Appropriating Space: Place in Transit

A paper to the '1st International Conference on Film and Memorialisation' at the School of Design, University of Applied Sciences, Schwäbisch Hall, Germany and in collaboration with the School of Creative Media, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, 14-15th October, 2006

Last revised 12th October 2006.

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Revised 12th October, 2006
Abstract: Appropriating Space: Place in Transit

This paper presents preliminary excerpts from my research project, which uses video artworks to explore the appropriation of public space into remembered places and emotive locations through my subjective spatial experiences as a commuter.

Public spaces can be defined and measured physically, but their appropriation in the public vehicles of urban transit is a fact of the routine experience of every commuter. This takes place in the daily transaction that starts at the place of origin and ends at the place of destination. Every space and place in urban transit incorporates a set of advantages and disadvantages that affect the objective and subjective values of their selection. Once the selection is made the commuter, with a set of unspoken attitudes, behaviours and personal properties, settles in to identify public space as personal place.

My work in progress is presented to show how I am exploring my audio-visual domain as a commuter, selecting and experiencing spaces, places and locations in public vehicles, and the surrounding areas. To achieve this, I am developing and using a “Personal Documentation Unit” (PDU) that comprises multiple pinhole video cameras and recording devices that are worn on my body. The PDU will capture my intentional subjective experience in transit together with the accidental, anterior, peripheral and posterior visual domain of the lived body. The recordings will provide a database of photographs and videos to explore transitional urban places and spaces, as the focus for my artistic works on the central themes of image-ability, body-spatiality, personal identification and location. I will use these materials to appropriate, deconstruct and memorialise my sense of location and spatial awareness within the investigated places, as the basis for artistic works.

Current research is presented in the context of earlier artworks which explored related themes, including “Baw pêng nyâng (It’s nothing)”, “Habitation: Human Form as Domestic Space”, “Hearth”, “RT4S NJ 07733” and “PKWY/TNPKE/TUNNEL”. 
Appropriating Space: Place in Transit

Appropriating Space: Place in Transit is a research project that is driven by art practice, so the themes of space, place and location are closely related to the personal circumstances which motivate my artistic work, as well as the theoretical framework for my research.

Concepts of “space and place are basic components of the lived world” (2003, p.3) and are widely used and investigated in many domains. I see space as a continuous area or expanse that is available or unoccupied. Space is the dimensions of height, depth and width within which all things exist and move. Space is temporal and implies movement. It is unfamiliar, ambiguous, purposeless, free and “in-between” (Grosz, 2001). Place, on the other hand, is a particular position in sequence or movement in space which exists because of the importance that is attached to it by someone or something in context. Place is static, defined and particular – it is a location, whether anchored in the present or the past. To understand our location, is to understand place as the space we inhabit. This occurs through an act of appropriation, when we reconcile our mental and physical place by accepting, modifying and adapting it to create a location where we can settle in and be comfortable (Lefebvre, 1991, Modh, 1998).

To explain why my art practice focuses on the issues of space and place, I need to ‘memorialise’ the personal context for my work by documenting it at this conference. “Memory and art are cognitively linked. If we look at art as a discipline that acquires meaning through a process of socialisation, then it is obvious that the data it draws from are in our history (the past, together with our awareness of it equals memory)” (Pace, 2006).

My father had to relocate frequently for his work. I was born in Canberra Australia and by the time I was sixteen, I had lived in twelve locations, three countries, two continents, and attended thirteen schools, in inner urban, suburban and country areas and tropical, subtropical and temperate zones in Australia, Papua New Guinea, and the USA.

Each new place was a new start, where the triumphs, mistakes and embarrassments of the last place were gone. I quickly adapted to new places and circumstances. I made friends fast, but by the time I formed deeper attachments, my family would move again. I learned the pitfalls of talking too much about where I had been, which made other children envious or bored. I learned to be slightly guarded and careful in my approach.

Moving was a way of life. The routine was established. The moving men would arrive for a day of boxing and pre-packing while my family cleaned and sorted objects. The next day the truck would arrive, the contents of the house would be taken away, the whole family scrubbed the place clean from top to bottom and we left for a hotel.

Driving to the next city or flying to the next country was our vacation. This transition period was usually a road trip. The first I can remember followed a flight from Port Moresby in

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1 In reference to Henri Bergson, Grosz says “the in-between is the only space of movement, of development or becoming: the in-between defines the space of certain virtuality, a potential that always threatens to disrupt the operations of the identities that constitute it” as “difference, repetition, iteration, the interval, among others”

Papua New Guinea to Brisbane Australia, and then an 1800 km drive down the coast to Point Lonsdale, in Victoria. When we moved to the USA we drove from Los Angeles California to Washington DC via New Orleans. I have countless memories of moving landscapes, urban, country, farmland, mountains, oceans, and skies while peering from a car, plane, train or bus window.

When we arrived at our destination we stayed in a hotel for a few weeks until we found a suitable house, and once more scrubbed it from top to bottom. The truck would come the next day, and by nightfall my mother would hang the curtains. It was always exciting to explore our new domain, to choose my room and explore every nook and cranny. Bachelard would say I was ‘creating intimacy’, by physically placing my body everywhere in the empty house it could fit, inside every cupboard, closet and corner of every room (1994). Unpacking all the boxes over the next few days was also exciting. Seeing all our stuff in the new environment made it look different.

My parents had the whole routine down like clockwork. There were inevitable disappointments and logistical and bureaucratic hassles but everything was always sorted quickly and efficiently. This was the drill, and I had a ball. I loved the excitement of it and knew no different. Home wasn’t our geographic location; it was of course the continuity of my parents, their routines and attitudes. Home was the process of relocating.

In 1987, after a two-year period in Melbourne Australia, my parents were moving again. I’d had enough. I wanted to create a subtle intimacy and understanding with one place over time, which I achieved over the next decade. I became extremely familiar with the city and it’s surrounds. I developed histories with many people, locations, houses and areas. I had a complex history with Melbourne, something I had never had with a place before, and I came to identify myself as ‘from it’.

From 1991 to 1997 I travelled frequently to South East Asia for two to three months at a time on self-assigned, photographic journeys. I needed to absorb myself in places that were culturally and geographically completely different to Melbourne. I loved returning to my childhood feelings of anonymity and discovery. I needed ‘quality dislocation time’.

After each assignment, I spent a further few months in Melbourne, editing thousands of images, and another two months producing an exhibition of the work. My objective was to share insights about people in foreign places and cultures, but I realized through the editing process that I was more interested in how people inhabit space, irrespective of their geographic and cultural location. The exhibitions simply presented what I found beautiful, strange or sad from my own physical, cultural and historical context. They were selected and framed in a way that made most sense to me. They represented my intentional critical view as an outsider in transit.
By 1997 I wanted to create and exhibit more than two-dimensional framed prints on a wall. I wanted the work to be experiential. For the next 12 months, I created “Habitation: Human Form as Domestic Space”, an installation which studied our engagement with domestic space, through decoration and habitation. To portray the ‘poetics of (this domestic) space’ (Bachelard, 1994), I photographed the body, digitised the images and abstracted them by cropping them into discrete portions, which I fragmented, stretched, contorted and multiplied to produce a series of patterns. Works were then displayed on domestic media: ceramic bathroom tiles and wallpaper. The intention was to show “that human habitation of domestic space is a process of construction rather than mere occupation. The human form does not inhabit or negotiate a given space, it becomes implicated in the very fabric of this space” (Wilken, 1998). In hindsight, I was recalling my childhood, by putting the body into the nooks and crannies that create intimacy with place.

In 1999, I moved to New Jersey in the USA, where I immersed myself once more in my childhood home of relocation. For those who are not familiar with New Jersey, living in the ‘Garden State’ is all about mobile domesticity, cars and convenience, within a dense system of highways, suburbs and shopping malls, which Rem Koolhaas refers to as “junkspace” (2004).

As I settled into my new place, finding a condo, leasing a car, working out where to shop and building my cognitive map\(^2\) of the non-descript highways and strip malls (during a very cold

\(^2\) A mental representation of my physical environment in which I visualize everything that is of interest and necessity to me in my new terrain.
winter), I became fascinated by a handful of specialist stores selling gas and electric fireplaces. I talked to the owners and customers and learned that many people were buying these objects to replace their wood burning fireplaces. Their motivations were not environmental, but rather, issues of convenience and control. Simulated fireplaces offer safe, convenient, instant fire at the touch of a button, with complete control over flame height, intensity and optionally heat. There is nothing to clean up and no wood to store or chop. Their sole purpose is aesthetic and, in New Jersey at least, the simulation is better than the real thing. These objects seemed to capture the soul of my new location.

I developed “Hearth”, an interactive, mobile, simulated fireplace. “Hearth” reflects the absence of a basic reality, the fire as the focus for domestic place; and a basic reality, flickering media as the focus of domestic place. The project explored the distortion of the fireplace through dislocation, simulation and appropriation by cool media (Baudrillard, 1983, Pyne, 1997). “Hearth” represents a moment in the life of a fire experienced over and over again.

As an object, “Hearth” consists of cut logs on an iron grill backlit with an orange light bulb. Behind the logs, a rotating wire, wrapped in tinsel, rubs against the edge of a fixed piece of plastic to produce crackling noises. “Hearth” lives in a water and fire proof metal case with wheels and a telescopic handle, along with extension cords, spare globes, safety instructions, disposable camera with tripod, power converters, and a custodial contract. Volunteers sign the custodial contract to use and respond to “Hearth” in their own domestic settings and chosen public spaces, and to record their experiences as part of an evolutionary project. “Hearth” has changed eighteen domestic spaces for custodians in nine cities in North America, Europe and Australia, and is currently located in a small apartment in Prenzlauerberg, Berlin.

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3 Pyne described fire as “a process as close to a living being as any inanimate part of nature could be”, that needs to be fed, bred, trained and sheltered, “to sustain it in an artificial environment” in which its desired forms can thrive. The design of the hearth “reflected the need to preserve, use, and control it” and “eventually, the cold flicker of television, not the warm flames of the hearth, became the focus of social life.” Further, “Hearth” reveals the successive phases of the image as devised by Baudrillard, from the initial reflection of a basic reality to “its own pure simulacrum” (pp. 49-52).
As a gallery installation, “Hearth” is located in an enclosed, rectangular room. At the entrance to the room, a backlit image of a thermostat signals the absence/presence of heat. Inside the room, “Hearth” is installed on its case at one end, directly facing a screen of similar dimensions at the other. A closed circuit digital video system unmasks “Hearth” on the screen. Only “Hearth” and the screen light the room. Visitors negotiate the simulation and its surveillance by freely walking around and between both objects.

Back to my cognitive map of New Jersey: I lived in a small fishing town on the New Jersey Shore; 25 minutes northeast to Manhattan by ferry during business hours (one to two hours by road); 25 minutes west to my wife’s office in the car. I drove my wife to work in the mornings and collected her in the evening, drove to malls to shop, and drove to Manhattan to attend NYU classes when the ferry service was unavailable. This became my terrain. I established my visual and social comfort in New Jersey by carving routines from repeated journeys along numbered highways. The landscape was diverse: rivers, bill boards, swampland, power-plants, leafy suburbs, military bases, coastline, farms, sprawling housing estates, quaint townships; all connected by numbered highways, the Garden State Parkway and the New Jersey Turnpike. Everyone in New Jersey describes any location in code: I lived “12 miles east of GSP exit 117, RT36 East”. I learnt the language. When given a code, I could visualize the location and it meant something to me.

I started to document my growing comprehension of these environments, and the way the journeys influenced my inner visualization of the discrete locations. For example, “Location: RT 4S NJ 07733” captures one of these experiences, in an ‘out-of-car’ observation on a two-lane highway in Central New Jersey.

Driving along a highway I had travelled hundreds of times before, I noticed an entire field of geese and wanted to walk amongst them. As the highway had no shoulder, the only place where I could stop safely was directly opposite a fence covered in shrubs, which blocked my view of the geese. I became fascinated by the view of the fence and set my camera up in a fixed position, which abstracted this view, by angling the lens so that the road was out of frame. This documented an objective perspective of a discrete location that is impossible to
view while driving. The work was presented as an eight-minute video loop in real time. The camera stands still while the commuters scream past.

I averaged about twenty hours a week on the road and as the journeys became routine, I came to realize that my true location was inside the car. Tuan Yi-Fu says “if we speak of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (1977, p.6). My commuter journeys became one long pause, with a stability that characterized home, the architecture of which I describe as a ‘commuter pod’.

Everyday, millions of commuters around the world float to and from home and work in self-enclosed commuter pods that obviate the liminal space between origin and destination. This isolated, yet shared experience encompasses fluctuating states of unconscious and acutely conscious space in repeated journeys. To explore and convey this experience, I fixed a video camera inside my commuter pod to capture my intentional view of the road ahead, and its history in the rear-view mirror.

PKWY/TNPKE/TUNNEL depicts a two-hour commute from a suburban garage to an underground car park in downtown Manhattan, slowed to one-third-speed real time. It is a six-hour video painting that explores fluctuating states of unconscious and acutely conscious space for a commuter traversing the physical, social and psychological terrain of known journeys. The video painting celebrates the “thinned-out places” of America that have materialized as car-dependence eliminates the social and commercial motivation to walk, and the visual and cultural distinctions between locations (Casey, 2001, pp.406-409). In the most banal places where nothing much is happening, and the dense urban landscapes where there is so much more to observe, the work explores physical spaces in the most obvious sense, and the drift into more ambiguous psychological spaces.

In 2004, I relocated to Berlin Germany, one of the great geo-political landscapes of the last century. I live on Zimmerstrasse, between the Topographie des Terrors, which memorialises the Gestapo Headquarters of the Third Reich, and Checkpoint Charlie, the memorial of the US military crossing that represented the cold war divide between West and East. The foundations of the Berlin wall lie three meters from my front door. There are many different routes and public transport options within short walking distance of my apartment, and journeys to most parts of the city take less than thirty minutes. There are two taxi ranks, six

Figure 6: “Location: PKWY/TNPKE/TUNNEL”, video stills, 2003.
railway stations and at least ten bus stops that take me anywhere I need to go. For the first time in my adult life, I don’t own a car.

My intensely personal New Jersey commuter pod has been replaced by the social architecture of a public railway carriage on the Berlin U-Bahn, where people from all walks of life temporarily come together as they move between diverse neighbourhoods. The contrast between the pods is stark. While the boundaries of my car commuter-pod were clearly private, my new, public commuter pod compels me to create my own sense of place in and amongst strangers. My intentional view of a journey through ‘thinned-out places’ has been submerged in an ambient view of my immediate personal space.

![Figure 7: Commuters in Transit: When 2 Trains Cross, still images, 2004/5.](image)

This is where the memorialisation of the context for my past work ends, and the process of memorialisation of my new project, “Appropriating Space: Place in Transit”, begins.

The general issue with the public commuter pod is establishing and sustaining a set of consciousness levels from the passive/placid to the forewarned, immediate and fully alert. In the public commuter pod, one can be immersed in a book, a soundtrack, a phone conversation, or a daydream. One relies on experienced perceptions of specific and learned attentions, or alert wakefulness, to respond to a set of external signals of great variety and complexity (the next stop, inconvenient delays, the threat of assault, love at first sight and terrorism…). In the public commuter pod, participants float to their destination alone, while their cumulative visions interplay with intrusive and ambient signals from authorities.

My research focuses on the public spaces (the commons⁴), which are appropriated by people in urban transit. This act of appropriation is a routine experience for every commuter, as part of the transaction that starts when one obtains a ticket at the place of origin and ends at the place of destination. Every space and place in the commons incorporates a set of advantages and disadvantages that affect the objective and subjective values of their selection. Once the

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⁴ The land or resources belonging to or affecting the whole of a community and accessible to any of its members.
selection is made, the commuter settles in to identify public space as personal place, by using a set of unspoken attitudes, behaviours and personal properties.

To investigate these concepts, I will explore the significant body of knowledge on personal space, lived space (spatiality) and lived body (corporeality) from the fields of phenomenology and humanist geography as it relates to transit. Koolhaas asks whether the bland junkspaces of the everyday can be amplified and their featurelessness exaggerated (2004). My research will attempt to achieve this by filming a repetitive commute from a subjective perspective.

At this time, I can only speak from the vantage point of my personal experience in my own apartment, where I have an intimate, interior knowledge. When I’m in one room, I have a feeling and understanding of the others. I am aware of the space and its contents and where all the objects are placed. I have a sense of what other people are doing around me. I control this environment. I construct its interior. I hold an interior view of what I cannot see. In spaces outside the apartment, it is not possible to have this understanding, intimacy and control. I therefore need a tool that helps me to gain a similar kind of intimacy with personal place in transit: a device that allows me to film and memorialise the junkspace of my commute - how I orient myself; react and move within it; and how I appropriate it to make me feel at home.

The tool I am developing is a Personal Documentation Unit (PDU) that documents the body spatiality of my experience within the journey. The PDU will use five pinhole video cameras, which are sewn into a hat, to record my personal visual domain (my up, down, left, right, forward, backward, past, present, future). The tool is designed to capture my intentional subjective experience, together with the accidental, anterior, peripheral and posterior visual domain of my lived body\(^5\) and the emotions I experience as I adapt my surroundings to make them my own.

The PDU will simultaneously capture multiple streams of video. This raw data will provide a database to help me explore, appropriate and deconstruct my location and spatial awareness in transit, as the basis for artistic works. I am using the PDU to grasp something that is generally

\(^5\) The 'visual domain of my lived body' is any external view that is accessible from my body’s location, which radiates outward from its’ location semi-spherically, while in transit.
perceived as floating and undefined to create a space of awareness. This entire working process is memorialisation.

While the PDU is in development I am conducting preliminary fieldwork by documenting my intentional view of commutes with still photography. Here is one narrative, which takes me from my apartment in Zimmerstrasse to the Volkshochschule at the Rathaus Charlottenburg, on the other side of the city where I have German language classes. I make this journey every Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. Class starts at 5:30 PM so my experience commences at 4.30PM, when I know I have to get ready to leave. These are the only points in time that I actually contemplate.

- At 4.30pm, I somehow know to look at the clock on my screen and finish whatever it is that I am doing to pack for the journey – textbook and notes, jacket, wallet, keys, phone, cigarettes and lighter – out the door by 4:45 PM.
- Get in the elevator and look out the window on the way down.
- Check the mail in the building foyer and leave the building.
- Light a cigarette and walk along Zimmerstrasse to the Friedrichstrasse intersection at Checkpoint Charlie.
- Scan the Berlin Wall memorial along the way and the busloads of tourists who have the time to focus on the same task.
- Turn right on Friedrichstrasse toward the Kochstrasse U-Bahn (U6). Hoards of tourists walk all over this corner taking snapshots and walking without purpose or direction, while street hawkers flog German, Russian and US military paraphernalia, so I’m always a little annoyed. If I can, I walk on the road near the curb to avoid them or weave my way as quickly as possible through them.
- Stand at the intersection of Kochstrasse and Friedrichstrasse waiting for the only set of lights in the city that block both streets at once.
- Check to see whether people are emerging from the U-Bahn entrance. Day trains come every six minutes, so if people are walking out, I know I don’t need to rush as I have at least another five minutes before the next train. If no one is emerging I know I can run to the train and avoid the wait.

Figure 9a: Volkshochschule Commute: Zimmerstr. to Kochstr. U-Bahn, Berlin, 2006.
• Walk across the centre of the intersection to the station entrance.
• Briskly walk down the stairs, reach into my pocket for change, step onto the U-Bahn platform and quickly move to the ticket vending machine to buy a two hour AB (metro zone) ticket for €2.10.
• If I have time, I walk to the other end of the platform, which means I will be right next to the exit I need at Mehringdamm station to change platforms and take the U7. Otherwise I jump straight onto the train.
• Because the ride to Mehringdamm is only three stops, I don’t bother to read or play games on my phone; I just browse the carriage, fixtures, fittings, people, signs and advertisements.

Figure 9b: Volkshochschule Commute: U6 Kochstr. to Mehringdamm, Berlin, 2006.

• Get off the train at Mehringdamm and look across to the U7 platform, to see the sign that shows how many minutes to the next train. If the train is already there I slow down, if I think I can get up the stairs, across the overpass, and down in time, I run.

Figure 9c: Volkshochschule Commute: Mehringdamm Connection, Berlin, 2006.

• Get on the U7 and choose the seat that gives me the most personal space. My favourite seats run parallel with the length of the train, if they’re all taken, the next choice is a seat facing the direction of the train next to the window, hopefully with no one facing me as I have long legs. I like to sit comfortably, without touching anyone and if that isn’t obviously possible, I manipulate my posture to avoid doing so. In the parallel seats this is generally very easy, but when I’m in a seat that faces other passengers, I spread out as much as possible, so that if someone wishes to sit directly opposite me, they need to indicate that I should move my position. I don’t wish to
make the seat in front of me inviting, but if someone makes a proactive move, I accommodate him or her immediately.

Figure 9d: Volkshochschule Commute: U7 Mehringdamm, Berlin, 2006.

• Once settled, I either: review my lesson notes and textbook; finish my homework; play a game on my mobile phone; or decide to do nothing.
• Immerse myself in my task or zone out for thirteen stations to Richard-Wagner-Platz. During this phase, I am vaguely aware that the train stops at stations, but rarely look up to see what station it is or who is getting on. I am in my own world. I am only interrupted if someone needs me to move so they can get up and out, or someone touches me, or the train stops for longer than it should, or a ticket inspector, busker or street magazine hawker gets on the carriage, or my phone rings.

Figure 9e: Volkshochschule Commute: U7 Mehringdamm to Richard-Wagner-Platz, Berlin 2006.

• My wife calls my mobile phone to synchronize trains. I tell her which carriage I’m in and move to the door so she can see me at Wilmersdorferstr. U-Bhf.
• She jumps on the train and we chat for three stops.
• We get off at Richard-Wagner-Platz and walk fifty meters to our exit, up the escalators and onto Otto Suhr Allee, then another two minutes to the front door of Rathaus Charlottenburg and another elevator and one hundred fifty meters of hallways to classroom on the fourth floor, room 451.
This narrative could provide a useful framework for my theoretical investigations into personal space, spatiality and corporeality, and for visual reference materials. But because it was documented with still photography, it is limited to my intentional view of the experience, and the acutely conscious decisions I make each time I take the camera, point and click. By contrast, the PDU will capture subconscious, continual and equally important accidental, anterior, peripheral and posterior views, to memorialise the visual domain of my lived body.

As a research project that is driven by art practice, “Appropriating Space: Place in Transit” embraces themes of space and place that are closely related to the personal circumstances which motivate my artistic work. By memorialising the origins of my interest in space and place, I have learnt that my art practice has been systematically influenced by these themes. I have also learnt that my current investigation represents a departure from the intentional view I used to develop earlier works on habitation and location. The PDU will be an essential tool to help me explore the accidental, anterior, peripheral and posterior perspectives that characterize the appropriation of space as place in transit. My hope is that the work will reveal the creative landscapes that emerge when many people focus on their private thoughts in the context of a very mainstream phenomenon.
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Trevor Morgan is an Australian artist in Berlin, Germany. His photographic, video and sculptural installations explore the themes of location and habitation. These themes reflect his experience as a continual traveller and as a child growing up in Australia, Papua New Guinea and the United States. Morgan completed an MA by project through RMIT University while studying at NYU in 2003 after 12 years as a commercial photographer and digital imaging specialist. He is now undertaking doctoral studies at the School of Creative Media, RMIT. Works have been exhibited in Melbourne, New York and Tokyo, and on-line at www.pixelartnyc.com.

For more information, see www.hearth.tv.

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