

INHABITED **3** SPACES

Mediated journeys

Jose Ferreira introduces us to artists' imaginative use of technology and its relationship to urban space.

THERE HAS BEEN A CORRELATION between technology and art making throughout history. Current debates on technology often focus on new developments and gadgetry as prime agents for artistic achievement. This article concentrates on ways that artists have incorporated video, film and performance in presenting technology-based works in unconventional spaces and how different media have been imaginatively and substantially integrated into social spaces.

In the 1950s and 1960s a multitude of artists gravitated towards technology as a medium. They perceived it as a vehicle to facilitate action beyond gallery structures which they considered restrictive, and to interrogate notions of public accessibility and audience reception. Artists like Milan Knizak, Joseph Beuys, George Brecht, Laurie Anderson, Bruce Nauman, John Latham and artists groups like the Guerrilla Art Action Group and Fluxus regularly used some form of technology as a conduit between artist/idea and the public. Working in social spaces artists engaged members of society that had been frequently neglected – marginalised groups and disenfranchised minorities were given a voice. Many of these works can be considered participatory but not all are interactive in the sense that we have come to expect from the internet or nanotechnology today.

It is important to emphasise that critical debates on the influence of technology in art making have been overwhelmingly concentrated on first world issues. Dubious revelations of global connectivity and technological egalitarianism are exhaustively proffered by computer wins who cannot grasp

how much of the world's population lives without electricity. Thus several questions beg attention, like what transpired in cultures outside the golden cauldron of material opportunity of the US and Europe? There were many artists engaged in early performance- and video-related projects outside of western countries. One example emerging during the 1960s was Brazilian artist Lygia Clarke who openly opposed decades of severe repression and censorship in Brazil. In her performance *Oeu e o Tu: Série roupa-corpo-roupa (The I and You: Clothing/Body/Clothing Series, 1967)* she explored relational aspects of Brazilian identity by using blindfolded performers. Wearing specially made costumes with cavities and pockets they 'felt' each other's bodies, relying on their irrational and intuitive faculties for information. Some artists challenge hierarchical historical narratives through technology like Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. He uses the term 'relational architecture' to define his technology-based interactive projections onto buildings. In these he transforms emblematic architectural structures by interfering with their traditional associations. *Displaced Emperors (1997)*, with Will Bauer and Susie Ramsay, was presented at Ars Electronica, onto Habsburg Castle in Linz as an outdoor audience activated encounter. The artists linked two seemingly disparate moments in history between Austria and Mexico. They projected a monumental image of a Mexican headdress that is housed in the ethnological museum in Vienna onto the castle. Aided by motion sensors participants were encouraged to stroke the surface of the façade

onto which the image was projected and potentially reanimate a historical juncture.

Divergences into video/performance art had precursory movements that laid a path for the anarchistic desires of artists eager to deconstruct ideological and social boundaries. One of them, Fluxus, a term coined by George Maciunas to define a movement unequivocally opposed to 'high-art' was a loosely defined group of artists, musicians, poets and writers. Like many others in the group Jannis Kounellis and Wolf Vostell staged events that interrogated the materiality of consumer culture and the institutionalisation of art, which gave Fluxus a distinct social edge. John Cage's emphasis on the role of chance could be seen as a familiar influence in the fluid structure of their events, which were often characterised by playfulness and informality. These qualities were reminiscent of the Dadaists and Marcel Duchamp, and became seminal for 'happenings' a decade later. Events were often designed to encourage maximum audience participation like Allan Kaprow's *Household (1964)*, a performance at Cornell University in Ithaca, USA.

Argentinean born Rirkrit Tiravanija's aesthetic blurs the boundaries between artistic practice and life. Like a contemporary successor to Fluxus he generates projects that challenge the contextuality of cultural myths. In 1999 he produced *Community Cinema For a Quiet Intersection (Against Oldenburg)* in Glasgow in which he turned a residential junction into an outdoor cinema. A poll distributed among residents established that the four most popular films in the neighbourhood were, *It's A Wonderful*

Opposite page: Marijke van Warmerdam, *Douche* (permanent installation Schiphol Airport), 35mm film-loop, 1995. Courtesy: the artist. Bottom right and middle: Janet Cardiff, *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)*, 1999. Photo: Gerrie van Noord. Courtesy: Artangel. Bottom left: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (with Will Bauer and Susie Ramsay), *Displaced Emperors*, 1997. Courtesy: Ars Electronica Center

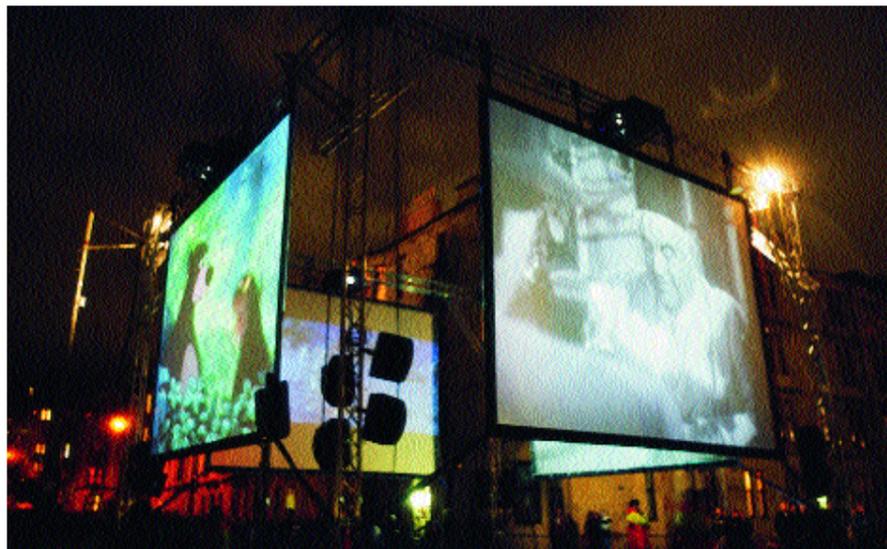


Right (top & bottom): **Rirkrit Tiravanija**, *Community Cinema For a Quiet Intersection (Against Oldenburg)*, 1999. Photo: Andrew Lee. Courtesy: The Modern Institute, Glasgow. Bottom: **Allan Kaprow**, 'Household' happening, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1964. Photo: Sol Goldberg #4466. Courtesy: Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library

Life, Casablanca, The Jungle Book and *A Bug's Life*. The films were simultaneously projected onto screens suspended above an intersection. He then served his trademark Thai-style cuisine and provided some seating. The amalgam of social space and cultural interaction constructed a collective experience among purveyors of Hollywood culture, through the distinctive choice of their films.

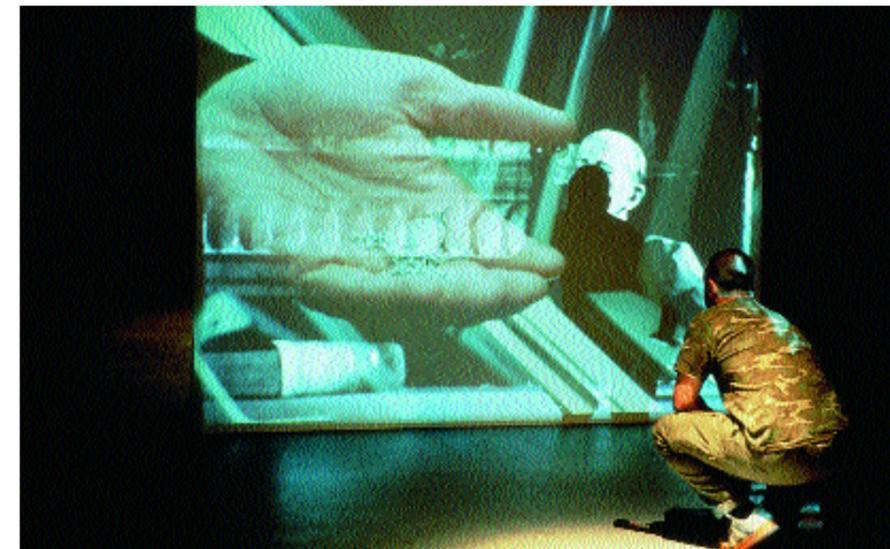
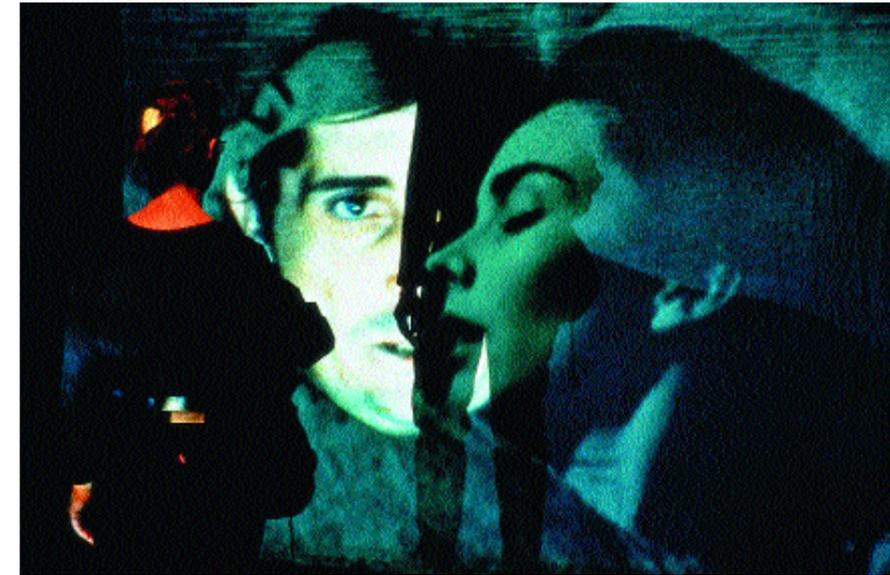
The 1960s was a period defined by enormous social upheaval out of which video and performance began to flourish. Artists bent on opposing conventional modes of production seemed to echo the radical socio-political changes that were engulfing societies burdened by post-war conservatism. They were searching for new ways to re/define their relationship to society. They became critical of the insularity of art practice, the passivity of audiences used to engaging 'high-art', and most of all their lack of integration into society. These attitudes resonate in contemporary art as many artists continue to negotiate audience engagement by manipulating spatial boundaries that dislocate our experience of familiar surroundings. In *Douche* (1995) Marijke van Warmerdam projected a 35mm film loop onto a screen in the underground station at Schiphol Airport (The Netherlands). As passengers waited on the platform they were confronted by a large image of a man's head drenched by water from a shower. The intervention evoked a sensation of private displacement, a moment suspended in time by the latent temporal quality of the film loop staged behind the constant movement of passengers and trains.

Nam June Paik, credited as the doyen of electronic media regularly destroyed video and television equipment in performances, attacking the most cherished icon and the very essence of western culture. In an exhibition in Wuppertal, Germany (1963) he corrupted the image on a monitor by disrupting the transmission with magnets. He placed monitors randomly in the gallery, and then proceeded to scratch and disfigure them physically. This synthesis of physical and electromagnetic disruption stripped the television set of its associations and connotations as a functional object that occupied the home. *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969/1970), a collaboration between Paik and Charlotte Moorman, was performed in Fluxus happenings. The performance usually consisted of two miniature TV 'monitors' adapted to fit a bra worn by



Moorman while she played the cello; both objects became dissociated from their normal functions. Like many others Paik took advantage of technology that facilitated artists in permeating society. Around 1968 Sony introduced a portable video camera called the Portapak, an apparatus that compared to contemporary equipment was bulky and cumbersome.

Armed with an arsenal of wiring, accessories and cameras, artists ventured into communities resembling wired cyber-citizens to record their experiences. The fluidity of the medium and the 'presentness' inherent in the process of filming encouraged them to capitalise on the moment. Combining the language of various media artists challenged western canons of capitalism. In 1976 Dan Graham installed *Video for Two Showcase Windows* in a display window, a complex video intervention delving into psychoanalysis, alienation and urbanism. He placed video cameras and monitors on either side of a shopping corridor reflecting images of the viewer/consumer amongst all the products on display. By interweaving a reflection of the consumer with the goods arranged for display Graham exposed vulnerabilities in our acceptance of consumerism and the spectacle of shopping. Within a similar context where he appropriates a social space and subverts our preconceptions of function, Douglas Gordon showed a video installation in a pedestrian underpass at the Sculpture Projects Exhibition in Munster. In *Between Darkness and Light (after William Blake)* (1997) Gordon placed a projection screen across a pedestrian tunnel directly interfering with the traffic flow. On one side of the screen he projected *The Exorcist* by William Friedkin (1973) and on the other side *The Song of Bernadette*, by Henry King (1943). The films were projected back-to-back playing continuously with sounds emanat-



ing from either end of the tunnel. A curious amalgam of images crystallised on a translucent screen. Depending on the scene and intensity of light some images would dominate while others receded into the darkness almost disappearing. Gradually one became aware of the constant wrestle between good and evil as the images battled for supremacy of the surface. Gordon comments on his intentions: "Having spent time in and around the underpass, I began to focus less and less on the architecture of the space, per se, and more and more on the function of 'passing through' from one place to another; in a concrete sense, and also on a metaphorical level. The underpass is neither above the city, nor beneath; it exists as a conduit between one state, and another". John Cage's deconstructive sound interventions during the 1960s often utilised rudimentary forms of technology. Similarly in the 1990s Janet Cardiff's walk series involved participants on a journey away from the gallery, creating a narrative between reality and fiction where anything could happen. Exploiting the concept of the audio-tour instituted by museums, participants were given instructions to explore a park via a Walkman. In *Drogan's Nightmare* (1998) presented at the XXIV Bienal de São Paulo visitors were led out of the building into a park. Listeners were lured by the intensity of her voice and the narrative into a collage of sound that left them somewhere between actual experience and fictional plot. In a space where one would normally be

secluded, enmeshed in a natural environment, physical existence became intertwined with fictional characters. The tour culminated in a circumnavigated fantasy that led them back to the venue. It's stimulating to work within a medium that has acquired such density within a relatively recent history. References to technology in contemporary art practice are often rhetorical, an ambiguous label that anticipates technological supremacy as a mutually exclusive agent. Although technological capability can play a significant role, it is not always sufficient to qualify a work as socially innovative or integrative. The works mentioned here use a variety of technologies but they also have a significant relationship to space and a temporal moment of intent, which locates them within art history. Artists have a responsible role as mediators of some sort and thus forays into technological investment need to be accompanied by a substantial desire for inquiry. Otherwise why rely on technology when, as Laurie Anderson says, "there is no reason why a perfectly relevant work can't be made with a pencil."

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Left (top and bottom): **Douglas Gordon**, *Between Darkness and Light (after William Blake)*, 1997. Photo: Roman Mensing. Courtesy: Gagosian Gallery, New York. Below: **Nam June Paik**, *Concerto for TV Cello, Project '74'*, Köln, Kölnischer Kunstverein, 6.7.1974. Photo: Hanns Sohm. Courtesy: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Sohm Archive

Further information:

WEBSITES

World Wide Video Festival
www.wvvf.nl to view works by Nam June Paik and many other video artists outside Europe.

Ars Electronica
www.aec.at and Liverpool Biennial International 2002 www.biennial.org.uk to view work by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.

Artthrob
www.artthrob.co.za arts website showcasing events all over the globe.

BOOKS

Okwui Enwezor (editor), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945 – 1994*, Prestel 2001.

Roselee Goldberg (editor), *Performance, Live Art since the Sixties, A comprehensive photographic account of performance since the 1960s*, Thames & Hudson 1998.

Sculpture Projects in Munster, Hatje 1997.

Documenta X: Short Guide, Cantz 1997.

'Inhabited spaces' is devised and commissioned by Deborah Smith in collaboration with [a-n] MAGAZINE. The series compliments and enhances existing editorial taking us on a journey through innovative practice exploring definitions and reinventions of our ideas of expression, looking at the shifts in language and discourses of art. In the January issue, the fourth in the series, *Jes Fernie looks at the fusion between art and architecture*. Deborah Smith is an independent curator and co-director of smith + fowle.

