

SHAGGY DOG STORIES

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Private Reveries, Public Spaces

Private Reveries, Public Spaces is an example of an increasingly popular style of collaborative artistic research that focuses on process as much as product. The Baltic Flour Mills, for example, describes itself as a factory as much as a gallery, a space that is as much about 'doing', about practice based research, as about seeing or watching the results.

The current interest in artistic practises that make reference to more formal, scientific, attitudes to research is not just because artists and scientists are equally involved in mapping our technological futures. It is because both artists and scientists share the curiosity of the flaneur; a kind of wandering (or wondering) about their subjects – a mutual curiosity about the social and aesthetic products of technological process.

Paul Klee said, "Drawing is taking a line for a walk". Richard Feynmann said about his approach to research; "It is about the pleasure of finding things out". Both of them are talking about that same form of enquiry – a similar kind of curiosity about their subjects, and interest in the journey that their curiosity maps out for them.

Richard Feynmann, who was an advocate for very rigorously structured scientific research, talks in his autobiography about his experiments with lucid dreaming as a way of understanding how our minds work. This is surprisingly poetic approach for such a rigorous thinker, especially someone who gave short shrift to astrology and other 'new-age' beliefs. But Feynman's prime motivation was the beauty and mystery of science. His curiosity was driven by a search for esthetic or sublime structures in his subject, an approach that Paul Klee would have appreciated.

Private Reveries, Public Spaces (PRPS) could be a description of lucid dreaming – a form of social sleep walking that has been brought into public space through mobile technologies. Kenneth Gergen has called this "absent presence"¹ – a shift from the vertical relationships that we have in the real world to a network of horizontal relationships facilitated across time and space through technology.

But this is not new; not something we have discovered in the last 10, 15, 20, or even 50 years. Gergen points out that it was print technologies that first enabled a monological distributed presence, where readers leave their immediate surroundings to enter a fictional space. Similarly, the mail system was perhaps the first introduction of a dialogic communication over time and space. Gergen uses *Les Liasons Dangerous* as an example of this kind of distant communication. Valmont and Merteuil enact a remote exchange of confidences and intimacies through their letters, an exchange that will be familiar to anyone who has ever engaged in a flirting session over e-mail, text messaging, or IM chat.

So we should not kid ourselves that technology is somehow ushering in completely new types of social experience. Before we chatted on our mobiles we cut ourselves off from our immediate environments using Walkmans, and before that we ignored everyone around us by sticking our nose in our book. We have been having private reveries in public spaces for a long, long time.

What I want to do is not to address these social experiences as if they were something new, but to look for new metaphors, to look for narratives that develop out of the projects in PRPS. In particular I explore three words; memory, accretion and agency; and how they infiltrate and construct these projects.

MEMORY:

Rachel Baker's *Platfrom*

We have always located ourselves by mnemonics, by having shorthand visual maps of our environment. This is as true for virtual information spaces as it is for 'real' geographies. Memory experts use visual mnemonics as a way of remembering lists of information. These techniques propose visualising a room or a house with many shelves or cupboards, and then walking around depositing the bits of information you need to remember around the rooms of this virtual space. When you want to recall the information, you mentally walk around the space until you find the memory object you placed there.

In his classic book on urban planning, *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch describes how important this kind of technique is when we navigate real spaces;

"Way finding is the original function of the environmental image and the basis on which emotional associations may have been founded. But the image is not only valuable in its immediate sense in which acts as a map for the direction of movement. In a broader sense it can serve as a general frame of reference within which the individual can act or to which he can attach his knowledge. In this way it is like a body of belief or a set of social customs, it is an organiser of facts and possibilities."²

Lynch is making a very distinct link between a repository of knowledge — a body of belief as he calls it — and physical space. A contemporary example of this is a website called NYCBloggers.com. NYC Bloggers maps Blogging activity in and around Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island, encouraging bloggers to register their physical location by marking their nearest stop on the subway. Visitors to the site can navigate the map of New York, clicking on the subway lines presented as mnemonic linking blogging activity. Using this mnemonic structure, you can find out who is blogging on Canal Street, or who's blogging at 5th Street, or in Queens or in Brooklyn.

In *Platfrom* SMS is used as a medium for a similar group of individual mnemonics. The train journey from London to the North is described not just a train journey but as a repository of stories and anecdotes. Train drivers tell stories about work, about how they have to be constantly thinking about the next station ahead, landmarks rushing by triggering them to think further down the line to the next station, the next curve, the next signal. For them the landscape is a series of mnemonics collapsing on themselves; each one a domino knocking a visual memory of what is further up the line.

But the drivers' stories in *Platfrom* are tinged with melancholy for the rail industry. The lines that provide the visual mnemonic that enables them to do their job has been cut up and reformed through privatisation. With privatisation, a form of collective memory has been lost too. Kevin Lynch describes a similar disorientation in subjects who have suffered brain injuries:

"These men cannot find their own rooms again after leaving them and must wander helplessly until conducted home or until by chance they stumble upon some familiar detail. Purposeful movement is accomplished only by an elaborate memorisation of sequences of distinctive detail so closely spaced that the next detail is always in close range of the previous landmark. One man recognises a room by a small sign, another knows a street by the tram car numbers. If the symbols are tampered with, the man is lost."³

Platform makes an explicit connection between the privatisation of the railways and the corporate ownership of the cellular networks we have come to rely on so much. The cellular network, like the railway network, enables us to augment our environment with stories – mnemonics that root us in dynamic space. But who owns these memories? Are your private reveries really in a public space, or are they reliant on a private infrastructure that can be broken up and resold? If we had invested in memories in such an infrastructure, how would we find our way around then?

ACCRETION:

Ben Hooker and Shona Kitchen's *EdgeTown*

EdgeTown is a project about the boundaries of urban space, and about devices that passively map and visualise activity within these boundaries. It invokes the situationist metaphor of the city as a palimpsest – an accretion of unconscious communication in the city, both structured and serendipitous.

Cities are already a forest of signs, but most of these signs are authorised texts; part of the official story of a city. Public space was already a conflicting narrative of official and unofficial texts before the introduction of mobile communications. Billboards, road signs, street names, shop windows – these are the stories that have fascinated flaneurs since the 19th century.

But the city also has a tradition of writing itself in unauthorised ways, from graffiti tags to the wall paintings marking sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland. These are signs of a city marking its own boundaries, and also a dynamic public discourse about the structure of the city itself. In her book *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England*, Juliet Fleming describes the practice of writing on walls in private and public places as a form of public discourse that has been lost to history. Erased both physically and historically in favour of authorised printed texts:

"I imagine the whitewashed domestic wall as being the primary scene of writing in early modern England. That the bulk of early modern writing was written on walls, and was consequently both erasable and, in our own scheme of things, out of place is a proposition with consequences for current assumptions about the constitution of statistics of literacy and schooling in the early modern period."⁴

Fleming describes a discourse in 16th Century England that has been erased for us. Save for a few etchings in glass windows, on furniture, or on mantelpieces, we have very little evidence of this very vibrant social discourse. There is a similar form of social discourse happening today over SMS – a similarly ephemeral medium to the chalk writing of 16th Century England.

This ephemeral discourse is not part of a city's official narrative, but can form underground communication network that are critical marginalised communities. A contemporary version of 16th Century wall writing is the 'Hobo Codes' that are used by transient communities in the USA. These codes, written on buildings in residential areas, tell stories for other hobos, and offer advice about finding food or shelter. For example, a squiggly line in a black box means "bad tempered owner", a number of dime and nickel shaped circles means that there is a good chance to get some money, and, one of my favourites, a simple circle with two arrows, meaning get out fast.

Matt Jones (www.blackbeltjones.com) recently proposed that we could reform some of these underground symbols to indicate the wireless networks that are starting to open up around our cities. Following on from 'war dialling', an old hacker term used to describe random attempts to access closed phone networks, Jones has called this system of ephemeral signs 'Warchalking'.

Warchalking inscribes invisible communication networks into the physical space of the city, creating an iconic visual language that is deliberately ephemeral. Ben Hooker and Shona Kitchen's *EdgeTown* is a technological version of these ephemeral icons – a vocabulary of small gestures that tell the city small stories about itself, about what happened, what accrued and what was washed away. Their series of sensors and small displays are a city listening to its own background noise. The patterns that emerge are part of a tradition of 'edge town' languages, from 16th Century Graffiti to Hobo languages and Warchalking. Edge Town turns the technological infrastructure of the city in on itself, creating a feedback loop of listening and representation. Will the ephemeral language created by this loop be stories about the technology itself? Or will it create a new vocabulary of icons for the inhabitants of the city? What stories will *EdgeTown* tell us? How many of them will be remembered, and how many forgotten?

**(DOUBLE) AGENCY:
Natalie Jeremijenko's Sniffer Dogs**

There are two stories that we always recur about future technologies. One is that in the future technology will dematerialise; the interface, and even the physical product itself, will be replaced by a wave of the hand or a voice spoken into the air. The other is that technology will automate the drudgery of work, with artificially intelligent devices liberating us all and making possible a life of leisure. Both these fantasies assume benign outcomes for technological progress, but also relegate the physical reality of technology to the background. The 1950s vision of the house of the future was all sleek curves and shiny surfaces, with none of the clutter and cables that make our current lives anything but seamless.

The parallel, dystopian, versions of these stories form a dark undercurrent where the edges of technology are all too visible and sharp. In films like *Blade Runner* and *Alien*, technology has not disappeared, but become the landscape itself. In this landscape, intelligent agents haven't liberated us, but exist in an uneasy partnership, as confused and uneasy about their own existence as we are. Artificial Intelligence hasn't created a transcendental form of agency, but an existential crisis that is all the more complex for its indelible link with its imperfect human origins.

Natalie Jeremijenko's Sniffer Dogs project is a playful exploration of these themes of intelligence, agency and avatars. At the heart of the project is an inversion – the domestic face of artificial intelligence, exemplified by the recent craze for robotic dog toys, is repurposed for a more sinister task – sniffing out radiation levels in the landscape. Jeremijenko reprograms the toys with a custom chipset and radiation sensor implanted in the dog's nose. The dog then 'sniffs' the air for radiation, following the scent and mapping radioactivity levels as it walks.

The contrast of these cute robot toys with their grim nuclear task gives a frisson of perverse glee. Jeremijenko uses the inbuilt system of behaviours programmed by the toy manufacturer, so the dog wags its tail and performs a little dance whenever it senses radioactive material. But perhaps there is an even darker concept lurking underneath. Jeremijenko suggests in her supporting material that these domestic robot dogs have had ulterior motives all along, killing their time barking and playing with bones and smiling at their owners while secretly awaiting further instructions.

This suggests a new spin on the issue of technological agency – instead of the domesticated avatar, we have the double agent. Most technological futurology see agents as benign, as obedient slaves who only have our best interests at heart. Jeremijenko playfully suggests that a

dark heart always exists, even behind the most domesticated technologies. If cute robotic dogs harbour secret alter egos, who knows what ulterior motives lie behind your PC screen, or your mobile phone?

In Bruce Sterling's short story 'Maneki Neko', a similarly domestic icon — the Maneki Neko, a Japanese good luck item in the shape of a cat — is the icon for an intelligent social network coordinated by 'Pokkecons' — PDA style 'pocket controllers'. These devices organise their owners lives around a gift economy of seemingly random gestures. Your Pokkecon might order you to buy an extra coffee and hand it to a stranger in the street, then when you return home you find a parcel has been delivered containing your favourite type of sweet. These daily activities are seen as benign to people who have woven the pokkecon into their everyday lives, but a visiting American executive who doesn't engage with the system find herself under attack, like a foreign agent rejected by its host:

"I know very well what this is. I'm under attack. I haven't had a moment's peace since I broke that network. Stuff just happens to me now. Bad stuff. Swarms of it. It's never anything you can touch, though. Nothing you can prove in a court of law. I sit in chairs, and somebody's left a piece of gum there. I get free pizzas, but they're not the kind of pizzas I like. Little kids spit on my sidewalk. Old women in walkers get in front of me whenever I need to hurry. My toilets don't flush. My letters get lost in the mail. When I walk by cars, their theft alarms go off. And strangers stare at me. It's always little things. Lots of little tiny things, but they never, ever stop. I'm up against something that is very very big, and very very patient. And it knows all about me. And it's got a million arms and legs. And all those arms and legs are people'."⁵

The Pokkecon initially seems like a benign agent for goodwill, but by the end of the story, it's more like a shadowy double agent for an immoral underworld, as if the Yakusa or Mafia had invented an IM client. Unlike the perfect intelligent agent who understands your every need so well that you don't need to think or do anything anymore, the double agent is a threat — a shadow lurking around every corner. A double agent isn't looking out for you, but instead gives you the eerie feeling that you are being watched, making you look over your shoulder. In their benign forms, intelligent agents exist solely to smooth your path towards a technologically seamless future. Its sinister twin, the double agent, is evidence of a complex past returning to haunt you — an uncanny doppelganger from a future that is really a half-remembered, re-engineered past.

The double agent also has a kind of existential cousin in the private eye — an agent who has no life except as lived through others. Constantly trying to make sense out of an incomplete picture, the private eye is an imperfect avatar, always a few clues short of the whole story. In the classic gum shoe novels of Raymond Chandler, this anti hero is always getting in the way rather than getting to the truth, getting implemented in the crime and led down dark alleys. How much more interesting are these double agents compared to the dumb shiny world of the intelligent agents? The double agent recognises that intelligence can never be perfect, and those who hold intelligence cast a malign, powerful shadow. After all, even the best, most discrete butler always keeps a few too many of his master's secrets.

The intelligence we are building into our technological landscapes will be cast with these same dark shadows, so lets build infrastructures that recognises that instead of hiding it beneath an illusory surface of perfection. We need to have more cute robotic dogs turned into Geiger counters. Interactive Barney needs a double life uncovering conspiracy theories instead of reading saccharine-coated bedtime stories. Lets build intelligent avatars that remind us, not of upcoming commitments, but of our past mistakes. We always think we can make the future

better, cleaner, and brighter, but we never quite get there. By setting our targets lower, we might achieve something more complex, unpredictable, and truer to our own dystopian lives.

Private Reveries, Public Neuroses

There is little that is new in our mobile media networks; we are yet again fooling ourselves that we are doing something wholly new. Our dreams are always of shiny futures where we are always in control, but dystopian futures are closer to reality and a lot more interesting to study. Hooker and Kitchen use the phrase, "devices like weeds" to describe the elements of *EdgeTown*, and that is a powerful metaphor for these alternative futures. These random double agents will grow up through the cracks of the shiny, seamless future that commercial technology companies always promise us.

The privatised networks of Rachel Baker's *Platfrom* project, the double agent robotic dog in Natalie Jeremijenko's project and the accretion of digital information like chalk marks on a wall in Hooker & Kitchen's *EdgeTown* – these are all signposts for alternate futures. Futures where our ability to access and traverse networks is difficult or impeded, but where human creativity finds ways of communicating, telling stories that help us navigate again. This is not a future made to our specifications, where a path is cleared for us every step of the way, but one where we have to negotiate and battle for every step. These are utopian dreams brought down to earth – there are weeds by the kerbstones, cracks in the rails, and graffiti is still visible under the whitewashed walls. But these spaces are richer and more truthful than the slick surfaces of commercial hype. The product of reverie, these proposals are all the stronger, and perversely, more truthful, for being shaggy dog stories.

Notes

1 Kenneth J. Gergen, "The Challenge of Absent Presence", collected in *Perpetual Contact*, eds James E Katz & Mark Aahus, Cambridge University Press, 2002

2 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, MIT Press, 1960

3 *Ibid*,

4 Juliet Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England*, Reaktion Books, 2001

5 Bruce Sterling, "Maneki Neko", collected in *A Good Old Fashioned Future*, Bantam Books, 1999

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