Mapping invisibility

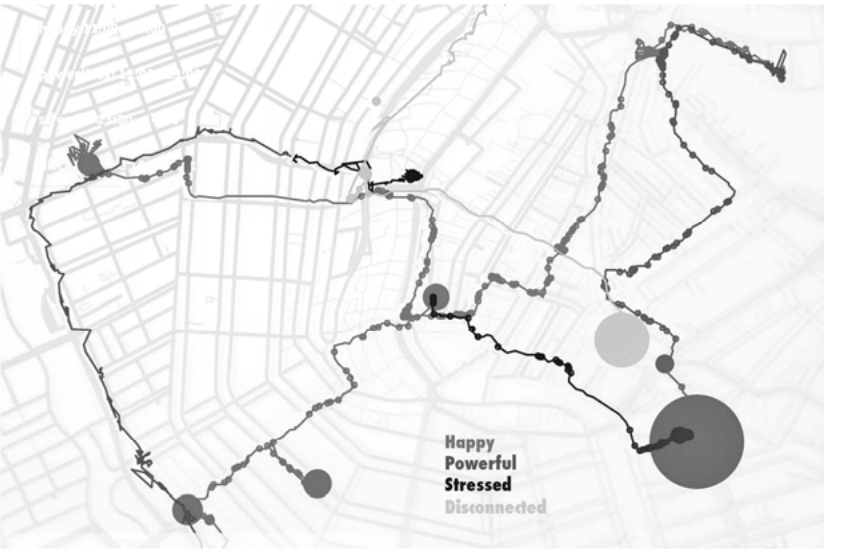
Surveillance art and the potential of performative cartography

SIGRID MERX

A man guides us through Amsterdam. We follow him. He stops at every traffic light, carefully waiting for it to turn green, even if there is no traffic to be seen. During our four-hour walk, he tells us about his life in Africa and why he decided to leave his country to try to build a life in Europe. We ask him questions. He replies. After a while we stand in front of the public library. The man says he loves the library. The calm atmosphere of people reading and studying. The knowledge that is piled up in there. The fact that there is free internet. And that it is one of the few places in the city where it is quiet, no one bothers you and you can take a short nap. The man explains how entering this public building without a library card has become increasingly difficult. A card you can only obtain with a Dutch passport or other identity papers. Documents he doesn't possess.

The group is carrying a recording device documenting the conversation and a mobile phone with a mapping application that traces our walk in real-time. Somewhere else in a cultural venue in the city centre, people look at a projection screen that shows a map of the city centre of Amsterdam. A blue line crawls through the streets. That's us. The longer we stand still at a certain location, such as the library, the more the line thickens, transforming into a dot. Other lines trace other groups that are simultaneously walking through the city with their guides, jointly creating a collective map. When our tour ends, our conversation is made available online as an audio download. People can only 'unlock' the story on their mobile phone by physically standing on the exact starting point of the walk and following the exact same route. Deviating from the route results in the voices fading out. In order to engage with the story, the audience is required to literally and carefully retrace the steps of the undocumented person and his or her movements.

Figure 1: Screenshot Map from 'Mapping Invisibility'



© Naomi Bueno de Mesquita

I have been participating in 'Mapping Invisibility', a workshop on performative digital mapping designed by spatial designer Naomi Bueno de Mesquita (TRADERS)[1] in collaboration with Platform-Scenography.[2] The workshop is part of *Out of State*, a four-day cultural program with performances and public debates about the practical consequences of Dutch immigration policies for immigrants. Based on my experience as a participant, this short text aims to reflect on the potential of such a performative cartography to produce a space for civic engagement. To do so, I will pay particular attention to practices of walking as acts of both social engagement and co-producing the city, and I will position the workshop within the framework of surveillance art. The framework of surveillance art helps to point out the critical and subversive nature of the project and

1 TRADERS (short for 'Training Art and Design Researchers in Participation for Public Space') researches the ways in which art and design researchers can 'trade' or exchange with multiple participants and disciplines in public space projects and – at the same time – trains them in doing so. Naomi Bueno de Mesquita is one of TRADERS' PhD researchers.

2 Platform Scenography, based in Rotterdam in the Netherlands, is an analogue and digital network by and for scenographers dedicated to scenographic thinking and working (cf. http://www.platform-scenography.nl/).

how digital surveillance technologies can be used to create alternative regimes of visibility and participation.

WALKING AS A WAY OF PRODUCING THE CITY

The act of walking the city lies at the heart of the project 'Mapping Invisibility'. Walking functions both as method and content, both in terms of the workshop where participants walk the city collectively with a guide, and in terms of the audio tour where the participant walks the city individually.

For most participants, walking the city is usually a matter of logistics (getting from A to B) and/or consumerism (shopping, culture, dining, tourism etc.) For the guides, however, the largest part of their day consists of walking around the city out of necessity. The so-called 'bed, bath, bread policy' ensures that undocumented immigrants are entitled to a place to sleep during the night, where they can wash up in the morning and have a meal in the evening. During the day they are required to leave the shelter and to live on the streets, regardless of the weather. Since working is not an option for these people, they don't have money to buy anything, and since standing still is potentially dangerous because it might identify them as 'illegal' immigrants, they are forced to pretty much just walk around all day.

According to Michel de Certeau, to walk is to compose a path. What makes up the city is the collection of an innumerable amount of these intersecting paths (Certeau 1984: 97). The city space, Certeau suggests, is "actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it" (ibid.: 117). Through their spatial practices, the undocumented citizens participate as much in the production of the city as their documented counterparts. The idea that urban space is socially produced in and through our collective movements – an idea that has been theorized in most detail by Henri Lefebvre (1991, 1996) – has a distinct emancipatory potential. It suggests that the production of space is not limited to planners, bureaucrats and administrators, but takes place in the everyday activities of inhabitants and users. This is not to say, however, that our movements in the city are free and spontaneous. They are characterized by repetition and dictated by state and market-modelled patterns of behaving and being.

Lavrinec (2013: 25) describes this repetition of movement by urban citizens as the performance of a "routine choreography". It might seem that the undocumented somehow escapes these urban routines, wandering all day through the city, not working, not consuming, just being there, creating their own alternative paths. However, not following the predesignated paths, not performing the dom-

inant choreography and not adopting to the rhythms of capitalist society is of course not a radical choice, but the ultimate and inevitable consequence of not being recognized and acknowledged as a citizen and therefore as a co-producer of the city. In a way, the urban trajectories performed by the undocumented are as much a form of routine choreography as are those of the other citizens. Most of them, as becomes clear in the conversations during the walk, have developed a set of routes and routines that they repeatedly use depending on their personal needs and desires. For example, if they want to be able to sit down for a while without calling attention to themselves they go to Central Station and mingle with the people who are waiting for a train. Or, as already indicated in the introduction, if they need free Wi-Fi or take a nap, they can try to get into the public library and find themselves a reading booth. If they need God, they can go to a church. Their day ends by returning to their shelter. They wake up the next morning and continue with their daily routine. In this respect they are, to use a term by Certeau, 'blind walkers', strolling along predetermined paths without self-control and agency.

Figure 2: Workshop Mapping Invisibility

© Naomi Bueno de Mesquita

Opposed to the figure of the blind walker we often find the 'flâneur', the urban stroller that counters the monotonous routines of everyday life in a capitalist society. The Situationists believed the 'flâneur' to be critical and subversive in the sense that he wandered around without a specific aim or plan, adopting to anoth-

er rhythm, allowing him to perceive and experience the city in a 'new' way (Sadler 1999). We could consider the walk in this project as an urban drift in the tradition of the Situationists; an unplanned urban journey that allows one to perceive and experience the city in a new way and according to an alternative logic and to make a connection between urban settings and bodily-emotional experiences of the city (Lavrinec 2013: 56). For the undocumented guide, not only is the city revealed as a social space, a place where you can encounter people instead of hiding from them, but also as a public space in which you have the right to appear and to act. Walking others through the city becomes a political act. The participant of the workshop or the audio tour is invited to an alternative city tour with an unlikely guide and is thus confronted with a parallel and often unknown reality of exclusion, invisibility and oppression, and with an other that inhabits and lives this reality on a day to day basis. Co-performing these trajectories through the city thus disrupts the daily routines of both undocumented guides and documented participants; and it opens up a space of encounter between them.

SURVEILLANCE ART

Using strategies and technologies of digital mapping, tracing and tracking the project aimed at bringing undocumented and documented citizens together by making the everyday practice of walking in the city as an undocumented citizen visible and perceptible. Considering the particular use of surveillance tools and strategies, I propose to understand this project as an example of so-called 'surveillance art'.

According to performance scholar Elise Morrison, surveillance art can be considered a particular genre of political activism and performance in which (digital) surveillance technologies, such as CCTV cameras and GPS devices, are used and appropriated to create "an array of technologically savvy, politically conscious and aesthetically innovative alternatives to the current structures of power and participation within surveillance society" (Morrison 2015: 126-127).

Within the broad field of surveillance art and performance, Morrison (2015) distinguishes three ways in which surveillance art can interrupt and counter our contemporary surveillance society. First, through physical intervention in habitual patterns of movement and usership as conditioned by state, military and corporate design of surveillance interfaces. Secondly, through the appropriation of surveillance technologies for subversive ends. Thirdly, through critically highlighting blind spots in surveillance society.

Morrison's examples of surveillance art range from performances like *Tracking Transcience* in which Hasan Elahi, having been spied on by the FBI on a regular basis, develops a website that updates his whereabouts every hour of the day on a world map; the *Surveillance Camera Players*, who develop plays for CCTV cameras; the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, a tweaked cell phone that is redesigned to function as a GPS mobile device that helps Mexican immigrants safely cross the border; the *iSee software* developed by the activist-engineer collective, *Institute for Applied Autonomy,* that allows users to interactively map 'the path of least surveillance' through cities around the world.

As Morrison stresses, surveillance not only entails a top-down process of discipline. In our everyday lives, using credit cards, webcams, tagging our pictures on Facebook, navigating through a city with our smartphones, we constantly participate as citizens in the surveillance society (Morrison 2013). In this respect, surveillance is by design participatory. However, in surveillance art and performance, "participation becomes a tactic of political critique and subversive action" (ibid.: 7). This is certainly the case in *State of Shelter* where surveillance technology is appropriated to allow for alternative models of participation, agency and subjecthood.

In any other context, following an undocumented immigrant through the streets of Amsterdam, checking and mapping his whereabouts, documenting his life story and exposing it to others, could be considered a rather problematic and even unethical act of control and surveillance. Moreover, it is quite paradoxical to make visible the urban trajectories of people who have no legal right to be there, considering that much of their daily life and fate is about being invisible, staying off the grid and under the radar. Nonetheless, it is precisely this fact that motivated these immigrants to participate in the event. They are all part of *We Are Here,*[3] a group of refugees in Amsterdam who are not entitled to housing, not permitted to work and as a result, are forced to live on the streets. Not wanting to hide any longer and claiming a place in society, they decided to actively start making visible the inhumane conditions they have to deal with. Participating in this workshop has been just one of many ways the group has called attention to their situation. In doing so, they both critique and subvert the structures of power that keep them from participating in society and forces them to live off the grid. The project is political in the Rancièrean sense, in that it entails a redistribution of the senses, of what is visible and sayable, and produces an alternative politics of vision (Rancière 2004). It restages bodies that have been disem-

3 See http://wijzijnhier.org/ (accessed July 23, 2016)

powered and made invisible through government policies. In a very literal sense, as we will see later, it puts people back on the map.

With respect to the people guided through the city by the undocumented both during the workshop and the audio tour, the participants were invited to navigate through public space in an alternative way, experiencing the city – if only for some hours – through the eyes and stories of their guides. Stopping for each traffic light, even without any traffic around, does make sense when your guide tells you that being caught while crossing the street with a red light might lead to his arrest and eviction from the country. Perceiving the public library predominantly as a great place to take a nap is perfectly understandable when you learn that the shelters are crowded and full of noise. According to Morrison, surveillance art and performance can "expose audiences to their own habits of watching and being watched" (2015: 127). Participating in this walk revealed different understandings and possible meanings of public space, of being and acting in public space, of alternative subjectivities in public space and also of the participants' own presence and behavior in public space. Such temporary aligning with the movements of the undocumented also highlights in an embodied way the tension between hiding and making public – a daily recurrent theme for the undocumented.

PERFORMATIVE MAPPING

A particularly interesting aspect of the workshop, is how the map for this subversive city tour was created through collaboration. Not only were the different trajectories of different groups mapped in real time on one digital map, but the legend of the map had been generated prior to the walk by the participants (not the guides) and decided upon collectively. The map's legend consisted of emotions, which the participants thought the undocumented might experience while walking through the city, such as despair or fear. Every hour, the guide would respond to a particular emotion by bringing his group to places and locations he personally associated with this emotion. While walking, the group had the chance to evaluate their preconceived ideas in direct dialogue with the undocumented. Each emotion would be marked by a color on the map, making visible the specific trajectory connected with that emotion. Moreover, every time the guide decided to stop at a certain location, the line on the map would turn into a dot, growing bigger depending on how long one would stay at that particular location, revealing the importance of the location in relation to the emotion. The workshop therefore also experimented with the genre of emotional maps, which

chart human feelings onto a cartographical landscape (Perkins 2009). The maps that were produced not only depicted the actual trajectories of walking but charged them with affective and subjective meaning. This is what Katherine Harmon (2003) refers to as 'personal geographies'. Such personal geographies reveal how a map is never an objective representation of reality, but always implies a particular perspective. Normally this perspective is obscured, allowing us to use the map without any further questioning. However, by bringing the subjectivity of the map to the foreground, we are invited to look beyond its functionality and ask ourselves what these trajectories actually mean. What narratives do they perform? For example, what is this huge blue dot, connected to the emotion 'hopeful', that appears on all the maps on the exact same spot? It turns out to be 'Het Wereldhuis', a centre for information, counselling, education and culture for undocumented migrants and one of the few places in Amsterdam where the undocumented can go to find advice, comfort, food and most importantly fellow migrants. Through the strategy of real-time digital visualization, then, the map invites reflection, understanding and engagement.

In order to understand how the workshop not only subverts dominant structures of participation but also produces a particular space of engagement, it might be helpful, then, to not only position the project within the context of surveillance art, but to also approach the work from the perspective of cartography and in particular as an example of performative and collaborative mapping. (Verhoeff 2012) Performative mapping is part of the so-called 'performative turn' in cartography in the late 20th century, which shifted the attention from maps as representations to the process of mapping. Not only are maps understood as a product of co-creative relationships between maps and users, they are also considered to have agency. Maps can 'do' things and produce certain effects. According to James Corner, mapping produces a particular understanding and experience of the world that is being mapped. As Corner argues, mapping is never neutral or without consequences, but instead a creative act "first disclosing and then staging the conditions for the emergence of new realities" (1999: 216). This quote also points to the performative and creative potential of maps to constitute and produce (new) worlds. Corner foregrounds the notion of imagination in relation to mapping: "Its agency lies in neither reconstruction nor imposition but rather in uncovering realities previously unseen or unimagined, even across seemingly exhausted grounds. Thus mapping *unfolds* potential" (ibid.: 213; orig. emphasis).

Returning to the workshop, we see how the conditions are indeed staged to facilitate a different understanding of the city and to reveal the harsh reality of 'illegal' immigrants. In this particular case, it is precisely the act of *collaborative*

mapping that allows for the emergence of a new perspective. It is only through an encounter between undocumented and documented that this shift in perspective can occur. The space for this encounter is produced in and through the process of collaborative mapping.

In digital cultures, networked technology-led interactive mapping is facilitating new forms of collaborative mapping. According to media scholar Nanna Verhoeff (2012: 13), one of the most striking characteristics of screen-based interfaces is "the possibility for people in transit to co-create the map of the spatial arrangement in which they are operating". With increasing interactive qualities, mapping has allowed users to also become producers.

It is precisely this emancipatory potential that explains why collaborative mapping as a strategy is so appealing to activists and socially engaged artists and designers. Co-producing its maps entails co-producing the city. It allows for reclaiming the city. In the case of the undocumented, this project is not only about being a subject that can actually be put on a map, but more importantly about being part of the map, being in a position to co-create the map and being acknowledged as a co-producer of the city and therefore as a citizen.

Even if this agency only can exist within the temporary framework of the workshop and people are forced back into invisibility, the marks they have left on the city while mapping it remain and are there to stay. Or as Corner (1999: 225) puts it: "The map 'gathers' and 'shows' things presently (and always) invisible, things which may appear incongruous or untimely but which may also harbour enormous potential for the unfolding of alternative events".

I would like to suggest that this potential is located in the downloadable audio tour. Through this app, the stories of the undocumented will be forever linked to the locations where they were shared; stored metadata can be retrieved whenever someone takes the time and makes the effort to revive them by activating the app and retracing the steps of the people who went before them. Because of this element of geotagging, something has been added to the city. It is charged with the potential of new encounters, ready to unfold in other instances, hopefully leading to other, more humane futures. In this respect the project functions as an open and lasting invitation, and as a call to engage.

CONCLUSION

Surveillance technology, such as GPS and other mapping devices, is a tool for (self)control and oppression. As I hope to have demonstrated, however, the mapping performances it supports can also encourage emancipation and individ-

ual and collaborative agency. In the case of 'Mapping Invisibility', the act of trying to understand through mapping helped to make visible – and to engage with – the undocumented and their performances in a world that is constantly being mapped, and where they are normally forced to remain invisible. Here, cartography became performative, in that the map was not a mere digital representation, but something that was produced in a co-creative relationship between the map and its different users. Through producing different modes of encounter and interaction between documented and undocumented that would normally not meet each other in public space, the project opened up an understanding of performative cartography as enabling, or perhaps provoking, a space for civic engagement.

REFERENCES

Certeau, Michel de (1984): Practices of Everyday Life, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Corner, James (1999): "The agency of mapping: speculation, critique and invention." In: Denis Cosgrove (ed.), Mappings, Chicago: Chicago University Press, pp. 213-252.

Harmon, Katharine (2003): You Are Here. Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination, New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Lavrinec, Jakaterina (2011): "From a 'blind walker' to an 'urban curator': initiating 'emotionally moving situations' in public spaces." In: Limes: Borderland Studies 4/1, pp.54-63.

Lavrinec, Jakaterina (2013): "Urban scenography: emotional and bodily experience." In: Limes: Borderland Studies 6/1, pp. 21-31.

Lefebvre, Henri (1991[1974]): The Production of Space (D. Nicholson-Smith, trans.), Oxford: Blackwell.

Lefebvre, Henri (1996[1968]): "Right to the City." In: Eleonore Kofman/Elizabeth Lebas (eds.), Henri Lefebvre: Writings on Cities. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 63-184.

Morrison, Elise (2013): "User - unfriendly. Surveillance art as participatory performance." In: Theater 43.3, pp. 5-23.

Morrison, Elise (2015): "Surveillance society needs performance theory and arts practice." In: International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media 11/2, pp.125-130.

Perkins, Chris (2009): "Performative and embodied mapping." In: Nigel Thrift/Rob Kitchin (eds.), Encyclopaedia of Human Geography, London: Elsevier, pp.126-132.

Rancière, Jacques (2004): The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible, London: Continuum.

Sadler, Simon (1999): The Situationist City, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Verhoeff, Nana (2012): Mobile Screens. The Visual Regime of Navigation, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.