Freeing Urban Space

Drew Hemment

A flicker of movement is caught by a static camera. A hooded figure enters, clinging to walls. The CCTV camera pans out, catches a second figure vaulting an obstacle, zooms in again. Running, jumping, a blur of fluid motion. The traceurs (parkour or free-running performers) have the run of the huge shopping mall; their free-running poetics now repeated on 30 or 40 or 50 of the screens that line the avenues of the mall and are scattered among the shops. It is artists not security guards at the controls of the CCTV, and the film is The Duellists by MediaShed.

The Duellists at Futuresonic 2009. Photo © WeAreTAPE

At the recent Creative Collaboration open space workshop in Istanbul the issues of art, public space and the city were explored. The idea of 'public space' means very different things in different countries. What is universal is that the physical infrastructure of a city encodes power. In the Occupied Territories in Palestine, the roads for the settlers are built above the roads for the Palestinians, so that the settlers are out of reach and can see but not be seen. In Croatia public space is ravenously consumed by corrupt private construction for the international tourism market

Graffiti Research Lab - a focus in a number of contributions to this issue of Filter - have pioneered hands-on experiments mixing the DNA of street art and digital media. They graft digital tools into graffiti culture, adding LED Throwies and Laser Tags to a list of techniques such as spray cans, stencil graffiti, sticker art and poster bombing. By design not accident permission is not asked, bringing street art subversion into the world of media arts.

The Duellists - Directed by David Valentine of MediaShed and featuring Methods of Movement - similarly combines free-running with free-media. Free-running involves fluid uninterrupted movement adapting motion to obstacles in the environment. Like free-running, free-media makes use of and re-energises the infrastructure of the city. The Duellists was created for Futuresonic 2007 using only the in-house CCTV system within the Manchester Arndale Shopping Centre, exhibited on plasma screens usually used to carry advertising. Media and devices of every kind increasingly surround us - finally free-media unleashes its potential.

The Duellists at Futuresonic 2009. Photo © WeAreTAPE

The Art For Shopping Centres exhibition at Futuresonic 2007 - for which The Duellists was created - featured major commissioned artworks responding to the social context of one of the UK's main shopping centres. Unlike the work of Graffiti Research Lab, here permissions were obtained by the Futuresonic team, and the process of seeking permission became an integral part of the exhibition. Initial meetings with the Chief Exec - an influential figure responsible for pedestrianising a large swathe of Manchester - were followed by an ongoing negotiation over many months, only for the entire exhibition to be cancelled midway by senior management, and later reinstated. Unlike the work of Graffiti Research Lab, here permissions were obtained by the Futuresonic team - involving an ongoing negotiation, involving resulting in the entire exhibition being cancelled midway by senior management, and then (later reinstated) - and the process of seeking permission becommingcame an integral part of the exhibition. The need to negotiate with the people and agencies who run the city centre enabled the outlines of control to be made apparent, and, like a polaroid image appearing, it was possible to discover truths about the city that are not always seen. Graham Harwood from Mongrel, a member of MediaShed and also presenting a solo project in the exhibition, from Mongrel and MediaShed documented how public space has been privatised in the Manchester city centre, with the consequence that protesters have been moved on from a busy square and replaced by polite musicians, and kids are not permitted to walk through the shopping area in groups of more than three. In a small way, the exhibition reversed this. Alternative images and activities occupied the private space of the shopping centre without being co-opted, and commerce was momentarily interrupted when the with Muzak - the bland music piped into elevators and shopping malls worldwide - was switched to a soundtrack by Hybernation in what was surely one of the most incongruous 'gallery tours' of all time.

Everything Really Is Connected After All by Katherine Moriwaki at Futuresonic 2009. Photo © WeAreTAPE

In the city we can occupy many different social spaces at once. Katherine Moriwaki explored relationships of proximity and intimacy in a piece in the same exhibition. People roamed the arcades of the shopping centre listening on a wifi Arduino device to monologs recorded by local people, which when they strayed close to another user were interrupted with words to make you stop and think, subtly making apparent encounters with others in Herzian space. In The Vernacular of the Spectacular: Playing with Bits and the City, Matt Jones discusses what parkour - a "response to becoming an urban-species" - can teach us about life in the augmented city. For Jones, traceurs know the fabric of the city in a unique way. And their embodied knowledge is prophetic of the localised, intimate knowledge we will need in the augmented city. They size up "the bollards, brick-courses, park benches - the atoms of the city, which have different granularity all around the world." Traceurs have an intimate knowing of the fabric of the city. They size up "the bollards, brick-courses, park benches - the atoms of the city, which have different granularity all around the world." Another kind of atom is the pixel. GRL's 'LED Throwies' break the broadcast medium down to its smallest unit, the single pixel, creating ammunition for the urban artist. They make the 'urban screen,' designed for collective, large scale, public consumption of advertising, seem like hulking slow media in comparison. Moriwaki and GRL introduce us in different ways to the atoms of a media saturated environment. Their two approaches are linked in sticker projects such as Yellow Arrow, or in mobile virtual graffiti, also known as geo-graffiti - geo tagged digital content created and accessed via a mobile device. Here networked media melds with the psychogeography of the city, and the digital artist-as-traceur moves between a fleeting experience of city space and the folksonomies of the web.Such singular interventions become a part of networked space in sticker projects such as Yellow Arrow. Another kind of digital graffiti is geo graffiti, which brings together the two types of tagging, graffiti tag and metadata. Geo graffiti is mobile virtual graffiti - geo tagged digital content created and accessed via a mobile device. Here networked media melds with the psychogeography of the city. This creates a convergence of network space and urban space, a seam between a fleeting experience of city space and the folksonomies of the web.

Netmonster by Harwood at Futuresonic 2009. Photo © WeAreTAPE

One place and time when digital media art leaked out of galleries and off the desktop was at the Mobile Connections exhibition during Futuresonic 2004. Following pioneering events by RIXC in Latvia, it was the first major exhibition worldwide on mobile, wireless and locative arts. It took digital arts out into the streets, and marked out a convergence of interest in digital media and the city shared by the arts, architecture, game design, urban planning and many other areas besides. For the Futuresonic festival, the legacy of this work with mobile media has been a focus on the city and on the social. The festival has spread and infiltrated throughout Manchester, working in lived city spaces, with a focus on participatory artworks which re-imagine the city.

At the Istanbul open space workshop, I led a session involving a fantastic and diverse group of participants asking how artists can remake cities. This is not the same as asking how they might re-imagine the city, if in asking that the limit of our imagination extends no further than decorating urban spaces, or using Photoshop, After Effects or Processing to create visualisations that nonetheless do not engage with the people and communities who live within. In Istanbul we explored the future of the public sphere in the city, how artists and communities can influence the direction of commercial development, and the city as a catalyst - the way cities bring people together and make things happen. There is a movement in public art away from artists creating monuments to artists creating the spaces between buildings. It is this space - which draws together architects, artists and activists - that animated proceedings in Istanbul and which will lie at the heart of Futuresonic's vision for years to come.

Continuing the focus on presenting social and participatory artworks in unexpected city spaces, the theme of Futuresonic 2008 is Social Networking Unplugged. It will be "unplugged" in a number of ways. Among the commissioned artists, Simon Yuill is collaborating with local people to map how 'free' and 'open' are different areas of the city, including public parks, street corners, shopping centres, cafes, clubs and community halls. The map will be made available online and in a free printed format that will be distributed across the city. Other artists are exploring physical metaphors for online social networking, or looking at who is excluded and left out of the loop of Web 2.0, and so "unplugged" in another way. Collectively these projects will pull out the plug in order to take the new social spaces apart and see how they work, publish the code, and invite people to put them together in new ways. Inspired by artists such as MediaShed, Graffiti Research Lab and Simon Yuill, the exhibition seeks to explore the seam between open source culture and the public sphere in the city.

Futuresonic 2008 takes place 1-5 May in venues across Manchester UK.
http://www.futuresonic.com

(1) Commissioned by Futuresonic 2007. Director David Valentine, featuring Methods of Movement. Art For Shopping Centres conceived and curated by Drew Hemment.
http://archive.futuresonic.com/theduellists
(2) These examples are from the 'Creative Collaboration' open space workshop in Istanbul, December 2007, organised by British Council.
(3) http://archive.futuresonic.com/shoppingcentres
(4) http://archive.futuresonic.com/mobileconnections
http://www.mobileconnections.org
(5) Creative Collaboration website forthcoming.