

Place as a Pattern of Stories

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ABSTRACT: A series of public art trails and an online MUD event are used to examine issues of geographic location and social activity.

Conversation becomes a tool with which participants are able to both contribute to the building of place descriptors and identify as a discourse community.

KEYWORDS: Multi-location public art, MUDs, events, conversation

INTRODUCTION

Online spaces such as MUDs construct spatial metaphors and identities in flux. The particulars of this kind of performativity are however in part produced by (geographic) location and (situated) cultural values.

This paper discusses **The Picnic**, a public art event situated simultaneously in various New Zealand locations in which audiences are expected to participate both online and offline, and examines the recognised ability to contribute to place descriptors, and how this helped to shape a discourse community.

The paper compares public art trails and a miniMUSH constructed (and online) for the event and how a shared understanding of place is produced through conversation.

THE PICNIC

The Picnic is an ongoing serialised multimedia art event (or series of happenings) that I curate from Dunedin, in the South Island of New Zealand. Each event has manifestations in different geographic locations, occurring simultaneously and connected through online works and activities, based loosely on the theme of a 'picnic'. This project examines relationships between conceptual art and community-building practices and how this has become a participatory art practice that connects people, places and local urban cultural activity.

For the purposes of this paper I will use examples from the initial Picnic event (October 14, 2000, 4 hours). This event happened in four New Zealand locations (three cities and a port town) in addition to a live performance webcast from Amsterdam. **The Picnic** as Situated Arts Trails

Offline, over 70 artists and designers contributed works, performances, installations and games to form public art trails in four urban locations simultaneously during a four hour period. Printed media included maps and picnic signage which directed the audience, as picnickers, to sites where they could encounter art works and activities.

At times wacky and apparently random, the art trails encouraged aspects of discovery. Frequently, negotiation was required to find and identify works, which in turn produced conversations as a tool to help picnickers make sense of their experiences, both current and in memory.

Reminiscent of the Situationist's "dérive", the experience of **The Picnic** as a public art trail generated an opportunity for (both for artists and audience) to rewrite possible relationships with urban sites and places. This rewriting shapes a community-building practice. In a related discussion of MUDs Randal Woodland talks about "community [as] the key link between spatial metaphors and issues of identity". He comments that "place descriptors help to shape a discourse community." [2] (430)

Offline, Nick Stevenson has also introduced the concept of cultural citizenship which is participatory and open to critique. "The power to name, construct meaning and exert control over the flow of information in contemporary societies" [9] (127) begins at a local level. Stevenson asserts that we should seek to form an appreciation of "ordinary" understandings and how they become constructed, as a way of reclaiming the production of culture.

The Picnic as a set of public art trails connected social activity in different places, by creating localised (and "out of place") manifestations of a picnic as a mutually understood experience. While Woodland was referring to online communities, this idea of rewriting urban activity by creating the opportunity to contribute to (local urban) place descriptors, is relevant to the current project.

As an arts trail **The Picnic** is specifically performing a spatial practice in particular and various locations which de Certeau describes as 'place'. [4]

***The Picnic* as an Online Event**

Online, **The Picnic** event was a website with maps of each location's art trail, plus digital images of art works, sound and animation works made by artists and designers for the event, some directly related to the geographically situated works. There was, for example, a Flash animation



Figure 1: Rose Paul Emma and online activities. The Physics Room Contemporary Art Gallery, Christchurch. *The Picnic* digital was a part of the Physics Room's 2000 Web Exhibition Programme. Photo: Dan Arps.



Figure 2: An Empress and Loop production with special guest stars present 'Space Lounging: A Costume Oddity', live performance webcast from Amsterdam. This image projected at Arc Café, Dunedin. Photo: Sarah Jones.

of poetry floating in waves. Stills of this work were printed on large paper and pasted on walls around Dunedin. [6] Other digital works specifically referred to the landscape in which they were produced.

PicnicMUSH, was a miniMUSH created using PENNMush specifically for, and only online during the event.

PicnicMUSH began as a multiple-roomed MUSH built by small group of designers prior to the event. Publicity material for *The Picnic* instructed new users and online visitors how to download software, connect to the MUSH, interact with players, and create and build objects and rooms within the MUSH. (New visitors were automatically granted the status of wizard).

Visitors to the MUSH event explored and encountered descriptions likened to the various cities, the situated works and performances. This MUSH acted on one hand as a descriptive and navigable exhibition catalogue. As a MUSH event *PicnicMUSH* also contributed in different ways to the sense of simultaneity that the offline event explored.

For example there were four identical wooden Yogi Bear sculptures made by one artist [3] that were planted in the ground in each of the four New Zealand locations. The experience of simultaneity that this work explored could best be experienced through multiple encounters in the MUSH, as the distances offline between the sculptures were too large for any picnicker to visit more than two Yogi's (offline) during the event.

The PicnicMUSH, as an online event, also connected people and places through conversation. Conversations

(logged) between people reflected their encounters, expectations and experiences, similar to conversations between participants at the local (offline) events.

Perhaps more explicitly in a MUSH event conversation is required for participation, and is performed through typed (or copied-and-pasted) text. Text is both the toolkit and the medium of a MUSH. Text is the tool used to construct spatial metaphors and objects. It is also the tool used to communicate, borrowing from the convention of talk. According to Sherry Turkle "a new kind of conversational space opens up ... The particular mix of spatial metaphors and the dynamics of instantaneous communication... build a sense of belonging" [8] (234). However, the rules of encounter differ between the online and situated events. In a MUSH all objects are created to be encountered. While similar to those artworks positioned in urban public places for art trails (among many other urban signifiers), in a MUSH all objects and spaces are positioned in this way. In an event MUSH the sense of encounter becomes time-based, and able to be built (and destroyed) and negotiated like conversation.

***The Picnic* as media**

The Picnic was a major event in the 2000 Dunedin Fringe Festival, and in this regard received local media attention as well as Festival promotion opportunities. Media releases were printed in local and national newspapers, magazines and on national radio. *The Picnic* also produced and independently distributed thousands of flyers, stickers and maps in each of the four locations. The ability to have the activities of *The Picnic* presented within existing corporate media as well as to be able to establish our own independent media voice reflects some of the concerns of the project. As an event, *The Picnic*, both offline and online, presented



Figure 3: The Logan Sisely Collective, 'Recipes for Success (Date Kisses)', roaming texts, Wellington. Photo: Layla Rudneva-Mackay.



Figure 4: Teresa Andrews & Ruby O'Connor perform 'Black Picnic', Blue Oyster Gallery, Dunedin. Photo: Cathy Hells.

audience as 'picnickers' constructing relationships with place and retelling stories of places they have been, and this began with the promotional postering and sticking of public surfaces. Posters and stickers identified potential picnic sites and indicated the temporary colonising of public space, the renaming of that place for another purpose. To clarify, the production and consumption of distributed media can be seen as a spatial practice consistent with Augé's idea of non-place. Media products intervene with localised place, but through suppressing specificities, define place through (the reader's) transient habitation. [1]

The media and works of *The Picnic* can be seen as manifestations of this kind of intervention.

The theme of a picnic, as a colonial social ritual, infers interaction and participation. When we accept an invitation to join a picnic it is with the inscribed willingness to participate in that ritual, to meet at a particular place and to become a member of that cultural grouping for a short time.

The offline Picnic trails and website used aesthetic recognition and association, while the MUSH used short descriptive text prompts as a creative tool for developing both object descriptions and spatial metaphors. By attending/participating in *The Picnic*, the audience became community, and space was mapped through conversation and shared experience.

LET'S TALK

"...if speech [genres] carve up the social then they can also be seen to carve up space." [4] (79)

Reflecting on the relationships between connected and situated (art) practices has led me to an intersection. Here the idea of the event becomes useful for examining connecting ideas of both place and talk.

Place as an Event: Bakhtin's relational approach presents the almost contradictory idea of differences in simultaneity, through "the unique and unified event of being". Each individual person organises their world through the specificities of their unique experiences. As Bakhtin said, no two bodies can occupy the same place, and similarly each body is unique. [4] (74) This (occupied) place, for Bakhtin, is an event. This dialogical space offers me a way to examine the specificities of my experience, and compare, but not have them consumed by, the experiences of another, in another place.

Talk as an Event: Conversation becomes my negotiating tool which I can use to form relationships with others. In conversation we offer one another the opportunity to contribute to the making of agreed meanings, with a culture of mutuality. These may be contested interactions which shape or construct not only a sense of my own (situated) identity, but also a sense of my own and each others' social worlds.

Conversation is associative. We bring lived experiences and associate our own meanings with others' in conversation, articulating a constant interaction. Through conversation we are able to form relationships with others in local environments as well as form and maintain relationships with other people in different places.

Through conversation, experience and memory are brought together: different speakers' experiences are presented and produce new ideas for each speaker. In a Deleuzian performative sense conversation is not scripted but enacts effects. *The Picnic* as an arts trail produced

conversations between people as they enact the effects of the works and trails through experience and memory provocation. Verbal and textual negotiation was required by picnickers to identify and interact with situated works and experiences. Each encounter required personal (and often inter-personal) association and recognition.

On one hand these conversations of encounter produced conversational places. Picnickers, both online and off, stopped to talk to each other. These places became associative picnic events in themselves, reflecting traces of where we have been. On the other hand these conversations demanded a space in which the rules of conversation may take place. This talking becomes a spatial practice.[7] (6)

We are living Here

I am sitting here at my desk, in Dunedin (a small city in the far south of New Zealand) on a remote geographic periphery. Even within New Zealand, the activities that occur here, unless sport-related, are mostly ignored or unknown.

On the other hand, Dunedin, while remote, is part of a well-connected and mediated global culture. The Internet and its associated forms of communication are widely used, and the New Zealand media (for good or bad) is mostly compiled from stories produced and distributed by companies resident outside of this country.

Similarly, the new media academic culture of Dunedin is a received one. I read. I consume texts, words from another's page, from another place. And I ask the texts to talk with each other; as in a MUSH, reading becomes the spatial practice which allows the texts to make connections.

While I understand myself to be 'far away' from the production of these stories, there is a relationship formed with my own social world. This relationship echoes Bakhtin's (aforementioned) relational approach towards Self and "this place" as a (dialogical) event "a multiple phenomenon of three elements: a centre, a not centre and the relation between them". [4] (75)

How do activities in different locations effect each other?. There is a dynamic tension created between spatial and social worlds. By organising an event which is a self-aware community art activity, *The Picnic* examines these issues through a social lens.

The Picnic enacts and is a way of examining Shotter's "world as activities and events rather than substances and things" [9] (115). In this sense place can be understood by our relationship to it: there is no pure or empty place prior to our relationship. The articulation of this relationship is a cultural activity, it produces both a knowledge of the system and a sense of our own identity. This becomes clearer, yet more complex, when we are made aware of our social relationships to several spaces. The multiple art trails and MUSH environment of *The Picnic* seek to produce this awareness.



Figure 5: Picnickers encounter Douglas Kelaher's installation 'Litter', painted polystyrene, outside Te Papa (Our Place), New Zealand's national museum, Wellington. Photo: Layla Rudneva-Mackay.

**The Picnic* is Performative:* *The Picnic* is a conceptual relation between people as (localised and online) 'picnickers'. Art works and actions are designed to prompt memories and this performativity is maintained through conversation, the making and telling of stories. This storytelling affects the places in which they are told.

The Picnic also acknowledges the performing of our local (situated) cultural values. Our language(s) of spacing necessarily reflect the specificities of our bodies and localities.

**The Picnic* is Multiple:* *The Picnic* addresses part of the stated problem by identifying itself as Dunedin-based and creating connections to other national and international locations, as a kind of outreaching imaginative experience.

My position shifts from being a receiver of cultural texts to being also a producer of texts as activity.

**The Picnic* is Temporal:* *The Picnic* is an event. Activities based online and in separate localities are fixed within a shared timeframe. They share a beginning and an ending. They create as well as refer to memories.

To conclude, conversation articulates and requires both space and time, and becomes the strategy and effect of the work as art. Place is enacted through this event within (localised and online) communities of social discourse.

The Picnic is a serial event, and like conversation, or visiting a MUSH, can occur in different places at different times.

Let's meet again.

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