

Visually augmented urban space: mobile and massive image media

by Susanne Jaschko

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When I first read the conference's schedule I tried to find a deeper meaning in having me after Bruce Sterling and right at the beginning of the conference. After thinking through what I would like to contribute and what Bruce is going to talk about, the only conclusion I came up with, was that we both might mark the boundaries of this symposium with him talking evocatively about technologies and technology empowered design objects which we have to cope with in the future and me focusing on a very specific use of old and new media in public space -the visual augmentation of public sphere through new media art and design while not paying too much attention to the technology part.

Reading again the outline of the conference and of the whole Interface and Society series I was not surprised that the way in which the term Interface is used in this context is very much technology orientated, mentioning ubiquitous computing and communication and control technologies which surround us in our everyday lives.

The term 'Interface Society' which the organisers of this conference use, expresses that we have come to a point where we use technological interfaces and machines behind them for basic activities such as communicating, telling stories, cooking, meeting friends, buying and so on. In most cases, machines and interfaces employed for these activities do not replace a human counterpart, but they enable an extended and different experience and execution of those basic activities. By doing so, they have a huge impact on our perception of time and space and the cultivation of habits.

The high time of debate and research on the interface was in the 90s when the pairing of science and new technology based artistic creation was still strong and resulted in mainly technology orientated experimentation in media arts. At that time the hype around interactive art was early built on the difference in concept and perception of computer based artworks, and strongly emphasising the innovative and boundary pushing character of these works.

Since then we have witnessed equal hypes of generative art and locative art. What we can observe looking back on the rather short history of media art is that the use of these ever new technologies in the production of art has not only opened up new thinking about the relationship between the artwork and the perceiver, and has led to completely new models of authorship, new formats, genres and production processes; it also has moved into new spaces such as the internet.

What we currently find is a strong move of media art into urban space, which happens parallel to a general refocusing on public and urban space in various academic and economic fields and which at first glance seems to be antipodal to the increasing individualization of information and its independence from location. And it's not only media art which has gained an almost constant temporary presence in public space, but public space is presently 'rediscovered' by contemporary visual art in general.

So in this talk I would like to focus on the visual augmentation of urban space, suggesting two complementary types of visual addition of dynamic image and sign space to physical urban space and discussing their context and impact on perception. My interest in this particular topic derives from my own curatorial practise – I am currently involved in a number of projects which deal with urban and public space as a platform and location for new media-based artworks. In this context, I like to think of the city as an interface between the private and the public, between heterogeneous social groups which together build the public sphere, and between the physical environment and the space of data connected to it.

Conditions for art in urban space

So what are the present conditions for art in urban space?

Today, urban space is a highly complex, fluid, dense and dynamic space which is subject to massive changes. In the last decades, we have witnessed the constant loss of public space through its conversion into private and semi-public spaces. Consequently, the increase of control and massive regulation of these spaces have created awareness for the fragility of civic rights.

Naturally, the density of the urban environment generates conflicts between its users; corporate and private interests clash and are weighed against each other.

Equally private and public interests might differ and have to be managed in this realm.

Electronic, digital and mobile media deeply change the city, which thereby is transformed into a media-based, all-time accessible platform and a multi-faceted space of perception.

The ubiquitous use of digital, networked and mobile media in our everyday environment raises new questions about definitions of both private and public space. Invisible surveillance systems and spy bots, the semi-private forums of on-line chats, the use of the cell phone in public space, and wireless access to the internet -- they all have a strong impact on our understanding of private and public space – and they demand for more precise and accurate definitions and demarcations of these spaces.

In this situation, urban space offers a huge potential for conflict – and at the same time an ideal playground for artists who feel the urge to comment on the change of the urban space and its inherent risks and flaws. In addition to this, I would like to suggest a couple of reasons why in particular the use of new media has become so popular with artists intruding the city.

In contrast to the white cube or other contained art spaces, urban space is much more complex and a natural environment for interaction. Every minute, the city is in process, it is dynamic, changing, multisensory. So are new media. It seems to be more than adequate to respond to the urban environment by means which enable an equal multisensory and process-based, dynamic, or interaction based experience.

Secondly audiovisual media emit light and sound into urban space and thus can cover much more space than traditional non-dynamic and material media do. Definitely the use of audiovisual media is very attention grabbing and thus guarantees a maximum of presence in a space in which sensory distraction is a common feature.

Moreover the omnipresence of commercially used old and new media in urban space seems to cause a backlash by creatives working with new media, trying to reclaim communal space and opening it up for alternative contributors.

Finally, new media art is still excluded from the art market and the majority of art institutions. While this creates a specific economy for media arts, it also liberates artists working in this field to explore different spaces but the traditional art spaces and to address an audience outside those institutions. Looking back into the history of early video and electronic art we can see that from the beginning those media productions often were presented in 'non-contaminated' spaces, while traditional art spaces were not rejected in principle. Particularly the protagonists of early video art searched for alternative spaces, driven by the idea to bring technology and the knowledge of its creative potential to the people.

Not to forget, it is also the decreasing costs for equipment and the minimization and mobility of media which support not only a general increase of new media based art production but also its constant expansion into various physical spaces, particularly by using technologies which are able to travel and to retrieve and send location- and person-related data.

In general, new media based art in urban space uses two different strategies: Either it taps into existing media infrastructures and uses prevailing interfaces or it brings those interfaces and devices into the space.

With those other technologies which are brought into the streets, these are increasingly 'adhesive' which means they cling to all kinds of objects, mobile or immobile, in a parasitic or symbiotic way.

Mobile moving image media

Looking back into media art history we first find adhesiveness of moving image media in the early 70s which illustrates perfectly that the mobility and the temporary independence of a technology from a power point provokes immediate experiments, moving out of the studio into the fields or the street.

For the expanded cinema installation *Adjungierte Dislokationen (Adjugated Dislocations)* from 1973 Valie Export has strapped two Super-8 film cameras to her breast and back. A third 16mm film camera documents the parallel and diametrically

opposed scanning of various spatial situations, moving from a room over corridors, street, square into the open countryside.

Ten years later Steina Vasulka mounts a tiny fish eye camera to her head and drives along a deserted street capturing the landscape around her and her body movements in a distorted moving image.

While these works and others of that time focus on spatial exploration of outdoor environments and aim at breaking the ordinary modi of spatial representation and perception, the presentation of these works was still indoors.

Today and one step further it is no more input media in the first place but output media which are attached to urban objects. These adhesive media temporary intervene into urban space and add a second virtual and visual layer to physical space.

This spatial intervention does not remain on the level of the purely visual and physical world, but it builds connections to a non-visual world. In this sense, the urban object becomes a foil which reflects its related, virtual nature for instance by being projected upon.

As an example I would like to show *Light Attack* by Daniel Sauter which is a mobile projection of an animated virtual character that is projected onto the cityscape, exploring places 'to go' and places 'not to go'. The project elaborates the concept of the so called 'moving moving' image - the projected moving imagery corresponds to the movement through the space while the character's behavior responds to the urban context and passers-by. In 2005 in the iconic architecture of Florence, Italy, the virtual character revealed and absorbed a hidden urban context through its own beam of light, engaging passers-by and architecture in a visual dialogue.

The setup includes a computer laptop, velocity sensor, power supply, and projectors. The car's movement through the city determines the virtual character's behavior and motion patterns, synchronized by a velocity sensor attached to the car wheel and custom computer software. Short pre-recorded video loops are arranged into seamless motion patterns by the computer software, allowing also an immediate intervention by the artists.

The moving projection of moving image in the city creates a layering of information and simultaneity of various velocities. The first physical and most static layer is the architecture itself, the buildings which during the night lose their expressiveness to a great deal. That loss of detail and shape, resulting from the decrease of light, turns them into a sort of black screen, a black board, inviting to add, paint over or cover.

The second layer is the projection which moves in correspondence to the speed of the car over the surfaces. This moving image forms a kind of moving film strip in front of another moving film strip, given that the perceivers do not stand still, but moves on the trajectory of the street. When people walk along the street, their own velocity differs from the projected image, so that we have at least three different movements/layers within the city.

Together with other projects such as the *SMS Graffiti Projector* which is a hand held device with which the urban environment can be temporarily enriched with text and the *Parasite* underground projection device, these 'adhesive' and mobile projection media enable performative and spontaneous interventions into the urban environment. In this sense, they convey the idea of a public sphere to which everybody can contribute to and which is open for individual expression in a post-graffiti era.

These concepts are based on an accidental audience and a short perception time depending on where the projection is moving and what distance of viewpoints architecture provides. In most cases, the encounter with the moving image will be surprising, show up like a flash of thought and leaving nothing but a strong visual impression on the retina and in the visual memory. As such, these works pursue the concept of an individual perception in public space, and calls for the gaze of the flaneur, instead of a collective perception. Here art is deliberately happening parallel to a multitude of other actions and does not demand for an unshared attention. It is not isolated but adheres to real life and occurs as one possible layer of the perceivers' reality.

Massive image media

The antithesis of those adhesive and interventionist media which are employed for temporary, short-term, interventionist practice into public space, is a form of projection and image media which I address in the following as 'massive media'. In my understanding of the term, massive media are media technologies and applications which are temporarily or permanently connected to architecture thus creating an enormous attention absorbing visual field: public screens, media facades and large scale projections onto buildings.

For the movie 'Children of Men' which plays in a crisis-ridden, not so distant future in the year 2027, the set designers conceived a city that is still dominated by the now contemporary and by then old architecture, augmented with moving image. A visual concert of media facades and screens creates a dense neighbourhood of dynamic visual information which is perceived as one big ambient moving image, divided into a multitude of frames.

It seems that in the information age the idea of the single image has faded away and was replaced by the concept of side by side presentation of information in various contexts. While Walter Benjamin has already complained about the state of sensory distraction in the city at his time, one could argue that we are already so familiar with coping with and choosing from an overload of information that we almost need crammed environments to focus properly. The multi-screen concept is surely one of the most prevailing visual concepts of our time and has shaped not only a completely new aesthetic, but has a massive impact on the way we process information and thus on our culture.

Interestingly, it was the video pioneers of the late 60s and 70s which first pursued the idea of side-by-side simultaneity of the image in expanded cinema works, such as *Whipe Cycle* by Ira Schneider and Frank Gillette (1969) or Merce Cunningham's productions for indoor work.

Today's migration of electronic screens into the external cityscape has become one of the most visible tendencies of contemporary urbanism. Electronic screens do not form part of a building's memory in the way frescoes or stained glass windows could;

rather their restless constantly changing imagery contributes to a dematerialization of architecture, a sense of ephemerality which is pervasive in 21st century urbanism. This is particularly the case because current media facades only rarely form an integral part of the architecture's body (such as the Bix facade in Graz), mediating between the inner and outer space. In most cases such as the *Spots* facade in Berlin, the media system is applied later and forms a superimposed visual surface. Often the content displayed on those image walls is either of commercial nature as in the case of the Chanel facade in Ginzo, Tokio, having at least a direct relation to the site or the facade is treated like an image output medium which is independent from its location, functioning like a contained window in the tradition of a TV.

Due to the development of powerful projectors visual augmentation of urban space is also achieved through large scale projection onto architecture. Large scale projection is employed in both artistic contexts and media events such as the Frankfurt show for this year's soccer world cup. The show took place on 8 high rise buildings in the city center of Frankfurt and had two mayor elements: In the first 30 minutes, spectators saw 500 dynamic photographs of legendary moments in the history of soccer. For the second part, the artist Marie-Jo Lafontaine conceived a multi-part work challenging the audience with a mixture of rather simple text messages, followed by highly metaphorical images and photo portraits, altogether attempting to convey a complex understanding of the world of power and deceit we are living in. However, almost all events of this kind (such as Rafael Lozano's public works, even the politically orientated projections by Jenny Holzer's) have to face a mayor problem which is inherent in their location. The art critique Paul Adrenne has stated:

'The fact that an artist encounters the public directly does not guarantee an aesthetic effect per se. Art in public space has been reutilized often and has become a key figure in cultural politics, moreover it seldom is more than a fairground attraction (some kind of contemporary version of circus) and it subdues to a changed perception. The public perceives less the conceptual dimension of the artwork but its quality as spectacle which it is offering.'

Before this background the responses by the Frankfurt spectators where more than foreseeable. While the first part of the show presenting emotionally loaded pictures of soccer history fascinated the audience, the intellectually demanding and critical

iconography of Lafontaine's *I love the world* work was not equally appreciated by the masses.

Media spectacles as the Frankfurt show or even Rafael Lozano Hemmer's famous Relational Architecture series build on the tradition of passive but collective perception of the baroque firework.

So can massive media also be orientated towards collective forms of engagement and interaction? Or does the nature of public space undermine exactly this concept? What became apparent in the 'failure' of Rafael Lozano's *Body Movies* was that collective engagement in public space calls for easy-to-understand content and intuitive models of interaction. While the concept of the work was based on the idea that people should cover the projected portraits with their shadows, this offer was either not self-explanatory enough to the unprepared audience or not desirable. Instead people started to interact with each other's shadow, most of the time neglecting the complicated visual recognition system that was implemented, and enjoyed the simple self-exposure, one of the major motives of interaction in public space.

I would argue that in times of increasing individualisation and constant loss of community spirit, particularly in the urban sphere, the desire for collective experiences is stronger than ever but harder to accomplish, particularly in a globalised and mediatised world, in which urban space has become 'relational space' as Scott McQuire suggests.

In his words, relational space is 'a space which has been stripped of inherent qualities, such as stable dimensions and appearances (and of course stable social meanings), but is increasingly experienced as shifting, variable and contingent. Relational space can only be defined by the temporary position occupied by each subject in relation to numerous others, which suggests that relational space is not easily unified since every subject belongs to multiple matrices or networks that overlap and interpenetrate.'

The question that the concept of relational space poses is if media designers and artists, architects and public broadcasters should accept and embrace it as a given

fact. If we believe that today visual relationships between things are losing relevance in relation to invisible connections of objects amongst each other, this paves the way for completely new design paradigms and a completely new understanding of the city. If we accept the idea of relational space, there is no more necessity of for example a building and its facade to be coherent. The content of a screen attached to a building or a permanent visual display on an urban object would not have to be in line with the spatial context which is built through the urban environment.

Indeed, the emergence of the public screen, its current arbitrary usage and permanency in the urban environment seems to be in line with the idea of relational space. In its multiplicity and nature as a window not being connected to the location through its content, it supports the feeling of physical and spatial detachment. Partly as a reaction to these kinds of massive media implementations in urban place, other projects deliberately foster the identification with and emotional attachment to places through evoking and supporting the impression of the here and now.

One of the famous massive media projects which succeeded in building a new relationship between people and a place was *Blinkenlights* which turned the House of the Teacher in Berlin into a huge message and gaming display. The temporary 'misuse' of a highrise as a giant display turned out to be extremely popular at night and people gathered on the otherwise deserted Alexanderplatz to watch and interact with the facade. For those who could be present at site (the webinterface allowed contribution of animation from everywhere) the project evoked completely new and positive associations with the location. Public space could be experienced as accessible space, a platform for individual expression. A similar concept was applied in the temporary piece *P2P Power to the People*, which provided the opportunity to formulate a message collectively through a local switchboard. And recent years have seen a couple of these kinds of massive media interventions into public space, mainly aiming at a collective experience or trying to initiate a public debate in the tradition of the 'agora' such as Johannes Gees recent work in Christchurch, NZ, for the Scape Biennial which I curated.

On five nights, Gees invited the public to use their cell phones to engage with each other and him in an exchange of thoughts about religion. While this concept used

existing input media and a simple interaction model, it also emphasised the locality by not allowing any other device.

The question is if those interactive models which call for focused attention can function on a permanent basis and could serve as concepts for a meaningful and community building use of permanent screens too.

Apparently the challenge of creative use of new media technologies in public space lies in understanding the audience and perception models prevailing in this realm. It might be disenchanting, but what we learn from current creative media use in public space is that restrictions like the desire for the spectacle, for simple interaction, or sensual distraction have to be taken into account, seemingly leaving not much room for conceptual experimentation. When looking at those previous examples, it becomes clear that only first steps towards new forms of public relationships, identity building, and public engagement have been made. So far.