

# 9

## PATHS OF MOVEMENT

### Negotiating Spatial Narratives through GPS Tracking

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*How do the examples in this chapter help us understand the practice of storytelling in the mobile media age?*

As GPS technologies are embedded into mobile devices—and thus everyday life—it has become common to track the location and trajectories of humans as well as objects. While knowing where people and things actually are and have actually been can be interesting, by also engaging with the lives and (hi)stories of both “nomad” and location, factual data is transformed into narrative potential. When location data is layered with everyday life, spatial narratives emerge. This chapter analyzes the artistic practice of Dutch media artist Esther Polak, who demonstrates how location data can be brought to life as narrative material and as a storytelling tool. With her GPS receiver, Polak experiments with ways of accessing and discussing the many (spatial) narratives that humans, animals, machines, and goods (e.g., dairy products) create in their everyday trajectories. Through an analysis of Polak’s works, and with theoretical reference to Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and French theorist Michel de Certeau, this chapter discusses how mobile media seem to facilitate an informed (re)engagement with space and the spatial narratives that unfold when people and objects disclose the personal, national, and global stories that are expressed through their paths of movement.

#### Keywords

- **“The Generic City”**: A text by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, “The Generic City” both serves as a manifest and describes an architectural concept of the modern day metropolis: it is newly built, consists of skyscrapers, is populated by global migrants and brands, and could have been built anywhere. In twenty years, it will either be completely different or have disappeared.

- **Tactics and strategies:** As complimentary notions, the *strategic* and *tactical* were coined by French theorist Michel de Certeau. The terms originate from military jargon and describe the plan of the attacker and the countermeasures taken by the attacked, respectively. As metaphors, the *strategic* describes the position held by entities of power and control (for instance, political entities or agencies of cultural production). *Tactics*, then, describes the position or actions of those who, in theory, do not hold power but in practice manage to maneuver and circumvent the plans made by the *strategic* entity (for instance, the way that “ordinary” people avoid bureaucratic measures).
- **Psychogeography:** Coined in the 1960s by the primarily French artist group, Situationist International, psychogeography describes the way that locations are felt and experienced. Where geography produces maps of Euclidean space, psychogeography maps space as it is felt and used by those that inhabit it. One of the most famous maps is “Paris, the Naked City” (1957) by artists Guy Debord and Asger Jorn. In recent years, with the existence of GPS, psychogeography also means making maps by tracking movements, thus visualizing the use-patterns of individuals and/or cities.

*The key issue to examine with locative media and pervasive games is that many of these new, mediated experiences refer to and appropriate space while divorcing it from its meaning, history, and significance.*

—Mary Flanagan<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Critically discussing locative media projects, digital media theorist Mary Flanagan presents a critique of their tendency to only explore a location superficially. This is especially true, she argues, of projects that mediate or add layers to a location. Such projects often demonstrate little reflection on the particular urban space they are designed for. While they may be “context aware” in a strict technological sense by using position data as design material, they are rarely “aware” of their location in any other sense. Flanagan makes this argument as part of an explicit critique of the many locative media projects that claim to be indebted to the psychogeographic practice of the Situationist International (SI) because this artist group emphasized how every location has a unique way of fostering individual experiences. With this and others of their interventional artistic practices, the SI sought to investigate the myriad of (historical, social, and political) layers, experiences, and narratives imbued in every location in 1960s Paris, France. Understanding the city as a complex historical and political assemblage, the practices and theories of the SI stood in contrast to the then-dominant paradigm of functionalism, where the ideal city would be a well-functioning “machine,” built to enable efficient transportation and living as well as maximizing capital gain and spectacular experiences.<sup>2</sup> Reminding readers of the full SI agenda, Flanagan

argues that rather than embracing the full potential of psychogeography, most locative media projects simply understand a location as a point on a game board.

Flanagan suggests that one possible way to overcome this is to insist that locative media projects “begin to reflect the contested nature of the lived reality of such spaces” when they seek to reengage site-specificity.<sup>3</sup> In other words, mobile media projects need to take (the often complex) spatial layers into account when they seek to expand the participant’s experience of a location in the here and now.

I will argue in this chapter that the narrative potentials of mobile media go beyond expanding the locational experience of the here-and-now participant. Mobile media are also able to make manifest the lived practice(s) of space and thus make spatial narratives available for negotiation. My primary case will be an analysis of Dutch media artist Esther Polak’s artistic practice—primarily her two recent GPS tracking projects, *Souvenir* (2008) and *NomadicMILK* (2009). Polak herself states that her interest lies in the way that trajectories are experienced by the people making them.<sup>4</sup> Using the GPS receiver as a storytelling tool, she accesses individual stories about everyday practices and how individuals experience their relationship to the larger structures that are part of their movements. I understand Polak’s projects as site-specific narratives that both “write” and “read” a location with the heterogeneous “voices” of those who embody the place. The argument will be supported by two theoretical positions discussing the relationship between the experiencing individual and the larger social, societal, and political structures: French scholar Michel de Certeau and his famous distinction between “writing” and “reading” a city narrative through movement,<sup>5</sup> as well as Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas’s ideas about how (living in) a postmodernist city is built on globalized capital’s ability to reinvent itself in the same image everywhere.<sup>6</sup> I will discuss how Polak’s two projects embody multiple interpretations of de Certeau and Koolhaas in ways that meet Flanagan’s critique by renewing the challenge she poses. Of particular relevance is de Certeau’s focus on the difference between experiencing (“writing”) and tracing (“reading”) a city, as he argues that it is impossible to do both at the same time. The questions then obviously become: Must the conclusions arrived at by de Certeau be changed for the mobile media era? Has it become possible to reconstruct an individual narrative with the help of the tracking possibilities offered by mobile devices? When it comes to digital movement data, what is the relation between narrative and tracking?

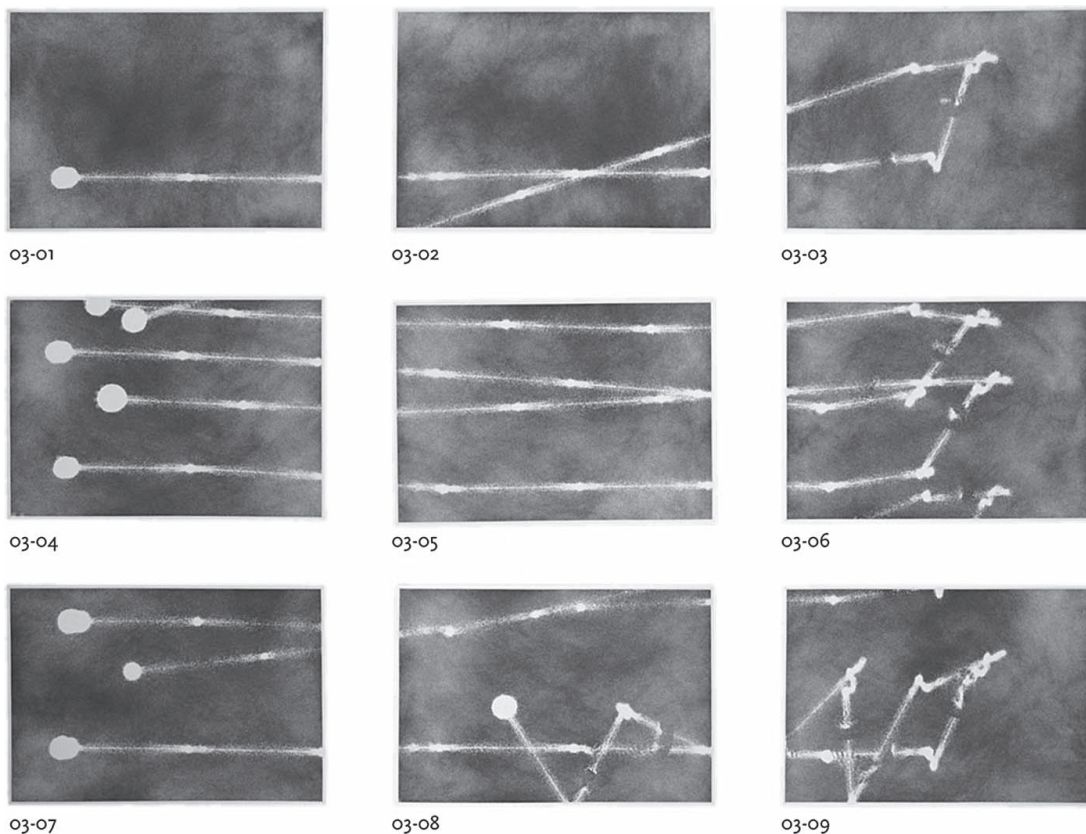
### Polak’s Artistic Practice

Esther Polak was one of the first media artists to explore the artistic potential of the GPS receiver. The GPS satellite system, owned by the American military, was unlocked for civil use in 2000 and already in 2002 Polak did her first GPS project, *Amsterdam REALtime*, in collaboration with the Dutch foundation Waag Society.<sup>7</sup> By logging the movements of select citizens of Amsterdam, she explored how the city was used on an everyday basis. Grey and white lines of movement gradually filled a

black projection screen in an art gallery, thus mapping the life of Amsterdam; popular places and routes are highly visible, whereas unvisited areas are left as a black void.

*MILK project* (2003) visualized the traces of people and movements “embedded” in a common Dutch cheese.<sup>8</sup> Again using GPS receivers, she followed a dairy route from the (Latvian) cow, to the (Dutch) consumer thereby visualizing how the Dutch cheese bought at a Dutch farmer’s market was rather a Dutch-type European cheese carrying hidden stories from those who manufactured it. People who played a role in the supply chain from Latvia to the Netherlands were invited to carry a GPS receiver to register their movements for one day, after which Polak’s team used custom-made software to visualize and subsequently discuss the tracks with the participants. The result is an online exhibition of pixelated maps, tracks, participant comments, and other elements that shows how the milk’s route is part of complex transnational economic transactions and flows.

In the project *Souvenir | the landscape as a place of work*, Polak and her partner Ivar van Bekkum worked (under the joint name PolakVanBekkum) with Dutch farmers working their fields for crops. By tracking tractors, the movements of plowing a field were translated into a series of prints (see Figure 9.1). Knowing



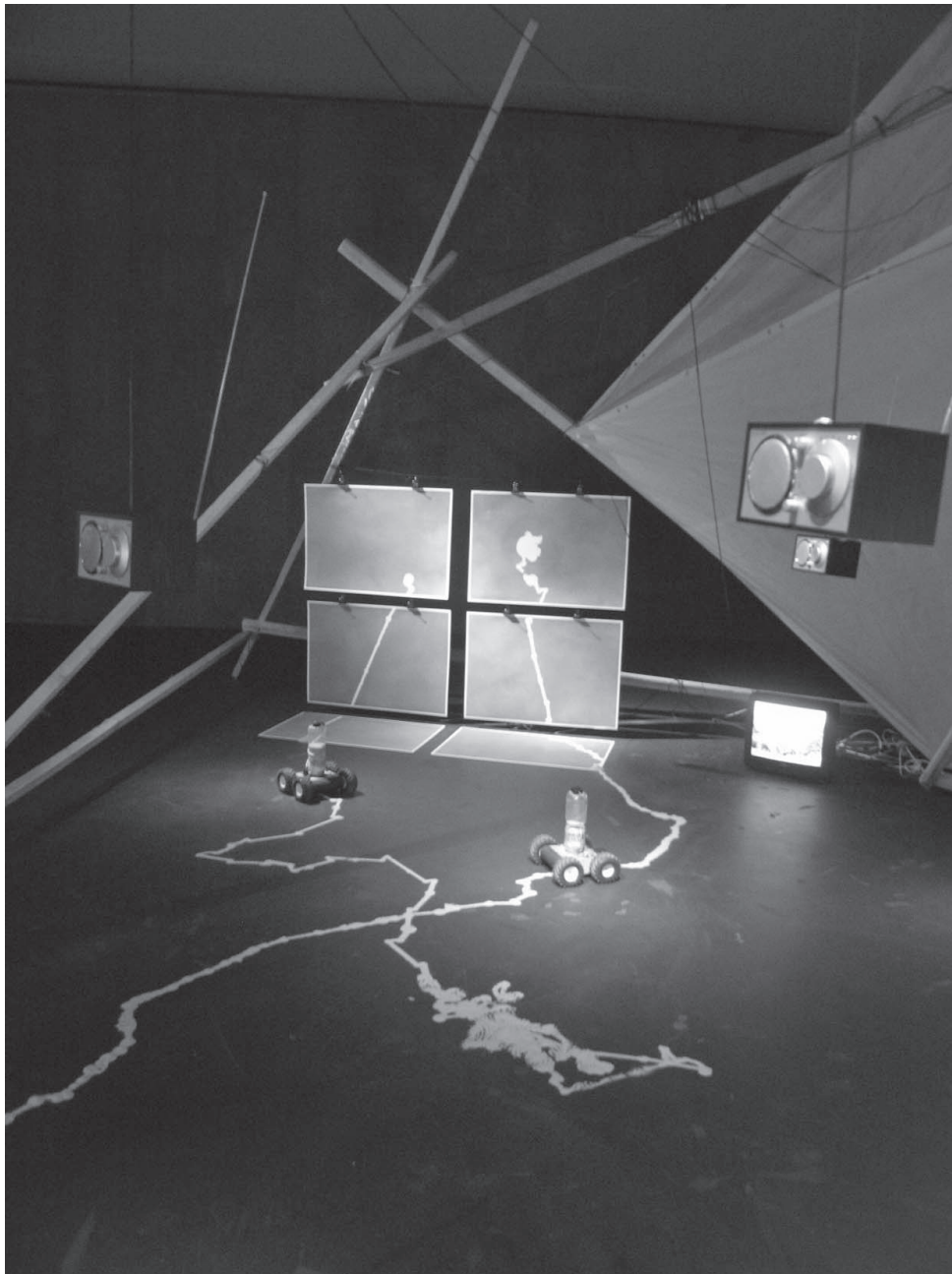
**Figure 9.1** A series of prints from Esther Polak and Ivar van Bekkum’s work, *Souvenir | the landscape as a place of work*. The white lines show the movements of tractors, which were traced using GPS receivers in the Netherlands. Monoprints *Souvenir Zeeland*, PolakVanBekkum, © 2008.

that the prints are visualizations of a plowing tractor and recalling a furrowed field's straight lines, the pattern of movement is easily recognizable even if it is a bit distorted. When looking at the prints, it is entirely possible for the inner eye to see the land and visualize the tractor driving up and down the field.

Unlike Polak's own projects, the primary purpose of this project by PolakVanBekkum was to get into dialogue with outsiders, to investigate ways of satisfying the often nostalgic idea of farming and the rural landscape by creating artworks for tourists.<sup>9</sup> This is not unlike classic landscape painting, which was also made for those not actually inhabiting them; however, the visualizations in *Souvenir* are different because they depict movements and not vistas. Furthermore, they are made from the perspectives of the working farmer and the satellite instead of the artist looking for picturesque views. Rather than exploring the dynamics between an individual and his or her own tracks, *Souvenir* explores different relationships to the same land.<sup>10</sup> By recording, visualizing, and ultimately selling the movements, PolakVanBekkum investigate the landscape as artistic material when seen from the perspectives rendered by the gazes of the tourist and the farmer, respectively. In *Souvenir*, the paths of movement are detached from the experiences of the tracked individuals and the depiction thus stays an abstraction. As with any other souvenir, it confirms "the idea of farming"—or the stories told about farming by onlookers—instead of challenging the viewer's (often nostalgic) perspective.

Like *Souvenir*, the *NomadicMILK* project is concerned with landscapes and people in the food supply chain. Set in Nigeria, *NomadicMILK* investigates the everyday spatial narratives of contemporary African dairy transports. Two very different, but closely interwoven, dairy production and distribution situations are the project's artistic material: one narrative centers on imported, powdered milk where one brand, the Dutch PEAK, is particularly popular and is available in even the most rural parts of the country. The second narrative centers on Nigerian cultural heritage, as one particular nomadic tribe, the Fulani, has been responsible for herding cows for as long as anyone can remember. Although the Fulani are struggling to maintain their traditions, both cultures are still active; the tribe is still herding cows while PEAK milk is being transported into every corner of the country. Polak realized that these two types of milkmen share space and working conditions: their workspace is the land of Nigeria, and both lead very nomadic lives. With the aim of illustrating and discussing how herdsmen as well as truck drivers embody, understand, and narrate their nomadic practice, *NomadicMILK* shows how the individual stories construct this "shared workspace." Concretely, Polak used her normal procedure of collecting movement data with GPS receivers and discussing the tracks with the participants in order to give them "a new perspective on their own perceptions of place, mobility and economics."<sup>11</sup> Through the participants' relations to—and narrations of—this space of milk transportation, the project investigates how the practices relate to the political and economic structures in Nigeria in general.<sup>12</sup>





**Figure 9.2** Pathways of the *NomadicMILK* project by Esther Polak. This image shows the installation view at the Transmediale, Berlin. © 2009 Esther Polak.

*NomadicMILK* is exhibited online and in galleries (see Figure 9.2). Both show the abstract paths as well as videos of interviews with the participants whose paths are visualized by a sand-drawing robot that Polak brings to the interview. By using sand as drawing material, participants are able to interact and modify the path with hands, feet, and available tools. (Prints and videos of the project are available on the online exhibition of the project at [nomadicmilk.net](http://nomadicmilk.net).) As is evident from the videos, the “hidden narratives” of the abstracted paths materialize in a very concrete and engaging way through the physical relation to the tracks

(especially pointing, moving a bit of sand, and moving around the track during the interview). And to the exhibition spectator, the Nigerian locations and practices come to life in a way that is both very close and very abstract. Polak thus manages to make participants aware of their own spatial engagements, but she also makes it possible for spectators to see the many narratives that are embedded in the landscape. With the individual practices of Nigerian land as narrative material, the lived reality that Flanagan seeks is exposed by help of GPS, some sand, and an interested interviewer.

In my analysis below, I will look at some of the issues at stake in *NomadicMILK* while adding *Souvenir* to the mix. Two aspects of these projects are particularly compelling: first, both *Souvenir* and *NomadicMILK* address the difference between the person being tracked and the person trying to make sense of the tracks. Second, both projects show how the tracked participants negotiate and navigate structures of politics, economy, and the concrete landscape through their movements. Through the theories of Koolhaas as well as de Certeau, I will explore how we might understand the way that the two projects expose and discuss the (spatial) narratives that are created and negotiated when someone creates a path of movement that others can explore.

### Koolhaas: Generic Cities and Economies

*All Generic Cities issue from the tabula rasa; if there was nothing, now they are there; if there was something, they have replaced it. They must, otherwise they would be historic.*

—Rem Koolhaas<sup>13</sup>

In his monumental book *S, M, L XL*, Rem Koolhaas (co-founder of OMA: Office for Metropolitan Architecture) introduced the idea of “The Generic City,” describing how every modern metropolis is essentially a slightly reconfigured clone of any other hyper-urban area. As an architect, he finds the search for “historic identity” meaningless as the “perpetual quest for ‘character,’ grinds successful identities down to meaningless dust.”<sup>14</sup> What most would bemoan, Koolhaas applauds, because out of this identity stripping rises the Generic, “an endless repetition of the same simple structural module.”<sup>15</sup> Koolhaas is concerned with identity and with how the very contemporary city has neither history nor core identity. Nothing refers to what happened “yesterday,” and if it is referred to, it is only superficial. Every place is just a placeholder until something new pops up elsewhere:

[I]t is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-destructs and renews. It is equally exciting—or unexciting—everywhere. It is “superficial”—like a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday morning.<sup>16</sup>

So according to Koolhaas, contemporary cities have neither character nor history. The “original” cities have already “disappeared,” partly through the attempts of conserving them, and Koolhaas finds the idea of bemoaning this loss of identity almost ridiculous. Instead, we see places that have more in common with places elsewhere in the world than with places that are physically closer; Singapore has more in common with Dubai than with a rural village in Malaysia even though the latter is closer. This also means that we see similar patterns of movement, of politics, of capital, and of life everywhere. The differences between life “here” and life “there” are very small, and most places share the same generic narrative about a “proper” way of organizing life.

Following this, Koolhaas does not accept the idea of the layered city but rather argues that the new city is layer-less. If something changes, the changes are visible in the next city that is being built: “The Generic City, like a sketch which is never elaborated, is not improved but abandoned . . . it *has* no layers. Its next layer takes place somewhere else.”<sup>17</sup> So if we understand mobile media as something that works with narrative layers of cities and experiences of locations, which is clearly what Flanagan does when she argues for “meaning, history and significance” in the opening quote, Koolhaas’s points seem to undermine or contradict the very possibility of making projects that “reflect the contested nature of the lived reality of such places.”<sup>18</sup>

However, if we look closer at Koolhaas’s understanding of the contemporary city, the generic is also transient. Independent scholar Richard Prouty expounds upon Koolhaas and believes that “the generic city describes a way of seeing as much as it describes a set of objects.”<sup>19</sup> So, while Koolhaas seemingly describes the postmodern metropolis, other types of locations—for instance, the countryside—can also be subject to this postmodernist way of looking at the world; always with a distanced look and always ready to move on. The gaze belongs to globalization and to the tourist: every place is understood as a marketplace, and every place can be objectified and subject to preconceived narratives such as “the idea of farming,” as Polak addresses in the *Souvenir* project when the farmer’s movements are transformed into abstract patterns that please the tourists’ gaze.

“A generic city is the humid boomtown you visit on business,” Prouty remarks, thus highlighting that the generic space disappears when site-specific narratives emerge as a result of lived practice. Everyday life produces narratives, and also the generic becomes embodied; it is always sensed, understood, and “lived” in relation to the individual—even if it is often generic to someone else. This idea of narrative is aligned with Michele Chang and Elizabeth Goodman’s notion that locative projects “consider how player activity constructs ‘place’ out of data,” a practice that can be eye-opening for the person experiencing it.<sup>20</sup>

The idea that the embodiment of a location is what constructs a “place” obviously refers to Michel de Certeau’s famous statement, “Space is a practiced place,”<sup>21</sup> where the embodiment of a place is crucial to its space-ness.<sup>22</sup> He clearly distinguishes between experiencing the world (the inside view) and looking from



a distance at the person experiencing (the outside view). This qualifies Prouty's points about the fundamental difference between being a tourist and a resident and that (political) structures and (individual) actions co-create complex spatial narratives.

### Michel de Certeau: Reading the Embodied City

A city's narrative and history is created by everyday actions of ordinary people, de Certeau argues, using the metaphor of writing. It is the engagement with a place that in itself establishes the "text" or the "narrative" of the location:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below," below the thresholds of at which visibility begins . . . they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of the urban "text" they write without being able to read it. . . . The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness.<sup>23</sup>

Grand narratives do not form a city's narrative; instead, the narrative is formed by the many different voices created by individuals as they navigate between power structures and possibilities. From a de Certeauian point of view, there is a big difference between being engaged in "writing" and being able to "read" this kind of narrative whose broader perspectives are invisible to the individual who lives "below the thresholds of at which visibility begins."

This example of city narratives is part of a bigger argument where de Certeau examines the ways in which people reappropriate—and thus create—culture through everyday actions and in everyday situations. This important discussion serves to argue that many of the formal or statistical approaches in the social sciences fail to capture significant aspects of cultural production. Differentiating between the elevated and the immersed position, de Certeau uses the metaphor of the city's "text" to explain strategic and tactical thinking and/or actions. The strategic is the planned and "elevated" view largely held by those in power positions and control—for instance, political entities or agencies of cultural production—whereas the tactical is the way that "ordinary" people manage and evade these power structures either explicitly or implicitly. On a political level, the embedded walking practices of people "down below" is an image of how power relations between "systems" and "users" are thwarted when individuals transform designed strategies through tactical "operations" on—in this case—space.

While arguing that it is what you do with the opportunities you are given that matters (again echoing the distinction between strategies and tactics), de Certeau strengthens the argument by showing how every experience of a site will always

involve some level of embodiment. But if walkers write with their movements within the city's structures (all while questioning and engaging these structures), who reads these narratives? What is possible to "read" from the "writing" done by the walkers, and what is the reader's role? By differentiating between what individuals experience and what distant others see them experience, de Certeau establishes a distinction between structures and operations, between doing and looking, and between engaging in the moment on location and analyzing actions from a distance in time and space.

Interestingly, de Certeau argues, this engagement or narrative cannot be "read" merely by tracking the person traversing the cityscape. Only "the absence of what has passed by" is visible, which is not to be confused with the actions themselves because "surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by."<sup>24</sup> It is not possible to be strategic and tactical at the same time. Though it is possible to ascertain the routes people take, this will neither capture details nor the reasons for particular behaviors. So, in order to be able to read the narratives of the city, it is necessary to engage instead of trying to decipher general patterns or a bigger picture.

Fast-forwarding to the present time, mobile technologies have led to a renewed interest in facilitating, collecting, and displaying individual tracings and trajectories, often using a map interface. It is well argued that maps and mapping practices are always imbued with power relations and politics.<sup>25</sup> Following this, one might view maps as tracings of performative processes of politics, and one might view the act of tracking and displaying paths of movements as a performance of a particular (and often politically embedded) embodied narrative. Contemporary literature on mapping practices and mobile media suggest that mobile media strengthen the emancipating potentials of these performances; it enables the surfacing of previously concealed insights into how an individual's actions are connected to a bigger picture.<sup>26</sup>

By design, mobile technologies thus seem to be able to simultaneously make explicit the structures of strategy and the traces of tactics. Even if de Certeau regards "tracing" (reading) and "writing" (narrating) as mutually exclusive, it appears that this picture may change with mobile technologies as they enable knowledge on how specific actions are related to other actions and agendas. In many ways, mobile media in general, and Polak's projects in particular, thus seem to facilitate an informed (re)engagement with space and spatial narratives in ways that both echo and resist de Certeau's ideas.

### **Polak: Negotiating Spatial Narratives and Practices**

In the opening quote to this chapter by Mary Flanagan, she argues that the appropriation of space through these kinds of traces often divorces space from its "meaning, history, and significance." However, "the contested nature of the lived

reality” of locations is exactly what Polak’s artistic practice addresses on at least three levels. First, the projects enact and explore “readings” of locations based on how they are embodied. Second, they enable individuals to discuss their everyday practices from an “outside” perspective through the technology, the software, and the artistic intervention. And third, there is a political dimension where Polak, though often unarticulated, examines the movements of globalized economy and culture. All three levels are concerned with how paths of movement become spatial narratives.

In two ways, *Souvenir* and *NomadicMILK* deal with the relationships between the perspectives of the particular and the generic. First, they show that it is possible to simultaneously hold the inside and the outside view. Second, the visualizations show how the tracked participants negotiate and navigate structures of politics, economy, and the concrete landscape through their movements. In regard to the first issue, both *Souvenir* and *NomadicMILK* install a difference between the person being tracked and the person seeing the tracks. There is clearly an “inside” and an “outside” view; *Souvenir*’s art explicitly expresses two very different perspectives on the landscape—even though one perspective may not see the other (the farmer may not understand the art of the project and the tourist may not see the farmer’s efficiency perspective). Furthermore, the abstract prints allow tourists (i.e., outsiders) to maintain their often nostalgic view on the landscape because they are only confronted with a slightly different perspective on what they know: the rhythmic structure of the furrowed field. Had *Souvenir* used the same procedure as *NomadicMILK* of displaying video recordings of Polak interviewing participants about their work and their struggles to maintain their culture, this knowledge of contemporary Dutch farming could probably destroy the nostalgic tourist gaze, which is the one that the project instead seeks to activate. This dynamic is not without irony, though: tourists acquire an abstract artwork of a familiar landscape that for many holds nostalgic narratives about farming the land and about the Netherlands as an agriculture country, but this familiarity is from a perspective that has little to do with the perspective of both contemporary farming and with the person who knows every twist and turn of the land. In this case, the project shows no intention of making viewers (“readers,” in de Certeau’s terms) engage further, physically or emotionally, with the producers (“writers”) of the tracks. This is primarily because the foundation of the project is the difference between “writing” and “reading” the landscape’s culturally embedded, spatial narratives, even if the participants themselves do not fully realize it.

The clashing of inside and outside perspectives is also evident in *NomadicMILK*. First of all, the Nigerian participants are able to view, explain, and reflect on their moves from an “outside,” or at least distanced, perspective when the robot draws the paths in the sand. By mixing the two perspectives, participants are able to see their own actions and decisions in a larger perspective. As in *Souvenir*, the exhibition-goer meets abstract prints in the exhibition context, but Polak very much aims to

let the viewer know as much as possible about how the prints came into being and of the life leading to these kinds of movements. However, the remoteness of context also establishes (or maintains) a distance between the Nigerian participant and the spectator's gaze even though we see both tracings and video, and even though the contemporary life of Nigerian milk industry (including the Fulani herdsmen) is thoroughly explained. In a way, both prints and video are exotic and very hard to relate to for a Western buyer who has never been to Nigeria. In this sense, tracings, prints, and videos become abstractions of a location the viewer will never quite understand—just like the outside spectator will never understand the life on the streets from tracings on a map in de Certeau's theories. Still, just like Prouty's remark on Koolhaas, also the exhibition-goer might get moments of embodied experiences through the exhibition material's ability to immerse the viewer in the gallery's spatial narratives. This is different from being in Nigeria but still an experience that transgresses the generic view.

The participants in the *NomadicMILK* project, however, are given "access" to being outside and inside at the same time. The traces come to life and are no longer only "relic sets" of what once was, as de Certeau stated. From the videos, it is clear that Polak's repeated visits make participants begin to explain and explore the broader perspectives of their particular actions. When they see their movements replayed in the sand drawings, both herdsmen and truck drivers begin telling the stories of their movements in and intertwining with the locations through which they navigate. The contested nature of these locations becomes visible through the stories that they tell Polak. So it seems like de Certeau's assertion that it is impossible to be both a "reader" and a "writer" would have to be rethought in light of the possibilities of seeing one's own actions with the help of mobile media. It is clear from the project and the videos that participants are now reading their own writing.

In this way, *NomadicMILK* has at least three layers of visualization: it shows individual narratives and how they can be discussed by help of mobile media traces; it shows the interpersonal and shared workspace of drivers and herdsmen as well as their different perspectives on this space; and then it has a third—international, perhaps—layer, which creates a particular narrative about how these individual experiences are interwoven with global dynamics.

This third visualization layer has to do with the second of my two primary points of interest, which addresses how both projects show the ways that tracked participants negotiate and navigate structures of politics, economy, and the concrete landscape through their movements. *Souvenir* shows that the farmer's plowing is highly choreographed in order to make the most profit out of the land: the field and its furrows are optimized in order to maximize the amount of crops per field. *NomadicMILK* shows that PEAK truck drivers are part of a centralized distribution system leading them onto even the smallest roads, but also that this system only functions because the driver is able to improvise through the

unpredictable landscape. Similarly, the movements of the Fulani herdsmen are affected by structural issues: as nomads, they traditionally go where the cows go, but, for instance, the availability of processed milk has changed the cultural view on nomadic cows. And with the increasing focus on the value of land, herdsmen now also have to navigate between permitted and forbidden routes. Both projects thus address how global structures influence everyday actions and cultures even if the participants are not explicitly aware of this in the moments when they move. In this sense, the milk in Nigeria becomes a carrier of hidden stories about everyday spatial narratives just like *MILK project's* Dutch-style European cheese shows how everyday movements of people, animals, and goods are the backbone of the globalized economy. But participants are only able to see this pattern and “read” the story when they have access to the full picture, which few people have.

Most of *NomadicMILK's* audience has no frame of reference to the Nigerian landscape, which is why Polak provides plenty of information on the Nigerian cultural history of milk. But even though we see every detail in the participants' moves, the distance in both culture and miles makes it difficult to understand the movement patterns in any other way than a very generic one. In this way, the project shows how everything is connected through the same exchange flows and, unless you know a place very well, everything can only be understood as part of a generic pattern. Koolhaas's generic view belongs to the tourist. In many ways, this gaze is similar to the tourist's gaze in *Souvenir*: primarily based on distant and distancing preconceptions. A similar dynamic is visible in *NomadicMILK*: even though the maps and stories visualize highly embodied spatial movements, and even if viewers are provided with information about the context, they are left with few references through which they can internalize the movement visualizations if they have had little or no exposure to African reality. In that sense, the participants' movements in *NomadicMILK* are hard to comprehend in other ways than the generic idea of the African land and life. The paths drawn by *NomadicMILK* are hard not to read as paths that could have been made anywhere, anytime, and by anyone.

Lastly, Koolhaas's thoughts of generic globalization provide a framework for understanding what is also at stake in *NomadicMILK*: a story about the impact of globalization on ways of life. In the generic economy, everything is already or is about to become a commodity. This is true for Nigeria's milk culture, as it slowly changes from a local and particular structure to a generic structure where milk is a processed staple being distributed from center to periphery in a preplanned pattern. Nigerian dairy distribution can and should be understood within the framework of dairy distribution in other countries, especially because the PEAK milk is itself “migratory,” as it is made from Dutch milk powder transported by boat from the Netherlands to Nigeria. In this way, the nomadic narrative has shifted from describing a certain way of life to describing a particular economic pattern, where goods and capital move freely around the world looking for “greener pastures.”



## Conclusion

Viewed as a collection of projects, Polak's artistic practice highlights that every movement in space is imbued with private narratives as well as with the influence of global trends, structures, and movements. In every single project, we see a particular pattern of attachment (which directly relates to Teodor Mitew's distinction between different types of mappings),<sup>27</sup> but I have argued that Polak makes different things visible to different types of viewers. The narrative that the GPS receiver makes available for readers depends on whether you are a tracked participant or an outside viewer. Additionally, Polak's artistic practice also shows that the particular and the generic are tightly connected; even though people see different things, it is possible to "read" and "write" simultaneously with mobile tracking technologies (and a fitting artistic approach). In this sense, we can understand generic space—which is also about capitalist patterns making every place accessible to generic goods—as something that is made visible through particular acts of movement.

Projects like *NomadicMILK* thus embrace GPS technology as something that allows for concealed patterns of movement and capital to become explicit and available for public scrutiny. This is one of the aspects that Polak investigates by using mobile GPS receivers to track, store, and later replay the everyday movement patterns of individuals who, in de Certeau's terms, produce space as they make use of it. Also, Polak's artistic practice clearly has a political aspect—even if she understates this by rarely mentioning political motives and by barely bringing it up in the exhibition contexts. I have argued here that all of her projects deal with the political dimensions of how individual actions are always tightly interwoven with larger societal structures, and if we look at her artistic practice in total, we can see that she shows that this pattern is repeated everywhere. Basically, it is possible to see her projects as a way of investigating the spatial narratives of the individual with the help of mobile technologies and subsequently highlighting how each everyday practice is a result of strategic structures and tactical embodiment thereof, be it in Latvia, Nigeria, or the Netherlands.

## Notes

1. Mary Flanagan, "Locating Play and Politics: Real World Games & Activism," *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* 16, no. 2–3 (2007): 5.
2. Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1998).
3. Flanagan, "Locating Play and Politics: Real World Games & Activism," 9.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).
6. Rem Koolhaas, "The Generic City," in *S,M,L, XL*, ed. Rem Koolhaas et al. (New York: Monacelli, 1998).
7. Esther Polak and Waag Society, "Amsterdam Realtime," <http://realtime.waag.org/>.
8. Esther Polak, "MILK project," <http://milkproject.net>.

9. "In the case of the *Souvenir* project the interaction is more intended to be between the local tourists and the visualization than on the farmers and their own tracks [. . .]" (Polak, 2008).
10. Esther Polak, "Souvenir: Explanation and monoprints," <http://souvenirzeeland.wordpress.com/explanation-and-monoprints/>.
11. Esther Polak, "NomadicMILK: The project," [http://nomadicmilk.net/blog/?page\\_id=2](http://nomadicmilk.net/blog/?page_id=2).
12. Ibid.
13. Koolhaas, "The Generic City," 1253.
14. Ibid., 1248.
15. Ibid., 1251.
16. Ibid., 1250.
17. Ibid., 1263.
18. Flanagan, "Locating Play and Politics: Real World Games & Activism."
19. Richard Prouty, "Buying Generic: The Generic City in Dubai," *Static* 8 (2009): 7.
20. Michele Chang and Elizabeth Goodman, "Asphalt Games: Enacting Place Through Locative Media," *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* 14, no. 3/4 (2006).
21. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.
22. As Rowan Wilken notes, the terms "place" and "space" have a "lack of definitional clarity and precision," which is often confusing. In, for instance, Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction between space and place, place is the embodied location, whereas Michel de Certeau uses the same two words in the exact opposite way. For the rest of this chapter, however, I will stick to de Certeau's terms, as he is my primary source, in which case Chang and Goodman's argument in the previous paragraph would have been that living and acting in a location is what constructs a "space." See Rowan Wilken, "From Stabilitas Loci to Mobilitas Loci: Networked Mobility and the Transformation of Place," *Fibreculture Journal* 6 (2005), <http://six.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-036-from-stabilitas-loci-to-mobilitas-loci-networked-mobility-and-the-transformation-of-place/> and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1977).
23. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.
24. Ibid., 97.
25. See e.g., David Pinder, "Subverting Cartography: The Situationists and Maps of the City," *Environment and Planning A* 28, no. 3 (1996): 405–427; Frank Mort, "Cityscapes: Consumption, Masculinities and the Mapping of London since 1950," *Urban Studies* 35, no. 5–6 (1998): 889–907.
26. See e.g., Scott W. Ruston, "Storyworlds on the Move: Mobile Media and Their Implications for Narrative," *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 2 (2010): 101–120; Teodor Mitew, "Repopulating the Map: Why Subjects and Things Are Never Alone," *Fibreculture Journal*, no. 13 (2008).
27. Teodor Mitew, "Repopulating the Map."