

# URBAN SPACE AS A MEDIA PLATFORM

Maaïke Rijnders, FONTYS ACI

SPY, MADRID

FILTHYLUKER

CATTELAN, MILANO

## SUMMARY

In an increasing urban environment city dwellers seem to appropriate their public surroundings more and more. By exercising little interventions they are commenting the city and the society this city is part of. They are using the urban public spaces as a platform of communication, way beyond graffiti ever did.

Could urban knitting still be considered a frivolous flaw, dwellers' initiatives such as guerrilla gardening seem to be a good example of a more consistent transformation taking place in accepting authorities when it comes to public space in the city. In the *trendrede 2012*, an annual essay written by a group of Dutch trendwatchers this changing mentality has actually been given a name: "de burger van stavast", best translated with Citizen Strong.<sup>1</sup> The city dweller is withdrawing back from authorities and taking over control of his own city. By shaping it, by changing it, by communicating through it. Citizen Strong wants to participate and cocreate. The city is becoming one big media platform. This is the graffiti of the future.

***"More than half of the world's population live in cities. Very many, especially the young ones, love it there. They like it when people, including themselves, work together to make the city a more empowering place – Love Thy city, we call this. "***

*(Carl Rohde, trendwatcher, Science of the Time)*

There is probably nobody left who has never heard of or seen this bizar phenomenon, where random objects in our city are being covered with a frivolous and colourful knit. Urban knitting, or yarn bombing originating from

the USA, has been popular in our country for a few years now and still is very present, mainly in smaller villages, picked up by the mainstream audience. It'll pass, it'll disappear in a few years, but it doesn't stand on it self.

It's part of a bigger phenomenon we call urban interventions: inspiring and often humorous interventions, adjustments to the urban space, made by artists, or anonymous city dwellers. They can be extremely small like "The Little People project" from the artist Slinkachu, or very huge, like the work of the artist Filthyluker.

They are often funny, playful or even moving, and bring a smile to the faces of passers, even when being actually illegal. Striking urban interventions spread all over the world via blogs and social media and many urban interventors have built up a worldwide fame, albeit anonymous.

In his book *"Urban Interventions, personal projects in public spaces"* Robert Klanten describes the phenomenon as follows: "Evolving from graffiti and street art, urban interventions are the next generation of artwork to hit public space. They turn the street into a studio, laboratory, club, and gallery. The work is an intelligent and critical commentary on the planning, use, and commercialization of public space. It challenges us to question if the cities we have are the cities we need while adding a touch of magic to mundane places and situations."

Clearly these interventions manifest themselves beyond the idea of urban play<sup>2</sup>.

1. this is the translation the trendrede organisation itself came up with

2. urban play is a name that is often given to urban furniture and interventions that are deliberately made to make the city a playground area

According to George Yúdice, Professor of American Studies Program and of Spanish and Portuguese at New York University “Urban interventions can have an important role on bringing social cohesion in neighbourhoods”. Yúdice emphasises the participating element of urban interventions: “Public or participatory art can be a process through which publics constitute themselves and experience something extraordinary. Certain practices can catalyze a public experience of what it is to come together as a public” (Yudice, 2005)

Describing urban interventions as public or participatory art, as does Yúdice, extends the definition significantly: he specifically points out that urban interventions don't necessarily have to be guerrilla-actions, being initiated by anonymous citizens. It can include urban initiatives from brands and NGO's as well, as long as people are given the opportunity to interact, contribute, participate, and the urban space is the platform on which these communications occur. This is indeed exactly what is happening right now: whereas street artists and non-commissioned urban interventionists started to experiment with urban interventions over the past years, now also governments and brands aim to be playful in public space by creating and injecting urban play elements.

## A BIT OF HISTORY

Commentary street art has been around for ages. Political graffiti was found on the walls of antique Roman houses in Pompeii and in the 16th century in Rome “talking statues”<sup>3</sup> provided an outlet for a form of anonymous political expression.

### Situationists International

Situationists International is the name of a movement in the 1950s, working on the cutting edge of art, politics and the city. The situationists made their political statements in urban environments by creating so called situations, they called “happenings”. In short, situationists wanted to realize their own urban space, instead of living in designed modernistic architectural planning schemes, they considered almost fascist. Not surprisingly, the theories of the situationists have been in the spotlights lately. Merijn Oudenampsen describes the big influence the situationists have had on political, cultural and philosophical level. “Think of the Provo's back then, or Adbusters and the Yes men right now, or think of art groups like the Critical Art Ensemble, or the Graffiti Research Lab, think of philosophers like Baudrillard and Lyotard, or the urban theories of Lefebvre. Situationists were ahead of their time in thinking about the creative city that is so popular these days” (Merijn Oudenampsen, 2008)

### Fluxus

Fluxus was the name of an international network of artists, composers and designers noted for blending different artistic media and disciplines in the 1960s. They were active in visual art as well as literature, urban planning, architecture, and design. It was an attitude more than a style. They aimed to bring daily life and art together in simple performances, short texts and understandable art. Humour was an important element in their work. The influence of Fluxus still shows, particularly in Performance art, Street art, and Graffiti. In fact, on all those artists who choose to work outside established museum systems. An artist like Banksy is a good example of the continuation of the Fluxus philosophy.

***“let the citizens themselves decide what spaces and architecture they want to live in and how they wish to live in.”***

*(Guy Debord, The Society of Spectacle, 1970)*

**Banksy**, the popular, yet mysterious urban street artist. He has become internationally known for his counter cultural artwork in public spaces. He uses a particular stencil-like technique to express his humorous, but very sharp protests on society and politics. Banksy has been working since 1991, and has art in major galleries all over the world, but most of his subvertising is freely (and illegally) drawn on public surfaces. He works against the mass media establishment, but has been featured in local, national, international news. In 2010 he made the movie “exit through the gift shop” and had himself nominated for an Academy Award. Up until now nobody (officially) knows who Banksy is, but we can be sure that he has managed to take graffiti to a new level.

3. (Criticisms in the form of poems or witticisms were posted on well-known statues in Rome. It began in the 16th century and continues to the present day. The statues even had dialogues amongst each other, several popes in the 16th century tried to have them destroyed or thrown into the Tiber river, but they always turned up again.)





BANKSY



LUZINTERRUPTUS, MADRID



PUTHOLE ART, EAST LONDON



BOA MISTURA



D-TOWER, DOETICHEM



JR, PARIS



AMARO, HAARLEM

So it's about creating, participating, socializing, protesting and communicating, using the city as a medium. That means artists having citizens participating in their projects, or citizens initiating their own projects. It means artists and performers creating social cohesion through their work, but it also means brands and governments acknowledging and using the power of urban space as interactive medium. Let's look at a range of examples

## GUERRILLA URBAN INTERVENTIONS

Urban interventions are still going strong, numerous new examples being uploaded on numerous blogs around the world. Amsterdam based blog [www.popupcity.net](http://www.popupcity.net) and Berlin [www.raumlabor.net](http://www.raumlabor.net) are great sources to keep up with new interventions, such as illuminating guerrilla gardeners from the Spansih collective Luzinterruptus, and the tiny pothole scenes created in East London by anonymous artists.

Both in England and in New York City, old, still existing phone booths are being transformed into public little libraries. Residents can take, borrow or exchange books as much as they like.

## PARTICIPATING URBAN ART

Residents being invited to join in executing the art projects is a phenomenon which we find a lot in South America, in particular Brazilian favela's. It has even gotten it's own name: favelapainting. Earlier in this paper I mentioned the beautiful and moving art from the Boa Mistura art group in Sao Paolo. On the site [www.favelapainting.com](http://www.favelapainting.com) it becomes clear how popular this movement has become.

A form of cocreation on a different level are huge art projects in which participation from the spectator is needed to transform the artwork. The **D-tower** project in Doetichem, Holland is such an artwork. D-tower is an artpiece that maps the emotions of the inhabitants of Doetichem. D-tower measures happiness, love, fear and hate daily, using different questions. The mood is being translated different colours of the statue.

Every year Idea-platform TED awards a prize to an exceptional individual who receives \$100,000 and, much more important, "One Wish to Change the World." Both 2011 and 2012 prizes were awarded to urban minded projects: **JR** (winner 2011) is a photographer. IN the TED jury report: "he creates pervasive art that spreads uninvited on buildings of Parisian slums, on walls in the Middle East, on broken bridges in Africa or in favelas in Brazil. People in the exhibit communities, those who often live with the bare minimum, discover something absolutely unnecessary but utterly wonderful. And they don't just see it, they make it. Elderly women become models for a day; kids turn into artists for a week. In this art scene, there is no stage to separate the actors from the spectators."

2012 TED award was granted to **City2.0**: "I am the city, dream me, build me, make me real". Best is to watch the film at [www.tedprize.org](http://www.tedprize.org).

## PARTICIPATING PERFORMANCES

**Andre Amaro** is a Dutch artist-cook who has become internationally known by his urban cooking performances. He creates unexpected restaurant-like surroundings that bring people together. His Haarlem project "De Tafel" meant dining at Haarlem station and sitting next to hundreds of your (unknown) cotravellers at a 200 mtrs long table. Very social and participatory performances both in the city as well as in rural surroundings.

A religious minded, urban, and participating performance experience was "**The Passion**





THE PASSION ROTTERDAM



SPACEBUSTER



TELEPHONE BOOTH NEW YORK



THE FUN THEORY, VOLKSWAGEN



CONTEX



DROPSTUFF



SAVING FACES

**Rotterdam** that took place april 5th 2012: the story of the passion of Christ, being told, played and sung on a walking tour through the city of Rotterdam. The audience was walking with them. Not a huge stage, not a cinema, not a theatre was the scenery for telling this famous story, but the city itself.

**Space Buster**, (New York, 2009) is a mobile, hot-air balloon pavilion that is used to change public space into temporary quarters for the community to get together. A bubble-like dome inflates out of the back of a standard delivery truck and organically situates itself in relation to the surroundings, creating a exclusive structure that changes with different environments.

## BRANDS AND NGO'S DISCOVERING THE POWER OF COMMUNICATING IN URBAN SPACE

The **Fun theory** is a CSR Volkswagen platform that has taken the urban space specifically to create sustainability awareness amongst urban dwellers. One of many projects, the metamorphosis of a metro stairs into a huge walk-on piano which was filmed and broadcasted on youtube has gotten viral and has spread all over the world through numerous blogs.

French brand **Contrex** smartly used urban surrounding to create an ad campaign that has gotten a lot of attention on the internet. A little bit of sex, a little bit of healthy living, a little bit of humour, and a lot of urban participation.

## URBAN COMMUNICATION

**Urban screens** have been around for some time, being mainly functional for commercial purposes. But they are very quickly getting an additional function. The widespread adoption of Urban Screens as a tool for community engagement has been slow and organic in its evolution, but if current trends persist we are all looking forward to a very exciting surge in growth over the next few years. BBC Big screens are interactive urban screens that have been put up in 22 English cities. During 2012 Olympic games the screens and the areas around them will become "Live Sites". In the meantime, april 19<sup>th</sup> 18 Big Screens will show a special portrait of HM The Queen, which will be made up of self-portraits from young people aged 4 to 16 years, over a 24 hour period in a bid to break a world record.

**Dropstuff** is an urban screen network for digital and interactive art. Renee van Engelenburg, founder of dropstuff likes to call his initiative "a museum without a building". It's a cultural infrastructure, all screens connected to each other and being able to react to each other. Visitors can interact with the screens, using their smartphone

A very FLuxus kind of initiative is **Saving Face**, by Karen Lancel and Hermen Maat. They themselves describe their work as follows: "Saving Face is a smartphone app connected to an urban screen; with which you can create a networked identity through the act of touching and caressing your face. For the creation of this identity your face functions as a painter's pallet: though the act of caressing, you 'paint' your face on the Urban Screen. On the urban screen your face merges with the faces all previous participants of Saving FaceThe context is part of the the Saving Face experience. On city squares, like Rembrandt plein Amsterdam or Time Square New York, city inhabitants create together an identity of a city or square: *The Face of New York* or *The Face of Amsterdam*. At one hand Saving Face is a funny happy game. At the other hand it shows in a playful way social tension about the meeting and integration of personal histories and cultural-political backgrounds."

## WHAT WILL THE FUTURE HOLD?

The enormous popularity of urban interventions, participatory urban performances and art appear to have paid off. Among architects, planners and authorities there is growing awareness that the people living in a city need to participate in building the city. This has led to new visions in planning and architecture like **placemaking**. Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces. It involves looking at, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space, to discover needs and aspirations. This information is then used to create a common vision for that place.



***“A smart neighbourhood planner acknowledges that the neighbourhood is not going to look like the plan, and that is desirable to a large extent” (Doug Sanders , author of Arrival City)***

Urban screens will become a common phenomenon in the urban space. They will be more interactive, more participatory, and less commercial. Brands have come to realize that using urban screens merely as a modern billboard is decreasingly having its effect on consumers. So we see them moving towards new methods of ad campaigns using the city itself as their platform. Billboards will become adventurous playgrounds for city dwellers using their smartphone to add content.: E-graffiti.

I imagine a city of the future that can be experienced as a great adventure. A city that talks to me, and I can talk back. A city that is owned by its citizens. Authorities , planners



and commercial stakeholders are realizing this change and acting upon it. Urban interventions will become part of daily urban experience, like the traffic light. We will be smiling a lot.

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