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On the move with artworks

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Abstract. In this paper I present three artworks that were created for portable digital screens: *Alter Bahnhof* (2012), *Top Shot Helmet* (2007) and *Weaving-Scape I* (2011). The artworks are used to discuss the creative possibilities that portable electronic devices offer to contemporary creative practitioners and to analyse how these devices influence the construction of the “self” and “place” in public space when mediated through artistic practice.

Keywords: walking, audiovisuals, portable electronic devices, place, mediated spaces

I. INTRODUCTION

The presence of portable electronic devices (PED) is rising in the contemporary city where individuals and creative practitioners perform their everyday lives. Portable technologies that allow people to constantly connect to each other and to select and collect data at relatively high speed – no matter where – are becoming normalised and their use is spreading into almost every aspect of public and private life. The concept of Bring Your Own Device (commonly known as BYOD) has surpassed the space of hack events and other creative collaborative gatherings, and has reached the professional working space. In the name of productivity, maybe, PED such as digital tablets, smartphones and digital screens facilitate a wide range of functionalities that can be used to produce and consume data. Being constantly in connected to PED brings up the issue of distinguishing between leisure and labour time. PED are opening the possibility of constant and immediate digital presence and access to information during daily activities of going to work and of going to play. In *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* [1] Rebecca Solnit concerns herself with this issue in relation to the everyday life practice of walking, and argues that in the current situation where PED are used constantly by individuals while in motion, the activity of walking has been transformed from a time to think into a time to be filled in with information, into a time to work.

In the urban landscapes through which Solnit walks in some of the chapters of her book, the city and its public spaces are characterised by the tensions between her body in motion, and the history and relationships with others and the surroundings. Like in Solnit’s walks in the suburbs of cities, it is in the verge between the

social and the spatial that the three artworks, *Alter Bahnhof*, *Top Shot Helmet* and *Weaving-Scape I*, discussed in this paper operate. The urban landscape of the contemporary city, and public space in general, is an open canvas in which multiple realities and fictions coexist, where technology, people and space are brought together in an intertwined multi-dimensional construct. Creative practitioners in their attempt to critically and poetically engage with the public realm of the city appropriate the technologies that are embedded in their environments, and utilise them to address their own concerns about everyday life events, consumer practices and mass culture, all of which, from a contemporary perspective, involve the construction of virtual selves and the *life on screen* of individuals [2]. Although using advertising platforms such as urban LED screens is still a possible everyday life technology that artists can use in public space, the most powerful use of the medium is already situated in a historical framework. An example is one of Jenny Holzer’s pieces for the series *Truisms*. In 1982, Holzer placed ‘one-liners’ or ‘mock clichés’ on an advertising screen in Times Square¹ to critically engage in the debate of power relationships and their influence on public and private life [3]. Although urban screens can still be used as platform for presenting artworks outdoors, PED screens are currently being used for creative purposes by more practitioners.

The three artworks that have been selected for their use of PED (more precisely for their use of portable digital screens), for involving walking practices and for their use of public and urban spaces are:

1. *Alter Bahnhof* (2012)

By Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller created for DOCUMENTA (13) is a video walk for iPod-touch & headphones that develops during 26 minutes inside the old train station of the city of Kassel, Germany [4].

2. *Top Shot Helmet* (2007)

By Julius von Bismark is a wearable media sculpture created in Berlin and tested in various train stations of the city composed of a weather

¹ Some one-liners read ‘PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT’ or ‘YOUR OLDEST FEARS ARE THE WORST ONES.’

balloon, an aerial perspective visual live stream, and a specifically designed helmet with a pair of video glasses inside [5].

3. *Weaving-Scape I (2011)*

By Rocio von Jungfeld is an audiovisual walk for a found iPod and headphones that connects the National Library of Scotland (Edinburgh) with the Meadows (also known as Hope Park). The sound is a live improvisation by Shiori Usui (prepared piano) & Sean Williams (analogue synthesizer) [6].

II. MOVING FROM PLACE TO PLACE

On the move refers to the practice of moving in the urban landscape while using the locomotors of the body. In the action of walking from one space to another the individual has the opportunity of engaging in an embodied dialogue with the surrounding environment: façades, windows, lampposts, trees, benches, pavement, vehicles, signs, other people. The three artworks introduced in this paper use the action of walking or moving in the public realm to investigate the relationships between bodies and space, and how these relationships are mediated by perception and technology. Embodiment is at the heart of these artworks, because it is in the shifting of the position of the individual within a given space that the artworks unfold.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre's analysis of Martin Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* (being-there) seems relevant in relation to the concept of the unfolding of artworks that are to be experienced in the action of moving in space. Using Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, Lefebvre observes that space is constructed while walking the path and that 'space – the woods, the track – is nothing more... than 'being-there'' [7]. For both, Lefebvre and Heidegger, as for many other theorists of space such as Le Corbusier, it is in the positioning and movement of the individual in the environment that space is ultimately created. Space is only revealed when experienced in the action of *being-there*. Le Corbusier poses this question in relation to architectural spaces and states that 'it is while walking, moving from one place to another, that one sees how the arrangements of the architecture develop' [8]. It is in this milieu of constructed space that artworks designed for PED develop. It is in the positioning and superimposition of space, body and media that the artworks are revealed. The artwork opens up to the individual in motion and becomes alive.

In *Alter Bahnhof* (2012), individuals are situated in the built environment of Kassel's old train station holding an iPod-touch in their hands and wearing a pair of headphones on their heads. The choice of moving in the space of the train station is restricted by a set of instructions given by the voice of Janet Cardiff. With her voice she aims to guide the individual through the different microcosms that are recreated on the screen of

the PED, the iPod-touch. Different individuals will carry in their hands different self-contained realities, different portable places made of visual and aural records, memories and stories. The digital screen of the iPod-touch is like a glass globe, like a window into another reality, like a micro world that can be carried around wherever you walk. The artwork exists in a space that is composed of physical and also virtual elements, and it only unfolds as the individual moves across the different spaces of the train station: from the hall to the platforms, from the end of the platform to the ticket vending machine, from the photo booth to the gift shop, from the waiting room to the café.

In order to engage with Cardiff & Bures Miller's artwork, and with the other two artworks that are mentioned in this paper, the individual has to move across a specific space, embodying the work while flowing in the public realm. It could be argued that in this venture the individual is the carrier of place. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) Michel de Certeau describes walking as *place-less*, and holds that in every step, the location of the body changes in an 'indefinite process of being absent in search of a proper' place [9]. If as de Certeau proposes walking is a constant search for place and that the act of walking emphasizes the lack of being in a place, then I would argue that the notion of place ought to reside within the individual that experiences and explores the surroundings while moving along any given path. In this way, place is inside the individual who creates it while flowing across space. It is in the action of dwelling in a continuous change that place exists.



Fig. 1. Julius von Bismarck, *Top Shot Helmet* (2007). Aerial image taken from the weather balloon in a train station, Berlin. Image courtesy of the artist and Alexander Levy, Berlin.

Von Bismarck explains that the concept of the top view navigation is based on the aerial view that one would have when playing computer games such as *Grand Theft Auto*.² With the *Top Shot Helmet* on, the visual perception of the environment is mediated by a

² For more details visit <http://www.juliusvonbismarck.com/topshot-helmet/fertig.html> (available in German language only).

bird-eye view, by an aerial perspective that provides the individual with a contextual positioning of the self in the physical space of the station (*Figure 1*). The individual wearing the helmet is at the centre of the Panopticon [10], and through the screens of the video glasses inside the helmet, he establishes his position in relation to the built environment of the station and to other individuals who are also moving in the space. The identity of the wearer of the *Top Shot Helmet* is hidden behind Styrofoam, but the actions of other individuals are exposed, surveyed and looked at from above. The *dominating* view of the wireless camera that is installed at the bottom of the weather balloon transmits live video feed into the video glasses inside the helmet. People and their movements in the station are detected by the *Top Shot Helmet* wearer, but passers-by cannot tell whether surveillance is taking place or not, because they are unaware of the capabilities of the apparatus. Some people ignore the presence of the helmet wearer, others might be more concerned with the difficulties that the wearer is encountering in his attempt to navigate the space of the station. In the tentative action of moving through the station, the helmet wearer carries place with him, a place that is contained in the interaction between his understanding of *being* physically *there*, moving in space, and *being* virtually *there*, as an abstracted spatial visualization on the video glasses. The virtual self is *there* surveyed by the aerial camera and encapsulated within the helmet. The notion of place is a construct, a combination of an embodied and disembodied understanding of his self within space.

III. WHEN THE SCREEN LEAVES THE ROOM

The artworks of von Bismark, and Cardiff and Bures Miller, and *Weaving-Scape I* (2011) have a common feature. The digital screens in which the artworks and their audiovisual or visual content develop are not fixed to a location, but move with the individual who adventures into the public realm with them. In *Weaving-Scape I*, the individual puts her headphones on, presses play on the found iPod and starts walking inside the National Library of Scotland (*Figure 2*), and then steps out into the streets of the city of Edinburgh. The digital screen in which the artwork unfolds is not bound to the physical architectural construction of the library building, or to a room or the walls of an architectonic space. The artwork plays free in the different spaces into which the individual decides to go: the locker room, the library café, the stairs, the street, the traffic light, the park, the bench.

As PED are becoming smaller, lighter and more reliable and affordable, more and more artists are taking the opportunity to explore the functionalities of these devices and to transform them into creative events by mixing analogue and digital media. With the improvements in size, weight and reliability, the reduction of cost and the connectedness of digital devices to an architectural network of information, audiovisual media are liberated from the burden of being attached to specific locations. In the *media or informational city* discussed by Scott McQuire [11] and Manuel Castells [12], audiovisual media and data can

leave the physical space of the room and move into outdoor spaces at the user's will. The position of audiovisuals within any given environment is circumstantial rather than imperative.

In the urban environment, the transmission of data and audiovisual content can be processed effortlessly by the PED while the individual sets in motion and engages with everyday life practices. Regardless of the constant repositioning of the body in the environment, individuals are able to engage with digital content and play their preferred audio and audiovisual material wherever they happen to be. In this action of repositioning her location in the city, the individual carries with her a place that is a mixture of physical and virtual elements, a place that is half tangible and half immaterial. The portable screen with which she leaves the privacy of her home or the public indoor space of the library, and which she takes with her in her journeys in the city, is a palpable object, but its content are ethereal, they are time-based and encrypted in a binary code which she is unable to decipher in real time. Even if she knew how to read into a text composed of zeros and ones, she could not render the information at the speed she processes the information of the physical environment in which she moves.



Fig. 2. Rocio von Jungefeld, *Weaving-Scape I* (2011). Detail of digital screen (found iPod) in the National Library of Scotland.

The portable screen of the PED renders the digital material into human readable form, so that she can wander in the streets and play digital content without the need to be plugged into the electric mains. In the action of moving in the public outdoor space, she creates a constantly changing place for herself that is simultaneously constructed by physical and virtual elements: the space of the street and the creatively mediated street (the artwork). While walking in the city with the digital screen of her PED she constructs her own place, her being-in-the-world, her *Dasein* [13]. In spite of her physical location in the public sphere and her exposure to public gaze, she experiences a subjective place which no one can access when she engages with the content provided by her PED. Although vulnerable to public scrutiny, she conceals in herself an intimate encounter with the world. In motion or as de Certeau proposes 'in search of a proper' place, with every step and relocation of her *self* she engages with the space that surrounds her, with the environment

that develops while she moves in the public realm and constructs her individualized place.

IV. MERGING PLACES AND AUDIOVISUALS

In the three artworks presented in the paper, the human body is given the function of *locus*. The individual becomes the mediator between the physical environment, where the artworks develop, and the creative virtual spaces that are constructed on the screen and superimposed on the tangible world. The artworks come into existence through the embodied interaction of the individual with the physical space and with the virtual content displayed on the PED. In this embodied action, the individual constructs a portable place. The self and place are constructed in motion as she performs the artwork. The individual that experiences any of the three artworks presented in the paper could be said to be like Tim Ingold's spider. In *Being Alive* (2011) Ingold uses the metaphor of the spider as an analogy to discuss how humans relate to the environment and with each other, and how they construct their paths as they move along them. For Ingold, the individual moves in a web of threads, in a tangle of connections that are constructed in the action of living. The human, as the spider, generates threads continuously, using her body to create the paths or 'lines along which' she 'perceives and acts' in everyday life [14].

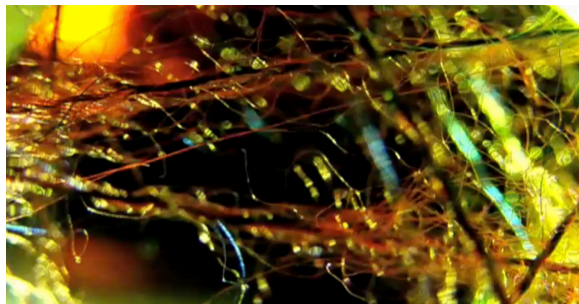


Fig. 3. Rocio von Jungendorf, *Weaving-Scape I* (2011). Detail of *Weaving-Scape I*, image featuring wool threads and light.

In light of Ingold's proposition of the spider weaving her space and defining her place as she perceives and act in the environment, the audiovisual walk *Weaving-Scape I* offers a creative space, a tangle of connected threads with which the individual can engage while moving along a path. With the audiovisual walk playing on the iPod screen that she carries in her hand, she connects with spaces as she moves (Figure 3). The woolen threads present a visual network of lines, moving images of three-dimensional wool and paper structures that she superimposes on the world. She perceives the environment, performs the artwork, and in so doing, she produces a place along which she perceives and acts, and in which the physical and the virtual blend.

In the video walk *Alter Bahnhof*, Cardiff and Bures Miller play with the psychological tactics of mixed realities to construct their fictional narratives. They also play with the idea of the individual as *locus*, with the idea that place is constructed in the act of living. Cardiff

creates 'portholes into' her 'other worlds,' as she herself describes it in the article *The First Page* (2005) [15]. The experience of constructing place while moving in space is known as proprioceptive perception (haptic). However, in *Alter Bahnhof* as in the other two artworks, this tacit understanding of the self in motion (proprioception) is at the same time superimposed on the fictional realities that the artists have constructed. For experiencing the artwork *Alter Bahnhof*, individuals are equipped with an iPod-touch and headphones while they move in the *real* train station, walk along the hall and into the platforms. In the video walk, the voice of Cardiff guides them through a psychological exploration, questioning and playing with the individual's perception and understanding of reality and fiction. In this context, the individual explores the self in relation to space and media.



Fig. 4. Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *Alter Bahnhof* (2012). iPod touch and hand inside the train station, Kassel. Image courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York.

The artists bring echoes of history, events and memories of the train station into the artwork and combine them with imaginary stories that they have invented, dreamt, set up, or staged (Figure 4). Fiona Bradley describes Cardiff's audio walks as 'entering a strange new time and place' where the real merges with 'recordings and imaginings' [16]. This 'entering a strange new time and place' described by Bradley is also applicable to the video walk discussed here. The audiovisual material playing on the PED refers to the physical space in which the individual is positioned, the *Bahnhof*, but the space in which the *almost* disembodied voice of Janet Cardiff is located, is rendered and constructed through the individual's embodiment of place while in motion. The screen of the iPod-touch and the headphones are facilitators and mediators of visual and aural content, but it is through the action of moving in space with the body, that the memories and stories of the space merge and coalesce with the audiovisual material that is presented in the artwork. As if looking into the outside world through a glass globe, the screen of the iPod-touch with which the individual experiences the video walk is a multidimensional window that opens up simultaneous coexisting realities. Through this window-screen both spaces, the physical and the virtual, are perceived superimposed in the action of creating place, of repositioning the body in the environment.

In *Top Shot Helmet*, von Bismark plays with the idea of positioning the individual in the environment

through a mediated self, a self that is visually abstracted and located in a representation of the surrounding space. In the artwork, a camera with a fish eye lens is flying above the persons' head and streams live data into the stereoscopic screens (video glasses) that are inside the helmet (Figure 5). The peripheral vision of the individual is limited to the little screens in front of his eyes. The rest of the surrounding environment is concealed by the helmet. The helmet not only limits the visual perception of the environment, the Styrofoam helmet also isolates the individual from the acoustics of the space in which he navigates. The only direct visual connection that the individual has with the space in which he is moving and in which the artwork develops is his own body, the front side of his body, which he could normally look at from an everyday life point of view, but this view is encapsulated and reframed by the helmet. From within the helmet, a space in which visual and aural perception is considerably limited, he can engage at a glance with two perspectives. He can visually perceive two points of view that describe the position of his body in the world, his *being-there*. His body is connected to the ground through his feet through which he perceives his place proprioceptively. He can corroborate this connection between his feet (body) and the ground (space) when looking downwards to the pavement with his naked eyes. Conversely, he has another perspective of his body in motion, the aerial perspective, which provides him with some information about the surroundings.

While moving in space with the helmet (a visual apparatus that transmits live data as if it were a low tech geo-positioning-system) the individual perceives two simultaneous selves: the self that is perceived proprioceptively while in motion and through which place is created, and the self that is mediated, disembodied and transposed into a different perceptual plane by the bird-eye view. The disembodied self that is perceived as a moving image gets updated in real time, never mind the delays or glitches produced by the wireless transmission of data. This disembodied *second self* [17] which shows on the screens of the glasses inside the helmet gets re-embodied when the visual information is processed by the individual in the action of moving in the space of the train station.



Fig. 5. Julius von Bismark, *Top Shot Helmet* (2007). artist wearing the *Top Shot Helmet* and navigating in a train station, Berlin. Image courtesy of the artist and Alexander Levy.

As if the helmet wearer were converted into a blue dot on a Google Map [18] which aids the navigation of a space with which the user is not acquainted, the individual navigates the space by looking at his position on the screen inside the helmet. He concentrates on the visual information provided through the video glasses instead of relying on the spatial cues that surround him such as sound and visual perception of the environment [19]. In this artwork the experience of acting and perceiving the self in the environment, *Dasein*, is made of a merging of physical and mediated perceptions of the self, place and space.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The three artworks used in the paper, *Alter Bahnhof*, *Top Shot Helmet* and *Weaving-Scape I*, have served to discuss how PED, an abbreviation for the wide range of portable electronic devices that are currently available, are being used to produce creative experiences in public spaces. Since portable technologies are increasingly becoming embedded into the everyday life context of the city and into the environments in which people dwell or move through, it is possible to foresee the potential use of PED as a common technology for creative explorations.

In *Weaving-Scape I*, as well as in the other two artworks, the city and its public spaces are treated as indispensable elements that ought to be taken into account during the creative process. The urban space offers a multidimensional, unpredictable and ever changing canvas composed of a complex set of relationships that can be creatively explored. In any creative practice that involves the use of PED in public space, the concept of embodiment is at the centre of the creative equation, as it is through the perception and understanding of the individual relationship with space and media that the individual is able to apprehend space, and construct her own place, the self.

With *Weaving-Scape I*, the individual follows a virtual audiovisual microcosm while at the same time positioning herself in the physical environment. She constructs her *Dasein* while moving along the path that she constructs for herself, along an idiosyncratic journey where footsteps are improvised. While she walks from the quiet space of the library into the noisy street, she constructs the spaces that she temporarily inhabits and occupies. In her creative adventures in the streets, she carries in her hands a portal, an opening to a world of threads, of abstract drawings made of light projections, of spontaneous metallic sounds and textured surfaces. With the device in her hand and her headphones on, she walks in the search of her place, and in every step of her journey she creates her multi-dimensional place of fictional and physical merging realities. It is in her experience of moving along the thread that she creates place, that she flows in *Dasein*.

PED are freeing creative practices and audiovisual material from the physical location of the cinema theatre, the gallery space or the computer terminal, and people are free to wander in the environment while, if desired, experiencing a multilayered reality. In this

context saturated by media technologies that are small, portable and indispensable for everyday life activities is where the next generation of creative practitioners will be able to develop their spatio-temporal narratives.

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