Fête Mobile: a Hyper-Local Self-Surveillance and Media Broadcast Experiment

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Abstract

Fête Mobile was the name given to a multi-purpose airborne media platform first exhibited at the Zero1 2006 festival in San Jose by Luke Moloney, Marc Tuters and Adrian Sinclair. Under this moniker we performed social experiments having to do with media sharing, surveillance and local-area media dissemination. Fête Mobile's center piece was a 6.5m long semi-autonomous blimp equipped with a file server, a video capture system and, in a subsequent iteration, an internal graphical projection system. Regarding the issue of surveillance, the project sought to increase awareness of public surveillance beyond a mere critique to propose individuals might become responsible for their own surveillance. An experimental internal projection system was later tested at nighttime cultural events, as a sort of local visual public address system. The assemblage was conceptualized as an extreme-low-altitude, hyper-local prototype of an art satellite existing for the same general purposes as many real satellites: surveillance, data communication and media broadcast in an artistic context. It is a continuation of the artist' research with the MC3 project for the MDCN.[1]

Figure 1: Fête Mobile ready for launch.
Photo Credit: Julian Bleecker

Localized self-surveillance

In our daily lives we are surrounded by surveillance. Closed-circuit television, traffic cameras, bluetooth phone tracking and RFID logging all contribute to a pervasive surveillance environment. Beyond merely criticizing this state of affairs, we encouraged the public to be aware of surveillance and to engage it directly. Fête Mobile proposed that the public take part not only in surveillance of those around them but in surveillance of self thereby questioning the narcissism inherent in surveillance.

Rather than trying to obscure its nature by hiding behind a smoked dome, the Fête Mobile presented itself as a highly visible surveillance system — a humorous embodiment of surveillance. A camera that drew attention to itself rather than tried to divert or hide from it. As a safe platform for aerial surveillance, coupled together with a video capture system and web server, Fête Mobile broadcasting a real-time feed from the onboard camera and made it available locally via a WiFi captive portal.

Media broadcast

Surrounded as we are by advertisement-filled public spaces, it can be difficult to find visual space that is not, at least indirectly, an expression of some sort of media. Advertisers are ever trying to find new ways of expressing their vision and promote their clients' message. An additional element of the Fête Mobile project thus involved experiments with visual media broadcast. As well understood by advertisers the world over overhead blimps serves as an excellent presentation backdrop for projected media. Once a potent symbol of the modern city's hope, today blimps in urban space serve principally as flying billboards. Towards these ends we attached a video projector to the inside of the blimp envelope, driven by the onboard computer. Yet, rather than broadcast advertisements, we chose to display

visuals from local media artists at outdoor nighttime events.

While simple to implement, this approach had its draw-backs. Only visible at night, the blimp's curved envelope only presented part of the picture to spectators, depending on their angle of view. Nevertheless, these presentations were well received on the whole.

Fête mobile lifestyle

For its initial debut at Zero1 2006,[2] the blimp was presented as part and parcel of a larger lifestyle branding concept. Inspired by the conceptual design of the Japanese collective, Maywa Denki,[3] the Fête Mobile lifestyle brand consisted of a branded clothing line, blimp-shaped frozen treats, or "blimpscicles" as we called them and whimsical uniforms for our ground crew. While the treats and clothing were well received, it was our uniforms consisting of brightly coloured jumpsuits and hard-hats that seemed to generate the greatest response.

Figure 2: Fête Mobile team. Photo Credit Julian Bleecker

Findings

As per our original vision, this project was very ambitious. Originally Fête Mobile was intended to be an autonomous surveillance platform that could be collaboratively-controlled via a web interface available via a local WiFi connection and a broader web connection. This, however, presented some great challenges. While a blimp is dynamically stable by nature and thus easier to control than other types of aircraft, making anything fly autonomously is very difficult. UAV development is the stuff of government-funded military/industrial programs, not under-funded artists.

In addition to technical challenges, we had to deal with logistical problems. Surveillance of public space is only interesting if said space is populated. More populated areas are inevitably more difficult to operate

a flying machine in. While a blimp is easier to control and inherently safer than other classes of aircraft, it is nevertheless a challenge to fly around crowded areas without running afowl of the populace, local civil authorities or federal aviation authorities (the latter authority in the USA did, however, grant us permission to operate near the San Jose airport in 2006!).

Reception to the project has been mixed and very interesting. Many people have a seemingly emotional response to blimps, promted, no doubt, by collective memories. Some were fearful that the blimp might catch fire in a horrible Hindenburg-style disaster. A greater majority, however, felt an affinity to blimps, finding them very non-threatening, even friendly. The slow motion maneuvering and cartoony balloon-like dimension of the blimp envelope no doubt contribute to this reaction. The affinity of the modern blimp with sporting events and public summer festivals may also contribute to this positive emotional response.

Upon realizing that the Fête Mobile is a surveillance platform, a new set of reactions was expressed. Many of the people we presented accused us of having created the ultimate stalker tool, to which we responded that while anonymous surveillance by the public could create a stalking toolkit, the blimp was a conspicuous if not ridiculous tool for stalking. Some people were concerned about our creation of a particular surveillance system, and thus expressed concerned about public surveillance in general. This of course, is one of the key reactions the Fête Mobile endeavored to provoke. Still more were unconcerned about the surveillance of public space, argued as it often is to be important to public safety, but were concerned about the ability of the public to anonymously view said surveillance.

This embodies a key question we attempted to ask with this project: who owns surveillance of public space? While surveillance of public space is no doubt growing thanks to cheaper and easier to install surveillance systems, this surveillance data does not seem to be more publicly available. Insecure webcams and video sharing websites notwithstanding, it seems that increasingly surveillance data is becoming the private property of law enforcement and corporate security. Perhaps in the future socially-aware media artists and enterprises alike will endeavor to provide more and better tools for the public to participate in surveillance of their own spaces.

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1 Mobile Cartographic Command Centre, a project of the Mobile Digital Commons Network presented May 2005 at La Société des arts Technologiques in Montreal, Quebec <http://www.mdcn.ca>

2 Zero1 SJ: A Global Festival of Art on the Edge <http://01SJ.org>

3 Maywa Denki <http://www.maywadenki.com/>