chapter 2: *screenworld*

the takeover of public space, or, *lost in screenworld*

Traditional conceptions of space are to do with boundaries: inside and outside, the concept of national space, sovereign spaces, legal and illegal spaces, and resistant spaces. The concept of 'architectural media space' relates to public and private spaces. It relates to media – print, sound and moving image and how these work in the spaces we inhabit, be they domestic and work spaces, or transport areas like railway stations and airports, or the driving spaces of streets and highways. Each space engenders its own, albeit transient, community.

Then there are the networks themselves – the internet and the possibilities it offers for communities derived from media forms like muds, moos, lists and blogs. 'Internet Architecture' is a possible name for the practice of using the internet as a delivery mechanism to inhabit and or change actual urban spaces. This practice is exemplified in recent projects of the Berlin Chaos Computer Club[1] and *Vectorial Elevation* by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.[2] There is the whole area of computational space and *networked* computational space (the big sibling of the internet – research networks like the US Grid,

or Australia's Partnership for Advanced Computing and the GrangeNet) and the kinds of architectural media practices which could emerge from these.

Television, as an arrangement of electricity and glass, has a number of siblings – those consumer areas that also require a glass surface as part of their narrative, like shopping centers, car windshields and computers. In this sense, writes Klein "television has now officially become a style of architecture, perception, even city planning."[3] What distinguishes television from the car windshield and the like is its simultaneous event space transmission of broadcast and reception.

A relatively new phenomena is the 'railway station television' that Channel 7 has developed on Sydney's eastern suburbs line. Television characters used to confront possible viewers as stills in newspaper or magazine ads or articles outside of domestic TV time/space, but this has encroached more significantly into public space with the advent of train-television – the taste of things to come. At the moment it is just ads and quick news updates to which people are glued as they wait on the platforms.

It is likely that as these spaces increase globally, small versions of existing programs will begin to be made for these spaces alone. Or maybe new shows altogether – precisely intended for such public spaces. A Japanese 'youth' expert described all media as virtual reality.[4] One can imagine a scenario where you can be with your (automated) screen friend from the moment you awake until you go to sleep via public screens or personal screens. That screen friend or set of friends could see you at home on TV or the net, be with you on the train or bus, be with you all day at work on the net, accompany you home, eat dinner with you and then chat before bed. No need to see or relate to anyone else… This is of course made more possible with advances in mobile communications.

One can envisage a future where it is not just the environment broadcasting to one, but one locked into a networked web of spatial narratives.

New phenomena such as the railway station broadcasts are the result of technological change: it is now possible to have cheap powerful projectors for relatively light environments; as well as networked and/or satellite connectivity. They are live, being produced and broadcast live from, for example, somewhere in Sydney to all locations. With the technology comes new possibilities and new problems.

The urban environment becomes a substrate in the code of the people living in that environment. Screens form the skin of the urban environment, bringing to life the Robert Venturi take on architecture, that it is primarily a communication instrument, and potentially a two-way, interactive one at that. Architects are typographers and the city is a graphic. People moving around such spaces develop new literacies born from that environment. As Nigel Coates says, "we learn to compensate, by adopting the vocabulary we are faced with."[5]

On his first visit to the city of Seoul, curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist was struck by the more than seventy large-scale electronic billboards all over the city. Every day, millions of passersby, from close to afar, see moving images in the streets of Seoul and from this came the idea of an exhibition on these large screens, *Seoul on the Move*. He writes "flickering screens create a massive, and at the same time very fugitive and ephemeral beauty in the visual environment, where the facades of the city become interwoven with giant billboards of moving images. These injections/inserts/polarities are new forms of the display of images, and hence, new media." [6]

External media spaces might be watched in a way that Dutch art critic Jeroen Boomgardt[7] has termed 'distracted viewing.' He traces this type of viewing as paralleled in the 1960s Fluxus happenings. Mainly nothing would ever happen, and then suddenly, abruptly, something would. Like a Warhol film. Like a lot of contemporary video art.

The narrative formations of such mediated urban zones are designed to capture the passing fragmentary attention of travelers. Billboards and screens are often large, approaching immersion. As Rothko said in a 1953 statement: "I paint large pictures because I want to create a state of intimacy. A large picture is an immediate transaction, it takes you into it."[8]

In 'distracted viewing' train-television mode the subject is in a kind-of sleep, a trance at the end of the day, and in this state their desire is mobilised via advertising and the strange fractured narratives that make up the world of mass media. Jonathan Crary in *Suspensions of Perception* writes of the modern age where attention:

> *is not reducible to attention to something. Thus attention within modernity is constituted by these forms of exteriority, not the intentionality of an autonomous subject. Rather than a faculty of some already formed subject, it is a sign, not so much of the subject's disappearance as of its precariousness, contingency and insubstantiality.* [9]

The idea is that of the subject as being-in-process, as the boundary of a continuous movement between inside and outside. The subject is a constant emergent entity – born of this world and communicating on its terms. Therefore it is what constitutes the

'outside' that plays such an instrumental role in determining the outcome and direction of subjective 'interiority' via the interface idea which was introduced in the previous chapter.

Speaking at the *Creative Cities* seminar, Melbourne media theorist Scott McQuire said that five years ago when he visited Las Vegas there were no large screens along the central boulevard.[10] On his most recent visit in 2003 there were at least 30-40 large screens along the same boulevard. On this main thoroughfare people don't so much drive but walk, and so have time to engage in some way with this abundance of screens within all the other theme park elements which make up this city. McQuire quoted Slavoj Zizek as saying that the idea of a fantasy space functions as a screen for the projection of desire. What kinds of desires are set in motion by these giant screens in Las Vegas? McQuire said that all they had on them were standard advertisements. However these screens are not television, and require a rethink. There is a lot more going on in a street than there is in a normal lounge-room. It is clear that large screen environments will need to develop new languages to speak themselves into being, given that at best passers-by engage with information screens from within the confines of 'distracted viewing.' Each of these 'new languages' will need dialects for those passing through the spaces at different velocities – walking, driving, viewing from a train or bus window and with varied levels of concentration. And also for those passers-by that don't necessarily speak English or whatever the language of the place is. A new kind of international lingua franca will come into being with the emergence of these large-scale public space screens. One assumes that graphic elements will feature significantly.

One question that needs to be addressed is who or what benefits from the current takeover of public space by giant screens and other marketing devices (billboards for example). The production of space is inherently political. Such productions determine

the way we occupy the city and the way we narrate our lives. The mediated city is becoming an increasingly placeless zone with all the sites alike, devoid of any unique cultural connection. This sense of placelessness is paralleled by the media – media which look the same everywhere on the globe (at least in the west, and increasingly elsewhere.)

In answer to this new realm of architecture, Paul Virilio has developed the concept of the 'Electronic Gothic', and writes that:

.... architecture is becoming a support for information, not to mention an advertising support and, in a broader sense, a mass media support... the Electronic Gothic of media buildings illuminates the crossroads - Times Square for example - in the same way that, in the Gothic cathedral, stained glass windows illuminated the nave or the presbytery to tell the story of the Church... During the Middle Ages, information was transmitted through its stained glass windows, sculptures, tapestries, mosaics [...]. But this information was fixed, static, constant, only renewed through the action of language and songs. Today, on the other hand, we are entering an age when information is active and interactive; in other words, we are no longer just dealing with frescoes on walls, sculptures in niches or stained glass windows, but with a place of action and interaction. ....time is no longer the time of a sequence alternating between day and night, but a time of immediacy, of instantaneousness and ubiquity; in other words, it possesses what in the past were the attributes of divinity.[11]

And in Australia as in much of the world, sport is the new religion. Flusser, mainly talking about newspapers, wrote in a prescient manner in 1983 that: "gigantic complex

apparatuses of photographic distribution have come into being. Attached to the output of the camera, they absorb images flowing out of the camera and reproduce them endlessly, deluging society with them via thousands of channels."[12] During the 2002 Soccer World Cup, staged in Korea, there was an abundance of local advertising for Sanyo projection systems, screens and players (also as prizes on all the major networks). We see the same focus in 2003 with the World Cup Rugby. If it's not cars, it's screens, *apparatus of capture*. Flusser's idea is basically that humans function to perpetuate the life and technical development of apparatus. For example, the creation of desire to own these objects in the minds of the sport viewers (or a desire encouraged by the apparatus itself), leads to greater sales, greater levels of colonisation by the apparatus and of course greater levels of R&D to produce even more advanced apparatus to enslave humans, as if by magic. There are increasing levels of global sporting events which access and colonise public space to perpetuate themselves as broadcasts. Sydney's Norton Street in Leichardt was completely closed off during the last World Cup Italian soccer game in 2002 and screens were in every restaurant in the area. The reaction of the British watching the UK game was that the entire country closed down, and in Moscow's Red Square two people were killed and many beaten following the Russian loss. Australia is no stranger to this, having long been subject to the televised sporting and gambling obsession around the annual Melbourne Cup event.

Such takeovers of public space and subsequent management of behaviour are becoming more prevalent in our culture. These are mainly for sporting events which have the effect of engendering an official nationalist and/or tribal spirit *wherever you may go*. The idea that there is *no outside* is one Vilem Flusser speaks to when he warns that critical awareness does not necessarily lead to a disenchantment of the images. That is, it can itself have been put under a magic spell, thereby becoming 'functional'. He cites

the Frankfurt school as second order paganism ". ..behind the images it uncovers secret, superhuman powers at work (for example capitalism) that have maliciously created all these programs instead of taking it for granted that the programming proceeds in a mindless automatic fashion."[13]

Such thinking reverberates with Maturana's notion of 'the domain of interactions' as a closed system (articulated in the previous chapter). However, the same subjectivity which can be subjected to the noise of architectural media space offers hope for change. Despite the pressures on it not to, I argue that the *new* does emerge, as humans are messy creatures and not so easily controlled. As N. Katherine Hayles notes:

> *As Bateson, Varela and others would later argue, the noise crashes within as well as without. The chaotic, unpredictable nature of complex dynamics implies that subjectivity is emergent rather than given, distributed rather than located solely in consciousness, emerging from and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it.[14]*

It is this emergent subjectivity which will be the way forward, as it offers the potential for change. This quote of Hayles invites a space for the new to emerge, and strategies need to be developed to encourage this emergence. To make surgical incisions into the fabric of the media and thereby change the 'domain of interactions' the individual and their group operate within is potentially the aim of artists who hope for better, or even *revolutionary* outcomes.

resistant spaces, resistant subjects

I think television is a totally destructive and corrosive medium. People are living lives though television and films and the media rather than through their own lives. They are not living creatively. They are living reactively and passively all the time. We feel we need all this stimulation, but in fact we need very little.[15]

In Amsterdam for the World Wide Video Festival, I am the hotel room at 8.30 am Sunday morning, watching the Olympics. The Australian women's hockey is playing the British women's hockey team, and winning. The BBC commentators are not happy. They think that the umpire is biased and impart this view in a subtle manner to their projected audience. However, I am not one of theirs, instead I am an alien in their midst, a different subject, with an alternative desire – I would like the queer cult hero Australian women's team to pulverise the British team (in a manner of speaking, of course). I am not normally a sports person but, that's sport. Such anti-British sentiment is deep inside the Australian subjective construct, and watching the Olympics in BBC media space in an Amsterdam hotel room allows it to emerge from comparative slumber. No doubt similar sentiment is being galvanised in Australian media space at this same very moment, however the commentators there would be speaking to their own, at 'home'. I am not home and yet I am not here with them – the BBC commentators and by implication the British – and they, not with me, even though they were hovering in the same media space.

How does living 'architectural media space' handle the idea of the alien subject – outside of its world, perhaps so far outside of its projected world that it has no possibility of

understanding that subject, of reaching and convincing that subject, and of colonising that subjective assemblage – as would be the intention of a global media giant like the BBC.

I flick the channel and there is a familiar face. It's Stelarc. 9am Sunday morning. He's talking about information overload. I am immediately interested and engaged. Which demonstrates how transient the subjective engagement is within media space. Such spaces between the subject and this mediated world are like iterative, emergent behaviours – one is *more-or-less* there. In this context it might be useful to liken Benedict Anderson's description of national identity as springing from 'imagined communities'[16] to the idea of an 'architectural media space' which necessarily works with its own imagined, and 'projected,' community.

Such spaces therefore need a community sensor (derived possibly from marketing analysis), to know in whose community I – the object of the endeavor – is, so that the 'architectural media space' can speak to me appropriately. These issues become more difficult for those whose task it is to generate particular 'architectural media spaces' like the international public spaces of hotels, airports, city buildings and plazas and more private spaces like houses or galleries. What holds transient communities together in such spaces, what do they share? Perhaps the more interesting question is how to safeguard one's subjectivity from such consumerist-driven incursions by the very surrounds. No doubt these twin imperatives will increasingly exist in tension.

In public spaces people may inhabit a range of positions vis-à-vis the space – a desire to engage or resist, or they may be indifferent or bored. How much time does the subject have, and in what way are they watching or listening: from attentive to distracted to not

at all. How to develop strategies within their time frame, for example: are they on the run from A to B, are they ambling through the space, sitting down or dining, are they seeking anything from the media, for example, is this an information space or something else, and what kind of direction is necessary from them, what might they be looking for.

The task of cultural practitioners – architects, artists and designers – is not just how to construct 'architectural media spaces' as public art works, for example, but, as subjects in the world, how to resist and offer ways out to people. Spaces which take account of the fact that people will want to resist, will need to resist being colonised by the various machinic assemblages thriving virulently through media space.

How to enable a sense of metacritique within spaces which increasingly seek to control subjects at core levels, turning them into consuming colonised subjects as they move through? How best to allow paths out, lines of flight if you like, inside the built spaces. One 'cultural' response might be to build a pod in which to think and operate from.

To give an example of such a self-sustaining pod: the Jewish couple at one of the many airports on a long flight to Banff in Canada who constructed a space inside the deeply public airport lounge in which to conduct their own private ritual. They did this by pulling a shawl completely over the man's head, while the woman read texts in a low voice into the shawled enclave. They were not bothered by others, however, they were deeply mysterious to the others, us, those out there in the open space. Everyone was acutely aware of their difference, their closedness. Then they stopped, sat back, and looked nowhere in particular.

To resist one may need to make oneself alien, the classic monstrous other in a state of extreme social dislocation and willed alienation. This was played out less spectacularly in the eighties with the introduction of the walkman, and moved into the nineties with the mobile phone. And equally, what might the media component of 'architectural media space' be looking for? Does it want to engage, or could it be sublimely sovereign? Spaces which do not desire to speak with anyone, even. Media which go on regardless of whether anyone is paying attention or not. Sovereign media. Such media "insulate themselves against hyperculture. They seek no connection; they disconnect…they leave the media surface and orbit the multimedia network as satellites."[17] One most sublime work of what could be called sovereign media was a radio station in a long silver box at the Helsinki ISEA in 1994. Called *Ambient City*, it went on broadcasting on its own wavelength, sending out ambient frequencies regardless of whether it had an audience or not. It was stately, royal.

Sovereign media, these independent life forms – extraterrestrials – shut themselves up inside a self-built monad, an 'indivisible unit' of introverted technologies which, like a room without doors or windows, wishes to deny the existence of the world: "This act is a denial of the maxim "I am connected, therefore I am."[18]

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[1] http://berlin.ccc.de/index.html
[2] http://www2.alzado.net/
[3] Norman M. Klein, "Audience Culture and the Video Screen" in Hall, Doug/Fifer, Sally Jo, *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, New York: Aperture in association with Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990, pg 394
[4] SBS television, Dateline, 16 September 2003
[5] Coates, Nigel, "Street Signs," in *Design After Modernism*. Ed John Thackara, New York:Thames and Hudson, 1987, pg 98

[6] Hans Ulricht Obrist, introduction to the *Media City Seoul 2000* catalogue, September/October 2000, Seoul, Korea, pg 154

[7] In a talk at the *World Wide Video Festival*, Amsterdam, September 2000.

[8] Wall quote in the Rothko room, Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, cited in March 2001

[9] Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture,* Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1999, pg 45

[10] Part of a talk at the Creative Cities seminar, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, October 28 2003

[11] From an interview by Franáois Burkhardt published as an article in the first issue of "Crossing" (cited online at 28 October 2003) http://www.ranaulo.com/

[12] Flusser, Vilem, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London: Reaktion books, 2000, pg 53

[13] Ibid., pg 64

[14] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became PostHuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, pg 291

[15] Michael Leunig interviewed in December 1996 (cited online 5 August 2003) http://www.shootthemessenger.com.au/pre_dec97/a_life_dec97/l_leunig.htm

[16] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Spread of Nationalism*, London New York: Verso, 1983

[17] Adilkno, *Media Archive*, New York: Autonomedia, 1998, pg 12

[18] Adilkno, *Media Archive,* New York: Autonomedia, 1998, pg 12