

TOWARDS A TRANSNATIONAL 'CAMPO'

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The *Large Screens and the Transnational Public Sphere* research project explores the exchange of information and interactive content between cities identified as media 'hubs' and the impact on the formation of a regional public sphere. This project currently links screens between Federation Square, Melbourne and those managed by Art Center Nabi, Seoul.



Fig 1. "sms_origins", Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starrs, Federation Square, Australia 2009. Photo: Leon Cmielewski



Fig 2. "Value @Tomorrow City", Seung Joon Choi, Songdo, Korea, 2009. Image courtesy of ART CENTER NABI

The *Large Screens and the Transnational Public Sphere* research project explores the exchange of information and interactive content between cities identified as media 'hubs', and the potential for the formation of a regional public sphere, in this case, the Asian region.

Public screens could become sites to incubate innovative artistic and communication modes that revitalize public space and public interaction. Networked public screens could also function as a nexus for new forms of cross-cultural exchange. Transmitting artwork on a large screen between two cities with public interactive dimensions requires an innovative approach in curatorial techniques, artistic content production. Our approach emphasizes social and cultural values above commercialization of the screens and squares.

Artists' investigations, the changing role of the curator, interaction with audiences, the overcoming of technological differences and financial imperatives, will be described in the context of the issues faced in trying to generate a 'sense of belonging' in many contemporary civic public spaces.

Begun in 2009, research for *Large Screens and the Transnational Public Sphere* will continue until mid 2013 developing interactive realtime artistic events between Melbourne and Seoul to explore the capabilities of different art practices that inspire and bridge communities across two cities.

Our program of cross-cultural exchange and empirical analysis of public interactions around large screens, aims to inform media, cultural and urban planning policy. Our culturally and organisationally diverse team members include theorists, administrators, technicians, artists and curators, from the Art Center Nabi, Seoul, South Korea, Federation Square PL, University of Melbourne, University of Sydney. Funding comes from the Australian Research Council and the Australia Council for the Arts. [1]

THE SCREEN AS TRANSNATIONAL 'CAMPO'

Can recently 'created' public spaces become places of civic engagement - can they become a transnational 'campo'?

The hypothesis being tested is that real-time, interactive artwork presented between nations, on large public screens can have a positive impact on how we engage with one other and, in a broader sense, affect our civic lives.

Our aim is to inform media, cultural and urban planning policy to revitalize public space and public interaction by increasing risk-taking and creative opportunities.

Current urban planning policy in Australia, for example, treats electronic screens in much the same way as static billboards. This underestimates the possibilities for public screens to be sites that incubate innovative artistic and communication modes. Current policy also ignores the potential for networked public screens to function as a nexus for new forms of cross-cultural exchange.

The tendency is to regulate the scale and location of public screens based on the assumption that the primary use will be advertising or passive programming. Urban policy needs to address the resulting paucity of civic engagement when screens only support centrally regulated content that treats viewers

as passive spectators. To provide informed urban planning guidelines, we need a clearer understanding of the spectrum of potential uses of public screens and address the common perception that content produced by artists is free. Artist's development and production time should be allocated during budget development and allocation as a part of civic forward programming.

The aim of the *Large Screens and the Transnational Public Sphere* project is to show what an interactive city can be or should be. We envision the city as a living organism that expresses in real time its emotional and physical states. We dream of a new collectivity based on diversity. This is possible with today's media. The large screen works as a window to other cultures, airing cultural and artistic contents from around the world. But as cities develop and their populations expand, it becomes clearer that public art should also be able to question our notion of the 'civic', reflecting on it, asking if there are any holes, rather than conforming to it. The term 'civic' can be refined and redefined by good public art. In the end, it is a process of cultural negotiation. Through this project, we are proposing both new modes of experience to share with and between people, delivered by a new *template* for content delivery — across countries, across screens. Mediated by technology, but inherently live.

THE ARTISTS

Artists can seek to encourage subtle shifts in how public's think of themselves and each other. This is particularly so, when the work being presented requires the public to interact with it in real time, and, therefore have a crucial role in realising and performing the work.

THE FIRST TWO ARTWORKS

In August 2009, two artworks were presented simultaneously on the Incheon (South Korea) and Federation Square (Australia) networked screens, with the public invited in both places to interact with the work and with one another. These projects related in a delicate way with each other, both articulating identity in some way, beginning what is becoming a poetic transnational creative dialogue.

sms_origins uses the large screen as a public sms graffiti board. Leon Cmielewski and Josephine Starrs conceived and designed the piece working closely with programmer Adam Hinshaw. A phone number is displayed on a large screen in a public space along with the instruction "sms the name of the country you come from.". When participants sms their (and/or parents or grandparents) country of origin a curved vector is added to the map of the world displayed on the large screen, which updates in realtime as it receives texts. The map of the globe then becomes a platform for a more dynamic understanding of the people with whom we are sharing that public space. The purposefully innocuous design of the screen becomes geographically alive to share our personal heritages. *sms_origins* reinforces concepts of global citizenship and multicultural societies. Importantly, this work provides an entrée for the less extrovert, leading to a greater sense of participation and shared histories. The work is designed with a simple appearance, although the programming is far from simple. The complexity of global migration is revealed and, in a very undemanding manner, provides a collective platform that generates a sense of the evenness of our demographic histories.

The concept, design and programming by Seung Joon Choi in <Value> explores what is important to people. A word sent via sms responding to the question "what is valuable to you" generates a text and data flow. The wordcloud expands depending on how importantly people value each word. The words may

be 'love'/'networking'/'home'/'joy'.<Value> expresses what any particular group, in that time and across space, wish to emphasize. Choi says that 'pursuing or choosing values in our lives can lead to vital decisions at times'. <Value> suggests that we take a step back and lightheartedly explore whether it is possible to harmonise different values. We are familiar with this tool now (in 2011) as information clouds, but this remains important work, as it still not commonplace for data on group values to be collected and displayed in this way.

Both projects set and achieved very ambitious aims – working cross culturally and transnationally in a real-time public interaction bridging two urban screens. We are building on this initial experiment to develop a range of artworks that include live performance, interactive sound, simple gestural and imaging based on the specific sites. All this, and the overarching aim to investigate how best to foster a sense of community, makes for fascinating dynamics.

THE CURATORS

Traditionally a curator acts as a carer, someone who is meant to minister to the immediate needs and longterm survival of artworks. Over the past fifty years or so, the curator has also been charged with caring for artists and for the events that tend to transpire around artists. Indeed, with the rise of 'participant' cultural phenomena such as performance art, relational aesthetics, interactive and emergent installations, the curator has become a kind of behind-the-scenes producer as well as a creative diplomat.

The intention of socially engaged practice challenges or sometimes blithely ignores the gallery context of the artworld. There are many for whom the 'outside world' is now the relevant domain for artistic encounters. Where the rules are wider and wilder in this boisterous world of vernacular experience.

Our aim is to effectively curate interactive and emergent artworks that are specifically designed for large public screens. However, the legal and technological context of public screens run counter to conventional artistic development and presentation. The screens are 'public' because they carry their sound and image streams into the civic domain. When we add the additional possibilities of public engagement there is a potential for the kind of spontaneous response not normally associated with the gallery system with the hope that this may engender the (re)democratisation of civic spaces.

But we are not quite there yet! The corporate entities who manage the screens require a cohesiveness of the programming as well as a predictable 'behaviour' of the public. Adopting the familiar template of the television broadcast, reduces the risk of an unplanned empty screen, a failure to be avoided at all costs. Turning over the technology to artists to test out their ideas first is often a hard-won negotiation. The artist wants to be able use these screens and spaces to play and experiment - to see what happens and to explore the creative questions that arise. Again, not every artist can leave their egos at the pavement to transition into experimenting in these uncertain public spaces. Conventional training certainly has not helped them in this kind of public risk taking endeavour either. These are artists who have developed a publically engaged practice through experience. Part of the curators role is to find the common ground for sharing the aspirations that are sincerely driving presenters and producers, and to figure in the engagement with the public.

THE AUDIENCE

The first audience evaluation for this project was conducted in August 2009 during the live telematic broadcast of *sms_origins* and <value>. A survey was conducted at the Tomorrow City's Plaza, Incheon, and the same survey was trialled simultaneously at Federation Square. Evaluations from Korean responses revealed a high rate of participation with the interactive art works on the large screen. More than three quarters of the audience engaged with the new media art using text messages, and considered such interactions successful in forging cross-cultural ties. Many also expressed enchantment towards the new art forms shown on the large screen. These experiences of enchantment and shock reflected the high modernity of the megacity, as envisioned by the Incheon City planners. Although audiences were acutely aware of the top-down urban regeneration of Incheon, their responses revealed how the networked screen could potentially create a transcultural space mediated by their individual experiences of media consumption. [2]

The second audience evaluation was held across three months from September to December 2010 at Federation Square during further screenings of *sms_origins*. The broader political climate in Australia at this time was marked by rising racial anxiety. Issues of migration dominated public discourse. SMS responses to the work showed that the participants were themselves migrants or had family members who had experienced migration. In analyzing these participants' responses, it appeared that most embraced the ideology of a multicultural Australia — the idea of Australia as a country of migrants — as most reacted positively to the diverse ethnographic demographic of users in the square.

At the Songdo event, respondents were predominantly urban Seoul dwellers in the age group between twenty and forty. Older people and those from the surrounding rural province of Songdo did not participate. From the production cycle of curating and technological networking, to the consumption of its practice as an event, such exchanges highlight the politics of access and distribution that underpins the mobilities proffered by the large screen.

"HELLO" PROJECT

The next experiment will be presented in early October 2011. We aim to present an alternative that resiles from the necessary approach adopted in 2009. In particular, we aim for the artists to experience a more playful ambience and be able move away from "broadcasting" methodology. "HELLO" is a performative work based on gestures gathered from a range of multicultural groups in Seoul and Melbourne.

The evolution of this project is worth outlining as its gestation covers the kinds of interactions involved in this research.

The idea, based on the practice of Australian choreographer, Becky Hilton, in collaboration with Korean choreographer, Soon-Ho Park, is that gestures are gathered from various groups, five gestures are subsequently selected to form a choreographed sequence. These are then exchanged one-on-one between participants to produce an unanticipated dance.

The concept has been through several iterations, and at one point the thought was to include public organisations such as the Korean army, folkdancing troupes and the volunteer fire brigade. The idea is now distilled into a more secretive and seductive 'Chinese Whispers' where, in a tent or temporary enclosure in both sites, one dancer shows another the movements, who then repeats their memory of the moves to a new performer. The crowd outside only sees the participant that receives the gesture being passed on. The final reveal to the public is the combined results of all the gestured "movement-whispers." This

iteration of the idea stems directly from the transnational aspects of the project as it addresses the concerns of the Korean partners about individual reticence to spontaneously perform in public. In turn, the Australian ideas of multiculturalism were taken up by the Korean choreographer with gusto, providing a way in for them to workshop with local multicultural organisations for the first time.

Because of our enthusiasm, the project had quickly and imaginatively leapt into the paradigm of the 'big event'. This in turn fed the paradigm of the 'high production broadcast' and unwanted pressure on the part of the artists and participants. We needed to scale-down to maintain a simple approach while keeping the role of the artist and the core concept at the heart of the project. The resulting new approach does this and aims to extend the technological uses of ready to hand programs such as Skype. Engaging the public in this scenario now becomes the main challenge. We hope people will begin to replicate the movements themselves in a spontaneous response to what they are seeing on the screen, creating yet another version of this contemporary "folk dance."

Throughout, the curators have found that the primary discussion, which needs reinforcing all too frequently, is to keep the artist at the core of the project. And all the while, investment in maintaining good will from all the partners is paramount. It is where most of the energy of this project has been expended — with excellent results in navigating and developing the transnational relationships over the course of this chapter in the research.

References and Notes:

1. *This paper includes extracts from a journal paper pending publication in 2011, with written contributions from research partners: Nikos Papastergiadis, Scott McQuire, Amelia Douglas, Ross Gibson, Audrey Yue, Sun Jung, Cecelia Cmielewski, Soh Yeong Roh and Matt Jones.*
2. *A. Yue and S. Jung, "Urban Screens and Transcultural Consumption between South Korea and Australia" in Global Media Convergence and Cultural Transformation: Emerging Social Patterns and Characteristics, ed. D.Y. Jin, 15-36 (Philadelphia: IGI Global, 2011).*