

THE CITY AS LUDIC INTERFACE - VECTORS OF VIREAL TESTLABS IN URBAN MEDIATECTURE

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This paper focuses on new forms of artistic and playful assemblages within urban environments. Artistic project cultures which are using existing media-technological infrastructures, networks, communities and ideas to invent new frameworks to interact and experiment within the city.

Introduction

This paper focuses on new forms of playful assemblages within urban environments. Artistic project cultures which are using existing media-technological infrastructures, networks, communities and ideas to invent new frameworks to interact and experiment within the city. By this means media architecture developed in urban space not only relies on building materials, but also encompasses a virtual framework to enable “new socio-cultural contingencies”(1). These have intensively changed over the last decades because multiple extensions of media-infrastructures e.g. mobile-technology, locative-media and location-based-services have been installed largely in the city. Under these circumstances urbanity has become a complex interface, which is one of today’s dominant forms of human selforganization. To deal with these developments on an artistic level, ludic methods are opening chances to get to know possibilities, risks and new forms of interaction within this emerging new communication formats. Ludic in this sense stands for a playful practice of testing out possibilities without a clear goal or ruleset. It stands for approaches characterized by experimental and mistake friendly behavior, to create a perspective shift in user centered data handling and mediated self-representation. Based on joy and motivation of looking at this mediated disposition in different ways, it forces artistic projects driven by flowful interactions. As an effect it foments new ways of abstraction by using public space in unusual and alternative ways to produce an unforeseen intermingling of real and virtual spaces. It seems that the city itself is becoming the environment of choice for media activists and alternative artistic structures. The city is turned into a ludic interface, a playful environment and urban playground by several artistic projects that transform it into a performative space. They are as well working as access points for a better understanding of media-technological infrastructures and tools to create a new understanding on the value of public space in urban environments. My presentation based on this paper will introduce examples of new artistic practices and ability profiles using the city as laboratory, exhibition space, communication platform or hack-space. These examples will exemplify an understanding of ludic interfaces as artistic test-spaces and proto-types based on a reinvention of urban space.

Ludic Tendencies in Media Arts

Starting my research nearly ten years ago on artistic projects using locative media and mobile technology the movement shared plenty of fresh ideas and concepts how this can shape the vectors of interaction in urban space. At this time it was hard to use the available, mainly proprietary, soft- and hardware

to get artistic projects done properly. Artists invented concepts which had to be rich on connotation and storylines to encourage the very raw and minor opportunities with this new media- and communication- infrastructure. Today the available technologies have been opened up on availability and extracted a large global community of modding culture, home brew technologies and DIY inventions based on mediatechnological artifacts. Artistic projects like the artist collective LUDIC SOCIETY(2) or UBERMORGEN.COM(3) still follow a hacker paradigm and by this means try to use the available infrastructures under conditions they haven't been designed for or to circumvent limitations. Early projects like the ones from the meanwhile well know group „Blast Theory“ tried to get their hands on users, receivers or participants, to enable them within a method of gameplay. On the contrary many artistic projects from the field of digital media based arts have nowadays been transformed into small businesses. Former artists are working as programmers or designers for all kinds of smart-phone apps, media companies or startups on mobile social media to make their living. This reminds me of a blog entry on the website called „Networked Publics“(4), where I was reading the following quote from Michael Liebhold and Anthony Townsend, both working at this time at the „Institute for the Future“(5). They forecast:

“Geohackers, Locative Media Artists, and Psychogeographers, as key players in constructing the ‘geospatial web’, in which the web becomes tagged with geospatial information, a development which is having enormous unharvested business opportunities.”

As we see today this has become reality dealing with an infosphere of mobile computing and locative media. It has as well become a mass movement of mediamorph lifestyle, which is constantly expanded by thinkers, designers and producers. For the arts this means more or less to get sober again from the businessman's dream of interface phantasms and the endless dream of (thin) innovation. At the moment it seems that the playful potentials of artistic projects to try new things out and experiment within the city as interface are at risk to get fettered by „playbour“ (J. Kücklich, 2010), using playful methods as new forms of productivity and resource in a post-industrial age. Since cities have turned into enriched mediadispositions with hyper accessibility and endless numbers of devices, sensors, cameras and networks alternative abstraction models based on artistic interventions have to be enabled. It emphasizes the fact that artistic practices have to recapture the freedom to create meaningful small scale projects within an experimental setup. Reintroducing basic situationist practice such as “dérive” can help to see the city as a laboratory, where people create shared backgrounds and intensions to experience things on a quite open level of understanding. On this level artistic methods of playing in the city can invite users to taking part in actions they might don't know or realize.

The City as Playspace

The ludic approach of artists dealing with media technological interfaces becomes more and more related to context- and interaction-design rather than to the technical configurations of the interface itself. Projects using the city as playspace, like the LUDIC SOCIETY's projects called “Tagging the City”(6) is using technologies like RFID-chips and digital mapping systems which are applied in a citywide gameplay. With the slogan “we are selling play not game” they also created an open framework of how the

conceptual structures of the project can be understood. Another example is the project “re:farm the city / tools for urban farmers”(7) ,which combines the topics of urban farming, guerilla gardening and media arts with the support of a global mobile phone based gardening interface. Both projects function on a level where new awareness and relationship to the territory is created by a ludic interface and by new forms of interaction scenarios on the intersection of real and virtual space. It introduces the chance to create awareness for users and change their knowledge and habits by transforming the way to deal with their interests within a certain environment. This art projects are using existing structures in new ways by the reconfiguration of preexisting infrastructures of media architecture. The basis for the usage of the city as playspace is created by a large amount of opportunities within media-technological infrastructures. The introduction of new technical programs opens up the development of ideas to establish new alternative social and cultural programs of interaction for users and producers. The catalyst for this development is the “digital ground”(8), like Malcolm McCullough calls it, which is embedded into the city ground. By this means the significance of computing in this environment has become its capacity to let us take part in shared representations of action, as Brenda Laurel describes this in her essay “Computers as Theater”(9).

Using and expanding the city as interface of social, cultural, artistic, (media-) technological and architectural interactions is not common practice and common ground so far. At the moment the city still functions as a laboratory for temporary usage, and ad hoc appliance, even if the gentrification models are strong they seem unsustainable for a valuable development of cultural sustainability. One of the interesting challenges will be to attract people to invent as interesting social interaction spaces as the buzz of technology used to create.

References and Notes:

- (1) *cf.: Urban Fictions; Eds.: M. Faßler, C. Terkowsky; Wilhelm Fink Verlag; Munich 2006*
- (2) *http://www.ludic-society.com (last accessed: 21th July 2011)*
- (3) *http://www.uebermorgen.com (last accessed: 21th July 2011)*
- (4) *http://networkedpublics.org (last accessed: 21th July 2011)*
- (5) *http://www.iftf.org (last accessed: 21th July 2011)*
- (6) *http://www.ludic-society.net/tagged (last accessed: 21th July 2011)*
- (7) *http://www.refarmthecity.org (last accessed: 21th July 2011)*
- (8) *Digital Ground; Malcolm McCullough; The MIT Press; Cambridge, Massachusetts 2004*
- (9) *Computers as Theater; Branda Laurel; Addison-Wesley Professional; Indianapolis, Indiana 1993*