

Video-Art invading the visual sphere of our public spaces

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Urban Research

In February 2004 I was commissioned to undertake a questionnaire for an artist initiative from Düsseldorf called [STRICTLY PUBLIC]. Since 2000, their vision is to bring Video-Art to the public in a variety of urban settings like subway- and train-stations, plazas and street-crossings, suggesting that the urban environment is linked to the fleeting and ephemeral character of Video-Art. Large public screening boards serve as their canvas. From January 30 through February 29, 2004 they organized a screening event on the largest LED-display in Berlin at the busy corner of Kurfürstendamm and Joachimstaler Str. Ten short videos made by [STRICTLY PUBLIC] and 6 other international Video-artists have been shown, interrupting the normal commercial program around 96 times per day. Curious about the effects they asked me to develop an inquiry to undertake with the audience. Having worked for a while in a gallery for Video-Art, I was pleased to do this little step out of the white cube back into the urban space, my original terrain as a graduate of Urban Planning. I knew I would face a completely different audience.



So, does it make a difference to show Video-Art in an urban setting on a large screen, usually strictly reserved for advertisement and if lucky some daily news reports? „The interweaving of commercial information with works of Art accentuates the contrast between the two disciplines. The attentive viewer will sense the tension produced by the opposing types of content and experience an unexpected and unique visual quickening (...) [STRICTLY PUBLIC] aims to break through the barriers of a medium that was developed for commercial and informative purposes. Mixing other elements into the common programs encourages new ways of visual thought and recognition.“ is written on the website of the artistgroup. Exactly how will this change in content, this intrusion of the commercial visual flow effect its spectators? What do people think of being faced with this, 'new' kind of Art in public space?

For two days I went out. It was cold and people walking with turned up collars seemed to protect their attention neglecting the outer world constantly trying to catch their attention. It was like I suspected, almost nobody wanted to interrupt the flow of movement to have a look at my questionnaire. Maybe being afraid of just another trick to turn their attention to some kind of advert trying to catch a bit of their precious time. Even the guy next to me distributing flyers refused to answer my questionnaire, being afraid to be watched doing his work properly. I noticed a few people randomly looked at the screen while waiting for the traffic light to change. But their gaze, was it just caught by the flickering light or did some message of the one minute clips reach their brain? I turned to the people waiting at the bus stop. I was successful, all in all, I interviewed thirty-five people. They seemed to agree to shorten their time of waiting for the bus, still longing for entertainment, though being fed up with the ads that constantly try to catch their commercially over-stressed brain. And art?! Is that the suitable solution? Through the questionnaire it was revealed that very little people noticed, there was something different on the screen, interrupting the usual program. In fact the Art was not differently perceived from the ads. Yet, the Idea of Art, of the possibility to see Art was almost welcomed by everyone. But what is Art - especially what is Video-Art, I was asked several times. Sure many people have gone to museums or exhibitions, and rarely someone admitted, „I am not interested in Art“ (was it politeness towards me?) Anyway just the imagination there would not be just ads and news, but Art, triggered a lot of sympathy among the interviewed. Though I got the notion that people associated so different images with Video-Art, or maybe even better to say, they were unable to spontaneously imagine concretely what might Art on this screen look like.



So I wondered, if it is Art or just another type of new short-term entertainment that their hungry brains are longing for? I suspect a lot of them might hardly accept that Art wants to interrupt them in their daily routine, their smooth flow of everyday-life. These same people ready to support the idea of Art on that commercial screen might get angry about Street-Art reclaiming the sterile surfaces of the commercial urban sphere. We live in a time where Art is accepted as something that is needed, but it is very blurry, what is Art, where do we find Art, who shall pay for Art, how does it differ from entertainment and leisure-facilities. Can Art legally intrude the commercial sphere of ads and entertainment or is the only possibility for, 'true' Art in public space not to be just consumed as entertainment to become illegal? It is not so easy anymore since Advertisement itself started to use ,artlike' strategies in the big fight for attention of these humans learning more and more the Art of selective perception, necessary to survive in our complex urban world.

Another issue is touched: can Art be seen here in the position of being abused, or of letting itself being abused? Thinking of the critique of technological determinism, it became clear in the questionnaire how strongly the outdoor LED screen was associated, thus predefined with advertisement, subconsciously influencing the behaviour of the viewer. If thus Video-Art tries to use these strongly predetermined forms of media that have inscribed already such a clear association with commercial content, does it automatically also support this function, does it give additional power to the medium? So there might come up the critique of a bad compromise, forming an alliance with the commercialized intention of the owner of the screen. A new strategy might be smelled how to catch back the attention of the advertisement weary audience. Allure them with some, art candies! The more it matters how to make use of the screens as Artist, the more necessary I see the need to very clearly address this "prefixed" function, to hack the power structures through the content of the shown Art pieces. In the clear hope to broaden the function of these screens and thus change the medium itself, creating spaces that offers people different viewpoints outside the dominating system.

But I don't want to blame [STRICTLY PUBLIC] that their intention to interrupt peoples visual habits might have failed. They simply fight a hard fight against the dominance of the commercial visual sphere in public space. It became much harder to set something outstanding against this, to be noticed by a not necessarily "art educated" audience.

There are other, 'easier' ways, how artists have tried to bring Video-Art to a new audience into public space. In the tradition of the graffiti and the 'adbusting', Artists have used the context of the street, its furniture and facades to critically overwrite them temporarily with their mobile screening facilities. During the Media-Art-Festival, radical connector(s) 01' in October 2004 the, Filmgruppe Chaos' from Bremen organized a screening intervention in the public space of the inner city of Weimar., We brought the old Herder sculpture back to life, projections made him roll his eyes and let his mouth quiver - a shirty, critical gaze of the philosopher from past days on our modern world", says Karsten Weber from the Filmgruppe Chaos. By projecting their visual material over the facades of the Herder plaza they caused an unexpected effect, thus being able to catch attention and to disrupt the flow of the passers by. Surprisingly, a lot tourist expressed their sympathy, not being deterred by the strong political content of the screenings. So even provocation became harder to cause in public space!



During the worldwide action in Sept. 2001 against video-surveillance they organized together with the group City Crime Control a project called TV CONTROL. As a performative screening event they reclaimed the urban space as place for discussion and exchange by transforming the local quarter into a ‚walkable television‘. At several places mobile TV sets or screening facilities were set up and people were invited to jointly watch ‚TV‘ in the streets. „There were street-screenings with VCRs or TVs in a handcart or open car boots, with electricity from the nearby shop, or Monitors in shopwindows and the sound through the radio via the open channel. And the audience came with their own ghetto blaster. With the aid of a ‚projektion-minibus‘ we could mark almost 100m of the shopping boulevard in Bremen with our visual ‚stamps‘.“ (Karsten Weber) Additionally a special TV-Magazine guided through the critical program. Here screening-technology becomes clearly the catalyst for a process of intimate public communication, causing critical discourse.



Whatever strategy you prefer to invade the commercial visual sphere of public space, these are attempts to see urban space again as a medium of communication with the city, with the new and unknown and the frictions that arise from that. Finally I think there is a large need, to reconsider what is Art in public space. In this context we urgently should establish a culture of critical discourse about our more and more media determined society, to form a movement against the dominance of commercial visuals in our urban space.

Mirjam Struppek lives as freelance urbanist in Berlin and researches about urban space, public sphere and its transformation and acquisition through new media. Commissioned by the Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam she currently prepares a conference about „the potential of large public LED screens for our urban society“, which is scheduled for September 2005.