

# URBAN SCREENS Reader

EDITED BY  
**SCOTT MCQUIRE, MEREDITH MARTIN  
AND SABINE NIEDERER**  
INC READER #5



**Urban Screens Reader**

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The INC reader series are derived from conference contributions and produced by the Institute of Network Cultures. They are available in print and pdf form. The *Video Vortex Reader* is the fourth publication in this series.

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## PUBLIC ART IN NOMADIC CONTEXTS

### GISELLE BEIGUELMAN

This chapter discusses some urban interventions I did using commercial electronic billboards in São Paulo between 2002 and 2004. All the projects happened in networked environments, dealing with collective forms of appropriation of the advertisement system as public space. They allow us to discuss public art in a nomadic context where the interface becomes the message.

My point of departure is that network culture's action space is an informational space, mediated by communication networks which have systematically imploded not only the notions of distance and locality,<sup>1</sup> but also the limits between the places of art, advertising and information, on the one hand, and the relationships between place and non-place, on the other.

It is true that some of those transformations go back almost half a century, and they are not tributary of the everyday's digitalisation. The land art of the 60s, and particularly Robert Smithson's gigantic earthworks,<sup>2</sup> for example, have reconfigured public art, because they broke the prevailing relationships between works and places of memory, introducing the concept and the practice of tensioning between site and non-site, or place and non-place.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the meaning of a monument as an agent of the past in the present is emptied, starting from a fraying of the Newtonian tradition in which time is defined in relation to space. Conceived as works with dimensions often incompatible with the human scale, dealing with perishable materials and diagrammatic forms, they configured a new architecture without qualitative value.<sup>4</sup>

An architecture which can only be read momentarily and contextually, as the contemporary urban landscapes and their series of slums and skyscrapers, bridges and dejections, or supermarkets and gadget stores, with their infinite shelves of everything and a little more. Ethereal, amorphous and de-objectified, that kind of work dealt with entropic situations in which it seemed impossible to ask 'from which period is that?', making one interrogate 'where was that time?'<sup>5</sup>

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1. Manuel Castells, *La Galaxia Internet (Reflexiones sobre Internet, empresa y sociedad)*, Barcelona: Debolsillo, 2001.
  2. For Robert Smithson's earthworks, art projects, biography, bibliography, references and essays, visit <http://www.robertsmithson.com>
  3. Nelson Brissac, *Art/City – Urban Interventions [Arte/Cidade – Intervenções Urbanas]*, bilingual edition, São Paulo: Senac, 2002.
  4. Robert Smithson, *Entropy and the New Monuments* (1966), [http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy\\_and.htm](http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy_and.htm)
  5. Smithson, *Entropy and the New Monuments*. [http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy\\_and.htm](http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy_and.htm)

However, if it's true that some subjects related to the paradigmatic break of the networked cultures today were somehow prefigured in other contexts, one cannot ignore that cyberspace's ubiquity has maximised those tensions, forcing us now to re-elaborate space in the ambit of referential non-tridimensionality and beyond geographic circuits, in malleable territories which articulate themselves in the punctual cartography of global cities, from and among the networks' dynamics.<sup>6</sup>

It is what we call 'cybrid' configurations, situations resulting from the on- and off-line networks' interconnected experience, that occur in the traffic mediated by control systems, electronic panels, cell phones, PDAs and intelligent agents, such as those which I dealt with in some projects since 2001, including *Wop Art*, *Leste o Leste?* [*Did You Read the East?*] *egoscópio* [*egoscope*], *Poétrica* [*Poetrica*] and *esc for escape*.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of their differences, all these projects are related to reading and creation contexts marked by nomadism and by shared strategies of appropriation of advertising devices. They deal with situations in which inscriptions volatilise, and interfaces multiply and fragmentise the reception in electronic surfaces connected to telecommunication networks.

They investigate the possibilities of a hybrid culture, crossed by printed and digital, phonetic and non-phonetic substrata, in which informative, programming and aesthetic codes are entangled, producing a new semantics of organisation of signs and significance procedures, within which the relationships among words and symbols are re-articulated, and the limits of language, communication and art are redefined.

To discuss the new forms of creation mediated by increasingly remote, fast and wireless networks, with which *Wop Art*, *Did You Read the East?*, *egoscope*, *Poetrica* and *esc for escape* dialogue with, it was imperative to take into account the unprecedented reading contexts that emerge in the interaction with mobile network interfaces, as cell phones, and of distributed reading, as electronic panels.

So it is important to highlight some meanders of their creative processes, because more than guiding the development of those series of nomadic poems, they could be indicated as their presuppositions or conditions for existence. I recall, therefore, some verifications that were formatted before, during and after their creation:

- The popularisation of portable wireless communication devices with the option of connection with the Internet, and the proliferation of telecommunication spaces in urban areas, as electronic panels, point to the incorporation of the nomadic life pat-

6. Saskia Sassen, 'Towards a Sociology of Information Technology', *Current Sociology* 50.3 (2002): 380-382; available online from <http://www.columbia.edu/~sjs2/PDFs/webpage.infotech.pdf>

7. See the following websites, *Wop Art* (Wap op art), <http://www.desvirtual.com/wopart>, *Leste o Leste?* [*Did You Read the East?*], <http://www.desvirtual.com/projects/did-you-read-the-east-leste-o-leste/>, *egoscope*, <http://www.desvirtual.com/egoscopio>, *Poetrica*, <http://www.poetrica.net>, *esc for escape*, <http://www.desvirtual.com/projects/esc-for-escape/>

tern into the large city's way of life.<sup>8</sup>

- Instruments especially developed for adaptation to traffic and displacement situations, PDAs, cell phones and electronic panels, are adaptation tools to an urban universe of continuous acceleration and entropy, which alters and adapts itself to new forms of perception, visualisation and reading.
- Art conceived for those nomadic interfaces demands a reflection on reception in environments of constant flow and in displacement situations that involve interaction with different equipment related to multiple and non-correlate tasks (such as speaking on the phone and driving, checking e-mails and eating, or watching films privately and being in a line).
- To create for those conditions of saturation and entropy implies rethinking the nature of artistic fruition and communication's conventions and formats in the range of a culture of ubiquity, in which contemplation will vanish.

Creation directed to that emergent liquid reading context, which happens from and in the flow of connection systems, forces us to ask: *How to think an art form that may be read 'in between', among varied and simultaneous, but not synchronous, acts and interfaces?*

*Wop Art* was the inaugural gesture of that reflection, and it presented to the reader an imponderable situation: optic art (op art) accessible via mobile Internet in WAP (wireless application protocol) cell phones. It can be said that the situation was imponderable, not because of the medium's rudimentary nature at that time, the middle of 2001, but for the incompatibility between what was given to read and its reading context.



Fig. 1: User browsing *Wop Art* wap site.

The Op Art of the late 1950s and 60s is a key reference for a reflection on virtual experiences, since the image one sees, resulting from the optic effect, doesn't exist, but is realised as a potential of the original structure. It is a form of virtualisation that depends on the reader's degree of concentration and introspection, but images conceived for mobile devices no longer relate to contemplation. They are made to be seen in traffic, in a state of dispersion, according to a logic of acceleration that makes introspection unviable.

It was not the case, therefore, of trying to adapt Op Art to cell phones to create an optic series that could work as a Tamagotchi directed to a learned public, fetishising the device and contradicting the object, but rather, proposing an ironic situation in which the friction between content and reception conditions sounded as an instigation: to face the novelty of another status of art fruition in entropic environments.

8. William J. Mitchell, *Me++: The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

Art not to be seen as art – mixed with communication devices and presented for reading interrupted by several other inputs – was a mode of relationship that was intensely explored in my next two projects, *Leste o Leste? [Did You Read the East?]*, accomplished during the project *artecidadezonaleste* in São Paulo in April 2002, and taken to the limit in *egoscópio [Egoscope]* in August of the same year.

*Did You Read the East?* and *egoscope* involved public streaming processes, commercial urban telecommunication devices and Internet functionalities. Based on a combination of networked systems and electronic billboards, they allowed web users to send online content to the panels. Submitted materials were inserted every three minutes between the advertising clips commonly displayed on these billboards. A webcam focused on the outdoor screen relayed images back to online viewers. Despite these similarities, however, the conceptual and technological backgrounds of the two projects were very different.

In *Did You Read the East?*, it was possible for any Internet user to select and send to an electronic billboard, from 11:30 am to 8:30 pm, using only browser resources, e-graffiti created by myself.



Fig. 2: *Did You Read the East?* on-line interface.



Fig. 3: Electronic billboard displaying user submission for the *Did You Read the East?* intervention. (Photography: Helga Stein)

This large billboard (360 ft) was located on the Radial Leste freeway, which connects downtown São Paulo to one of the city's most complex urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Images were inserted every three minutes, between the advertising clips commonly displayed on this kind of communication device. A webcam focused on the outdoor screen relayed images back to online viewers.

Conceived in the context of a wide urban-intervention project in the city of São Paulo, *Arte/Cidade* dialogued with one of the evidences of the silent civil war that unfolds there on a daily basis: the visual guerrilla warfare of graffiti.<sup>9</sup> A series of six videopoems, composed with stylised fonts, "invaded" the programming of a regular electronic panel, among several other advertisements, with themes such as violence and social hypocrisy, but also speaking of love and lyricism, mismatching form and content with the support it occupied.

The relationship of online and urban spaces, connected to the Internet, and the deep connection of its discussions with the specific location of the

panel used for urban teleintervention, gave the project the outline of an 'e-site-specific work'. In *egoscope*, however, spaces were related in a cybrid form: they connected several networks in an anti-biography of a being (the very 'egoscope').

The teleintervention happened in August 2002, and it allowed anyone connected to the Internet to send, by means of the *egoscope* website, other sites to two electronic panels placed in a busy avenue in São Paulo (av. Faria Lima), used to display the advertising of several companies. At the *egoscope* website, the public was invited to participate in an anti-biography, mapping a being of unidentified name, age, or gender, a disembodied post-subject who is not recognised in any space besides that of telecommunication.

It was a character who lived in the boundaries between art, advertising and information, promoting a permanent state of *disorientation* and *hybridisation* of those terms.<sup>10</sup> In a sentence, the public related, during the teleintervention, to an inhabitant of the global city who was made by processes of passivity and interaction, *entropy* and *acceleration*.

During the two weeks of teleintervention, situations were created in which the public was invited to post sites departing from some questions: How is the *egoscope*? What is his/her sex? Age? What does he/she like? To which restaurants does he/she go? Does he/she have a car? Which car? Where does he/she live? How is his/her house? What does he/she make after work? In fact, does the *egoscope* work? Which places does he/she frequent? Does he/she have vice(s), some perversion? What does he/she read and listen to? Which are his/her favorite sites?<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 4: *egoscópio* online interface.



Fig. 5: *egoscópio* project, electronic billboard displaying user submission. (Photography: Helga Stein)



Fig. 6: *egoscópio* project, electronic billboard displaying user submission and webcam feedback.

10. For a complete sample of how *egoscope* was shown to the public, producing a permanent confusion between the limits of art and advertising that permeates digital culture, visit <http://www.desvirtual.com/egoscopia/english/documentacao.htm>

11. To know the interface used by the public during the teleintervention, visit <http://www.desvirtual.com/egoscopia/english/teleintervention.htm>

It was not mandatory to answer those questions, however. *egoscope* participants were free to submit any site to the panel and most of the participants in fact didn't follow the pre-established scenarios. This was important in order to multiply *egoscope*'s nuances as a mutant personality with multiple identities, accentuating the *egoscope*'s character as the alter ego of the twenty-first century's urban culture, a disembodied being made of fragments of advertising, of consumption, and of the reprocessing of what he/she absorbs and digests.

As soon as they were posted, the sites were automatically transformed into video files and images appeared on the panels [Fig. 6], dispersed in the daily grid of advertising, as if they were plain ads, ready to model another fragment of other thousands of *egoscopes* who are in the streets.<sup>12</sup>

The URLs appeared as advertisements, dispersed among other ads, on two electronic panels of 215 ft each, located at avenue Faria Lima, in front of Shopping Centre Iguatemi, where 120,000 people transit every day. Drivers and pedestrians certainly understood some of those URLs as mere advertisements. Nevertheless, the street audience was subjected to the same processes of interaction and passivity as our protagonist.

All material captured by the server that manages the e-panels could be checked online by images shot with webcams located below the e-panels. Simultaneously, images were re-sent to the remote public by means of webcams that captured the panel's display and transmitted its results to the Internet, allowing a curious and particular experience in cybrid spaces.

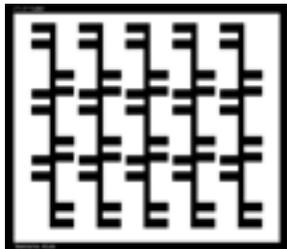


Fig. 7:  $z2 \times 3 = \text{ballet}$ , Giselle Beiguelman, 2003.

The websites appeared following the submission orders and according to the panel schedule (one insertion of 10 inches every 3 feet). Some of them were published twice or more, depending on the users' choices and on the on-line traffic. Some were not displayed at all because of the short time I was entitled to use the panel (ninety daily insertions).

Because of the project's technological structure and its conditions of transmission in the electronic panels, following the order of ads scheduled to be broadcast, its reception was

intercepted by processes of passivity and interaction, entropy and acceleration, outlined by its delays. Those delays stressed the confusion of limits between art, advertising and information, since it was very difficult to differentiate, on the panel's webcams, what was an *egoscope* insertion from materials of the other panel users (commercial companies' ads and public services).

In that sense, we can say that the delay in the context of this multi-user teleintervention between submission and publication reinforced the hybridity of these terms (art, advertising and information), which are typical of all digital media that use online systems. Combining

12. A scheme of the implanted technology is available at <http://www.desvirtual.com/egoscopio/english/tec.htm>

cyberspaces and urban spaces, *egoscope* was revealed through a process of combustion and planetary assembly, centralised in the Web and which happened in a disperse way in the programming grids of two electronic panels, with 215 square feet each, located in Faria Lima Avenue, in the city of São Paulo, facing Iguatemi Shopping Centre.

Paradoxically, the Web, the most fragmentary of mediums, is the only place where, by means of the inputs received and recorded in its database – where the more than 3,000 sites posted along the 14 days of teleintervention are aligned – it is possible to get a unified vision of *egoscope*.<sup>13</sup>

However, the references and registrations that now give us an idea of what was *egoscope* should never compose an imaginary figure, as if it were the image of a body made through 'cut and paste'. As it was said before, *egoscope* is a post-subject and, thus, it is non-ontological, it has many faces and identities, it is multiple, fragmented and distributed.

In other words, *egoscope* is a character mediated by the media, a disjunctive personality of all the other bodies. A sign, syntagm and paradox of the public art generated by and for telecommunication circuits, a project whose object was to interrogate cybrid space, guided by the interconnection of on- and off-line networks, starting from some symptoms:

- Exercises of multiple identities
- Multi-authorial operations
- Hybrid languages
- Nomadism and de-territorialisation
- Discontinuous integration of mediums
- Open Public Streaming

In spite of their differences (site-specific and net-specific works), both occurred through the connection of spaces (the electronic billboards' locations, and the visitors' locations), of media (Internet, webcams and panels), and of telecommunication systems (intranet and the Web).

However, everything that was viewed was always a result of an interaction (between the creator and the businesses which produced the interfaces, between the audience and the creator, and all these and the online and off-line traffic). The audience was called upon to operate commercial goods, to be curators or editors of the content generated by the artist. The audience had to construe meaning, working with advertising and communication devices in the realm of a fluid reading context.

This was a bet on new aesthetic, cultural and behavioural perspectives unveiled by the digital media, based on the assumption that art created for remote communication devices is rendered through an integration of aesthetic, technological, cultural and advertising repertoires associated with a new appreciation of artwork, and disconnected from its function as object. This was the central issue in *Poetrica*.<sup>14</sup>

13. The complete list of sites sent by the public is available at <http://www.desvirtual.com/egoscopio/english/lista.htm>

14. *Poetrica*, <http://www.poetrica.net>

*Poetrica* was accomplished in two stages. In the beginning, it was a series of visual poems made of non-phonetic letters with non-alphabetic fonts (system fonts and ding bats). This process results in poems where the textual meaning does not emerge from the visual construction. It's the opposite: a non-phonetic text writes an image and a different meaning.

Every poem has in its title the equation that was typed before the sequences of operations (additions, superpositions, divisions, etc.). In addition, each poem has a colophon, placed at the bottom, specifying the name of the font, size of the font, and whether or not it has a vector effect.

An example makes it clearer. The title is: 'z2 x 3= ballet' and indicates the algebraic operation and the meaning that emerges from it. The colophon is the font used (Tele-marine) and its size (43 pts).



Fig. 8: *Poetrica* in São Paulo at Faria Lima avenue. (Photography: Helga Stein)

Conceived for PDAs, the Web, and for unusual dimensions of paper and printing methods (like plotters and old spin printers), *Poetrica*, in the first stage, also explored different contexts of reading and perception, beside new paradigms of digital visual poetry.

In the second stage, *Poetrica* became an urban intervention, or more precisely a 'teleintervention'. The intervention, which began in São Paulo and ended in Berlin, accomplished between October 2003 and April 2004, was an investigation of reading and creation in

entropic and continuous traffic situations. It involved the visual poems composed by me with non-phonetic fonts in the first stage, and an urban teleintervention mediated by public creations with that same typographic repertoire.



Fig. 9: *Poetrica* 'ad+oetries' at Kurfürstendamm electronic billboard. (Photography: Helga Stein)

In the stage accomplished in São Paulo, images were produced anywhere, via SMS (text message via cell phone), fixed and mobile Internet, and made available in electronic panels located in the urban blotch of Galeria Vermelho, in the avenues Paulista, Consolação and Rebouças.

Those images were also retransmitted online by webcams, and replicated in different devices (cell phones, Palms, computers) and, in some cases, in plotters and other digital printing systems. Re-dimensioned and saved as something new, those images, however, were always composed of the same information, but lacking connection with a specific support, thus resulting in independent visual meanings of their textuality and dissociated from their site of production and diffusion.

In Berlin, *Poetrica* was presented at the digital poetry exhibition P0es1s<sup>15</sup> indoors, at Kulturforum, and in public space. In the museum space, *Poetrica* consisted of a set of large dimensions prints, a DVD projection<sup>16</sup> and a project website. In public space, *Poetrica* was displayed at Kurfürstendamm electronic billboard and in the movies, in trailer format, announcing the P0es1s through the series 'ad\_oetries' (ads + poetry)<sup>17</sup> conceived specially for this venue by invitation of Friedrich Block, P0es1s curator.

In that sense, *Poetrica* stressed the logic of cloning, which permeates digital creation. In spite of being identical in format and informational content, messages produced in the scope of *Poetrica* are not identical with regard to fruition and legibility, evidencing the most fascinating aspect of the clone logic: its ability of being identical while being different.

*esc for escape* (2004), my last project conceived for electronic billboards, continued this investigation about reading and reception processes in entropic and continuous traffic situations, but exploring not only more media resources but also public art as collective and distributed creative processes oriented to a common target. Commissioned by the 2nd Art and Technology Biennial of São Paulo (art.ficial emotion 2.0), hosted by Itaú Cultural, the project is a cross media work on error messages.

In short, it is a documentary on life beyond the screen with outputs in DVD, electronic billboards and indoors exhibition, mediated by Internet, SMS and MMS. The audience was invited to submit error messages (text and images) by mobile phones and the Web. Their submissions appeared on a commercial electronic billboard at Paulista Avenue (São Paulo) and simultaneously in the exhibition space at Itaú Cultural, and some of them were incorporated into the documentary.

At the exhibition room at Itaú Cultural, it was possible to browse the error messages archives, follow the updates that appeared in the electronic billboards, and watch the documentary on error messages. As in the former experiences I had with interventions in commercial electronic billboards, I think the most interesting challenge of the project was to make people



Fig. 10: Error message submitted to the electronic billboard that fed the cross-media documentary *esc for escape*. (Photography: Giselle Beiguelman)

15. P0es1s - Digitale Poesie ran from 13 February to 4 April 2004, organised by the literaturWERKstatt berlin in cooperation with the Brückner-Kühner Foundation (Kassel) in the special exhibition hall at the Kulturforum Potsdamer Platz, Berlin. See <http://www.p0es1s.net>

16. Some samples of the DVD and the large dimension prints are available for download at <http://www.poetrica.net/english/download.htm>. For further images and critical context of the work, visit <http://www.mediaartnet.org/works/poetrica>

17. ad\_oetries, [http://www.poetrica.net/english/ad\\_oetries.htm](http://www.poetrica.net/english/ad_oetries.htm)