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CITY AS SCREEN / BODY AS MOVIE

Let's start with a photograph taken by Hiroko Masuke—of a billboard featuring an ad for the television miniseries *The Andromeda Strain* that was printed in the *New York Times* a year ago.[1] The billboard includes a large, horizontal poster for the series, along with a video display showing clips embedded within the poster. What's *not* visible, however, is a small video camera (made by the company Quividi) that records passersby as they look at the billboard. The company has developed what it calls the "automated audience measurement solution," which documents visitors who look at the billboard, channeling the information into a database, from which it decodes the data. It examines factors such as the overall height of viewers, as well as facial features, including cheekbone height and the measurement of space between the nose and chin. The goal is to determine gender and age, and although the company says it does not yet factor for race, it plans to soon.

This essay takes as its topic urban video and screens, umbrella terms that include the multiple cameras and projection surfaces that characterize the topology of contemporary urban space. At any given time in an urban setting we are participants within an information space—as subjects surveilled and "captured" by video cameras; as users of cell phones and PDAs that allow for multiple and layered interactions with data, from telephone usage to web-based activities, photography, and video capture; as users of ATM screens; as viewers of the media displays on terminals at train stations and airports; as readers of assorted screen-based texts; as viewers of video ads; and as subjects interacting with a broad range of specific media streams. In these capacities, we exist as both networked subject and object, viewer and viewed. We are imbricated within networks, often without our knowledge, while interacting with others. In short, we continually negotiate innumerable interfaces, are hailed as subjects and enact our subjectivities in the midst of continual media flux. Urban screens are just one aspect of a larger set of screens that build a network around us. As such, screens are no longer simply dedicated to display; instead, they become components of what has been described as "augmented space" and "mixed reality,"[2] namely physical spaces overlaid with data through various devices and technologies.

Academic interest in the urban networked sphere stems from the specific, yet convergent, media from which its iterations derive, namely the traditions of cinema, video, public art, and an emerging participatory culture, some of whose participants borrow from and extend the tactical and politicized activist media practices of earlier decades. However, urban screens also intersect with other categories and disciplines:

- as integral extensions of the built environment, they are discussed in the field of architectural theory and debates about the intersection of the digital and material as articulated by architects designing and constructing actual buildings;
- because screens often display advertising, they are also included in discussions about corporate branding and the interface between markets and individuals;

- because they dot the urban landscape, sometimes hovering between private and public space, these screens serve as the focal point for discussions about political power and public space as a necessary component of democracy.

However, in the context of this particular issue of *Afterimage*, I want to address what kinds of literacies are being shaped by pervasive video in public space. In spaces rife with advertising, what rhetorical strategies are deployed by users of this space, whether corporations, governments, artists, and others, to "speak" to viewers? And how are everyday viewers responding with their own images in public? As cities become screens, and bodies become movies, where do we situate empowerment and literacy?

Major cities are employing screens as a means to draw visitors to certain locales and to sell goods through advertising. The biggest screens—those that are several stories high—are known as "spectaculars." Found in cities such as New York, Las Vegas, London, and Tokyo, the screens have become increasingly prevalent as the technology needed to create them becomes more affordable. Until recently, these signs were akin to billboards and because they required careful planning to alter, they generally remained static. However, in 2005, many of the signs were networked, which meant the material displayed on the sign could be changed instantly. The Coca-Cola sign in Times Square was one of the first billboards to be networked. The programming, typically silent motion graphics or animation (most often made by repurposing existing print or commercial advertising) is sold to advertisers in the form of "dayparts," a term borrowed from television advertising that refers to the segments of a day during which advertisers seek to address the viewers deemed most appropriate for their products. The company Wow Factor, for example, has trademarked the term "content engineering" to refer to the work the company does to align a particular sign's technical parameters and the advertiser's need to "create content that 'pushes the envelope.'"

While spectaculars have become tourist destination points, a more common form of screen is increasingly finding its way into public space. It is what Clear Channel calls the "Digital Outdoor Network," large digital billboards that rotate through sequences of static images. Clear Channel has experimented with a variety of digital advertising forms. Two years ago, they collaborated with the New York Mass Transit Authority, which runs public buses and subways, to install eighty LED advertising panels above various subway entrances. The project was initially dubbed "Street TV," but Clear Channel had trouble selling the space because advertisers were not sure what the space was—television or traditional signage? The company adopted the term "moving billboard" to help alleviate the confusion. This instance points to the process of definition taking place as these screens continue to proliferate.

Since 2000, the number of artworks involving projected, multi-channel, or single-channel displays of video has grown exponentially within museums and galleries in the United States and abroad. Large-scale spectacles have drawn viewers back to institutions whose power and significance was on the wane in the 1990s. Normally ensconced inside the museum, media art is gradually moving outside of art institutional contexts into the public sphere. One example of this trend is a project that was situated inside the New York City Museum of Modern Art's Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden in early 2007. Gigantic moving images were projected onto the walls encasing the garden every evening. The films, part of what artist Doug Aitken calls a "broken screen" narrative, chronicle the lives of five characters as they move through the city at night.[3] The accompanying website notes, "These characters provide a blueprint for the metropolis as a living, breathing organism fueled by the desires, energies, and ambitions of its inhabitants."[4]

Visitors to this site-specific cinema were able to access commentary about the project via their cell phones, and a fast-paced, 60-second trailer was posted on YouTube in the hopes of generating interest. Visitors were invited to stroll around the silent film to see all six 11-minute segments. The large images (many of them close-ups) exaggerated the enormity of the characters' faces and figures so that they were visible blocks away. The title of the project was *Sleepwalkers*.
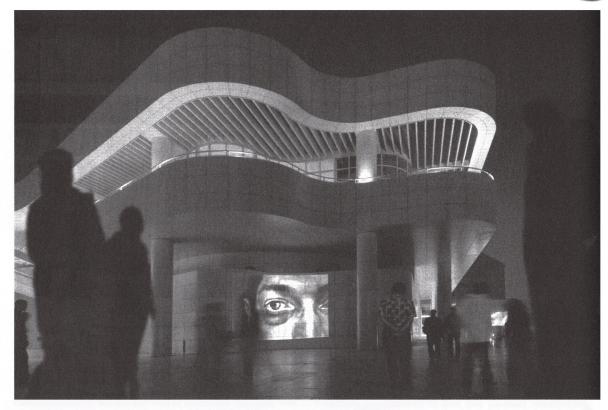
While unusually large-scale and expensive, Aitken's project is just one example of a broader trend toward the embrace of video art in general as well as video art installed in public space specifically. The 2001, '03, and '05 Venice Bienniales received much criticism for what critics characterized as the "infiltration" of video as well as the circus-like atmosphere created by the presence of multiple screens and their accompanying aural cacophony. The 2006 Whitney Biennial was both celebrated and criticized for its emphasis on moving images. However, many museums are seeking to reinvigorate their cultural significance by finding new ways of connecting with audiences, often by pushing their exhibitions out into the city, hoping to offset charges of redundancy and irrelevance. The recent series of inSite_05 shows staged on the border between Tijuana and San Diego, for example, are situated within neighborhoods, streets, and highways. The Hammer Museum and The Getty Center in Los Angeles have also exhibited extensive outdoor projections.

Along the same lines, many museums attempt to engage the public by crafting buildings that architecturally blur the boundaries between inside and outside, whether through translucent skins or large-scale screens designed to attract viewers from a distance. For example, the Walker Art Center's $70 million expansion (designed by Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron in 2005), which includes what has been described as "a skin of crinkled aluminum mesh that changes constantly with the sky, sometimes looking like ice, sometimes like glass and other times like cellophane" and at other times like concrete.[5] The addition also includes a "dynamic information display" designed by the New York-based firm Pentagram Design. Located on the outside of the building, the display is a rear projection featuring two streams

of information and utilizing five synchronized video projections that are displayed on an etched-glass surface. The resulting images are described as "ghostly" and "diffuse" but these effects are intentional; the designers did not want the images to appear as sharp as they would be on a monitor.

In short, many museum spaces and outdoor advertising screens are attempting to appeal to a wider public through the presentation of large-scale moving images, screen-based information, and screen-like facades that blur distinctions between interior and exterior and among media (whether cinema, television, or print), as well as between branding, entertainment, and art. These screens contribute to a larger project of constructing viewers capable of transcending the boundaries dividing aesthetic viewing from activities such as browsing, walking, talking, and shopping. Viewers are increasingly addressed as subjects willing and able to fluidly negotiate the information and artistic flows that surround us. To some extent, this is nothing new. Billboards and television similarly addressed spectators who could negotiate multiple forms of attention. However, seen in the context of a growing screen ecology, screens presume and construct a new kind of viewing subject as well as propose a public space that overlaps with private—and often corporate—spaces.

Why is fluidity between the public and private spheres so desirable? One reason has to do with the construction of digital consumers and workers. To be productive as either, we need to develop new forms of attention and perception. What used to be derisively dubbed "distraction" or "continuous partial attention" (simultaneously listening to music, chatting on IM, and working on three projects at once) is now

called multitasking and is seen as a skill. Further, sitting in front of a film screen immersed in a single narrative is no longer a skill within the instrumental logic of the new corporate environment—being able to handle multiple streams of input is.

Screens and their reconfiguration of boundaries also reflect what Saskia Sassen dubs the "global city." She describes the contemporary city as "an amalgamation of multiple global circuits that loop."[6] What "remains physical in the city," she says, "is transformed by the fact that it is represented by liquid instruments" in a dense, digital infrastructure.[7] Physical space, especially in cities, is augmented by data, and that information's significance has grown exponentially over the last decade. If much of the activity occurring in global cities is as invisible as the flow of electronic information and finance all around us, the screen remains obstinately visible, framing and demarcating what threatens to overwhelm us or alternatively to disappear altogether. Screens often act as the display for digital information flows, representing them visually. What exactly do they demarcate in their stubborn presence? Who deploys this demarcation and toward what end?

Several artists ask these questions and attempt to answer them through the use of outdoor projections. Perhaps the best-known artist working with video projected in public space, Krzysztof Wodiczko, has been

exhibiting controversial images on the surfaces of public buildings and official monuments for more than twenty-five years. Similarly, Canadian-Mexican media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer utilizes public space in many of his projects. In "Under Scan" (2005), for example, Lozano-Hemmer projected a series of video portraits on the ground of public squares in several towns in England. However, the portraits are invisible until people walk into the light of the projection, at which point their shadows reveal the portraits. An exchange takes place between the viewer and the video portrait, resulting in a sense of composited and performed social identity that is at once connected to, and more than, the single, individual body. Similarly, in "Body Movies," part of a larger project Lozano-Hemmer dubs "relational architecture," the artist and his team created a series of interactive projections based on photographs taken on the streets where the piece was shown. In this case, the photos only appear within the projected shadows of people passing by, again conjuring a link between the viewer and the image.

In a 2005 interview with José Luis Barrios, Lozano-Hemmer quotes Cicero, "We make buildings and buildings make us."[8] He is referring to his projections on structures; however, the quotation might be expanded to include public space. Indeed, the artist explains that the global city represents capital rather than citizens. His response to the dominance of capitalism is to encourage an "eccentric reading of the environment" and promote "alien memories" that do not originate with or belong to the site.[9] He insists that as an artist he is less interested in creating traditional site-specific media art installations than on what he terms "relationship-specific" projects that emerge from his use of the term "relational," which he juxtaposes with the "virtual." If "virtual" suggests a dematerialization of experience, the relational, in contrast, is about the dematerialization of the physical world. For Lozano-Hemmer, then, "relational architecture disorganizes the master narratives of a building by adding and subtracting audiovisual elements to affect it, effect it, and re-contextualize it."[10]

I propose that we extend Lozano-Hemmer's understanding of "relational" to a literary context. The artist cites the function of relational databases, which weave "multi-dimensional webs for connecting various fields." He explains, relational is "a good word in counterpoint to the term 'virtual,' which emphasizes the dematerialization of experience and asks us to create in simulacra." In contrast, "'relational' emphasizes the dematerialization of the real environment and asks us to question the dissimulation."[11]

The ability to understand play across frequencies must be added to our understanding of contemporary literacy. To sketch a history: "critical literacy," a term used by Paulo Freire in 1967, designates the need to incorporate critical perspectives into pedagogies dedicated to literacy. Part of that critical perspective is an understanding of the hegemonic and ideological drives that influence, and perhaps govern, modes of communication. One of the primary practices of critical literacy is the "uncovering" of hidden agendas or the revelation of coded meanings.

What is required in addition to these literacies then, is relational literacy, which unites a critical stance in regard to "reading" the world, as well as an understanding of visual literacy, but adds the ability to negotiate the material and immaterial vectors of media and the social relations they engender. Just as a relational database allows users to discern unforeseen relations among sets of data, so relational literacy helps users discern the invisible or unacknowledged connections between data streams. Relational literacy, then, parallels the augmented reality noted earlier, similarly working as an overlay on the environment allowing us to perceive the heretofore unperceived. It is also situated, and specific, to users emerging from the specificity of place, time, and subject.

What are the specific components of this relational literacy? First is the recognition of a new form of subjectivity. If cultural objects construct us through interpellation, a subject constructed through myriad mediated instantiations of interpellation and surveillance is different from the traditional cinema spectator. In his book *The Cinema Effect* (2004), Sean Cubitt charts a path through the history of cinema in an equation that aligns Jacques Lacan's realms of the psyche—the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic—with Charles Sanders Peirce's description of thought, as composed of three categories, firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Roughly summarized, firstness is pure experience; secondness includes a sense of the physical; and thirdness involves more complex thought, imagination, and the ability to think through representations. In firstness, cinema provides the plenitude and immersiveness constitutive of the Real; in secondness, the filmic cut enacts the division between subject and object corresponding to the Imaginary; and in thirdness, writes Cubitt, we arrive at the Lacanian Symbolic, moving toward "concept and meaning, socialization, the paradigmatic axis of film."[12] He calls this phase "the vector," and notes that as its spectators, we are addressed "no longer as termini but as media: as people who make sense, but only as nodes in interweaving trajectories of signification." He continues, "It is no longer a matter of recognition, of deciphering what is already encoded. Rather it is a matter of reinterpreting, of adding a new spin to a trajectory that has not yet realized itself," adding a bit later, "we confront the double presence of the screen image as at once object and image."[13] As subjects, we are not terminal points but nodes within a relational network.

Second is the fact that much of what we hope to discern is in fact invisible or hidden. The surveillance camera on a Quividi-equipped billboard, for example, is not immediately apparent, nor does the information on the billboard connect the "viewer" of the camera's footage with those being viewed. Here, the billboard acts as both a screen hiding a camera and an image, hovering in the space in between, acting as an interface through which information is conveyed, as much as it is a screen that obscures and makes information invisible.

Just as many of us carry screens around with us, we have some power to direct and participate in the information flows that surround us. In *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (2006) Yochai Benkler describes the "networked information economy," as distinct from the industrial information economy thanks to its creation of a communications environment that creates individuals who, he says, are less passive, "and thus more engaged observers of social spaces that could potentially become subjects for political conversation; they become more engaged participants in the debates about their observations."[14]

Benkler's excitement is paralleled by that of Henry Jenkins who, in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), discusses the relationships among three concepts: media convergence, participatory

culture, and collective intelligence, noting that he is most interested in convergence as a cultural shift, through which "consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content." He adds that his book is primarily concerned with "the work—and the play—spectators perform in the new media system."[15]

The fourth component of relational literacy, is play. Play in urban spaces takes multiple forms, from the casual gaming of subway riders using increasingly miniaturized cell phones or DS consoles, to citywide alternate reality games that may have no visible manifestation whatsoever. The appropriation of city spaces for play has profound implications for the experience of individuals who, in the words of Michel de Certeau, navigate the city "against the design"[16] of urban planners, oriented toward orderly movement and maximized access to commerce.

Finally, the fifth component of relational literacy is the making of a public through narratives that disrupt, that allow the silenced to speak, and that empower the disempowered. What are the various practices of users in public space that *make* that space? Returning to Sassen, whose work focuses on these practices, we find a sense of urgency. She notes that we are at a critical moment in the work of what she calls "making the public and making the political." She highlights "growing velocities, the ascendance of process and flow over artifacts and permanence, massive structures that are not on a human scale, and branding as the basic mediation between individuals and markets."[17] She argues there are narratives that "add to the value of existing contexts" and to the "utility logics of the economic corporate world."[18] Then she adds, "But there is also a kind of public-making work that can produce disruptive narratives, and make it legible to the local and the silenced."[19]

If the city is now considered dynamic and layered, a space of multiple, mutable flows, then urban screens, in their convergence and divergence, in their contradictory agendas and diverse audiences, serve as emblems,

tangible manifestations of the liminal juncture between material and immaterial. Relational literacy designates the ways in which we might "disorganize" the master narratives of mediated public space and its screens, in order to differently reconstitute our own architectures of meaning and priority.

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NOTES **1**. *The image can be found at www.nytimes.com/2008/05/31/business/media/31billboard.html (accessed May 31, 2008).* **2**. *"Mixed reality" comes from the 2005 International Symposium on Mixed and Augmented Reality, which focused on "the environment generated by new technologies that contain significant interaction possibilities in both virtual and physical spaces." "Augmented space" comes from Lev Manovich's discussion of the Prada store in Manhattan in "The Poetics of Augmented Space: Learning From Prada," 2002. A downloadable PDF is available at www.noemalab.org/sections/ideas/ideas_articles/pdf/manovich_augmented_space.pdf.* **3**. *The term "broken screen" is also the name of Aitken's 2006 collection of interviews with artists interested in nonlinear narrative forms.* Broken Screen: 26 Conversations With Doug Aitken, Expanding the Image, Breaking the Narrative *(New York: Trilce, 2006).* **4**. *See the website at www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2007/aitken/flash.html.* **5**. *Karren Mills, "Walker Art Center Undergoes Futuristic Face-Lift,"* The San Diego Union-Tribune *(April 24, 2005).* **6**. *Saskia Sassen, "Making Public Interventions in Today's Massive Cities,"* The London Consortium, Static, *Issue 04: 5. Available as a downloadable PDF at static.londonconsortium.com/issue04/.* **7**. *Ibid.* **8**. *"Loose Ends: A Conversation Between José Luis Barrios and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer," April 2005, page 7; available as a downloadable PDF at www.lozano-hemmer.com/english/texts.htm#Downloadable.* **9**. *He adds, "I don't want to develop site-specific installations but rather focus on the new temporal relationships that emerge from the artificial situation, what I call 'relationship-specific' art."* **10**. *Nettime listserv entry, January 1998; accessible at www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9801/msg00056.html.* **11**. *All quotations from Barrios conversation, page 9.* **12**. *Sean Cubitt,* The Cinema Effect *(Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 70.* **13**. *Ibid., 92.* **14**. *Yochai Benkler,* The Wealth of Networks: Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom, *Comment Press version, Chapter 1, paragraph 23; available at http://yupnet.org/benkler/archives/8.* **15**. *Henry Jenkins,* Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide *(New York: NYU Press, 2006) 3.* **16**. *This notion comes from Michel de Certeau's essay, "Walking in the City," from* The Practice of Everyday Life *(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).* **17**. *Sassen, 7.* **18**. *Ibid., 1.* **19**. *Ibid., 7.* 🄰🄸