

## First Monday, Special Issue #4: Urban Screens: Discovering the potential of outdoor screens for urban society



For an aesthetics of transmission

by Giselle Beiguelman

### Abstract

This article addresses some urban interventions I did between 2002 and 2004 using commercial electronic billboards. All those projects happened in networked environments, dealing with collective forms of appropriation of the advertisement system as public space. They allow us to think about an aesthetics of transmission and to discuss public art in a nomadic context where the interface becomes the message.

Today, images are measured by their weight, and they are given to vision by informational maps. Their volume doesn't relate to dimensionality, but to the amount of bytes they conform. Any excess may cause an inviability of reception when one is on line.

It is time to give in to, and to think of, an aesthetics of transmission, facing the emergence of an interactor capable of coordinating multiple and simultaneous readings of contents mediated by countless uncontrolled variables.

Projects conceived for on-line environments configure a type of creation that deals with different kinds of connections, browsers, traffic speed, monitor quality, screen resolution, and so many other instances that modify the forms of reception.

What one sees is the result of countless possibilities of combination among different programs, operating systems, access providers, phone operators, hardware makers, and all their inestimable forms of customisation.

To create within and for those conditions is, thus, not only to think an aesthetics of transmission, but also to play with an articulation of the imponderable and the unexpected that, in its turn, impose a reflection on programming and publication strategies that make the work readable, decodable, sensible.<sup>[1]</sup>

That occurs because the 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 (Castells, 2001), but also the limits between the places of art, advertising and information, on one hand, and, on the other, the relationships between place and non-place.

It is true that some of those transformations go back to almost half a century, and they are not tributary of every day's digitalisation. The land art of the 60's, and particularly Robert Smithson's<sup>[2]</sup> gigantic earthworks, 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. (Brissac, 2002)

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. (Smithson, 1966)

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 (Ibidem). 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 to interrogate *where* was that time?

However, if it's true that some subjects related to the break of paradigms that we live today, in the scope of the networked culture, were somehow prefigured in other contexts, one cannot ignore that the 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. (Castells, 2001 and Sassen, 1991)

It is what we call "cybrid" configurations (Beiguelman, forthcoming 2006), situations resulting from the on- and off-line networks interconnection experience, that occur in the traffic and in traffic, mediated by traffic control systems, electronic panels, cell phones, PDA's and intelligent agents, such as those which dealt with some projects I have accomplished since 2001, as *Wop Art*[3], *Leste o Leste?*[*Did You Read the East?*][4], *egoscópio*[*egoscope*][5], and *Poétrica*[*Poetrica*][6].

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, interfaces multiply and fragmentize the reception in electronic surfaces connected to telecommunication networks. (Beiguelman, 2004)

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 networks more and more remote, fast and wireless, with which *Wop Art*, *Did You Read the East?*, *egoscope* and *Poetrica* dialogue, 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 art projects, 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 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 pattern to the large cities' way of life. (Mitchell, 2003)

Instruments especially developed for adaptation to traffic and displacement situations, PDA's (Personal Digital Assistants), 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 thought 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 and 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?*



Figure 1: Emulator showing Wop Art wap site

*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 rudimentariness at that time, the middle of 2001, but for the incompatibility between what was given to read and its reading context.

The Op Art of the late 1950's and 60's is referential 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.<sup>[7]</sup>

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 inviable.

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"<sup>[8]</sup> directed to a learned public, fetishising the device and contradicting the object, but rather to propose 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.

Art not to be seen as art, mixing with the communication devices and presented to reading interrupted by several other inputs, relationships that were intensely explored in *Leste o Leste?* [*Did You Read the East?*], accomplished during the project *artecidadezonaleste*, in São Paulo, April 2002, and taken to the limit in *egoscope*, in August of the same year.

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



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

This large billboard (360 ft<sup>2</sup>) was located on the Radial Leste freeway, which connects downtown São Paulo to one of the city's most complex urban areas.

Images were inserted every 3 minutes, between the advertising clips commonly displayed on this kind of communication device. A webcam focused on the outdoor screen relayed images back to on-line viewers.



Figure 3: Radial Leste freeway in São Paulo, Photo: Helga Stein

Conceived in the context of a wide urban-intervention project in the city of São Paulo, *Arte/Cidade*<sup>[9]</sup>, dialogued with one of the evidences of the silent civil war that unfolds there in a daily basis: the visual guerrilla of graffiti.

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, social hypocrisy, but also speaking of love and lyricism, mismatching in form and content the support it occupied.





Figure 4: Screen displaying user submission to *Did You Read the East?* intervention

The relationship of on-line 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 a "e-site-specific work".

In *egoscope*, however, spaces were related in a cybrid form: they connected several networks in an antibiography 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 advertising of several companies.

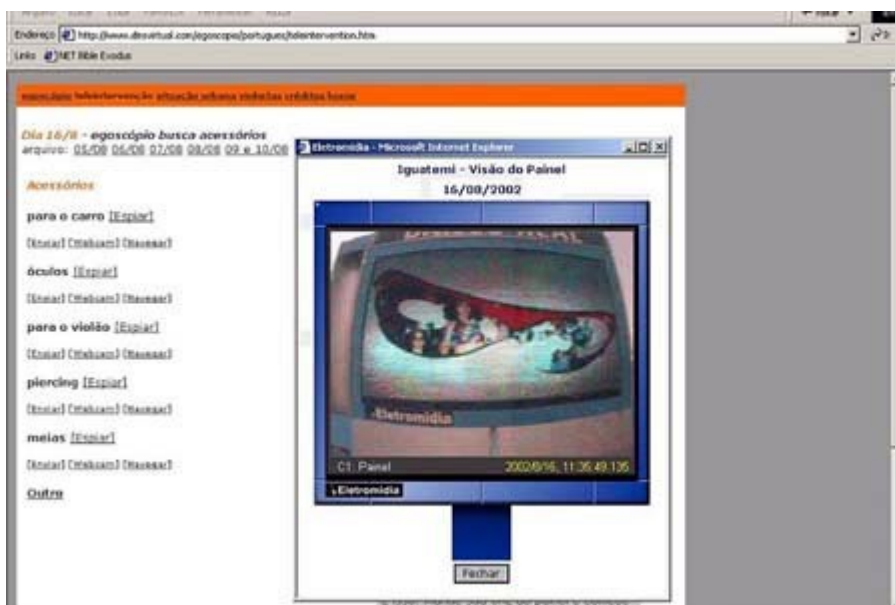


Figure 5: *egoscope* on-line interface

At the *egoscope* website, the public was invited to participate in an antibiography, 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 *hybridism* of those terms.[10] 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 car? Which? 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 favourite sites?[[11](#)]

It was not mandatory to answer to those questions, and most of the participants in fact didn't follow the preestablished scenarios, accentuating the egoscope's character as the alter ego of the 21st 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.



Figure 6: User submission in *egoscope* project

As soon as they were posted, the sites were automatically transformed into video files and images appeared on the panels, 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, submitted to the same interaction and passivity processes as our protagonist.[[12](#)]

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 and the experience of participating in a project whose pioneering character gave the artist a highlight in *The New York Times* elective art section.



Figure 7: Screen displaying user submission to *egoscope* project

Combining 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 Center.

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 & 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.

To synthesise, *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 the cybrid space, guided by the interconnection of on- and off-line networks, starting from some symptoms:

- Exercises of multiple identities;
- Multi-authoral operations;
- Hybrid languages;
- Nomadism and de-territorialisation;
- Discontinuous integration of media;
- Open public streaming.

*Poetrica*, a project that began in São Paulo and ended in Berlin, accomplished between October 2003 and April 2004, is an investigation about reading and creation in entropic and continuous traffic situations.

It involves a series of visual poems composed by me with non-phonetic alphabets, and an urban teleintervention mediated by public creations with that same typographic repertoire.

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 zone of Galeria Vermelho, in the avenues Paulista, Consolação, Rebouças and inside the gallery (Galeria Vermelho).



Figure 8: *Poetrica* in São Paulo at Consolação avenue, Photo: Helga Stein

Those images were also retransmitted on line by webcams and replicated in different devices (cell phones, Palms, computers), and, in some cases, in plotters and other digital printing systems.

Redimensioned 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[14] indoors, at Kulturforum, and in public space. In the museum space, *Poetrica* show consisted of a set of large dimensions prints, a DVD projection[15] and project web site.

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)[16] conceived specially for this venue by invitation of Friedrich Block, P0es1s curator.





Figure 9: Poetrica "ad+oetries" on Kurfürstendamm screen

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.


All that was created, however, was seen and read in a completely different way, according to their reception context, and that is not a result of the screen dimension, or of the kind of surface to which images and texts momentarily adhere.

It is the result of a "mutable aesthetics that accommodates contemporary phenomena like 'second-hand originals'", as Peter Lunenfeld states (1996, p. 97) peculiar of that nomadic writing that, for being clonable and disconnected from the support, dematerialises the medium to make the interface become a message.

Therefore, one may take the risk of weaving some conclusions that should work rather as challenges than factual proofs of a moment that resists to work as a registration: art has overflowed the margin of objects to invade and to be invaded by the transitory territories of screens and windows of the places and non-places that compose us without solidifying us.

Now that we became fast snails traveling the world as a handful of data that reside @somedomain, it is urgent to think new creation forms that respond to the fragmented and mixed character of information.

To speak of hybridism and cybridisation is more than to give in to the fashion universe of what is hype in the globalised university. It is fundamental. That which matters happens in multiple platforms in the interconnection of spaces, networks, words and things.

It is quite possible that all that Herculean effort of managing data, administering domains, working with new languages, is in vain. All that is said today, is deleted and remade without leaving tracks of whatever it meant to be. It doesn't matter. We got it. We have updated McLuhan (2003, pp. 21-37). The media doesn't count. In the time of nomadic practices, the interface is the message. 

## About the author

Giselle Beiguelman is a new media artist and multimedia essayist. She teaches Digital Culture at the Graduation Program in Communication and Semiotics of PUC-SP ( São Paulo, Brazil). Her work includes the award-winning *The Book after the Book*, *egoscope*, and *Landscape0* (with Marcus Bastos and Rafael Marchetti). She has been developing art projects for mobile phones (*Wop Art*, 2001), the Web, SMS and MMS, and Internet streaming for electronic billboards like *Did You Read the East?* and *egoscope* (2002), *Poetrica* (2003) and *esc for escape* (2004).

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## Notes

1. For a discussion about the role of transmission in net art projects, see Tilman Baumgärtel, 1997. "We love your computer - The Aesthetics of Crashing Browsers (Interview with Jodi)," *Telepolis*, 6/10/1997, at <http://www.telepolis.de/r4/artikel/6/6187/1.html>, accessed 23 December 2005.
2. For Robert Smithson earthworks, art projects, biography, bibliography, references and essays, visit <http://www.robertsmithson.com/>
3. *Wop Art* (Wap op art) at <http://www.desvirtual.com/wopart>
4. Leste o Leste? [Did You Read the East?] at <http://www.pucsp.br/~gb/portfolio/web/leste/index.htm>
5. *egoscópio* at <http://www.desvirtual.com/egoscopio>
6. *Poétrica* at <http://www.poetrica.net>
7. For more information on Op art, see: "Op art ." *Encyclopædia Britannica* from Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service, at <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9057164>, accessed 23 December 2005, Tate Glossary – Op Art, at <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=206>, accessed 23 December 2005 and Frances Follin, 2004. *Embodied Visions: Bridget Riley, Op Art and the Sixties*. East Sussex: Gardner Books
8. Tamagotchi is a virtual pet created in 1996 and sold by the Japanese company Bandai. For more information see "Tamagotchi" at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamagotchi>, accessed 23 December 2005.
9. Arte/Cidade at <http://www.artecidade.org.br>
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, see: <http://www.desvirtual.com/egoscopio/english/documentacao.htm>, accessed 23 December 2005
11. To know the interface used by the public during the teleintervention, see <http://www.desvirtual.com/egoscopio/english/teleintervention.htm>, accessed 23 December 2005
12. A scheme of the implanted technology is available in: <http://www.desvirtual.com/egoscopio/english/tec.htm>, accessed 23 December 2005
13. The complete list of sites sent by the public is at: <http://www.desvirtual.com/egoscopio/english/lista.htm>, accessed 23 December 2005
14. 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. <http://www.p0es1s.net>, accessed 23 December 2005
15. Some samples of the DVD and the largedimension prints are available for download area at <http://www.poetrica.net/english/download.htm>. For more images and critical context of the work, visit <http://www.mediaartnet.org/works/poetrica/>, accessed 23 December 2005
16. ad\_oetries at [http://www.poetrica.net/english/ad\\_oetries.htm](http://www.poetrica.net/english/ad_oetries.htm), accessed 23 December 2005

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