

## All over the map

### New technology inspires projects that are redefining the artistic landscape

Where are you?

That question used to have a simple answer: I'm in the kitchen. But spurred by sophisticated technology, such as global positioning systems, cellphones, surveillance cameras, and the virtual world of the Internet, the definition of place, and of the body in space, has gotten more layered. Now there are many answers: I'm in the kitchen, at a particular longitude and latitude; reading a blog; on the phone with Grandma. In short -- I'm all over the place.

Artists are leaping on this new understanding of space. They're looking at a dispersal of self over wired and wireless connections. They're using the newly accessible precision of GPS technology to reinvent the landscape.

You may think of a landscape as a painting on canvas with a horizon line. Think again: The new landscape has gone three-dimensional, and you're standing in the middle of it. And it's not just what surrounds you; it's also in your head. It's a map that charts trends, emotions, and the neglected and hidden parts of society.

"We're experimenting with real life, real people, real context, real situations," says Catherine D'Ignazio, an artist who is involved in a number of mapping collectives and who has written an article about the phenomenon in *Cartographic Perspectives*, a scholarly journal.

Doing performances in the street, or making work that leads people through the landscape, harks directly back to the Situationists, a Parisian movement of artists and social activists that stretched from 1957 to 1972. They dubbed this kind of work "psychogeography."

Today, thanks to new locative media and a rising interest in social issues among many artists, psychogeographic works are exploding around the world. A major US instigator this time is Glowlab, a New York collaborative founded in 2002 that stages and sponsors a variety of projects. Glowlab put together an annual conference called Conflux, which next month moves to Providence to merge with a similar conference, Provflux, under the auspices of the Providence Initiative for Psychogeographic Studies. In the Boston area, several upcoming exhibitions and performances, many of them tied to the Cyberarts Festival (April 22 through May 8), highlight this kind of work.

"Boston is a hotbed of psychogeography," says Leslie Brown, who has curated "Land/Mark," a mapping show that's at the Photographic Resource Center. "You don't know where any road goes."

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A recent Boston performance by PIPS member J. Gabriel Lloyd, documented on Glowlab's website ([www.glowlab.com](http://www.glowlab.com)), illustrated Brown's point. He came to town to find a high school friend who lives here. Lloyd didn't know any more than that. So he wandered the streets, asking people if they knew her, following wispy leads. He didn't find her, but remarkably he did come across another friend from high school.

"Artists are at a point of re-examining the urban context in a very detailed, finite way," Lloyd says. "With technology, everyone around us is speeding up, sharing information all over the world. These works are about slowing down, finding lost places in the city."

D'Ignazio, who started out writing software, is a founding member of the Institute for Infinitely Small Things and Ikaton, two Boston-based artists' collectives that are collaborating on "Corporate Command," a kind of ongoing street theater project that puts under the microscope the way advertising aims to influence society. Every Friday,

D'Ignazio, in the spirit of a flash mob, sends out an e-mail to a list of 500 with the next day's plans.

Each Saturday at 2 p.m., the group dons lab coats and goes into the city to locate the billboard D'Ignazio's e-mail has specified and obey its command. At a Cingular ad, for instance, they got on the ground for a "rollover." In the ATM vestibule of a Sovereign Bank, they gathered with wine and music to "Enjoy life." Outside Jos. A. Bank Clothiers, they brought sleeves, pant legs, and more to "Build your own suit." They engage passersby and invite them to share in the fun, telling them they're doing research.

And then there's Yellow Arrow, an amorphous international group that will exhibit its work in the PRC show. Members place yellow stickers with black arrows, like road signs, throughout a city. Each is marked with a code and a cellphone number. Make the call, punch in the code, and you'll get a text message about the site marked by that arrow.

"Small things like this re-energize your personal environment," says Brown. "Yellow Arrow makes an annotated environment. You see it and think, 'I need to pay attention. Something else is going on here.'" In the South End's "Sifting the Inner Belt," an ongoing performance and outreach project, artists work to knit together community gardens and their surroundings.

In works like these, part of the aim is to democratize art. One democratizing factor occurred in May 2000, when the Clinton administration made highly accurate GPS, previously available in the United States only to the military, open to the public.

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While many might feel excluded from conceptual art, these artists are as likely to call their work research as art.

"I've been thinking about performance art as methodology for research, to use it functionally," says Hiroko Kikuchi, one of the instigators of "Sifting the Inner Belt."

"If you identify yourself as an artist, you might be building walls," says Teri Rueb, whose GPS-based walk through Boston Common, "Itinerant," will be part of the Cyberarts Fest. "Research is one way of opening a dialogue. People understand that they are the subjects of research."

In the same vein, individual artists often remain anonymous under the umbrella of the collective. That way, they discard the identity of the auteur, which can be off-putting to people outside the art world.

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Rueb's work doesn't involve a performance -- except perhaps that of her audience. At GPS coordinates around the Common, the GPS equipment an audience member carries sparks different audio recordings. Some are ambient, some are Rueb's own reflections on a nomadic life and on navigating the often confusing streets of Boston, some are texts culled from Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. The audience member wears headphones to hear these snippets, and so the art takes place not only on the Common but inside the audience member's head.

"Artists have turned to locative media to make people look and listen," says Rueb. "There's an increasing awareness of an invisible landscape -- like Hertzian space, invisible layers of frequencies and wavelengths. It's different than the visual construction of space. Hertzian space and sound bleed and blur those boundaries; an interior monologue becomes part of the art."

Margot Kelley's contribution to the PRC show documents a new phenomenon known as geocaching, which flared up after GPS became more accessible in 2000. Soon, people were planting little treasures in the landscape and posting their coordinates on the Internet. Today, Kelley estimates, a million people take on these scavenger hunts around the world, with 17,000 boxes, known as geocaches, out there. Her book on the subject, "Local Treasures: Geocaching Across America," is due out in the fall.

"Geocaching creates a new kind of collaborative map, not based on the needs maps are usually made by," Kelley says. "A different and potentially healthful way of making maps."

As we implement new technology, Kelley suggests, we reorient to and reinvent our world. The more objective the technology, like GPS's gridding of the entire world, the more significant our own subjective experience becomes.

"It's not just that GPS is available," she says. "A GPS is the ultimate in illusions of objectivity: We know the coordinates, so we know where we are. But where are we?"

- Cate McQuaid ■