both personal and collaborative agency for people excluded from formal, structural and national constructions of citizenship. Media arts become then a process of renegotiating belonging, claiming rights, producing localities and constituting communities (Rosaldo 1994: 57). Much of this process entails crossing borders, material or otherwise.

Khaled Sabsabi's wall installation, "You", (video / mixed media, 2007) as part of the ON' n 'ON provides a hint for non Muslim and Muslim alike as to the immanent and perceived power of the imam. An image of Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of Hezbolla, stares directly at us. The screen multiplies into a myriad. A wall full of Him confronts the viewer with the seductive power of His image as it constantly transforms. His repeated image in different squares is at different stages of transformation — coming into focus with the finale an explosion of light in the background which appears to emanate from his head — the spiritual leader, the explosion, the emergent power of Islam are all suggested in this work. As audience we can participate in virtual religious crossings through this piece of power signifier.

In "The Obstacle is the Path", artists Ali Kadhim traces the story of the first Le-Parkour workshop in Sydney. We see young people trained to jump, fly and run. The intense re-marking of the territory that creates borders and ghettos becomes transformed by unexpected creative leaps that defy barriers and walls. It requires prowess that is utterly knowledgeable, flexible and self reliant — no ropes or gismos — to remake the 'new country' into something that edges into a form of conquering that can lead to a "sense of belonging" which eschews borders (in this case — of urban high rises).

Perhaps what we are looking for is a form of new media a la parkour.

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