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The Aesthetics of Electronic Art in Public Spaces

Our idea of the public has been informed by political and social constructions ever since Greek antiquity. It was in its apparent heyday in bourgeois society that the term “public” was defined by a whole range of social exclusions. Under the post-war era’s systemic pressure to consume, the notion of a bourgeois public disintegrated and its communicative space became mythical, i.e. “a secondary semiological system in the Barthesian sense” (Habermas).

The question today is what (public) effect art can achieve in this situation. What kind of public emerges in an age when our understanding of what is public has been fundamentally changed by the influence of digital media? These questions concern all fields of art. How can art manage to find an aesthetic form for the superimpositions and interpenetrations of different space and body constructions today?

Public space has always been a field of experimentation and research for changing patterns of perception and behaviour. While the discourse about public space in the 1990s was dominated by a perceived loss of all political functions and art practised withdrawal in the shape of almost invisible interventions, we see an exemplary restructuring of its political and social qualities today. Strategies of performance are producing a new idea of the public. Situationist explorations and interactive forms of play create situations open to audience involvement where new narrative forms are developed.

This paper describes how artists keep resisting any one-sided appropriation of the “public”, thus keeping it alive. It analyses and demonstrates various artistic strategies and tactics of the “Agon” (Chantal Mouffe), the contest for democracy. The miniaturisation of digital mobile media, their ubiquity,

generates changed public spheres. It is not the task of art to design a new techno-fetishism of “embedded technologies” or to promote acceptance of new technologies. It does, however, participate in the creation of new narrative forms striving towards a subjectification and personalization of the wide and often anonymous public space, thus re-positioning it in the technosphere.