

Traces of *Time Transit*

Co-creating ambiance in a mobile art installation

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Abstract. *Interactive public art installations generate fascinating ambiances, but seldom undergo rigorous social-scientific analysis. Informed by urban anthropology and the “mobilities turn” in the social sciences, I present a qualitative analysis of the 4000 text messages displayed on the screens of “Time Transit”, an installation by Kim Morgan, which ran on city bus route #4 in Regina, Saskatchewan, 2006. The messages, sent by people riding the bus or surfing the installation’s website, invoke matters global and local, profane and poetic. Together, they can be understood as microdocuments of social interactions, privately composed but publicly displayed, which collectively created unpredictable ambiances on the #4 bus. Overall, this paper helps us understand how people actually interact with interactive public art.*

Keywords: *public art, public transit, text messages, social interactions, mobility*

Analyzing artistic ambiances

Interactive public art installations are an increasingly common sight in cities, particularly in light of the emphasis that municipal governments and city governance bodies place on culture and creativity in order to attract tourists, investors and “talented” workers. People are encouraged to play with the parameters of the artwork – in the form of light shows, fountain sequences, projections of images or films, performance art, etc. – in order to generate new, compelling ambiances, and to “reenchant” urban space (Garnier, 2008). But whatever form or combination of forms it takes, very little has been written about how interactive art installed in public spaces is actually used and received by members of the public, and therefore what ambiances the art generates.

Artists themselves are deeply absorbed in the process of creation. Once the artwork is “out there”, and once it has been documented *in situ*, its creator is typically less interested in researching audience reactions to the work than in moving on to the next project. Artists’ writing on public art therefore tends to focus on the pre-exhibition phase, discussing the processes of gathering ideas for and producing the artwork and situating it in elaborate networks of reference and inspiration. Moreover, it is often produced for an exhibition catalogue, which, since it must be printed prior to the exhibition opening, cannot possibly take into account audience points of view. Writing on public art by curators, art historians, art journalists and other experts, grounded in a carefully tended and defended body of critical knowledge, tends not to engage with audience perspectives either. Previously, art scholars focused mainly on the formal and aesthetic merits of artwork; since the 1990s they have explored in greater depth its social and political context (Bourriaud, 2002; Deutsche, 1996; Kester, 2004; Lacy, 1995). This kind of critique, which “tends to perceive public art as always and necessarily polemical and political” (Gérin, 2009, p. 6), fills an important gap. However, it typically unpacks the sociopolitical context of public art by explaining and making connections with overarching historical and political processes, rather than with the

experiences of members of the public themselves. The latter are sometimes included in accounts of participatory community art projects, but still, with some exceptions (e.g. Zebracki, 2011), scholarly literature on art excludes audience perspectives – the points of view of casual viewers of public art (Hall, 2007).

Research which does engage with audiences' experiences of art is usually conducted for managerial purposes, in order to evaluate and improve museum, gallery or festival operations (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006). The major exception here is Pierre Bourdieu's (1969) work on European art museums, a theoretically sophisticated sociological study that deconstructed the close relationship between culture, "taste" and class, showing how an appreciation of "high culture" acquired through middle – and upper-class socialization was naturalized as "good taste", which effectively excluded the working class from cultural venues (museums, art galleries) that were supposedly open to all. While valuable, this work is a product of its time, so is hard to apply to the new, necessarily more inclusive forms of public art that are installed out in the city rather than institutions.

There is thus a gap in the literature on how members of the public actually perceive, experience and interact with urban public art. This research helps fill this gap by analyzing the traces left by *Time Transit*, one such artwork set in a functioning public bus.



Figure 1. *Time Transit*, 2006, Kim Morgan (artist), Craig Gelowitz (engineer), TR Labs Regina, art installation on Regina city bus route #4. © Kim Morgan

Traces of *Time Transit*

Time Transit, a temporary mobile interactive art installation created by artist Kim Morgan in collaboration with engineer Craig Gelowitz, ran in autumn 2006 in the City of Regina Transit bus route #4. Regina, the capital and second-largest city of Saskatchewan, had a population of about 180 000 in 2006. Bus route #4 (Walsh Acres/University) traverses neighbourhoods that vary greatly in class and culture, from the University of Regina, through the impoverished north central neighbourhood ("the hood"), to wealthy new suburbs. Morgan's installation had three main interactive components: an operating city bus; six major bus stops along the route equipped with cameras constantly filming them; and a website with messaging functions.¹ The bus was fitted with a GPS system, four flat-screen monitors, a computer and a wireless network connection. Two monitors were mounted near the front of the bus and two near the middle of the bus; each pair displayed the same content, which meant all passengers could experience the installation more or less equally as they rode the bus (figure 1). The monitors displayed images captured from the cameras that were focused on six

1. <http://timetransit.com>

major bus stops along route #4. The right-hand screens showed real-time images of the next filmed bus stop along the route, that is, where the bus was headed. The left-hand monitors displayed images from the most recent filmed stop on the route, which were translucent stills layered on top of each other to represent the cumulative, collective memory of gestures and activities from where the bus had been. The passengers were thus able to view what had happened at the last stop and what was happening at the next stop on the screens.

Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, people could send text messages to the bus, via cellphone or the *Time Transit* website, which were displayed as scrolling text on the monitors of the bus. The website showed the real-time location of the bus on a map and images from the bus stop cameras, and also allowed users to communicate with the bus by typing a text message into a sidebar textbox. The message could either be displayed immediately or be dropped at a particular zone along the route, in which case it would show as soon as the bus reached that location. However, a display hierarchy was set up to give cellphone text messages priority over ones from the website, favouring real-time communication from passengers riding the bus.

Time Transit's configuration made plain the ways that new mobile communication technologies fold time and space in on each other, in that it existed simultaneously in real and virtual space, and its images melded the past, present and future of the bus's trajectory. That said, what I am most interested in analyzing here are the remaining traces of the installation. While all the images had to be discarded to comply with local privacy legislation, the 3960 text messages sent to *Time Transit* during its exhibition (September 26-November 30, 2006), being anonymous, are available. This remarkable dataset offers the rare opportunity to analyze how members of the public actually engage with an art installation. The preliminary analysis I present here is mainly based on a sample of every tenth text message, counted from a random starting point, for a total of 390 messages. We used qualitative data analysis methods to describe and categorize the messages in terms of their substantive content (what does the message contain, describe or signify?) and communicative context (does it seem to have an intended individual or collective recipient? Does it stand on its own, or is it a reply to another message or one link in a chain of dialogue?).

"Memes are neat": Playing around with public art

The text messages sent to *Time Transit* range from profane to poetic, silly to serious. They fulfil many functions: some invoke matters global or local; others advertize events, tell jokes, or start conversations; still others seem to be random acts of kindness or, alternatively, incivility. Below, I work through some of the themes emerging from the data analysis.

"Memes are neat" – one of the messages – points to one of the major content categories, the colonization of this new digital frontier (i.e. the bus screens) by pop-culture memes from elsewhere in the digital world. These include satirical factoids about American actor and martial-arts master Chuck Norris (a meme that apparently started in late 2005²), elaborate emoticons, and nuggets of l33tspeak (from "elite speak", a dialect incorporating numbers and symbols used by computer gamers and hackers). Less arcane (less 'l33t'!) pop-culture references include rallying cries for local sports teams ("Riders will prevail"), and partial song lyrics, like "layla ya got me on my knees!" and – inevitably in this context – the children's song, "The wheels on the bus go round and round" (which one day prompts the reply, "Ohhh noooo! Not the wheels on the bus song!" due to its efficacy as an earworm, one of those songs that can get stuck in your head for a very long time). Another kind of message was the more or less facetious "pearl of wisdom", such as "Don't hate yourself in the morning, sleep till noon" or "the wise arn't always wise". Other messages are simple greetings

2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chuck_norris_facts

("Hi Bus People"), which may have been sent just to try out the installation's functionality. Several messages praise, question or criticize the project itself ("I don't understand this", "this time transit is idea is pretty kewl", "What is the total cost of this art installation?"). A fair number comment on public transit – either that journey in particular ("Route 4 and bus 600 is where the party is at!") or bus riding in general. There is also more serious social commentary, including a series of statements about Canada's and China's CO₂ emissions. However, such calls for reflection are rare, and the vast majority of messages are playful. In this dataset, the ludic slides easily into the obscene. Many messages stink of toilet humour ("I just peed my pants"), and many others make more or less explicit or offensive reference to sex ("p3n1is" being one of the milder ones). Some of these seek to humiliate individuals; a few even ask for or advertize pornography website URLs. Given that messages were displayed entirely anonymously, this Rabelaisian shower of smut is unsurprising. It seems likely that many passengers were testing the limits of the system: just how rude could their messages be? In fact, *Time Transit* was initially set up with no limits on content except a 60-character maximum length, but, having realized that the display could serve as a forum for pointed insults directed towards bus drivers, the bus company requested that the project engineers add filters to censor swear-words and profanity. Of course, that meant that passengers just put even more of their considerable creativity to work in finding ways to curse without using the forbidden words, thereby circumventing authorial regulations.

Co-creating ambiances in mobile public space

To some degree, the text messages can be likened to ephemeral graffiti, as if the bus were a mobile virtual public washroom stall wall that passengers could "tag" to leave their mark ("Jason Shabatoski wuz here"), whether humorous, neutral or nasty. As research from the "mobilities turn" in the social sciences shows, buses and trains have their own social, moral and affective orders, where bodies are thrown together and class, gender, age and racialized differences and disparities are made visible and negotiated (Attoh *et al.*, 2011; Bissell, 2009, 2010; Jain, 2009; Wilson, 2011). The installation allowed passengers to disrupt – anonymously – the normal moral order of the bus in the same way that graffiti disrupts the visual order of the city (Austin, 2010). And just as not everyone appreciates graffiti, not all passengers can have appreciated the uncivil, profane or obscene content of some messages. It is easy to imagine certain messages making some bus-riders/readers quite uncomfortable, while others will have found the exact same texts entertaining.

Time Transit also generated some kinds of communication that graffiti simply cannot, by virtue of its movement through urban space and time. Moreover, while it is hard to fit more than one or two people in a washroom stall, a public bus creates a "temporary congregation" (Jensen, 2010) of passengers who, during *Time Transit*, were both physically copresent – sharing the same space – and "telecopresent" (Zhao, 2005) – sharing the same virtual or technological space. This meant that *Time Transit* participants could have conversations with each other, mediated by the installation, as illustrated by this series of consecutive messages sent on September 28:

- A. PEOPLE SHOULD USE CORRECT GRAMMAR!!!! Jeez...
- B. don't shout!
- C. you've all become so comfortable being under surveillance
- D. why not? the world is full of shouters?

Message B responds to A's use of upper-case letters, which is usually interpreted as shouting in the world of emails and text messages, while message D (which may or may not come from the sender of A) challenges B's injunction. (I will return later to message C). As well as extending conversations over time, passengers could embed their messages in space, referring to particular places or events along the bus's trajectory, such as the university campus ("OMFG - THE UNI *cries and runs*").

Bus routes have their regular riders with their own codes of behaviour (Nash, 1975), and with route #4 going to the University of Regina, it seems likely that it hosted a mix of strangers and “familiar strangers”, including a regular crowd of students who either knew each other or knew the kinds of people they were likely to be. In other cities, the familiarity and even intimacy generated among regular passengers of a bus route can lead to political mobilization, as Boudreau, Boucher and Liguori (2009) found among Latina domestic workers travelling to their workplaces in LA. In contrast, this installation fostered a more banal, teasing, or bawdy kind of intimacy. In effect, it made explicit and amplified much of the tacit non-verbal communication that circulates in public transit spaces, as well as giving public (if silent) voice to apparently private messages (“Ah, Virginia, sorry. How'd you hear about us, anyway?”). The link between the bus and the website also allowed people to send messages to friends who they knew were riding the bus (“Doug, pick up some cheese for us. –Sally”). As message C above suggests, *Time Transit* – especially its photographic component – points to the ubiquity of surveillance technology and its effect on our perceptions of private and public space. But it also challenges our paranoia about such issues. To a large degree, participants controlled the content and data collected by the equipment: they could appear before, perform for or hide from the cameras; they could watch and be seen on screen. As our analysis suggests, the text messages were above all performative: small claims for attention and entertainment staked out among the uneven startings and stoppings, waitings and watchings of a space of public transit.

Conclusion: the ongoing archaeological dig

The interpretation I present here is akin to archaeological work, excavating what now seems like an ancient ruin, given the speed of progress in new media and mobile technologies. Without access to the actual social and environmental context of each message, we can only surmise whether a message such as “Its good we have time” refers to a long wait at a bus stop or some more personal event, or whether an international environmental conference triggered the spate of messages about CO₂ emissions. Further analysis will allow us to transit back in time to 2006 to flesh out the chronological context, and to consult Regina and their city about the spatial context of the messages.

Time Transit combined art, engineering, public transit and digital media in order to explore the impact of ubiquitous technology on our daily lives, and its potential to generate both interconnection and alienation in urban public space. It created a kind of liminal space, between the real and the virtual, the telepresent and the copresent, the public and the private. By rendering public what is typically private, it subverted the tendency of mobile communications technologies to act as individualistic, atomizing “snail shells” protecting their carriers from disturbing interactions (Weber, 2011). Together, the textual traces of *Time Transit* can be understood as microdocuments of social interactions on the #4 bus, privately composed but publicly displayed, which show that viewer-participants intervene in urban public art installations in creative, unpredictable, and often subversive ways.

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