Mobile Connections: Curator's Statement

Curatorial statement by Drew Hemment, Director, Futuresonic

Out of the galleries and off the screen: exploring new horizons in mobile, wireless and locative media, the boundary between open and closed nodes, and changing perceptions of location.

Mobile Connections was an international exhibition and conference in 2004 on mobile, wireless and locative arts. It was staged at the Urbis museum, plus mobile projects in the city streets, from April 28th to May 8th 2004 in Manchester as a part of the Futuresonic 2004 festival, featuring participants from more than 20 countries.

Mobile Connections was the first major exhibition worldwide on mobile, wireless and locative arts. It was developed during a series of workshops in 2003, following events by RIXC in Latvia, and followed by Wireless Experience at ISEA2004.

The exhibition explored how mobile and locative media reconfigure social, cultural and information space. It looked beyond computing in its current form, towards the social and cultural possibilities opened by a new generation of networked, location-aware media. It sought an art of mobile communications: asking, are there any forms of expression that are intrinsic or unique to mobile and locative media?

Artists are responding to new ways of seeing, sensing and representing: radar, sonar, GPS, WiFi, Bluetooth, cellular, GIS, etc. The exhibition explores new horizons in wireless and mobile media, and looks at the diverse ways in which artists and technical innovators are pushing the limits, and soliciting unexpected or unforeseen results from communication media past and present, from the radio to mobile telephony and wireless LAN. Some are seeking to make visible and audible the signals and transmissions that fill the air around us, exploring the potential of interfaces unfettered by wires and cables for performance or interaction, or the kinds of communication and creative expression that emerge within networks with no fixed centre, but rather multiple, mobile nodes.

Just as recording enabled sound to be heard apart from the place and time of its creation and radio made possible remote listening, so a new generation of communication technologies are now reconfiguring geographical, cultural and perceptual space, and transforming the nature of the art object and the art event. Mobile Connections seeks to sketch the outlines of emerging artforms that are coalescing around artists, programmers and DIY technologists who are responding to new technical tools by asking what can be experienced now that could not be experienced before.

The rapid uptake of the mobile phone, both in the West and increasingly in the global South, the proliferation of wireless networks, and the promise of pervasive computing in which networked devices become embedded in the environment around us has created a space that increasing numbers of people are starting to explore. Mobile phones have enabled places without fixed line telephony to get connected. In comparison to the internet, however, the mobile phone networks are centralised and proprietary, limiting the scope for DIY innovation. At the other end of the spectrum, the Free Networks movement empowers people to build their own wireless networks, its goal not just to leak bandwidth but to extend an independent and free community infrastructure.

Grass roots movements of artists and technologists are opening up new horizons. An area that has caught the imagination of many is the emergent field of Locative Media. Rather than distance becoming irrelevant, location has become key in mobile communications, because when you are on the move, you need information relevant to where you are. Assigning data with spatial coordinates so that it can be accessed from particular points, Locative Media explores how networked mobile devices, when combined with positioning technologies such as GPS, may be used for social communication and organisation, or for artistic interventions in which geographical space becomes its canvas.

The question of location within art is by no means new. Mobile Connections will also explore how location is approached in other artforms, and issues such as material embodiment and the resonant qualities of a space. It will feature sound and media art projects that enable place and the urban environment to be experienced in different ways, including the Location site specific sound installations, and projects that enable the city to be navigated through sound.

Drew Hemment
April 2004

Mobile Connections Exhibition Themes

Mobile Connections seeks to balance artistic visions that open new perspectives on the technologies and their social implications, hands-on tool building sessions, and discussions of the processes involved in producing art for wireless environments. The artists and projects featured explore a number of interrelated themes:

Radiation is all around us
In SIGNAL_SEVER! - TRANSIGNAL 1 musicians, visual artists and high frequency and satellite telecommunications experts explore the radio zones of the electromagnetic spectrum, and Telenono by Rupert Griffiths brings the radiation that is all around us into view by creating a negative image - an installation built to look like a phone box that is sealed off from all radiation, offering true radio silence.

Wireless World
Disembodied Voices by Jody Zellan is a web based project examining the connected - but disembodied - voices that populate modern telecommunications, and Auto Mobile by the Center for Knowledge Societies is a short film that tracks changes in the use of mobile phones by autorickshaw drivers within the urban culture of Bangalore.

Art Unplugged
the-phone-book Limited and Tim Cole of the Tao Group explore the mobile phone as a creative medium - taking the limited technical resources as a creative starting point, or pushing the frame to generate high quality live sounds on-the-fly - while Katherine Moriwaki explores ad hoc networking, where connections are made directly between individual devices, so that data can hop from one to another without needing to be routed through a central point.

Wireless Interface
Come Closer by squidsoup explores how wireless technologies offer non-restrictive interfaces that enable interaction free from cables and physical connections, Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau discuss the use of magnets to introduce a sense of tactility and touch at the interface between the body and the nearest node, Schminky explores gaming in wireless environments, and the Soundbeam sensing technology - also featured in the futureDJ event - offers a gestural interface for composition and performance.

Free Networks
Free Networks pioneers Consume demonstrate how to build your own wireless network, while RICHAIR2030 by TAKE2030 and Wi-Fi Hog by Jonah Brucker-Cohen explore the boundary between open and closed nodes, and the limits placed upon access to the supposed panacea of openness and accessibility, one through a performance set in a fictional future in which bandwidth is a scarce resource sought out by renegade rollergirls equipped with homemade lunchbox chiputers, the other by enabling people to gain complete control over a public access wireless network and create localised and temporary user groups.

Locative Media
The Locative Media Lab road test some locative tools, hot on the heels of a ground breaking session at ETCON and part of a series of events and workshops during 2004. (area)code is a themed locative project that enables passers by to leave their own digital graffiti through simple SMS, InterUrban offers an interactive narrative in the city streets, and Aura explores how a soundscape is composed by the relative movement of participants.

Sonic City
Streetscape by Iori Nakai is an interface that enables the user to trace a journey in sound through the city, Sonic Interface by Akitsugu Maebayashi alters the way the city is perceived by processing sounds heard as you wonder through the urban environment, and The Central City by stanza offers the chance to remix the city.

Location Based Sound
Colin Fallows curates live sound and sound installations that explore place and location, featuring Lee Ranaldo, John J. Campbell, Max Eastley, Colin Fallows , Russell Mills and Ian Walton, Mathew Gregory, Vergil Sharkya', Phil Mouldycliff and Colin Potter, and Glide by Echo and the Bunnymen's Will Sergeant.