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SERGIO MOTTA**On Mobile Crash**

It has been said, it is a common place: new trends in portable devices boost not only consumerism but also a fetishization on owning products that not long ago we did not notice we needed them. The hype on mobility overrides real needs and drives endless releases of phone models promising features expensively charged by local carriers or that would never work as expected.

Motorola and LG have launched more than 150 cellular phone models each in the last 6 years. Samsung has released more than 300 in the same period of time. Most of these products will not stay on the market for long but produce a definitive, instant desire on the customers, due to their latest features. With a slightly different strategy Apple has launched just 3 iPhone models so far, but is taking vast advantage of such predisposition of consuming. For its 4G model (out on June 24) Apple is expecting to sell no less than 20 millions of units until the end of the year.

This reminds me of Bruce Sterling's speech at ISEA Montreal, back in 1995. After mentioning the technological rhetoric present in the 90's culture, he took his brand new PowerBook to compare how little such device would last compared to its source reference, saying that even the cheapest paperback book would outlive his machine quite easily.

PowerBook is a good name, but not a really pretty name. Personal computers have had much prettier names. Like the Intertek Superbrain II. It must have been extremely difficult not to buy [one], even though that machine is absolutely as dead as mutton. (Sterling, 2005)

In his ironic speech Sterling lists dozens of dead media and pretentious gadgets, and after 15 years we know what he meant: "But wait! There's more! Dead mainframes! (...) Dead supercomputers. Dead operating

systems”, he continues. In fact, for some existing products today there are a myriad of dead media, meaning also *obsolete language* disappearing together with the dead systems.

Critical approach

In Brazil the majority of people from lower classes will have access to a mobile (smart)phone, with computing capabilities before they will put their hands first time on a computer. 3G networks are superseding the amount of data traffic over the wired, physical Internet. Unfortunately, due to the high costs of data access in Brazil, accessibility is not yet the right word for this phenomenon, but increased consumerism is. It also does mean *planned obsolescence* attached to the hundreds of mobile devices models spread over the world in an escalating fashion. In the name of market niches or presuming regional cultural preferences, but always spotting alleged needs, it is just an economic strategy. A huge thing, actually, when we take into consideration that emergent economies such as Brazil, China and India “have jumped into the networked culture skipping the landline communication moment”, relying on wireless-based infrastructures, as Giselle Beiguelman reminds us on her notes regarding the work *Mobile Crash*, focused here.

Beiguelman calls anthropologist Néstor Canclini to state: “the new communication technologies have expanded the notion of citizenship, incorporating consumption practices to its exercise” (Beiguelman, 2010). It exposes a link between consumerism and citizenship in a way that leads us to believe that participation in the social public environment (both physical and online) has been truly dependent on mediation technologies – increasingly through portable devices.

If our entire culture was sucked “into the black hole of computation, an utterly frenetic process of virtual planned obsolescence” as Sterling has said, we may now experience the crashes related to the mobile media.

Artistic approach

Mobile Crash is a project I made after my involvement with mobile media technologies [1]. Developed as an interactive installation it is constituted by four projections in a room with a respective direct sound, creating an immersive audio and video environment. Through the viewer’s interaction a series of “sentences” or rhythmic sequences are reproduced in an increasing scale of intensity. Images show devices and equipments in state of obsolescence being hammered. It invites the public to share the actions in a kind of catharsis, which can be collective or individual.

The interface, built as a customized IR-camera detection system, was developed for the work with the intention to create a truly friendly system – and has proved to be very intuitive, robust and reliable [2]. Once the viewer enters the space the camera detects his/her direction regarding the screens and would respond accordingly, by playing a series of video sequences in the related screen. Inside the room, one would just point to one of the four screens to make it trigger the videos. It produces immediate dialogues

between the screens as in a kind of live-video set composed by a series of instant *mash-ups*.

Pointing gestures are a basic input for running the system, which is detected intuitively by the audience, in a progressive sound and visual chain, also escalating in terms of intensity and power. The sequences would reach up to 12 levels, according to the persistence of the player.

To increase the power of the hammer, producing a noisier action results in a sort of relief. It might be the desire of many to hold the hammer seeking to achieve a catharsis, a little revenge against consuming so many technological devices that will not be around for long in their lives. How attached can we become to these little machines? – we might resound Sterling’s questions mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Through different approaches, *Mobile Crash* focuses the instability of a new medium, addressing the fragility of language involved in an image production fed by *fetishization*. This might bring an anachronistic view to the current technological media in times of obsolescence and mobility.

References

- [1] I refer to shows I curated for Sonar SP (2004), Life Goes Mobile (2005-2006), Motomix Art Festival (2006) and the arte.mov, Mobile Art Festival (2006-2010)
- [2] Made with Pure Data and openFrameworks, both open source software.
- Beiguelman, Giselle (2010) *Mobile Crash In*: ISEA2010 RUHR Catalogue, ISEA2010 Dortmund.
- Sterling, Bruce (2005): *The Life and Death of Media* [online]. Alamut, Retrieved from: http://www.alamut.com/subj/artiface/deadMedia/dM_Address.html [accessed 31 May 2010]