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Walking, Drawing and Procedure

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Abstract

What is the relationship between coding practice and contemporary forms of socially engaged art practice? Both can trace links to the conceptual art tradition. Both explore issues of system, instruction, communication and constraint. Both disturb the limits of autonomous art - either by choosing to speak and to think in an alien, technologically inflected language, or by refusing to function in the gallery context and in the service of producing neatly solid and distinct aesthetic phenomena. Although at times the two can correspond closely – within currents, for example, of open source culture and political software art – they tend to preserve an uneasy relation. Despite their affinities, they cannot quite find adequate points of contact. This paper aims to examine this awkward relation, considering key dimensions of commonality and difference, as well as envisaging possibilities for greater collaborative intersection. Fostering exchange involves, at the outset, acknowledging diverse modes of addressing the social – from the literal to the indirect, from the immediate and ephemeral to the diagrammatic and abstract. Then, in a related manner, it involves conceiving new ways of setting these modes at play, of bringing into dialogue code and lived experience. More specifically, this paper examines how forms of code-drawing, which can easily be interpreted in terms of a naïve and conservative return to the terrain of conventional art, can intersect with the diagrams and ephemeral 'walked' paths of socially engaged art.

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Introduction

It is worth briefly considering the etymology of the term "code". It is derived from the Latin *codex* (a hand written book – a book of laws especially) and the earlier Latin *caudex* (tree trunk - the piece of wood that holds together ancient books). It would seem that only early in the 19th century did it gain the additional sense of secrecy – code as cipher.

They say you can't see the forest for the trees. I wonder, however, whether in the case of our understanding of code, the reverse may not be the case. We see a generality that applies seamlessly across all manner of biological, psychological, cultural, legal and technical contexts. This general concept of code denotes not only the explicit articulation of systems, rules and constraints, but also their deliberate and systematic obfuscation. At the same time, however, that code obtains a pervasive generality, there is also search for specific foundations. Programming code emerges as one relevant context. There is the sense in which all coded systems can be thought in terms of the metaphor of software programming. This obtains its most extreme form in the still relevant image of data rain in *The Matrix*; the whole of society and the most intimate details of lived experience rendered as the illusory effects of programmatic systems. My aim here, in a very small way, is to resist this tendency to position computer programming as a model for all dimensions of coded experience. More particularly, I am concerned with the specific relation between

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coding (as in computer programming) and walking. While there have been many recent efforts to conceive walking in terms of the experience of programming, my own experience of this relation is different. Instead of neat parallels, I have tended to discover alternate trajectories and awkward misalignments. What follows then is a description of two projects, one involving algorithmic drawing and the other walking. This provides the idiosyncratic basis for an equally idiosyncratic catalogue of key differences.

From Code to Walking

Three years ago I realised that I could no longer spend so much of my time computer programming. I had just turned fifty and sensed that I'd reached the limit of an interest that had preoccupied me since my late thirties. My eyesight was deteriorating and I no longer wanted to spend quite so much of my time sitting at my desk, wrestling with arcane and largely unnecessary screen-based problems. To be honest, I also recognised that I'd done pretty much everything that I could possibly imagine in terms of creative system elaboration. Without substantially improving my limited mathematical conceptual skills, it seemed unlikely that I would end up doing much more than recycling the same old tropes of array shuffling, object individuation and the like.

The last few years I had focused specifically on developing algorithmic drawing systems. The most recent project had explored the recursive subdivision of geometrical shapes. It involved pushing the computer to perform an endless series of repetitive, increasingly microscopic drawing tasks. This set me thinking about issues of computational labour, not particularly my labour of programming, but the non-conceptual, blind labour of the machine. Although at every instant informed by my code, it seemed to me that this unthinking sphere of process obtained a strange freedom – a strange aesthetic potential – precisely and paradoxically through the rigorous following of instructions. The elaborate patterns that the system produced were not entirely conceptual. They emerged from the dialectic between concept and procedure. This interest in the aesthetics of procedure led me to imagine somehow performing procedures myself, rather than simply choreographing them at a distance. This, in conjunction with a range of other factors (chiefly, an interest in the tradition of art and everyday life and the debates surrounding new forms of socially engaged practice), led me to contemplate shifting my practice from programming to walking.

In case this seems an unlikely shift, there are all kinds of associations between software practice and experimental walking. Both activities have a procedural aspect. Both involve repetition and looping. Both maintain a dialectic between aspects of explicit conceptual instruction and unthinking mechanical process. Both elaborate systems that involve dimensions of navigation and exploration. All kinds of software – particularly gaming software - frames engagement with possible and impossible, literal and metaphorical spaces of perambulation. Furthermore, a common heritage of intervention in everyday instrumental systems links software art practice to traditions of experimental walking. The relationship between intervening in

codes and interrogating aspects of social space via walking is archetypally evident in the practices of the Letterist International. Their twin aesthetic strategies of *detournement* (the re-use, recombination and derailing of existing cultural materials) and the *derive* (the drifting re-articulation of typically urban social space via non-instrumental forms of ambling) are clearly closely associated. Both involve the subversion and renegotiation of existing cultural forms and materials. *Detournement* disrupts and re-inscribes representational systems, while the *derive* undermines and re-conceives spatial systems (and modes of spatial experience). This joint concern remains a potent inspiration for many forms of contemporary socially engaged art practice, which tend to involve both the critical negotiation of societal codes and literal intervention in social space. Within this context it is hardly surprising that contemporary media art should expand its concerns beyond the technological frame to consider broader contexts of interaction and experience – including walking based practice.

In terms of my own specific interests, another point of reference is worth mentioning – the practice of the British artist, Richard Long. His work differs from the Letterist International model in a number of ways. Long's walks tend to prefer the scenography of isolated 'wilderness' environments rather than urban spaces and his work is less critical than speculative in character. It charts relations between dimensions of abstraction and ephemeral lived experience, sculptural intervention and traceless passage, concise poetic language and the duration and effort of long walks. Associated with the tradition of 60s and 70s Land Art, Long positions walking not as an antidote to art or as an assault on extant spatial regimes, but as an experimental form of sculpture, poetry, performance and drawing. While I am less concerned to render walking in the image of art, I share Long's concern with non-urban spaces. My walks are set in bush at the damaged fringe of the suburban environment. I also tend to avoid the classic avant-garde defamiliarisation of spatial codes. My aim is more to trace existing paths; to follow them attentively as they change, as they appear and disappear, as things happen. Finally, I share Long's concern with minimal strategies of documentation – with gestures of displacement, reticence and silence.

Of course, there is nothing new about exploring relations between the world of software code and practices of walking. In 2004 the Dutch collective Social Fiction won the Transmediale festival Software prize for their *dot.walk* project. Drawing on the Letterist and Situationist heritage, it was an experiment in "algorithmic psychogeography" (2007), representing the playful, spatially inappropriate codes of the *derive* in pseudo programming code. Inspired by the emergent potential of John Conway's "Game of Life" (Social Fiction, 2007: 2), the project described a simple, unambiguous algorithm for enabling a defamiliarised experience of urban spaces. Tjark Ihmels (undated) summarises the rules in these terms:

```
//Classic.walk
Repeat
[
1st street left
```

2nd street right
        2nd street left
        ]

The program is structured as a rudimentary loop. It employs the objectivity of simple counting in order to avoid any relapse into subjective, intentional behaviour. The affective sense of spatial derangement is notionally guaranteed then by an avoidance of affective dimensions of choice.   On the one hand, *dot.walk* charts a correspondence between algorithmic code and conceptual walking instructions, but at another level it dramatises the incongruity between instructionally precise code and the messy and informal character of actual walking. In relation to the latter, the project is less about describing a natural alignment between computation and walking than employing code as a means of denaturalising ordinary patterns of lived interaction with urban space.

Although sharing similar overall aims, the field of locative media practice positions the relationship between coded abstraction and urban experience somewhat differently. While a level of tension remains evident, there is a much greater emphasis on the potential for overlap, correspondence and exchange. Ben Russell, in his influential *Headmap Manifesto* describes "a world in which computer games move outside and get subversive" (1999: 1). Locative media works to unsettle the boundaries between the spheres of information and actual urban architecture. It presents an inversion of space, in which the computational obtains a literal identity and real social space is shot through with dimensions of the virtual. A whole set of analogies between real and programmatic networked space are grounded in the possibilities of the Cartesian GPS-grid and the RFID relational encounter. In this sense, leaving aside the political debates about its relation to larger mechanisms of administration and power, locative media suggests a euphoric space of co-mingling, inversion and projection.

As a final example of practice in this field, it is worth mentioning the work of British artist and academic, Simon Pope. A member of the I/O/D collective - famous for its seminal alternative web browser, *WebStalker* (1998) - Pope portrays a more complex relation between technical networks and dimensions of spatial interaction.   His various relational walking projects, which are cast in deliberately social terms and involve elements of encounter, conversation and the like, extend the notion of networks beyond any narrow technical conception. Pope insists upon a broad conception of networked artistic practice - "The network becomes a field, terrain or environment through which to operate on, in or through " (2003). A recent work, *Memory Marathon* (2012), involved walking the London Olympic marathon route speaking to hundreds of locals about their Olympic memories. It explores the relationship between personal recollection and larger social and historical events. It shapes a local, intimate, unheroic human network by re-performing aspects of the marathon and Olympic torch relay. Pope (2002) pointedly resists the view that technical networked culture and open-source software practice provides a model for more general, social-collaborative artistic practice. Suspicious of blurry metaphoric associations and determined to approach fundamental concepts of

network and code in an open, non-reductive and medium-agnostic manner, Pope suggests interesting strategies for rethinking the relationship between programmed and walked systems.

Drawing Lines

Defining systems for drawing lines. Determining paths and following them. How different can these two things be? Which of the two necessarily refers to computer programming? Which of the two refers to walking? To be honest, I had assumed that there would be strong lines of association between my algorithmic drawing and walking practice. I had assumed that they would enter easy dialogue and close correspondence. On the contrary, they seemed to turn away from each other and diverge, suggesting very different relations to aspects of process, system and event.

So here, very briefly, are the two projects:

1. *Loom*: this is the algorithmic drawing project that I have already described, which was concerned with the recursive subdivision of geometrical shapes and the aesthetic relationship between algorithm and machine procedure. I spent many months writing the underlying engine and rendering a variety of complex patterned images. These images were far too detailed and fine to be seen on a computer screen, so they were printed on high-quality paper.
2. *Multiplex*: this more amorphous project involved walking (and running) around the local neighbourhood and bush escarpment, deliberately only documenting displaced portions of the activity, while also engaging in meta-level reflection on the multiplexed relation between dimensions of art and walking. There was no programming involved, but it did involve aspects of photography and blogging.

I could say more about these projects, but I'm not sure that I need to. The projects in themselves are not that important. What counts is my experience of them, particularly my experience of their coded character – their systematic dimension.

Best to begin with the key difference – the most obvious one. In terms of classical systems theory (Bertalanffy, 2003), *Loom* represents a traditional closed system, while *Multiplex* represents an open system.

Evident even at the level of its overall aesthetic strategy – its concern with the interior subdivision of enclosed geometric shapes - *Loom* involved a work of finite system elaboration. The paradox is that this is oriented towards the production of complex, unpredictable images. In typical style, a finite apparatus is geared towards the (apparent, always only apparent) production of emergent results. Another level of paradox here is that despite the sense that emergence is the consequence of the interaction of simple elements and rules, in the case of *Loom*, the pursuit of complexity also involved an increasing complexity of input

parameters and algorithmic subdivision rules. In typical style, no matter how fiercely resisted, the programmatic system very quickly becomes as complex and unpredictable as the pseudo-emergent results. So, as much as the process of coding appears as one of *ex nihilo* invention and mastery, it also teeters at the edge of disabling loss.

Multiplex worked very differently. I set myself far less elaborate rules – for instance, to only take photographs at the beginning and end of a walk; that is, to document the process of walking in negative terms. Walking appears as that which is not made visible, but which defines the duration and difference between two otherwise roughly identical shots. These rules, however, lacked any clear, strictly defined precision. What counted as "before"? What counted as "after"? How closely did the before and after shots have to match? This imprecision – this possibility of imprecision – was something new to me and engaged with the wider issue of fuzzy, ultimately indeterminable system elements and boundaries. Rather than struggling to anticipate and enable all possibilities, it as though the conceptual system that informed my walking had a thoroughly tentative and heuristic value. Instead of summoning the emergent from the finite, the walking system projected an initial incompleteness – it structured an opening because closure was not feasible, because the system itself could never take adequate independent shape. It was more broadly, ecologically determined and enmeshed at the outset.

The problem of the programmed system is always how to retain sufficient flexibility so that the system can evolve and change in interesting ways. In relation to *Loom*, for instance, I deliberately avoided building any kind of user-interface. All the user parameterisation occurred at the level of code in order to avoid the necessity for a standard, stable system-view architecture. The problem I encountered in my *Multiplex* project was precisely the opposite. Instead of an unwieldy, overly determined system, I was faced with very a loose set of rules that were constantly changing as new walking possibilities emerged. I suppose I could have stuck rigorously to a narrow set of rules, but it seemed more interesting to constantly adapt my rules in terms of new circumstances.   The risk here is that the project loses all formal integrity.

The malleable character of my *Multiplex* system was partly linked to the lack of a clear distinction between aspects of code and aspects of running. Whereas development of the *Loom* system involved a constant interplay between programming and machine compilation and execution, the Multiplex system enabled reflection upon aspects of system within the midst of procedure. There was not that necessary gap between the material abstraction of programming code and the blindness of dumb procedure. Conceptual code and lived walking practice were closely entwined and linked.

Closely related to this different experience of system is a different experience of event. Events – for instance, the production of a specific drawn image or the recognition of an occurrence while walking - can be conceived as the product of a given system, but they can also point to its limits. For the French philosopher

Alain Badiou (2007), events occur against the the grain of systems, at their points of collapse. They take shape not as logical consequences but as accidents and aberrations. They are uncertain and unpredictable. In a manner reminiscent of the tradition of existentialism, Badiou argues that events demand recognition and commitment. They gain their truth value precisely through moments of radical insight and efforts of fatal allegiance. Within this conception of the event it is possible to recognise aspects of the ancient Greek notion of *Kairos* – decisive time, time that must be recognised and seized – and that is specifically contrasted to *Chronos* – measured, linear-sequential time. Within programming I can only foster an event in relation to a choreography of precisely timed instructions. I am bound to speak the language of Chronos even as I struggle to summon something else. Most significantly, my images emerge as the products of an integral system, rather than as tears in its constraints. While there is nothing necessarily wrong with this obedience to the language of systems, especially as this obedience can also represent a meta-level reflection on questions of logic and limit, I experience things very differently in my walking activities. There, despite every effort to dutifully follow a path, I am constantly encountering things that lead me astray – a mattress in a creek, a deer pursued by dogs, a heap of wrecked cars in a gully. Actually, of course, the walking system is explicitly configured to enable these encounters. Any positing of systems, rules and constraints is just an excuse to begin walking and, in so doing, to stumble across events. The key issue is that the walking system does not altogether anticipate the character of events or encompass them – rather it provides a minimally determined framework for accidents of encounter. It may be that these various events are not radically irruptive in Badiou's demanding sense, but they are still primarily oriented away from system integrity towards openness and discovery.

It is worth considering one last and more uncertain point of difference. It relates to the social positioning of the two systems. Here the concern is how the specific coded system relates to the wider social system.

At the beginning of her recent historical overview of participatory art practice, *Artificial Hells,* British critic Claire Bishop explains her preference for the term "participatory art" rather than "socially-engaged art" or "social-practice" by explaining that "participation" is more precise (signalling work that involves multiple people). She argues that the term "social", in contrast, is imprecise. In her view all art ultimately responds to its social environment, "even via negativa" (2012: 1-2) . In consequence, she excludes the potent space of the via negativa from consideration. However, while it may not belong within a discussion of neatly defined participatory art, it is certainly central to any consideration of art's relation to the social. Neglecting it ignores how ostensible turns away from the social - positing indirect, mediated relations - may in fact be emblematic of key dilemmas of sociality, communication and interaction in contemporary society.

Loom clearly demonstrates a displaced relation to the social. If it deals with issues of labour and mechanical process then it does so via a language of patterned abstraction. I would argue that it withdraws from direct

social interaction – certainly from any sense of literal audience participation – in order to reflect indirectly on the *aporias* of the social. It signals constitutive contradictions and modes of alienation precisely by retaining a scrupulous distance from any rhetoric of social intimacy. It is precisely in its isolation, in its apparent solipsism, that *Loom* speaks to the social. In contrast, *Multiplex* appears much more socially engaged. It follows established paths and explores dimensions of custodial environmental responsibility. At the same time, it maintains an allegiance to a traditional romantic conception of isolated walking. Walking appears both as a means of alienation and social engagement. The socially-inscribed paths stage contradictory trajectories – both away from and towards the social. At least in this respect then the algorithmic and walked systems discover a point of agreement – they are linked by a shared ambivalent relation to the larger social system.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that code does not assume its pure, developed and most refined state in computer programming. Computer code is not the crystalised version of code generally, rather it is only one of many sites in which a notion of code is elaborated. Without necessarily wanting to generalise on the basis of my own experience, it is evident that the articulation of aspects of system, event and interaction can be posited very differently within the context of different species of coding activity. In relation to my own practice, this represents less a disabling state of affairs than a potential basis for rethinking aspects of software programming and walking in novel ways, not only in terms of areas of communication and correspondence, but also, equally importantly, areas of incongruity, disjunction and juxtaposition.

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