

INTERVIEW WITH

Teri Rueb

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by Jeremy Hight, online via email correspondence, February 2011

Re-Drawing Boundaries, Leonardo Electronic Almanac New Media Exhibition

Curator: Jeremy Hight

Senior Curators: Lanfranco Aceti and Christiane Paul

How would you best describe your body of work and how it has progressed over time?

A consistent thread in my work is concerned with tracing the relationship between public space, embodied interaction and landscape as sites of struggle for cultural and symbolic experience, meaning and representation. Looking back I can describe the majority of my work as an effort to create situations in which bodies, language, and technology come into collision and confluence under conditions of heightened or intensified aesthetic encounter with place. I believe that transformation emerges as much from aesthetic experience as through reason and rational discourse, and that it is the particular responsibility of the artist to reveal ways of knowing based in perception, feeling and action.

How do you see locative media art in the larger pantheon?

Locative media is just a contemporary name for the art of place making which pervades all cultures and times in more or less specialized practices that extend across the formal and the everyday. I would hope, however, that the reassertion of the culturally situated nature of place intended in the coining of the term would expand to resonate in media practices of all kinds—from writing to radio and beyond, there are no media that aren’t ultimately spatial, and therefore social and political, in their implications.

What first led you to work space and location?

I became interested in site and community based practices when I first learned of Joseph Beuys notion of “social sculpture”. At the time I was in college studying sculpture, painting and literary and cultural studies, where my mentors were Conrad Atkinson and Camilla Griggers. Griggers and Atkinson were deeply influential to me then, and it was through them that I became exposed to site and community

based practice, and post-modern theory and philosophy of the body and technology. After college I moved to New York City and apprenticed Martha Rosler. During this time I also worked in midtown Manhattan where I could spend my lunch hours at the Donnell Media Library where I was inspired by the films of Trin T. Minh-Ha (*Naked Space – Living is Round*) and Yvonne Rainer (both her own films and those documenting the performances of the Judson Dance Theater). The interrelationship of everyday sound and movement were important elements in this work. This topic emerged a central concern when I had the opportunity to study ancient, medieval, modern and non-Western mnemonic practices including the oral traditions of peripatetics and aboriginal songlines. This research was carried out in the context of a seminar taught by Daniel Melia in 1994. His generosity and perspective as a scholar of oral epic and ancient rhetoric was deeply influential to me and ultimately led me to the GPS-based practice I later evolved in the context of my graduate studies at New York University. However, my interest in working outside conventional genres is probably linked to more basic instincts. As a kid I was always inventing worlds in the form of drawing imaginary apartments and towns, making up stories about alien planets and societies, cultivating ant farms, and designing obstacle courses under my bed or in my closet. I was also prone to organizing group activities such as digging our way to China every day at recess, calling impromptu parades, and taking kids unknowingly on really long walks that would trespass through the back yards of hostile neighbors and the pastures and fields of nearby farmers. There was nothing more irresistible to me than a literal or implied “no trespassing” sign – each boundary had to be tested – and there were lots of them where I grew up because the front range was still semi-rural at the time and cattle ranches still stretched over hundreds of acres of the Rocky Mountains.

What are you working on now?

Finishing a dissertation—on landscape, subjectivity and interface. And beginning new collaborations with three people whose work I see as emblematic

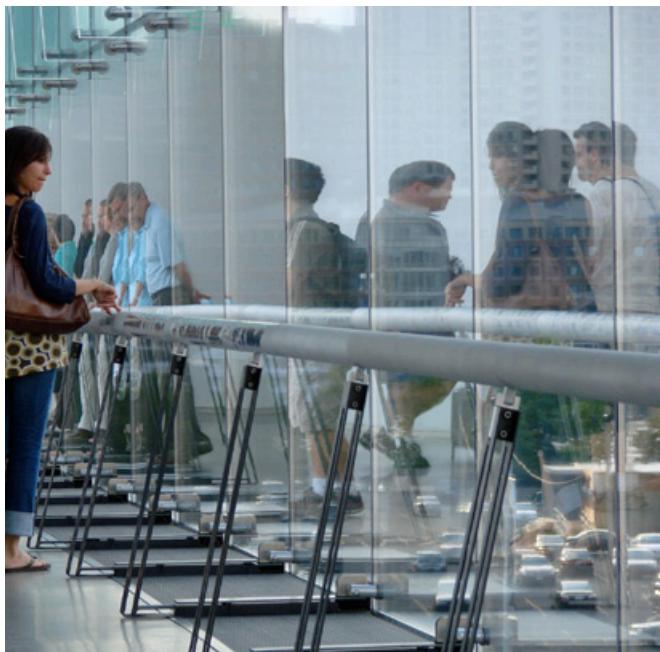
of the important questions of place making today: deconstructing American landscape mythologies and exploring the common landscape (John Stilgoe); exploring the spatial ontologies of Western cultures, including indigenous peoples (David Mark); and teasing out the tension between ideologies of the picturesque and the botany of post-industrial disturbed landscapes (Peter del Tredici).

How do you feel about being called a pioneer?

It is a problematic term as it gets over-used and romanticized, but still I think it is appropriate to use in reference to people who truly take risks to create a context for thinking or living in a new way—and usually this means going where very few precedents or established paths already exist. Despite the colonizing and imperialist connotations of the word, and the very real exploitations and violations associated with pioneering as cultural practice, there is still a sense of the word worth holding on to—namely what it implies as valuing the path that lies beyond the mass movement. It's a mistake to underestimate or casually dismiss the difficulty of committing oneself to an idea that lies beyond the scope of popular concern, where the risk is very real that one's efforts may yield little in the way of tangible returns and may fall beyond notice entirely.

How is the map changing now in this moment globally and how is this to affect our sense of data, space and cartography?

It seems that all signs point to a world fashioned according to Google and the normative spatial ontologies of geographic information science—but hopefully the same force that propels the spread and popularity of these technologies will ultimately fuel a broader and more critical participation in place making, spatial practices and cultural identity. ■



Core Sample, 2007, Teri Rueb. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist.

Core Sample

Core Sample (http://www.terirueb.net/core_sample) is a GPS-based interactive sound walk and corresponding sound sculpture that evokes the material and cultural histories contained in and suggested by the landscape of Spectacle Island. The piece engages the extended landscape of Boston Harbor as bound by the new Boston Institute of Contemporary Art building on the downtown waterfront, and Spectacle Island, a former dump and reclaimed landfill park visible just off the coast. The two sites function dialogically, questioning what is seen versus what is not seen, what is preserved and recorded versus what is suppressed and denied. Visitors take the 15 minute journey to Spectacle Island via the Harbor Islands Express Ferry from Long Wharf and borrow headsets free of charge at the Spectacle Island Visitor Center. Sounds play back automatically in response to each visitor's unique itinerary. Thematic sound content shifts with the changing elevation contours of the path system suggesting the vertical layers of a metaphoric core sample (see map of installation). Abstract sounds and spoken word blur surface and core, natural and artificial, industrial and organic, past, present and future.

Core Sample video link:

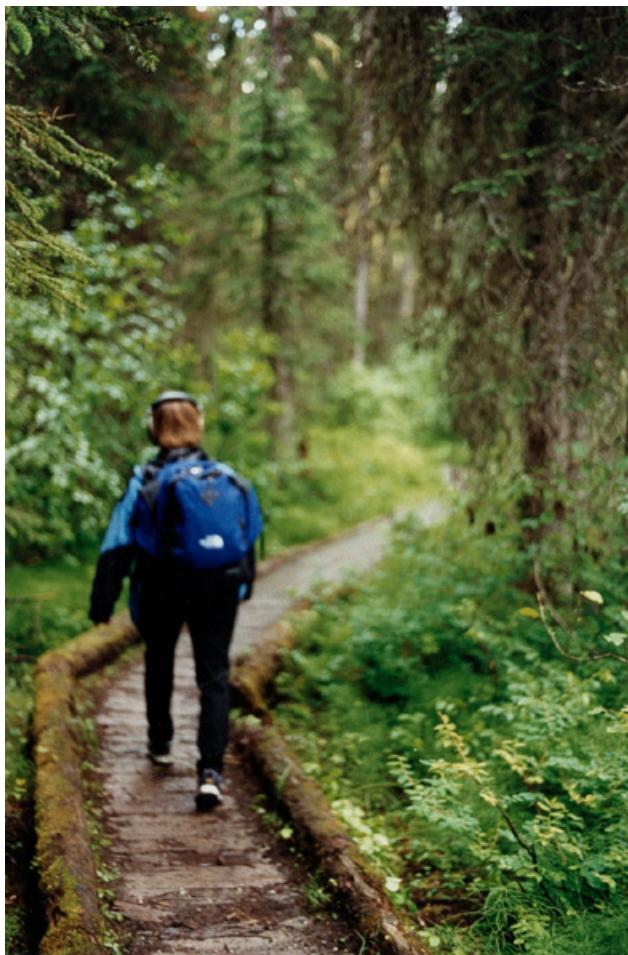
<http://www.youtube.com/user/LEAbroadcast#p/u/0/zMjFILC-wv8>



Drift, 2004, Teri Rueb. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist.

Drift

The ubiquity of GPS (global positioning satellite) and other tracking technologies suggests that “being lost” may itself be an experience that is being lost. However, simply knowing one’s geographical location as expressed in longitude and latitude coordinates has little bearing on one’s personal sense of place or direction. “Drift” (<http://www.terirueb.net/drift/index.html>) poses the age-old question “Where am I and where am I going?” in a contemporary moment in which spatial positioning and tracking technologies provide evermore precise, yet limited, answers to this question. The installation embraces the flow of wandering, the pleasure of disorientation, and the playful unpredictability of drifting as it relates to movement and translation. Sounds blend footsteps on different surfaces with spoken word in different languages. Spoken word passages are drawn from poetry and literature dealing with the theme of wandering, being lost, and drifting. Meaning also drifts as Rousseau, Joyce, Kerouac, Mann, Dante, Woolf, and others are presented in the original and in translation. The Watten Sea becomes a metaphor for hertzian space as visitors are invited to wander among layered currents of sand, sea and interactive sounds that drift with the tides, and with the shifting of satellites as rise and set, introducing another kind of drift.



Hiker with knapsack, 1999, Teri Rueb. All images and video material are the copyright of the artist and cannot be used or altered in any way without the express consent of the artist.

Trace

Trace (<http://www.terirueb.net/trace/index.html>) is a memorial environmental sound installation that is site-specific to the network of hiking trails near the Burgess Shale fossil beds in Yoho National Park, British Columbia. The installation transforms the trails into a landscape of sound recordings that commemorate personal loss. Walking through the installation is like wandering through a memorial sculpture garden where, instead of visible monuments, visitors weave their way through memorial poems, songs and stories that play in response to their movement through the landscape. The project explores loss and transformation in an historical moment when concepts of memory, presence and absence are undergoing significant shifts in cultural meaning. This drift in meaning is directly related to developments in the field of information technology.

Artist's statement

For the past fifteen years I have created GPS-based interactive sound, land and environmental art. These large-scale responsive sound environments explore landscape, architecture and urbanism, the body and subjectivity, and sonic and acoustic space. All of my work is developed through extensive encounter with the site through walking, driving, bicycling—what I think of as *kinaesthetic attunement*. I also engage sites through observing and interacting with inhabitants and noting temporal patterns of natural and social processes, from the idiosyncratic to the institutional. It is a very concrete and physically engaged process of interaction with site, community and environment. I have created works for settings as diverse as the Berlin Tiergarten and the Boston Commons, to a landfill in the Boston Harbor Islands, a shopping mall in post-Soviet Estonia, and freeway systems in U.S. cities including Baltimore and San Antonio.

My works are primarily created using wireless and wearable technologies including global positioning, satellite receivers (GPS), laptops, pocket PCs, mobile phones and wireless networks—now collectively referred to as “locative media”. I was first drawn to these media as further means by which I could extend my interest in public art, specifically Joseph Bueys’ notion of “social sculpture” in which the sculptural object is replaced by deep interactions with site and community. In addition to offering new ways to engage the participation of broad audiences, I found emerging wireless telecommunications media interesting in their ability to raise questions about the complex interplay of space, place and identity in public settings. As a sculptor and installation artist, these media also offered ways to reassert the body and the full spectrum of the senses in digital media experience, something that I felt was sorely missing in the mostly screen-based world of digital media at the time (1995).

In developing my first GPS-based work, *Trace* (1996 – 1999), I became interested in the interaction of landscape, movement, memory and sound. Since then, the weaving together of space and sound, and the peculiar qualities of social interaction in mobile

networks and public spaces endures as the focus of my creative practice and research.

Each of my works explores different aspects of the interaction of public space, landscape, architecture and identity. They range in form from a design for a new kind of memorial park (*Trace*), to tracings of the social and political forces that operate in the production of everyday space (*Choreography of Everyday Movement*, 2001-2003); from sound walks that address issues of homelessness and mobility (*itinerant*, 2005) to reflections on the movement of shoppers as newly constructed “consumers” in malls in post-Soviet Estonia.

Drift (2004), set along the tidal flats of the Wadden Sea in Northern Germany, marked a unique moment in my practice as I integrated natural cycles (tidal phenomena) with the algorithmic cycles of computational media. Yet it was also unique as a moment of self-reflection regarding my own use of GPS as an artist versus its then newly emerging status as a common household, or rather dashboard, technology. To create reflective and corporeally engaging experiences that encouraged physical risk, experimentation and non-goal oriented movement was at odds with the commercial promotion of GPS as a technology of accuracy and efficiency. The visual rhetoric of reductive geo-spatial representations presented in tandem with the soothing voiceovers of navigation software were both curiously infantilizing to my sensibilities which had formed through *in situ* wanderings since I was a child.

Core Sample (2007), a GPS-based site-specific sound walk made for a public landfill park in the Boston Harbor Islands, was perhaps my most visible and widely experienced project. For this work I sought to connect the extended landscape of Boston Harbor across two sites: Spectacle Island (a former dump and now landfill park in the Boston Harbor) and the new site of the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art on the downtown waterfront. The primary work is a site-specific GPS-based interactive sound installation that covers the entire topography of Spectacle Island. Sounds evoke the varied material, geological

and cultural histories of the island as visitors move through the fluctuating elevations of the island where one might find evidence of these histories in an imaginary core sample.

Collaborating with architect Michelle Fornabai, I was also able to realize a sculptural “core sample” which appears as a railing spanning the length of the Boston ICA’s Founders’ Gallery overlooking the Boston Harbor. The design—part sculpture, part architecture and part sound installation—sought to bring museum visitors into reflective contemplation of the Boston Harbor as a working industrial landscape. Sounds were drawn from the island installation and emitted from the section of sculptural “core sample” at depths corresponding to the elevations from which they were drawn. More than a beautiful panorama or parkland, though it is both, the Boston Harbor Islands are perhaps most compelling when viewed as a symbol of our on-going struggle to rehabilitate and come to terms with our own place—and responsibility—in a troubled environment. It was not my intention to inspire guilt or anxiety about environmental issues through the project as much as to engage visitors in an uncanny encounter with refuse as the extension of our own bodies and consciousnesses through circuits of consumption and waste.

In Summer 2009 I launched a dual-location site-specific sound walk and bike tour for the exhibition *Landschaft 2.0* co-organized by the Edith Russ Site for Media Art and the Springhornhof Kunstverein. The project was also presented as part of the Klangpol Festival of experimental sound in Oldenburg, Germany. In each site visitors explore local landscapes layered with responsive sound, most of which is drawn from German and American popular film and television. In Oldenburg the installation is set in a nineteenth Century botanical garden that represents climates from all over the world, while at the Springhornhof the installation extends like a “groove” along the bike route that wanders through the touristic heath surrounding the village, leading visitors to land art sculptures installed amongst farms and cornfields. Excerpts from film scores (e.g. Werner Herzog, David Lynch, Wim Wenders and Victor

Fleming / *Wizard of Oz*), are patched together with advertising jingles and songs from German-dubbed television and radio programs (e.g. *Bonanza*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Winnitou*)—all of which are highly evocative of landscape types from the sublime to the kitsch, as found in both cultures.

I am currently working on several projects, the first of which deals with constructions of the picturesque in post-industrial disturbed landscapes. Another is an experimental road movie exploring American landscape mythologies of *borderlands* though the extended cinematic space of mobile media. And finally, I am conducting a parallel inquiry into Western and indigenous spatial ontologies of wilderness as encoded in narratives entangled with “self-paced travel” in urban and remote environments.

Bio

Teri Rueb is an artist whose work engages digital, architectural and traditional media and modes of production. Her most recent project, “Elsewhere: Anderswo” is currently on exhibit across two sites in Northern Germany, The Edith Russ Site for Media Art (Oldenburg) and the Springhornhof Kunstverein (Neuenkirchen). Another recent project “Core Sample”, received a 2008 Prix Ars Electronica Award of Distinction in the Digital Musics category. Rueb has pioneered the form of GPS-based interactive installations and is the recipient of numerous grants and commissions from international institutions including the Edith Russ Site for New Media, The Banff Center for the Arts, the Boston ICA, Artslink, Turbulence.org, and various State Arts Councils. She has lectured and presented her work worldwide at venues including Ars Electronica, ISEA, SIGGRAPH, Transmediale, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, Kiasma Museum, and IRCAM. ■