

Place @ Space

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Abstract

Every day, we transform our surrounding space into a proper place. We have our own ways to walk through the city and creatively reorganise our houses. Partly under the influence of new technologies, our environment grows in diversity, size and complexity. We cross borders more easily and make faraway, invisible or vanished places “tangible” through television or mobile phone. This, however, stands in tension with the intangibility of all sorts of technological networks in our environment. We are not always aware of the “controlling” power of surveillance cameras, RFID or data banks. It is in the field of tension between visible and invisible interferences, between actively and passively dealing with the environment where some developments within media art are situated. These projects take not only the man/technology/environment relationship as a point of departure of an artistic interference, but also as a goal. The work of art is a result of reflecting on the relationship mentioned above, but in turn it wants to intrude on the environment and “tactically” reassess the relationship between man, technology and living space. This they do, for example, by making invisible qualities of spaces visible, “writing” spaces or giving tools to people so they can create their place in space themselves. The often — literally — border and discipline transcending media works make a different, often more holistic approach to space possible.

The fields of tension between tangible and intangible, place and space and between disciplines serve as the source of inspiration for alternative field studies on “space”. In this research we chose to combine methods in cultural and visual studies with artistic and design research to make possible a more holistic and material approach to the man/technology/environment relationship. The study takes shape in a tactile interface that reveals possibilities to develop a creative and enduring relationship with the hybrid environment.

Introduction

De Certeau (1988) teaches us that a ‘space’ is a ‘place’ as soon as someone can draw his or her patterns in it. Ubiquitous computing (technology is ubiquitous and present in everything around us) makes that more difficult because the space does not provide complete insight into it (Weiser 2000). Designers integrate technological networks into our spaces neatly and almost imperceptibly for our comfort. Yet, we do not want to be excluded from formulating our spaces. How does artistic research contribute to defining Man’s place in the hybrid space?

Spaces in networks

The Actor Network Theory defines space through and between human and non-human actors (Akrich, Callon & Latour 2006). In this network media provides ‘displacement’ (Couldry 2004: 6). That’s how hybrid spaces are formed. When a networked space feels natural, it becomes black-boxed (Couldry 2004: 1). Artists that explore the role of media, technology and science play a vital role in opening up those black boxes. By ‘mapping’ junctions (people and things) they can reveal properties of and moments of acts in spaces thereby stimulating ‘agency’ (the feeling of being able to act in a space) (Murray 1998). They indicate how we can use them via a tactical or self-devised logic (de Certeau 1988). We call these topologies because, more than cartographies, they permit networks between different contexts to be made visible and the physical perception of them to be examined (Flusser 1988: 177). This literally gives the rather abstract network more ‘body’.

Hybrid bodies

Technology creeps under the skin of things and under our skin too. The things surrounding us are increasingly fused with traces that people leave behind (distributed objects), and vice-versa, we carry traces of the

technological networks that are interwoven with us (the concept of the cyborg, the distributed subject) (Joselit 2007). The resulting spaces are difficult to ‘grasp’, partly because we are permanently part of them. Duchamp’s strategy was to handle the world like a readymade and to make it topsy-turvy from time to time. The theorist and critic Joselit argues for a similar approach to our increasingly technological and mediated space: ‘seize the world as a readymade and break open its circuits’ (Joselit 2007: 171).

Hybrid viewpoints

Hybrid spaces require hybrid viewpoints. The ethnographic approach is best combined within social and cultural sciences with more material and hands-on approaches to the subject. Theories of daily life are better able to consider the body as part of the network and of the space (Galloway 2004). Some exact scientists explore the world in a very material and physical manner (Zielinski 2006). Within design research, ‘performance ethnography’ plays with the blurring of borders between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. In the arts, this performative approach to space exists too. Intervening in small things or participating as a physical link in a chain are modest approaches that don’t profess to understand everything. Those that want to work in the knot have less inhibition and a greater chance of having an impact — even if very small — on the world.

Learning from the artistic approach in the knot

How can a society learn from these artistic topologies? These works of art act as a ‘boundary object’ (Nigten in Brickwood et al 2006: 126-129). It stimulates collaboration across sectors and disciplines. Outside the lab or museum context, in our daily space, it can also

steer communication with ‘the citizen’. Experimenting with interfaces that make it possible to share the knowledge about these methods and boundary objects with governments, art organisations, researchers and colleague artists can stimulate reflection on how we can stir the feeling of place, agency in a complex, hybrid space amongst citizens.



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