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Teri Rueb: Combining Sound, Technology, and Art to Make a Sociological Statement

One might consider Teri Rueb only an artist, but to slight her as such would be shameful, as she is at once digital artist, sociologist, teacher, and explorer of technology. Rueb is steeped in academia both as a student and a teacher, but as an artist she creates installations using innovative technologies and equally creative approaches. Her installations are large, often use existing, public spaces, and include deliberately and intricately planned accompanying sound elements that serve to alter the atmosphere of the entire installation. This paper explores how Rueb employs technologies such as global positioning satellite receivers (GPS), incorporates the participants and viewers of her installations, and draws on sociological ideas like urbanism and alienation to breathe life into her multi-faceted installations, such as *Trace*, *Itinerant*, and *Core Sample*. All of which ultimately explore the pervasiveness of technology in our own modern society, as well as space and sound.

Rueb uses various technologies in her works such as GPS to enhance the existing spaces in which she chooses to create installations. She describes her works as such: "Most of these works are large-scale outdoor installations that utilize global positioning satellite receivers (GPS) in combination with digital interactive sound".¹ As she says, the sites that she chooses usually exist outside; this might include spaces such as parks or specified areas within a city or even the entirety of a city. Because GPS technology uses coordinates to map to a specific location, Rueb in turn uses GPS to link specific sounds, which might include fictional or non-fictional narratives, music, or simply just recorded sounds, to specific locations within each of her installations. This intricate mapping of sounds to locales is the basis for her major works, and this is what gives a certain dimensionality to her installations, affecting visitors' perceptions and experiences of the locations in real time despite that the linked sounds are prerecorded.

One example of how Rueb links specific sounds to specific locations within a site is in her installation called *Trace*. *Trace* takes place along hiking trails in a national park in British Columbia; the site is outside and covers a wide range as it encompasses a network of walking trails. Visitors to the site were provided with a backpack equipped with a GPS receiver and computer, and as they walked along the trails and moved through specific locations they listened to memorial sounds linked with those locations.² The visitor's experience of walking through the trails is enhanced by the various sounds that Rueb has chosen and thus changes the visitor's overall experience of the space, which consists of the national park's trails. Rueb explains how, "...visitors weave their way through memorial poems, songs and stories

¹ Teri Rueb, paper written for Center for Advanced Inquiry in Interactive Arts, 2002, *Consciousness Reframed 2002: Sonic Space-Time: Sound Installation and Secondary Orality*, <http://www.terirueb.net/publication/caiia.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2009).

² Stephen Wilson, *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science and Technology*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

that play in response to their movement through the landscape".³ Rueb has effectively made the visitor part of the installation itself, which adds a layer of interaction to her work. Additionally, one can surmise that each visitor responds to these sounds differently too, which in turn adds yet another layer to the outcome or final effect of this installation.

Not only does GPS technology play a role in linking sounds with spaces in Rueb's works, but, as in *Trace*, the listener participants work in tandem with the GPS to stimulate the sounds at the set location or coordinates within each installation space. Rueb describes, "These sonic spaces are accessed and activated by the movement of visitor-participants as they travel through them".⁴ This means that participants play a vital role in her installations because without them nothing would stimulate the sounds linked to the site through GPS technology.

Itinerant, another of Rueb's installations, also draws on both GPS technology and the listener as an active participant to propel or activate the sounds in the installation. This installation takes place in the Boston Common, a neighborhood and its surrounding areas located within the city of Boston. However, this time instead of creating a memorial sound walk, as she did in *Trace*, Rueb takes pieces of the story *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and interweaves these with bits of her own fictional story that mirrors that of *Frankenstein*. The listener participants are given headphones, a small PC with GPS software, and recorded pieces of both stories are then linked, through GPS signals, to specific locations throughout the area of the city that Rueb defined.⁵

The story of *Frankenstein* is one of an outsider to the humanistic world; he is a character caught between technological forces beyond his control impressed upon him by his creator and the desire for true love like the humans surrounding him share with one another. Rueb's own original text follows the story of a character who is similarly estranged from the humanistic side of things and the humans around him. Rueb uses these themes of estrangement and outsider to the human world to construct an environment for the listener participants, and as she explains in her artistic statement about the work, "The primary theme of alienation and the plight of the social outcast is...enacted by the participant as she walks through the urban landscape listening to a patchwork of location-specific spoken word narratives delivered in different voices".⁶ Again, the listener participant activates the sounds linked to the site and he or she becomes part of the installation itself. Furthermore, Rueb manipulates the delivery of the narration to create a feeling of discord for the listener. She could have presented both stories in their entirety from beginning to end in a perfect linear fashion, much in the same way as one might read the stories from a book; however, Rueb uses this non-linear delivery of the stories to affect the experience of the listener participants by "...juxtaposing constantly shifting perspectives, both in the story and in the physical journey through the city".⁷

³ Teri Rueb, project brief, 1996, *Trace*, http://www.terirueb.net/old_www/trace.html (accessed May 6, 2009).

⁴ Teri Rueb, *Consciousness Reframed 2002: Sonic Space-Time: Sound Installation and Secondary Orality*.

⁵ Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, eds. *Second Person: Role Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*. Designed by Michael Crumpton. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.

⁶ See note 5 above.

⁷ See note 5 above.

Another work of Rueb's that highlights her use of GPS technology linked to an outdoor space is *Core Sample*. This installation also addresses ideas of urbanism. *Core Sample* takes place on Spectacle Island, which is located in the Boston Harbor. Historically this island was used by the city of Boston as a dumping ground and was at one point closed down for some time because it was inhabitable. Recently, the city decided to cover the island with leftover dirt and land from the creation of a large tunnel highway system located on the inland part of Boston. In doing this, the city unveiled the island as a public park that visitors can come and use for recreation purposes. Similarly, Rueb's work unveils something: the true history of the island that the city so simply covered up. Rueb explains how, "*Core Sample* seeks to pierce the picturesque surface that conceals Spectacle Island's complex past, present, and future, exposing it through layers of sound".⁸ Similar to both *Trace* and *Itinerant*, Rueb uses GPS technology to link sounds to specific sites on Spectacle Island, so that visitors to the island can connect to and understand the true past of the island.

With both *Itinerant* and *Core Sample*, Rueb addresses ideas of urbanism and technology. *Itinerant* shows how despite our interconnection through technology, people often still remain isolated and alienated from society, much like Frankenstein and Rueb's original character. Rueb's use of GPS technology in this installation serves to underscore the idea of technology as something that can link humanity but also as something that can, and is, fundamentally changing our society. Likewise, in *Core Sample* Rueb exposes the history of Spectacle Island and in doing so she illustrates how urban ideas of renewal are often contradictory, as they seek only to cover the past rather than celebrate it for what it was.

In conclusion, all of Rueb's works are intricate, multi-layered pieces that address topics relevant to today's society. She achieves this by selecting locations that often serve the public, which are located outdoors. The location of Rueb's sound installations are key because they not only lend themselves to the themes of the overall works, but they also provide her with an expansive area, which she can crisscross with sound connections through GPS technology. With her installations, GPS technology plays a significant and vital role, as it not only makes up the artistic breadth of the work but it provides a basis for the installation and ultimately it serves as the point of interaction for her listener participants. Rueb deftly combines all three of these aspects, art, sound, and technology, to make subtle but thought-provoking sociological statements.

⁸ Teri Rueb, project overview, 2007, *Core Sample*, http://www.terirueb.net/core_sample/index.html (accessed April 14, 2009).

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