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Comment

SCIENCE CENTRES AROUND THE WORLD SEE UNREST FOR ART AND SCIENCE IN SOCIETY

The art of discovery

Susie J. Lee

ABSTRACT: "The Art of Discovery" discusses an ambitious educational program taught by the artist which incorporated locative media, contemporary art, site specificity, and creative work as a proposal for the integration of art, technology and science.

> *The students from the museum stood at the corner of the street, GPS in one hand and nebulous clue in the other. One of the students staring at the screen finally yelled, "Down the hill and to the right!" We navigated through the city, students periodically calling out directions based on the GPS. There were times of reversals and backtracking, but always movement with analysis of our position, until the GPS stated that we had arrived at our destination. At the site were directions for a project that an artist had conceived for the teens to experience at that very moment in that very specific location. Each student found a balloon with the words "The soul of the city is the space between the buildings," printed on it.*

I have been asked to write about the role of art in science and the role of science in art, perhaps because I am often assumed to be a translator between these two worlds. For ten years I studied science and medicine, and for the most recent ten, I have worked as an artist. With little overlap in training, it is often perceived as a challenging conversion from one sphere of learning to another. Certainly, it can appear that artists and scientists stand on different planes, simultaneously indifferent and curious of the other's sphere of inquiry and pursuits. Nevertheless, I thought it entirely natural to retain both identities as a working artist, and now I find myself in quite good company of other artists who wear multiple hats, as they pursue roles as makers, writers, testers, curators, and theorists. As contemporary art evolves through its specializations and fields, its practitioners have sought to break down these divisions to varying levels of hybridizations in their work.

> *They were to release the balloons, follow them, trace their paths, and explore the city through the movements of the balloons. This was one of seven projects developed over the summer, in a studio art class which combined GPS, GoogleMaps and other mapping tools with the activity of geocaching. "So what exactly is 'geocaching?'" I had initially asked the educational director. "It's this popular high tech treasure hunt adventure game," she explained. "People create caches in remote locations and upload clues and navigational coordinates onto this website, where you can then go on these treks to find the locations which will contain a cache of trinkets. You can take a token and also leave something behind." Inherently geocaching was a mishmash of old and new, and in further discussions we recognized there were great opportunities to naturally expand this activity to incorporate the arts, particular site-specificity and locative arts.*

Digital and new media art seem poised naturally to be areas which can relate to science as there is a common language of technology. However, technology is not the same as science. Applications of science are realized through technology and invention, which can, in turn, facilitate more complex developments of science; science and applied science form a feedback loop in which technology lays a foundation for further advancements in scientific understanding. In artists' hands, however, technology becomes a medium of sociocultural relevance and communication. Sometimes the technology is used as intended; other times it is subverted. Regardless of its function, what both science and digital art must recognize is that technology is ultimately a vehicle, a constantly aging, soon to be obsolete, vehicle. For

its relevant moment, technology, used intelligently and thoughtfully, has the potential to move us closer to better understandings in science and art.

> *We invited seven artists to conceive projects for this class, "Geocaching and Art in the Public Realm." These artist caches ranged from the balloon guidance through the city to musical compositions based on car colors. Students recorded sounds, documented video, took photographs, and created maps and journals of their experiences. And of course, the GPS tracked their meandering paths through the city, recording time, location, and space. At a subconscious level, the students began to understand why the technology of GPS was so attractive to artists who saw the potential in this instrument to investigate perspective and documentation at a human and transportable scale.*

Can art be truly integrated and understood within scientific paradigms? Where might these two worlds potentially intersect and how can that dialogue be facilitated? Simply stated, science is reductive, while art is expansive. What is meant by this is that in its inquiry and pursuit, science seeks singular answers while art attempts to create open connections. Through empirical investigation, science seeks concrete answer to questions and validation in reproduced and consistent experimentation. Art aims for the distinctiveness of "One." Subject to dynamic interpretation, the meaning transforms over time as a reflection of society's perspectives. A shared and common level of inquiry is necessary for one world to engage the other. An object placed in a science center may provoke questions of "How" and "What does this do?" but the same object placed in a museum may lead to questions of "Why?" and "What does this mean?" Connections and further edification can encourage a dialogue between these two perspectives.

> *The projects offered both familiar and challenging moments for all the students, as the teens came from entirely different backgrounds. Some had never taken an art class before but were expert geocachers and handled the GPS with ease. Others had taken only traditional drawing and painting classes but had little exposure to contemporary art. And then there were a few who didn't even have a cell phone but were simply open to anything. Inherently participatory, and sometimes performative, every project engaged the teens with their surroundings and required them to use their observational and critical skills to document what transpired at that place and time. The students enthusiastically embraced each project's intentions, as the expanded what they knew and what they could learn, Finding the cache and tracking its path was one part of the adventure, while recognizing what the words "the space between the building is the soul of the city" as one followed the balloon was completely another.*

A model that incorporates elements that both art and science centers can latch onto is paramount for a successful integration of these two disciplines. In the geocaching class, students created their own methodologies to analyze clues and interpret GPS data. There were explorations and inquiries, hypotheses and tests. Upon arrival, the caches introduced fairly sophisticated social concepts such as psychogeography, history and fiction, globalism, and locality. Creative works were developed in response to their experiences. As well, in this experiential and site specific environment, there were unexpected and poetic moments to pause within before the next part of the adventure was revealed.

This flow from science to art, the pursuit of one type of inquiry to the other, is entirely possible, as well as fulfilling, as I have observed not only in teaching, but also in my own practice. The creation of work is a balance of science and art. Attempts to control variables, methodical deductions and logical organizational steps are found in my material explorations. There are constantly evolving iterations of ideas, tests, and observations. I step back and watch what emerges, and I say, "This isn't working. Why isn't it working?" So the process begins again. Sometimes, one small thing will fall into place, and when that happens, I don't ask why it is right. When it works, I stop asking why just for a moment before moving onto the next step.

> *The blue balloon sat for a long time underneath a car, then suddenly took off in a gale of wind, skipping across the road, dancing in front of a bus, then picked up by an elderly woman. She stepped onto the bus and let it go, and it was picked up by a young boy. The student followed the boy and his family until they went inside to eat, and the blue balloon hovered outside the building until catching another gust of wind and heading upwards. For a moment, spontaneity, mapping, technology, art, deduction, analysis and discovery converged, and it was almost palpable, the feeling of "What's next?"*

In both science and art, the anticipation, standing on the precipice of "what's next," is completely shared, understood, and appreciated. It could be a lovely first introduction of one to the other.

Author

Susie J. Lee is a new media artist in Seattle Washington. Her work merges digital technologies with physical materials, codifying phenomena into systems of experiential art. Metaphorical touchstones on the interstitial moments of human connections are evoked through the time-based activation of light, sound and water's phenomenological properties. She was born in Hershey, Pennsylvania and grew up in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She was awarded a Bachelors of Science in Molecular Biophysics and Biochemistry at Yale University and a Masters in Education at Columbia University. She received her MFA at the University of Washington. Susie is represented by Lawrimore Project in Seattle and Galleria Tiziana Di Caro in Italy. E-mail: susielee11@gmail.com.

**The class "Geocaching and Art in the Public Realm" was taught by Susie J Lee in the summer of 2008 at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle WA. This project was curated as an exhibition of student work by Yoko Ott as "Happiness Mapped on Their Faces, Curiosity the Twinkling Eye's Course" at the Frye Art Museum.*

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