

# From Representation to Performance: Responsive Public Space

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## ABSTRACT

*What is the public sphere in cyberspace?*

*What should the public sphere in cyberspace be?*

*What should we do with the public sphere in cyberspace?*

*What can we do with the public sphere in cyberspace?*

We approach these questions by embedding them in two ways, historical and material. We ask:

"What alternative ways of being together in public have evolved over the centuries since the Greek agorá?" and "What in fact *is* this stuff of which cyberspace and public sphere are made?"

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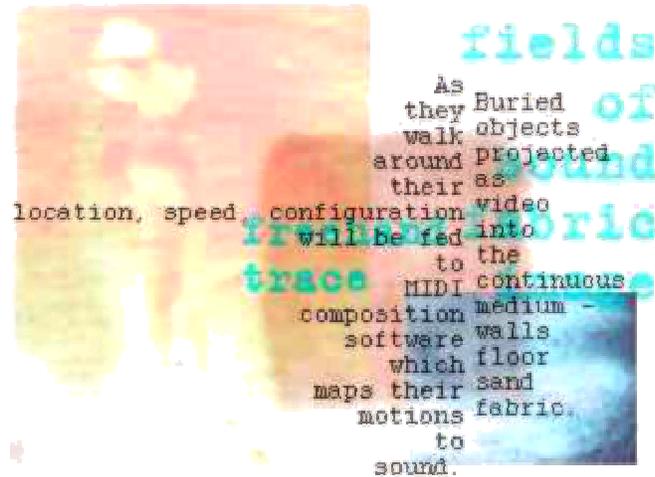
<sup>1</sup> **sponge** is an international association of artists, researchers, writers and their organizations, dedicated to public experiments in perception, phenomenology and desire. <http://sponge.org>. FOAM is a non-profit dedicated to the



Corso Saint Francoise 1905

Overall, our paper has three threads. In the first thread, we concisely critique a few common terms of the debate about cyberspace and the public sphere. In the second thread, we provide a few evocative descriptions of social spaces and events whose roots precede the industrial age. In the third thread, we propose an ontological critique of how information and network technologies are designed, and propose an alternative approach to public space in the information age. We offer some ways to rethink how such technologies can be embedded in historically- as well as ontologically rich ways that could support life-generating and life-sustaining aspects of public activity. We will describe experimental responsive performance spaces being built by our associations, **sponge** and FOAM, that make concrete some of the concerns and approaches we highlight in this paper.

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from T-Garden Installation concept

## 1 PROBLEMATIC PROMISES: Cybernetics and Information Theory

Over the last three generations, we have witnessed the penetration of cybernetic and information-theoretic habits of thought far beyond their original domains. "Languaging" as a form of being has now been replaced by the exchange of data as commodity. Subjectivation has been reduced to the description of events and people coded as database schema. Information is a common denominator that has tended to reduce all forms of human experience to equivalencies. Simultaneously freighted with, and unmoored by information, we drift in an ocean of consumer choice. The so-called new economy has remodeled community as a place of pure exchange, indexed by *information*. What of the subject, the citizen? Every individual "Self" has taken the role of the "Other" on its shoulders, that is the role of creating difference, but to quote \_\_\_\_\_ Karatani, as 'the essence of the otherness of the other lies in (...) indifference' the 'differentiated' information flows freely, but unnoticed. Karatani identified this reduction of human relation to transactions that become meaningless as we give up the collective construction of meaning. In light of these phenomena, the multidisciplinary debate about the re/construction of public space is one of the most crucial discussions for the evolution of the our society.

In the enlightenment conception, what does the public sphere allow us to do? Damiris and Wild, in their paper "The Internet: A New Agora?" have perceptively and usefully triangulated different modes of public behavior by: rational action, social action and ethical action. We gain another perspective on public space by turning sideways and examining it as a domain of *synchronicity*, *speech action* and *commitment*. We can nuance the notion of public by these notions: *synchronicity*, *speech action* and *commitment*, and by distinguishing community from society. Society in our view is not simply a union or a web of black-box communities but a vibratory medium in which communities can absorb influences or find dis/harmonies with distant communities. It is the rich soup of our physical world, resonating against the instability of the virtual one, that allows hybrid public spaces to emerge.

————— It's true that every society infected by the notion of the Greek *polis* has its own ambivalent relationship with the problem of what constitutes public space. On one hand, public space is necessary to mediate a community, on the other, it has a great subversive power. Historically, public spaces were not only a home to sellers, buyers and news broadcasters, but also to radicals, thieves, jesters and other rule breakers. — Building a public space is a community practice — both personal and collective — memories, interests and rituals.

### 3 HISTORICAL ALTERNATIVES



Bruegel. Booth Theatre and Fair

What examples from pre-industrial societies can we draw on for alternative ways of being public, or being *in public*? The well-known alternatives include:

- the Agora, a classical basis for the western democratic *polis*;
- the Pre-capitalist Market, based on trade among autonomous communities;
- the Renaissance Italian Piazza, a meeting place where most of the everyday urban

communication took place;

- the Garden, a place for reconciliation, meditation and *non-communicative* interaction;
- the Street, used not as a transport conduit, but as a locus of experiencing a city in time;
- the Fair or Festival, an itinerant event that adapts to different local conditions;
- the Mediaeval Circus, parading tolerated differences;

The publicness of these last two events comes not so much from any intrinsic character but from their periodicity and placement in the cycle of seasons.

- and finally, in the mid-20c, we have the Situationists' psycho-geographic experiments , with their seriously playful attempt to make urbanity strange and marvelous once again.

In these spaces or events, especially in the Garden, the Street, the Circus, the Festival and the situationist drift, *play* becomes the most salient mode of public activity. As Hakim Bey put it, this sort of play becomes "... a secret theatre, in which both artist & audience have completely disappeared - only to reappear on another plane, where life & art become the same thing, the pure giving of gifts (...) Potentially, everyone is now some kind of artist - & potentially every audience has regained its innocence, its ability to become the art that it experiences."

We have found it fruitful to let the phenomenological dimensions of these historical examples inform our approach to the construction of hybrid physical digital spaces. These dimensions include

- material resistance;
- territory;

temporality, synchronicity and ritual;

commitment and empathy;

logic and sensuality.

~~Both mentioned historical examples and public experiments that we conduct today should be fully lived interactive experiences, spaces based on the temporal rhythms of emergence and disappearance, where the experience is a synergy of an eerie ambience, smells, sounds, change and exchange, memory, prophecy and ecstatic dance. The language of these spaces is alive and shared among its participants, not owned by anyone, but spontaneously generated by everyone, in all variety of individual argot.~~

#### 4 WITH SUCH CONCERNS IN HAND, WE MOVE FROM DESCRIPTION TO PERFORMANCE.

Let me spin out one thread of such a move:

Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following is a good starting point to think about a public hybrid digital-physical space that is constructed on the fly by its participants. For Wittgenstein, a rule, even a mathematical rule, has no transcendental logical authority; its causal force comes instead from social historical practice. By shifting attention from *representation* to *performance*, we shift the focus of design from static representation (e.g. form-based search queries and document-centered data exchange), to creation and performance. Of course, the historical social forms that we mentioned earlier all have rules and conventions of their own, some of which are followed strictly even if they are tacit. However, those rules are not chains or shells encasing the players' activity, but rather collective agreements emerging after the fact, emerging as conventions in the course of play. And we think of rules as scaffolding to enable the players to improvise against a provisional framework, and reach beyond the scope of their past activity if they desire.

We can think of rules as grammars constructed for newcomers to a social game, as a way to telescope the history that they've missed.<sup>2</sup>

Just as the rules of languages are invented from the standpoint of foreigners, so it is same with the cyberspace. Newcomers use structure and rules to enter a discourse network. But to the degree that the newcomer is willing to improvise in play, her dependence on following formalized conventions decreases. Maps and grammars are most useful for those who have not lived in a town very long. Such technologies of representation may be useful for transitions, for facilitating entry into a community, but less so for day-to-day play.

Nonetheless, changes due to systemic shifts in technology can force even indigenous inhabitants to resort to maps. In large U.S. cities, emblematically in Los Angeles where high ways have lifted people onto an abstract landscape, local inhabitants carry encyclopedic maps against the need to descend to the surface streets of communities made distant, or even alien from their own.

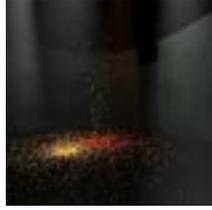
Speaking of large scale built environments we could usefully appeal to the notion of pattern in evolution. Christopher Alexander, in his book, The Timeless Way of Building, viewed each space as alive with events that are scaffolded by the geometry of that space. Schematizing Alexander's description, the geometry of a place gives a shape to the imagination of the inhabitant, the imagination inspires the behavior of the inhabitant, and the behaviors build the event. What sorts of repetition and variety emerging in play can we expect in hybrid space?

## 5 MALLEABLE SPACES

How can we construct alternate forms of public social action in our contemporary mixed architectures built out of computation, digital media and steel? What are some "techniques" that we might invent appropriate to such hybrid architecture?

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2. XML is such an example.



3d rendering of the T-Garden environment

## Translation and Allergy

In our globalized society, communities that used to be comfortably bounded and closed are exposed to exogenous and even alien language. If language is an appropriate medium of public activity, then translation becomes all-important. But translation -- the "Holy-Grail" of artificial intelligence -- is a living process, not an automatic one. Could translation become an organism living inside the cyber-public space alongside more automatic processes?

Seeing the Internet as an autopoietic system, we understand that the Internet could not be transparent any more than an organism could live without skin and immunology. Under the impact of plague messages, internet service providers (ISP) have grown spam filters and firewalls like skin to protect their inhabitants. But now perhaps we can build a more subtle form of immune system that lives in the interstitial fluid inside and outside our hybrid bodies. An immune system that doesn't simply destroy or eject alien objects, but modifies the habits of the body in order to accommodate the presence of other living processes.

## Static Space to Elastic Space to Responsive Space

Our society has long departed from the modernist aesthetic, so masterfully epitomized by \_\_\_\_\_ Eames, of a built environment that assumes the neat separation between user and object. In the magma of our lives, there are no clear rules or boundaries, no definitively resolvable moral conflicts (as Stuart Hampshire profoundly argued) and, in a democratic polis, no eternally fixed resolution of interests (as Latour, and earlier Chantal Mouffe & Ernesto Laclau observed). Given this, we argue that public space should be created for heterogeneous communities and must remain

polyphonic; that its totality exceeds the scope of any one schema. (supreme arbiter, as Latour put it).

*But* the inhabitants of a medieval market could make sense of their environment despite the lack of fixed formal total schema . Fernand Braudel remarked that in 14c Paris, servants gauged when to rush out into the market not by watching clocks (which didn't exist) but by attending to the varying quality of the mixed roar of vendors and hawkers voices as the vendors entered the streets of the city. How can we sustain the intuition in today's public spaces? What is the stuff, the fabric of society that we wish to make elastic? This elastic fabric includes the communication networks, the flow of information, systems of identification, and systems of credit. What elasticity means must be worked out in the course of playing the games of communicating, identifying, buying and gifting. (~~We remark that designing for elasticity in the public domain applies to the computational as well as the physical.~~)

This places the emphasis on *transformation*, rather than *object*. In the modern era, much information and social technology is devoted to testing for when an object is of type X. Now we are creating technologies that transform an object from type X to type Y. Some of these technologies will be computational, but others will be mediated as social conventions. It is essential that we design public space not as a cybernetic exercise, but as a design of material, built, inhabited space, augmented by computational processes.

Such environments can become not only elastic but *responsive* spaces, as we can see from the examples I'll show in a minute.

## 6        EXAMPLES

If we, the inhabitants of these elastic, responsive, computationally augmented public spaces wish to take responsibility for the shape and the behavior of these environments, we will have to engage in

experiments in real-time and in life. We will have to take these spaces apart and reconstruct them many times and across multiple cultural contexts.

Sponge and FOAM are associations of artist researchers who are constructing public experiments along these lines as a way to rapidly develop a feel for inhabiting such hybrid spaces. We're exploring how to construct live spaces from the detritus of a "dead" public space using digital means, turning parking lots into parks, working with heat and speech as pliable media, clothing as forms of writing.

We're producing experiments such as:

5 T-Garden: You don ritual clothing that sounds as you move, and you enter a responsive room filled with fields of video and sound that respond to your motion. As inhabitants pass one another, patterns of projected video and sound appear pass from one body to another, dissolving and re-forming bodies out of the alchemical field.

6 Media Sauna: Building a media sauna in which people sweat out the toxic icons, dead metaphors and routinized lingo that advertizers have embossed into our bodies;

7 GroWorld: Developing a network of public gardens and inhabiting them not only with the local bio-diversity, but with global arts and media, by organizing an itinerant festival taking place in the gardens instead of in convention centers.

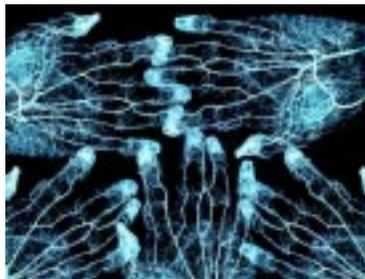
8 Hubbub: We explore how cities conduct conversations in public built environment, using computer techniques to give speech some of the fixity of print, and text some of the prosodic dance of speech.

7 WHAT ARE THE MAJOR CONCLUSIONS OF OUR PAPER?

- Looking at the history of public space, we realize that spectrum of public action is much richer than what we typically see in modern informatic abstractions of the market or the agora. A glance at the history of theater and folk performance reveals many alternative forms of public

action that have been swept into the category of play and ignored by (sober) theorists of *res publica*.

- We advocate shifting our analytic perspective from representation to performance. By shifting the emphasis from *making representations of society* to *performing socially*, we hope to discover ways of designing, building and inhabiting spaces that might afford more supple, life-giving forms of public activity.
- We advocate shifting technoscientific attention from objects and alphabets to substrate and field. This is analogous to shifting the concern of an urban design commission from the shape of the windows or fixtures on a specific building, to the Earth on which -- and the material out of which -- citizens build their homes.
- We shift attention from purely digital representation and simulation to material, embodied experience, augmented by responsive digital media.
- We propose to explore responsive spaces with art and speculative design as well as technoscientific research. The projects I've described: Sauna, T-Garden, GroWorld, Hubbub, are all examples of such public experiments. Over the next few years, we will build these experiments first in Europe and North America, and take what we learn into the domain of public, urban design. We invite all interested in such experiments to join us.



<http://sponge.org> | [www.foam.net](http://www.foam.net)

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Temple in the trunk of a Banyan tree in India