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**THE COMMON MINIMUM MICRO**

Abstract

The popularization of multimedia cell phones and portable video and audio players indicates more than a market trend. They consolidate the emergency of a new format of creation, guided by an aesthetic of transmission, and catalyze a process of de-spectacularization of art, in the scope of the mobility culture.

Cell phones are devices intrinsically related to the multitask style of contemporary humans. They are made in a way to allow the performance of simultaneous and unrelated tasks, such as driving and talking, or writing SMSs and attending a class. Therefore, they cannot be limited to a field of special attention to the works, as is the case in museums and movie theaters. Furthermore, they mediate a type of creation whose parameters are defined by large corporations and manufacturers, and which in turn infiltrates them to create a parallel mediatic universe. This is a phenomenon which podcasts – emblazoned by the name of the presently most famous and profitable product by Apple (iPod) – confirm daily, providing a counterpoint to the big news services and to the sameness of FM radio.

As instruments specially developed to be adequate to traffic and to displacement situations, mobile communication devices are adaptive tools for an urban universe in constant acceleration; they sensibly affect forms of perception, visualization and remote communication. We must now therefore reflect on how reception happens in environments of continuous flux, or in entropic conditions where the reader/interactor is constantly engaged in more than one activity (driving, looking at an electronic panel and talking on the phone, for example), interacting with more than one device and performing multiple, independent tasks.

Creating for those conditions involves, thus, rethinking the very conditions of readability, and the conventions and formats of communication and transmission. But it also involves understanding the political, economical and ideological meanders that intervene in these conditions of creation. These questions refer, on one hand, to relations among independent creators and corporate demands, and on the other, to contexts of production, circulation and reception particular to cybrid experiences (i.e. experiences that happen within and among on- and off-line networks) (Beiguelman, forthcoming, 2006).

From an institutional point of view, they pose a complex situation for the artist who wishes to use the cell phone in his/her projects without giving up on creative freedom, especially when the work involves tactical and anti-corporation perspectives.

A simplistic reasoning might conclude that in these molds there is no way to produce art and culture with critical perspectives. However, two essential nuances should be taken into account: firstly, let’s remember that today the work of the structural field of cyberpolitics is not questioning of the brand or of the product itself, but rather that of the operational systems and the kind of program coding being used, open or close source, because it is this that will define whether the generated content can be reviewed, recycled and reused in a different way, so that creation does not become a brand's hostage.

Still, in order to not to rhyme militant with ignorant in this political and institutional sphere of discussion, we must remind here of the "real reality" factor, making clear that the wireless context is very different from the fixed Internet. Wireless was born corporate (in contrast to the Internet, which the computing companies connected to later on) and is entirely mediated by operators and manufacturers.

The intention to be decisive does not, however, exempt the artist of his/her critical responsibility. On the contrary, it requires, maybe more than ever, an awareness that all technological options are ideological, and that to preserve his/her freedom of creation and thought rdemands that one abandon romantic attitudes founded on division of labor between inspiration and perspiration. Without knowing the foundations of programming, one risks becoming a publicist of who knows what…

Having settled this aspect of the debate, without which any and all discussion of art and technology is void, it is still necessary to clarify what one understands by wireless art, differentiating art for mobile devices (microart, strictly speaking) from art with mobile devices.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Secondly, this also entails highlighting projects that explore the interaction of portable devices with other telecommunication equipment[[2]](#footnote-2) (internet, electronic panels, the electric network) in public and collective situations (e.g. concerts and movie theaters) and those locative media that privilege new mapping and geographic circumscription strategies and systems.

Both modes, however, force us to think the emergence of a different artistic scope. The dialog with the mobility culture is a dialog with multitasking beings, beings who are, as we said before, in situations of transit and displacement, and are also mediated by entropic and continuous-acceleration states. Noisy spaces of consumption, cell phones are also extremely ‘strict’ devices. Any content produced for a cell phone implies the acceptance of rules pre-established by operators (such as the maximum "weight" in Kbytes) and by the devices themselves, curbing, in a way, the freedom of other art forms though which the artist might define the laws according to which her work functions.

We cannot forget that images are today measured by their "weight," and they are offered up to vision through informational maps. Their volume doesn't relate to dimensionality, but to the byte size; excess may cause a failure of reception. It is time to think an aesthetics of transmission by anticipating the emergence of an interactor capable of coordinating multiple and simultaneous readings of contents, mediated by countless uncontrolled variables. Projects conceived for on-line environments configure a type of creation that deals with different kinds of connections, browsers, traffic speed, monitor quality, screen resolution, and so many other instances that modify the forms of reception. What one sees is the result of countless possible combinations among different programs, operating systems, access providers, phone operators, hardware makers, and all their inestimable forms of customization. To create within and for those conditions is thus not only to think about an aesthetics of transmission, but also to play with an articulation of the imponderable and the unexpected which, in turn, influences programming and publication strategies that make the work readable, decodable, sensible. [[3]](#footnote-3)

This is the case because the action space of network culture is an informational space, mediated by communication networks which have systematically imploded not only the notions of distance and locality (Castells, 2001) but also the limits between the place of art, advertising and information on one hand, and the relationships between place and non-place on the other.

It is true that some of these transformations go back almost half a century, and are not tributaries

 of the omnipresent digitalization. The land art of the 1960s, and particularly Robert Smithson's[[4]](#footnote-4) gigantic earthworks, for example, have reconfigured public art because they broke the prevailing relationships between works and places of memory, introducing the concept and the practice of creating tension between site and non-site, place and non-place (Brissac, 2002). Thus the meaning of a monument as an agent of the past within the present is emptied, an extension of the fraying of the Newtonian physics that defines time in relation to space. Conceived as works on dimensions often incompatible with the human scale, executed in perishable materials and diagrammatic forms, they configured a new architecture, without qualitative value. (Smithson, 1966). This architecture can only be read momentarily and contextually, as contemporary urban landscapes and their series of slums and skyscrapers, bridges and dejections, supermarkets and gadget stores, with their infinite shelves of everything and a little more. (Ibid.) Ethereal, amorphous and de-objectified, this kind of work dealt with entropic situations in which it seemed impossible to ask 'from what period is that?,' and made one interrogate instead, *where* was that time? (Ibid.)

However, while it's true that some of the subjects related to the break of paradigms we live today in the networked culture, were already prefigured in other contexts, one cannot ignore that the ubiquity of the cyberspace has maximized those tensions, and that mobile arts have deepened these uncertainties. These are arts that occur within what we call cybrid configurations, situations resulting from the on- and off-line networks' interconnection experience, in traffic and in transit, mediated by traffic control systems, electronic panels, cell phones, PDA's and intelligent agents.

But they are also an artformat typical of the post-mediatic context, as discussed by Lev Manovich, one that operates the break of the relation between sign and referent that had allowed traditional criticism "to think about the author's intentions, the content and the form of an artwork – rather than the user" (2001:6), and to think the medium in relation to the message. (Beiguelman, 2005:167-174) *Poetrica*[[5]](#footnote-5), a project that began in São Paulo and ended in Berlin, and was accomplished between October 2003 and April 2004, could be a good starting point for this discussion.

The project was an investigation about reading and creation in entropic and continuous traffic situations. It involved a series of visual poems composed by me with non-phonetic sources, and an urban tele-intervention mediated by public creations with that same typographic repertoire.

In the stage accomplished in São Paulo, images were produced anywhere, via SMS (text message via cell phone), desktop and mobile Internet, and made available on electronic panels located in the urban space of a São Paulo gallery (Galeria Vermelho), between the avenues Paulista, Consolação and Rebouças. These images were also retransmitted on line by webcams, and replicated in different devices (cell phones, Palms, computers), and, in some cases, in plotters and other digital printing systems. Redimensioned and re-saved as new, those images were, however. always composed of the same information, but with no connection with a specific support, resulting in independent visual meanings of their textuality, and dissociated from their site of production and diffusion.

In Berlin, *Poetrica* was presented indoors at the digital poetry exhibition P0es1s[[6]](#footnote-6) , at Kulturforum, and in a public space. In the museum space *Poetrica* consisted of a set of large-dimension prints, a DVD projection[[7]](#footnote-7) and a web site project. In the public space, *Poetrica* was displayed on an electronic billboard on the Kurfürstendamm and in a movie theatre, in a trailer format, announcing the P0es1s show through the series "ad\_oetries" (ads + poetry)[[8]](#footnote-8) conceived especially for this venue on the invitation of Friedrich Block, the curator of P0es1s.' In that sense *Poetrica* stressed the logic of cloning, a logic that permeates digital creation. In spite of being identical in format and informational content, messages produced in the scope of *Poetrica* are not identical with regard to fruition and legibility, and so evidence the most fascinating aspect of clone logic: its ability of being identical while being different. All that was created was, however, seen and read in completely different ways, according to their reception context—i.e. not as a result of a screen’s dimension or of the kind of surface to which images and texts momentarily adhere. Rather, it is the result of a "mutable aesthetic that accommodates contemporary phenomena like 'second-hand originals'", as Peter Lunenfeld states (1996:97), peculiar to that nomadic writing which, in being clonable and disconnected from its support, dematerializes the medium so as to make the interface become a message.

A phenomenon intrinsic to the dynamics of transmission aesthetics, cloning brings a specter of new variables into the process of creation and reception. It forces us to think strategies that would allow us to become accomplices of the machine, and to give in to the logic of partnerships that plays with otherness in the roles of creator and creature, facing the ambivalence between visible and invisible, the place of the code and the place of the image.

A matter that is the vertex and the vortex of *//\*\*Code\_UP* (2004), a project on digital image that interrogates the role of the code in the construction of meaning. I worked there in dialog with Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 *Blow Up*, one of the deepest meditations on the nature and the place of image, and on the ways we deal with the visible and the invisible.

In *// \*\*Code\_UP*[[9]](#footnote-9), the audience takes pictures of themselves with cell phones and sends their images via bluetooth to large screens. The images are manipulated by a program specially developed for the project, which through algorithm reads the colors' RGB[[10]](#footnote-10) code as heights, transforming them into mobile and interactive matrices. A zoom is operated in the color processing that indicates to us a radical point matter: digital images relate not to nature but to programming languages. Their colors – a basic element in visual perception – are produced by numeric systems, operations of logic, and electronic displays. How do those questions affect our ways of seeing and perceiving?

It would be naive to try to answer this question now, but would be inconsistent to not face the unprecedented situation imposed upon us by the aesthetics of transmission, and the to ignore the way these images challenge us to think in a pixel rhetoric, think about the screens' reading requirements, and about color coding parameters. It may be hard to anticipate the answers, but one must take the question seriously. For it brings up, implicitly, one more variable that emerges with mobility culture, and refers, once again, to the aesthetics of transmission, namely the experience of disconnectedness as a reference to be thought with regard to art and communication in the wireless context. And it was precisely that line of concerns that defined the action agenda of a "trilogy" I developed recently: *De Vez em Sempre (Sometimes Always)*, *De Vez em Nunca (Sometimes Never)*, both created in 2005, and *Sometimes* (2006).[[11]](#footnote-11)

*Sometimes Always* reflects on the world as seen through screens and windows, in which each moment of the day looks like a film, erased and consummated as soon as it is realized, answering to the fragmentation and acceleration dynamics that produce them.The project consists of an interactive screening, based on generative systems, which allow the audience to capture images with cell-phone video cameras and send them to large screens via bluetooth. When passing the mouse over the videos, the images on the screen are decomposed in frames that are reorganized by the interactor's moves, following the drawings and directions s/he imposes via the mouse. When the action is interrupted the videos restart, without erasing the mosaic of the scattered images that has formed on the screen, generating thus an intriguing situation of intense difference and repetition. Always.

In *Sometimes Never,* the starting point is the idea of a "degenerative" video that is deconstructed through the public's action. Videographic images, captured in the exhibition room with cell-phone cameras, are sent to the large screen via bluetooth and made available for manipulation through the keyboard and a mouse. In real time the interactors recompose the order of frames and re-edit the original film, introducing color and light filters on images by means of the keyboard, which associates a different color filter to each key, to be superimposed onto the decomposed image frames (via the mouse action on the video). The first film is restarted over the new layer of images constructed by the public any time when someone abandons the mouse/keyboard. The result is a dynamic palimpsest of images that consume themselves, following an entropic logic in which the accumulation of registers is made through erasings and suppressions, building fleeting and fluid memories.

In *Sometimes,* a disturbing situation of stagnation is defined as the starting point. The public is invited to manipulate, with the help of a mouse, images taken on my cell phone from a car and arranged in a triptych that presents horizontal and vertical vectors of congestion. The more the mouse moves, the more the frames in the original video sequence are diluted. The program developed for the project thus transforms the mouse into a magnet that takes the images to the points drawn on the screen by the mouse. Nothing is erased, everything is accumulated, resulting in enigmatic compositions which either bring to the surface a fleeting moment of the day, or else erase, delete, make scraps of everything that preceded them.

In spite of their methodological and technical similarities, the projects *Sometimes Always,* *Sometimes Never* and *Sometimes* have distinct cognitive and perceptive horizons. In the first one, the manipulation of images generates a situation marked by differences and repetitions; in the second one, the result points to an unstable palimpsest, in which a saturation disallowing the repetition of same action prevails. Never. In the third one, the agenda is composed of a brute regime of unstableness: intermittence between connection and disconnection.

And it is in this context of distribution in the interstices of the practices and processes of cybridization that art conceived for mobile devices is radicalized as an aesthetic and epistemological experience. Made in cell phones and to be consumed in small screens, it points to an unequivocal process of de-spectacularization of art, not a consequence of the diminutive size of a cell-phone screen, but as the fruition of a context guided by the nomadism inherent in the wireless experience. It is an art confounded with the means through which it is offered; experienced in transit situations, it tends to impose a regime of near-anonymity to its creators.

Regulated by feedback comprised of disconnection, saturation and acceleration --all keywords of an aesthetic of transmission-- the art of mobile devices is conceived in the scope of mobility, in a scattered vision that is lost and updated, in the gaps of data-transfer flux and on- and off-line networks. Made to be transmitted by bluetooth, MMS or download, cell-phone microart confronts the asepsis typical of digital art exhibitions, and disdains the silence and concentration of traditional art circuits. An art that lives its own temporality, that of the interval, it bets on the de-spectacularization to face the risk of not being seen, and to celebrate the common minimum micro.

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*//\*\*Code\_UP* (2004), at <http://container.zkm.de/code_up>

*Sometimes Always/Sometimes Never/Sometimes,* at <http://www.desvirtual.com/sometimes>

1. For many good examples of different projects dealing with mobility and wireless systems, see http://www.netzwissenschaft.de/mob.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A detailed analysis of this creative line was explored by the author in *Link-se* (art/media/politics/cyberculture), pp. 160-165, and in *For an Aesthetics of Transmission,* at http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/special11\_2/beiguelman/index.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a discussion about the role of transmission in net art projects, see Tilman Baumgärtel, 1997. "We love your computer - The Aesthetics of Crashing Browsers (Interview with Jodi)," *Telepolis,* 6/10/1997, at http://www.telepolis.de/r4/artikel/6/6187/1.html, accessed December 23, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For Robert Smithson art works, projects, biography, bibliography, references and essays, visit http://www.robertsmithson.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. www.poetrica.net [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. P0es1s - Digitale Poesie run from February 13 to April 4 2004, organized by the literaturWERKstatt Berlin in cooperation with the Brückner-Kühner Foundation (Kassel) in the special exhibition hall at the Kulturforum, Potsdamer Platz, Berlin. <http://www.p0es1s.net> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Some samples of the DVD and the largedimension prints are available for download at <http://www.poetrica.net/english/download.htm>. For more images and critical context of the work, visit [http://www.mediaartnet.org/works/poetrica/.](http://www.mediaartnet.org/works/poetrica/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ad\_oetries at <http://www.poetrica.net/english/ad_oetries.htm>, accessed December 23, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <http://container.zkm.de/code_up> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We basically use two formats for color coding on the internet: RGB and hexadecimal (a combination from 0 to 6 and A to F, where black is 000000 and white is FFFFFF). RGB, descendent from the video, is the code based on primary colors (Red, Green and Blue), translated in web programming into a scale from 0 to 255, where black is 0,0,0 (zero red, zero green, zero blue) and white, the sum of all colors, is 255,255,255. Not by chance, in *//\*\*Code\_Up*, the lighter areas of images correspond to the bigger lines. To see an image processed by the program in action, visit <http://container.zkm.de/code_up/web/english/apps/applet/index.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [www.desvirtual.com/sometimes](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cndurovic.IOWA.002%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CMicrosoft%5CWindows%5CTemporary%20Internet%20Files%5CContent.IE5%5C0M9OATOA%5Cwww.desvirtual.com%5Csometimes) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)