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ADA Mesh Cities: network, space and memory in the transitional city

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Keywords

cities, mesh, network, ada, space, city, memory, transitional

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ADA MESH CITIES: NETWORK, SPACE AND MEMORY IN THE TRANSITIONAL CITY

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes, Christchurch, New Zealand is framed as a 'transitional' city, moving from its demolished past to a speculative future. The ADA Mesh Cities project asks what role media art and networks may play in the transitional city, and the practices of remembering, and reimagining space.

Keywords: Earthquake, Media art, Network, Space, Memory.

This paper summarises a panel discussion hosted by Aotearoa Digital Arts at ISEA 2013. It addresses the ways in which media artists around Aotearoa New Zealand are responding to the implications of the 2010 and 2011 Canterbury earthquakes. Aotearoa Digital Arts (ADA) is a network of media artists, writers, teachers, and audiences, and a charitable trust focused on supporting media arts in Aotearoa New Zealand. This panel is part of an ongoing series of events for the ADA Mesh Cities project, which broadly explores the role of media art in the 'transitional city.' Transitional in this context refers to the state of constant and future change in Christchurch, as the city is cleared of the rubble of its past and contested plans are made for its future. However, all cities are transitional, in a moment of being between versions of themselves, and in other New Zealand places now the relationship between the past and future in built environments is marked by new anxieties about the status of buildings and spaces 'after Christchurch'.

In the broader ADA Mesh Cities project, the transitional concerns of Christchurch and other places are connected by the framing ideas of network, space, and memory. These reflect new concerns with space in Aotearoa New Zealand: an overabundance of it in demolished Christchurch, the increased vulnerability of affordable spaces in often under maintained older buildings elsewhere, and new awarenesses of the kinds of unseen geographies that may be revealed by a seismic event. Memory speaks directly to the dual sense of Christchurch as a city now existing only in memories, and

a city to be reimagined for the future. However, this particular version of transitionality is simply an extreme instance of the state of any space at any moment. The network connects spaces, memories, people, artists and practices.

With these issues in mind, this panel brings together artists from around the country to reflect on the impact of the Christchurch earthquakes on media art practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. The panellists are some of the key contributors to the ADA Network, and they variously respond to the themes of network, memory and space, and describe their own practices in art making and organising. Su Ballard traces art in the transitional city through disaster and post-industrialism. Caro McCaw outlines some of the implications of the earthquakes for artist spaces in Dunedin. Vicki Smith considers the network and community. Trudy Lane is working on walking, geologic time, and memory. Ian Clothier facilitates artists' negotiation of place through the SCANZ residency in New Plymouth. Janine Randerson is responding to memory and place around Onehunga in Auckland, and Danny Butt explores archiving and memory in the context of Auckland's hidden waterways.

As the written document of a wide-ranging panel discussion, this is a necessarily elliptical survey of responses to the earthquakes in Christchurch, and to the possibilities of network, space and memory. To begin with, Su Ballard and Caro McCaw ground the discussion in built spaces, art making, and networks.

Su Ballard

I have been thinking about the ways in which humans have historically imagined disaster and the current tools that we have for doing this. For me this connects with the concept of mesh cities, by asking how do artists contribute to the way that we might re-imagine a city post-disaster?

The 1755 Lisbon earthquake was a moment that shifted the ground that gave us Modernism. Authors, poets and artists found themselves confronting the ruins of what had until then been a sense of permanence, of the modern individual within certain architectural forms. The Christchurch earthquake will also contribute something to future art making. Lisbon 250 years ago was a specific and particular experience for the Portuguese people. It is a reminder of the general as well as the specific.

One of my key concerns is thinking through how, and what, a media arts network might contribute to thinking about the specific experience of disaster. The contemporary art gallery offers one answer. Over the past 25 years, in many western cities in the world, industrial spaces have been transformed into art galleries. Spaces that were once factories and mechanisms for industry have become sites of contemporary art. In Christchurch it is not so simple to occupy buildings. This means that we cannot engage with spaces in our usual way. We are also not dealing with a blank slate. Understanding the formation of a city through its networks counters a monumental method of thinking the city.

The second thing I would like to address is language. Since 9/11 our languages of disaster have become conflated into one language. When we talk about a terrorist attack and when we talk about a natural disaster, we use words that reflect the kinds of same affects (Brian Massumi has written extensively about this) [1]. The land attacks, we are threatened, fear is heightened. Both terrorism and earthquakes are hyper-objects (to use Timothy Morton's word [2]) and engender a particular language of response. In New Zealand, the languages of disaster became conflated into a single response, which was one of fear. This subsequently enabled an extreme neoliberal approach within the city to take complete control. Through the politics of fear, many alternative approaches to the city have been limited. And this is where it is exciting to watch the approach of artists and art institutions in Christchurch. The inspirational work is by individuals and collectives who immediately instigated different (and often disobedient) kinds of response and language.

My final question is: how do we contest the language of what has been happening on quite an unimaginable level, and in what ways do media arts practices begin the discussion?

Caro McCaw

I live in Dunedin, a small city relatively close to Christchurch in the South Island. We all have family and friends in Christchurch, and we feel the earthquakes, both physically and socially. Dunedin is not a very affluent city. Its economy peaked in the 1870s as a result of the Otago gold rush. We have a lot of old buildings that were built over 100 years ago, paid with gold. The contemporary networked city however does not need

this kind of architecture. These old buildings need to be either strengthened or demolished in the next 10 years. So we are facing a kind of rewriting of the city, a lot like Christchurch, where there is demolition, though in Dunedin there is no 'rebuild'.

A central thread through this discussion is the co-opted use of spaces, and the importance of remembering and reimagining the city. Underlying this is a set of values. In Dunedin our challenge also includes "How do we create value for cities, their spaces and stories, that no longer have economic value?" Part of the answer is in sharing histories through storytelling, and a need to create material and social experiences to share these stories, as a different form of architecture. New media has a role to play. However we need to think and experience histories beyond new media, not just archive histories as information for new media formats, for personal search and retrieval. Physical and social experiences of the city have a different value from the archive.

For the Aotearoa Digital Arts symposium in September 2013 we start with local architectural implications of the city, brought about by the change in building codes as a result of the Christchurch earthquakes. We consider and experience arts practices that engage with city spaces in New Zealand, and the city as a site that has geological as well as social histories, presences and futures.

Vicki Smith

I am from Harihari, located on the West Coast of the South Island. We have the alpine fault running through the valley and grew up feeling earthquakes. Some of the Christchurch quakes are also felt there.

As a visual artist my interest is in how the digital intersects with the physical, and real-time online story making. I also work with schools to develop 'community of practice' processes for distributed learning, which requires networks to provide both access and resources, especially to remote communities. I volunteer for the West Coast Kete project, a community story-gathering site. I am also a trustee for Sailing for Sustainability and a trustee for the ADA network.

I am positioning myself here because I am project manager for ADA Mesh Cities, a series of artist workshops, tours and symposia incorporating the ADA Community and drawing in a wider network.

The network is of particular interest to me, and I am influenced by Erenora Puketapu-Hetet, an eminent weaver whose practice bridges science, art and culture, who describes the strength of weaving as always being in the connections.

The Mesh Cities project references Robert Oullette's concept of the MESH [3], but also the cyclone fence: a mesh fence that is ubiquitous in our country and in Christchurch, where from February 2011 to June 2013 it encircled the 'red zone', and the space around damaged or demolished buildings. So it's a barrier, but permeable in its nature, with spaces that can be creatively co-opted. In one section of mesh fence in central Christchurch was woven the word 'Hapori'. This speaks of community and wellbeing, and illustrates the essential outcomes of Mesh Cities as I see them. That is creating something for the whole community, an opportunity to engage and participate in the practice of art in public as social process, rather than art as provided only for public consumption.

In thinking of communities such as ADA I suggest strong networks are those in which people are drawn together by a high degree of commonality, and successful networks are those that are flexible and encourage diversity in order to continue growth.

Trudy Lane

I live in Auckland in New Zealand. I grew up an hour south of Auckland, and have been involved with the ADA network for a number of years and work on the SCANZ (Solar Circuit Aotearoa New Zealand) residency.

I visited Christchurch recently for the first time since just after the first earthquake. Seeing the city this time was very shocking – there are just a few buildings among the empty spaces. It was surprising to realise that over two years later they're not actually re-building - they're still demolishing; that they are still trying to figure out what they're doing, and that it takes so long to demolish things properly. The other aspect that struck me was the stories of people in Christchurch, all of which reflect the very different kinds of experiences that people have when such a big event occurs that affects so many people.

I have been working on a project about geological time, called *A Walk Through Deep Time*. It is a shared walk project, which is now also an audioscape app that enables people to listen to and share scientific, philosophical, and personal perspectives that relate to the time-

scales of geologic time. So it was interesting to see how that perspective is now coming up in the stories people tell in Christchurch: everyone knows what liquefaction is, and everyone now knows about the geological structure of the city and the decisions made about building a city on an unstable alluvial plain. This perspective is now intruding on their lives, as they're all a lot more aware of it, and thinking about the city in a different way.

We started talking with those at the CEISMIC archive at the University of Canterbury whose role is to capture the stories of what people have experienced [4]. James Smithies, the archive project manager, described it as being like standing under a waterfall with a teaspoon – there are just so many interesting and tragic stories. That conversation has led to the possibility of working with the local arts group Gap Filler [5], which has done amazing work in the time since the earthquake. They fill the 'gaps', the big empty lots where buildings have been demolished, with community projects, and have been a really great focus of engagement to bring communities together again. So we are now developing this system for a location-sensitive audioscape for Christchurch, to allow people to record and share memories and ideas of place.

Ian Clothier

Part of the rebuild of Christchurch is actually the reconstruction of cultural life, and "Gap Filler" has done some marvellously simple things to help with that. They have organised successful events that have engaged the public, and I see them as engaging with issues and with audiences, articulating a creative participatory space very successfully.

My first arts council grant, received when I was 19 years old, allowed me to organise an open-air arts exhibition for a day on the steps of Christchurch's Town Hall, in 1979. The idea of 'pop up' events has been around for a long time, but has gained new currency recently, as electronic media provides new ways and contexts to engage with audiences.

My own practice currently involves connecting to the environment with data sensors, and then opening a dialogue with Indigenous people, and that is both in my practice and in the curatorial work I do. This approach also maps across to SCANZ, which I organise with Nina Czegledy and Trudy Lane. We are guided by three main values of engaging with the sciences and hybrid arts, acknowl-

edging the environmental crisis and engaging with Indigenous groups.

The next SCANZ event is coming up in January 2015, and is themed on water and peace. It is unusual in Western frameworks to combine a consideration of water with an ethic like peace. But this has come out of the work that we do with Indigenous groups, where those two things stand side by side. We will be spending the event's first weekend on a marae, and the works that get produced will be exhibited in public space. There is a river walkway that goes from the sea up into a botanical garden and this is the planned site for the works. We also intend having a walking symposium, along the same river, and this mirrors aspects of "Gap Filler" in terms of locating projects and activities in public space.

One of my projects involved putting data sensors in our local botanic garden. I recall talking to the park curator Chris Connolly, and us both commenting about works in public space being better for the audience, as there is no need to negotiate the cultural frameworks embedded in galleries. The public can just directly experience the work. So some of these "Gap Filler" themes involve wider discussions, which is a factor in their success.

Janine Randerson

I am based in Auckland, and the project I discuss here in relation to what is happening in Christchurch concerns memory. I have been working with master's student Hannah Alleyene on thinking about how media art, or spatial propositions in her case, can act as mnemonic devices to retain memories of a place. A mnemonic device is a kind of memory aid that might be visual, might be audio, might be kinaesthetic in some way, and that serves to aid and stimulate memory retention.

I have been thinking about disaster and memory in response to an article, "Disaster, Memory and Culture: Distressing Attempts to Develop Disaster Culture in Turkey" by Ali Tolga Ozden, that is about the post-disaster situation in Turkey after the Van earthquake in October 2011 [6]. Ozden identifies a problem with short memory caused by shock and fear following a disaster that can result in erasing the impacts of the disaster itself from memory, but also memories of places as well.

In my discussions with people from Christchurch, they have talked about this very strange feeling of having buildings that at first were ruins, so that it was

possible to still identify with this building to some extent, and then a few days later having it completely gone, so that it is almost like losing some of your own mind, your mental synapses which help you to orientate yourself and situate yourself in the world.

That really resonated with me because of a project that Hannah and I are working on in Auckland, which is about the scheduled removal of the old Mangere Bridge, which is a physical scaffold between Onehunga, where I live, and the Mangere Bridge township. It is a pedestrian bridge that used to be for cars, but they now use a motorway nearby. The bridge has become a real community gathering point for fishing, talking, chatting, bike riding and hanging out, but it is about to be removed. There is a fear that its removal will also see this community meeting point disappear, and also all the memories of that place, memories of the Manukau Harbour that it spans over.

At the same time, the Auckland Council is also constructing an artificial beach, reclaiming land in the Manukau Harbour. This Harbour is still quite polluted because, for example, Fonterra is still discharging milk-processing effluent into it. In fact, there has never been a beach there, even before the harbour was polluted, there were only shellfish banks and that kind of thing. So there are odd transitions happening around this Onehunga Harbour area.

Hannah has been asking how can you actually retain memories of something that has disappeared, and I think the answer has a lot to do with the archival value of new media art. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun describes that as one of the defining features of digital media; its value as an archive, an ever-increasing archive in which things don't necessarily get lost or disappear (although inevitably they do). Chun calls this the 'always there-ness' of new media [7]. So perhaps by collecting these stories and creating different forms of archives we can generate mnemonic devices in these ways of remembering.

Danny Butt

"Waiariki" is a project by the Local Time collective for the 5th Auckland Triennial, 2013, curated by Hou Hanru. It has no obvious physical form. If you went to an event at one of the venues you would drink water sourced from a spring which runs underneath many of the Triennial venues. One of the questions it raises is, "What is the archive of

information about this resource and how should that be circulated or not circulated?"

We realised that perhaps it was not our position to contribute that knowledge to institutional archives. What we wanted to do was to get people to find their own performative relationship to the water, perhaps talking to people who have knowledge rather than just picking up a brochure, or logging on and having it or feeling like they have it.

To me the project is quite influenced by the discourses of media art in a negative way. Many media art projects assert a certain autonomy over the process of archiving, and the archive is a question of democracy, and being able to contribute to archives is a positive thing. But with Waiariki, and perhaps Christchurch, if we think about the trauma of an event, an archive of memory is not always positive. These flows of information from archives about the event may not be always 'goods,' they may be 'bads' for particular people.

Derrida, Spivak and Stiegler talk about the pharmacological nature of archives, as medicine that is also poison [8]. You need them to make you better but they can also kill you in the wrong doses or if you have an allergic reaction. It is not always a good thing to remember; there is a certain protection in forgetting.

There seemed to be no real way to present both Māori and European/Pakeha perspectives on Waiariki at once in any easy archive. There is a tendency towards artworks wanting social mobilisation, but I think it is also worth recovering the avant-garde legacy that a negative space can help us think and to reflect upon.

Zita Joyce

The intertwined issues of water and archives and memory provide a perfect ending point here. One of the things that is resonant about Waiariki is the surfacing of water, because one of the big problems in Christchurch is that the European settlers covered over all the water when they filled in the swamp and then built a city upon it, made of unreinforced masonry. So the city is full of water that is invisible and covered over, and there is a metaphor in that for the sort of things that come up, the things that are hidden within a city and released by the trauma of an event like the earthquake, and then the demolition of the city in its wake. There is genuine trauma arising from the loss of people, homes, jobs and

the familiar environment that many of us can barely acknowledge even now.

A Victorian city built on a swamp in a country that straddles a tectonic plate boundary is inherently transitional in a way – such a place was never going to last. And when it came apart it also created space for artists to respond to the physical, political, and social implications of this new awareness of transitionality. There is a lot of wall art, there are the “Gap Filler” projects which are very community oriented, there is a cardboard cathedral, and lots of temporary ‘popup’ kinds of structures[9]. Many of these Christchurch based projects are about creating structures and spaces for people to gather and physically connect in. Many others focus on online mapping and archiving – such as mapping food foraging sites and archiving wildflowers growing in demolition sites.

One of the aims of the Mesh Cities project is to explore the possibilities of media art practice in and about transitional Christchurch, and the implications of the earthquakes and this new sense of transitionality for other places in Aotearoa. Particularly, in thinking about the connections between network, space and memory, we are asking how media artists can create responsive social works that connect with people’s experiences of these things.

Danny Butt’s caution that retaining, or archiving all memories is not necessarily beneficial establishes an important ethical ground for often documentation-focused media practice. However, the works shared by the contributors to this paper demonstrate the potential role of media artists in creating responsive social archives, independent of the unreliable structures of buildings; networked practices that resonate in the spaces and time between remembering the past, and imagining the future.

References and Notes

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9. Projects relating to ‘transitional’ Christchurch are ever evolving. Significant examples include the Christchurch Art Gallery’s ‘Outer Spaces’ programme, running while the gallery building is closed for repairs <<http://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/exhibitions/>>; The ‘Festival of transitional architecture’ <<http://2012.festa.org.nz/2013>>; and others catalogued on sites like Neat Places <<http://www.neatplaces.co.nz/browse/transitional-christchurch/>>, and in the Project Freerange book *Christchurch: The Transitional City pt IV* (3rd edition, 2013) <<http://www.projectfreerange.com/product/christchurch-the-transitional-city-pt-iv-updated-3rd-edition/>>