

BIG BIRD IS WATCHING YOU! ART, ACTIVISM AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE PUBLIC ARENA

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Many contemporary artists working in the public arena have recognised the potential that the rapid development of digital media technologies presents. This paper discusses the potential of art and technology collaborations stimulated by the continuous transformation of our cities. It explores the intersection between art, activism and technology as a new art practice used as a tool for creating situations prompting cultural change.

Introduction

Today, George Orwell would have felt like a prophet if he was able to walk the streets of London and see the thousands of CCTV cameras following, and recording, pedestrians and vehicles. Perhaps he would have been inspired to write another novel if he knew how technology had progressed, allowing satellites to track down car license plate numbers and mobile phone signals to within a matter of meters of their geographical location, all from outer-space. Some people now believe that most of Orwell's predictions are now being integrated into our free society. Finger prints, retina recognition, phone taps – these are all now mechanisms that governments use to manage countries and people. Do we now live in the modern day Oceania? [1]

Perhaps Orwell was right - war really is peace; we simply need to look back to the not so distant Cold War decades to realize that fear was keeping peace on this planet. Globalization impacts our lives and is widening the income gap between the rich and poor. This is strongly reflected in public space, which is now becoming more increasingly managed and controlled. Perhaps the reason that we have so many brain-numbing reality TV shows today is because governments and media are embracing the mantra that ignorance is strength. This is strength for the powerful economic conglomerates, the financial corporations, insurance companies and banks. Could the TV Show *Big Brother* be the present-day *Newspeak*, that makes "all other modes of thought impossible?" [2] Because whilst we are watching *Big Brother*, our minds are occupied and we do not question what is really happening with the world around us or what is happening with the public space that is meant to belong to us, the public. But is this just a camera trick?

What is the role of the artist today in relation to the challenging political, social, and economical climate? The Dutch painter Piet Mondrian thought of the artist as someone whose position is humble and who is "essentially a channel." [3] Mondrian lived and worked at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the dawn of Modernism. He was interested in theosophy, a movement launched in the late 19th century, which was centered on the importance of the interconnectedness of the whole universe. Perhaps this fact relates to Mondrian's description of the role of the artist as a channel - a channel of ideas, a link between real and imaginary, or as someone who is able to reconcile their creative pursuits with their understandings and beliefs about life.

Precisely, this role of the artists as a channel of ideas reveals itself in the projects discussed later in this paper. However, the artist today is more than a generator of objects or channel of ideas. Many artists

today are becoming catalysts for political, social, and cultural change. This notion is strongly reflected in the concepts of various activist art practices, which are most commonly seen outside the gallery space as their creators are trying to reach a larger audience. These artists are trying to point out what is happening in the public space today; their strategies are becoming more vocal and effective and many art groups and individual artists are working anonymously in order to deliver their true message.

There are various ways in which activists interfere with our physical and social environment today. This paper presents a selection of examples which illustrate, in a witty and playful way, the tactics and methods used by artists and art collectives. This essay examines the works of contemporary artists and art collectives who use the power of technology to publicly engage political, social, and community issues.

One may rightly ask the question, “Why do we call these practices art?” It could be “community practice”, or perhaps “political action”, or none or all of the above. The majority of these works are project, rather than object, orientated. Nina Felshin describes it as an activist cultural practice with “...one foot in the art world and the other in the world of political activism and community organizing.” [4] In his book, *Art Matters*, Peter de Bolla suggests that our attention should not only be directed at the obvious aesthetic values of the artwork but at our experience of it. He also notes that “...the great value of art lies in its power to prompt us to share experiences, beliefs, and differences.” [5] Perhaps we can find the meaning, value, and significance of activist art not in the art object itself but in the idea of conveying a message, provoking thought, and creating a dialogue not only between the artists and their audience, but between the audience members themselves as well.

Who can initiate, create, or take part in activist art projects? Anyone can. Not being an artist does not mean that a member of the general public can not initiate or participate in activist activities. At the same time, artists are part of the public and they have as much right to intervene with the public space as anyone else. These projects and actions are representations of the messages that the artists are hoping to spread. The outcome of these practices is not necessarily the actual artwork, but rather a passage to the particular idea that the artist had in mind. Furthermore, these practices are inspired not by the intimate world of the artist but are focused on what is happening in our public space today.

John Henry Strikes Back

Often, activist art projects are collaborative and done anonymously. They have no specific author and, most often, are the result of teamwork between artists, architects, programmers, engineers, and activists. The individual authorship is not important, especially as the number of the members of the art collectives is never a constant. Additionally, the vast development in technology has contributed to the decreased notion of expression of the individual. As described by Marchal McLuhan, “...as new technologies come into play, people are less and less convinced of the importance of self-expression. Teamwork succeeds private effort.” [6]

Founded in 1998, the Institute of Applied Autonomy (IAA) is an art group dedicated to creating activist projects which call for social or political change. Most of the IAA members are anonymous, not simply because some of the promoted works are conducted ‘guerrilla style’, but because the authors are trying to keep public attention focused not on the artist, but on the problems that the work is dealing with. They use the name John Henry as a collective nickname which unites a group of artists, engineers, and activists under the idea of using technology to raise public awareness on social and political issues.

One of their more recent works, the *GraffitiWriter*, was developed in response to the increased government funding for military robotic development. By 2030, the Pentagon is planning to replace about 30 per cent of its armed forces with robots, or as Professor Bill Smart, one of the project leaders from Washington University, calls them “autonomous systems.” [7] Powerful robots will lead human soldiers into battle within the next decade. In response to these plans, The Institute of Applied Autonomy developed the *GraffitiWriter*. The robots can operate in parks, shopping malls, and buildings and its purpose is to disseminate subversive and politically controversial texts. With the help of an operator and a remote control, the *GraffitiWriter* sprays linear messages on the ground. In 2004, the robot was set up to take part in the Grand Challenge, a military robotics event organized by the research and development office for the U.S. Department of Defense. *GraffitiWriter*’s mission was to print Isaac Asimov’s First Law of Robotics – “A robot may not injure a human being...” – at the starting line of the event.

In a similar fashion, in 1993, the art collective RTMark conducted a controversial act of product hacking by developing a project called *Barbie Liberation*. The mission of the project was to challenge gender stereotypes in the children toys industry by performing voice surgery. The project involved swapping the voice boxes of Barbie Dolls and GI Joe toys in a number of toy stores in the United States. The toys were returned to the stores with switched voice clips and, without the knowledge of the staff, were released back on the market. Many children heard their Barbie dolls shouting “Vengeance is mine!” and GI Joe soldiers saying “Let’s plan our dream wedding!” The website of RTMark provides a manual with a step-by-step guide how to perform the voice surgery. Since then, Barbie has evolved and embarked upon many different professions such as becoming an astronaut, doctor, police officer, and even a presidential candidate.

One Nation under CCTV

In 2001, The Institute of Applied Autonomy initiated a project called *ISee*. It was created in response to the vast growth of CCTV surveillance of public spaces. The web-based application was first developed for the streets of Manhattan mapping the locations of the cameras. Via the *ISee* website, anyone can generate a route with the least number of cameras watching them and walk around the streets without the uncomfortable feeling of being filmed without permission.

Research has showed that most CCTV cameras in New York were placed in the financial district of Manhattan but not in the poorest and most unsafe areas of the city. [8] One has to wonder if the cameras are actually keeping people safe or protecting the property of the wealthiest. Another study done in the United Kingdom revealed that CCTV cameras in Glasgow’s city center did not actually have a significant impact on crime in the area. [9] Projects such as *ISee* do not question the use of video surveillance to prevent crime as a whole but rather its effectiveness. Furthermore, the authors are trying to draw attention to the fact that many of the public space cameras are actually privately owned by banks and stores, which undoubtedly makes the recordings private property.

Created in 2007, Celine Shenton’s *Bird City* also tackles similar issues. The project consists of series of bird houses for urban areas. The birdcages look like surveillance cameras but, in fact, they really offer refuge to birds. Shenton installed real video cameras inside the bird houses which were able to broadcast video of the bird’s life to the nearby homes. As an alternative to TV shows such as *Big Brother*, *The Bachelorette* and *Celebrity Detox Camp*, this work offers multiple thought provoking points regarding our dehumanized urban spaces and increasing detachment from nature.

In the same fashion, apart from trying to convey a message, the work of Tad Hirsch's *Tripwire* also offers a real solution to a specific problem. The project is designed for a specific suburban area of California near the San Jose International Airport. Hirsch's custom built sensors were mounted inside coconuts and attached to real trees in the noisiest areas of the neighborhood. When an excessive aircraft noise was detected, the sensors would trigger automated phone calls to the complaint line of the San Jose Airport on behalf of the citizens.

Another public space intervention, involving media memory, is represented in the *Image Fulgurator*. This is essentially a photo hacking project which embeds an image onto the photos of an unsuspecting photographer. The result of this photo graffiti is only visible after the original film has been developed, or after the image is viewed on the camera screen or on a computer.

The *Image Fulgurator* is, technically, a classic photo camera which uses exposed and developed film with images on it. A device inside the Fulgurator detects when a flash goes off and automatically projects the image onto the object which is being photographed. The photo intervention is particularly effective when used in public spaces that have particular political significance. The author of the project, Berlin-based artist Julius von Bismarck, sees it as a piece of art which could be a dangerous attack on the media.

Mash It Up

The rapid development of technology during the past few decades, plus the open access to information facilitated by these new technologies, has created a new public space for politically orientated dialogue – the internet. The internet is also a creative space, an enormous arena for social interaction, and at the same time, an open canvas for work and collaboration.

The term “mash-up” originates from the hip-hop music genre and represents a specific style of mixing two or more songs. In technology, the concept of combining different software is not new. Internet “mash-ups” consist of combining information and services of different websites in order to create a new project. Most commonly, internet mash-ups use a combination of online maps, such as Google maps, and mapping locating service applications.

A creative mash-up that locates informal play spaces in Sao Paulo was created by the Spanish art collective, Basurama. As part of a research project, the group developed an interactive map of urban spaces which could also be used as informal playgrounds. The images can be uploaded by any member of the public, and Wikimap reveals outlaw street football pitches and improvised playing fields. The mission of the art collective was not only to provide information about these areas but to also bring about a discussion on topics relating to the re-use and reclaiming of city spaces.

Another creative use of data available on the web is represented in a video project initiated by a Tunisian cyber activist and blogger called “Astrubal”. He created a video work in response to the claims of the Tunisian Government that their president has only left the country three times in the past few years as he was preoccupied with important government matters. Astrubal investigated flight information available on the internet relating to the Tunisian presidential airplane. He collected images from various mapping websites, which identified the plane at specific locations and at certain times. The result of this investigation, represented in a video, proved that the president has been out of Tunisia far more often than stated and not on government matters, but on holidays and shopping trips, which are

funded by Tunisian tax payer's money. This project is a fantastic example of creative use of online data, which is gathered collaboratively by various internet users and combined in a video work, available through video sharing websites.

Another innovative model of online activism can be found in internet political mash-up sites, such as www.PublicWhip.org.uk and www.TheyWorkForYou.com. These websites provide information on the activities of the members of the United Kingdom Parliament and, more specifically, on their voting patterns, parliamentary debates, and expenses. All of the House of Commons and House of Lords debate transcripts are available online, however, via these websites, each member of the public can view summarized information for their MP and his or her activity without having to browse through hundreds of Parliament pages and newspaper articles. The creators of these projects work on a voluntary basis and their mission is to "...to help bridge this growing democratic disconnect, in the belief that there is little wrong with Parliament that a healthy mixture of transparency and public engagement won't fix." [10]

The internet has come a long way since the 1960's, when it began its existence as a Government project. It now provides various creative opportunities for activist art collectives to share concerns, viewpoints, and, essentially, engage the public in dialogue and actions prompting change. The global net is now a new public arena with enormous democratic potential for political and social action.

Final Thoughts

Patricia Philips defines public art and activist art as inseparable and, "...united in an inherently cooperative model of social-aesthetic practice." [11] According to this notion, art can be defined as "public" based on what it does, but not where it is located.

It is apparent that in the public activist art projects discussed above, the meaning of "public" is identified precisely via the messages that these works are trying to communicate to their audiences. Artists define their own commutative relationship with the public by observing, trying to understand our culture, and by producing works that challenge and provoke emotions; attempting to make us angry, make us happy, or, at least, make us think.

It has been more than 60 years since Orwell wrote:

They were born....they passed through a brief blossoming period of beauty and sexual desire, they married at twenty, they were middle-aged at thirty, they died.....the care of home and children, petty quarrels with neighbors, films, football, beer, and, above all, gambling filled up the horizon of their minds. [12]

Have we become more or less concerned with what is happening around us since then? It is perhaps not surprising that in the contemporary urban space, constituted of social and political power, artists and activist groups are trying to engage the public by provoking some kind of response calling for social change or simply raising awareness. I believe that a good artist is one who is aware of what is happening around them and who manages to translate their thoughts using the power of images, objects, technology, text, and performance. Site-specific interventions, product-hacks, and internet mash-ups are offering the public the opportunity to re-examine its relationship with the urban, social and virtual spaces.

I do not attempt to plead that all art should focus on activism or that the artists should only be concerned with political issues. I also think that it is unreasonable to expect that art can resolve major issues in the political or social sphere. What I do believe is that art has the power to help us imagine, think, understand, and care.

Art can be seen as a tool of communication with the other, but also as a tool of relation to the other; a method of conveying a message that otherwise may not be understood. Breakthroughs in technology have had a vast impact on the way activist art projects are initiated and developed. Furthermore, the internet, as a virtual public space, has presented the artists with an opportunity to organize and promote their practices. At the same time, I can't help but wonder if the increased use of virtual space has not affected the way we think about the physical public space. I do, nevertheless, think that being indifferent to our surroundings may put too much power into the hand of banks and corporations and restrict, even more, our right to enjoy the public places that belong to us - to the public.

References and Notes:

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