

From Scenography to Planetary Network: Shanghai World Expo 2010 at ISEA San José 2006

Franck Ancel

All that has been conceived exists.
Jacques Polieri

If cities are currently being extended and transformed into "urban territories" through the impact of science and technology, then the classic places for artistic performance are essentially victims of these changes, since these traditional performative spaces have not really been able to incorporate technological change. New technologies are responsible for the emergence of an "Interactive City." This *City of Bits* was first analyzed in terms of "Space, Place, and the Infobahn" by William J. Mitchell, a researcher at MIT, in his book of the same name, published ten years ago. This was the period of the appearance of VRML and the hope for democratizing effects of the Internet, a time when some people saw cyberspace as another world and a new continent and others, as a Utopia. The rise of the World Wide Web was signalled by the use of a global language, HTML – invented by a scientist from CERN in Switzerland – which allowed us to share information on our computer screens without knowing any code. It was a case of "computers making city life better, perhaps," which also is the underlying philosophy of the forthcoming World Expo in Shanghai. However, this is not the first interaction between art and technology at a World Fair.

36 years ago, Jacques Polieri, the creator of modern scenography, implemented part of his projected *Théâtre du Mouvement Total* (Theater of Total Movement) at the World Fair in Osaka, Japan, in partnership with the industrial group Mitsui. Through an integration of electronic and technological developments, the continuous nature of his *Spectacles: 50 ans de Recherches* (Shows: 50 years of Research) – derived from historical avant-garde art movements – allowed Polieri to present an extension of the past and a break with it, one that anticipated the future computerization of this planet. It is this concept that I referenced last year in the five texts in my cycle of five communications for five continents, *From Scenography to Planetary Network*, all of which are available on my website in English.

Polieri created historical events of the same standing as those organized by creators such as Frederick Kiesler and Enrico Prampolini. In 1925, at the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris, Kiesler (with his

Ville Spatiale), and Prampolini (with his *Théâtre Magnétique*) extended art forms in a spectacular way that anticipated a global art form, one that is not localized within a structure but linked to the spirit of the city and modern life. Frederick Kiesler issued his manifesto in 1926:

1. Transformation of the surrounding area of space into cities.
2. Liberation from the ground, abolition of the static axis.
3. No walls, no foundations.
4. A system of spans (tension) in free space.
5. Creation of new kinds of living, and, through them, the demands which will remould society.

In 1958, another ode to electronic technology had been performed within the context of a World Fair. The architect Le Corbusier, together with musicians Edgard Varèse and Iannis Xenakis, had installed a magnificent *Poème électronique*, the precursor of a multi-disciplinary arts approach, in the Philips Enterprise Pavilion at the World Fair in Brussels.

In the 50s, Iannis Xenakis was involved in several of Corbusier's projects, first as an engineer and then as a musician, notably in connection with the establishment of the Indian town of Chandigarh. Xenakis' primary involvement, in collaboration with his master, was with the Philips Pavilion, which was destroyed at the end of the Fair. Roberto Barbanti, a theoretician, explained the direct relationship with technology that was demonstrated by "the electronic Poem within the Philips Pavilion, a 'multimedia object' ahead of its time," in which Le Corbusier, Edgard Varèse and Iannis Xenakis joined forces to "aim at a summary of the arts, instead of a synthesis": "the Philips Pavilion is an installation in which immaterial architectural elements and sound technology are combined. Having taken on this order from the Philips Company, the Pavilion was obliged to use their technology to transmit sound and images. This technological input was well concealed in the architectural space of the Pavilion, making way for the artistic role of the tri-dimensional work." The architecture provided by Xenakis projected the music into what was previously only a setting, the space in which it was diffused. The ephemeral and avant-garde architecture of the Philips Pavilion was invented in order to diffuse the *Poème électronique* by Edgard Varèse through 425 loud-

speakers. As early as 1936, in "Music of our time," he claimed to be seeking "in the projection of sound, the quality of a third dimension in which sound emissions resemble rays of light, beamed from a projector, the extension of a journey into space." [1]

Although Polieri's *Théâtre du Mouvement Total* had been exhibited in a closed structure, the visual projection and sound effects, combined with the freely circulating spectators within it, were an attempt at achieving something more than a straightforward expression of modernity enshrined in art. The principle would still be same, whatever the external form chosen for the building: a cylinder, cube, or parallelepiped, or even some type of convex polyhedron. Polieri's *Théâtre du Mouvement Total* presents a dichotomy of the external form of the building and its internal scenographic arrangement; these are completely autonomous and independent. The relationship between the moving spectators at the center of the auditorium and the mobile spectacle surrounding them was, for the first time, completely dynamic in all three aerial dimensions. Kinematics became an essential part in the transmission and reception of messages. Such kinetics may be random but can be described mathematically. This was an open-ended vision, always expressed in global terms through an infinite movement towards the outer limits of the abstract or the cosmos.

As the World Fair in Osaka, at which electronic technology was featured in the form of robotics, the next Expo in 2010 in Shanghai will undoubtedly see the appearance of a new re-combination and inter-connection that is just as important, one between space traversed by satellites and a period of hopes for technological democratization of our everyday life, travelling towards another future. Further information on the Osaka World Fair can be found in a book published in New York in 1972 that describes the relationship between E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology) and Pepsi Cola, which resulted in the creation of a pavilion in Osaka in 1970, under the direction of Billy Klüver, Julie Martin, and Barbara Rose.

Recent developments, such as the World Expo in Aichi, Japan, in 2005 and the announcement of Shanghai as the site for the next Expo in 2010 are indicating a revival of established ways of envisioning this sort of project, relating it to previous historical occasions. The initial architectural work on the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai suggests this direction, but also displays a certain concern for the environment in the choice of its theme: *better city, better life*. Hugo Lacroix has written a monograph about the team of architects who produced the first design for the 2010 exhibition infrastructure, titled *Architecture – Studio*, in which he points out that "The European spokespersons seem to be very close to the ideas of the ancient Confucian philosopher Wang Fuzhi. For them too, the ideal consciousness is to maintain a state of evolution, avoiding all immobilisation. For them,

eternity has acquired this meaning; the ability to actualize an endless process of becoming." This could also be said to describe the reality driving us to conceptualize and construct projects on a planetary scale, projects that connect directly with the universe and with (meta)physics in a digital age.

Let us recall, just briefly, that the Architecture – Studio agency was also behind the construction of the Institute of the Arab World in Paris (with mechanical screens that filter the light, designed by Jean Nouvel) and the European Parliament in Strasbourg (a real cathedral of politics in that city). For Shanghai, Architecture – Studio envisioned a symbolic bridge, passing from the past to the future, as the philosophical expression of an invisible link between the historical quarter of the Shanghai Bund and the Pudong office skyline across from it. Together, these establish the context for the forthcoming World Expo. The real time movement across a passageway seen no longer as a utopia set in the future but as an objective dimension to the city of the present, is presented not just as a single event but one that projects into the future.

While this initial design for the Expo site, submitted to the International Exhibition Bureau as part of the proposal, was created by a French agency, a new overall site plan, developed by three international prize-winners, was subsequently presented as a joint design in November 2004. After all, Shanghai, at the heart of the continent, is in the process of becoming the Asian New York. It is this process of urbanization, unfolding in a city with no end and no limits, that is being discussed for 2010. Consequently, what is being developed in Shanghai is not simply an immaterial bridge between a global event and a planetary dimension. The theme of the "contemporary city" is increasingly coming to the fore in exhibitions and events dedicated to the electronic arts, as at the 2006 ISEA gathering in San Jose.

Some of the planned interactions between urban evolution and current techno-scientific developments constitute a linkage to today's artistic explorations. The concept of a bridge of flowers as part of the initial design for Shanghai 2010 constituted a unifying monument, and there definitely is a need to create an immaterial meeting place for this city that would be just as unifying, at a time when the virtual world is in the process of becoming part of everyday reality. In Shanghai, the process of becoming is symbolized by the river, a state of flux, along which the city, and not just the port, is being extended.

Drawing from the history of cinema as a media art, one could make an offbeat connection between Orson Welles' 1947 film *The Lady from Shanghai* [Fig. 1], the Shanghai Port (World Expo 2010) and San Francisco Bay (ISEA 2006, San Jose), evoked by the story of the film and existing in reality, since the two are twin cities. The forthcoming large-scale events in China – the 2008

Olympic Games and the 2010 World Expo – will take place during the same years as the next two ISEA festivals. However, this obviously is just a coincidence in space and time. For instance, the forthcoming World Expo in Zaragoza, Spain, in 2008 does not represent any meaningful connection in temporal or symbolic terms. Nevertheless, one could establish a connection in terms of a universality that we consider a necessary part of the agenda for humanity. I am not talking about a dimension of universality that neglects diversity or originality, but, on the contrary, about an appeal to openness and to freedom, whereby electronic artistic creation is employed as a "peaceful weapon" for achieving an opening up to the world. It is up to us to think about tomorrow, starting this very day.



Figure 1. Still from *The Lady from Shanghai*, Orson Welles.

Given that China has a monument of planetary dimensions, the Great Wall – the only human construction that can be seen from space, classified as a national treasure by UNESCO – the country could perhaps be the first to support a different concept within the context of the World Expo, namely, an event capable of suggesting a more global, not to say cosmic, dimension. This cosmic dimension plays a role in the consciousness of "the planet's thinking layer," defined by Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit scientist who was exiled to China over a century ago. The Internet is sometimes considered to be the incarnation of his "noosphere." The conquest of space has definitely changed our way of seeing and inhabiting the universe. Thanks to communication systems and the Internet, the idea of linking several continents today is a reality, but it is no easy matter to apply this concept to artistic creation.

The AIT (Architecture, Image, Technology / 2002, 2003, 2004) triptych in the heart of Paris was an attempt at imagining the basic requirements for a project involving several continents, connecting the cities of Paris,

London, and Los Angeles. Van Wagner, a world-leading communications company that recently opened offices in France was one of the first corporations to use large advertising spaces with still projection in New York during the 1970s. They now own the screen at the bottom of the Montparnasse Tower, the only one of its kind in France, and also have two screens in London and Los Angeles, respectively. The Paris LED screen has a surface area of 38 square meters. Its location in the French capital, at the crossroads of many different types of networks, is what motivated us to spend more than six months negotiating a partnership with the Van Wagner company, with the aim of completing the project free of charge with their technical support. We also approached other businesses involving networks, such as RATP, the

company that manages the Parisian metro system, in the hope of using live images from their CCTV cameras for our screen display. Additionally, I established contact with mobile phone companies, proposing to use the "cyber-traceability" of mobile telephone chips, based on software monitoring of all movement within the city and cartographic superimposition.

This scenario would have opened up the possibility for everyone to send live photographic and video captures from a mobile phone to each window of the screen display by means of MMS. However, none of my proposals to these companies has produced any results, positive or negative, but the dialogue is still open for other projects. At the moment, I am not yet dealing with questions surrounding the potential health

risks of mobile phones or privacy issues with regard to CCTV.

Van Wagner finally did not allow us to use the screen in real time. We therefore did not have access to the MP4 server broadcasting to the Paris and, potentially, the two other screens in order to produce a live triptych between Paris-London-Los Angeles. In the end, the entire financing of the project came from a private source, as cultural institutions were not interested in supporting the work. However, with a major partner, such as China Mobile, for the 2010 Shanghai event, it would be possible to explore how this type of project could offer 50 million visitors from all over the world an orchestrated representation of an urban scene in a state of immaterial flux, traveling through the fabric of the city and out to different locations on the planet.

A project with this potential would certainly be a more appropriate architecture for establishing a networked virtual installation than a pavilion. The World Expo should provide an opportunity to engage with the immaterial and urban culture of flux, and the *Théâtre Immersif* project for the Franco-German pavilion at the Aichi World

Expo has not really met this expectation. The simple procedure of expanding an electronic projection towards a panoramic dimension that is involved in this project certainly does not amount to an awareness of the world as it is. As the French newspaper *Le Monde* stated with regard to the 2006 World Cup in its edition of November 30, 2005,

For the first time since it started in 1930, the 2006 World Cup will not open with a football match. It will be held in Munich, starting on 9 June, but the opening gala will take place two days beforehand in Berlin. It will feature an event which the organisers promise will be 'grandiose'; the football supremos are planning to present the world with a 'Festival of the senses', to take place in the Olympic Stadium in front of sixty thousand spectators and hundreds of millions of TV viewers. FIFA promises 'A unique event which will combine music, dance and special effects' and is intended to 'emphasise the emotional aspect of football.'

The French choreographer Philippe Decouflé masterminded the production, which still had the feel of an old-style stadium rather than a "planetary event," despite the aesthetic quality of the show. Let's hope that the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, another "global" event, will be an opportunity for a more up-to-date aesthetic concept.

On our part, we are exploring the way in which numbers are used in competitive sports as one aspect of our research on the computerization of the planet. The use of GPS as part of an (albeit post-mediatic) happening could become a body performance artistically linked with the cosmic notion of spatial conquest – an idea that was given visual impact by a simple photographic image of Yves Klein's physical act of daring, his *Leap into the Void*.

Polieri's research formed part of a series of attempts at artistic creation that were linked to new technologies and more in sync with the process of global connectivity. A major theme in our proposals is the use of a satellite via GPS or the launch of an artwork into orbit as an expression of our awareness of the universe. We explored the use of satellites for the purposes of scenography in our text *Le satellite au service de la scénographie*. [2]

In December 2005, during a brief stay in Shanghai, I was able to confirm several of my assumptions in this respect. I will refer back to this trip, in the form of an actual conclusion or an imaginary proposition.

On Saturday December 17, 2005, between 1800 and 1904 hours, Paris GMT, my artistic intervention on a passenger plane was directly transmitted via the Internet during a flight from Shanghai to Munich, at a speed of intelligent agent 06.02

over 900 km per hour and an altitude of 30000 feet. By means of a live webcast I completed my cycle of five communications on SPN (from *Scenography to Planetary Network*) for five continents. The transmission could be viewed in real time on my website via a satellite link relaying images and sound from the plane.

This direct flight extended and completed my cycle of five communications for five continents, constituting a movement of projecting the body into space at a point in time ("X") thanks to not a dance company, but an airline company, without help from cultural institutions. The rhythm of an emergent form in a flowing movement pointing to both the past and the future and inhabiting an eternal present: a connection established by means of a handycam linked to an iBook transmitting its audio-visual flux to a wireless satellite weblink. Not a simple "streaming" motion but an attempt at global transmission in flux.

I was able to set up this performance thanks to Lufthansa's offer to provide FlyNet with a connection by Boeing. This webcast makes a formal nod towards the sleeper John Giorno, the poet of *Sleep*, Andy Warhol's mythical neo-avant-garde film made in 1963 in New York. This time around, a sleeper leaves the Asian New York of tomorrow, Shanghai, on his way to a new year under the sign of China. For this world event, the video ran for 64 minutes and focused on 64 keywords involving a combination of 12 wordplays on five themes (five continents, colors, senses, elements, years). The "64 symbolic hexagrams" depicted invite the audience to engage in a journey of artistic creation and inspired imagination towards a process of "becoming" on a planetary scale that was initiated with the forthcoming World Expo 2010 in mind.

I refer to this artistic act of communication because it does not merely integrate contemporary themes and technologies in an original and innovative way but is also an attempt at re-thinking the emergence and appearance of a work in terms of a vision that sums up the modern age.

Without being completely in agreement with the ideas put forward by the Situationists Guy Debord and Benjamin Constant in 1958, I want to reference this context with a presentation of their three last utopian principles:

9/ All methods can be used, on condition they are used in a unitary action. The co-ordination of artistic and scientific methods must result in complete fusion.

10/ The construction of a situation means setting up a transitory micro-ambiance and random events for a single moment in the life of a few people. This cannot be separated from the construction of a general ambiance, which would be relatively longer lasting, in a unitary urban space.

11/ A constructed situation is a way of approaching unitary urban spaces, and unitary urban spaces form the indispensable basis for developing the construction of situations, as a game and as serious aspects of a society that is more free.

Today, it is not a question of organizing shows or making films in the manner of Orson Welles, but simply one of imagining the projection of images and sound into a performance area that is not a theater and / or a cinema, but the emergent city (for instance, the emergent city of Shanghai), thereby creating historic and urban counter currents that lead in every direction. One could imagine to create art for the city network one day by means of screens (urban and telematic) at each street intersection; consider the size of the projections on the Pudong skyline, which make Times Square seem small. The city's span and dimensions are what makes it unique in the world. However, considering the historical precedents in the 20th century and the vision behind the art created for the World Fairs, from Kiesler to Polieri, we have no choice but to become involved in a dimension that enables a much more global level of interactivity – between technology and "cosmic conquest."

Our cities and lives are currently in the process of being computerized, in one respect or another, and becoming more unitary and imaginary than ever before. However, the content presented in these computerized environments is not necessarily interesting. In any case, the future society and urbanity we are talking about here is already no longer media-oriented per se, but definitely spectacular in nature. This means that "messages" are no longer on the agenda, not even artistic messages. Consequently, the imaginary freedom provided by the process of computerization will not be able to continue beyond the post-media age arriving with the digitalisation of the entire planet, with the effect that only some actions or gatherings of universal, or even cosmic, significance will make sense and be of real interest in the context of the techno-sciences.

The fact that the recent development of the city of Shanghai rests on a thousand-year-old culture has not prevented the city from being wholly oriented towards the future, not a future of re-construction but of an opening up to the world, even if it unfolds in ways that are politically and economically contradictory. It is the "ultimate" building site in its search for innovation, without comparison on earth and, above all, without fixed or even social rules. This is undoubtedly what constitutes this city's special and original character. Let us hope that, in contrast to the global role that Shanghai played by universally welcoming exiles from a Western world that was marching towards World War II, another phase will emerge between now and 2010. Shanghai will not become the center of the world simply because it is a gateway to China. It is not a new Babylon (think about the imaginary city evoked by Constant, a Situationist, almost half a century ago), even though, prior to World

War II, it was an exile that sheltered people from around the entire world in the "Shanghai Hotel" so well described by the novelist Vicki Baum in 1938, before she went to live in California.

The city might merely become a new set of themes that are interactive on a virtual level provided by companies, such as Google. Urbanity will not become particularly innovative in Shanghai if artists are proportionally less and less able to creatively imagine interfaces and installations that are capable of addressing current issues and rising beyond mere documentary and museum-oriented explorations.

From April 2 to May 7, 2006, the exhibition "Invisible Layers, Electric Cities" at Island 6 Arts Center in Shanghai – curated by Allard van Hoorn, Margherita Salmaso, and art director Thomas Charveriat – explored the contemporary city. The press release informs us that

the urbanization process is a complex matter: the aggregate effect of human interaction constantly eludes major attempts at urban planning; the cold search for control over the various elements of city life is always confronted with chaos and disorder, as natural aspects of multiplicity. Multiplicity produces the reality that we experience; through its constantly re-combining forms, it teaches us how to look at the world and reminds us that cities have myriad reflections. (...) The exhibition thus intends to show how creative processes can share lessons in multiplicity, which then become the groundwork for the aesthetics of the exhibition. Here, artists emphasise the constant play of urban "difference." Various layers of civilization are combined and recombined, put in new relations, connected through a thrilling electric breath, permeated by intersecting emanations and transmissions of life information.

During my visit to another exhibition, at the Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition Hall in People's Square in December 2005, I was able to see two installations evoking the preparations for Shanghai 2010 and ways in which to engage with the future. One of these was a video that opened like a window onto a planetary level, featuring documentary images drawn from the five continents, functioning as a reminder of our multiple cultures, and bringing to mind the national pavilions at the global get-together of the World Expo. It should be pointed out that the point of view of the video seemed to be "cosmic" since it was rotating in line with a satellite whose trajectory started and ended the pictorial animation. Another installation, involving multiple interactive panels, documented the plans for computerizing the city of Shanghai. It consisted of an immersive space providing a 360° view of the city by means of computer graphics.

This text establishes a link to and between ISEA 2010 and SHANGHAI 2010 in order to imagine what action one might take in a city to create a major event that



connects to the whole planet. We are living in a time of "smart mobs" [3], which I define, experience, and direct as "digital mobile wireless systems." We are talking about these systems with groups of industrial researchers in Europe, through the 3i3s association, or with computer artists who have already worked for World Expos, such as Emmanuel Sévigny who contributed to the Canadian Pavilion in 2000 and 2005. Our research has already been the subject of interviews with Martin Robain, the founder of the Architecture Studio (Paris – Shanghai) agency, who presented the City of Shanghai's successful proposal to the committee for the World Expo. The real and imagined city of Shanghai, whether for good or bad, will certainly resonate a formal relationship with the daily experience of the people who dwell and live there, directly and in real time. The forthcoming World Expo in China is an opportunity to achieve this change, and we are open to all other exchanges and partnerships on this future path. We are convinced that a "New World City" is about to emerge, partly in Shanghai, and that an operating interface with frameworks and virtual limits – to be explored beyond the classical and modern codes of urban development or aesthetics – will be key in the process. We are now at the beginning of the gateway to the third millennium. In this sense, the "interactive" city is no longer an imaginary utopia but an atypical reality. That is to say, there

are no illusions apart from those that allow us to dream up and determine its forms, not in terms of a "Fantasy Architecture" replacing a surveillance society, or a secure prison, but in terms of an open planetary territory enabled by new technologies. [4]

Franck Ancel
<http://franck-ancel.com>
<http://remixarts.com>
info@franck-ancel.com

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Color Photo: Shanghai 2005. Franck Ancel.