

# Liminal Acts: Using Mobile Technology as a Critical Medium

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We live in a mobile hybrid space. This short sentence indicates one of the most important features of our post-modern times, which is, according to Bauman, liquidity,<sup>1</sup> as both society and culture we live in are in a state of constant and growing metamorphose — they change faster and faster with every ring of a cell phone, with every data transfer, with every switch on of a laptop. It also informs us of inevitable changes of perception, as the world we live in is a space where borders between real and virtual are being constantly blurred and our experience is mediated or even simulated. As Hansen notices, fluidity between body and computer and body and space, which he perceives as two extremes of our experience in hybrid space, makes us more responsible for generating our personal space. When we create it by moving freely between material and virtual, we actually “wear” it, hence his term “wearable space.”<sup>2</sup> Mixed, augmented, virtualized, hybridized reality — these phrases are coined to describe the fact that the world, being accompanied by the sphere of electromagnetic waves and digitalized information, demands new forms of behaviour and consciousness.

New electronic and digital technologies play a crucial role in these processes as new forms of reality and experience develop in close connection to principles inscribed into them — mobility, interactivity, and immersion being the most obvious. However, as we walk the streets of our computerized cities and cross borders of materiality with every use of cell phone or laptop we rarely notice that being connected to the net is at the same time being caught in it.<sup>3</sup> Wearable, mobile technologies liberate us from the constraints of space but they make our mobility seen, tracked, measured and controlled as well. While accepting this double-sidedness of mobile technologies is the inevitable condition of using them, still this ideological and ethical rather than material cost

is difficult to see and very often goes unnoticed. Critical attitude towards technology can help to comprehend various, often contradictory and paradoxical, effects and implications of easy and obvious things of everyday life. In this respect, artists who use technology as a tool for creative practice and at the same time develop so called “direct theory,”<sup>4</sup> can be seen as media and culture theorists who try to disclose or make visible the hidden dimension of hybrid reality, and propose critical reading of its influence on both public and private spheres.

Although aiming at the same goal, artistic “direct theory” is founded on principles that differ much from academic ones. Estrangement, provocation, shock, subversion, *detournement* — all these strategies are used by artists to “make easy things difficult”, to say after Foucault. Being rather sceptical than optimistic, refusing idea of transparent technology, searching for uneasy, not visible at first sight or hidden effects of technology on social, political and cultural reality, artists try to resist (as Foster puts it)<sup>5</sup> technological hype and defend against unreflective techno-optimism. Doing so, many of them decide to create new electronic devices, or misuse existing popular products to challenge “the conformity of everyday life by short-circuiting our emotions and states of mind”<sup>6</sup>. The idea of *noire* design works in close relation to David Rokeby’s understanding of artistic practice as designing, or construction of experience. Technology, thought of as a cultural interface, generates and demands certain mode of use, specific points of view and states of mind, and, last but not least, behaviours; it determines our experience of the world to a certain degree. To comment on this effect artists subvert usual experience of techno-mediated reality, their works take form of activist provocation that destabilizes and deconstructs notion of technology as transparent and neutral.

Taking the paradox of mobile and wearable technology mentioned above as point of departure, we can, on one hand, find number of works that make zones of panoptic control visible by hacking wireless surveillance systems and questioning strategies of dataveillance (David Rokeby, Michelle Terrain, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer), or, on the other, find works that focus on critical interpretation of use of mobile phones, GPS systems, and

other commonly used electronic devices as technologies in which “freedom and control are one” (Laura Beloff, Steve Mann, project Ashaver220). Balancing on a threshold between liberating and constraining aspects of today’s high technology artists’ design of “liminal acts”, they construct experience which is unusual, strange, sometimes even threatening rather than easy to comprehend, obvious, or normal.

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1. see: Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
  2. Hansen, Mark B. 2002. “Wearable Space.” In *Configurations Volume 10 (2)*. Spring, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 321-322.
  3. Levinson stresses this point commenting that mobile phone is at the same time called cellphone and cell is also a prison cell. This paradox and duality cannot and should not be missed while interpreting cultural impact of technology.  
See: Levinson, Paul. 2004. *Cellphone: The Story of the World’s Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything!* Palgrave Macmillan.
  4. Edward T. Small proposes this notion in reference to practice of avant-garde filmmaker and video artists to stress their interest in conditions of medium they use. To use a certain technology, in this view, means asking questions about “the massage of the medium” in various respects: cultural, social, political.  
see: Small, Edward T. 1995. *Direct theory. Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre*. Southern Illinois University Press.
  5. see: Foster, Hal. 1996. *Return of the Real. The Avant Garde at the end of the Century*. London: The MIT Press.
  6. Dunne, Anthony, Raby, Fiona. 2001. *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects*. Basel: Birkhäuser, p. 10.

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