

CO2nfession/CO2mmitment: Experimental Urban Media in the Climate Change Debate

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The advanced video installation CO2nfession/CO2mmitment is an example of the use of experimental urban media to facilitate participation, encourage reflexivity and foster engaging conversations about complex environmental issues such as the climate change debate. CO2nfession/CO2mmitment was part of a range of experiments with interactive urban installations to enhance civic communication conducted at the national research center, Digital Urban Living (DUL), at Aarhus University.

The installation was developed as part of the exhibition CO2030 in Aarhus. The exhibition was organized by the municipality as an opportunity for the citizens of Aarhus to get inspiration and good advice on how to decrease the emission of CO₂ on an individual level. As part of the exhibition, CO2nfession/CO2mmitment specifically aimed at putting a personal face on the climate change debate both in the exhibition space and throughout the city. The video setup encouraged and displayed the production of user-generated content and narratives in relation to climate change and environmental sustainability.

The installation itself consisted of two parts; one inside the exhibition space (Ridehuset), and the other on info stands and bus stops throughout the city. In Ridehuset, people could enter a booth, where it was possible to confess ones climate sins (using too much water or electricity, eating too much meat, driving too much etc.) and to commit oneself to a more active fight for a better climate in Aarhus. In the booth, a number of props were placed to help inspire the climate story people wanted to tell or perform. A video was recorded of the persons in the booth shown as a live-feed outside the booth to attract bystanders. The video was edited the same day and distributed on the screens in the city where people could hear the sound of the videos by touching a sensor on the screens. During the exhibition, 68 recordings were made and distributed across the city. Located in busy city locations, these screens showed edited versions of the videos 24/7 for four days.

A wide range of people used the installation, from people just visiting the exhibition who found a good opportunity to get something off their chest to



Fig. 1: By voicing their opinion in the confessional booth, people were able to put a personal face on the climate debate throughout the city of Aarhus.

the local city Mayor. The videos recorded were extremely diverse ranging from straightforward and simple confessions to complex animated narratives with props used in creative ways. Concerning the screens in the city, a number of people remarked their existence. Stories of people going to a certain screen to see themselves were reported, but also stories of people suddenly seeing some of their friends appearing on the video screens to their surprise. As such it can be argued that the infrastructure had the potential to change people's expectations to a traditionally somewhat commercialized use of urban screens in the city and to create new affective ties to the climate debate. In general, although the screens created a lot of attention in the city it nonetheless proved to be difficult to attract people to actively engage with the content of the videos.

While some felt that the personal exposure in CO2nfession/CO2mmitment was warranted, or indeed needed, due to the urgency of the theme, others perceived the communicational setup as too intrusive. Interestingly, a lot of the people who did not enter the booth did, however, take the time to discuss with the operator of the booth why they did not want to go into the booth, and what they would have said, had they entered. In this way, the installation fostered discussions relevant for the topic that were not recorded by the system.

CO2nfession/CO2mmitment simultaneously tried to render the climate debate personal and immediately relevant in the Aarhus cityscape and attract people to Ridehuset for the exhibition. It is interesting to look at the ways in which people actively appropriated and made sense of CO2nfession/CO2mmitment in multiple, unforeseen ways. The openness of the installation proved to be an asset in engaging people creatively in playful modes of content-production. It remains a question to what degree and how one should balance between controlled and open interactions in an urban environment. Nonetheless, our prior experience and the findings from this case study indicate that the openness of the system is an asset that can be actively pursued in the design. Another question concerns the impact of the installation on concrete climate improvements, which is far more elusive to measure. It seems, however, that the conceptual underpinnings and urban distribution of CO2nfession/CO2mmitment did help capacitate and engage a number of people personally in conversations about a better climate through urban interactions and performances.

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