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**Transgeography. Art as an Element of  
Communion between Peoples**

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**Transgeography.  
Art as an Element of Communion between Peoples**

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**Abstract**

The constant evolution of online artistic practices, that are increasingly relational, have changed territorial complexity, eliminating any difference between center and periphery. The structures that define the identity of the urban areas are constantly challenged and take a fluid form by changing boundaries where is unthinkable to establish distinctions between near and distant things. Starting from that, this topic focuses on some of the most significant works of contemporary art that, since the early 90s, through digital media, allowed users to manipulate, to different semantic levels, the identity of a specific environment. This study demonstrates how the network is able to produce a real effect, a concrete action on a specific territory, expanding the definition of space. The new living experiences are part of a cultural infrastructure that I would define as “Transgeography”, i.e. a collection of information ecosystems that transform the urban territory into interactive environments: the landscape is able to store, exchange and modify data through computer networks, facilitating access to the public sphere. The purpose of this analysis is to outline, also from a socio-anthropological viewpoint, a new knowledge of territories as suggested by interactive works, in which, every single contribution becomes common heritage. This proposal will try to answer the following question: how can art be an element of communion between peoples?

**Keywords:** Art, Internet, Interaction, Globalization

The network art practices, being more and more relational, have challenged the static nature of places, facilitating the overcoming of space-time barriers. The structures defining the identity of urban territories are constantly challenged and take on a fluid form with changing boundaries where it is unthinkable to be able to establish the differences between the centre and the periphery, as well as the distinctions between near and far things. The new cultural landscapes spontaneously change their form being stimulated by continuous flows of information. They are relational spaces that face, through the sharing of ideas, geographical complexity. Some works develop forms of communication in a ubiquitous dimension, favouring interactions in "distant" territories.

The new experiences of living are part of a cultural infrastructure that I would call "Transgeography", a set of informative ecosystems that transform the urban territory into interactive environments: the landscape is able to store, exchange and modify data through computer networks, facilitating access to the public sphere. Places become dynamic narratives that everyone can access. The "Transgeography", a hybrid territory in which the intimate and private place of the user coincides with the public and heterogeneous one of the community, redesigns an aesthetic iconography based on the sharing of knowledge. In this creative habitat, we build knowledge in a collective way, preventing any distinction between landscape, information and individual. Citizens have become active users of the network and have understood the social, political, economic and cultural potential of the digital world. The interweaving of history, geography and innovation is the key to interpreting a way of living that enhances new poetics of the place.

It is opportune to dwell on some of the most significant works of the contemporary art scene that, since the beginning of the 90s, have allowed users to manipulate the identity of a specific environment, through digital media and at different semantic levels. In 1993, the advent of the World Wide Web led to widespread use of the Internet, "the most representative sign of globalization"<sup>1</sup>, radically changing the landscape of art.

The user, unique but also dual, becomes the co-author of an artistic project, reinterprets the complexity of a place - replacing the traditionally intended exhibition area - and enhances it with his/her signs, cancelling out any space and time constraint. Two geographically distant events unify in "a screen that becomes environment"<sup>2</sup> evolving in its unpredictability. The focus is on its procedural and non-representative character, on remediation, therefore on the concept of the end of the border.

"Transgeography" continuously elaborates performative actions and it is configured as a flourishing landscape of social experiences, generating a shared imagination. The new cultural registers examine these narrative spaces in an interdisciplinary perspective able to stimulate creative processes that bring out the work from the museum context to reach a diversified audience. These kinds

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<sup>1</sup>Manovich 2002, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>De Kerckhove 2008, p. 168.

of fruition and socialization create a way of living that gives tangible value to the data provided by users through a new experience and an immersive potential. Places can be manipulated and make the margins between simulation and reality forever permeable in a story that is not linear or spectacular and in a flow of different ideas and behaviours.

Those who move into "Transgeography" exploit the network as a real place able to produce a real effect, a concrete action in a specific territory, widening the definition of space. Therefore, interaction and integration become fundamental aspects to understand the developments of new migratory phenomena and ever-changing scenarios. In this coexistence of distant geographies, the planning is shared and the citizens choose the way they want to shape it together: materials change form dynamically with the same elasticity of pixels on a screen. In "Transgeography", a creative society can build the world in a different way, with a variety of environments and an informational capital that were unknown in the past.

### **The Emotional Paths of Transgeography. The Most Representative Examples**

In these new landscapes, online experience can be a vital support system. Eduardo Kac demonstrates that with the installation *Teleporting An Unknown State*<sup>3</sup>. The work was presented for the first time in 1994. Users were invited to point their cameras to the sky to capture the photons and send them back in real time, via internet, to a completely dark room where a seed was preserved in a patch of earth. The light, coming from different parts of the planet and diffused by a projector, guaranteed photosynthesis, therefore the growth and development of a life form. Only actions of collaboration and responsibility could ensure the survival of the small plant.

*Telegarden*<sup>4</sup> refers to the world of nature as well it is a tele robotic project by Ken Goldberg and Joseph Santarromana, developed at the University of Southern California. The network audience interacted with a remote garden that housed living plants. Community members could move an industrial robotic arm to plant a seed and water it. It was also possible to monitor the growth of living organisms through the internet. The artistic installation, presented in June 1995, was transferred to the hall of the Ars Electronica Centre in Linz in 1996, where it remained online until August 2004. Each plant represented a user, a real avatar that grew along with the other "members" of the group.

In 1996 Masaki Fujihata presented *Light on the Net*<sup>5</sup>, a sculpture of 49 lamps arranged in a matrix (7 X 7) that could be controlled by the users and displayed thanks to a webcam. The work was installed in the Gifu Softopia Centre in Tokyo and the feedback was immediate. Users could change the

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.ekac.org/teleporting.html>

<sup>4</sup><https://goldberg.berkeley.edu/garden/Ars/>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.fujihata.jp/lon96>

lighting of the public space through a website (which registered the IP addresses of the last ten actions).

In 1999 Eduardo Kac created *Genesis*<sup>6</sup>. This is a transgenic art work presented at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz. The main element of this work is a synthetic "artist gene" created by Kac translating a sentence from the English version of the Old Testament into Morse code and converting this code into pairs of nucleotide bases of DNA according to a principle expressly developed by the artist. The Genesis gene was inserted into *E. coli* bacterial strains that were then exposed in the gallery and shown to an audience that could use the internet to turn on an ultraviolet light in order to cause real biological mutations in the bacteria. Thus, the biblical verse in their genome was altered.

Later, the DNA of the bacteria was sequenced, translated into Morse code again and then into English. Through the interaction of the users, the mutations occurred in the DNA changed the Bible's sentence in an unpredictable way, showing the possibility of new meanings every time.

Light is again a protagonist in the work *Vectorial elevation*<sup>7</sup> by Rafael Lozano Hemmer, an interactive artistic project presented for the first time on the occasion of the new millennium in the Zócalo in Mexico City. The website, [www.alzado.net](http://www.alzado.net), offered the users the opportunity to illuminate the sky above the square, controlling the direction of eighteen projectors, and then the movement of powerful beams of light through a 3D simulation program. The luminous sculptures, visualized by digital cameras, created a sort of dialogue that was going to be completed on the web page where the participants could leave any message, love poem or marriage proposals.

Similarly, for the 2003 *Eon*<sup>8</sup> work, users had to send poetic phrases to the artist Shawn Brixey. The emails were codified using TTS (*text to speech*) synthesis, modulating ultra-pure water and generating light through sonoluminescence. The network users could watch a video stream of the small light source created with their own words.

Regarding graffiti art, in 2005 John Geraci proposed *Grafedia*<sup>9</sup>, an original way of "clicking" the writing on the walls of public places to display images, videos or other documents. The tags, made with chalk or varnish, are blue words, underlined as if they were hyperlinks: through your mobile phone, you can send a message and receive an answer with the reference content. Everyone can participate in the development of an interactive city that is similar to a web page, choosing a word, writing it anywhere and associating it with files. Instructions are indicated on the website [www.grafedia.net](http://www.grafedia.net).

In 2003, a 12-metre-high interactive sculpture, made of polyurethane foam, called *D-Tower*<sup>10</sup> was installed in Doetinchem in the Netherlands. The luminescent work, which resembles a large heart, aims to map the emotions of

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.ekac.org/geninfo.html>

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/vectorial\\_elevation.php](http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/vectorial_elevation.php)

<sup>8</sup><http://shawnx.com/eon.php>

<sup>9</sup><http://www.grafedia.net>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.d-toren.nl/nl/>

the inhabitants, showing the hidden feelings through a physical representation of the data. The project, conceived by the artist QS Serafijn and by the architect Lars Spuybroek (Studio Nox), collects the information on a statistical basis. Thanks to a questionnaire accessible via the internet at <https://www.d-toren.nl/nl>, users can interact with the work. *D-Tower* calculates the most important emotion based on the answers received, assigning them a symbolic colour: red for Love, blue for Happiness, yellow for Fear and green for Hate.

In 2008, Jens Wunderling presented *Default to public: tweetleak*<sup>11</sup> in a public place in Berlin. A printer similar to a monolith recorded messages, that users had written via Twitter, on paper tapes. These pieces of information could be stuck everywhere and inserted in a new context, out of the control of their authors. Thus, the city could become a space to personalize and interpret in an original way.

The following year (from 21<sup>st</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> October), Franz Cerami proposed the *Light Your Blue*<sup>12</sup> installation in Naples with the aim of illuminating the cliff around Castel dell'Ovo. The gradation of blue was determined by the choice made by the users on the [www.lightyourblue.com](http://www.lightyourblue.com) website. The artist had asked people to express their emotions through a shade of colour: a sign evoking the sea or the sky.

On the other hand, Aram Bartholl asks users to intervene as "artisans" in the architecture of cities. In 2010, the artist started a file sharing project called *Dead Drops*<sup>13</sup>. It invites people to set USB keys into public building-walls as to be used, for document sharing, by anybody. The dislocation of usb memories is shown on a map with the exact coordinates recorded by the participants. On the official *Dead Drops* website, <http://deaddrops.com>, you can consult all information and points where you can access the exchange of data.

A reflection on the connective, global and ubiquitous identity was proposed by Art is Open Source (Salvatore Iaconesi and Oriana Persico) in 2011 with the project *The Electronic Man*<sup>14</sup>. The performance was articulated through three elements: a web interface (<http://electronicman.artisopensource.net>), urban stickers containing a QRCode and a mobile application. Users were invited to print and paste the codes in the city's public spaces, and then record their geographical location. Every time someone, anywhere in the world, took part in the performance, the phones of all the participants vibrated at the same time giving life to the body of a new digital being: the Electronic Man. In October of the same year, Stephen and Theodore Spyropoulos presented the *Detroit Memory Cloud*<sup>15</sup> installation at the entrance to the Detroit Institute of Art. During the two weeks prior to the appointment, messages about Detroit were collected and archived at [www.voiceofdetroit.com](http://www.voiceofdetroit.com) to later be projected on clouds of smoke. During the event, users continued sending "notes", transforming the public environment into a dynamic space for communication.

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<sup>11</sup><http://www.defaulttopublic.net/tweetleak/index.html>

<sup>12</sup><http://www.franzcerami.com/home/paramyths>

<sup>13</sup><https://deaddrops.com>

<sup>14</sup><http://electronicman.artisopensource.net>

<sup>15</sup><http://minimaforms.com/#item=memory-cloud-detroit-2>

*Nature and Man in Rhapsody of Light*<sup>16</sup>, a work created by Jennifer Wen Ma in collaboration with Zheng Jianwei (lighting designer) in 2013 has a great visual impact. The facades of the National Aquatics Centre in Beijing, known as *Water Cube*, become a sort of "skin" that changes colour - via LED lighting - every day interpreting the content of ancient Chinese teachings (*I Ching*) and the emotions of the citizens expressed through emoticons on some social media such as Weibo.

On December 5, 2013, I received an email from Jennifer Wen Ma. The artist focused on the concept of overcoming space constraints and on the new experiences of living, reaffirming that

Modern technology has certainly shortened distances and bridged the difference between center and periphery. Another way of looking at it, perhaps, is that the "center" is less about geographic locations such as New York, Paris, or Milan, and is more about the individual. A person can organize his or her life and relationship to others based on his or her understanding and knowledge of the world aided by technology. Geographical locations become less crucial and we can be involved in things happening around the world without physically being present. The geography is less physical and more psychological. Having said that, ultimately what makes one engaged is still intellectual curiosity and personal empowerment. Having endless volumes of information is still just a tool; the individual has to decide how to make use of that tool and to what extent he or she wants to activate it.

In 2015, the Brazilian architect and designer Guto Requena created *Light Creature*<sup>17</sup>, an interactive façade at the 30-storey structure WZ Jardins Hotel in São Paulo, Brazil. Some metal panels were placed on this surface. They are blue, grey and gold during the day, whereas, at night, LED lighting creates patterns that change colour based on various factors including air quality and road noise. The light installation reacts to different stimuli in real time, also via a telephone application that allows anyone to interact with through voice or a simple touch. All information is available at <https://gutorequena.com>.

*The Murmur Wall*<sup>18</sup>, on the other hand, is a work by San Francisco Future City Lab and it was presented for the first time in May 2015 at the main entrance of the YBCA (Yerba Buena Centre for the Arts) in San Francisco. It is an interactive installation revealing what the city whispers, thinks and feels. *The Murmur Wall* is an intricate interweaving of tubes and digital displays. The work shows visitors flows of intertwining data in the form of animated LED light and digital texts by collecting the local online activity through search engines and social media. *The Murmur Wall* is a constantly evolving interface that can also offer network users the possibility to modify the story. You can collect anonymous contributions through the <http://www.murmurwall.net> web site. The information comes to life as flows of bright white data in real time. It is displayed only once and is not archived.

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<sup>16</sup>[http://www.littlemeat.net/pictures/water\\_cube.html](http://www.littlemeat.net/pictures/water_cube.html)

<sup>17</sup><https://gutorequena.com/light-creature>

<sup>18</sup><http://www.future-cities-lab.net/murmurwall>



These works show the value of "Transgeography", a concrete demonstration of how art is able to go beyond political and cultural borders, fuelling an ideal context for the production and exchange of knowledge and stimulating the participation of citizens in the development of social activities and the free circulation of knowledge. However, other important factors can be outlined: those typical characteristics of the hybrid age scenarios, which consist of the interpenetration among different disciplinary fields, different types of territory, technologies and human beings. The examples shown clearly demonstrate that human nature is no longer distinct from technology, but has merged with it.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union seems to have been the driving force behind the fall of other borders, the other phenomenon of globalization that has eliminated the concept of centre and periphery making the world a connected totality more similar to the shape of the network than to the perspective geometric schemes we were used to. "Transgeography" is an example of hybridization, the hallmark of our time.

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