

large screens, third screens, civic spaces and innovation

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Can recently 'created' public spaces become places of civic engagement - can they become a transnational 'campo'?

A partnership between Australia and South Korea will incubate innovative and artistic practices via public screens. The hypothesis is that interactive artwork presented across nations on large public screens can have a positive impact on how we engage with each other and affect our civic lives.

our questions

The *large screens and the transnational public sphere* research project explores how information and content is exchanged between cities identified as media 'hubs', and what the impact is on the formation of a regional public sphere, in this case in the Asian region. In the first instance, the screens are linked between Federation Square, Melbourne and Incheon, Seoul.

We ask how the networking of these cities contributes to regional public diplomacy, in the light of an increasing emphasis on the role of culture in urban development, tourism and transnational communication. How can networked screens distribute regional cultural production and generate new social relationships in public space? Does this create new modes of civic participation at local and global levels? To what extent can a cross-cultural focus enable a new perspective on the relation between technological change and cultural production? What can the network model tell us about culture in the era of what George Yúdice has termed 'culture-as-resource'? How might it contribute to inter-city cultural rivalry for economic infrastructure and development? And, crucially, how might this model be tested and adapted collaboratively?

our team

Our culturally and organisationally diverse team members are from the Art Centre Nabi, Seoul, South Korea; Australia Council for the Arts, Federation Square PL, University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney, Australia.

The project's genesis has been twofold. A real impetus for the project came from Soh Yeong's conception of the Cultural Network Asia (CNA) from a symposium she convened in 2007 that called for regional content exchange between city 'hubs'. The project also developed from the Discovery research, *Public screens and the transformation of public space*, (first named CI Scott McQuire, CIs Nikos Papastergiadis and Sean Cubitt, Research Associate, Meredith Martin).

The two large screens are managed by the Art Centre Nabi and Fed Square PL. Art Centre Nabi is a new media art centre that opens new spaces for creative practices. Their aim is to humanize technology so that it is integrated with cultural life. Fed Square PL is Melbourne's meeting place and a unique cultural precinct comprising an entire city block. Over 2000 events are held annually there – both live and using the large screens and state of the art broadcast systems. The Australia Council for the Arts is the Australian government's arts funding and advisory body. It supports the creative development of the arts projects and which form the basis of this research.

what we seek to change

This program of cross-cultural exchange (involving theorists, administrators, technicians, artist and curators) and empirical analysis of public interactions around large screens, aims to inform media, cultural and urban planning policy.

Current urban planning policy in Australia, for example, treats electronic screens in much the same way as static billboards. This underestimates the possibilities for public screens to be sites that incubate innovative artistic and communication modes. Opportunities to revitalize public space and public interaction are being missed. Current policy also ignores the potential for networked public screens to function as a nexus for new forms of cross-cultural exchange.

Appropriate policy for public screens should not be confined to regulating their scale

and location based on the assumption that primary usage will be advertising. Nor should it assume that screens will only support centrally regulated content which treats viewers as passive spectators. Nor should it assume that content produced by artists is free. In order to provide informed urban planning guidelines, it is essential to develop a clearer understanding of the full spectrum of potential uses of public screens.

why we want to do this

The commercial interest in large screens has proceeded with phenomenal speed especially in Asian cities. The growth of large screens has also been driven by the success of major events such as the Live 8 concert and the FIFA World Cups which use mobile public screens as 'live sites'.

Professor Misook Song, researching Asian cultural heritage, media art and the urban environment says: 'There has been a process of modernization in Asian countries, which is quite different from Europe, Australia or the United States.' While Professor Song notes that the rise of global media platforms and content-sharing has had an homogenizing effect, particularly in the realm of popular culture, she observes that technology 'works both ways: it [also] brings out local and indigenous cultures, traditions, or artistic practices - those that are unique to a region, city, nation or race'.

Scholarly analysis of the impact of media on social life and urban space has generally been framed by concern with spectacle and the commodification of space on the one hand, and surveillance and the policing of space on the other. While these orientations are clearly of great significance, it is equally important to identify and research alternative modes of social life that are emerging in the interaction between new media, urban space and mobile publics. Contemporary artistic practice is included here as a key arena for experimental and emergent forms of social interactions.

the artist

Concepts such as relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002), social aesthetics (Enwezor 2007), and networked cosmopolitanism (Hsu 2005) are attempts to grapple with the paradigm shift from object-based to process-based work undertaken by artists such as Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. They emphasize the capacity for art to facilitate, mediate and translate social relationships within and across

specific contexts marked by complex differences. Artists who create works in public space demonstrate aesthetic and technological innovation, but also have the capacity to articulate and influence civic values in the context of global culture.

Artists can seek to intervene in public spaces and shift public consciousness. New media and digital networks offer strategic potential for realizing these ambitions. Instead of forming a belated representation of social life, art is able to become an active partner in the production of new forms of social experience.

the first two artworks

In August 2009, two artworks will be presented simultaneously on the Incheon and Federation Square networked screens, with the public invited in both places to interact with the work and each other. These projects relate in a delicate way with each other, beginning what we hope will be a poetic dialogue.

fone_hm uses the large screen as a public sms graffiti board. Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starrs conceived and designed the piece working closely with programmer Adam Hinshaw. A phone number is displayed on a large screen in a public space along with the instruction 'sms the name of the country you come from'. When participants sms their (and/or parents or grandparents) country of origin, a curved vector is added to the map of the world displayed on the large screen, which updates in real time as it receives texts.

The concept, design and programming by Seung Joon Choi of <Value> explores what is well regarded by people. A word sent via sms responding to the question 'what is valuable to you' makes a water ring and sound, stirring the boundaries between words that segregate the space on the screen into three sections for each word. <Value> lets us express the relationship between different values. Choi says that 'pursuing or choosing values in our lives can make vital decisions at times'. <Value> suggests that we take a step back and light heartedly explore possible harmonization of different values.

the curators

We work with the principle that it is no longer sufficient to select existing new media works to project on the large screen in a static viewing situation. The potential to

transmit artwork on a large screen in two cities with public interactive dimensions involves innovation in both curatorial techniques and artistic content.

This means that the task facing the curator is to participate in both the creative production and public interaction processes. Ross Gibson (Sydney College of the Arts), Cecelia Cmielewski (Australia Council for the Arts) and Dooeun Choi (Nabi Art Centre) will ensure that the artistic contributions are sensitive to the specific social, cultural and political contexts in which the work appears. The curators negotiate and facilitate the presentations of interactive artwork at the sites of two controlled public spaces. This means that they may well also influence the aesthetic, civic and communication aspects of the medium.

The capabilities of different artists and media that can both inspire and bind communities across these cities will be investigated. This method needs to be attuned to cultural and technical parameters of both sites to provoke any new transnational civic consciousness.

hi res / lo res

There are two typical modes of screen in use in public spaces in the early 21st century. A simple relationship can be established with screens in public space: high resolution means low interaction, while low resolution is associated with high levels of interaction.

The first is the large, high-resolution LCD screen characteristically used for advertising, and typically placed in the busiest spaces. In some cities, these are malls and open public squares, in others, like Seoul, major traffic intersections. In many cities, operators have also taken the opportunity to provide public service activities: closed-circuit relays of local events, rather like the use of such screens at sporting and music events; public-service broadcast, again often of cultural and sports events, but also of news and current affairs; and to a limited but interesting extent artworks designed for public space. With the exception of the latter, while audiences may cheer or boo, they are rarely in control of the flow of images on large screens.

The second is the handheld 'third screen' of mobile phones, PDAs, iPods and console games, low resolution, intimate LCD screens which, while they may also be commercialised in playback of films, TV, games and advertising, are also commonly

used to port video and still images person-to-person. The increasing use of Bluetooth or wire headphones increases the intimacy of the cradled screen. The likelihood of cheering and booing diminishes, but at the same time the ability to text, speak, manipulate and make one's own videos and images is immensely greater. The porting of social networking websites to mobile platforms is a major advance in this intimacy of the mobile phone, even as it is increasingly ubiquitous in public spaces.

public space

Both populate public space. We might trace their histories back fifty years and suggest a relation like that between the poster and the paperback. One is bigger, brasher, brighter, and open to both artistic uses and graffiti-style intervention, but in a relatively highly policed zone where fly-posting was (and remains) an illegal activity. The paperback meanwhile was highly portable, intimate, personal communication. Admittedly few people authored their own novels, but the degree of personal intimacy with a good book, the engagement with the reader's fantasy, and the exclusion of the surrounding world are very similar. One major change has been that with the billboard-sized screen and its robust LED components, it is far more expensive to place content on high-resolution screens than to silk-screen rebellious posters, and far more difficult to damage a commercial screen than to deface a commercial poster. A second is that even the wave of commercial applications for third screen devices has not supplanted their use for generating person-to-person media.

What remains the same is the struggle in the streets and squares for attention, and the struggle, more specifically, between low-resolution but engrossing intimate media and high-resolution, spectacular display media.

The anonymity of the crowd, celebrated by Poe and Baudelaire, dramatized the dialectic of self-loss and spectacle between immersing oneself in deeply personal and emotional small media and subordinating oneself to massive spectacular displays. To the extent that both play with established rhetorical techniques of word, sound and image, and that both deploy standard repertoires of illusion and narrative, they are akin in replacing the actual city with a vista upon something which is not actually present.

The expropriation of public space by corporations for purposes of advertising may be inevitable. Smearing the walls with commercial messages has a history stretching

back to the late 19th century, and is in some respects indistinguishable from the rise of colour lithography. The migration from TV screens carrying advertising in shop fronts to big LED screens mounted on buildings, and from print to moving image technologies is entirely in keeping with the age. The loss of any public goal in public space, other than the generation of unwanted desires for unnecessary products, is largely seen as harmless by the public who inhabit them. Of a similar visual effect the poet John Montague writes 'The censor's certificate flashes up./ I scarcely notice / so deeply has the harness worn in'.

We are inured to this theft of time and space, and have developed strategies for ignoring our environments as a response. One such technique is to concentrate one's attention on a portable screen, as previously on a book. The sightless gaze of those lost in conversation or fantasy is now ubiquitous in public space. The accusation of theft then runs beyond the theft of public space to the theft of human attention to the environment or to one another.

For the unplanned criss-crossing of lives in the city, mobile networks substitute networks into which we have opted, networks that are planned, networks of like with like, walled gardens from which we need not stray to find an unexpected cultural difference or an unwanted challenge to our shared opinions. Under such conditions, the meaning of the word 'public' has changed, and with it what we might understand by the public good.

As Scott McQuire argues, large public screens in metropolitan centres stand at the junction of two conceptions of public interaction: the longstanding tradition of urban public space and the more recent practices of electronic public spheres. This unique capacity to articulate physical and electronic space positions large screens as critical frontier zones in the investigation of the dynamics of public life in contemporary cities.

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Endnote

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