

## Building an Open Access Repository for the Locative Arts | Dr. Joshua Synenko

### Research Objectives

In recent months, artists around the world have been energized by interest in non-fungible tokens or NFTs, a file format that regulates access to digitized media to guarantee both the scarcity of the object, and the (monetary) value of ownership. NFTs, however, are further implicated in debates that address the haphazard way that digital media is often preserved and archived for years to come (Ernst 2012, Hoskins 2017, Mattern 2017, Vismann 2000). This project expands on these debates by adding another layer: What if the digital media under consideration is tied to specific geographical locations? What methods and practices are needed to preserve and disseminate this content?

There are no existing projects anywhere that address these questions.<sup>1</sup> This grant would not only lay the groundwork for such a project, but it would bring greater awareness to a niche artistic community. The term “locative art,” for instance, refers to expressive works that use location-tracking devices like smartphones to explore questions of place, positionality, and movement (Emerson et al. 2021, Emerson 2016, Farman 2011, Goggin and Wilken 2013, Hemment 2006, McGuire 2016, Verhoeff 2012). Adjacent to the “net art” phenomenon of the late 1990s, locative art is diverse, engaging maps, geo-annotations, and games to explore questions surrounding the social stratification of neighbourhoods, segregations of race and class in urban development, indigeneity, and climate. Locative arts have been incorporated into gallery shows and museums and used as a platform to explore site-specific cultural memory. The interest in locative arts has only grown with the ubiquity of location-tracking devices in our everyday lives (Benjamin 2019, Brown 2015, Haleboua 2020, Frith 2015, Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011, Licoppe 2016, Morley 2017, Wilken 2019). What is needed, however, is a sustained effort to build a digital repository for these creative works, as most individual locative arts projects cater to limited audiences and are barely preserved if at all. As a result, media scholars are not able to catalog such projects globally, making the network of participating artists loose and intangible. On this basis, there is an urgent need to preserve the cultural heritage of these ephemeral practices.

### Background and Context

Although locative arts have been around for 20 years, they draw from a much longer history of experimental practices with space and culture that span over a century (Shields, 2013). But why do such projects persist in an era dominated by ubiquitous mobile media? By reprising some of the earliest collectives, movements, and exhibits – which would be greatly enhanced by a repository dedicated to these works – I argue that researchers would be better equipped to identify the continued appeal of technology-driven artistic engagements with spatial questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Just one example stands out: GPS Museum (<https://gpsmuseum.eu/>), which has documented a few dozen locative arts projects. However, according to the website, this effort is inadequate, and requires significant additional resources to be successful.

Offering both a critique of contemporary digital placemaking rubrics, and a work of collective memory, the aim of this project is to revive locative pasts to reveal long-forgotten artistic strategies such as *détournement*, opposition, tactical resistance, and performative refusal. I argue that these strategies are needed more than ever given the colonializing patterns of stratification, inequity, and affective controls that characterize pervasive algorithmic cultures, machine learning environments, and the automation of critical infrastructures and supply chains (Crawford 2021, Noble 2018, Rossiter, 2016). Moreover, investigating locative arts projects from the past will help to further address the changes experienced by artistic practitioners amid a renewed interest in fields of research creation. Indeed, this grant will help to make an important contribution to the scholarship on locative arts with a bridge to media studies, geography, and the sociology of mobilities.

## Methodology

The grant will be applied to cover two major expenses. First, it will be used to pay nominal fees for virtual consultations (via Zoom) with leading scholars and practitioners in chosen media labs. These meetings will help to determine the practical, technical, and infrastructural needs that must be met prior to creating an open-access repository. Ten media labs have been identified, as follows:

1. **Archaeologies of Media and Technology Research Group (AMT), Winchester School of Art.** This group focuses on image arts, media technologies, and preservation techniques.
2. **Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, New York University.** This institute hosts the largest digital library of Latin American performance art.
3. **Media Archaeology Lab (MAL), University of Colorado, Boulder.** This lab hosts a significant collection of still functioning analog media equipment.
4. **Alice Lab for Computational Worldmaking, AMPD, York University.** This group experiments with artificial intelligence to create mixed reality environments.
5. **Blast Theory, University of Nottingham.** This arts collective is one of the first to specialize in locative media with a focus on cities and urban issues.
6. **Electronic Disturbance Theatre (ETD), UC San Diego.** This arts collective was founded by Ricardo Dominguez, creator of the famous “Transborder Immigrant Tool.”
7. **Geomedia Research Group, Karlstad University.** This premiere European research group advances work in locative media to explore questions of mediatization.
8. **MIT Senseable City Lab, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.** This lab is an international, interdisciplinary meeting place for those working on cities and technology.
9. **Mobile Gaming Research Lab, North Carolina State University.** This lab specializes in immersive, locative, mobile and mixed reality game technologies.
10. **Technology, Art and Games Research Centre (TAG), Concordia University.** This research group specializes in game studies and design, digital culture and interactive art.

The second expense covered by the grant will be on training three HQP. The most significant position will be the Research Assistant (RA), who will accompany the PI for the duration of the grant period. The RA will help to develop the consulting questionnaires, attend the consultations, liaise with the other HQP, present findings at a conference, co-author a published report, and develop an itinerary for future research. The grant will provide training for two additional HQP, namely an archivist with an interest in digital collections, and a

geographer with an interest in geographical information systems (GIS). Both will be called upon to analyze the findings of the consulting interviews, and to advise on the project based on their field of expertise.

## **Outcomes**

The most immediate outcome of this grant will be to create or enhance existing meeting places to generate ideas, communities, and knowledges on the subject of locative arts both at Trent and beyond. This work will focus on strengthening international partnerships between Trent and scholars invested in arts and humanities, communications and media, geographical information systems (GIS) and library sciences. Beyond that, I expect this grant to result in creating a blueprint for an open access repository designed to collect and preserve locative arts projects from the 1990s to the present. Unparalleled by any other digital collections project, the repository is intended to become an essential resource for artists, geographers, media scholars, and technicians. If built, with the help of additional funding (please see Statement of Need) it will require installing a server at Trent in one of its media labs, whether it be the Odette Critical Making Studio or the Media Commons Lab which is under construction at Traill College. The repository will hold digital collections of locative arts in every format. It will include their codescripts, metadata and location data, as well as visual presentations of individual works that will be accessible to anyone with an internet connection. The repository will collect outmoded locative devices such as cell phones and GPS handhelds, adding to the existing collection of legacy media that is currently housed in the Cultural Studies Department. Further, the repository will offer a platform to host collaborations with media scholars around the world, hold events on themes that are appropriate to the collections, support local graduate research, and facilitate outputs including publications. In terms of its social benefits, and regardless of whether the repository is built or not, this grant will help to enrich our collective understanding of myriad social problems. These include mass urbanization, social inequality, overdevelopment, the social impact of architecture and design, and the role of location-based media in our everyday lives.

## **Audiences**

Above all, the research that I plan to initiate with this grant will draw from and engage with artists and practitioners who have expressed an interest in urban issues, the social impact of media technologies, and broader questions of space and culture. If created, based on the research that I undertake with this grant, an open-access repository for the locative arts will further contribute to publicly available specialist knowledge that lies at the intersection between the computational arts, geography, memory studies, and research creation. With dedicated resources for lectures and public events, a repository would also provide an occasion to welcome local audiences at Trent University, and invite cross-disciplinary friendships among scholars working in adjacent fields.

## **Need**

There are no existing projects anywhere that address the lack of archival preservation of the locative arts, and therefore engaging in this effort is crucial. The only precedent that exists is the now-defunct GPS Museum (<https://gpsmuseum.eu/engine/>). This project managed to preserve the websites and descriptions of 30-40 locative arts projects from the last 20 years, in addition to a number of outmoded locative arts tools. But this project was not successful because, as the creator of the website explains, "there is not much to do until we take very seriously the preservation of our digital heritage." That is exactly what this grant sets out to do. More specifically, an Explore Grant would be used to determine precisely what is at stake in the larger undertaking of building a repository for the locative arts. Doing so requires a number of preliminary steps, including reaching out to specific media labs (see written statement) to learn about their experience in digital preservation. It also requires speaking to the makers of locative art, and learning their thoughts about what may be needed to preserve their work, including the technical specifications. Moreover, this grant will lead to the training of 3 HQP which are necessary for these preliminary steps. The archivist with an interest in digital collections will learn about the importance of media specificity, and be tasked with identifying the challenge of working with a digital form that presents specific challenges to preservation. The geographer with an interest in geographical information systems will have an opportunity to explore an artistic forms, and to make determinations based on the specific vantage point of their field. The Research Assistant (RA) will acquire many different skills by working closely with the PI in shaping the questionnaires, liaising with other HQP and participants in the consultations, and identifying future directions. Finally, although the outputs from this grant stand for itself, the work undertaken here will prepare me to apply for a SSHRC Partnership Grant to purchase equipment such as a server, and a SSHRC Insight Development Grant, which would be used to enhance the community exchanges between research units at Trent and those around the world. ly for a SSHRC Partnership Grant to purchase equipment such as a server, and a SSHRC Insight Development Grant, which would be used to enhance the community exchanges between research units at Trent and those around the world.

## **Outputs and future directions**

The Explore Grant will result in at least one article published in a peer-reviewed journal, one presentation at a conference (identified in the Timeline, phase 4), and the training of HQP. It will also result in greater knowledge of the locative arts, and it will help build bridges between research units at Trent and those in the U.S., the U.K. and Sweden. Looking to the future, the work undertaken with an Explore Grant will help prepare to build the repository itself. I intend to use the information gathered for applying to a SSHRC Partnership Grant, which would be used to install a server either at the Odette Critical Making Studio at Bata Library, or the Media Commons Lab which is under construction at Traill College. I also intend to apply for an Insight Development Grant, which will be used to enhance the scholarship on locative arts through conversations and projects initiated with researchers around the world.

## Timelines and budget

	Phase 1: 5/21-7/21	Phase 2: 8/21-10/21	Phase 3: 11/21-1/22	Phase 4: 2/22-4/22
<b>Tasks</b>	1) Work with the RA to identify relevant materials for the consulting questionnaires. 2) Clearly outline the RA's responsibilities.	1) Together with the RA, consult media labs focused on issues of archiving and preservation, including AMT; Hemispheric Institute; MAL.	1) Together with the RA, consult media labs that engage in producing locative media, including Alice Lab; Blast Theory; EDT; Geomedia; Senseable City Lab; Mobile Gaming Research Lab, TAG.	1) Together with the RA, present findings at a suitable conference venue, egs. Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present (ASAP); Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR); Transmediale.
<b>Targets</b>	Develop a timeline with reasonable targets for the duration of the grant, including a plan to hire additional HQP.	1) Together with an archivist/digital collections specialist, analyze the findings of the consulting meetings, and identify unique challenges in preserving digital media.	1) Together with a geographer/GIS specialist, analyze the findings of the consulting meetings, and identify unique challenges in preserving location-based data.	1) Identify potential journals to publish one article detailing results from the grant. 2) Develop an itinerary for creating an open access digital repository for the locative arts.
<b>HQP and other expenses</b>	1) Research Assistant (phase one)	1) Research Assistant (phase two) 2) Archivist/digital collections specialist 3) Three consultation meetings.	1) Research Assistant (phase three) 2) Geographer/GIS specialist 3) Seven consultation meetings.	1) Research Assistant (phase four)

HQP and other expenses	Pay schedule	Totals
10 Consultation meetings	\$100 x 10 (Phases 2 & 3)	\$1,000
1 Archivist/digital collections specialist	\$500 (Phase 2)	\$500
1 Geographer/GIS specialist	\$500 (Phase 3)	\$500
1 Research Assistant (RA)	\$4,000 (Phases 1-4)	\$5,000
		GRAND TOTAL: \$7,000

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