

Mérida T'Ho_MX: Exploring Locative Media in a Latino Territory

Raul Moarquech Ferrera-Balanquet



Hybrid Cartographies

Today's Latin American cities are multigeometric configurations wherein struggles between colonial urbanism, pre-Colombian history, and a post technological future are played out. In these hybrid landscapes, culture, ethnicity, technology, financial data, media transmission, sociological disparities, as well as other power relations, intercept organically to form variable geometries which defy a concrete notion of the urban landscape. Information technologies are not the only reasons why the city's concrete structure is continuing to be effaced, but they are nonetheless responsible for the altered social interactions and citizenships via a neuro-typology of data flow, wireless networks, geopositioning systems, satellite location and portable transmission devices. In order to configure this imagined terrain, we must understand the hybrid cartography of today's media city and its hybrid expression of speed and time.

These emerging technologies are also responsible for the transformation of public space into privatized data flow, affecting civil liberties and freedom of movement. The presence of information technologies such as wireless telephony, geo-locative media and data transmission capable of penetrating and traversing public spaces reveals how communication corporations, with their "freedom to connect" marketing campaigns and positioning/surveillance technologies, transform public space and therefore, our very notion of public art and citizenship.

During the election campaign of the present municipal government of Mérida, access to the Internet became a contentious issue. The current mayor promised to wire some of the city's public parks if elected, and won popular votes with this maneuver. William J. Mitchell argues that in the 1990's, there was strong public pressure over the allotment of telecommunication technologies for public access and in 1994, such a bill was introduced in the United States Senate.¹ Echoes of this pressure traveled to Mérida, where the desire for strategic control over the traffic of information came packaged as a public service to broaden access. The low speed of the Internet, the need for users to provide private information when entering networks in public parks, and the government's alliance with TELMEX—which points towards the privatization of the public sphere—are just some of the control mechanisms in the fraught cartography of the new information city. Ashcroft affirms: "The regulation of space by physical boundaries is the metonymy for the regulatory practices of Western epistemology itself. The philosophy of enclosure, like the creation of the map, is related to a perspectival view of space. It is not simply a rationale for dividing land but reflects a fundamental aspect of Western thinking. The ocularcentrism of Western discourse is marked by the complementary, thought opposed, concept of horizon and boundary. Whereas the horizon adumbrates the region of imaginative possibilities which the methods of thinking attempts to regulate, boundaries organize visual space in ways that enable the method of perspectival vision to dominate thinking."²

The Mérida T'Ho_MX project, mobilized through an understanding of how boundaries imposed through Cartesian geometry limit the imagined space needed to develop a locative media, thus attempts to interrupt colonial thinking through the creation of multidirectional flows of information and actions. The physical installation delineates a given territory with its four projection screens. But when viewing and hearing the articulation of an experimental history of the city's urban development, the surface of the images becomes a revolving door with the capability of opening the imagination of its users, players, viewers, spectators and performers to an asynchronic imagined space. Here the boundaries are ruptured as members of the audience are inspired to assemble imaginative representations of the Mayan city, reconstruct colonial encounters, foresee the post-technological future and recognize how communication technologies and wireless networks in public spaces have become mechanisms of control which hinder the conceptualization of the variable geometry postulated by Mérida T'Ho_MX.

The Imagined Hybrid Territory

Mérida Tho_MX is a hybrid artwork employing the wireless network established in four public parks in the city of Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico. It produces a heterogeneous territory whose narratives traverse an organic history of the city's urban development from pre-Colombian times to an imagined post-technological future, though not necessarily in chronological order. The project examines urban dynamics, the many processes of social interaction emerging with the use of new media technologies, as well as the constant variable geometry of the geo-political, socio-historical, cultural and technological configurations existent in Latino territories in the first decade of the 21st century.

Mérida Tho_MX integrates diverse media and formats such as interactive installation, website, chat, photography, digital video projection, drawing, diagram, live media, live performance and live electronic writing, all working to create the hybrid territory where a real time live performance is mixed with an online game to demonstrate that, today, both the geographies of cities and of the work of art are expanding in multiple directions.

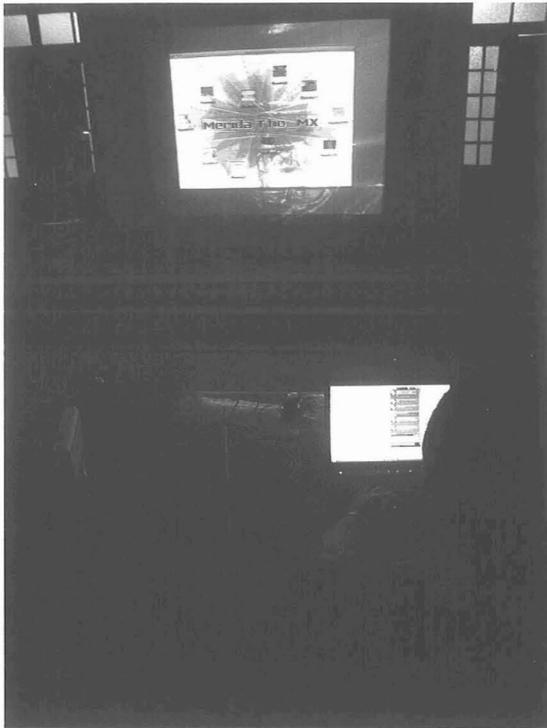
The project originated from research based on the history of urban dynamics of Mérida done by the artist during a previous work,³ as well as notions of the circus and its relation to public space, games as forms of popular social interaction, "anthropocosmic theater" developed in Mexico during the 1960's, the uses of information technologies in Latino territories in the first decade of the 21st century and the understanding that many of today's media artworks are dependent on transformed relationships between the physical and virtual, where the immersion of the users play a determinant role.

In a previous essay I argued that "Mérida is a point of intersection in a specialized network of ports, industries, farms, archeological sites, ceremonial centers and tourist attraction."⁴ The relationships established within this network led me to interrogate Cartesian geometry used to configure urban development. In this vein, cyberspace offers a new typology of the city and opens the door to understanding the intertextual, variable geometry of the city formed not only through flows of digital data, but also with text based information as well. Coincidentally, Mitchell's exploration of variable intertextuality in his book *City of Bits*, defines the distinction between physically and virtually recorded sound through the mention of Mérida: "Café Peón Contreras, Mérida. A trio sings and plays as I drink Montejo beer... and the music holds us all in a face-to-face, synchronized relationship for as long as the performance lasts."⁵

This interest in imagining the variable geometry forming today's Latino city cracked open for me a road of knowledge. The understanding of occularcentrism and Cartesian geometry as colonial mechanisms produced new horizons in my creative process, as well as propelled my desire to interrogate and intercept the maneuvers of the info-electrical empire.

The Struggles Over Citizenship

Exclusionary practices are common when dealing with new media practices. Information technologies, with their recurrent neurosis of surveillance and "vanguard" practices, produce a series of access denial mechanisms to a body of knowledge and production strategies. The dominance of the English language in the programming industry and the recurrent anxiety of the surveillance apparatus are two factors that, when thoroughly interrogated, shed light over issues of citizenship, information control, and data production. The data landscape is still controlled by governments and corporations. Case in point, Internet access must be paid for even in public



areas where we find “free” wireless networks; in some of these cases, it is the municipal government that pays the telecommunication companies. This creates an imagined ideal of “free” access that could be deconstructed when considering how bandwidth and transmission in fact reduce the possibilities of free speech within the so called “public wireless network.” In the case of Mérida, where I produced Mérida T’Ho_MX, the municipal government pays a monthly fee to TELMEX, a large Mexican communication corporation, for limited Internet bandwidth, in effect controlling the amount of data that can be transmitted and received in the public sphere. One of the drawbacks with this deal was felt during the Mérida T’Ho_MX project, when the live stream coming from the video feed could not be shown at the physical installation as planned. This forced me to question how issues of citizenship and access manifest themselves within the new cartography of today’s Latino city.

The Project

a. Installation

The construction of a physical/virtual territory of the “installation” involved connecting the public park to the Internet through wireless networks, and was employed to explore media configurations emerging as the result of integrating public space with museums and interactive parks where sensorial responses are the products of knowledge production and social relations activated by the artwork. The installation fulfilled two main functions: to serve as a territory of social interaction for visitors, users and participants, as well as to establish a physical scenario for the performance and a game which took place during the live performance.

The installation itself was composed of four screens upon which images from the live media, chats, streaming, blogs and the photographic series were presented. There was also a sound system with four speakers

located in relation to the screens. Additional digitally printed banners were located around the site with images and information about the project.

b. The Online Game

Interrogating the dynamics of social interaction in public spaces through wireless networks, the project articulates the online game as an alternative communication process. The user/player, in order to advance in the game, has to recognize their participation within a team structure and use the wireless technologies to establish communal dynamics that call on knowledge exchange and team work to subvert the surveillance apparatus and allow the formation of an organic multidirectional and informal communication process.

The users, constructing a virtual and mental cartography for the exchange of data, augment the physical/virtual cartography imposed by urban development and Internet technologies as they enact a variable geometry for an imagined Latino territory where they have the power to create the data and the mechanism for its transmission. Information about the project as well as dates of the live performance game were publically broadcast on the radio, TV and Internet, instructing users to send an email to the project's site thirty minutes before the live performance.⁶

The game was located within the realms of the public park, the installation and the Internet; information was available to the players via the performance, the live media as well as video streaming. The game, advanced during the actual performance, employed the use of communication strategies. This was not a virtual game designed in 3D, but rather a game constructed with the idea of an extended territory whose information networks became its very architecture. At the chat, there were two actors who conducted the game. These two actors also performed in the physical space of the installation, providing a hybrid zone where we were encouraged to interrogate the generic idea of the cyborg via the integration of a mixed reality. The actors were responsible for posing the questions, verifying the answers and publically declaring the winner. Because the game was not cumulative, there was opportunity for different teams to win any of its four levels.

The first two levels of the game were associated with the nomenclature established in Mérida during the 19th century and was employed to classify the corners of the historic district with names of buildings and businesses, historic events and architectural traits. Level I included the identification of a location presented in a black-and-white photograph taken by the Yucateco photographer Pedro Guerra at the beginning of the 20th century. Level II implored the identification of three consecutive corners within the historic district. Level III of the game related a neighborhood of the historic center with a well-known writer, whose major novel is a vivid portrait of a group of young gang members and their struggle to survive in one of the roughest areas of the city. Level IV, the last level of the game, was associated with the way urban development was conceived by the Mayas during their classic period when Ich Caan Siho, today's Mérida, was built. Proposing to find who and where Bolon D'zcab was, this portion of the game inscribed an interpretation of colonial history, migration, Mayan literature and philosophy. The players, after being informed about population movements, as well as the traffic of art objects to satisfy the dominance of a cultural ideology, were asked to locate Bolon with the realm of Mayan Classic Literature.

c. Performing Expanded Time

Along with the role of variable geometry in configuring the material Latino city, variable time and the ways in which it intercepts colonial chronological time has also become a crucial issue in the development of art in the first decade of the 21st century. In emphasizing the fugacity of data transmission and recognizing the

cosmic time employed by the Mayas, the project had to confront its duration as well as the “narrative time” it was constructing. The performance’s duration demanded a moment of commencement and an instant of closure. These moments became two of eleven scenes that intersected with a fluid time wherein the performers had moved in and out of their physical and virtual presence, connecting the people at the installation with the online users.

I was inspired by the origins of Maya culture, their nomadic nature and the concept of progressive time, all expressed in the Book of the Chilam Balam of Chumayel,⁷ one of the sacred books of the Mayan Yucatecos translated from classical Mayan glyphs into Spanish during the early colonial period. The Mayas believe in a moment of immobility where we are suspended in time and surrounded by cosmic silence, a time that progresses like a spiral, creating the vortex moving towards the infinite and recreating the heart of the sky. Their early nomadic culture inspired them to develop a series of cities near natural water deposits, for they believed that these locations are the entrance to the underworld, *el inframundo*. After the cities were built, the Mayas left for other locations, converting the original city into a ceremonial center visited during specific times of their annual calendar. It is in the Book of the Chilam Balam where I first found, in one of the prophecies, a reference to the end of the present calendar cycle and to the imagined subsequent new era. This information fueled my creative as well as my decolonizing drive, with the notion of chronology interrupted through imaginary time. It has since extended the possibilities for imagining other hybrid temporal structures such as the “narrative time” of Mérida T’Ho_MX, which explored the expanded time of mixed realities. This expanded time is a collage of different temporal relations conceived also as a variable geometric time evolving in multiple locations, which at moments may collide, depending on their flows and the ways in which the performers connect them.

d. The Script

The performance was scripted through the principles noted above. In the first scene, Mayan origins were connected with Mayan philosophy and their concept of time. The next scene offered the opportunity for the performance to intervene in the physical space of the installation, thus providing overall information about the project, explaining the dynamics of the online game. The nomenclature employed in the Mérida of the 1800’s was connected with an understanding of the surveillance apparatus and imagined post-technological future in the third scene as it ended, augmenting the imposition of colonial stereotypes. The online player teams’ activity in the chat and in the physical location intersected through the subsequent scenes which included content such as: a biography of Pedro Guerra, the photographer-author; a segment dealing with the traffic of organs in today’s global economy; a short presentation of the life of Raul Renan, a well known writer from Yucatán; a segment dealing with the colonial city and a critique of its urban development; the presentation of the Jarana, a traditional Yucatecan dance; an analysis of Mayan urban development and an examination of the city of Mayapan, one of the oldest cities constructed in the early Mayan classic period; an examination of Ich Caan Siho, the Mayan city constructed during the classic period, during which colonial Mérida was built. These informational elements and analytical components were interrupted or elaborated through performance and live media. For example, delineating the relationship between the physical and virtual spaces, the performers interrupted the seventh scene by addressing the audience and the players in two locations and the scene continued with a fictional tale of Bolan Dz’Acab, a Yucateco native who, due to the irregular population movements, is now living in Madrid. A live media mixing with images of death, a cemetery, and a sacred object closed the scene. In another example, scene nine started with the performers interviewing the members of the audience and the scene ended with the video projection of a Mestizo ritual where a Mayan priest invoked the

deities in Spanish. Meanwhile, over the speakers, we heard women's voices chanting a sacred Mayan song. The last scene was employed to bring the players out of the virtual locations into the physical space of the installation. The actors gave away prizes to the winning teams and interviewed the players about their experiences. A live media mix opened the closing segment as we saw the credits rolling on one of the screens.

e. Collaborations and Social Interaction

Thanks to the support of the Cultural Office of the City of Mérida, its director Roger Metri and Laboratorio Cartodigital. Mérida T'Ho_MX was produced for the 2009 City Festival in January. Two of the performances—at the main Plaza and Las Americas park—were enriched by the participation of the spectators, who in many instances commented that some of the topics presented on screen were actually unfolding in the present. I would like to mention that this project was possible due to the collaboration and input of a team of artists and programmers. Among them were Jose Luis Garcia who developed the graphic interface; Mario Sanshiro, Cabañas Sosa who programmed the website and chat; Ilsee Irasema Morfín Alemán and Noe Tamayo who contributed as actors. Roberto Azcorra, Carlos Martín Briceño, Sergio Salazar, Adolfo Fernández Gárate, José Juan Cervera, Melba Alfaro, Oscar Sauri, Verónica García and Lope Ávila, all members of the Centro Yucateco de Escritores, contributed with the live electronic writing. The original music was composed by Jorge Alam, Elías Falla Martínez and Roque Escobedo. Additionally, photographs, drawing, illustration, sound mixing and performances were provided by Antonio Reyes, Víctor Sánchez, Adrián Cerda, Eloísa Guemez, Gabriel Ortiz Alatríste, Gema Ríos, José David Segura, José Luis Llanes Vázquez and Grupo Raices.

<http://www.cartodigital.org/Méridatho>
<http://vimeo.com/user1111761/videos>
<http://www.ustream.tv/channel/Mérida>

ENDNOTES

- 1 William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place and the Infobahn* (Cambridge-London: MIT, 1996).
- 2 Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2001).
- 3 Traveling Cornes, <http://www.digipopo.org/content/traveling-cornersesquinas-rodantes>
- 4 Raul Moarquench Ferrera-Balanquet, "Metropolis transmigratorias: Mérida-MX y Los Ángeles_Aztlán," *Evento Teórico Forum Idea 2006*, (Havana Biennale, Havana: Centro Wilfredo Lam, 2006).
- 5 William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place and the Infobahn*, (Cambridge-London: MIT, 1996), p. 34.
- 6 The first forty users were allocated among the teams identified by colours. The actors responded, via email, with the name of their team, the password and the contact information of their fellow team players. When the groups were formed, the players began to communicate among themselves to prepare for the game. Ten minutes before the performance went live, the teams were installed in the chat and briefed about the rules and dynamics of the game, which were accessible only after they received the password. All the team players were advised about the importance of the Internet as an information archive to solve the problems posed within the game.
- 7 Antonio Mediz Bolio, translator, *El libro de Chilam Balam de Chumayel*, translated from Maya to Spanish, (Mérida: Maldonado Editores, 1996).