# Reflecting on locative media art
# with Fred Adam and Geert Vermeire

Mike Duggan and Cristina A. G. Kiminami

Locative media refers to mobile technologies that have the capacity to locate themselves and other media on maps using GPS, WI-FI and cellular technology. These commonly include GPS devices such as the Sat-Nav, the smartphone, and a whole range of smartphone applications including mapping apps, self-tracking fitness apps, food delivery apps and location-based games. This technology has been extensively used by artists over the past decade and more, looking to understand how our relationship to, and experience of, place can be augmented by digital

technologies. We now have a wealth of knowledge and experience of how this technology shapes arts practice and how artists shape the use of this technology. And yet, there is still very little in the way of a public conversation about how artists came to use this technology and how it continues to shape their ways of working and thinking about the world.

In publishing the following edited interviews with two pioneers of locative media art, Fred Adam and Geert Vermeire, we aim to recognise their contributions to the field and to encourage and inspire readers to think about the possibilities of this media, and our reasons for using it. Locative media is nothing new, but as these conversations demonstrate, there is much left to think about how we might use it to explore questions of space, place, time, legacy, community, and ultimately what it means to live on the planet with others, both human and non-human, in the present, throughout history, and through deep time.

Our interest in publishing these interviews, which are best read as a pair, comes from working with them both on a research project exploring the possibilities of using locative media as an educational tool for understanding the locally-global issues of climate change, migration and mobility. For more information about this project please visit https://supercluster.eu/courses/earthlings/ and https://cgeomap.eu/earthlings/

## Fred Adam

Fred is a New Media explorer, co-founder of the *CGeomap* project and founder of the *Lab GPS Museum*. He is also a researcher and Freelance Art Director in spatial narratives in the outdoors. Fred is especially interested in the interactions between the world and smartphones, in time and space, from the very small to the very large and from the past to the future. He has a special interest in investigating how mobile technology can help us to understand better and preserve the Earth by involving people into transformative outdoors experiences. With the curator and artist Geert Vermeire, he launched the Locative Media Supercluster web portal in 2020, which is a space for organizing collective mapping events and online courses. Previously, he has been inspired by and collaborated with David Merleau Andy Deck, Celia Gradin, Robert Filliou, Rich Blundell, David Abram, Verónica Perales, Dan Mc Veigh, Stephan Harding, Francisco López, Chari Cámara, José Ramón Alcalá, Rebecca Solnit, Brian Swimme, Sylvie Marchand and Keiko Tanaka.

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### Mike: How did you get into located media? Could you explain your trajectory into locative media artworks?

I did fine arts in 1991 during which we were witnessing a transition between analogue and digital artwork. Soon, I started participating in the digital lab at the University of Nantes in France. We started, as a small group of people, to experiment with interactive nonlinear stories with the use of a software called 'Macromedia director'. Also, I travelled to Spain in 1993, and had a very transformative experience spending one year in a small village with my computer. There, I started to write a travel book about my interaction with people in the village. It was 'locative' in the sense that I was in a village with my computer and talking to people, using recorded media and creating a story about those interactions in that place. After this, I worked in Cuenca (Spain) at the Museo Internacional de Electrografía, which specialized in artworks made with printers, machine, photocopiers, copy machines, etc. It was a time of transition; a lot of people were starting to use machines to create artworks and I spent several years there doing a lot of projects.

It was 1997-98 that the internet started; it was a big change because we went from a local creation to the global context of audio-visual interactive creations. This was a significant change and I felt lost in this immensity, this ocean. It was quite scary to tell you the truth. Questions emerged: What is the relationship between artworks we could do at the local level, and what kind of work could we do at the global level. During that time, I had a chance to meet people like [Verónica Perales](#) (Spanish artist) and [Andy Deck](#) (American artist), who are both from the generation of 'net artists' and some of the pioneers. We created a collective called [Transnational Temps](#) and explored this problem, this relation between the appearance of new digital places and artworks, and the disappearance of biodiversity on Earth.

We focused on this question at the global level. Historically, around 2000-2001, locative media technology emerged, and in 2007, the first iPhone. It was really exciting to go back to the 'local' through technology by placing one foot in the local and the other foot in the global, which is, I believe the best context for digital interactive creations.

**Mike: Net Art was a fairly niche corner of the arts community in the early 2000s. Did you consider yourselves 'Net Artists'?**

Net Art was centered on questioning the code more than anything. It was not about questions of the environment, and biodiversity and other kinds of stuff. We (Transnational Temps) were encouraged to be this way, it was like a bubble, where we imagined a new market made of digital-only creations (see net artists like [Jodi](#), for example). However, it was a very narrow vision and we were not interested in Net Art and so we never entered the market. We were borderline, more interested in questions relative to the local and the global, to create a local connection with the internet.

**Mike: We've talked about the three waves of locative media art before, as a way to think through the different phases of this work, from early Net Art through to the explosion of locative media projects after the iPhone came out in 2007. How do you differentiate between these waves?**

I used to think in terms of the technology. CD ROMs, the internet and then locative media. However, it seems that now everything is blurred. What matters is not if it's digital, but what the message is? What is the impact? What is the ability to connect with people through the artwork? So, yes, these boundaries, these boxes, are dissolved today. I don't think they exist anymore.

**Mike: In terms of your journey through this, and the communities that you joined, would you say that there was any defining point where you joined the 'locative media community'? And how do you see yourself and your role within the locative media arts community?**

Locative media has really been a community network from the start because it was not yet in the mainstream. There was no market for it. It was an experiment by programmers and artists. From the start it was a big community, but the last two or three years have seen even bigger changes. The artworks we created early on were for the audience. You created a locative work with your friends, afterwards you make your workshop, create interesting ideas and deliver it as a single experience. Now, however, the work is maturing and we understand that it's not only about delivering a product or an experience for one person. It's about generating communities around understanding territory, place, time, the global and the local in a better way. For example, the most important part of CGeomap, the platform we created in 2016, is the process of community creation around these issues.
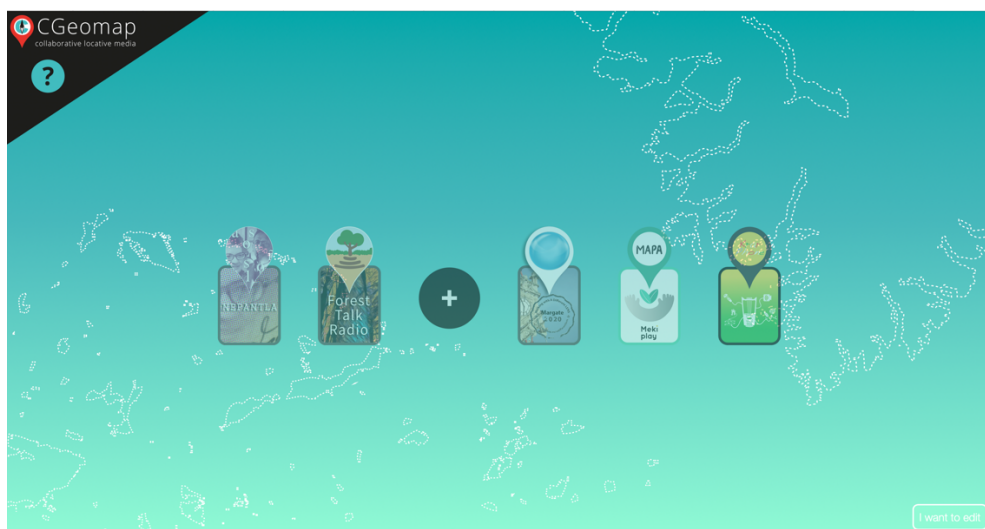
**Mike: So it's more about the process of developing a particular app, and then a community based around that app or that website?**

Yeah, that's my feeling. At first the technology is very hypnotic, and you are very excited, but you forget to see the big picture. When we look at it with a certain level of maturity and distance the collaborative process is what matters. We have intuitions as creators and artists, and sometimes we know, but we need time, years, to realise this potential. I understood from the start that locative media was a good way to articulate technology in ways that I wanted. I knew it from the beginning, but now I understand it better by going beyond just creating media or resources.

For example, we did a project with the Escoitar group and the Cultural Centre of Mexico in 2014-15 with Horacio González. We made a [map](#) of the Spanish exile from 1936-1939, regarding the civil war in Spain, where 25,000 people fled by boats to Mexico. They were welcomed by President Lazaro Cardenas in Mexico to escape from Franco- the dictator. It is an exciting example of a positive integration of exiled people into Mexican society and culture. We interviewed ancestors from these people, as well as historians and people interested in the topic, and ran workshops and led some walks. There was also the participation of young people, which resulted in an exciting cultural exchange, something that does not happen often today. It was a success, although it was a very dramatic subject because it deals with a situation of people who suffered so much and had to leave their country. It's important to say that it's not a problem to talk about Civil War in Mexico, but it's a very big problem to talk about the Civil War in Spain, where it remains a taboo. The project was a very transformative experience.

What is very good with locative media and storytelling is that it is not like cinema, documentary or painting. Everything can be a reference for you. Cinema can be referenced, a documentary can be a reference, the game industry can be a reference, literature and poetry can be a reference, sound creation can be a reference, so it is a very exciting position where everything is possible. Locative Media is like a crossing of languages.



**Mike: It's very interesting to hear about how locative media can be used to engage young people, and how you use walking as a method for engagement. Was this always a priority of yours or was this something that just came out of the work?**

Locative media as a terminology is wrong. It is not complete. Instead we should say 'locative-time-media' because when you walk, you explore a place in time. Locative media has this ability to work across the dimensions of place, through time and space. Through it, we can start to think about the geological layers of the place as well as reintegrating the ancestral values of place. When we spend time in place, especially in nature, we understand the transmission of values through generations, which is something I believe we have lost, because there is an artificial barrier between generations. It's hard for young people to talk or to accept information from

older people. Older people feel disconnected from society; therefore, they disconnect themselves from society. This is a drama because we need to keep the flow of experience and knowledge. So, a natural way to apply this understanding of time and space is to involve young people, as we did with elders in Mexico. It's important to keep the legacy of places, in that location, because what happens with all these materials, these memories in 50, 100, or 200 years if we do not? That's a big, big problem, and really leads us to a conversation about digital conservation and the digitalization of memories in place.

In regard to walking, the act of walking it's indivisible from the act of thinking, and we think better when we walk. The body is the starting point of any experience because, of course, there is no separation. Locative media and walking have value because together they make this connection with our mind and body. To walk is to tick in time, in the sense that you have a certain speed, and when you walk it is like a clock, one step after another, moving in space and time. There is a marvelous opportunity here [for locative media] to build a story or build a locative experience relative to the distance you cover and to your speed. We might look to the language of cinema here, to learn how to deliver and deal with a new dimension, which is all about the body and the spirit.

The best example I could give you is a project we did with Stephan Harding at Schumacher College in England called the [Deep Time Walk](), where we played with our bodies and our perception of space and time to tell stories. By converting a step into a timescale, we converted one step to equate to 1 million years, so that when you walked 4.6 kilometers it would be the equivalent of walking along with the evolution of life on Earth.

As you walk the 4.6 kilometers using the app, this scientist is telling you the story of the evolution of the Earth, of life on Earth. There's also a Shakespearian fool character, asking strange questions to the scientist. So you have this App that dictates your walk through space and time, which is marvelous. There is an embodied cognition going on, by converting the motion of the body into time-space or space-time. The work gives you a sense of scale you cannot understand only in your mind, you have to understand it through embodied cognition. We, as humans, don't have a sense of time. We believe that we are around since the start and that we are cleverer than any tree, any bird, or anything around us. We arrived just 300,000 years ago, which

is very few, and that's what bodyily perception gives you. So, as you begin to walk the 4.6 kilometers, you realize, where are the humans? You have to wait for the last five steps to see that.

Mike: I love the idea that it's about working with several different axes, both temporal and spatial. There is also this idea of scale which is important to how we understand both what we're doing and how that connects to deep time.

You should try it. There is an app to share and you can autoplay at home if you want. I'm so happy to have done this project, but there is no market for this type of thing, which is a bit of a problem. We are doing interesting things with locative media, but because there is no market, no mainstream, the project has a very short life; it's expensive to do this programming, and to update the technology all the time.

Mike: That's a good point about the finances of projects like these. As you say, it is expensive to run the project, but then even more to maintain them, to conserve them.

Yes it is, but really, the conservation of the media is absolutely impossible. Let's be honest, it's not possible, unless you have a lot of money. It could be possible, but not yet. Also, the market is not interested in it because it's good business to have no permanent access to these memories.

What matters more is how you tell the story and who you share the story with. What kind of message do you want to communicate with the story? That's the real spirit of locative media. What is necessary is for us to keep the stability of creative worldviews inspired by the ancient times, inspired by the understanding of space and time, inspired by a sense of community and exchange, inspired by gratitude, to our lives, to our years.

Mike: I want to change tack slightly to talk more about your work with CGeomap and with the GPS museum. Why did you initially start these projects?

We originally created CGeomap for a workshop on locative media. We wanted to control and have our own tools. It came from our desire to create open-source tools for the community, but it was extremely difficult to create CGeomap because we were not a company. People come and

go, and it's also technologically complicated because we don't do apps. We emulate apps on web browsers and mobile phones.

With CGeomap we introduced the possibility of creative collaboration of locative content – making things together - which is new. I don't know anyone who is doing that right now. It's simple in terms of the possibilities you have, but it gets us to a place where collaboration is central to what we want to do.

Today we are still working on improving the tool and I am expecting to arrive at a certain moment soon, where we stop and keep it as it is, just adding small updates. I believe that we have almost arrived at this point. We don't want to make it more complicated. We have a new programmer now, working on Cité des sciences in la Villette in Paris. He is a Jedi of programming, and thanks to him we are getting there. But it is difficult, you know, because the technology is always changing; how HTML works is changing, navigators are changing, the operating system is changing. It's very, very difficult, but we continue to work on it. It takes a lot of energy and time, but we have a reason for doing it.

**Mike: Following on from this, I'd like to know how you began working with Geert and how that collaboration started because we, me and Cristina, met him at the same time, in September 2019, but we've only known you through Zoom, which is a strange situation, but it works. I always want to know how you and Geert got to know each other and how that partnership works?**

I have such good communication and collaboration with him. I have the feeling that I have known him for a long, long time, which is not true. We didn't even meet each other until recently. Even then we just met one time, for a few hours, when he came to visit me in the [wooden hut](#) in Spain. We just built our relationship online, you know. There is really good magic and alchemy between us because really we have two parts, two pieces that fit very well together. This is a beautiful story. Recently, we created the [Supercluster.eu](#) site together as a meeting ground to teach collaborative media. It was a chance to discover and collaborate with amazing artists like [Stephanie Whitelaw](#), [Fay Stevens](#) and [Elspeth Billie Penfold](#) and others.

**Mike: Working with you both, it is like you have known each other for years!**

Yeah, it's true. We found ourselves, over the years, becoming part of a universal family of people working in the same direction, having the same targets, or visions, and at the end, we finally got to meet each other. It reminds me of the French artist, Robert Filliou who talked about the eternal network... Before the internet, a long time before the internet, was this sense that we [artists] were creating a network, an invisible network of people doing similar things. Geert and I got tied up in this network together.

**Mike: Finally, have you thought about this in terms of locative media and how you see it developing in the future?**

Yes. We talked about the potential third wave of locative media and I am very, very concerned, about the disappearance of digital information. There are absolutely no guarantees that all the work, all this time people are spending on it, all the memories of places will be preserved. This is my first target for 2021, to continue to have the conversation with interesting people like Hamish Sewell in Australia, who are working on the idea of universal locative media formats, which is so important. So yes, I would love to be able to offer a way of conserving locative media

work in the long- term. If we do not preserve these media and content, people will only be able to access mainstream media and content in the future, which is very problematic. I do not know if there is a solution, but let us try… let us try.

**Geert Vermeire**

Geert is a Belgian poet, walking artist, curator with a focus on spatial writing and locative sound. Co-founder of the Milena principle, team member of noTours and collaborator of Escoitar, and core team member of CGeomap. His practice is about walking as a creative instrument, unfolding around human connections, text, sound and space, resulting in sound- and text-based art, site-specific interventions, locative media and in creative walks engaging both with the landscape and with those walking through the landscape.

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**Mike: The first thing I wanted to do is to get a sense of your personal history with locative media and art. I know you as an artist and a poet that became a walking artist and then got involved with locative media. Could you talk me through that journey?**

My principal occupation is indeed being a poet. At a certain moment in my life, I hit the wall with my written poetry. I felt that it was too limited to the mind and I was looking for ways to connect it with the senses of the body. I started to study music and learned a lot from my teacher at the time, Sergiu Celibidache, who had a very special approach towards music. He never recorded or wanted to record his performances, out of the idea that music is something that is made from the moment itself and then disappears. It is a one off experience. As a poet who was writing things down, I was very much intrigued by this. I started to find ways to write poetry that interacts with the environment and with people, and poetry that doesn't specifically have to be preserved, but experienced.

The first site specific poetry I did in the early 90s - with poetry by myself and others - offered a visual or more interactive experience for people in public space, and not in the classical way of just putting texts on walls. By inviting artists to make installations and visual presentations of poems, and by bringing and putting them in places where they had a connection, we were doing something different. That project was developed together with the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Ghent (SMAK), which is one of the major contemporary art museums in Belgium, who were very interested in considering poetry as another form of contemporary art that could also be

part of this museum, as an ephemeral form of performative art. The whole idea was to bring poetry outside into public space, and at the same time, to end the standard image of art in public space, to bring poetry inside the museum as a lived experience. This was a partial success, and it now seems that I was ahead of my time, but I did not really understand this at that moment.

After, I moved and got a job as the Director of the Flemish Poetry Centre in Belgium, where I was asked to make and create alternative experiences of poetry, specifically for young people. I was also tasked with bringing poetry experiences to the museum, and to bring poetry and art to public spaces, to try to make collective experiences of poetry. Poetry is not just something that you read as an individual in a book, somewhere isolated in a cosy room, but it can also be experienced in groups and beyond reading. To create poetry in groups by moving with the body, or at least integrating the body with poetry texts in public space, I started some projects for young people, and poetry walks, that experimented with sounds and interactions with public space, writing as a gesture, and poetry as a performative act.

This became a big project and it travelled all around Belgium to public libraries and museums, but it had a lot of resistance from the traditional attitudes of, let's say, the Poetry and Literature worlds. That made my life quite hard, so I decided to quit this job at the Poetry Centre and to work exclusively for the Museum of Contemporary Arts, where my ideas fell into more fertile grounds. Shortly after I went to live in Portugal and take a break. I lived in the North of Portugal, very close to Galicia. There I met with a group of people by coincidence, a collective called 'Escoitar', which is the Spanish word for 'to listen'. They were a group of interdisciplinary people with philosophical, historical, musical and technological backgrounds, that all had a passion for the act of listening. When I became a member of this group - more specifically through their project noTours- we considered silence as a sound, not an absence, but a presence. This was in the mid 2000s, and we were very concerned with how we could get rid of this cultural pyramid, where institutions decided what culture is and where people should be consuming culture. At the same time, we were thinking how we could bring the act of listening, or the relation people have to sound, into the cultural world. The first thing we did was create workshops that tried to sensitise people to listening, and more generally to sounds. With the people that were into technology and specialist software, Escoitar decided to create a sound map towards the end of the 2000s, which at that time was quite innovative. That was the first sound

map ever made in Spain and also innovative in the sense that it was not a sound map that was created by a small group of specialists, but instead was collaborative and open to a collective of people and inhabitants who could add their personally recorded sounds of Galicia. We were not looking for sounds that were official or institutional. We were looking for sounds that people had a relation to, sounds that had become part of personal life stories. We wanted to create a sound map that didn't just resemble the sound of the river, the sound of the city or the sound of the sea, like the rest of the game. We wanted to create a map of stories in sound about how people lived. They could do this by uploading sound recordings, small bits of text and photographs from any device. This grew immensely and at the end of the three-year project we had more than 4000 contributions from people.



Simultaneously we thought, yes, this map is really wonderful. It's interesting, but it is something that is limited to a desktop and doesn't allow you to experience sound stories in a more physical way, through movement. So, we started to create some locative media software called noTours. The same principle applied, the sounds would be added by people themselves, collectively or collaboratively to tell their personal story. We thought this would give an alternative to traditional audio guides, which give official discourse and linear histories about places, and allow for people living in a place to tell their stories about life in that place. We used an open access

editing tool so people could just go to the website, make an account and start to upload their sounds. These were then transferred to an app where you could listen to the contents by going to these places where the sounds were connected. We intentionally promoted this as a non-linear experience and were not expecting people to create a walk or to walk from A to B to C to D, but actually to see the tool as an instrument for their own compositions based on personal experiences. We wanted to create possibilities for people to make and create their own work and not to be limited to a predefined route. Being able to start at any point and to leave at any point was important to us. It was designed as a Dérive in that sense. That's why it was called noTours, not only as an anti-audio guide, but as well, trying to invite people to just wander and lose themselves. We want to give them the possibility to do this. This was not possible in many of the then existing audio guides where you had to follow a certain route. By making their own routes and by making their own choices, we gave agency to the people that were working with it or using the app as walkers.

This became an immense success and in the years that we worked with noTours, it became a very advanced tool as well. Not only did it allow you to put a sound on a place, or to fill a certain area with sounds, but you could also layer sounds so that sounds merged with other sounds or let them appear depending on the listening of previous sounds, or depending on the direction you were approaching. This made it an interesting tool, not only for beginners, for which it was meant, but also for sound artists. At that moment, there was no other tool that allowed for this. Echoes did not exist yet. SonicMaps started two years later. So for a time we were actually the pioneers that did this sort of service, at least with open source code and available for free, which was essential to us.

The last project we did with noTours was in 2014 and was our most ambitious. We filled the centre of Athens, the triangle between the three main squares of the city, Omonia square, and Syntagma square and Monastiraki, with 800 sounds from 15 artists. This lasted one and a half years, allowing people to walk for hours creating their own routes, and to walk it again and again and have another experience. The strength of noTours – the fact that it was open access, free and community driven - was also its weakness because there was no money to keep it going. We all had our other jobs and we did this in our spare time. At the end of noTours, 900 walks had been made with this platform, which meant for us daily questions and technical problems to solve. We

couldn't respond to people's requests anymore and we didn't want to make this commercial, it was impossible, and it was against the nature of it. So, we decided to stop the service in 2015, to move on to another objective in our lives as a group, but not without making the source code available for all on [GitHub](#).

Around the time we also decided to stop the sound map made in Galicia, but we had a problem. There were 4000 sounds uploaded there, thousands of people that shared their story. The big question was, what do we do with this, because it's not ours, it's their map. It would not be fair for us to keep them, to archive them, at least not without their permission. In the end we decided to give them back to the people, but in a very, let's say, poetic way, by creating a [website](#) in which we said goodbye to everybody from the Escoitar group from 2006 to 2016. Every time somebody visited this web page to say goodbye, one sound was played and then erased from the database. In the end, all the stories and sounds we had collected over the years were given back to silence. It was a very symbolic act and a closing of the cycle we began in 2006 and as well questioning and making aware of the importance of (returning to) silence.

A bit later, I joined up with a new small group of people, including various members of Escoitar and Fred of course, developing a new software platform called [CGeomap](#). At the beginning, it was quite simple and it was some time before it was established as it is now, but the same idea and collaborative approach was used. It was a platform where people could work together, open source, and open access, but we extended it to include other media so people could share videos, photographs and texts next to sounds of an environment. We didn't want to make the same mistake as before in the sense that by offering it completely for free, we became a victim of its success, so we put in a pricing structure where people had to pay to use it, although the group embraced and embraces creative work together on the platform without any commercial objective

In these years, we started to think about our role in this new landscape of locative Media, because as you know, we maybe started as the first, but lots of others are now around. Platforms like Echoes and SonicMaps, for example, that were inspired by the noTours project in 2011, when all protagonists met in Manchester. NOVARS at the Music department at Manchester University was actually the hotspot and the hub of all these in Europe, breeding new initiatives for locative media via locativeaudio.com. CGeomap came to a second wave of locative media trying to preserve the original spirit of collective and collaborative creation. I also had a personal interest in creating a tool for writing out text in space, to find ways for writers to move through ways of writing that are not only two dimensional, by just writing on paper, but by writing through

interactions with the environment and your body. That is one of the focuses of CGeomap that we are exploring. The other is the community element as we started with noTours, to create ways for people to come together to share their stories and share their interactions with each other on a digital platform that is more than a desktop experience. In a sense, CGeomap brings together the two projects we did with Escoitar - sound mapping and locative audio walking, but as a separate and new project.

Within CGeomap my main interest since 2018 has been to bring collaborative creation processes to the next level - on a global scale - by bringing together creatives from different disciplines, including writers, performers and movement artists, and from different cultural backgrounds. I've done this through projects such as Libraries as Gardens, which superimposes the indoors and outdoors, silences and natural sounds, through texts, voices and home recordings during the pandemic, and Ecumenopolis - a global walking project that explores silences and sounds in and around the big libraries of the world.

**Mike: Wow! That's a lot Geert!**

Yeah, and I only started in 2000 to have some fun!

**Mike: There are four things that I picked out from that incredible history that I want to ask you a bit more about. The first is about why sound was so significant for you, and the idea that you could locate sound. What is it about the ability to locate sound that is important for your kind of arts practice?**

As a poet, I came to sound as a sort of relief, in the sense that I found a way to express my art in a completely immersive way. I always had problems with written language because I felt that it created a distance between what I felt and what I could express. There is a distance between the words and what you're feeling because they are representing something that is not really the reality in itself. So, in music or sound, I found a way where the two unite, where the expression and the feeling are one and unique, and that's why it is not observable, because it's related to the experience and only the experience. That is why I came as a poet to sound, and why I eventually came to the Escoitar group in Spain as well.

I always felt a very close relation between my body and writing. Not only writing with my hand, but also with my body. For me, writing has always come to be something related to the whole body. As a poet, I felt that the whole poem was actually contained in all the senses, and as sound is the most immersive - it is something that you cannot close yourself off from - it contained all the senses for me.

Movement was important too. Movement cannot be separated from me or the poem either. The text is coming to life when interacting with the world around it; when it's not isolated. I found this interaction in walking practices, so I started to work with walking as a way of bringing text to people and letting people read it in a different way, through walking experiences and walking performances together with me. This immediately went together with sound and sound performances because it made a bridge between the human and non-human language. I was always very interested in language beyond the human because I consider languages not only owned by humans. For example, I made a performance called [Score for Buzzer (2004)](#), together with my friend and visual artist Stefaan van Biesen, where I wrote a poem out of the buzzing sounds of bees. During group walks we gathered around a tree to perform this poem like a musical score with 14 different buzzing sounds. We printed small strips of paper with these sounds on and invited the walkers to perform the score conducted by me, expressing their singing as buzzing sounds. We made a poem that was vibrating. We had a group of 14 people or more each making different buzzing sounds while I'm trying to achieve a unity of everything by conducting them gently, and trying to resonate with nature. In the beginning, people found this very funny and then a bit strange! But after a while, they started to feel how this sound was connecting them. After a few minutes, there was a click between the participants. There was a cloud of one sound that was originating from all these different people, a sudden resonance with what was around them and a unity with something that they felt separated from. That experience of how sound can really unite not only people, but people and places in a very intense and immersive way brought me to work with sound. That was in the pre-technological times! And then with the technology      came of course the potential of locative media to connect places and people.

Mike: As you were talking I was thinking about when we first met at the [British Library](#), and that click, that kind of switch that happens in these kinds of performances. What you're asking people to do is quite radical in terms of their everyday experiences. I remember walking around the British Library thinking this guy is mad! And then after 10 minutes or so you attune yourself to what you're being asked us to do. So, the question I want to ask is how did you first approach this way of bringing people together in ways that are quite different from their usual practices? Was this a learning curve in itself, or did it work immediately?

It was a learning experience. For example, I started out doing these buzzing performances with professionals and that was a big mistake. When I first did the buzzing performance it was with a professional choir. They were trying to do it so well, and to follow my instructions so precisely, because they are trained to do so. It was like a mighty aeroplane that didn't come off the ground, it was just not taking off. After this, I decided to just let things happen and not try to make something happen. Having people that are doing it for the first time, like you say, doing something that they are not used to, creates a space for possibility. There is a richness to this, and although it does need some talent to bring the right people together, I'm not choosing them directly. People come because they have an interest in the topic. I think the key is to be able to create the conditions for which things may happen, or not. Leaving enough space for things to happen, not defining things too much.

There is a certain risk with this, of course, because some people don't like that and they feel very uncomfortable with that, but in most cases, this approach opens eyes. It is also a very horizontal way of working, giving people the freedom to find the creative in themselves, and not trying to define it for them. They have agency, like they did with noTours, not only as creators but as walkers. This is what attracts me so much to the walking arts, because the work of art is the walk. It is made by the people that walk it, and it's not something like an object that you create. I remember what Hamish Fulton said once when asked how a walk can be a work of art. Firstly, he said a walk is a work of art because the artist says so. Secondly, he said walking art invites you to do something as it is for the first time in your life. If you come with an open mind, preferably together with others, you may be doing something in your life that you have not done before. Suddenly, you come to a new experience. I think that is the trick.

Mike: Yes, I totally agree. The British Library thing was just like that. I had walked around it loads of times before, but I had never walked around it like that before! That was the takeaway message for me.

Cristina: You said these audio guides incentivise you to dream, to wander, and to not follow. Do you think that nowadays it is possible to get lost and have this wonderful experience, in the contemporary context when everything is already geo-located or signposted?

It's a very relevant question and something to really think about. We live in a world where so much is defined for us. We don't escape anymore, we are in a system, and even if I try to be subversive it is from inside this system. I have to live by the rules, you cannot escape the civilised world anymore. There's no unexplored nature anymore. There seems not to be any freedom anymore to be independent or alone, because we are all connected globally, by the digital and more.

I am, let's say a poetic subversive. I think that in poetry, in the imagination, there is a subversiveness, in a gentle way, that is able to transform what is around us. I believe very strongly in the power of transformation by every creative and artistic act. By its nature, art is transformative, but it is not always visible. It can be a very subtle change you are stimulating, like walking, always a beginning. I remember, for example, in Turkey during the protests in 2013, when [Erdem Gunduz](#) came up with the idea to just stand silently in front of an of Atatürk Culture Center in Taksim Square. He was not loudly protesting or doing anything, just standing there completely in silence. This became a powerful act of subversiveness. In fact, this became a scandal and had an immense effect. So, by doing something simple, almost nothing, you can still be free as well, because it's showing that you are still existing and that you're not accepting the system as it is.

Silence was alway key in my poetic and site specific work, and lead eventually to another global project, connecting cities around the world, in 2016 this started in three cities within the Urban Emptiness network : Athens, Edinburgh and Brussels, but in the course of the years expanding as

well to New York, Lisbon, Nicosia, Gdansk, Brasilia and Sao Paulo with silent walks and silent actions.

To walk together in silence in an unknown territory with people you don't know before, getting lost together is an art practice I developed in collective walks, the most recent are the Utopia walks since 2016 and this laid out as well what became eventually "Made of Walking", summer gatherings in abandoned natural areas to walk them together for the first time in silence with other people from around the world, and to exchange creative walking practices. Twice a year, organized at the beginning of summer and end of the summer, with first a gathering dedicated to walking and the second one to sound (and silence), this has lead since 2016 to gatherings in Greece, France, Cyprus and Portugal -the last edition at the Prespes lake at the Greek, North Macedonian and Albanian border with 200 walkers from all continents, more than 20 countries. It was simultaneously in 2017 the beginning of the now yearly global event Sound Walk September, with as much a focus on silent walks as on sound walks.

Cristina: Silence can be very loud, sometimes.

Yes, indeed.

Mike: It's a really fascinating conversation to have about transformation and how to transform yourself within a system, or how to transform the way in which you look at the system, when you're in it. I was thinking about the WhatsApp walk we did as part of the [summer school](#) and how that was the last transformative arts experience I had. We were using the technology in a very structured way, working with the forms and the functions of the platform, but the experience itself went far beyond that. That we were all doing it at different times in different spaces around the world, was the transformative act. Looking back on both the archive of that walk and [Cristina's video](#), that shared sense of transformation comes back to me.

The next thing I wanted to ask you about is the community around this kind of art. From my perspective, there is an international community of what we might call located media

**artists, or walking artists interested in located media. Do you agree with that? Or would you say they are separate communities doing things slightly differently?**

Well, I wouldn't say that they are all one global community, but there are art communities that interact. I'm very happy that we managed some of this with the summer school, but it's still very difficult (for me) to get into Asia, Africa, the Middle East, even Latin America, to connect with people that are working with these sort of artistic tools. It is mainly North America, Europe and Australia that has a strong community. What I really miss is the voice of people from other parts of the world. This may be a language problem. We often think that everybody speaks English, but it's not the case in Latin America or Africa, for example.
This creates a subtle resistance because they are not being able to express themselves in their own language using our tools. That's why we are focusing now on making a multilingual platform for Spanish, Portuguese and French speakers, so we can integrate the work of these people from non English-speaking backgrounds. So go beyond the language barrier is important in bringing a global community together.

The most organised groups are in the United States, in Canada and in Europe and Australia, where most of these software platforms are based and so there you have this established system. We are aware of each other and we have contact with each other so there is a dynamic there, but it's a pity that in a global world, this is limited to these parts of the world.

We did learn quite a lot from a big [CGeomap project in Mexico](#) about the Spanish exile which had quite an impact on Mexican society, so I think there are parallel interests in various parts of the world. Maybe it's just that people are not really aware of the potential of this media yet. Although everybody is very much aware of what you can do with smartphones and mobile devices, the creative potential or the potential for culture, heritage, or ecology is not completely seen yet. It all depends on people that are very emotive in getting it started. That's why people like Josh Kopecek from Echoes are important because they are making a very big effort to make people aware of the potential of this medium around the world. This is also what we are trying to do with CGeomap.

Supercluster, a collaborative meeting ground for locative media in the XXI century, wants to play a fundamental role in addressing the lack of an organized global community. An initiative from Fred and me, it emerged in the run up to the first summer school and explores new forms of creating and learning with locative media in the light of locally-global issues, our planetary crises, and forces of global change. We aim to encourage local and global joined-up-thinking, or in short to become a global community of creators, educators and scholars using locative media as an instrument, in a synergy with another community of digital storytellers, artists and scientists called Oika, dedicated to creative forms of ecological intelligence. Together we aim to develop the principle that no technology makes sense if it is not concerned with ecology.

Supercluster joins as well with walk listen create, which includes Sound Walk September, initiated in 2018 and organized by Andrew Stuck, Babak Fakhamzadeh and myself. Walk listen create is the largest global community bringing together walking and sound creatives with a crowd sourced directory of sound walks, online meetups and events promoting locative audio around the world.

The roots for all this were laid in 2003, when I initiated the Milena principle with Stefaan van Biesen and likeminded creatives from different disciplines. Together we created simultaneously ecological aware art communities on local and global scale, leaning upon the renaissance heritage of Flanders when artists and scholars travelled around Europe as creative nomads, created networks in friendship and solidarity, and for whom travelling became a work of art. This became the breeding ground for Thomas More's Utopia, laying the cornerstones of the later modern and global world. Now artists, and even more so digital artists, can play this essential role again in building a new future.

**Mike: Yes, it seems that the field has these key players that have worked had to build these communities.**

**I also had some questions about the technology itself. We've talked about how locative media is not the focus of your work – this is not about the technology per se – and I agree with that, but what do you think are kinds of the possibilities that these technologies afford?**

**Where do you see locative media going with the technology, or rather where do you see locative media arts going with the technology?**

I think we are still in the first stage of this media. I always compare it with the history of film. For the first three decades of the 20th century, there was no sound in film, and although fantastic creative films were made - in fact some of the films that were then made have never been surpassed in quality and originality – something like 90% or even more of those made were lost, which is also, unfortunately, a side effect of ephemeral media like locative media. More than 90% of the locative media works that were made since the end of the 90s are lost forever now.

Where the future will go? I think there are possibilities for artificial intelligence and technology that is not so physical anymore, in the sense that you will not need a device between you and the reality of the environment. There will be devices that are much more integrated with parts of your body in the form of wearables and immersive technologies. I think locative media in general has yet to see the big revolution to come. Locative media will be in cars, for example, where you are in a car and you pass a certain place and get information about this place automatically, like we have now already but in a simpler form with Google Maps. You could drive through a place and get all sorts of interaction with, and information from, the things that are around you. So much more will become integrated into daily life through things like cars, buses, other forms of transport, or even clothes and glasses.

Locative media still seems to be something that has not completely broken through to the mainstream. People are used to using a smartphone to communicate using WhatsApp and other tools, but this locative aspect is not as present as it could be. I think we could expect some new developments there.

**Mike: Do you think that's because the market just isn't there for it? I talked a bit about this with Fred. There's lots of possibilities for locative media for artists and artwork, but can they be realised if the market is dominated by locative advertising and the big platforms that produce the technology? Is the future just full of mundane uses of locative media, or are there exciting prospects for artists ahead?**

I think there are prospects ahead. I was a little bit surprised by Bose, the producer of headphones and speakers, when they started Audio AR - a locative media sound platform two years ago that was connected to audio glasses which allowed you not only to listen to music by just putting the glasses on, but as well to allow for locative sounds. They invited artists to develop ideas and projects for these glasses, but after a while they didn't believe in it anymore and they stopped it. So, I really don't know where this will go and when it will break through. It could take some time.

For the artists, I think locative media gives them a new possibility to connect with the environment, especially now during pandemic times, where we are looking for outdoor alternatives for art experiences and art creation. Locative media may be a solution for bringing arts to public spaces without needing to have indoor venues. Thinking especially about performative arts, for example, theatres that can go outside may benefit. The pandemic may help, ironically in making people aware of the creative possibilities of locative media.

Mike: Yes, I was just thinking about public space, and whether the pandemic will make us realise how valuable outdoor public spaces are. There's been a neglect for public spaces, particularly in the UK, especially when we look at things like pseudo public spaces, which seem public, but are controlled by private organisations with security guards. I wonder if the pandemic will make us realise that there is value in these outdoor spaces for people to gather and to do things like produce and experience artworks? There's a long history of public spaces and art and I wonder if the post-pandemic world will allow that to flourish again.

I'm on the Arts Council here in Belgium and I see the projects coming in, that the artists propose and submit. I'm sometimes shocked to see how artists today live like 100 years ago. They are working in a very linear and straightforward way with their art. I think locative media allows for a new form of art that is multi-layered. You do not only need to work with space as an environment or a platform for your art, but you can also make art with time – you're not limited to time anymore. You have a multidimensionality that we've never had before in arts, a way of escaping every form of reality, or those ending in space and time. It seems to me that artists are not aware of that. You have some exceptions, like the work of [Duncan Speakman](). The last work he made - *It must have been dark by then*- was fantastic because it's exactly about that. You also

see it in cinema with films that play with time and space. This is what locative mallows; it gives artists an opportunity to redefine the multidimensionality of their work. So, I hope that some artists will jump on this train and develop interesting work.

I think locative media has so much to offer to journalism as well. It offers another form of journalism where you do not only listen to news about certain locations, but giving an added experience of being in a place where something happened, and not from a distance, like when you look at the television news. By connecting place with the news, by being in the place, in a modern documentary sense, people could feel and experience what has happened in a different way. There's also so much potential here for documentary and of course, locative film too.

Mike: Yes, definitely. There are these things called idocs, which I think are trying to do some of that. The idea is that you experience and watch the documentary as you go through different locations, though at that the moment it's really only on desktop computers. I know the New York Times have put in a load of money to make and experiment with digital experiences. We're beginning to see some interesting stuff come out of that, particularly with AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality) formats.

Okay, I want to ask you one more question about you and Fred. As you know, I've never met Fred, but I feel like I know him well after all the work we've done together. I see you and Fred as my locative media mentors in a way, and I'm interested in how you came to work with him because, quite clearly, it's a relationship and a working partnership that works really well. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

Like I told you in the beginning, I was part of a group called 'Escoitar'. Horacio González, who was part of that group, was in contact with Fred and they set up CGeomap. This is how I eventually met Fred. I knew about him and what he was doing for a long time before, but we never actually collaborated until after we stopped noTours. We had been in contact on various occasions before, but we didn't start to work together until then. So, Fred contacted me actually, because he knew about my collaboration with Horacio and Escoitar, and he asked me if I could be involved in CGeomap. As you have understood by now, I'm not technological at all so I was there to provide other skills. I think they were just happy to have me aboard because I'm a -

spatial- poet. But really, this was not about the project in the end. As with Escoitar and noTours, it was much more about doing something with a peer group. It was about friendship and collectively, and about being connected beyond the making of projects and the material. With Fred there is a mutual and deep understanding of the world in a very human way.

**Mike: That's the sense I get from working with you both. There's a shared sense of understanding which is quite deep. I think Fred said, 'it's like I've known Geert all my life.'**

It's not so easy to find, you know, to have a real friendship through creation. This is not happening every year, or even every five years. Sometimes people say 'walking art is so obvious, you just go for a walk'. Lots of people say 'I can do this as well. It's just like putting a line on a paper and I can call it art'. What people don't see is the long history. To make this perfect line on a piece of paper you have to have a life behind it of decades, let's say 20 years of looking, searching, trying, failing, trying again, experimenting, leaving behind, starting over, humanizing it, so it not only becomes a gesture but a resonance. In that sense you can say it lasted 20 years before I could walk again as it was for the first time. I think this is also the defining relation between me and Fred as friends. We both have a history, a long history, and this friendship was only made possible by working towards and meeting each other at the right moment, at the right time. And then the magic happened.

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