

# Public Spheres

## Public Spheres and Network Interfaces.

### An Essay.

Andreas Broeckmann

1. The public domain is conventionally viewed as an assemblage of urban social spaces - the market place, theatres, libraries, cafés, etc., - where ideas and practical concerns of society can be voiced and discussed in an open dialogue.<sup>(1)</sup> Even here, the public sphere that is constituted at these sites is not of itself neutral and democratic, but invested with political and economic power. Think, for instance, of the exclusive English clubs and coffee houses of the 18th century where a new class of industrialists and traders negotiated their political influence, or the large city squares where the architectural and ritual presentation of power determines the horizontal expanse of the public site.

The notion of what is 'public' is currently undergoing a deep transformation which is brought about by a variety of geographical, economic, geo-political, technological and discursive drivers of social change. The public sphere, and the way in which individuals and groups participate in it, is taking on a whole different set of meanings, compared with the classical forms of the civic public that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. Most importantly, it seems to be impossible today to speak of only one public domain, but we have to think of the public domain as a heterogeneous, at times hybrid, at times fragmented dispersion of physical and virtual spaces populated by different types of 'publics'.

The public domain is a composite of many stages and layers, open and closed physical spaces, media channels, forms of communication and cultural expression. The city is still a prime site of experimenting with the new public domain; it is a zone of tension in which social conflicts and instabilities are made productive. The city can be seen as both an interface to, and the generator of new interfaces to the different publics. At the same time, the changing media sphere (telecommunication, broadcasting, WWW, etc.) is creating a translocal topology of the public domain which is both embedded in, and which reaches beyond, the urban territory.

Media technologies play a crucial role in the current curbing the urban public domain. Developments such as the transfer of economic activities into closed electronic networks, the privatisation of public areas, the homogenisation and the separation of functions by allocating specific zones to shopping, entertainment, housing, traffic, etc., - seek to make public space more secure and more efficient, but they undermine the essence of the public domain as a zone of uncontrollability. The instability of the public domain is a condition of its democratic potential. Artistic urban interventions strive to counteract the safely surveilled and appeased urban terrain of the transparent city with its technologies

of security and privatisation the city - zoning, surveillance cameras, biometric systems, etc. -, by means of tactics and technologies of conflict and participation, reclaiming the public domain with and for multiple heterogeneous groups. (2)

The challenge in the creative use of media technologies is to foster the diversity of public actors and terrains and to develop strategies of articulating the new public domains that connect physical urban spaces and the potential public sphere of the electronic networks. This public sphere will only come into being if there are complex forms of interaction, of participation and learning, that use the technical possibilities of the networks and that allow for new and creative forms of becoming visible, becoming present, becoming active, in short, of becoming-public.

2. Visibility, presence and action define three levels of being in public. They are also the main faultlines of public conflict. Invisibility is one of the stigmata of modern society. Whether in the case of minorities, social movements or special interest groups, achieving visibility, the visible factuality of a particular social group, can already be an important achievement towards the goal of political effectiveness. However, visibility is always already connected to the possibility of control. Like other forms of public policing, the increasing use of surveillance cameras in public and private spaces indicates that visibility is a matter of concern for the public order. Whatever is publically visible always already bears the potential of being illegal, indecent or otherwise unacceptable. Becoming visible in an urban environment is therefore often conducted as a clandestine activity, like in the illegal pasting of posters, the placing of graffiti and tags, pirate radio broadcasts, taking on an artificial identity on the Internet, or the elusive appearance in larger masses of people. In these medial strategies, the regimes of visibility, anonymity and identity are locked in a problematic imbalance. (3)

The notion of visibility is connected to a fleeting, impermanent perception in time and is therefore, at best, a tactical element of being in public. In contrast, the notion of presence - not necessarily coupled to a visibility - makes a claim to 'being here, now' and is an affirmation of a public status. Presence is immediate, which means that it can not be realised through medial representation. At the same time, presence is affirmed in the form of a mediality, it always manifests itself in a medium: graffiti have presence as signs and images in the urban space, radio programmes manifest a presence on the air waves, squatting is the physical occupation of a space declared empty and unused. Presence is the affirmation of an identity and of a Now in a specific medial environment.

Neither visibility nor presence can in themselves provide the potential for becoming publically active. This notion of public action relates to a form of political agency which aims to effectively transform a material and symbolic situation by means of argument and through more or less immediate performative acts. Possibilities for such actions are on the decrease where symbolical representation, mediated participation and the equation of consumption and democracy, have replaced a sense of active presence and involvement in public matters. Being in public is identified with potential illegality on the one hand,

and with the danger of personal harm on the other. Reclaiming public domains as sites of constructive conflict, and developing democratic forms of agency for the new intersections of virtual and physical public environments, are therefore imperatives of the current situation.

3. The interface is the connecting zone of two separate elements in a networked system. Most commonly, the interface is understood as the tool through which the communication between the human user and a computer is facilitated, or the connecting plugs or software tools that allow for different technical apparatuses to communicate with each other. More generally, the interface is the border zone, the in-between shared by different systems where the exchange of signs and data translates virtualities into potential effectiveness.

The interface is the site of potential agency, and it has therefore been of central concern in some of the artistic experiments that have sought new articulations of media technologies and human actions in urban and translocal environments. Think of the inner-city projects by the German artist and architect Christian Möller in which the combination of chance or uncontrolled natural effects with the concrete yet uncoordinated actions of multiple users, creates surprising aesthetic results that oscillate between ambient noise and sublime expressiveness. The interfaces that connect the different levels of agency and make them visible and audible, facilitate an experience in the participants of a creative collectivity in an orchestrated, yet open and unpredictable located process. (4) (phot Moeller)

The projects of Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, in contrast, pay great attention to the action of the individual, both in relation to the technological system and in relation to other participants. Alzado Vectoriel (1999-2000) created a setting in which the choices of individual Internet users were immediately translated into a widely visible configuration of powerful spotlights over the central square in Mexico City. (ref. phot) The local experience of the urban space was co-determined by the tele-absent Net users who, in turn, received a stream of images back as an indication of the feedback on-site. A very different structure of mutual influence and interlocked communication was developed by Lozano-Hemmer in the project Relational Architecture #3 - Re:Positioning Fear (1997). Here, an online discussion about different aspects of fear was used as the - still legible - visual material for a large-scale projection onto the historical building of a military arsenal in Graz (Austria). (phot RA#3) The projection of the unfolding discussion text was placed in the shadows cast by visitors of the square in front of the arsenal. This effected a tight visual and metaphorical relationship between local and online participants. The presence and the movement of the on-site visitors became both the condition of the presence and legibility of the online discourse, and its projection screen, turning the on-site participants into the interfaces, the virtual objects and subjects with-in-between this translocal situation. (5)

Successful artistic interfaces like these connect different publics and urban layers, articulating physical spaces with networked communication spaces and facilitating what the Amsterdam-based group De Geuzen call 'social interfacing', i.e. a fragmented and heterogeneous system of engaging different publics in a variety of specific ways. Such interfaces are themselves dynamic and have the potential for being transformed and re-invented in relation to the inherent changeability of the social and cultural environment in which they operate. - A prime example for this is the artistically inclined anti-corporate campaign of the US-based online group RTMARK whose website is a highly dynamic creative and interactive tool through which they intervene into specific, socially and politically agitated situations. (6)

The artistic research into interfaces of translocal urban interventions, then, is also an investigation into the actors and the agents of the new public domain that emerges in the overlapping zone between physical spaces and electronic networks, their medial tools and the terrains where their agency can unfold. A project like Marko Peljhan's Makrolab, a platform for research into global communication systems, marks the fact that, very often, such artistic projects no longer represent and no longer allow for passive consumption by an audience. (7) Active participation is not an option, but a condition for the aesthetic experience, an aesthetic experience which is not to be found in an objectifiable processuality, but in the ongoing, transitory process of communication and exchange itself.

4. The subjectivation of groups is one of the prerequisites for an active appropriation of the new translocal public domain that connects distributed physical and virtual spaces. Artistic projects like those of Denis Beaubois, who ironically plays with and reverses the subjectifying gaze of public surveillance camera systems, deal with the question of potentials for agency on an individualistic level. (8) They follow the Situationist tradition of urban intervention with its key strategies of estrangement, drifting, and camouflage. However, artistic interventions which seek to deal with the translocal urban environment on a more political level, require the engagement of larger groups of people and their engagement in communicative and cooperative processes.

Closely associated with the current internal crisis of the Western democratic systems and the social effects of globalisation is the demise of collectivities which represented the hallmark of social renewal of modernity. From the public demonstrations of the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th century, through the formation of the workers' and trade union movement, to the development of the new social movements in the 1960s and 70s, the more or less organised collectivity of independent and ideologically united groups constituted a crucial political factor in the public domain of Western societies. In the face of a globalised economy and the concomitant ideological changes, this modern collectivism seems to have come to an end, having been replaced by ideologies of culture, identity, life-style and consumption.

In the year 2000, the media channels and interfaces available for bringing forth new forms of communication and cooperation still hardly exist. Multiple experiments for 'group-ware', online communication environments, 3-d multi-media spaces in Virtual Reality, etc., are underway, but neither the tools nor the necessary changes of mentality in the users seem to be in place for effectively using these. Electronic mailing lists and chat communities remain the most vibrant, distinctively low-tech cooperative environments, and a web-based collective memory project like akaKURDISTAN, initiated by Susan Meiselas and Picture Projects in 1997, deploys very simple upload and commentary tools for fostering a joint historical identity of the world-wide Kurdish diaspora. (9)

For the evaluation of the political effectiveness of networked media tools it is important to realise that they rely on connectivity in the sense of the quality of an individual's access to the networks, a factor that defines the degrees of freedom to act in the translocal public domain. The forms of agency that emerge in such networked environments are neither individualistic nor collective, but rather connective. Whereas the collective is ideally determined by an intentional and empathetic relation between different actors, the connective rests on any kind of machinic relation and is therefore more versatile, more open, and based on the heterogeneity of its components or members. The politics of the connective is, as yet, not understood, though experiences like those of the online developer communities of UNIX, Linux and other operating systems, or the global protests in such recent cases like the WEF and WTO meetings, the legal attacks on Etoy, or the discussions around the ICANN organisation, form a useful material for initiating such research. (10)

An experimental set-up for the investigation of such new forms of connective agency and their technical and social conditions, was created by the German-Austrian artists group Knowbotic Research in the IO\_Dencies project series (1997-99) with groups of people in Tokyo, Sao Paulo, Venice and the German Ruhr Area, and other nonlocated Internet users. (11) Collaborative online tools were specially designed to help stimulate and articulate current discursive interests of the participating individuals, mostly related to questions of urban development and the possibilities of public action. The online tools combined the possibilities of direct intervention into a medial environment through texts and images, with the manipulation of material provided by other participants, and the machinic reconfiguration of the intentional designs on the basis of multiple, tendential parameters of usage and the intensity of interests for certain materials or topics. In these projects, the connective relation between the participants emerged as an effect of the comparability and vicinity of individual strategies and interests, rather than on the basis of an a priori ideological agreement. What can develop from such assemblages of interests are social formations which are formally 'machinic', yet which have the potential for becoming active in a medial and urban environment that prioritises tendential over intentional forces.

5. The effectiveness of connective forms of public agency depends on the problem whether the connective can become an operational entity within the dispersed political

environment of today, and whether it manages to create a public zone in which multiple, heterogeneous forms of action and expression can take place. Necessary are multiple situative nuclei for a new, translocal public domain as a zone of diverse and politically engaged agencies.

It is one of the presuppositions of Knowbotic Research and others investigating this terrain, that digital interfaces should neither be seen as tools for mere representation, nor that the action in the present which they facilitate can follow the binary logic of the 1/0, on/off. The interfaces challenging these regimes of signification are intermediate zones, open force fields, in which potentials for action emerge as machinic, i.e. technical and user-dependent tendential shifts, intensifications, breaks, etc. Strategies of effectiveness will emerge, as François Jullien maintains, not on the basis of subjective intentions, but by paying attention to the circumstances which make a certain effect possible: "The potential depends on the circumstantial conditions, (...) therefore it is paramount to use the potentiality of the circumstances." (12) The strategic exploitation of such potentials of agency will be a decisive factor in the struggle for defending the latitude of medial and public spaces.

## References

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