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17 Conclusion: Beyond the Intimate?
The Place of the Public in the Region

Larissa Hjorth, Natalie King, and Mami Kataoka

NEW MAPS FOR THE REGION

As noted in the introduction, the problematic history of Asia-Pacific as a geopolitical notion has been fraught with debates as to how to redefine its shifting and contesting localities. For Wilson and Dirlik, the region is characterized by ambivalence—geographically, historically, and politically. In an age of mobile social media described as part of an "intimate turn", how we conceptualize, practice and contextualize the relationship between art and place changes. With mobile media as a ubiquitous part of everyday life, the role of media in art—as the content, medium, context, and dissemination—becomes central. It is no longer the prerogative of "new media" but rather an integral part of everyday life.

Ng elaborates on how various institutions and organizations in the region such as the Asia Art Archive (AAA) have sought to redefine their voice and dissemination through social media. Gardner and Green’s chapter provided insight into the region on both a local and global level through mapping the rise of “Mega-Exhibitions, New Publics and Asian Art Biennials”. Storer took us through an intimate analysis of the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) through some of its key initiatives, while Sunjung Kim discussed her Platform Seoul projects as an alternative model to the all-pervasive biennale. This questioning about the limits and new possibilities for collaborative models and curating is discussed in King et al.’s "Towards Utopia: A Pan-Asian Incubator" as well as in Lee and Hjorth’s chapter. In particular, Lee and Hjorth argued for engaging “PlayStations” to shift power relations.

For Gaweewong, the uneven rise of digital media in Southeast Asia has seen a revision of the importance of oral cultures in locations such as Indonesia and Thailand. Jurriëns continues this investigation by focusing on the relationship between new media art and urban ecology in Indonesia. But highlights the role played by state regulation of the Internet in Vietnam and how artists can subvert and challenge such censorship. Cubitt’s chapter investigated the politics of digital media regulations and its attendant normatives upon art, expression, and identity. The artwork of Cao Fei is
NEW NETWORKED AND EMPLACED VISUALITIES

As Daniel Palmer noted in his study on iPhone photography, “cameras have colonized the mobile phone over the past decade”. Nokia has reportedly put more cameras into people’s hands than in the whole previous history of photography. From the mid-2000s, particularly since the launch of Flickr, photosharing has emerged as an important social practice in the new emergent visuality. The rise of user-created content (UCC) images with their “raw” and “amateur” aesthetics has become an important part of twenty-first century media cultures. Their affect and effect has shaped narratives around place and intimacy in ways that span the visual, social, and emotional.

For Mikki Vili, “much of the traffic in photographs now circulates through digital networks and is facilitated by new platforms”. This photographic evolution—part of broader new networked visualities—has been accompanied with as much enthusiasm as anxiety. From user-created content images of disasters in Bangladesh and social revolutions in Egypt to sexting, camera phones have seemingly left no space unphotographed. But more than a decade on from the ubiquitous rise of the camera phone as an essential part of mobile media, and its so-called crisis to traditional professions such as journalism and art photography, the types of images, and their relationship to place and co-presence still remain entangled and emplaced in often taut ways. With location-based services such as geo-tagging added to the mix, we are witnessing an accelerated rate of camera phone taking, editing, and sharing. The overlays of locative and social media with the proliferation of photo apps and high quality camera phones have seen emergent forms of co-present visuality that interweave online and offline cartographies in different ways.

For some, the three key features of the mobile phone—social, locative, and mobile—are characterized by smartphones. For others, it is about mobile Internet. The mobile phone is no longer this century’s Swiss Army knife, but instead is a metaphorical caravan that carries our personal and sociocultural baggage (aka apps) across changing notions of mobility, home, public and private, and work and leisure.

Smartphone apps—epitomizing the intimate turn whereby work and leisure is commodified into apps—such as Instagram are playing an important role in how place and experience, recorded and conceptualized. Instagram provides a fascinating story given that only three years after its launch, the application already has more than 130 million registered users who have shared nearly 16 billion photos from all over the globe. Nadav Hochman and Lev Manovich have conducted a thick visualization of the city through its Instagram images to create new ways for understanding the local and vernacular through social media. According to Hochman and Manovich, “the most prominent element that underlies Instagram’s structure is its reliance on geo-temporal tagging: the geographical and temporal identification of a media artifact” that “suggests temporal, vertical structures in favor of spatial connectivity”.

What their study does highlight is the complex ways in which camera phone photography, when embedded in location-based services and social media, takes on different spatial, temporal, and social dimensions.

Camera phone apps can be seen as part of broader shifts in the ways in which visuality, place, and intimacy are entangled. As noted by Hjorth and Sarah Pink elsewhere, increasingly camera phone practices are being overlaid with social and locative media in ways that change how place and time contextualize the image. Geo-tagging renders the image stuck to a “moment” within a series of everyday movements. This can be understood as a form of emplacement: temporal, spatial, emotional, and geographic. Emplaced visuality puts a theory of movement at the center of our understanding of contemporary media practice. Rather than movement being between nodes in the “network”, movement needs to be understood as central to the way people and images become emplaced.

While camera phone images are shaped by the affordance of mobile technologies, they also play into broader photographic tropes and genres. For
example, there is a need to link contemporary camera phone sharing with the UK-based Mass Observation movement that began early in the twentieth century to define the emergence of vernacular photography. As Chris Cheshire notes, the iPhone “universe of reference” disrupts the genealogy of mass amateur photography that was formed through the rise of the Kodak camera. The rise of social mobile media also challenges models for curating, incubation, and collaboration.

BEYOND THE INCUBATOR: CURATING THE MOBILE

Following on from Charles Green and Anthony Gardner’s nuanced account of the surge of Asian biennales with their distinctive modalities and Russell Storer’s internal reappraisal of the history of the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, we might speculate on the changing role of the curator and museum in a networked society. When almost every museum has a digital policy and platform, what are the possibilities for curating and exhibiting this pervasive medium? With the acceleration of new media, how can we curate both slowly and quickly? Can exhibitions be iterative modalities with multiple and evolving incarnations? Are biennials alternative sites for experimentation and resistance within a recurrent exhibition format? ARKEN Museum of Modern Art has put forward a utopian strategy based on an eternally analysing, self-reflecting public which, with a point of departure in the observation of the artwork and consequent reflection and discussion, approaches an understanding of itself and the existence of which we are all a part. This participatory approach is amplified in the work of Cao Fei who explores utopia in virtual space while researching Siemens factory workers and the quasi-dystopian conditions of factory life. Her video documentation, text, and installation Whose Utopia Is This? 2006–2007 segued into her fantastical avatar as elucidated by Clemens. Moreover, Hans Ulrich Obrist in the World Biennial Forum No. 1, stresses the notion of utopia and the principle of hope in imagining biennals and conceptualizing new exhibition platforms. Terry Smith articulates the desires of contemporary curating to locate itself deep inside the changes being undergone by thought itself within contemporary conditions, arguing for Kate Fowle’s notion of “Reflective Curating”: platforms for curators, artists, and participatory publics’ ideas and interests.

In the essay “Earthworms Dancing: Notes for a Biennial in Slow Motion”, Raqs Media Collective implore us to be cognizant of dormant, barely discernable, and hibernating practices, even still in formation, that cut across cultures and geography to generate an atmosphere or ambience. Biennales compete for peaks of attention, that high-intensity moment of the event’s iteration, yet we might look toward mobile telephony as an analogous situation:

For decades, the telephony infrastructure in India was beset by chronic underperformance and shortages. For as long as a fixed landline infrastructure wholly owned and operated by a single agency defined what telephony was, it could take up to seven years to get a simple telephone connection, even in a metropolitan center. It took even longer in villages and small towns. Within a few years following the introduction of mobile telephony, India attained one of the highest densities of mobile telephone usage in the world, and has seen an exponential growth in rural telephone use. Today, India has one of the most dynamic cultures of mobile telephone usage in the world. ... What kind of realities would suddenly surface if we were to extend this analogy of the transformation from a sluggish monopoly to a dynamic multiplicity to the sphere of the institutional life of contemporary art? If the museum and the large cultural institution were to contemporary art what the fixed landline telephony infrastructure was to telecommunication, what might be the equivalent of mobile telephony? The material and immaterial dimensions of mobility are amplified by mobile media. Socioeconomic, technological, and psychological platforms are all highlighted with mobile media use. Far from eroding the importance of place, the democratic qualities of access to mobile media still brings with it offline inequalities. As Jo Tacchi, Kathi R. Kittner, and Kate Crawford note in their article on development, gender, and technology, the everyday use of mobile phones plays an important role in Indian rural women’s lives. Tacchi et al. introduce ways in which technological affordances might be thought about in terms of “meaningful mobilities” by discussing attachments, structures of labor, agency, and specifically how mobiles are an active agent in complex and evolving gendered relationships. As Leopoldina Fortunati observes in her Marxist analysis of women’s use of mobile media as part of their “double work” (home and paid labor), various forms of exploitation and empowerment can be found. The gendered agenda around technologies is also generational.

In China, the dominance of mobile Internet sees very different media practices playing out in generational divides. Although Weibo dominates, it is China’s oldest social media, QQ that is used by the old and young, in rural and urban locations. In China, the total number of mobile phones in 2012 was 1.04 billion. Of the 590 million Internet users, about 380 million are on China’s media-rich Twitter equivalent Sina Weibo. The significant role played by mobile phones as the dominate portal for social and online media is highlighted by the CNNIC 2013 report that noted that mobile web users now total slightly more than 463 million. In China, mobile phones have afforded a version of the online that traverses across urban and rural divides. Although not everyone owns a computer, the ubiquity of mobile
phones has allowed many people access to various forms of online media. Increasingly across the globe, the mobile phone is becoming a dominant, if not the only mechanism for accessing the online.

It is not by accident that key artists such as Ai, curated and discussed by Kataoka, have utilized social mobile media such as Twitter, YouTube, and Weibo to broadcast to various fragmented and intimate publics (i.e., Twitter is banned in China). In locations such as post-tsunami and Fukushima nuclear disaster Japan, known as 3/11, mobile media such as Twitter and Instagram have blossomed in the wake of distrust for mainstream media such as NHK. The “intimate” turn has had an impact across various areas of life: from media to politics. If the new exterior is the interior, how does this shape the arts and their engagement with social media as conduits for intimate publics?

On the one hand, the rise of social mobile media has afforded institutions access and new ways to engage with fragmented publics. On the other hand, these highly individuated forms of media required institutions to rethink their ability to get intimate and into the hands and hearts of audiences while battling the growing overabundance of information. Mark Andrejev calls “infoglut”. As Andrejev notes, the overwhelming amount of information at our fingertips is changing the way we think and know." One method is through apps. As Ng noted in her chapter, artists and organizations are embracing the role of apps as part of contemporary everyday life. But not everything can be compressed into an app or a series of tweets, and not everything should be condensed in such a manner.

Instead, as this collection has sought to illustrate, we need to understand art as part of broader contemporary gestures that both rehearse earlier practices while also signaling new directions for audience engagement, semi-engagement, and distraction. Like an analogy for the region, the multiple and competing screen cultures operate across various intimacies, co-presence, publics, and spaces. At the same time we see contemporary media participating in what Melissa Gregg dubs as “presence bleed”: bleeding across media, platforms, and contexts.17

What we see is a need for new metaphors to describe contemporary media practice in everyday life. In Kim’s chapter, she discussed her use of “platform” as a way to rethink the relationship among artist, art, and audiences. Her model revises the dynamic between art and audiences over nearly a decade. More recently, metaphors such as “network” and “platform” have come under question for their ability to address the complex entanglements between media, subjects, and places. As Tarleton Gillespie notes, “platform” has a number of definitions in English language, which together suggest “a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, lifting up those who stand upon it”.18 But within media spaces platforms are corporate applications that are far from impartial and equal. Instead, they highlight new divides in what Jack Qiu calls “have less” media practices. Although the platform metaphor seems to support the empowerment of the user, it also plays another role, echoing Wendy Chun’s paradoxical alignment of freedom and control:19 a tension that can be mapped throughout art history (see Figure 17.1).

Figure 17.1 Larissa Hjorth, Locating the Mobile (2004). Lightbox photograph, 45 x 60. 
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

MESSY AND ENTANGLED: NEW METAPHORS FOR THE REGION AND MEDIA/ART PRACTICE

So how might we reframe the region and its contested art and media practices? How is this reflected in the changing face (and structure) of art institutions and organizations? As Geert Lovink notes, social media has simplified the complex historical definitions of the social into a prefix to media.20 Moreover, we see the need to redefine the relationship between amateur and profession across a variety of discourses and disciplines. Although public institutions such as museums and galleries have long been the arbiters of taste—defining what is and what is not culturally significant—now these institutions have to respond to a more interactive public and be more demonstrably accountable to them, thanks in part to social media. Social media provides new ways for artists to connect, represent, and critique. From artists such as Cao Fei and Man Bartlett to artists on deviantART,21 the role of private galleries in the art market is being challenged. Art historian Julian Stallabrass notes that social media poses a serious challenge to the authority of arts institutions. He writes that

[i]to the extent that online art is associated with the culture of Web 2.0 and the “wealth of networks”, it appears not merely dissociated from
the mainstream market for contemporary art but dangerous to it...

Both museums and galleries are committed to the mystification of the objects that they display, holding to the fiction of a distinct realm of high art that stands above the bureaucratised world of work and the complementary vulgar blandishments of mass culture.

As Raymond Williams noted, there are no "masses", only imagined ones. But with contemporary "participatory" media that "spreads" across a variety of platforms, contexts, and media, the role of audience agency has further transformed into what Anne Galloway defines as "mobile publics". Social media messes up previously neat binaries between art and non-art and public and private space. Media, contexts, and platforms all bleed. This messiness exposes methods and representational modes as well as speaking to increasingly fragmented audiences. As Lucy and Wakeford have argued, methods cannot be separated from the research problem at hand. They are intimately entwined in the process, shaping and being shaped by a key issue. Dourish and Bell have highlighted the need to understand ubicuous media like mobile media as part of a messy ecology. This messiness is not something negative but rather an embedded part of practice that needs to be considered when exploring such media. For Dourish and Bell, messiness is an important part of everyday life, and we need methods and theories that openly engage with this mess rather than just trying to tidy it up. This messiness reminds us of the introduction in which we discussed Galloway’s notion of "mobile publics" as a way in which to encompass "messy" and "fluid" assemblages of everyday mobility which are more than just networked.

Arguably, the work of artists has been to expose these mechanisms and highlight the messiness of making meaning—something identified in avant-garde movements and artists like Duchamp and stylized by relational aesthetics. For Dan Perkel, Web 2.0 is not creating new forms of art or artistic practices; rather, the fabric of the web is a "multi-faceted form of infrastructure" that forces old tensions in art to collide with Web 2.0 ideals. This then, in turn, produces new tensions. Far from disrupting "romantic conceptions of art and creativity", Perkel argues that the web uneasily accommodates these multiple, messy and often conflicting ideologies.

Moreover, with the rise in a commodification and a professionalization of hobbyist discourses, new definitions around social and aesthetic language are required. If amateur art questions the boundaries of art, then vernacular creativity stretches them even further. Jean Burgess has called this kind of play "vernacular creativity", drawing upon the word vernacular, which implies language that is ordinary and everyday. This kind of creativity clearly predates modern technologies by hundreds if not thousands of years, but the rise of social media means that these forms of everyday ordinary creativity can be circulated and shared. So how do we embrace the messiness of practice and everyday life that acknowledges the historical hauntings as well as the new types of phenomenon in a productive manner?

Anthropologist Pink has argued that “emplacement” provides a productive metaphor for understanding movement within, and across, places. Emplacement, that is how place is situated through and within the movements and is integral in understanding everyday life. As we move unevenly into smartphone cultures and the attendant “application” ecologies, “network” no longer adequately seems to cover the entanglements between media practice, intimacy, and place. Rather, these practices are about a movement through and within place. Emplacement. Emplaced visibility. Emplaced visibility puts a theory of movement at the center of our understanding of contemporary media practice. Emplacement acknowledges the messiness of methods, meaning making, and transmission.

So how can we begin to understand the region as a series of mobile publics that are dynamic as they are contesting? As we suggest in this conclusion, maybe utilizing concepts like emplacement and mobile publics can afford us a way to think through art practice and curation in and outside, the movements of social media. In this conclusion, we have attempted to raise more questions about paradigms for imagining the intersection between art and media in the region. Some of these questions are rhetorical and have haunted debates around art, and imagining the region, for more than a century. Other questions are specific to the dynamics of media practice today and of what this messiness does to the entangled role of art in the region—in other words, the entanglements of mobile publics.

NOTES


4. Cited in Nadav Hochman and Lev Manovich. Official usage statistics around the world are not yet available. The most recent report mentions 130 million monthly active users, 16 billion shared photos, 40 million photos per day, 8500 likes per second, and 3000 comments per second; see Seth Fiegelman, "Instagram Has 130 Million Monthly Active Users", Mashable.com, June 20, 2013, accessed June 21, 2013, http://mashable.com/2013/06/20/instagram-130-million-users/

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24. Gregg, Work’s Intimacy.


29. Ibid.