

The Conceptualisation of Urban Media: FACT's 'Disco Window'
An essay by Mike Stubbs, Varvara Guljajeva & Mar Canet Sola

When defining public space today, it is important to point out that that large-scale privatisation is taking place. For example, large shopping malls aim to create environments for seducing people to spend their spare time in. There are a number of attractions starting from playgrounds and open-air terraces to underground aquariums and in-door skating facilities. Basically we can see an increasing number of private cities within a city.

From the perspective of urban media: media organisations and advertising agencies are making use of urban screens in order to extend their reachability to superimpose content. As Virilio says, *'Once public space yields to public image, surveillance and street lighting can be expected to shift too, from the street to the domestic display terminal: (The Vision Machine, 1994).*

In addition to this, the rise of mobile technology introduces a new paradigm that can be seen as *mobile privatization* according to Raymond Williams. This is aimed towards an individual form of consumption.

The meaning of public space today is a highly complex one and needs more detailed discussion – but exploring this is not the objective of this essay. Instead, we would like to approach urban media and its role in public space

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from the perception of artists and cultural institutions. To do this we will support our arguments with both case study and our specialist professional experiences. To be more specific, in the essay we will examine how the interactive works on media facades and question whether play is key to attain engagement. To take this further we pose the question: should we simply accept that any form of participation and sharing of space is a good thing?

FACT (The Foundation for Art & Creative Technology) has placed collaboration at its core and over a twenty-year period experimented with a range of media into public forums and spaces. This has been most successful between media and communities in projects such as the early net project Kingdoms of Piracy, Shu Lea Cheang, 2003, TenantSpin (Britain's oldest community TV station 2000 ongoing, which is a partnership with Arena Housing and many local residents, and more recently War Veteran Vehicle, Krystof Wodiczko made during 3 months in collaboration with returning soldiers from Iraq and charity Combat Stress resulting in temporary projections onto important civic buildings such as the Catholic Cathedral of the soldiers and families intimate feelings (Fig 1). These are a few examples of projects, which actively demonstrate the organisations aims to build new relationships with new audiences.

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Fig 1. War Veteran Vehicle by Krystof Wodiczco. 2009 (photograph copyrighted to the AND (Abandon Normal Devices) Festival. Photographer: Brian Slater).

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Case study 1 - FACT:

FACT has been involved in partnering several artists in producing works for urban screens. Probably the best-known art project presented on the BBC screen in Liverpool is 'Hand from Above' by Chris O'Shea in 2009 (Fig 2). This work represents an intelligent disruption into the flow of information, news and re-distributed broadcast television. Commissioned for the BBC, which has a network of BBC Big Screens which function as sites for syndicating BBC news content, local information and attempt to build a live site to enable community engagement. Of all Big Screen commissions entered into with FACT, 'Hand from Above' has been the most successful in demonstrating the public's willingness to play, combined with the artists' ability to nuance live material through humour when understanding interaction. Interestingly, this work has been presented internationally and seems to work across cultures.

The Liverpool Big Screen has been well loved regionally and nationally, although mixed opinions exist in the City around its physical structure and placement. Content has not been discussed on a wider scale until recently as costs are being negotiated in the run up to the 2012 Olympics. Revised licensing regulations and content provision models have begun to take precedence on the City Council's agenda with Philips (who own the screen),

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a third party content provider and the BBC (the initial content licensee).



Fig 2. 'Hand from Above' by Chris O'Shea on the BBC urban screen in Liverpool during AND festival 2009 (photograph copyrighted to the AND Festival).

In 2010, FACT gained funding from Liverpool City Council, which was aimed towards providing and working with urban lighting. As a result, an LED-based facade was integrated into the large window situated to the exterior of the FACT Centre, which faces a public square (see Fig 5, 7).

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Providing an artistic platform was not the original objective for the window - raising security and improving lighting in the centre of Liverpool were the main concerns for the funders. However, FACT quickly identified other more artistic and commercial possibilities to bleed its program out into public space with this platform.

Traxon provided and installed the screen and processor providing only a series of basic sequences for programming with a small consultancy from ARUP, the former leaving only rudimentary instructions on how the system could be 'customised'. FACT was now faced with the problem of locating specialist staff who had the capacity and expertise to explore all technical possibilities around art and the interface and continuing to seek artists to experiment within it. All digital facades require content to be displayed and periodically amended/changed. Happily, fate brought Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet Sola to the project when they began their EMARE (European Media Art Network Residency) at FACT and decided to focus their time on exploring the as yet untapped interface.

As a public institution FACT has a great degree of social responsibility. The 'disco window' enabled FACT is to turn the skin of the building into a public playground. Furnishing artists and curators with a challenging medium the in-house pixel screen has become a space for experiment and

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exploration.

Unfortunately, Media Facade's projects are not resourced with great, if any budget. A constant investment is required for displaying different artworks, and thus, engaging the local community towards the possibility of urban media. The reasons for expense are simple: for making an artwork that goes beyond traditional production one has to have very specific skills as well as experience with digital facades. Moreover, we believe that most of the artworks on urban facades are experiments, especially interactive ones. Therefore commissioning an artist is always a risk for an institution such as FACT because nobody can know whether something can be shown in the end or not. To summarise: there is no established production line for participative projects on urban screens thereby each new work or even adaptation of existing pieces means relatively high investment and risk.

Let us use LummoBlocks as an example for adapting an existing work to a new place (Fig 3, 4). LummoBlocks was installed in Madrid and in Cordoba. The artists had to amend the work in order to fit the installation in the new urban environment. In the first location LummoBlocks was shown on the urban screen. And in the second the artists were provided with urban projection onto a wall with windows. This highlights that as well as the work around any standard relocation a media facade project is always challenging.

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Fig 3. LummoBlocks in Madrid 2010 (photo copyrighted Mar Canet Sola).

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Fig 4. LummoBlocks in Cordoba 2011 (photo copyrighted Mar Canet Sola).

There are some cases organizations dismantling urban screens because of financial issues and lack of content. To give you an example from Liverpool (home of FACT) the BBC Big Screen currently shows no content. While a

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new contract with suppliers is being negotiated sustaining digital facades is both time and money consuming, thus proving that in order to sustain urban media one needs knowledge, permanent commitment, and funding.

This makes a good argument for pushing urban media in art into festival culture showing that often it is neither sustainable nor practical to have permanent installations unless fully integrated into the architecture and building process from scratch. As a result only a number of people are able to engage and experience an urban media artwork. Following the event only photographic and video documentation remains with the urban space, post participation, regains its usual face again. Perhaps we should ask whether the aim of urban media in art is to leave only a Youtube video or image on Flickr? If this is the case, how then does this legacy profit society and urban environments beyond documentation and memory, the values which performative art share.

LED lighting is more sustainable than other light forms and has made a positive impact on FACT's facade. However, we are convinced in the need for conceptualization of urban media, simply because the appeal of technology itself has a short-term effect and little meaning beyond decoration. Our experiences indicate that people tend to get bored from illuminated buildings and huge screens in public spaces very quickly: thus

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the former sexiness turns to kitsch. It is therefore crucial to think around the meaning of urban media and discuss the division between platform and content.

Case study 2 - Pixel Killers:

Pixel Killers is the first interactive work shown on the FACT media facade. As mentioned previously, artists Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet Sola were selected, as part of a EMAN (European Media Art Network) residency programme, to come to Liverpool, to place their work on an urban screen. The primary goal of their installation is to convert the FACT building and the public square beyond it into a playground thereby causing a positive change to the city's life.

Pixel Killers was designed according to the specifications of Media Facade and its urban environment. The light screen consists of 50x50 RGB LEDs that have DMX output, and thus, every LED can be controlled individually. The low-resolution of the facade sets certain criteria for the works that can be displayed on the pixel grid.

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Fig 5. Pixel Killers on FACT facade (photo copyrighted Varvara Guljajeva).

Consequently, Mar and Varvara followed 8-bit aesthetics and produced a game-art work that uses gamepads as an interface for interaction with the media facade (Fig. 6). In short, Pixel Killers is a team game with two teams of two. Team One are 'The Greens' and team Two 'The Reds'. The team that gains the required score first or shoot both opponents are the winners. As a result, the whole digital window turns into the colour of the victorious

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team (Fig. 7).



Fig 6. Pixel Killers on FACT facade (photo copyrighted Varvara Guljajeva).

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Fig 7. Pixel Killers on FACT facade. The Greens won (photo copyrighted Varvara Guljajeva).

Pixel Killers is only a recent project at FACT and it is too early to draw any conclusions. Looking at past experience, we believe that allowing the public to experience the work for at least a minimum 3-month period will provide us with valid results. What we have noted already after a couple of public events includes curiosity, engagement, communication, play, interaction and

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laughter combined with fear and confusion. More importantly, we have noticed that players tend to communicate with one another and their audience rather than the urban screen itself (Fig 6).

Time will give us answers to our questions: how important is interactivity for urban media works and what are the advantages and disadvantages of playful installations on facades, for example. It is obvious that people need to gain experience and understanding about being a part of and contributing to urban media. It definitely requires a period for learning. One could argue that participative installations on urban screens have been in existence for over 10 years. Let us turn an answer into a question: how many people have seen and experienced any cultural installation on a digital facade? The truth is only a very specific group of audiences are aware of the artistic usage of urban media. And that is the reason for working towards a permanent urban media playground.

To give you an example of this let us re-examine LummoBlocks, Lummo's work which Mar Canet Sola was part of. This piece was shown for over one year on the digital facade of Media Lab Prado, Madrid. As a result an empty public square found its use and became a social playground for many local people. This allows us to assume that conceptualization and long-term projects of urban media can bring a positive shift to the urban environment

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and add value to the local community.

Conclusion and Future Plans:

The digital window (or 'Disco Window' as it has affectionately, and possibly irreverently been dubbed by the FACT team) has become an experimental space, which lends itself to artistic purposes whilst serving part of its original task: to illuminate a public square. The focus, so far, has been one of participation, driven to introduce change to local street life. This helps to build a space where temporary communities can meet and play. Accordingly, we are thinking of this in terms of a long-term base. FACT already has a permanent set up for having and producing content on the media facade, The screen is now augmented with a network camera for motion tracking, speakers which are installed outside, two dedicated computers both in and outdoors and a gamepad's receiver.

During a short artist's residency a platform for experiment has been successfully established and now we are turning our thoughts to optimization and finding a way for more sustainable management of urban media. Because of the bespoke nature of the system we face issues in finding other artists with appropriate skill sets who can utilise the system. However, initial findings prove that change to urban life by providing an on-going experimental space for the works on the digital facade is possible with

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only small means and great innovation. We strongly believe in a long-term approach, because – as discussed here - interactive installations on urban media require certain learning times in terms of audience, artists, the custom of interaction and as well platform providers listening to user feedback. Of course a much broader discussion around cultural identity; virtual and technogised space and society creates a framework in which this work sits. These are all themes that require constant attention and debate through action-based research as well as developing specialist theory, which has major ramifications for us all.

<http://kop.fact.co.uk/>

<http://www.fact.tv/videos/watch/718>

<http://www.chrisoshea.org/hand-from-above>

<http://www.fact.co.uk/news/blog/2011/08/26/pixel-killers-on-facts-facade>

<http://www.mcanet.info/blog/?p=122>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/mcanet/sets/72157627354899967/>

<http://varvarag.info/>