



Disrupting Conventional Boundaries of Public Art In Urban Space

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Abstract

In contrast to the spectacle of large-scale projections onto urban architecture, digital eco-art offers intimate experiences in reciprocity with the largeness of the sensorial realm of nature. Digital eco-artists position work in natural settings for the exhibition of interactive computer generative sound and visual installation works. In doing so, they push traditional boundaries of urban public art to be more socially interactive, immersive, and inclusive of place they offer a means for re-visioning urban natural green space.

Keywords

LocoMotoArt, place, digital eco-art, technologically mediated experiences, urban environment

Introduction

“Space and place” are components of the living world, which have biological connections that can be mapped, measured, calculated, and used via the experiential. Within this concept of space and place, we find that both resonate multiple qualities, meanings and mediated symbolism, which we often take for granted. [1] We can also consider that space is a “sphere” consisting of multiple trajectories, more specifically that the sphere is comprised of “coexisting heterogeneity...without space, no multiplicity and without multiplicity no space.” [2] In this point of view, there is an inseparable character of space and place. Sampson reminds us, “a meaningful sense of place has four primary dimensions – emotional/affective, spatial/geographic, ecological/interconnection and temporal/historical. A true sense of place includes the intertwining of all four.” [3] Lefebvre defined the concept of ‘representational space’ as spaces of imagination, complex embodiment and coded symbolism. A conceptual triad, representational space is considered the “most evocative” and according to Lefebvre, linked to “the underground side of social life as also to art,” which he referred to as a “code of representational space.” [4]

Use of space embraces a multitude of competing trajectories, which are interrelated. Contributing to these intertwined boundaries, we find that physical space and place are deeply embedded with technology and thus, electronic space and place is as much a part of space and place as buildings, parks and plazas. As Amen and Thrift note this has “crucial consequences” because “the technical is not seen as separate from the social or the natural,” [5]. I con-

sider space and place to be intertwined, ever changing, steeped in complex fluctuating intricacies and temporal changes.

In response to the awareness of the oscillation between physical and electronic space and place, electronic artists seek to interrupt the everyday and transplant human activities through the ubiquitous and sensorial aspects of digital technologies. These artists move towards unconventional use and repurposing of urban natural space. In doing so, a means for local place making and exhibiting public art emerges that disrupts conventional and traditional boundaries of the space and appeals to the imagination more intimately. Traditionally outdoor spaces are used for concerts in parks, parades, street parties, and festivals. Digital eco-art, emphasizes electronic and physical space and place by oscillating between perceived realms.

In “Digital eco-art: transformative possibilities,” co-author Philippe Pasquier and I observe, “We must consider that there are many interactional experiences and relationships that exist in both natural settings and digital technology. It is generally understood that our ability to connect with nature is accomplished by way of direct sensuous engagement. Because digital devices and sensor technologies provide enhanced experience by augmenting human sensorial awareness within auditory, visual and haptic experiences, we can also be sensuously and immediately engaged through such technologies. By combining these multisensory augmentations with the experience of natural setting, the two blend, resurrecting our cultural connection to the natural realm...” [6]

Digital eco-artists use this sense of oscillation to push traditional boundaries of urban public art to be more socially interactive, immersive, and inclusive of place as a vehicle for re-visioning of urban natural green space. Drawing upon five years of arts based research and the work of LocoMotoArt, a multi-disciplinary media arts group, I report on a digital eco-art event, *LocoMotoArt @ Queen Elizabeth Park* in Vancouver, British Columbia. This paper does not provide the opportunity for lengthy discussion, therefore I describe briefly some of the works from the exhibition which played upon the oscillation of place, space, locale, memory, the uncanny, fusions of nature myths, the geological history and the convergence of the colonial ramifications found within Nature, cultural traditions and society as related to this specific urban space and place.

Disrupting Conventional Boundaries

A more traditional use of urban space by electronic artists involves the creation and exhibition of works for spectators to experience a distanced *engrandized* representation with sensations engendered by the sheer largeness of the spectacle of urban projection. During the 1980s and 1990s the “provocative spectacle” emerged as seen in the work of artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, who in the mid-1980s projected gigantic “40 foot” images of objects and body parts onto the facades of public buildings and monuments. In her paper *Urban Disturbances*, Ewa Lajer-Burchardth concluded that Wodiczko’s projections, “... indicate and use the contradictions of specific social space ... and in doing so open them to reinterpretation.” [7] Large-scale projection utilizes architecture for screening surfaces, for staging striking visual displays for immense crowds of people who are assembled together in an urban area. It is axiomatic that urban ecological sounds, (sirens, horns, motorized traffic, air and land), as well as metaphors and symbols of human history and the architecture used, begin to merge into the viewing experience.

In contrast, digital eco-art engages the spectator with the interaction and intimate experience of both nature and technology. Digital eco-artists strive to use all attributes of natural settings such as forests, beaches, caves, lakes, or stream banks for example. Screening surfaces are found within the contours of the landscape, and incorporate natural aspects such as steep inclines, uneven ground, sand, or rocks. Another contributing aspect is that of existing ecological soundscapes, such as waves, birdsong, or wind. These add to the artist’s work in ways that differ from large-scale urban projection or indoor gallery settings. Digital eco-art is the temporary occupation of natural urban place; it is small-scale and positioned in dialogue with natural settings, or as specific intervention. It engenders a sense of intimate connection to and the understanding of natural environment and its restorative properties. [8]

Aesthetics of Digital Eco-Art

The term aesthetics is commonly associated with the senses, art, and the value of appreciation of the beauty of art. The etymology of the term is “to perceive with the senses”, so it is possible to consider “all experience as fundamentally aesthetic.” [9] When considering the aesthetics of digital eco-art, we must acknowledge that we are corporeally connected to landscape, and that our senses hearken back millennia to a time when the experience of interconnectedness was synonymous with survival and our understanding of the world. Humans were so deeply embedded within a sustenance relationship that a sense of reciprocity with the natural world was embedded in human existence and culture.

Electronic space, or virtual space, is similar to natural spaces in that sensuous qualities such as texture, form, colour, light, scale and movement, sensation of sound may also be present. When we consider digital eco-art placed in

natural settings, we must also consider interconnected aspects of these. Digital technologies provide multiple sensory and interactive experiences and augment the senses in ways that could be considered similar to the sense of arousal one can experience in nature settings. Within the human sensory-perceptual system we have the capacity to interpret, or internalize cognitively that, which is perceived. Internal and external perceptions are produced at the same time, and they are not separate; “in our experience we never find them disjoined” [10]

Re-visioning Urban Natural Space

As an emerging genre, digital eco-art provides an intimate, heightened sense of aesthetic engagement among humans, technology and nature, and disrupts pre-conceived cultural notions of the separation of the three. Similar to the influence of Joseph Beuys on social sculpture and environmental art, digital eco-art and its use of public natural space, history and memory also responds to the need for generating discourse related to ecological issues. These types of “art agendas” involve traditional as well as activist practices, and all have a role in raising awareness of ecological issues. The ubiquity of digital media in our lives can make them seem at times more familiar than nature. Digital eco-art re-visions the park or natural green areas of a city and provides a means for the repatriation of the inhabitant with his or her environment. As electronic space interacts with the physical urban public space, it becomes a transformative experience. [11]

Social Interaction and Digital Eco-Art

During five years of field study with LocoMotoArt, spectators repeatedly commented that the sense of stimulation provided by the experience of digital eco-art led to feelings that were “pleasant,” arousing a sense of “being in love”, or “uncontrolled excitement,” or “intense uncontrolled curiosity” when experiencing electronic art installations *in situ*. Several spectators commented they had feelings of a sense of “intimacy” and that the technology and art all felt “absorbed” “connected” and not separate. In further findings participants spoke of feeling a momentary sense of human, technology, nature interconnectedness. This moment of bridging of the lacuna of the separation of all three – human, technology, and nature awareness – and the experience that all three are absorbed as one – the HTN Triad Relationship – may act as a conduit, or a potential sensorial pathway (intermediate agent). [12] Pursuant to research studies, there are associated cognitive and health benefits related to exposure to nature as well as “technological nature.” [13][14] For complete details related to the research study, I refer the reader to “LocoMotoArt: Digital Art in Natural Settings,” published in Volume 10 Issue 1 of the *International Journal of New Media, Technology and the Arts*, and other references listed related to LocoMotoArt.

LocoMotoArt

The multi-disciplined group of electronic artists also

called LocoMotoArt, re-vision natural settings for use in performance, participatory walk-based GPS enabled works, and interactive and computer generative sound and video installations. They are currently artists-in-residence with the Vancouver Park Board Arts, Culture and Engagement Division with studio space at the historic Aberthau Mansion in West Point Grey (2013-2016). It is the vision of the group to address the importance of our environment by offering audiences collaborative new forms of engagement through digital multi-media works comprised of sound, live movement, performance, storytelling, and participatory interaction with outdoor natural settings. [15]

LocoMotoArt @ Queen Elizabeth Park

Queen Elizabeth Park is a large world famous arboretum with a vista point from where tourists come and view the City of Vancouver. The park itself is an extinct volcano, and ex-industrial site. The former crater, previously a rock quarry, is now a showcase garden. Primarily a daytime park, at night the lower quarry garden is closed to the public. The garden became the site for the exhibition of twelve sound, visual and interactive installations created by artists: Jamie Griffiths, Miles Thorogood, Sebnem Ozpeta, Rob Scharein, Dave Leith, Laura Lee Coles, Merlyn Chipman, Mark Nazemi, Maryam Mobini, Wynne Palmer, Bobbi Kozinuk and an excerpt from *Coyote X* by the late First Nation media artist Terry Haines, presented by Aaron Rice.

Over 500 participants of varying ages, cultures and backgrounds enjoyed a rare opportunity to be a part of using the park in a non-traditional way during an untraditional time. To enter the installation area they had to descend a series of dimly lit stairways. Once at the bottom, the installations were viewed by walking the entire pathway, which snaked about through various levels encircling the large garden. The artworks could be experienced from afar, or up close – “in” the installation itself.

The members of LocomotoArt dedicated the exhibition to the memory of multi-disciplinary artist Terry Haines, of *Secwepemc*, Welsh, French and *Tsilhqot'n* ancestry. A short segment of the late Haines' monumental four-channel video installation, *Coyote X*, was screened on the large rock face situated next to a fast moving waterfall that dropped forty feet over a granite rock wall. Viewers had to reach this area by walking over a bridge and pond. They could first see glimpses of the movement of light, with splashes of red, blue, turquoise, purple and patterns through the trees, but once at a designated place, they gazed upon the single channel video by standing next to the falls witnessing the Coyote emerging in and out of the brick poetry of *graffiti*. Haines wrote of his work that *Coyote X* mirrors human actions of adaptation and survival, “Standing like us in the shadow of a dominant society, amid urban sprawls, colonial ramifications and realities of expansion...[T]he contingent environment Coyote inhabits echoes our society's precarious tense on occupied traditional territories. The serene forest, Coyote's sanctum, has become a place of chaotic discord and unimaginable transition.” [16].

beginning re-creation, was a multi-channel soundscape installation reminiscent of the former rock quarry of 1911. Presented by Miles Thorogood, whose work encompasses memory and imagination; the soundscape was generated using the *Audio Metaphor* system developed by Thorogood and Pasquier. “The composition module creates a layered two-channel soundscape composition by processing and combining classified audio segments. Each layer in the composition consists of processed background, foreground, and background with foreground sound recordings.”[17] Thorogood placed eight small hand-made speakers into the landscape, challenging the participant to enter a dimly lit secluded path off the main walkway, surrounded by lush greenery on each side. As the participant explored this environment, they walked up several stairs to reach the top of a 20-foot lava rock mound. As they traversed this steep incline they experienced sounds of the derelict quarry, shifting back and forth with sounds from current place and time, that is, sounds recorded from the current botanical garden's acoustic ecology. To get closer to the final sound zone, the viewer had to step close to the edge of the 20-foot drop. The tension further augmented the participant's sense of memory, place and space as they heard clicking of metal tools and grinding of mechanized quarry work oscillate with the natural sounds of birds.

Vancouver based media artist Sarah Shamash presented her dual projection video installation “*D*” for *Diorama*.” Shamash projected images of animals (tigers, gorillas, zebras, and rhinos) she photographed of the New York Natural Museum dioramas and alternated them with moving images of animals she videotaped at the Bronx Zoo. The installation was projected onto an 8-foot tall by 18-foot wide manicured Yew hedge. The alternation of uncanny dioramas with that of living animals that have been captured and removed from their natural settings – animals who in real life would never be found roaming the garden – invited the viewer to deliberate on the complex relationships among the animal kingdom, nature, and technology.

Interdisciplinary artist Jamie Griffiths employed a small-scale video pico projection accompanied by amplified audio for an isolated rock located off the main pathway, and found up a more secluded path with a slight incline. *BOTANICUS* discretely offered the visuals and sounds of people walking through Kew Gardens in London, UK (established in 1759 by British Royalty) and transplanted them into a public garden in Vancouver, BC. As the viewer climbed the small incline, the soundscape of Kews oscillated with the sounds of the present botanical garden. Through this alternating sense of presence of place, this meshing of locale, the conversations and species sounds intertwined to the point where sense of location was disrupted.

Conveyance[S] by Laura Lee Coles drew upon the geological history of the site known locally as “Little Mountain”. Coles used the symbolism of fire to stimulate thoughts of the primordial beginning, *Conveyance[S]* invited viewers to reflect on the presence and absence of the former volcano by experiencing different forms and pat-

terns of flowing molten lava. Projected onto the rock face of hardened volcanic rock and framed by hanging tree branches, viewers glimpsed into the past made present, as if an eye or a ball of fire existed in the corner of the site looking back at them

Conclusion

In contrast to large-scale urban projection, the digital eco-art genre re-defines the role of technology and at the same time is reshaping public sphere *because it intervenes and exists* between experiences of electronic space/place and physical place/space *intimately*. As artists utilize the intimacy of the multi-sensorial realm of work *in situ* in natural spaces, meaningful implications may be observed for contemporary society as the work provides for shared social interaction and personalizes the sensorial connection with place and technology. The practice also changes the art experience from a contemplative one to a living experience by stimulating the human pre-disposition for affinity with natural space known as “biophilia”, or “topophilia.” [18] [19].

It is through lived and living experience that socio, cultural and ecological processes, the human connections to natural places, are both transformed and reinforced. There is great value in the re-visioning of public natural space through associations of cultural and environmental aesthetics, which reinforce connection and in turn may lead to enhanced aesthetic appreciation for the environment. [20] “The more hi-tech we become, the more nature we need.” [21]

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the artists of LocoMotoArt who have contributed to my research pursuits related to human, technology, nature interaction as well the various grant funders and sponsors for their continued support.

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