



'Public Spheres and Network Interfaces'

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Editor's Introduction

Our exploration of cybercity politics and strategy closes with an examination of how artists across the world are experimenting with ICTs as means to try and revitalise, or at least augment, urban public domains. This reading, by Andreas Broeckmann, the Director of the Transmedia ars festival in Berlin, links neatly with Geert Lovink's analysis of Amsterdam Digital City (p. 371).

Like Lovink, Broeckmann points out some of the problems involved in using ICTs to revitalise, or merely identify, the multifaceted public domains of contemporary cities. He begins by analysing the deep transformations which are currently underway in urban public domains, as classical notions of public space-based interactions give way to plural, hybrid and technologised ideas of what urban public realms actually are (see Section VII). The key here is that the city, as a site where streets, spaces and face-to-face interactions blend with ICT-mediated ones, can be seen as both an interface to, and the generator of, a wide range of different publics at a range of scales. As economic, social and cultural interchanges become closed-off into ICT systems, however, so the risk of privatisation and commercialisation threatens to undermine the public roles of urban physical spaces.

Broeckmann notes, in this context, that a wide variety of artistic interventions are now emerging at the interfaces between urban public spaces and ICTs. These are attempts to work against the dominant logics of fragmentation, surveillance, and privatisation. They are assertions of the uncontrollability, and democratic potential, of hybrids which blend ICTs and city public spaces. And they subvert, and usurp, technologies of surveillance and capsularisation for other uses.

These interventions and installations thus celebrate the tactics and technologies of conflict and participation. In the process they seek to reclaim public domains with, and for, multiple heterogeneous groups in cities. Crucially, they do this by forcing the often invisible and ICT-mediated interactions in the public domains of cybercities out on to the political visibility of city streets.

Broeckmann finishes by reflecting on some of the most influential examples of ICT-based artists' interventions in urban public realms, imagining these projects as new types of urban interface, or border zones, between embodied presence and mediated exchange. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's installation in the main Zócalo square of Mexico City for the City's millennial celebration, for example, allowed people from all over the world to programme a series of huge searchlights over the net to light up the city's sky in the pattern of their choice. Other interventions project the texts of ICT and mobile phone-based exchanges on to city streets, walls or subway stations (see, for example, <http://www.rude-architecture.de>).

The key in such interventions is to connect many layers, many scales, and many publics into a visual hybrid of interface, public space, and urban design. The challenge, Broeckmann notes, is to do this in a way that celebrates the unpredictability and the essential uncontrollability of the social and cultural worlds of cybercities. Such interventions by artists are important in helping us to imagine public domains for cybercities which amount to more than a retreat from the spontaneous interactions of embodied subjects in physical space (other than for surveilled shopping in themed consumption zones).

It is imperative, however, that these temporary experiments emerge not just as one-off demonstrations by artists. The real challenge now is to develop ambitious and imaginative urban policies which will ensure that hybrid installations of ICTs and public spaces become normal, taken for granted, elements within the everyday landscapes of cities.

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

The public domain is conventionally viewed as an assemblage of urban social spaces – the market place, theatres, libraries, cafés, etc. – where ideas and practical concerns of society can be voiced and discussed in an open dialogue (Habermas, 1989). Even here, the public sphere that is constituted at these sites is not of itself neutral and democratic, but invested with political and economic power. Think, for instance, of the exclusive English clubs and coffee houses of the eighteenth century where a new class of industrialists and traders negotiated their political influence, or the large city squares where the architectural and ritual presentation of power determines the horizontal expanse of the public site.

The notion of what is 'public' is currently undergoing a deep transformation which is brought about by a variety of geographical, economic, geopolitical, technological and discursive drivers of social change. The public sphere, and the way in which individuals and groups participate in it, is taking on a whole different set of meanings, compared with the classical forms of the civic public that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most importantly, it seems to be impossible today to speak of only one public domain, but we have to think of the public domain as a heterogeneous, at times hybrid, at times fragmented dispersion of physical and virtual spaces populated by different types of 'publics'.

The public domain is a composite of many stages and layers, open and closed physical spaces, media channels, forms of communication and cultural expression. The city is still a prime site of experimenting with the new public domain; it is a zone of tension in which social conflicts and instabilities are made productive. The city can be seen as both an interface to, and the generator of, new interfaces to the different publics. At the same time, the changing media sphere (telecommunication, broadcasting, WWW, etc.) is creating a translocal topology of the public domain which is both embedded in, and which reaches beyond, the urban territory (Section VII).

Media technologies play a crucial role in the current curbing of the urban public domain. Developments such as the transfer of economic activities into closed electronic networks, the privatisation of public areas, the homogenisation and the separation of functions by allocating specific zones to shopping, entertainment, housing, traffic, etc. – seek to make public space more secure and more efficient. But they undermine the essence of the public domain as a zone of uncontrollability. The instability of the public domain is a condition of its democratic potential. Artistic urban interventions strive to counteract the safely surveilled and appeased urban terrain of the transparent city with its technologies of security and privatisation – zoning, surveillance cameras, biometric systems, etc. – by means of tactics and technologies of conflict and participation, reclaiming the public domain with and for multiple heterogeneous groups (Marchart, 1999; Deutsch, 1996).

The challenge in the creative use of media technologies is to foster the diversity of public actors and terrains and to develop strategies of articulating the new public domains that connect physical urban spaces and the potential public sphere of the electronic networks. This public sphere will only come into being if there are complex forms of interaction, of participation and learning, that use the technical possibilities of the networks and that allow for new and creative forms of becoming visible, becoming present, becoming active, in short, of becoming public.

VISIBILITY, PRESENCE AND ACTION

Visibility, presence and action define three levels of being in public. They are also the main fault lines of public conflict. Invisibility is one of the stigmata of modern society. Whether in the case of minorities, social movements or special interest groups, achieving visibility, the visible factuality of a particular social group, can already be an important achievement towards the goal of political effectiveness. However, visibility is always already connected to the possibility

of control. Like other forms of public policing, the increasing use of surveillance cameras in public and private spaces indicates that visibility is a matter of concern for the public order. Whatever is publicly visible always already bears the potential of being illegal, indecent or otherwise unacceptable. Becoming visible in an urban environment is therefore often conducted as a clandestine activity, as in the illegal pasting of posters, the placing of graffiti and tags, pirate radio broadcasts, taking on an artificial identity on the Internet, or the elusive appearance in larger masses of people. In these medial strategies, the regimes of visibility, anonymity and identity are locked in a problematic imbalance (Turkle, 1997).

The notion of visibility is connected to a fleeting, impermanent perception in time and is therefore, at best, a tactical element of being in public. In contrast, the notion of presence – not necessarily coupled to a visibility – makes a claim to ‘being here, now’ and is an affirmation of a public status. Presence is immediate, which means that it cannot be realised through medial representation. At the same time, presence is affirmed in the form of a mediality, it always manifests itself in a medium: graffiti have presence as signs and images in the urban space, radio programmes manifest a presence on the air waves, squatting is the physical occupation of a space declared empty and unused. Presence is the affirmation of an identity and of a Now in a specific medial environment.

Neither visibility nor presence can in themselves provide the potential for becoming publicly active. This notion of public action relates to a form of political agency which aims to effectively transform a material and symbolic situation by means of argument and through more or less immediate performative acts. Possibilities for such actions are on the decrease where symbolical representation, mediated participation and the equation of consumption and democracy, have replaced a sense of active presence and involvement in public matters. Being in public is identified with potential illegality on the one hand, and with the danger of personal harm on the other. Reclaiming public domains as sites of constructive conflict, and developing democratic forms of agency for the new intersections of virtual and physical public environments, are therefore imperatives of the current situation.

THE INTERFACE

The interface is the connecting zone of two separate elements in a networked system. Most commonly, the interface is understood as the tool through which the communication between the human user and a computer is facilitated, or the connecting plugs or software tools that allow for different technical apparatuses to communicate with each other. More generally, the interface is the border zone, the in-between shared by different systems where the exchange of signs and data translates virtualities into potential effectiveness.

The interface is the site of potential agency, and it has therefore been of central concern in some of the artistic experiments that have sought new articulations of media technologies and human actions in urban and translocal environments. Think of the inner-city projects by the German artist and architect Christian Möller (<http://www.arc.de/cm>) in which the combination of chance or uncontrolled natural effects with the concrete yet uncoordinated actions of multiple users, creates surprising aesthetic results that oscillate between ambient noise and sublime expressiveness. The interfaces that connect the different levels of agency and make them visible and audible, facilitate an experience in the participants of a creative collectivity in an orchestrated, yet open and unpredictable located process.

The projects of Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, in contrast, pay great attention to the action of the individual, both in relation to the technological system and in relation to other participants. The installation *Alzado Vectoriel* (1999–2000) created a setting in which the choices of individual Internet users were immediately translated into a widely visible configuration of powerful spotlights over the central square in Mexico City (see Plate 38). The local experience of the urban space was co-determined by the tele-absent net users who, in turn, received a stream of images back as an indication of the feedback on-site.

A very different structure of mutual influence and interlocked communication was developed by Lozano-Hemmer in the project *Relational Architecture #3 – Re:Positioning Fear* (1997). Here, an online discussion about different aspects of fear was used as the – still legible – visual material for a large-scale projection onto the historical building of a military arsenal in Graz (Austria). The projection of the unfolding discussion text was placed in the shadows cast by

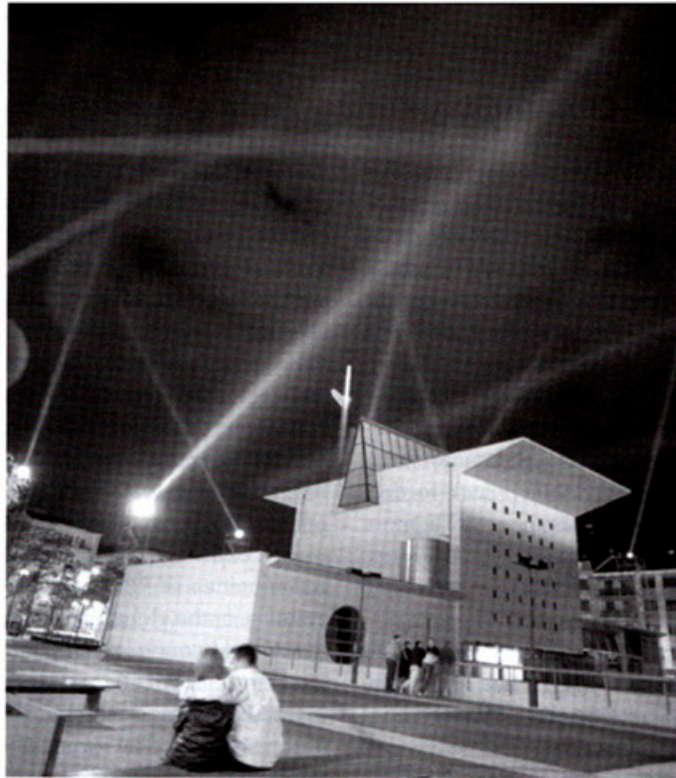


Plate 38 'Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture 4', 1999–2002. Large-scale interactive intervention with eighteen robotic searchlights controlled by the public over the Internet at <http://www.alzado.net>. First installed at the Zócalo Square in Mexico City. (Photograph by Martin Vargas.)

visitors of the square in front of the arsenal. This effected a tight visual and metaphorical relationship between local and online participants. The presence and the movement of the on-site visitors became both the condition of the presence and legibility of the online discourse, and its projection onto screen, turning the on-site participants into the interfaces, the virtual objects and subjects within this translocal situation (see <http://xarch.tu-graz.ac.at/home/rafael/fear>).

Successful artistic interfaces like these connect different publics and urban layers, articulating physical spaces with networked communication spaces and facilitating what the Amsterdam-based group De Geuzen call 'social interfacing', i.e. a fragmented and heterogeneous system of engaging different publics in a variety of specific ways. Such interfaces are themselves dynamic and have the potential for being transformed and re-invented in relation to the inherent changeability of the social and cultural environment in which they operate. A prime example for this is the artistically inclined anti-corporate campaign of the

US-based online group RTMARK whose web site is a highly dynamic creative and interactive tool through which they intervene into specific, socially and politically agitated situations (see <http://www.rtmark.com>).

The artistic research into interfaces of translocal urban interventions, then, is also an investigation into the actors and the agents of the new public domain that emerges in the overlapping zone between physical spaces and electronic networks, their medial tools and the terrains where their agency can unfold. A project like Marko Peljhan's Makrolab, a platform for research into global communications systems, marks the fact that, very often, such artistic projects no longer represent and no longer allow for passive consumption by an audience (see <http://makrolab.ljudmila.org>). Active participation is not an option, but a condition for the aesthetic experience, an aesthetic experience which is not to be found in an objectifiable processuality, but in the ongoing, transitory process of communication and exchange itself. [...]