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EREHWON: For a cartography of change

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Abstract

We introduce a work-in-progress collaborative research project, which aims at creating an interactive real time cartography of socio-political performative projects within Europe and beyond. The cartography will be designed as a digital platform for rehearsing new ways of direct democratic practices and experimenting with potential forms of public space transformation that these practices can lead to.

Politics and the people

As Randy Martin notes, 'politics today suffers from lack of evaluation' (2013, p.215). Politics has been shadowed and marginalised by global economic interests. Representative democracy has in many cases proved to be insufficient to include fair public participation in decision making. In addition, the recent global economic crisis has created continuous disruption of state economy and caused a sense of public disbelief towards the independence of state institutions from economic compromises which may prove harmful to the public welfare. Because of these conditions, public unrest has grown around the globe against the policies and conduct of governments and institutions.

Hannah Arendt discusses action (1958) as the highest realization of the *vita activa*, a word translating into 'the life devoted to public-political matters'. Arendt defined three categories that comprise *vita activa* all of which correspond to different but fundamental human activities: labor, work and action. While labor and work are necessary activities done in order to survive and to fabricate correspondingly, action is characterized by its ability to disclose the identity of the agent, to affirm the reality of the world, and to actualize our capacity for freedom. The capacity to take action comes from power, which in Arendt's terms is generated by 'the living together of people'. Indeed, she saw power as the means that maintained the public realm, where politics occur.

In the recent years of turmoil more and more artists, activists and other transdisciplinary collectives engage in initiatives, which indicate new and resurrected modes of acting and thinking. Socio-political performative interventions can be identified as direct aesthetic responses to the social and economic inequalities created in the last decades by the increase of neoliberalism and the globalized economy. These new forms of protest, 'performed' by artists, activists and collectives, come in response to the rising 'State of Exception' (Agamben, 2005), the authoritarian contingent measures imposed by governments in times of crisis, and contribute significantly to the awakening of social consciousness and the empowerment of the individual's political participation in society. They constitute a 'politics of aesthetics' and create the possibility for a reconfiguration of the political sense embedded in the image of the State, that of a 'dead mechanism' in the confrontation with the 'living power of the community' (Rancière, 2010, p. 119).

Well-known examples are the worldwide Occupy movement and the Arab Spring, the occupied theatres Teatro Valle in Rome and Embros Theatre in Athens, and the occupation of Gezi Park in Istanbul. These interventions are real acts of re-appropriation of culture. At their core, is the free sharing of public spaces that belong to and are managed collectively by the people connecting to the idea of the resurrection of the commons.

Performance and politics

In this paper we define the term *socio-political performance* within the research context of Performance Studies. The characteristically interdisciplinary practices of the field and, in particular, its articulation with philosophy and aesthetics become crucial to a more profound understanding of its ontological/aesthetic political implications in society and in the arts. The term 'socio-political' started being noticeably applied to aesthetic analysis during the 60/70's, when artists and scholars started publicly talking about pressing political and social issues. They brought this discussion forward to the public sphere through their performance and theoretical work. Performance studies is no longer solely concerned with 'artistic contexts', i.e 'the theatre', but its object of study extends to several formats and contexts that have performatic characteristics. These have the potential to critically and directly address specific social, cultural and political issues. These diverse 'formats' and 'spaces' become objects of analysis because they represent the desire to create new forms of society and enact ontological shifts through their creative and aesthetic power. They constitute 'free

experimental labs' for practising new forms of community-generated reconfigurations of the social, political and economic practices of life.

Ana Vujanovic in her work, *Vita Performactiva* (2011), notes that politics 'has become a keyword in the contemporary international performing arts world' of today. The question Vujanovic puts forward is, 'What does the metaphor of politics *qua* theatre mean and... what does *teatrum mundi* mean?'. For Vujanovic, it becomes crucial to understand these metaphors, because they evidence a conceptual and historical reference that reflects a "theoretical intuition" of an existent proximity between politics and performance. The author adds that beyond any metaphor there are also many sociological, anthropological and political studies which indicate similar formal and procedural practices between politics and public practice, and theatre and performance. Coming from a specific performance studies field, Richard Schechner has also tried to clarify the distinction between the concepts of *doing*, which refers to all human actions, and *showing doing*, which refers to performance, both in art and beyond (Vujanovic, 2011).

In times of crisis, socio-political performance projects reflect a continuous search for social justice with artists, activists and citizens 'acting' and becoming mediators who voice social and political discontent and the desire for change. However, there has not been so far a systematic attempt to record the methods, practices, and values that are created through each project and contribute to a narrative of change. Erehwon, our proposed project, addresses the need to design tools for organization and collaboration that facilitate the creation of sharable public spaces of co-creation and mutual support. For doing this we draw on the field of critical cartography.

Cartography as a tool for visualising and mirroring communities

The field of critical cartography has direct relevance to our work as it is concerned with the politics of representation and has strong historical roots in creating maps as tools for solving socio-political problems. Contemporary cartography is a tool for visualising networked communities through several layers of different connection types. Maps are active; they actively construct knowledge, they exercise power and they can be a powerful means of promoting social change (Crampton, 2004). Critical mapping practices explore maps as a tool for building new communities and enable communities and individuals to connect based on their needs, desires, expectations, aspirations, values and practices beyond spatial territories and physical borders. Crampton et al. (2006) write:

"Not only is the theoretical critique contributing to our understanding of the theoretical aspects of mapping, but the increasingly ubiquitous and mobile mapping capabilities are changing the structure of map production and labor. Maps are no longer imparted to us by a trained cadre of experts, but along with most other information we create them as needed ourselves"

As networked communities can be represented through different kinds of connections, an important role of contemporary cartography is that of revealing new networks that would have otherwise remain uncovered. Mobile and web technologies for mapping and for shared mapping offer tools for easier, quicker and more in depth 'organization, presentation, analysis and communication of spatially referenced information on a wide variety of topics of interest to society in an interactive, dynamic, multi sensory format with the use of multimedia and multimodal interfaces' (Taylor, 2006). Crowd-sourced mapping in particular is a powerful tool for connection and communication because it allows community to organise and manage itself. Guildi (2014) writes:

"Unlike the web tools of the early 2000s — chat rooms, forums, wikis, blogs, and podcasts — crowd-sourced maps actually analyze the data given to them, sorting social information into patterns of local, regional, and global patterns. The maps do not merely collect information, as a "memory hole" like WikiLeaks does; rather, the maps show the community back to itself, revealing hotspots of local corruption and pollution, giving activists the tools to target particular places with investigation or protest".

One example of a cartographic project, which used cartography for mapping civic unrest, is Hackitektura's project 'Mapping the Commons'. It consisted of a series of workshops in Istanbul, Athens, São Paulo and other cities with each one exploring the different definitions of the commons and assigning parameters to each definition based on languages, social relationships, knowledge and interests of the city's multitude. The different types of commons were then mapped on a geographic map of the city using video documentaries as case studies (i.e. <http://www.meipi.org/istanbul.map.php>).

Cartographic analysis through movement

In our project we introduce the concept of movement as a fruitful lenses through which to analyse critically our cartography. A cartography that aims at mapping action innately embodies the possibility of movement. In contrast to the view of cartography representing a geographical fixed territory, the mapping of action in

relation to thought is always in flux. This creates a real time composition, a visual score that is capable of translating movement as a process of thought. In Deleuzian terms, thought and action are perceived as constant becoming, constant territorializations and deterritorializations that characterize the immanence between human movement and the movements of the world.

The movable cartography is a real time cartographic composition, a landscape built rhizomatically by people's actions and thoughts, where thought and action interact beyond physical territories and borders, reflecting the ways in which bodies affect and are affected by the world. This kind of map is inherently affective, political and aesthetic, voicing people's desire for community.

This movable cartography also offers the possibility to create a visual narrative that shows the *actualization* of the different possible modes of public participation. The narrative can also show people's capacity to create possible futures collaboratively, and by constantly rehearsing democratic practices.

Erehwon: For a cartography of change

Erehwon, our proposed cartography, will be developed as a response to the lack of a real-time online cartographic interface of socio-political performative projects in Europe and beyond. We envisage that the map will become a tool for building community and empowering individual and communal action. It will be designed as an on-line platform, an on-line commons, which will facilitate the sharing of experiences and practices and disseminate knowledge by enhancing communication and creating a fertile territory for collaboration.

One of the characteristic roles we envisage for Erehwon is that of a tool to facilitate the mobility of the projects, and break the isolation of those working within this type of thematic. It will, thus, extend the geographical territories by inter-changing physical with digital channels of information. Erehwon will have the capacity to offer a constant updated view of the change across time and space on how citizens perceive and share common public space, while being a digital public space itself, an Agora, capable of receiving input from those involved and also open to real time reconfigurations and re-appropriations by them. In addition, Erehwon will have the capacity of foregrounding socio-political interventions before they become forgotten. Socio-political performances have the tendency to rapidly disappear or to go unnoticed by the general public, silenced by state powers and mass media. Equally, they are often rendered obsolete through the rapidly changing priorities and novelty that characterizes communication through social networks, which are normally their channels of dissemination.

By creating a platform for participatory visual mapping, Erehwon will be collecting information and shape memory through time. It will also mirror communities back to themselves giving them the necessary tools for analysis and thinking through the different strategies and modes of intervention. Erehwon's urgency as a critical tool resonates with Negri and Hardt's perspective who argue that, at the face of these challenging times, it is fundamental to 'rethink the most basic political concepts, such as power, resistance, multitude and democracy, before we embark on a practical political project to create new democratic institutions and social structures, we need to ask if we really understand what democracy means today (or could mean today)' (Negri and Hardt, 2004, p.7).

"Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them (...) what keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power. And whoever, for what reasons, isolates himself and does not partake in such being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent, no matter how great his strength and how valid his reasons". (Arendt, 1958, p.201).

Erehwon, the name of which is inspired by the homonymous novel by Samuel Butler who wrote about a utopian society, is a tool for rehearsing possible forthcoming communities as has been discussed by authors such as Nancy, Agamben, Negri and Hardt, Virno, and Esposito, to name but a few. Nancy's idea of a community (Nancy, 1991) is reflected in Erehwon's proposal: a community which is not characterized by physical vicinity, but populated by a plurality of singular individuals (*being singular plural*) where being in common translates as co-habitation of different singularities allowing the sharing of different modes of being and acting. Instead of communion, the focus is on communication. This rejects the idea of community as one perceived solely through harmonious relations or as one indiscernible collective.

Erehwon's design methodology

The first goal of the project is to identify, understand and articulate the design considerations for building Erehwon. The complexity, multi-dimensionality and culturally-conditioned nature of the data of socio-political performance projects presents a challenge for the design of the map: how can we determine and represent visually an interactive narrative that will make the user journey along the data paths meaningful to them in

terms of connectedness and communication? How can this narrative create affective connections among users? From a design perspective, the central focus of this question is how users will experience the map in an embodied way. In order to imagine possible future designs of this map, we need the first-hand experience of its future users. How do they envisage it?

Co-design, collaboration between the designers and the prospective users, is a fruitful method for exploration, ideation and development which is oriented towards the user's needs and requirements. The designers are able to identify and understand the different aspects of the user's experience while embedding themselves in the users' context. The users, who are the experts in the context to be addressed, are given the opportunity and the tools to shape ideas and provide suggestions and reflections on the design through the development process. Of course, co-design methods vary from project to project and they have to be tailored based on each project's dynamics and research questions. In this project, we consider two important parameters of the design process.

Firstly, we view co-design as a situation where the designers are not the 'experts' but the facilitators of the collaborative process. Designers have the background knowledge to orchestrate an ideation sequence, select the most effective, interesting and plausible ideas and run quick analysis-synthesis processes to steer the group creativity towards innovative possibilities. They should be open to serendipitous outcomes and be ready and able to manage them appropriately. Secondly, in order to fully explore the potential of the interactive cartography as a platform for communication, the designers should be able and flexible to absorb the knowledge of the collaborators and change the design process accordingly.

The co-design approach emphasizes the exchange of the background knowledge of all collaborators in a design process considering the knowledge as bi-directional. It also acknowledges the transformations that each of the collaborators' knowledge and experience undergoes. Therefore, the designers pass themselves through different transformative stages viewing the design process, their domain of expertise, as an experience in the same ways the future users of the map do. Being consciously in this self-reflective process while practising it is called Experiential Design, 'a transformational process between concept and experience, with a holistic view of design phenomena' (Woo H. R., 2008). In experiential design, the designers' existing design knowledge and the users' existing knowledge of the context are brought together and dynamically interact, creating new experiences, which, in turn, create new knowledge. The circle continues 'in a process of reproduction and regeneration' ((Friedman, 2007) in (Woo H. R., 2008)) leading each time to design innovation. Following these perspectives, the design of the map will be shaped through the collaborative creative processes initiated by a series of workshops. The designers who will be involved will have the role of the facilitator, observing and probing the exchange of knowledge, aspirations and needs of each group, challenging discussed ideas, reflecting on and enabling others' reflection on the newly created understandings.

Workshops

The workshops will involve participants from several disciplines pertaining to the research area, which more often than not cross-over, such as performance studies scholars, performance artists, directors, activists, audience/public/spectators, designers, hackers, political philosophers, sociologists etc.

The series of workshops will begin with a first public encounter which will contribute to the conceptual design of Erehwon. We will invite scholars and practitioners, experts in the research areas of Performance Studies, Political Philosophy, Cultural Geography and Design to contribute to the definition of the socio-political issues that will be addressed on the map, the format of the socio-political performance projects that will be included, and the design challenges and opportunities of building this map. The major thematics that will be identified during this first workshop, will comprise the content of the follow-up workshops which will move on to explore in depth the challenges and opportunities in each thematic.

The next hands-on workshops will be open calls to artists, activists, design practitioners, technologists, coders to collectively identify, understand and articulate practical issues, propose and trial solutions. The process of understanding the design considerations for developing Erehwon during the workshops will follow an iterative prototype method using low fidelity prototypes. This will be done initially with physical materials and then transferred into software by the coders who will participate in the workshops.

Although the map will be designed from scratch we do not start with a blank canvas. Examples of similar projects, including the ones referenced in this paper, albeit some without the dynamic functionalities we envisage for Erehwon, will serve as a source of inspiration in terms of levels of abstractions, narrative of the data, taxonomy, and aesthetic design.

Finally, all the prototypes and the final version of Erehwon will be open source and available to future designers and researchers. Under the Experiential Design approach, the design process never ends but reaches specific milestones set by the research goals each time. We aspire that Erehwon will comprise input for further design discourse.

Epilogue

In this paper we have unfolded the theoretical framework behind Erehwon, our on-going collaborative cartography project which aims to develop an online platform that maps and connects socio-political performance projects in Europe and beyond. We have discussed how Erehwon will be built to enable knowledge and experience sharing, enhance collaboration, communication, and engagement for anyone who is involved in these projects. We have also introduced the concept of cartographic analysis through movement. Following our design methodology, in the next stage we will run the described workshops and proceed with the development of Erehwon. The process will be documented and discussed in a forthcoming publication.

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