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Participation Cartography: The Presentation of Self in Spatio-Temporal Terms

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In this paper, I focus on disclosures by one participant as enabled by a kind of artistic practice that I term "participation cartography." By using "participation cartography" as a framework for the analysis of *Running Stitch* (2006), a piece by Jen Southern (U.K.) and Jen Hamilton (Canada), I demonstrate that disclosures by participants in this practice are to be seen as a form of self-mapping that positions the self in relation to a given performance space. These self-positionings present the self in spatio-temporal terms and by means of performative narratives that re-define the subject from an isolated individual into a participant within an unfolding live process.

It is my argument here that most of the participation performances to which the term "participation cartography" may be applied don't have a mechanism for participants to share reflections about their participation experience embedded in the framework the artists provide. By discussing *Running Stitch* from some participant's perspectives—mine included—I demonstrate that if such a sharing mechanism was provided, the participant's disclosures would enact a poetics of sharing that at once reveals and conceals aspects of the self. "Participation cartography" performances hold the power to generate autobiographical conversations and exchanges. Without these (collective) conversations and exchanges, the disclosures made by participants in and through "participation performances" such as *Running Stitch* conceal more than what they reveal, shattering thereby the cartographic (self-mapping) power of these practices.

***Running Stitch* (2006)**

This piece is a performative installation that involves the use of Global Positioning Technology and walking performances by participants in order to produce collaboratively a new kind of "map" or visual-art object, more concretely a tapestry. I experienced it in 2006 in Brighton (UK). It was commissioned by Fabrica, "a gallery promoting the understanding of contemporary art" (see: <http://www.fabrica.org.uk/>).

The following is the description made by the artists of the work on their Website (see: <http://www.satellitebureau.net/p8.php>):

Running Stitch is a 5m x 5m tapestry map, created live during the exhibition by charting the journeys of participants through the city...Visitors to the exhibition took a GPS-enabled mobile phone to track their journeys through the city centre. These walks resulted in individual GPS 'drawings' of the visitor's movements that were then projected live in the exhibition to disclose hidden aspects of the city. Each individual route was sewn, as it happened, into a hanging canvas to form an evolving tapestry that revealed a sense of place and interconnection (see also fig. 1).

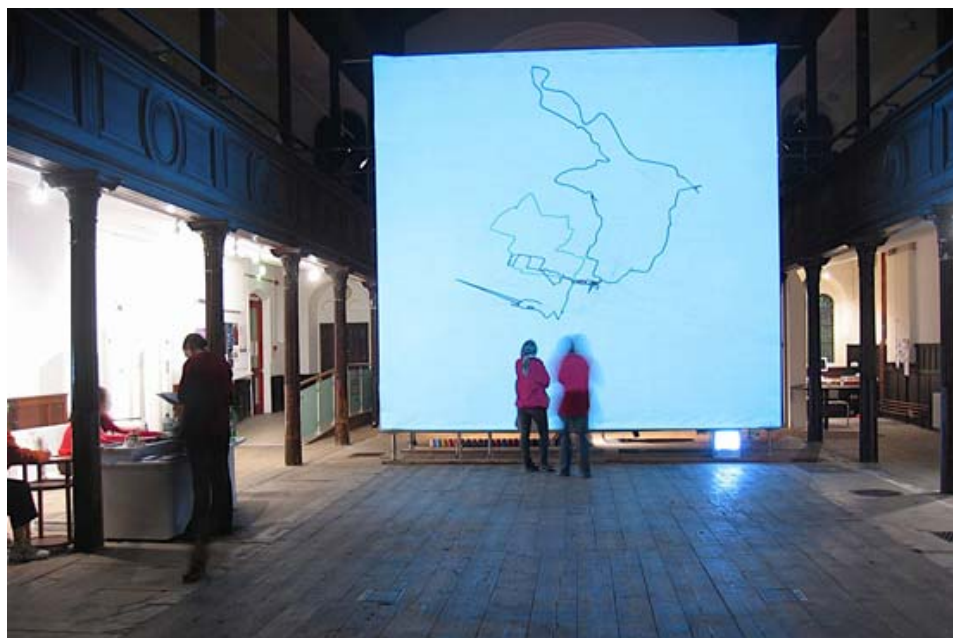


Figure 1. Image: Jen Southern and Jen Hamilton. *Running Stitch* and audience members. Fabrica Contemporary Art Gallery, 2006.

As the vocabulary used by the artists shows, the work was conceived at that time (2006) as a kind of collaborative map-making process by which previously “hidden aspects of the city” can be disclosed. My interrogation of this practice starts by questioning the assumption that cartography, as illustrated by cases such as this, refers to a physical or geographical space—the city. Through the lens of “participation cartography” I mean to show that what is being mapped in and through practices such as *Running Stitch* is not (physical) space but *the being-who-moves* in space. Rather than the city, it is the multiple subjects-who-move in Brighton’s town centre on a particular day in 2006 and within the frame of this event what is the theme and content of the resulting tapestry and of the disclosures it may contain. Accordingly, the resulting visualisation (the map) is to be seen as a *documentation* of past performances by concrete individuals rather than as a visual representation of urban space or as an autonomous visual-art object. Practices such as this are a particular form of “spatial auto-bio-graphical” performance art. In these practices, the boundaries between notions of cartography and autobiography are blurred and need to be critically addressed.

More established critical vocabularies such as locative media (Hement), psychogeography (Kananrinka), collaborative mapping (Sant), map-art (Wood), or counter-cartographies (Holmes), with which similar works have been discussed typically focus on studying the relationships between the resulting visual-art objects and notions of space, as well as on issues of representation. Similarly, the term site-specific performance, as articulated for instance by Nick Kaye, draws attention primarily to the physical location in which the meaning of a given artwork may be defined (1), rather than on the participation experience by the subject who engages with the artistic process. In my view, a participants-centred approach is needed in order to adequately understand the power of participation performances such as *Running Stitch* (2006) and its connections with ‘auto-bio-graphical’ performance.

Participation Cartography: A New Vocabulary

“Participation cartography” introduces an ontological shift in what is typically considered performance art. From live gestures, or more precisely, “live art by artists,” as art historian Rose Lee Goldberg (9) has defined it, performance is re-defined by these practices into live art by participants in response to a spatio-temporal interaction framework provided by artists.

Running Stitch illustrates a kind of practice in which the artists's creation is not a finished artwork or arrangement of actions and conditions (a conventional performance). Rather, the artists's creation is a kind of "open work" in the sense that the active role of the participant is envisaged by the artist at the very moment of conceiving the work (Eco 3). The participant is, moreover, conceived of by the artist as an individual who *collaborates* with the artist or group of artists in the very production of the artwork.

From an ontological point of view, I conceptualise more specifically practices such as *Running Stitch* as what Allan Kaprow termed "participation performances," that is, performances in which those who take part are literally, the ingredients of the performances (Kaprow 184). These were lifelike pieces in which normal routines by non-actors became the performance of a routine. In *participation performances* or *activities* every day life "performances" or "presentations of self" (Goffman) are framed as art, and more concretely, as a *happening* or a new form of theatre or performance art. For instance, by means of instructions to be enacted by non professional performers, in Kaprow's participation performance *Maneuvers* the daily routine of the courtesy shown another person when passing through a doorway becomes the artistic performance of that routine (191).

I conceptualise practices such as *Running Stitch* as a particular form of "participation performance," namely as "participation cartography." The cartographic power of such practices needs to be studied *from the participant's perspective*. Let me illustrate this idea by discussing *Running Stitch* more in detail.

Over a four weeks period, more than hundred participants collaborated in the production of the object called by the artists "the tapestry map". Each walk was represented by a line of stitches on the canvas, and each walk was stitched with a different colour. At the end of the process, the tapestry was a colourful and intertwined collection of threads stitched onto the same surface (see fig. 2).



Figure 2. Image: Jen Southern and Jen Hamilton. *Running Stitch* and audience members. Fabrica Contemporary Art Gallery, 2006.

But, what did each thread disclose about each participant? Who are they? What exactly is disclosed to whom?

On Disclosure

In *Running Stitch* it is possible to speak of two moments of disclosure, each moment illustrating a different scope of the verb "to disclose." First, there is the disclosure in real

time of the physical location of each walker. Second, there is the disclosure of the sense of purpose of the journey and of all what happened to the participant during the walk and after when confronted with the visualisation of her personal walk. It is this second disclosure what can infuse the “map” with personal meaning.

In the first case, disclosure is associated with surveillance. Positioning, as used within the framework of Global Positioning Systems, refers to the computational process whereby the geographical location of the carrier of the GPS device can be pinpointed, usually on a conventional digital map. “To disclose” means here to make visible and, more precisely, to “draw” by means of technology the whereabouts of someone—an anonymous other—who is outside of the gallery walking about Brighton’s city centre. This first moment of disclosure happens for all to be seen in the gallery. It is framed by the artists as the core of what constitutes *Running Stitch* as an artwork.

However, the technology-aided map-making that takes place here conceals the mental processes and the autobiographical stories that go with the actual walk—where did the participants go and why, what made them be there in the first place? This can only be known if the participant is given a voice for him or her to “map” herself by presenting the Self in spatio-temporal terms within the public arena of the ongoing artistic event. This would require an additional sharing mechanism to be embedded within the framework provided by the artists.

As organised by the artists, two participants at a time were walking during one hour outside in Brighton’s town centre in the area surrounding the Fabrica Gallery. While this was happening, other members of the public could witness the unfolding journeys live on the canvas inside the gallery. While one was watching, there were of course random and casual opportunities to engage in conversations with other onlookers. However, the artists did not devise more formal opportunities for the public to engage in conversations with previous participants or with other onlookers. After the two walkers in turn had returned to the gallery and finished their walks, the next set of walkers would depart. Typically, the previous walkers would stay for some minutes watching at the resulting visualisation of their walk—the running stitches—on the canvas. The framework provided by the artists placed these previous walkers as onlookers rather than as ‘official’ commentators of their own walks. Their comments and their thoughts on the running stitches representing their walk remained secret—concealed, unless spontaneous conversations would randomly communicate (reveal) them.

Fortunately, the artists did ask participants-walkers to fill anonymously a feedback sheet before leaving the gallery. In that sheet, participants had an opportunity to share their comments and thoughts about their participation experience with the artists in writing. These responses provide the evidence that, in practices such as this, a second disclosure moment can take place and, indeed, needs to be seen as integral to the cartographic process. Disclosure, in this second moment, is not associated with surveillance but with the ideas of sharing, self-reflexion, subjective positioning, and self-mapping.

“My walk was an act of love...”

One *Running Stitch* participant wrote anonymously in the above mentioned feedback sheet:

My walk was for a friend of mine –Sandra- who’s very ill. I wanted to go past various landmarks that had meaning for us both and end up in Prestor Park where I could make a large S shape. There was another park where we used to meet where I wanted to make an ‘X’ shape. Sandra signed her e-mails SX. (“My walk was an act of love”).

This testimony, which was not shared with others during the cartographic process called *Running Stitch* but framed by the artists as private participants’s feedback, not only

comments about the walk but constitutes it. This story explains what makes the participant 'be there', go to Prestor Park, and walk/draw an "X" shape on the canvas. Rather than a statement about place in itself, it is a "spatial auto-bio-graphical" presentation of Self as a friend of Sandra.

Within the framework of "participation cartography," a "spatial auto-bio-graphical presentation" is a presentation of Self in spatio-temporal terms that involves an act of self-reading.

By means of reflexive language, the participant gives an account of his walk as represented by his running stitches on the canvas. Literarily, by drawing his walk on the canvas via the *Running Stitch* framework, the participant made his Self *legible*. However, nobody but the walker himself is in the position to make an authoritative reading of his walk. The terms "reading" and "legibility" refer in this context to the ability to both remember and make sense of one's own steps. In this sense, the drawing—the trace of the walk—must be seen as a mnemonic device enabling the subject who walked to perform self-reading, hermeneutic acts. Disclosure, as illustrated by this case, is then linked with a self-reading process in terms of a walk—a spatio-temporal live process—as documented on the canvas.

Certainly, the Self of the participant emerges as the theme of his map as drawn on the canvas: "I wanted to go past various landmarks..." Rather than space, it is the *being-who-moves* in space what is being read and mapped through self-reflexive language.

According to Ervin Goffman's dramaturgical approach to social interaction, the notion of presentation of Self takes relevance whenever an individual "enters the presence of others" (14). To be in the presence of others, whether wittingly or unwittingly, involves a presentation of Self.

Goffman's influential *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is primarily concerned with arguing that the ways in which one presents the Self may direct the interlocutors's attention towards those aspects of the Self one chooses to highlight (14). A premise underlying Goffman's work is that a presentation of Self generates impressions and that one can manage the impressions one makes of oneself. A crucial concept in his theory is the notion of control: one can control and guide the other's impressions of oneself, and a number of techniques can be employed to do so.

It is crucial to understand that in practices such as *Running Stitch*, participants are enabled to occupy a dual position as "writers" and "readers" of the Self, as positioners and as the ones positioned. As "writers," participants position themselves physically, graphically and literally both in the city and "on the map." This takes place by means of a walking-drawing performance via GPS technology. As "readers", participants position themselves linguistically (by means of autobiographical stories) and in their mind in relation with the performed space in question.

By presenting his walk with words as 'a walk for a friend of mine—Sandra—who's very ill', this participant positions himself subjectively in relation to his performed walk. His auto-biographical narrative infuses his walk with meaning. There is a relatively new approach in social psychology called "positioning theory" (Harre and Slocum). Drawing on Goffman's work on social interaction, the issue that this theory investigates is the dynamics of creation of patterns of meaning. How can these dynamics be brought to light?

Positioning theory analyses the emergence of meaning in terms of story lines. It is concerned exclusively with analysis at the level of acts; that is, of the meaning of actions as expressed through story lines that infuse those actions with meaning.

A positioning is not a theoretical knowledge about one's relationship with a given space. Rather, it is a practised knowledge. Moreover, it is an act of freedom. It is a choice. And it is an ethical choice in the sense that the one who positions himself claims responsibility for his own acts and decisions. The "I" of the one who positions himself emerges as the actor, author, and theme of the narratives that go with that decision. Such an act writes

subjectivity (biography). Paraphrasing philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, a reflexive positioning is a disclosure and opening of being that takes place *for* others and *with* others and where being manifests, loses, and finds itself again “so as to possess itself by showing itself, proposing itself as a theme, exposing itself in truth” (99). A reflexive positioning is a moment of truth. However, and still with Lévinas, truth, “before characterizing a statement or a judgment, consists in the exhibition of being” (23). In other words, by presenting the self in public and in spatio-temporal terms, the subject who presents herself produces truth about herself as a relational and spatial being.

Positioning, or the Enactment of a Poetics of Sharing

I use the term sharing as the act of presenting private, subjective, everyday life, and autobiographical material in public contexts. My notion of the term sharing is inspired by Deirdre Heddon’s (21) account of how consciousness-raising events in which women shared personal concerns with each other was tied with the emergence of feminist, autobiographical live performances. In the context of such feminist events, according to Heddon, sharing and consciousness-raising processes were linked.

My argument is that, in a similar fashion to feminist’s consciousness-raising events, the “knowledge” that the representations (maps) claim to represent in practices such as *Running Stitch* cannot be achieved if the voices behind the trajectories are not activated. The transformation of the represented trajectory into *self-mapping knowledge* cannot be achieved if the individual who took part does not “read” herself by sharing her spatial autobiographical narrative with others. For such a self-mapping to take place, artists need to devise a mechanism for participants to share reflections about their participation experience and embed it in the framework they provide.

I use the word poetics as synonymous with the notion of “technology” as articulated by Martin Heidegger in his 1955 lecture on the question of technology. A poetics is “a way of revealing truth” (qtd. in McKenzie 156). In this sense, “participation cartography” is a technology that enables participants to bring forth “truth” (rather than simply disclose truth) about their self as a being-in-motion. However, it is a way of revealing that also conceals. This is precisely what makes this way of revealing a *poiesis*: it reveals and conceals at once.

For instance, the uniqueness of my *Running Stitch* walk was concealed to me. I walked with my wife, our son, and a couple of friends who lived in Brighton at that time. Our walk was a means for us to spend some time together. In a way, it was a means for building our relationship. The meaning of our walk became conscious to me after I had read the story of Sandra’s friend and the other ninety or so stories. Without these (collective) conversations and exchanges, the disclosures made by participants in and through ‘participation performances’ such as *Running Stitch* conceal more than what they reveal, shattering thereby the cartographic (self-mapping) power of these practices.

The act of validating the sequence of stitches as his is a crucial performative element of this process. It completes the disclosure process: it is the moment in which the voiceless walker on the canvas becomes a speaking subject who authors himself by recognising himself in the uniqueness of his auto-bio-graphical stitch. His spatial autobiographical narrative is a crucial self-positioning performance.

By not framing moments of sharing such as this as integral to the cartographic process, I suggest that the artist may scatter the self-mapping and self-positioning agency of this practice. In consequence, the representation loses sight of what it claims to seek and represent.

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