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Comobility and Polyrhythmia

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Interviewer: Alex Arsenault

Jen Southern is an artist and lecturer in Fine Art and New Media at Lancaster University. She has a practice-based PhD in Sociology from the Centre for Mobilities Research, where she is now artistic director. Southern's collaborative artwork, exploring hybrid digital and physical spaces and practices, has been exhibited at festivals and galleries in Europe, Canada, India, Japan and New Zealand since 1991. She currently works collaboratively with Chris Speed on Comob Net, exploring collaborative uses of GPS technology, and producing and making visible a sense of comobility, of being mobile with others at a distance. Her writing about comobility and locative art has been published internationally by *Transcript*, *The Canadian Journal of Communications*, *Second Nature: International journal of creative media*, and the *Fifth IEEE International Conference on e-Science*.

When did you first become involved with mobilities research?

I first started working with mobile media in 2001, within my own art practice. It wasn't until about five years ago that I started working specifically within the sociology of mobilities, when I started doing a PhD at Lancaster University. I went specifically to Lancaster because of the Centre for Mobilities Research there. I knew that the kind of work they were doing was an interesting context for the artwork that I was making.

How do you use mobilities in your research?

The work that I make is often using GPS devices – so, global positioning systems. I am really interested in the whole system of how that technology works. When I started using GPS, I was working in collaboration with a Canadian artist called Jen Hamilton and we began to collaborate with another Canadian artist called Chris St. Armand. Together,

we started developing mobile phone applications that would let us send live GPS data to a remote server and then to use that live data in a gallery exhibition. As we were doing those exhibitions we realized that the things that people were saying about the places they were walking were about the significance of walking around a city, the significance it had for them. We realized this was happening in the art work but there was also a whole lot of other stuff that would be interesting to study in the context of mobilities research. For me, it's about how technology mediates movement. That is my interest in mobilities.

What do you mean by comobility?

In my current research, I started off looking at GPS tracking, with the idea of making a trail behind you with a GPS device. But I realized that, although this is a way that many people think about GPS, it was only mapping individuals, and it wasn't mapping the relationships between people, in space. With another collaborator called Chris Speed, who works at Edinburgh University, we made an iPhone app that linked peoples' locations together. So, on a map, you see the dots of each person you're linked in a group with, where they are on the map, and a line linking you to them. We did various performative artworks in a research creation context. We started to realize the things people were saying to us about using that app were about the significance of knowing where somebody else is and about being able to see them moving, but from a distance. That perception, of seeing somebody moving at a distance, with them being able to see you moving, is what I call comobility. This awareness of other people at a distance that GPS enabled technologies that are networked are enabling us to begin to experience – increasingly, as more people get smartphones and similar devices.

What do you mean by polyrhythmia?

The word polyrhythmia is taken from sociologist Henri Lefebvre. He talks about using the different rhythms of a city as a way to analyze the activity there. Applying that to a mobilities framework, I am thinking about the ways people move around a city, the different movements, and the different temporalities of that. Some people might only occupy a very small part of the city but move around it quite regularly. Other people may move across the city in great distances. Some people have restricted mobility; some people work in a very mobile situation – like a mail person, for instance. So, instead of making these lines that track GPS data spatially across a map, I wanted to start thinking about that data in terms of temporality, using the GPS data to make live tapping machines. For the installation I call Polyrhythmia, I've made these six little electronic devices that tap and whir according to how fast people are going, carrying GPS devices. I call the work Polyrhythmia because it's about thinking about the different rhythms of people in the city and the way it shapes what the city is and the mobility of people in the city. And, fitting in with the Differential Mobilities Conference, the different kinds of mobility in the city. It's bringing all of those rhythms into the installation. Lefebvre talks about arrhythmia and times when the rhythms of the city break down. This isn't really what I've been looking at. Instead, I've been looking at the multiplicity of movement that gathers together in GPS tracks. That's why I've used the title Polyrhythmia in the work.