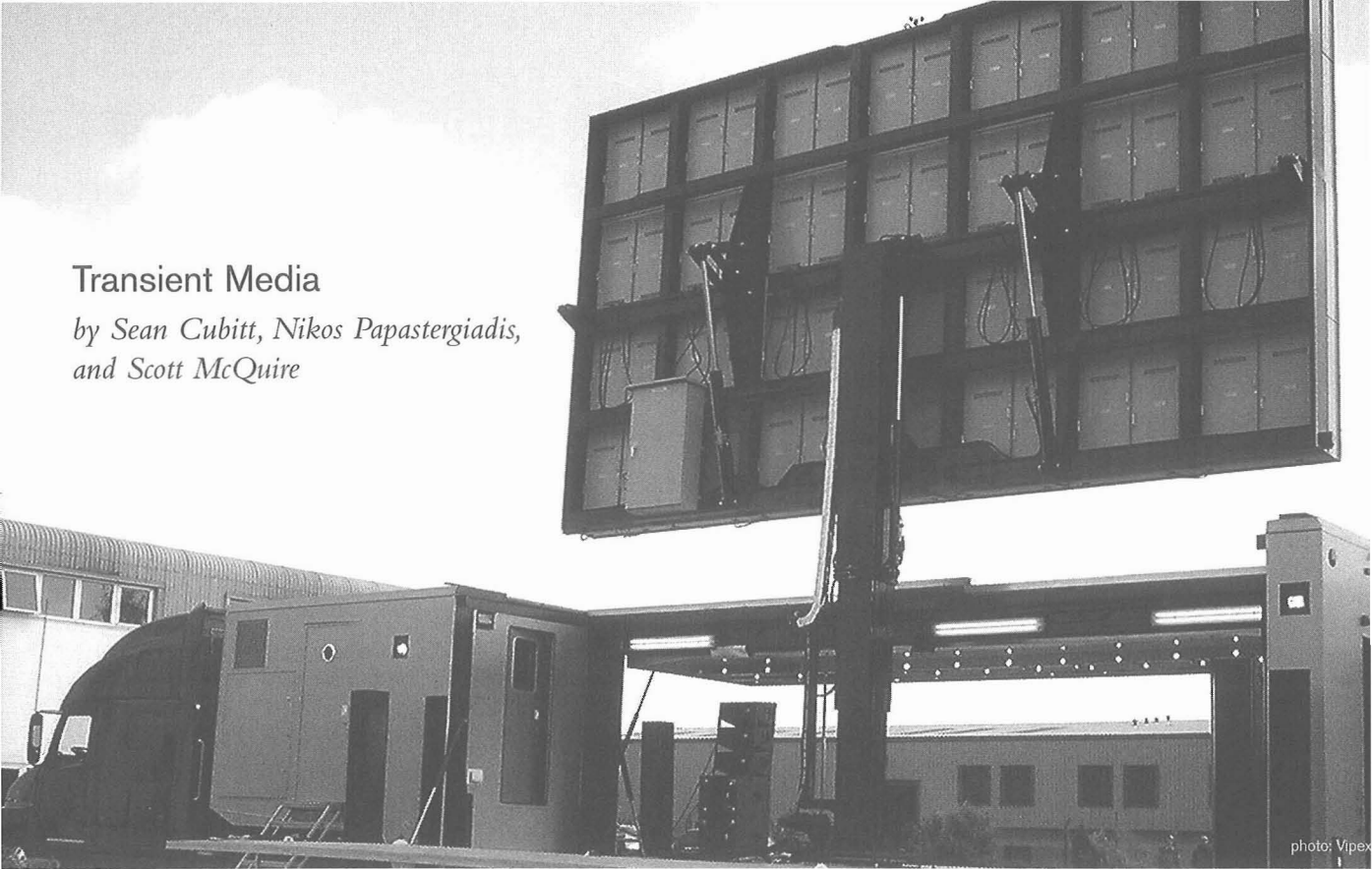


Transient Media

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Transience occurs, like any event, in time, but its structure is spatial. The homeless transient wanders the roads. Venus transits the Sun. The traveller in the airport lounge is in transit. All media are time based, even those that sit still, because they are experienced in time. But certain media are mobile, or, to much the same effect, certain media are fixed in places where their audiences are mobile. The large-scale urban screens that form the centre of our research are often placed so they can be seen from cars on the expressways of the city (in Seoul, for example), for all intents, merely glorified billboards. Our interest lies in how these increasingly common technologies interact with public spaces when they offer more than advertisements. We approach the subject from several integrated perspectives, including urban planning, the history of the crowd, and the evolution of new content. Underlying them, however, is an attempt to understand the grounds on which a new type of public space might appear, a technological geography of that forgotten topic of high modernism: the crowd. The concept of transience, we feel, may offer us a new insight into the operation of public screens in the emergent urbanism of ubiquitous media. In what follows, we establish the distinction

between transience and ephemerality; place transience in the context of a certain utopianism of the biopolitical management of populations; proffer an ecological understanding of how public screens mediate places to themselves; and finally, offer a critical view of a new mode of cultural practice that these conditions make possible. This form is a post-individual affect, a quality of crowds, which we characterize as the database unconscious—the embodied experience of the city that is excluded from digitization. We begin with a distinction between transience and ephemerality.

Transience and Ephemerality

All media are ephemeral to some extent, and it is a truism that the more contemporary a medium, the more ephemeral it is likely to be. Paper is surprisingly robust and inks keep their colour surprisingly well. Photographic film is reasonably trustworthy over decades. Magnetic media are at risk of corruption after about ten years, and optical media even sooner. So much so that contemporary digital film producers are storing their data files and their master copies on film stock, an unnerving parallel with early film archives at the Library

of Congress, where the only surviving copies of early movies were printed on paper, initially for copyright purposes, but with the unexpected bonus that paper prints survived when the celluloid did not. The Refresh conference, held in Banff, Alberta, in 2005, brought together curators and archivists concerned that much of the early generation of digital artists' work was already lost.¹ Though it is possible to emulate the code for some of these pieces on modern computers, the response times, colour gamuts, refresh rates—the whole look and feel—are changed by their migration from five-inch floppies and prototype touchscreens like Ivan Sutherland's 1963 sketchpad. Ben Laposky's works survive because he photographed from oscilloscope screens, but for many artists this would be documentation rather than the work itself. Much the same can be said of emulators.

The reality is that a vast quantity of the world's information will not survive for long. The Berkeley "How Much Information" project estimates that print, film, magnetic, and optical storage media produced about 5 exabytes of new information in 2002 (an exabyte is 10 to the 18th power, a terabyte 10 to the 12th power).² Ninety-two percent of the new information was stored on magnetic media, mostly hard disks. Telephone calls worldwide on both landlines and mobile phones contained 17.3 exabytes of new information if stored in digital form. This represents 98 percent of the total of all information transmitted in electronic information flows, most of it person-to-person. About 70 million hours (3,500 terabytes) of 320 million hours of radio broadcasting is original programming. TV worldwide produces about 31 million hours of original programming (70,000 terabytes) out of 123 million total hours of broadcasting.

A few notes are needed to contextualize these figures. First, no single researcher could watch a year's worth of new television programming. It is unlikely that even the whole community of television scholars could do so. No archive, not even the virtual archive composed of the international federation of archives, could contain the whole output. Some kind of sampling is all that can be afforded, and the media that are most capable of recording the sample are themselves subject to a speedy loss of quality. Second, we do not expect our phone calls to be stored, indeed we distrust attempts to do so. We are culturally acquainted with the fact that mediation is not the same as storage. Third, the attempt to make statements about the unknowable content of all the data produced in a single year not only adds to the pile of unread data, it raises the question of what we consider to be data. Among the many questions to be answered are those

concerning what constitutes information and what might be the legitimate interests of future researchers. While we might be able to answer the former, it is to be hoped that we are incapable of answering the latter in its entirety. The origins of a future pandemic may lie in X-ray archives of some hospital, but we cannot know at which football match the future emperor of Peru is at, shouting from the stands, less so what lines of intellectual enquiry are likely to emerge in the coming centuries. Like the widow of Richard Burton, translator of *The Arabian Nights*, we may be in the process of destroying, out of shame or economy, works of whose value to succeeding generations we have little or no idea.

Ephemerality is then built into the very fabric of contemporary media. Those that we wish to preserve, that we intuit will form the canon of the future, we make our best endeavours to care for, but increasingly with the knowledge that whatever pains we take, and regardless of the positive or negative prioritization of archiving among future governments, much of what we prize will be reft from us, and much of it sooner rather than later. As Rutger Hauer's Roy Batty says at the end of *Blade Runner*, "All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain." As media historians, we regret this deeply. As citizens of the twentieth century, we mourn it. But as media analysts in the twenty-first century, we welcome it. Ephemerality is an intrinsic quality of the contemporary, and therefore of contemporary media. Ephemerality is the price we pay for ubiquity. The ephemerality of our media is to be treasured like the ephemerality of a performance, of a kiss. Mere repetition is not virtue. The specificity of any moment of mediation is precious, and to some extent incommunicable. That the material objects of such mediation may also perish is no more significant than the fact that I can never kiss my partner for the first time again.

The transient is not the same as the ephemeral. It describes not a relation in time, but a relation in space, a relation normally between one moving and one unmoving party, or two moving parties, to an act of mediation. If we accept the traditional distinction between subject and object, we might situate the transient as an axis between them, a vector that goes both ways and that inaugurates a material process between them that cannot be distinguished as "subject" or "object" and that, in honour of its technology and its future-orientation, we can think of as project. In what follows, we hope to identify some characteristics of the project of transient media. To make this a little more manageable, we focus on one form of transient media in particular: large-scale screens in public spaces.

The Management of Utopia

By far, the largest assembly of large-scale public screens was built in Beijing for the 2008 Olympics, a collection of 162 screens, one for each competing nation. Olympic villages are of their nature utopian projects, stitched to the goals of the Olympic Movement. The 2004 Olympic Charter gives as its first two fundamental principles the following:

1. Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.

2. The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.³

They call for universal ethical principles (principles four and five declare sport a human right and condemn discrimination) grounded on principles of joy and the good. While this might appear to be hedging bets between virtue and utilitarian ethics (and between balance on the one hand and will on the other), the second principle embraces the harmony fundamental to Asian ethics, the peace that was once the highest value propounded by the Communist Party, and the dignity that is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. This catholic embrace of multiple ethical priorities in an effort towards their synthesis through sport, education, and culture is exemplary of the difficulty any international body, or indeed any cosmopolitan individual, is likely to find in verbalizing formally the qualities for which we would wish to strive. The desire to unify these qualities into a single movement is nowhere more concretely expressed than in the design of Olympic villages. In the case of the 2008 Beijing village, Sydney-based PTW Architects promise an ecologically themed, designed, and built environment featuring solar power, passive ventilation, water conservation, and walkways allowing fauna as well as humans to cross into the nearby Forest Park.

The screens will form an element in this design, but one that may not last as long as the Olympic Village, which is destined for commercial and residential use post-Games. The key role of the screens will come during

the games themselves, when an estimated half-million foreign visitors are expected, in addition to domestic visitors and thousands of athletes. The screens will be in place specifically for the purposes of the Games, to cater to a transient audience, and people in Beijing will also be able to watch the games for free on digital mobile transmissions, suggesting that the large screens will not be restricted to relaying events from the various stadia.⁴ This profusion of mediations is likely to offer only restricted interactive capabilities, given regional and national governments' sensitivities. But interactivity is not necessarily exclusively political and, after all, harmony is also an Olympic ideal. In fact, according to an early announcement on the official site of the Beijing Olympics, large electronic screen walls will be erected in public places such as Wangfujing, Xidan, Beijing Capital International Airport, the Beijing Railway Station, the Beijing West Railway Station, the China Millennium Monument, the Olympic Green, and the Central Business District. These screens will be used to publicize the purpose of the Olympic Games, socialist moral standards, and information for the public.⁵ The Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG) explains the "purpose" of the Games through its core concepts: "the Green Olympics, the High-tech Olympics and the People's Olympics," adding that it aims "to advance cultural exchanges, to deepen understanding and friendship between the peoples of the world, and to promote harmonious development between mankind and nature."⁶ In its ambitions, the BOCOG is not out of step with the curatorial ambitions expressed by a number of people working in the large screen environment. Writing in *First Monday*, Kate Taylor, reporting on the Manchester Bigger Picture project, notes that the political space of Exchange Square is as important to the ambient functioning of the screen and screen works as the content, or the climate, and that the area is inscribed with the political values of the City Council and the commercial businesses operating there. While the marketing managers of Triangle Shopping Centre on which the Big Screen is attached have a strong view of their target customer for the area—"the young urban achiever"—the behaviour of people in the space is physically regulated with the City Council's anti-skateboard partitions and a no-alcohol zone.

This branding and regulation exclude certain people and behaviours, and counter-publics emerge in the form of homeless people, young skateboarders, and activists. To some extent, the Big Screen, with its overtones of the big brother state, can encourage such fragmentation, both in

terms of social groupings and normalized patterns of behaviour.⁷ In short, the project of transient media, whether in the benevolent dictatorship of curatorial intention and public service broadcasting in Manchester, or in the combination of civic duty and Olympic ideals in Beijing, is in its deepest heart utopian, but it is also anchored in the recognition that it must operate within the specifics of its situation.

An Ethic of Situations

Transient media are tightly bound to the constraints of the situations into which they intervene. For Guy Debord, the situation meant the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.⁸ We must develop a systematic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the behaviours that environment gives rise to and that radically transform it, suggesting prophetically that “One can envisage, for example, televised images of certain aspects of one situation being communicated live to people taking part in another situation somewhere else, thereby producing various modifications and interferences between the two.”⁹ Such a strategy has been employed quite often in large screen presentations, linking city to city, city to country, or a city to its own history. But it raises the question of what constitutes the situation of a particular screen when, in addition to being present, it represents an absent elsewhere. Rather than address this in terms of representation and its collapse, we prefer to consider it as mediation, under the ethical rubric of an ecology of situations.

In the era of ecological consciousness and in the wake of Sigmund Freud, we are aware not only that our motives may not be conscious, but that we may be unaware of the consequences of actions we take, even though unexpected consequences, such as global warming, may be the most serious consequences of what we do or do not do (for example in the utilitarian pursuit of the happiness of the greatest number of people). Transient media, particularly in the case of the large screen projects that form the focus of our research, are new in the sense that they begin to operate in a new situation: that of an ethics of responsibility for unintended consequences.

The ecology of situations understands that consequences arise not only from individual, but from collective activities. Distinct from law, with its necessarily individual concept of responsibility, such an ethics recognizes the responsibility of collectives. The aggregation of populations into responsible agents is not in itself a new thought. It

is implicit in Karl Marx, and before him in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but it takes on a new form in the age of what Gilles Deleuze refers to as societies of control.¹⁰ This is yet another periodizing move, distinguishing network societies from the earlier disciplinary society discussed by Michel Foucault. As developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri,¹¹ the concept refers to a distributed network of self-regulating systems, a thesis further refined by Alexander Galloway in the term “protocol,” referring to the common standard software used to operate the internet and other network functions, embedded standard codes which, rather like the road network, simultaneously make possible but also constrain the kinds of behaviour possible in them.¹²

For us, the most significant aspect of protocol and control is that they operate at the level of aggregate populations rather than individuals. Their terrain, as in Foucault’s biopolitics, is no longer the individual, but the statistical and probabilistic behaviours of populations. It is at this level that large screens in public spaces address their audiences. In terms of “outcome,” the most observable consequence of installing a screen is that it modifies the group behaviour of crowds transiting the space where it is installed. Rather like the process used in urban design, which observes people’s average pathways through an area as a guide to the layout of pavements, a civic space is always characterized by common routes of transit. A large screen, if it has any effect at all, will have an effect on the movement of people through the space, creating a kind of gravitation towards itself that will alter the ways in which people make their ways across a plaza or square, encouraging them to dwell a little longer, or at the least to slow their progress, turn their heads, and catch a glimpse. Older models of aesthetics focus on the transformative effect of the artwork on a single consciousness. A significant role of large screens is to create situations that have a minor impact on large numbers of consciousnesses. It is in this climate that screens confront the silence of the silent majority.

Transition

It is a salutary thought that “Psychoanalysis and passports were introduced at almost the same time.”¹³ The opposition of individual/society that drives sociology emerges in their mutual construction through media formations like these. The passport is an absurd object, a universal signifier of uniqueness. In the ecological situation, such constructions are not unreal. On the contrary, those especially that bare their own and other contradictions are deeply real, in the minimal sense that they have consequences, and in the

maximal sense that they are media and therefore material. The question arises, however, of what order of practice can be undertaken in these situations, where control seeps deeper into more areas of life, and where the human ecology is perhaps the last alternative avenue.

Early digital works used simple iterative behaviours modelled on flocking algorithms or “termite” instruction sets. Many deployed emergent properties in chaotic systems. Many contemporary works are grounded on remote sensing of statistically significant network behaviours, such as Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin’s *The Listening Post*. Here, human activity is raw material, in much the same way as weather conditions or telemetry from the outer planets for other artists. Other online works like *Drawball* distinguish themselves by encouraging “stigmergic collaborations,” large-population interactions that use not simply iterative but locally-scaled creativity to encourage large populations to come together to make a global change to the installed situation.¹⁴ While individual acts in *Drawball* are often highly evocative and their histories intensely interactive, what is most impressive is the emergence of large activities requiring the coordinated actions of sometimes hundreds of people. The VIP symbol, which has been maintained on *Drawball* almost since it began, is, like other islands of achievement, always open to the statistical likelihood of vandalism. The significance of such practices for the probabilistic activity of large screens is that they indicate the possibility of assimilating personal creativity into group actions, much like the way that individual programmers contribute to the development of Linux. The principle of many-to-many communication embedded in network protocols encourages that scale of ambition.

At the same time, a very unambitious project can prove immensely fruitful. Getting a screen to mediate its immediate site is enormously popular: many of the online images unearthed by Googling “federation square large screen” are photos taken by tourists of themselves projected on the twenty-metre screen in Melbourne, Australia.

The practice may perhaps seem facile, and to open itself to the charge of being merely touristic. And yet the role of a screen in mediating the reality of a place also forms a part of its functionality. That the practice receives little artistic or cultural kudos should not detract from its potential value as an intervention. For the duration of their presence on the screen, any passerby can occupy the place in a way that, in general, urban spaces are not usually occupied. That act of occupation can transform the experience of space, an experience that, since the

writing of Henri Lefebvre, we should be able to read as constitutive of it.¹⁵ The “non” of non-space, the “non-lieux” of Marc Augé’s supermodernity¹⁶ is a “non” of experience, a nullity, an annulment, the vacation of space by anything recognizable as a project. What is left is perhaps just that subject that is the object of biopolitics, a statistical probability, an actuarial likelihood, and no more. To take possession of space even through the simulation of scale brought about through the feedback of large-screen closed-circuit television is to occupy the place of Big Brother. And while this may be analyzed as false consciousness, or an ideological hailing to identify with omnipotence, it is equally analyzable as satire.

Nor are participants naive enough to believe it is their “self” who appears on screen. Everyone mugs for the camera, or performs the ritual of being photographed: straightening hair, tucking in shirt, standing up straighter, smiling. Such performances, ritualized or improvised, are the stuff of the public presentation of self, which always only unveils the lack of a self to present, or rather, that the self is only present when it is presented. Otherwise, we shuffle through the square as invisible to ourselves as we are to others. In this making visible, this singling out, there is a magical invitation to existence that transforms a public space.

The touristic moment of photographing yourself posing for what is in effect a surveillance camera is so fascinating not only because it seizes an opportunity to assert your own existence, but also because the act is entirely typical. The nexus of surveillance and self-assertion brings to mind the reality TV show *Big Brother*, whose ideological function is to emphasize what everybody already knows—we are all individuals—in a global situation in which individuality counts for less and less. The assertion of individuality becomes a typical and necessary act for the reproduction of a system of distributed control. We must retain our capacity for action in order for what is now a cosmopolis to work. At the same time however, it is incumbent upon us to act within the parameters set for us by the protocols of biopolitics, that is, within the range of statistical probability. The depressing truth revealed by micro-targeted advertising, for example, is that even at what we regard as our most idiosyncratic, we are behaving within norms that still attract advertisers. In a summer in which cinema audiences decline, it’s more than likely that you also failed to visit a cinema. In a year in which the biggest worry expressed in opinion polls is the cost of oil, you too are probably worried by petrol prices. It is not that norms are in some way more nor-

mative today than in earlier epochs, but that the mode of their operation is now fundamentally actuarial. What counts is not the individual, but the aggregate.

A similar dialectic holds good in the construction of place, such as occurred around the Federation Square big screen in Melbourne during the 2006 World Cup soccer. It is vital to capital flows that cities are in some sense indistinguishable: that every major population centre hosts standardized protocols for financial flows, trade relations, intellectual property, and tax laws. Likewise, each major city is expected to have an exhibition centre, a conference facility, hotels with certain standards of efficiency, cleanliness, and service, restaurants of a particular range of quality, a selection of the big touring entertainments, plus an opera house and a ballet company, the latest Hollywood films, and a sporting venue capable of hosting international events. But it is also true that each city is expected to deliver a unique experience, typically symbolized by an iconic building or engineering feat. The irony is that iconic buildings like the Petrobras Towers, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, or Auckland's Skytower, while distinctive, are interchangeable. Like the individuality of individuals, the specificity of the icon is a component of its typicality.

Big screens, which are increasingly obligatory furniture in global cities, in one sense are a visualization of this non-specific specificity of public spaces. As furniture—that is to say, considered apart from their content—screens announce the arrival of contemporaneity. In their frequent use to connect disparate cities, they reproduce the smoothness of global flows as spectacle, indicating at once the specificity of each terminal screen's location in one particular city, and the fact that all cities are transmissible, and to that extent, equivalent. Big screens are in this sense new expressions of an already existing situation.

However, it is in their relation to their audiences that big screens indicate their capacity to do more than reproduce the protocols of global capital flows. At the heart of this relation is the embodied nature of the audience, not only as individual bodies, but as a crowd. The invitation to dialogue is only apparently extended to individuals, in fact it is extended to crowds. This level of intervention is effectively actuarial, a matter of a more or less unlikely statistical event, such as a mass sit-down in a public square. Art history and criticism envisages a far more intensive and individualistic experience. In everyday journalism about art, in classic essays like Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood,"¹⁷ and in poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti's line, "In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see,"¹⁸ the "we" refers to an individual experience. The

well-known, if possibly sourceless, urban myth that viewers spend only fractions of a second on average is phrased according to something closer to what we want to uncover. This is a statistic derived from a population, not from individual behaviour, still less from an intensity of individual experience. The values of each account of art, the intense and the statistical, rest on different value structures. Both are capable of saying "Dali's lobster telephone is the most popular exhibit at the Tate Modern." But the evaluation implicit in each statement is entirely different. In a more positive light, both accounts distinguish between their forms of value and cash, even when blockbuster movies not only have to count the box office returns and turnstile figures, but frequently use them in marketing pitches to drum up more trade and sponsorship.

The actuarial mode thus addresses transience as transition, initially as the transit of people through open urban spaces. Such spaces are always artificial, being the scion of a contradiction between the urban and the open. To a great extent, such spaces have either lost or never possessed the ritual tracks and pathways afforded by processions and displays of strength. Instead, daily navigation is usually unconscious. What big screens do is intervene quietly in that unconscious navigation, drawing tracks towards them, creating a curve in habitual straight lines. Individually, the impact is trivial. Collectively, it sculpts a new shape out of the aggregate movement of the crowd. It may also slow the communal pace of walking to a shared saunter. It is an effect like slow motion.

Slow motion itself is a statistical effect brought about by changing the rate of sampling (the shutter speed) or the read-rate (projection speed). Cinematic movement as a whole is a statistical aggregation of moments averaged across time. This is why it is important to realize that the unit of film is not the frame, but a cluster of three frames: this one, the one presently vanishing, and the one about to appear, plus the frame lines that separate them. In the case of the pixel-based digital screen, a similar truth is unavoidable. The unit is not the single pixel, but the array, and the array itself is driven statistically by its refresh rate. Rates of exposure and rates of scanning interlace with the already formidable complexities through which an image, especially a representational one, functions as a sampling of light from the area, and a sampling of its rates of change. That its effectiveness should be likewise statistical is entirely fitting. And this is the platform that allows a public screen to take place in a situation without invading existing territories. The screen supplements the organization of space, so typically

organized around civic values, moral laws, and the necessity to provide infrastructure for services, production, and shopping. The bending of aggregate practices around the screen is then an action entirely in accord with the normal working practices of the space, and yet one that has specific capabilities very different from either the movie house or the art gallery, the domestic TV or, in a certain sense, from the mobile screens by which it is surrounded and with which it so often integrates.

That interface, its ability to integrate with the invisible networks of mobile media, is one of the most intriguing aspects of large screens. Phone calls and text messages are among the most ephemeral of all media, but they, too, can have their moment in the sun on large screens integrating SMS text with other screen elements. In that moment, rather like the opportunity to catch yourself and your family or friends on screen, the effect is one of transition from a private unconsciousness (of how we look, how we walk) into spectacle by a magical act in which our private selves evaporate in the reproduction of the camera and the screen, even at the moment at which a self most seems to be affirmed by its public election. This new consciousness brings with it a new mode of unconsciousness, one that is proper not to the individual and her desire, but to the crowd and its behaviours.

Truth and Place

The event beckons—the possibility of an outrageous change, the potential for an entirely memorable moment, the capacity to begin a dialogue in the crowd, or a dialogue between crowds. Alain Badiou imagines truth as what emerges suddenly from a situation, more specifically from the void at the heart of an existing situation.¹⁹ The event that truly is one, rather than the outcome of a statistical likelihood, is revolution, love, a new mode of art or thought. And yet what we witness in public spaces is a half-conscious inhabitation of places that do not quite exist, except as zones of probability that will be inhabited according to broadly predictable patterns. And yet, always, even in this situation where an aggregate of behaviours constitutes the effect, the event beckons. Can the transitions that accumulate around large screens have anything to contribute to such a truth?

Badiou's theses, even as they refuse the individualism of dominant discourse, still respond to Romantic concepts of art. Artistic or scientific truths are events that open up new vistas, like Arnold Schönberg's twelve-tone row. They radicalize the moment of their arrival, demanding extreme commitment and often bitter struggles. Such an

imagination of the situation is Romantic in the sense that it recognizes as event only what changes the world around it, as William Butler Yeats had it, utterly. There seems to be a strong possibility in the case of public screens that such *sturm und drang* is no longer a defining characteristic of culture, creativity or perhaps even politics. In its place we find "relational space," which "can only be defined by the temporary position occupied by each subject in relation to numerous others, which suggests that relational space is not easily unified since every subject belongs to multiple matrices or networks that overlap and interpenetrate."²⁰

The change involves what Bernard Stiegler calls mnemotechnics.²¹ Globalization has integrated the technologization of memory—whose roots extend back to the invention of writing—into the technologies of production and reproduction to such an extent that personal memory is now evanescent. Global data banks are more than prosthetic memory, they are replacing memory, and with it the grounds on which genuine experience can occur. Without memory, experience is robbed of its basis in the actions of recognizing the familiar and discovering the new. Likewise, without memory, experience no longer has a basis on which to project the likely outcomes of what it experiences or what it might do in action. The global database, which in the current context can be identified as the technological realization of control in the statistical management of populations, robs those populations of experience. This vast human memory, once technologized, is the instrument of rule. Indeed, it stands where the sovereign once stood, the derivative of humanity excluding an actual living human or even an elite from standing in the position of rule.

What Stiegler does not observe is that this vast human memory also has its own unconscious, and that that unconscious takes the form of what it excludes, that is the mass of living, breathing human bodies. Databases are not only storehouses of past events, they are predictive, extrapolating from past behaviours the likely trends of the nearer or further future. Mnemotechnic control is premised on such projections derived from past behaviours, exactly those past behaviours it has removed from its human subjects. These statistical likelihoods are its processes and methods, but also its goals, for this is the exclusive language in which it operates. It might appear that terrorism, or shock in more aesthetic forms, would be guaranteed to disrupt the machinery of mnemotechnics. Not so. Indeed, such irruptions are not only planned for, but they accelerate the pace at which people are ready to

sacrifice decision-making to automation, for example, in automated surveillance systems. If on the one hand this denotes the colonization of the future by the past (and incidentally erases the possibility of ethics by ensuring that any probable action is already accounted for), on the other it erases the present, as the scene of action. Such is database consciousness, but what is its unconscious like? Structured by its exclusions, the database unconscious is shaped in the material micro-realities of physical sensory existence, in actions where ethical decisions can be performed, and in the present.

What makes this significant is that in the societies of control, we no longer inhabit worlds premised on individuality. Biopower describes “the endeavour, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race.” Biopolitics “tends to treat the population as a mass of living and coexisting beings who present particular biological and pathological traits and who thus come under specific knowledge and technologies.”²² The realities excluded structurally from the database that are relegated to its unconscious are no longer those of individuals (a category constructed in a very different media formation to the network world). As the apotheosis of bureaucracy, the database merely regulates without will or desire. Thus, will and desire are also components of its unconsciousness. But such will and desire are no longer individual. Will and desire have already been mapped onto public behaviours of voting and shopping, and ascribed to the vestigial individual as beliefs and choices, identities, and lifestyles. Here, the inner life addressed by auratic art has revealed itself a sham, albeit one still vital in the reproduction of control and capital. The logic of control has at last cured humanity of personal unconsciousness (perhaps at the cost of rational consciousness, a category itself deeply stained with its history of exo- and endo-colonial genocide). The database unconscious is external, not internal: the microscopic reality and macroscopic unrationality of crowds.

The concept of transient media is intended to help foster a different approach, one grounded neither in individualistic acts nor in the sudden event, but rather in subtle changes in the milling of crowds. Just what this change of direction might imply is hard to imagine. The future is the future precisely because it cannot be predicted. The prediction of the future based on statistical modelling drives the actuarial realization of control as control over

time to come. The project of transient media does not resist this control, it proposes alternatives, such as locative media.

Described by a blog for the 2006 Networked Publics event as “A form of media art that has emerged in the past several years referring to mixed reality projects, often done with more lo-fi technologies, locative media generally tends to converge wireless and mapping technologies such as cell phones and GPS.”²³ At its best, locative media offers platforms for the reinhabiting of localities through the use of common devices like mobile phones. In projects like Proboscis’ Urban Tapestries (<http://urbantapestries.net>), users embed machine-readable memories around where they live. As a team member writes,

The context Urban Tapestries aims for is one in which a community organically records layers of histories, experiences and events that are linked to familiar locations and accessible to everyone. As the name suggests, it aims to knit together many layers of narrative and discourse over the topography of the city. Urban Tapestries seeks to provide a forum for ordinary people to write and remember their stories and share them with others, enabling an alternative to the single authored storytelling in our museums, history books, and media. By collecting these stories, a community’s memory may grow on many levels with a hierarchy defined only by a user accessing what is of interest to them.²⁴

This is a call for the elimination of unconsciousness in its old, personalized meaning, through a class action of public remembering, of publicizing intimacies, of invisibly grafting the walls and pavements with memories of pain and joy, excess and abjection, tenderness and rage. At its most utopian, for example in Ben Russell’s *Headmap Manifesto*, the locative media movement sees wireless, nomadic but place-sensitive media as an alternative to the state, capital, and repression of every kind.²⁵ As the internet leaks into reality, it will transform it. The problem with this utopianism is that the leakage has already taken place, not at the level of users, the imaginary community of network societies, but in the extension of bureaucratic control from the state apparatus to commerce, in the context of the neo-liberal commercialization of everything. Urban Tapestries and similar projects, such as those interfacing big screens with SMS text messaging, are a populist sublation of bureaucratic mnemotechnics, not because they personalize but quite the opposite: they

evacuate the self of all its secrecy in order to create living, embodied, experienced, public, and definitively present scenes, scenes where, at least in imagination, it is still possible to decide and to act, that is to become once again but in a newly socialized and externalized form, political, a polis.

Towards a conclusion

The problem with the locative project is neither its utopianism nor its frequent (and possibly deliberately provocative) political naivety (for example Mark Tutters's Blimp project for isea07 which deployed surveillance techniques otherwise used by the US right-wing border militia, the Minutemen). Rather, it is that it exhibits certain nostalgia for a local place that in many respects not only no longer exists but in all likelihood never existed in the terms envisaged. Like Peter Ackroyd's *London: A Biography*, some projects try too hard to embed memories in places which, like the central trope of the St. Giles area in Ackroyd's book, have been all but obliterated by processes of urban blight.²⁶

Transient media, the arts of place, have yet to achieve the goal of unpicking the threads of power because they have, for the most part, responded to control, most of all by erupting at the strategic place of the present, so unavailable to database consciousness. But to create the present as a site for action, it is not enough to provide the shadow in the projection. Actions that are genuinely so named must be consequential. Habitual, predictable, unthought, and most of all regulated behaviours, such as the application of a rule, are not actions at all, because their consequences are entirely known, within the degrees of probability projected in digital simulations. But if it is the case that we inhabit or are invited to inhabit a newly public polis in interactions with transient media, a post-individual scene, then action is no longer the outcome of individual will and desire but of what must properly be described as an ecological will and desire.

Productivity—in the form of mass participatory creativity—is the dynamo of Web 2.0's commercial comeback from the dot bomb of the early years of this century. Meaninglessness is no longer the fiefdom of the avant garde, but lies at the heart of contemporary consumerism. Nonetheless, a minor adjustment makes Mary Anne Doane's embrace of contingency as resistance to rationalization important for transient media if we redefine contingency not as random, but as contingent upon—the result of past ecologies, to be sure, but implying that future states of the human ecology are in turn contingent upon what we do now.²⁷

In an ecology, the consequences of an action are not predictable. That is why we can be responsible for actions: because they have consequences, and those consequences escape prediction and projection. As the unconscious of mnemotechnic machines, the crowd is still structured by what excludes it. In the art of the future, it will be vital to restructure that relationship by assuming the crowd as the unit of consciousness. As we know, however, there is no “unit” of consciousness: consciousness is not thinkable in less than the face-to-face relation, and more properly still in less than social relations. The art of the immediate future, the transient media that are most fascinating in their ambitions, are those that create the grounds not for web 2.0 social networking of vestigial individuals, but for the dialogue between crowds.

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NOTES

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