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Translocal Connectivities and Citizenship Practices in the New Media Arts

The profound shift in the way art is taking place in the context of globalization is notable in the relationship between art and everyday life, between artists and political life, and between artists themselves. Globalization changes the nature of capital, the way in which national governments govern, and the experience of everyday life. George Yúdice, in *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*, argues that culture in the era of globalization is a resource. For Yúdice the expediency of culture is destructive and productive for social justice, citizenship, and histories: on the one hand everything is commodified, including local cultures for export, and on the other the new expediency has enabled new expressions of global citizenship and responsibility. On the one hand, “culture is being invoked to solve problems that previously were the province of economics and politics,” and on the other “the reciprocal permeation of culture and economy, not just as commodity—which would be the equivalent of instrumentality—but as a mode of cognition, social organization, and even attempts at social emancipation, seem to feed back into the system they resist or oppose.”¹ The changes in the meaning of art—its value, function, and publicity—take place when the images, stories, and histories from which it draws are part of a global culture industry and part of a political trade in symbolic power. One of the most significant forms of this shift in the production and dissemination of art can be seen in the way artists create connections to other artists across localities—following Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the way in which artists enact or perform global citizenship among the multitude, reappropriating control over space and thus designing the new cartography.² Of course, their

book *Empire* does not think about art and culture *per se* but about political and economic flows and the biopower of the multitude to generate, reappropriate and to move. And so, we add cultural flows (as per Arjun Appadurai) and think about artists' collectives as global citizenship practices. Through shifting and mobile forms of collectivity and connectivity, artists are negotiating the social and political failures of nations, generating new forms, reappropriating cities, and transversing borders.

Our contribution to *Public 31: digipopo* outlines a project we are beginning to research about artists' collectives and global citizenship. In particular, we are interested in the ways in which artists are forming collective projects across localities, the use of new technologies to facilitate and become material for such projects, and how the projects themselves materialize the local as a theatre of publicity. Since its inception in 1986, Public Access has been interested in tracing the changing claims for and against the idea of publicness and public art and the collective has made or facilitated projects that reflect on and intervene in the privatization of public space (through artists' projects, talks, and the publication of *Public*). As long-standing members of the Public Access collective, we recognize that a historical shift has taken place since the 1980s from the vocabularies of identity (including national, gender, racial), virtuality, and digital divides to collectivity, connectivity, and digital differentials. In Toronto where Public Access is based and in Canada where the artist-run centre system is a long-established institution of cultural citizenship, we can see that this shift in vocabularies has a concomitant shift in the formation of artists' cultures—from organizations and imaginaries of national, international and transnational orientation to mobile, fluid and transient collectivities that claim a global imaginary and a translocal practice. What follows is a description of our project and links to some of the artists' collectives whose work we are researching.

The research will undertake a detailed analysis of contemporary artists' groups and centres that use new media technologies (internet, digital media, cell phones) to create translocal connections between cities and communities globally. The project will devise comparative case studies, examining specific projects, exhibitions, and archives within the contexts of their cities: Havana, Merida (Yukatan, Mexico), Helsinki, Vienna and Toronto. The research will seek to understand the way such forms of art making increase civic participation, open up new participatory spaces for public and social engagement, and innovate artistic forms out of intercultural collaboration, circulation and connection. The project will include an international conference and will culminate in a book. This study will be supported by the Visible City Archive at York University, which will serve to preserve the research materials (some of the art works, exhibition catalogues, artists' proposals, curatorial exchanges, and so forth) and make them available to new media researchers.

The local as dwelling and imaginative horizon can be seen as an expressive metaphor for the distinctiveness of places and communities shaping and shaped by the global urban landscape. Many theorists of globalization³ have argued that globalization as a process has given rise to creative forms of social life conjugated by the recognition that local culture is an integral aspect of cosmopolitanism and internationalism. Appadurai maintains that terms like "international civil society" do not capture the mobility and malleability of those creative forms of social life that are localized transit points for mobile global forms of civic and civil life.⁴

While the last twenty years has seen the artistic, intercultural and social practices of translocality transform the ways in which we live public space, there has been no sustained study of the experience and central role played in it by art and artist cultures. Steve Dietz's landmark exhibition currently traveling out of the Walker Arts Centre ("How Latitudes Become Forms:

Art in a Global Age”) brings together network-based art from Brazil, China, Croatia, India, Japan, Mexico, Singapore, South Africa, Turkey and the United States. It is unique in its recognition of the interconnection between artists’ groups, translocalities, and citizenship. The proposed research program will examine these new forms of collaboration that are increasingly intrinsic to the practices of the new media arts. Artists who use new media technologies increasingly engage with the local and translocalities in terms of a new understanding of global cultural flows and circulation of actions. This emphasis on the local is not the means to some new essentialism, but provides a way of materializing experience, discourse, and alterity among other things in a world of increasing movement, multiplicity, exchangeability and virtuality.

Artists in the Americas and many parts of Europe and Asia have diversified their practices through design and digital media to both resist and take advantage of new global economies, forming new kinds of translocal partnerships with artist communities around the world. Such connectivities are creating possibilities for grass roots politics and reorienting and enriching the expressive order of collective life in certain parts of the world.

The tradition of artists’ groups that appears with modernity can be genealogized in terms of a critical engagement between art and citizenship: from the Salon de refusé to the modernist avant-garde movements to the Situationists to the more recent identity-based groups that form the core of engaged media production and exhibition networks. The groups we are considering in this study are connected to each other by their translocalism rather than by their identity or issue-specific politics. Therefore they are closest to the Situationists, whose anarchist city walks brought together a politically informed analytic and a wild desire. But the modernist city location of the Situationist depended on a specifically European-centred experience of both cities and

politics. The translocal artists' groups, however, are also arguably extending the Latin American cine mobile projects of collectivity, connectivity, motion and social change.

The translocal collectives' connections to their locations are important *because* they are also connected to other locales. In this way they can be seen to be responding to globalization by *renovating* the public sphere through cultural practices that are not based in identities but on the in-between, as Hannah Arendt talks about the public world—that which we have in common. The model of localities can usefully be understood through the geocultural idea of layerings⁵ and through horizontal connectivities that network theory develops. Thus an emphasis on localities and translocalities (connections between and within locales) allows us to conceptualize a more precise study of the global processes that inform the expressive orders of everyday life. In the study of localities, the anthropologist David MacDougall insists we recognize it is not only singularities but also interconnectivities and flows between particular cultural expressions that lead to art's capacity for deeply pedagogical and political gestures.⁶ The city of the multitude, as articulated by Hardt and Negri, is a productive imaginary for us: "The multitude is not formed simply by throwing together and mixing nations and peoples indifferently; it is the singular power of a *new city*.... A new geography is established by the multitude as the productive flows of bodies define new rivers and ports. The cities of the earth will become at once great deposits of cooperating humanity and locomotives for circulation, temporary residences and networks of the mass distribution of living humanity."⁷

While the global media have opened up a multitude of channels which complicate and negotiate the flow of information across spaces (for example, the development of film festivals as both national and international events), the circulation of art takes place both through these new circuits (the larger Biennales and exhibitions) and outside them in the material environment

of cities as centres of innovation, to use Jane Jacobs' words. It is, according to Marshall McLuhan, this connection to the perceptual, corporeal and temporal world which artists have always investigated through technology that make them the best aesthetic innovators and political instigators in the new informational environments. In *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization* (2001), Peter Michael Smith seeks to locate abstract global flows in terms of smaller localities and translocal political and cultural networks. At the end of his book, he proposes that in order to “understand the future of urban change we must focus our attention upon the communication circuits, no matter how complex, by which people are connected to each other, make sense of their lives, and act upon the worlds that they see, in which they dwell, and through which they travel.”⁸

While there is much talk about the “Creative City,”⁹ this project approaches the study of new roles for artists with caution and within a dialectical framework wherein we recognize the tension within capitalism to promote neo-liberal ideologies—civil society while advancing a consumer society where the artist's function is managed to promote cities as exciting tourist destinations and scenes. Also, as Timothy Brennan has warned, the ideals of cosmopolitanism (“among other things, the thirst for another knowledge, unprejudiced striving, world travel, supple open-mindedness, broad international norms of civic equality, a politics of treaty and understanding rather than conquest”¹⁰) come with a marketplace and, thus, a danger of erasing the local. Where in generations previous, the governmentality of culture saw the artist in terms of their role as nation-builder, in the post-national era the artist-function is much less clearly public, popular or museological. Both the cultural hybridity between the popular/local cultural production and the market¹¹ and the “expediency of culture” emerge as instances of the cultural logic of global capitalism and require a negotiation between citizenship and consumerism. The

intensified and complexified processes of unequal development under globalization means that, depending upon the location, this negotiation has very different political consequences and takes place with divergent economic and institutional resources. Dipesh Chakrabarty has analyzed the heterogeneous worlds that co-exist within colonial and postcolonial forms of capital. He argues that the time of capital cannot tell the story of both abstract and real (i.e., subaltern) labour.

There is, he posits, “something that straddles a borderland of temporality, something that conforms to the temporal code within which ‘capital’ comes into being while violating it at the same time, something we are able to see only because we can think/theorize capital, but something that also reminds us that other temporalities, other forms of worlding, co-exist and are possible.”¹² Arguably, artists groups and collectives are producing not just alternative spaces through their translocal productions and exhibitions, they are also creating alternative temporal registers of experience and, thus, of history.

From the relationship between globalization, new media art and citizenship, come three inter-related concepts that inform our choices of artists’ groups to study: instead of interactivity and virtuality we are studying translocalism (and mobility), interconnectivity, and cosmopolitanism. In our preliminary research, we have found that new media artists’ groups are developing projects facilitated by new media modes of communication (interconnectivity); these projects are translocal—that is, connected through the specificities of place and the creative transformation and critical interrogation of publicness or publicity; and the artists and their related community members are effectively reorienting citizenship away from nation-states or international relations (that is, away from the institutions and discourses of government) toward a cosmopolitanism that claims the world. Cosmopolitanism functions as a critical conceptual tool today. Since the late 1990s when the concept was being renovated from its Enlightenment

context, debates about the limits and potentials of “cosmopolitanism,” such as argued by Brennan above, insure that we use the concept critically. In other words, through the use of cosmopolitanism, we are interested in how the groups constitute themselves in relation to other localities and not merely in terms of their own self-referencing location.

We are looking at Havana, Merida, Toronto, Helsinki and Vienna. The choice of the five cities is based on transits and differentials: focus on the Americas and Western Europe in particular and North-South relations more generally to enable us to understand these projects in the global contexts of their cities/countries (arts funding, access to and use of technology, forms of citizenship and political/economic systems). But the modernist city location of the Situationist depended on a specifically European-centred experience of both cities and politics. The translocal artists’ groups, however, are also arguably extending the Latin American cine mobile projects of collectivity, connectivity, motion and social change.

Tied intimately to these considerations of differential relations to the history of modernity—unequal development, other forms of worlding, and negotiated culture—is our recognition that there is not so much a digital divide that must be taken seriously but a digital differential. The cities we have chosen to study reflect precisely this digital differential. For example, Havana is an intensely cosmopolitan city whose artists have little or no access to internet resources whereas in Merida, the translocal culture is not only wired, it is a site of one of the most important digital biennales in the Americas. Helsinki and Vienna are two examples of different political and economic contexts for new media arts that are subject to the new European arts policies. Helsinki’s connection to Eastern (Russia) and to other Northern countries (Denmark, Iceland and Sweden) will be vitally important for understanding the kinds of translocal media arts projects that have been developing in the city itself (host to the

International Symposium for Electronic Arts 2004). Vienna's tradition as an artist's city and as a socialist city in a conservative country persists today with organizations such as the Generali Foundation, developing connections and collections to link earlier generations of engaged media artists of the Balkans and former Soviet Union with contemporary artist collectives such as Frontera Sur RRVT, which participated in the exhibition "Geography and the Politics of Mobility." Also, there has been a long-standing relationship between Havana and Vienna, both in terms of contemporary art and urban planning, architecture and design. Artists and arts groups using new media in Toronto have connections to each of these four cities and Toronto has the highest concentration of new media arts collectives in Canada. We have chosen these artist groups based on their commitment to translocality, urban spaces and new media—we anticipate two groups per city. Some of the groups have permanent spaces, some occupy different spaces for their projects. The following is a tentative sketch of the groups we are considering but this list is subject to change as the research gets underway. The logic of the study is necessarily comparative since our objective is to understand how translocal strategies and concerns are being articulated in different urban and art contexts. The first two years of the study will involve traveling to the different cities to study the groups and view their exhibitions (the researchers will for the most part divide the cities between them). At the end of the second year, the investigators will work with Inter-Access in Toronto to organize a conference featuring the artist groups in the study along with new media scholars for a small intensive workshop.

Havana, Cuba: El Espacio Aglutinador; ENEMA; DIPP (Department of Public Interventions)

The situation in Havana is very specific because access to new media technologies is limited by

economic and political forces. Interconnectivity and translocalism necessarily depend upon a combination of old and new communications. The tradition of the artist group is a long one, beginning with the tertulias of the nineteenth century which brought artists, writers, and political activists together covertly in private homes in order to develop manifestos and projects informed by shared political interests of independence and, later, revolution. After the Revolution of 1959, such counter-publics became the state, forming the film institute and the union of artists and writers, etc. Since the 1980s, and particularly since the beginning of the Special Period in the early 1990s, artist groups such as DIPP (and its predecessor, DUPP), Los Carpentieros, ENEMA and others emerged—largely through the context of the Superior Art Institute. Of equal importance are the non-official spaces, such as El Espacio Aglutinador, the oldest ongoing independent art space in Cuba, which has been vital for both their own productions and for their interconnections with other artists groups in the Americas and Europe. El Espacio Aglutinador was created in 1994 by the artists Sandra Ceballos and Ezequiel Suárez in their own home, with the objective of disseminating a different point of view about art in Cuba. It is above all a curatorial space that responds to the ideas of those who organize events in it. They invited Toronto's Free Dance Lessons to perform interventions in Havana in 2004.

Merida, Yucatan, Mexico: Cartodigital: Ena Ricarlde, Agustin Chong Amaya, Raul Moarquech Ferrera-Balanquet, Ricardo Lorea Diaz

Cartodigital is an interdisciplinary project combining graphic arts, photography, video and new technologies to create proposals within Latin American dispersion. Cartodigital has locations in Los Angeles and Merida. Their mission is to create solutions to the communication problems affecting Latin American dispersion in an era of constant technological transformation.

“Traveling Corners/Esquinas Rodantes” is a current project of Cartodigital. It is an informational cartography of a virtual territory where immigrants from Yucatan, Mexico work with a transnational US urban metropolitan enclave such as Los Angeles, while maintaining ties with their native territory. The project looks at how emergent Latino Metropolises such as Los Angeles present a model of “Spanish speaking” urban neighborhoods that are centred on the notion of transnational communities. The project maps the virtual territory of the “transnational urban community” as a space of flows that provides, via the database and material arrangements—the experimental organic history—that allows for simultaneity of social practices without physical territorial contiguity. It will present specific individual cases: an educated illegal man from Merida who speaks perfect English and has no problem finding jobs in Los Angeles, a group of natives of Muna, a small town near Merida, whose network has helped other natives to come to the United States and the development of social programs in their city back in Mexico.

Helsinki, Finland: MUU; m-cult

MUU is an interdisciplinary artist association, founded in 1987 to represent and promote new and experimental forms of art. The aims of MUU are to develop the collaboration and interchange of artists working within different fields, to produce projects, events, seminars and exhibitions of the MUU (“the Other”) art fields and to arouse cultural political discussion. Net Art Online—GoCyber is an initiative by MUU Media Base to encourage and support approaches that record, describe, manipulate or investigate the internet. Most recently they have worked with artists from St-Petersburg to explore the political situation of borders. “Parameters of Fear” is an

international exhibition that focuses on the effects of living with terrorism (multidisciplinary media arts collaborations between artists from Ireland, Cuba, Canada and the United States).

M-cult was established in 2000 by a group of artists to support production, research and development of new media culture by an active involvement in the practices, policies and structures of the field. It is an artist-run centre and gallery that focuses on social and cultural innovations in urban, wireless and participatory media, and on developing infrastructures and competences in new media culture. M-cult organized ISEA 2004, International Symposium on Electronic Arts on the Baltic Sea, in Tallinn and Helsinki which was a spectacular experience involving 1,500 international new media artists alongside wireless and sonic experiences. The theme was flows and the event took place across numerous cities but mostly on a boat between the cities.

Vienna, Austria: Wiencouver/Reinventing Radio: Heidi Grundman, Robert Adrian X, Hank Bull, and others

Conceptualized as “an imaginary city hanging invisible in the space between its two poles: Vienna and Vancouver,” Wiencouver is an artist group that was formed in 1979 by artists living in Vienna and Vancouver. Using mailart, slowscan video, computer, telephone and telefax in its early years, Wiencouver is one of the oldest ongoing new media projects. “Seen from Europe, both cities are at the end of the road, one on the Pacific rim of North America, the other just 65 km from the Soviet Bloc. They are each on the edge of the art world’s magnetic field, able to observe from a distance, and equally able to turn the other way, one toward the far east and one toward the near east. Vienna and Vancouver are wealthy, regional cities with international perspectives. This, coupled with their linguistic and historical differences, makes them ideal

correspondents” (Wiencouver website). One of its ongoing projects is Re-Inventing Radio, which refers to a process in which artists have, for many decades, persisted in the search for the utopia of a new “radio” as an “apparatus of communication” and/or in absorbing it as part of an increasingly ubiquitous apparatus of control and surveillance.

It could also be said that Wiencouver represents an image of how the curatorial model of radio art production inside the public (national) radio was and is challenged—by artist-curated projects and spaces, by the non-curatorial field of networking, by the internet and most recently also the growing field of an “expanded radio art” through the use of wireless technologies and locative media. Another project of Wiencouver is the Long Night of Radio-Art. This event will have many artist-run nodes around the world and nodes with performances and installations at the Ars Electronica Festival and at the Broadcasting House in Vienna.

Toronto, Canada: Instant Coffee; SAVAC

The domain name Instant Coffee was registered in May of 2000. Instant Coffee is a service-oriented collective of artists, writers, curators, designers and code writers. Instant Coffee’s motive for initiating “services” came from their desire to place relational activities, more directly communication, at the core of their practice. They bring together artists, designers, musicians and other cultural producers under loosely themed events (the group publishes a monthly online magazine, *Instant Coffee Saturday Edition*).

SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Collective) is a non-profit arts organization. Over its ten year history, SAVAC exhibited national and international artists in ambitious programs including Contemporary Art and Identity in the United States (2000), Private Thoughts/Public Moments: site-specific interventions in the Art Gallery of Ontario (2000), Geeta Kapur (India):

International Lecture Series (2001), *Painting Over the Lines*: the first exhibition of contemporary artists from Pakistan in Toronto (2002), the popular Peace Taxi interventions in Toronto taxis (2003) and [ESC] (2004) which explores how globalization has changed our conception of culture.

¹ George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 25 and 28.

² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 400.

³ Mike Featherstone and Scott Lasch, *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation and World* (London: Sage Publications, 1999); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Michael Peter Smith, *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); Bruce Robbins, *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); R. Sugden and W.R. Wilson, "Economic Development in the Shadow of the Consensus: A Strategic Decision-Making Approach," *Cambridge Political Economy Society* 21 (2002): 111-34; John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," in *Globalization*, ed. Appadurai (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), and *Modernity at Large*.

⁵ Sugden and Wilson, 111-34.

⁶ David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, ed. Lucien Taylor (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁷ Hardt and Negri, 396-97.

⁸ Smith, 311.

⁹ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

¹⁰ Timothy Brennan, “Cosmo-Theory,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Special Issue on “Anglophone Literatures and Globalization” (Winter 2002): 659.

¹¹ Néstor García Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, trans. George Yúdice (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) and *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Marx After Marxism: History, Subalternity and Difference,” in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, ed. Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl (London: Routledge, 1996), 62.