

the unfamiliar gesture: gps drawing and design research

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Graphic designers should be aware of developments in the field of site-specific art. After all, issues of context and interface in the digital realm are central to both the site-specific artist and the designer of new media environments. As to the problems posed by the interface of art and design, Jay David Bolter contends “[d]igital art can provide the clearest test of the possibilities and constraints of digital design” (Bolter 11). He clarifies this with three assertions: “the computer has become a new medium”, “to design a digital artifact is to design an experience”, and “digital design should not be invisible” (Bolter 12). In teasing apart the layers of sophistication in the site-specific work of Andrea Wollensak, the multiple relevancies to design in digital media become clear. Nonetheless, the final artifact alone doesn’t convey the full contextual richness of the multifaceted project, as is evidenced in the online gallery presentation of similar work created under the guidance of Jeremy Wood. It is the entirety of Wollensak’s approach that offers designers engaging perspectives on the opportunities presented by the site. This paper is an examination of Wollensak’s site-specific “The Visual Language of Space” and Wood’s “GPS Drawing”, through a brief overview of important concepts and historical developments in site-specific art.

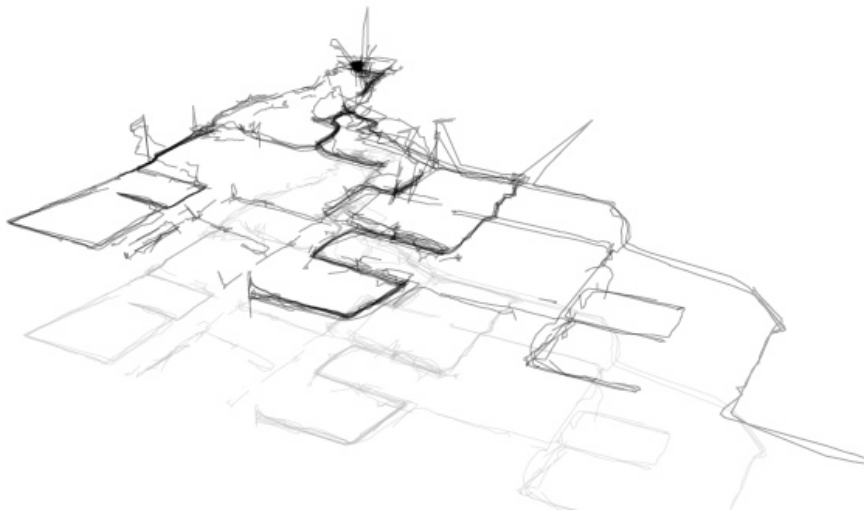
GPS technology was developed by the US Air force in 1993 for military use. It is a system which uses twenty-four low orbit satellites to transmit timing and position signals. The Navstar System is capable of detecting a person or object’s position on or above the earth’s surface within ten meters. Navigation no longer depends on physical landmarks. As a result, we are starting to understand *place* in entirely new ways. Data are removing boundaries and our reliance upon topographic maps. “GPS is forcing us to rethink our connectivity to space, time, place, and to each other” (Wollensak 125). Cartographic maps of the past are being replaced by way-finding tools which relate the world to the individual. GPS receivers are quickly becoming commonplace, as businesses and individuals can use them for a variety of purposes. The standard application for the technology is as a navigational aid for drivers. With all of the benefits of this tool, we try to ignore that we have been living beneath the military gaze.

In 1999, Andrea Wollensak, a professor of graphic design at Connecticut College, set out to use GPS technology “to develop modes of expression beyond claiming territory” (Wollensak 58). Wollensak asked dancers to explore places of personal importance in Manhattan with GPS receivers. She collected all of the data transmitted from these receivers, converted that information into vector representations and had another team of dancers perform interpretive, improvisational movements. The performers were encouraged to move according to the invisible form of their own, personal experiences as they related to the visual data. The result was the production of “gesture, memory and notational traces of place”. Wollensak’s intention, in her own words, was to “use technology to map ‘sites of resistance’” helping to create “a new kind of spatial imagination” (Wollensak 64). In addition to this political claim, she noted that with GPS “expression is realized as a spatial-temporal path marked by public movement, recorded as private” (Wollensak 64). In other words, the paths represent a bridge between two social contexts. Wollensak interprets this new perspective as an “inversion” of the old, where a *sense of place* is returned to the individual’s possession (Wollensak 64).

More recently, artist Jeremy Wood has performed and presented GPS drawing in a slightly different manner. His descriptions of the process seem to focus more on the fun of drawing with these high-tech tools than the political statement that is made in doing so. Wood is interested in the amazing affordances of this technology. He sees it as an activity suitable for kids and adults alike. Groups are encouraged to make GPS drawings together. Works are simultaneously generated in large, open areas. Giant animals, words and complex patterns are sketched. When the drawings are done, the vector representations of the data are often printed out and put on display in actual and online galleries. The curator of this exhibition, Jillian McDonald, offers this explanation of the work: “As a painter might pull imagery from the paint, the map as a birds-eye-view is a locative tool, which allows artists to playfully or poetically free information about physical and psychological space” (McDonald). The process does not share the same level of procedural or theoretical complexity as that of Wollensak.

The homepage of “Location is Everything”, where Wood’s projects are curated, offers a checkerboard grid which suggests a map divided by longitudinal and latitudinal lines. Icons representing eight different galleries float above the grid, moving about, defying a fixed coordinate position. Clicking on the “GPS Drawing” icon brings the engager to a very basic html page with a picture of a street in Basel and a GPS drawing beneath it. Clicking on the image of the street brings up a page which presents a GPS drawing that

was done during the *Viper Basel 2004 Festival*. Text explains that the public was invited to walk the streets of the city with a GPS receiver. One walk was choreographed to spell out the name of the city. An aerial photograph shows that some routes were more popular than others, causing some of the letterforms to have different stroke widths. The image appears to be a composite of an actual printed map and a digital image of the GPS traces. Two other drawings show improvised routes that were drawn in a park. One depicts a house with two trees and a shining sun. The other is a cartoonish human figure. These look similar to what one would find hanging on the walls of a kindergarten classroom. The last image is of the word “Basel” which, unlike the others, is not shown from directly above. It also is unique in that it has a shadow beneath it which indicates sea level. Each of these images convey something different. Only the drawing of “Basel” with an indication of altitude truly communicates what this technology is and how it’s being employed. This is because it demonstrates that the gesture created by the GPS tracking system belongs to separate place. It cannot be sufficiently described as the delineation of a network of city streets. It is the suggestion of something much more — a new space.



In order to fully understand the implications of the activity and artifact of GPS drawing, we must first recognize that it is fundamentally site-specific and a continuation of a history of site-specific art. Miwon Kwon identifies the very term “site-specificity” as a “site of struggle” or a “problem idea” (Kwon 1). Initially, site-specific art addressed the location of the object as being an integral part of the work itself. Duchamp’s *ready-mades* provide an early example. By placing a manufactured object which previously had not been considered a work of art in a gallery, the piece became ostensibly linked to the space. This

move required the engager to recognize the system to which the work belonged. Thus, the locus of meaning extended beyond the object into its immediate environment. The myth of the autonomous work of art was dispelled. The first outcome of this breakthrough was that it necessitated a broader critique of the institutional spaces which contextualized the work – the gallery and museum had to be considered as parts of larger social and economic systems. Site-specific art moved on to address, and frequently attack, the ideological function of the spaces in which it operated. Much of the performance art of the 1960s seemed driven by the need to deconstruct traditional ideas of what a gallery or museum space should be. Finally, following this movement, the site of today is “dispersed across much broader cultural, social and discursive fields, and organized intertextually through the nomadic movement of the artist” (Kwon 8). In other words, *site* now means much more than a geographic location — it is the full scope of any and every context in which a work is positioned (Kwon 8).

Nick Kaye, author of *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*, points to the transitive meaning of the word *site* in contrast to the substantive definition of the word to illustrate the shift in the meaning of site-specific art. The substantive meaning refers to “the place or position occupied by some specified thing, frequently implying original or fixed position”, whereas the transitive definition is “to locate, to place” (Onions Dictionary qtd. in Kaye 9). According to Kaye, the transitive definition highlights the postmodern condition where *space* is only “practiced place” (de Certeau qtd. in Kaye 4). In other words, *space* is established through activity, it is a transitory condition (Kaye 9). Furthermore it is often, if not always, an electronically mediated condition where there is “an absence of the *place* from itself, caused by the name it has been given” (Kaye 236). We live at least partially in a world of representation which distances us from actual *space*.

The idea that *space* must in some way be activated by the individual in order to be realized is not new. In the 1950s, a group who identified themselves as *Situationists*, took on an activity intended to activate *space* called *dérive*. This activity consisted of voluntarily disorienting oneself in an urban environment in order to playfully construct behavior and awareness (Debord 22). According to *Situationist* Guy Debord “*dérive* permits the drawing up of the first surveys of the psychogeographical articulations of a modern city... beyond the discoveries of unities of ambiance, of their main components and their spatial localization, one comes to perceive their principal axes of passage, their exits and their defenses” (Debord 22). In other words, the city is partially understood in terms of how one moves through it. Another *Situationist*, Claude de Lauwe offers that “an urban neighborhood is determined not only by geographical and economic factors,

but also by the image that its inhabitants and those of other neighborhoods have of it” (Debord 23). Even before the postmodern landscape was defined, this group was determined to discover their own, personal sense of place through playful, discursive movement.

Other artists and writers have described this very same movement as the act of *writing over* a site, where the earth is a “geography of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors” (Perec qtd. in Labelle 224). The site may be regarded as a *palimpsest*, a *paper that has been written upon a second time without erasing the original writing* (Ehrlich 32). The activation of *space* does not attempt to redefine, but to embrace the poetic fragility of what de Certeau refers to as “the living landscape” (Ehrlich 36). Similarly, Barthes offers that when moving about the city “one can find [or create] a different poem by changing a single line” (Ehrlich 36).

According to Kwon, the fundamental quality of contemporary site-specific art is that “the artwork’s relationship to the actuality of a location (as a site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as a site) are both subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate” (Kwon 26). The *site* is fluid and as a result, so are the activities within it, including the responses to it. The postmodern landscape doesn’t only shift, it pushes us along and includes us in its motion. This situation creates the possibility of “multiple identities, allegiances, and meanings... based on non-rational convergences forced by chance encounters and circumstances” (Kwon 165). Such a description begs the question: what does site-specific art do that isn’t simply reflective of the postmodern condition? Kwon proposes that we can view current site-based art as a “compensatory symptom *and* a critical resistance to such conditions” (Kwon 8). Kwon suggests that through understanding our condition, we are more empowered to cope, even thrive in our environment. Andrea Wollensak might describe it in terms of desire. According to Wollensak, combating “prevailing market forces from irrevocably dehumanizing space” involves identifying one’s own “rhetoric of space” (Wollensak 65). In other words, it is a personal experience where one is acquainted with locations where opportunities to address one’s identity and purpose exist.

It is useful to discuss the ideas of *place* and *space* in semiotic terms to further articulate how site-specific art functions. Kaye refers to de Certeau’s reading of Saussure on this subject. As Saussure’s definition of *langue* is “the complex of rules and conventions which constitute a language... realized in practice”, so *place* is an “exclusive and self-regulating system of rules” (de Certeau qtd. in Kaye 4). However, when

place is activated, the orderliness of the system is challenged. Therefore “different and incompatible *spaces* may realize the various possibilities of a single *place*” (Kaye 5). De Certeau moreover states that ‘in relation to *place*, *space* is like the word when it is spoken’ (de Certeau qtd. in Kaye 5). The *Situationists*, then, as they “construct[ed] behavior and awareness” — while passing through the city — were involved in an ongoing process of enunciation, and therefore a destabilization of *place* (Kaye 6). This phenomenon is realized to the extent that if there is an “attempt to fix location through the symbolic [naming]”, this attempt becomes reflective of one’s own movement, hence the absence of a permanently ordered place (Kaye 6). The representation of *place* causes one to become even more aware that there is no stable, actual *place*, and moves one along. Site-specific art recognizes this very state of being as one kind of *place*, while still acknowledging another *place* that is ‘formed by individual identities... complicities of language, local references, the unformulated rules of living know-how’ (Auge qtd. in Kaye 9). Site-specific art troubles the relationship between these two *places*. Kwon discusses the problem which site-specific art presents:

... it is not a matter of choosing sides — between models of nomadism and sedentari-
ness, between space and place, between digital interfaces and the handshake. Rather,
we need to be able to think the range of seeming contradictions and out contradictory
desires for them together; to understand, in other words, seeming oppositions as *sustain-*
ing relations. How do we account, for instance, for the sense of soaring exhilaration and
the anxious dread engendered by the new fluidities and continuities of space and time, on
the one hand, and their ruptures and disconnections on the other? And what could this
doubleness of experience mean in our lives? ... Today’s site oriented practices inherit the
task of demarcating the *relational specificity* that can hold in dialectical tension the dis-
tant poles of spatial experience... Only those cultural practices that have this relational
sensitivity can turn local encounters into long-term commitments and transform passing
intimacies into indelible, unretractable social marks — so that the sequence of sites that
we inhabit in our life’s traversal does not become genericized into undifferentiated
serialization... (Kwon 166)

Here, Kwon suggests that site-specific art heightens our awareness of intertextual realities, and that without this awareness, we are unable to reach our cultural potential.

In the 1930s, a group of Russian artists set out to reawaken their audience's awareness of their surroundings. Where the *Situationists* would later seek to defamiliarize their experience of the city in order to make it new, the Russian Futurists attempted to refashion the object in order to make experience new. *Ostranenie*, or "making strange" intended to reveal that our ability to see is diminished by habitual behavior. Opacity was a way of slowing down the engager. The Futurists also believed in the autonomy of the art object and that poetic language was achieved synchronically. In other words, the art object held an inner logic and did not need to be held accountable to ideological demands. The fundamental law governing their work, however, was that a shift to an unfamiliar point-of-view made the invisible world visible again (McCauley).

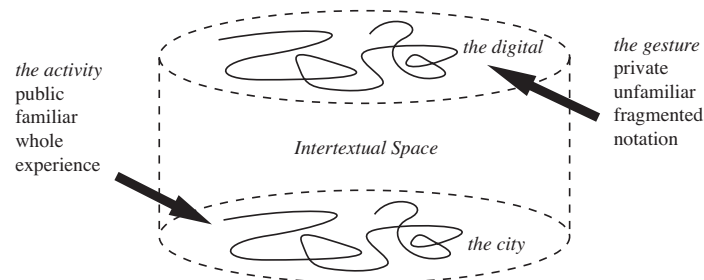
In some respects, the work of Andrea Wollensak is akin to that of the Russian Futurists. Fundamentally, both challenge ordinary ways of seeing to suggest new ways of being. However, for Wollensak and other contemporary site-specific artists, that which is made strange is necessarily inclusive of *site*. To make the object unfamiliar, tools of visualization, points of view, internal desires, chronologies — all contexts — must be considered. And this is exactly what Wollensak does. She repurposes the eyes of the military gaze and gives this new perspective, this new *place* to the multitude. She reveals that we have been hidden from our own movement, because we have not claimed the *places* overseen, and perhaps overlooked, by hegemonic powers. Furthermore, we have not recognized that our experience is *simultaneously* immediate and alien to us — awareness of new contexts reveals the life we were unaware we were living. The other world, in Wollensak's work, is expressed in the gestural form.

Jonathan Burrows in his article, "Time, Motion, Symbol, Line" looks at notational systems for dance as a cultural artifact. Although there are few complete systems, attempts at dance notation have made "some wonderful graphic scores" (Burrows 36). Some are more scientific than others. In the 1930s, Rudolph Laban developed a notational system which considered the breadth of possible bodily movements in terms of "time, weight, space and flow" (Burrows 38). Others look like Jackson Pollack paintings. The precise meaning of these gestural drawings is unavailable to anyone who isn't the dancer or choreographer who drew them. Sometimes they are simply "a way to push the imagination of the performer out of habitual ways in the manner of some graphic notation for music" (Burrows 36). The value of these drawings is variable, for "they only work if it enables the dancers to rediscover their own internal dance and let them take flight" (Burrows 38). The artifact is something beautiful, in and of itself, but its relevance to dance, and more specifically to the dancer, is a very personal matter. Dance notation exemplifies how the personal

experience of movement can take meaningful visual form – it is the recorded memory of activating space on the most important level, the human body.

Wollensak’s GPS drawings, like dance notations, help us to reimagine the possibilities of space. Yet, the gestures extend far beyond the kinosphere, seemingly into the atmosphere, turning the surface of the earth into an interactive display. The generation of these gestures cannot be described simply as oppositional acts. Rather, the human body collaborates with a digital medium to “[pose] against the misery of power the joy of being” (Hardt & Negri 413). It is to do what other dancers have described as “flesh[ing] out space” (Brown 236). Space and individual identity are transformed simultaneously. Jay David Bolter states “the most compelling interfaces will make the user aware of her contexts and, in the process, redefine the contexts in which she and the interface together operate” (Bolter 27). Wollensak offers us both the experience of *what we feel we know as place* and an interface into *what we have not yet realized as place*. Daniel Rozin’s interactive marvel “Wooden Mirror” operates this same way. Technology acts as a visualization tool, yet remains visible to orient the engager to a new plane of inquiry. If this split were missing, the experience would neither address the site, nor our location in the site. Displacement through intertextuality informs us of where we really stand — in a mediated *place*.

The Generation of a Diachronic Space for the Bodily *and* Digital



When we see GPS drawings we see our own perspective through a new lens. It *models* an unfamiliar way of seeing and being. It provides us with a necessarily awkward relationship to the initial event. Wollensak’s work is a living art — an open, synchronic experience. The production of the drawing has importance mainly in the way that it taps into such powerful contexts — the externalization of her desire, and those of the dancers, through the use of an electronic tool repurposed as a medium of expression. The gesture generated is instantly remediated through the human mind and body. There is a displacement here which ac-

knowledges electronically and architecturally mediated space, while deliberately not defining those spaces as *other*. The experience creates a chronological displacement as well, where what is happening can only be reflected upon during either the performance or the retelling of the performance. It forces a diachronic relationship with the object.

Jeremy Wood's exhibit "GPS Drawing" raises questions about the effect a further remediation has upon the initial displacement which occurs in the generation of GPS drawings. Kaye notes that documentation "presents itself in the absence of its object", and in a person's "remembering the missing image... [the object] continues to 'write over' the city's space" (Kaye 217). However, because the person who visits Wood's gallery of drawings online, most likely was neither involved in, nor a witness to the generative process, there is no *missing*. The collection is more the presentation of unusually made, decontextualized artifacts. The gestures *do* successfully convey a different context and point of view, as in the GPS drawing of the word "Basel". However, despite demonstrating a fragmented space, they do not displace enough to make the engager aware of the intertextual quality that existed in the artifacts' making. As Bolter asserts "[interactive digital art] is about the process of its own making" (Bolter 13). If we cannot feel a part of this process, nor experience its absence or distance from us, then a *space* has not been activated. The object is given closure and forgotten.

If video footage of Wollensak's work were placed alongside Wood's artifacts, *then* there would be sufficient displacement. "[T]he screen memory, characterized as it is by making meaning for the subject through the deferred action of 'recognition', affords temporal confusion: part of the future is in the past and part of the past is in the future" (Carson 101). Unlike a physical monument, which effectively relocates the past to the present, bringing closure to an event, the model suggested above, continuously defers the engager's understanding of the project. It would remain unclear whether the presentation were primarily about the activity or the final artifact. Furthermore, according to the psychoanalytic model of time, a person presented with a window into a past event "in the actual approach of his [historical] object is undercut unconsciously by an unavoidable recursivity" (Carson 96). In other words, what the engager experiences has much to do with what desire encourages the attempt to see into the past. It is "all aim and no goal" (Carson 96). Looking at a GPS drawing, without a simultaneous representation of the original event, makes significant displacement impossible, for there is no promise of reconnecting with a moment in the past.

If the brilliance of Wollensak's GPS drawing project is to be realized in a mediated form, that form must respond to the particular contexts which informed its making. There are certainly several aspects to the work which don't come across in the artifact of the drawing alone: locating the origin of spatial transformation in the body's desire to move expressively, the appropriation of the military gaze to erase territorialities and establish one's own rhetoric of space, the discursive quality of our lives and the site, the inversion of what is conventionally considered public and private, the disorder of activated space, our known and unknown electronically-mediated lives, embracing the contradictions of our spatial experience, the inclusion of visible technology as an indication of context, and seeing beauty in the unfamiliar object of gesture for its inner logic. There is so much rich context for Wollensak's work that remains invisible. For the graphic designer, each of these points of view constitute the framework for highly sophisticated interactive work and model a full spectrum of spatial experiences.

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Abstract

The first global positioning system was developed by the US Airforce in 1993 strictly for military use. The Navstar System is capable of detecting a person or object's position on the earth's surface within ten meters. Now GPS receivers are quite common, used by businesses and individuals for a variety of purposes. With all of the benefits of this tool, we try to ignore that we have been living beneath the military gaze. Jeremy Woods' project "GPS Drawing", exhibited on-line at rhizome.org, is a collection of artifacts which have resulted from ordinary civilians using GPS receivers to create their own maps and playful spaces. Andrea Wollensak, a professor of graphic design at Connecticut College, performed a site-specific piece in which dancers took GPS receivers and moved through places in Manhattan that were personally meaningful. This paper is an examination of Wollensak's site-specific "The Visual Language of Space" and Wood's "GPS Drawing", through a brief overview of important concepts and historical developments in site-specific art. These issues are relevant to graphic design in that matters of context and interface in the digital realm are central to both the site-specific artist and the designer of new media environments.