RE/F/r.ACE: a participatory performance media art event in the city

Andy Best-Dunkley
Media Lab, Dept. of Media
Aalto University, School of Arts, Design & Architecture
andy.best@aalto.fi

Introduction

Can a disruption or disturbance of institutionalised conditioning according to class, education, gender and physical abilities be affected by careful design and presentation of the interactive artwork? It is my contention that, in contrast to traditional visual arts, interactive art and participation in media performance demand an embodied experience, and therefore, the physical act of doing and being in a public space leads to an empowering cognitive experience with long lasting consequences for the active participant.

It is vital that the interactive experience invites and encourages social interaction amongst the participants, as it is only through social activity that the self-image can be positively developed. The physical artwork (as performance or installation) becomes a point of focus for social interaction AND empowerment, as the normal rules of engagement within public space are temporarily ignored in favour of those created by the participants themselves.

Many believe that contemporary art can be a driving force for change: already in the 1950’s, Yoshihara Jiro, founder of the Gutai (literally “embodiment”) art movement in Japan stated: “It is our deep-seated belief that creativity in a free space will truly contribute to the development of the human race” (Hirai 2004)

On their current website Marc Garrett and Ruth Catlow, artists and founders of the gallery and social arts organisation Furtherfield give their vision statement:

“We believe that through creative and critical engagement with practices in art and technology people are inspired and enabled to become active co-creators of their cultures and societies.
We can make our own world – together!” (“Furtherfield.org” 2013)

Half a century separates these two statements, yet they both sound remarkably similar, with a strong belief that artistic creativity can have positive, empowering consequences for people in their everyday life. Why then is it that so many, both within the arts and outside, refuse to accept that art does have the power to change people and society? Why is creativity still marginalised within mainstream politics?
Who’s City?

Participatory art works in public space have the potential to question the premise of urban design, which ultimately is not only aesthetical or functional but more importantly bears significant political implications to the inhabitants’ possibility to use their environment. Who is the city for? Is it a site of spectacle for tourism, or a place for living, for work? Who has the legitimate right to appear in the public space? And how does one become a visible and legitimate user of urban space in contemporary society? It seems clear that public spaces are designed for fast and target orientated transitional actions: people rush from home to work or to do their errands. There is little space within the built environment, apart from the occasional oasis of a park or garden, which is dedicated for casual social gathering unless this is specifically provided by a commercial venue. The speed and function orientated hierarchies of design imply that playing children, people with disabilities, youngsters with little money, and elderly people or the unemployed, who would have time and may just wish to pass the time watching other people, are not welcome in this environment.

The Excluded

Ivan Illich writes “Tools foster conviviality to the extent to which they can be easily used, by anybody ... for a purpose chosen by the user.” In his discussion of contemporary life he continues “the majority of people were certified as unfit for higher grades of enlightenment and had to be discarded as unprepared for the good life in a man-made world.” (Illich 2001, 22) For people with disabilities this is the situation they face every day – they are given little choice in where or how they live, what they do, or even if they can work. Susan Schweik has researched the so-called Ugly Laws which sought to forbid disabled people to appear in public in various cities in the USA – thereby in many cases restricting their ability to earn a living. (Schweik 2009) The categorisation of ability according to visual appearance is deep-rooted across society. Arthur Franklin Fuller, who was afflicted with chronic illness which confined him to a lying position, wrote in his autobiography: “The pianist could not play nearly as well as I, even in dance music. But these folks have well, normal bodies, and that makes all the difference in the world.” (Schweik 2009, 272) In the 21st century the cult of celebrity makes physical beauty even more of a social currency, yet for some, media technologies help to address the balance and empower otherwise marginalised individuals.

The Eye Writer project is a superb example of media technology being used to empower a specific individual (Tempt One) with a disabilitating disease (ALS). (“EyeWriter” 2013) As Tempt One himself states: “Art is a tool of empowerment and social change, and I consider myself blessed to be able to create and use my work to promote health reform, bring awareness about ALS and help others.”

It is clear that the act of empowerment for Tempt One comes through a combination of access to the technology, the ability to once again create graffiti art, and his possibility to have a presence in the public city environment through the large scale urban projections of his tags. As Rancière illustrates, emancipation
can arise through actions and activity which question the roles allocated to us by society. (Ranciere 2011, 19–21)

The disabled person, going about their everyday life, disrupts the rhythm of public space. They do not move at the same speed as the general population. They require lifts, ramps, wider doorways. They move at their own pace and take their space. Why don’t we see disabled people out in public, in the shopping malls and on the high street? For many of them, just getting to the city centre is a struggle, as they live in homes that are out of the way, requiring a taxi ride to get anywhere. They may need assistance when out and about. Helpers are hard to come by. The disabled person is constricted to being in public at times that suit her helper, and in places that are deemed accessible. They are at the mercy of both the architecture of the environment and the whims of others.

Petra Kupper compares the flâneurs of the 1840’s to the differently abled person in the street today. (Jackson, 4–5) Shannon Jackson concludes that the disruption of pace caused by the slowly or awkwardly moving person in public space today not only forces the rest of us to recognise this difference, this “other”, but also to understand the new possibilities for “being in space”. The hectic pace of movement most commonly witnessed in contemporary cities is markedly disrupted by an old or disabled person trying to move within narrow corridors in undergrounds or shopping centres. There is no place/space for the majority to by-pass the “obstruction”, and thus there is a systemic breakdown in the flow. In contrast to this, occasionally one may witness the opposite situation, when the disabled person or group of people, riding their motorised wheelchairs, are actually more at ease in the smooth floored palaces of contemporary consumption. Their top speed can outpace that of a fast walker, and they have learnt from centuries of abuse that there is no reason to slow down for other travellers! A couple, out for a romantic “walk” in their electric wheelchairs, can quite successfully disrupt the systemic understanding of normally able bodied shoppers, as they drive down the aisle hand in hand. This action can be seen as a clear attempt to reclaim the space—and the pace—of the public domain.

Henri Lefebvre regards the capitalist system as a colonialisation of both the producer (worker) and consumer (as one and the same person). The exploitation that was once directed at the colonised territories is now focused on the everyday life of populations in the industrialised nations. When once every aspect of everyday life was symbolic—every action, every thing had meaning, in contemporary life symbol has been “condensed into monuments” to power.

For Lefebvre everyday consumer behaviour is defined by this symbolism. Thus the basis of consumer behaviour, and the desired outcome of neo-liberal market led economics, is understood within this paradox. The citizen is slave to his own actions: producing, consuming, and believing in ‘the system’.

It is not just the old and disabled that are marginalised within the consumerist society. Young people too are discouraged from just hanging out in these new agoras, unless of course they can afford to consume.
Public space has become a place of consumption, not just a place to be. More and more the shopping centres, which define the contemporary urban life style, are privately owned publicly accessible spaces. Therefore the usual laws and regulations are superseded by privately enforced rules. If you do not conform, you will be excluded.

In the past couple of years gypsy beggars from Romania have become a regular phenomenon in Finnish city centres. Their crouching, rigid posture on the street in all weather conditions through rain, sleet, piling snow and ice displays a stark rhythmic difference and functional (dis)order to the rushing passers-by. During the first few months, due to their Catholic beliefs, they were begging kneeling on the street with praying hands upraised. This body position, a direct plea for mercy through individual donations, seemed to generate violent confusion and antagonism amongst the native population, who are mainly dispassionate Lutherans supporting the Church through automatically collected tax payments. This example highlights the limits of normative control mechanisms in contemporary urban space including acceptable behaviour, clothing, body posture, rhythm of movement and symbolic representation. The Prime Minister at the time demanded control over this foreign gypsy phenomenon in order to keep the streets tidy. He also implied that begging is not a part of Finnish cultural tradition, which is a far cry from the historical fact. During the 1866-1868 famine about 8% of the Finnish population (approximately 150,000 people) died from hunger induced illnesses, forcing entire villages to leave their land and seek for temporary shelter and food by begging. (“Finnish Famine of 1866–1868” 2013)

The Artist’s Role in Society

By the late 1950’s the hegemony enjoyed by abstract expressionism was beginning to face sprouts of resistance as a younger generation of artists began to look outside the closed domain of art for inspiration. Writing in 1956, Allan Kaprow envisioned a new kind of art as the real legacy of Jackson Pollack’s oeuvre, an art that dealt with everyday life itself:

“Pollack, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are the materials of the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists. Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us but ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard-of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in store windows and on the streets; and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents. An odor of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano; three taps on the front door, a
scratch, a sigh, or a voice lecturing endlessly, a blinding staccato flash, a bowler hat – all will become materials for this new concrete art.” (Kaprow, 7–8)

Kaprow magnificently foretold the development of a multitude of relational forms of art making that would not emerge until many years later, and are indeed still current today. He understood the forbidden and unspoken desire held by many artists of his generation to move outside the ridged boundaries set up by the dominant formalist painting of the period. (Kelley, xix) He understood that the tragedy for Pollack was Pollack’s inability to actually take that further step outside the edges of the canvas and into the realm of the everyday.

It is clear that Kaprow and artists who followed after him sought to engage their audience within a carefully orchestrated situation which would produce an experience for the viewer. Indeed, it was particularly this spectacle that drew the wrath of both Greenberg and Fried towards what the later described as ‘literalist’ art. Fried objected to what he saw as the theatrical within this new art form. While artists such as Judd and Morris champion the size and scale of these works, Fried saw only empty spectacle: “the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.” (Fried 2003b) And again as he continues his critique, Fried exclaims “‘the entire situation’ means exactly that: all of it – including, it seems, the beholder’s body. […] ..for something to be perceived at all is for it to be perceived as part of that situation. Everything counts”

Another generation of artists from another continent, The Young British Artists who emerged onto the art scene in the 1990’s employed a combination of conceptual and shock tactics in their work, consciously employing the media’s (usually negative) reaction in their working process – at least in so far as building up a myth around their art practice. Using the language and visual forms of past art genres mixed with a knowing understanding of inter-contextual relationships, these artists set the scene for what writer and curator Nicholas Bourriaud has called “relational aesthetics”, art works that employ inter-human relations as much as formal and aesthetic concerns. In his book of the same name (first published in French in 1998) Bourriaud writes:

“The artist’s practice, and his behavior as producer, determines the relationship that will be struck up with his work. In other words, what he produces, first and foremost, is relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects.” (Bourriaud 1998, 42)

For Bourriaud the emerging popularity of the Internet during the 1990’s and the emergence of a kind of collective online consciousness had influenced artists in their relationships with audiences. Continuing into the first decade of the 21st century online social media has exploded becoming a global phenomenon with huge cultural and political consequences. Today it is impossible to be untouched by the everyday weaving of relationships and threads of cultural data on Facebook or Twitter, as millions of users chat and send messages to friends and loved ones.
Bourriaud sees relational aesthetics as the contemporary projection of the modernist avant-garde, a logical continuation of Greenberg’s positioning of abstract expressionism. The work of art has a social and historical context, but its role is not to engage directly with society; Art is disengaged, it has its own space. For Marx, the essence of human existence is the inter-personal relationships which each of us creates in society. In our current neo-libertarian globalised world, the dominant ideology demands that we are each individuals making our own way. The whole concept of class struggle, of identification and belonging to some intrinsic grouping is almost outlawed, certainly regarded as out-dated and old-fashioned. Thus these inter-personal relationships are all we have left to utilise in our day to day struggle to survive.

**Media Art Practice**

In contemporary media arts research and discussion there are many factions. One of the leading approaches is to emphasise technological novelty. According to one of the foremost new media theoreticians Oliver Grau, with regards to the criteria for collecting and understanding the history of media arts, the quality and innovation of the interface design is more important than the artistic content. (Grau 2013) According to his view, artistic creativity, scientific research and technological development all spring from the same source of human curiosity for knowledge and play. If the essentialist ethos of modernist art philosophy was that painters should concentrate on colour and techniques of painting on a two dimensional surface, and sculptors should concentrate in their medium on three dimensional form and material, Grau seems to build his argument on the same logic of thinking. As a logical subset of his approach, media arts become essentially categorised through technology. If the McLuhanian idea “media is the message” is accepted, this ontological inseparability further backs up the claim that the medium, the technology itself, should be regarded as the content of the media art work. Therefore artistic creativity in media arts is seen as taking place as technological innovation rather than as an interest in quality or creativity in a more traditional artistic sense: content, concept, colour, representation, form or material display.

Another dominating view is the cultural critical approach which emphasises the instrumental use of technology and particularly the internet in various forms of struggle against the neo-libertarian world order. The aim is to emancipate various user groups by providing them with technological tools and skills. Often art projects in this area are organised around political activist and hacker communities. Pixelache festival in Finland is a good example of this type of activity, which has grown to encompass an international network of collaborators which operate on the fringes of the art world. (“Pixelache Helsinki” 2013) The FLOSS movement (Free Librè Open Source Software) is closely related. The fact that Linus Torvalds won the .net category in 1999 of the Prix Ars Electronica for the Linux operating system illustrates precisely the position that media art does not need to deal with "art" at all, not forgetting the controversies thrown up by the decision. (“RHIZOME_RAW : AEC 1999” 2013)
A third approach to media arts research could be regarded as a humanistic and artistic approach as opposed to technological or cultural critical. Roy Ascott and Eduardo Kac are examples of artists who heavily rely on new technological developments yet create powerful poetical works that touch to the heart and mind. Their works allow space for the observer to discover something for themselves, about themselves.

The Political

Since the beginning of the current financial crisis in 2008, the art world has seen a renewed interest in the political. As has been discussed, the relational aesthetics strategy has not been to directly engage with social and political efforts as such, and especially as these art works are situated within the art institution, tied as it is to money and status, other channels and strategies have been sought out by artists wishing to “engage” with the social and the political. Writer and critic Claire Bishop has drawn strongly on Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau’s “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) in which they claim that liberal democracy suffers from the lack of antagonism in politics. In her 2004 essay “Antagonism and Relational aesthetics” Bishop introduces her argument against the “feel good” convivial relational aesthetics art practices of artists Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick, comparing them unfavourably with what she sees as the “tougher”, and therefore “better” art of Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn, two artists whom she particularly admires. (Bishop 2004) Bishop extrapolates Laclau and Mouffe’s argument for antagonism in politics to the art world and art practice. For her, the artist must be confrontational to both the art audience and to society. For Bishop, “socially engaged art” must fail precisely because it lacks this antagonism. Sierra sums up both his own position and that of Bishop when he states:

“I can’t change anything. There is no possibility that we can change anything with our artistic work. We do our work because we are making art, and because we believe art should be something, something that follows reality. But I don’t believe in the possibility of change.” (Santiago Sierra: Works 2002–1990 2002, 15)

Bishop argues that the avant-garde artist must take a confrontational stance to society, the audience, and any potential collaborators. For her, even if social change is desirable it is not the role of art(ists) to achieve this change. Referring to the “Ladder of Citizen Participation” (“A Ladder of Citizen Participation - Sherry R Arnstein” 2013) Bishops states that:

“The most challenging works of art do not follow this schema, because models of democracy in art do not have an intrinsic relationship to models of democracy in society.” (my bold)(Bishop 2012, 279)

Continuing, she writes:
“At a certain point, art has to hand over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved” (Bishop 2012, 283)

In other words, for Bishop it is impossible for art to function as a tool for social justice, empowerment and change. Shannon Jackson takes issue with Bishop’s approach. (Jackson) Rather than approaching participatory art practices through the narrow lens of the visual art world, Jackson views these works from the perspective of theatre and performance as well as community and social arts, the later both anathemas to Bishop who seems to find it very difficult to accept any work that possibly compromises the authenticity of the ‘author’ through a genuinely collaborative creation process. Jackson draws up what she calls a ‘critical barometer’ to illustrate Bishop’s over dominating criteria for art that should be “critical, illegible, useless, and autonomous”:

1. Social celebration versus social antagonism
2. Legibility versus illegibility
3. Radical functionality versus radical unfunctionality
4. Artistic heteronomy versus artistic autonomy (Jackson, 48)

Bishop over-emphasises the later terms in her critique of participatory art by failing to discuss practices that DO manage to combine these contradictions. By focusing her critique on artists operating within the confines of the art world with its cosy, familiar audiences and existing status in society, Bishop ignores strategies that are inclusive, empowering, and challenging. By deliberately picking works such as Antony Gormley’s *One and Other* (2009) she illustrates how participatory art has become part of ‘The Society of the Spectacle’. (Debord 2008) Gormley’s relationship with his participants is similar to that of Simon Cowell and his American Idol contestants. (Bishop 2012, 362) For Bishop “In a world where everyone can air their views to everyone we are faced not with mass empowerment but with an endless stream of egos levelled to banality.” (Bishop 2012, 277) In contrast the work *Please Love Austria* by Christoph Schlingensief (2000), although using the language of the Spectacle and networked TV á la Big Brother is “antagonistic” and “provocative” – and therefore a more successful artwork. A large container-like building was placed in the centre of Vienna with a large banner on top reading “Ausläner Raus” (Foreigners Out). A group of real asylum seekers lived inside, and daily two people were voted out via an associated website and sent back to an actual deportation centre. This intervention in Austrian society, coming as it did at a time of political controversy with the electoral success of Jörg Haider’s extreme nationalist FPÖ, was deliberately provocative and genuinely ambiguous. The work was condemned and supported by both the Left and Right. For Bishop the work’s strength lies in it succeeding to provoke more discussion and dispute than the actual deportation centre nearby. This is the paradox of poetic terrorism – to act politically without being political. For Jacques Rancière the act of protest in a globalised neo-liberal economy is an act of self-conscious irony. The overwhelming power of the system “makes any protest a spectacle and any spectacle a commodity.”
We are urged “to admit that all our desires for subversion still obey the law of the market and that we are simply indulging in the new game available on the global market – that of unbounded experimentation with our own lives.” (Ranciere 2011, 33)

Nora Sternfeld, with a twist on the classic Marxist question “Who has control over production and reproduction?” asks, in relation to curatorial practice and art education (by definition participatory):

“.the point here, once again, is to connect the question “Who is speaking?” with that of authorized authorship—“Who has the power to define?”—and to ask how the powerful distinction between the production and reproduction of knowledge can be radically broken down.” (Sternfeld 2013)

Sternfeld is particularly concerned to question the power relationship between the curator/educator/artist/activist and their supposedly less well-informed/educated collaborator/participant/students. Sternfeld draws on Brecht’s play The Mother (1932) to illustrate how education should, in the best of cases, be a reciprocal exchange of knowledge rather than a display of power by the teacher. Learning for the sake of it is rejected and in its place is empowered learning – learning with interest, learning for a reason. In the case of the workers in Brecht’s play, they want to learn to read and write the words of their political struggle, not just any words that the teacher thinks will help them “to learn”. Unsurprisingly this struggle still goes on today: foreigners wishing to learn everyday Finnish are instead given linguistic tongue-twisters to practice at home. (Halme 2013)

Sternfeld raises important questions for those interested in open participatory collaborations of any kind, especially through the term she refers to as the “unglamorous”. Those moments, topics, or incidents that the ‘facilitator’ would really rather wish didn’t exist – but do. This is the true face of participation. In particular “the Disagreeable” can cause the liberal-minded pause for thought. Having created a free space for interaction between ideas and people, to be suddenly confronted by racist, sexist, and other bigoted opinions is a shock. Should we use our bourgeois position of authority to silence this bogeyman, or uncomfortably leave it un-challenged, a silent presence in the room? (Sternfeld 2013, sec. 2. The Unglamorous in Education) The challenge then, is to accept the unacceptable. This is the liberal paradox that Chantal Mouffe has illustrated.

RE/F/r.ACE

RE/F/r.ACE is a participatory video art work for public city space developed by the author together with Merja Puustinen and Victor Khachtchanski. Besides providing a temporary audio-visual environment, RE/F/r.ACE is a participatory multimodal urban event utilising interactive and mobile media on several levels. The audience participates actively into the creation of the content of the art work. Passers-by in the
street are able to send their own images directly from their mobile phones to our system. The submitted images instantly affect the projected image, as they are combined, layered and animated with others from the database.

These “live” images are simultaneously converted into sound data which feeds into the localised sound projections in the surrounding space. An ambient sound environment is created by recording urban sounds like the humming of traffic, horn honking, and people chattering nearby during the event. These sounds are synthesised and projected back into the city space to accompany the images. The interactivity of the work poses an intriguing possibility for the audience to produce content both deliberately via mobile phones and coincidentally through noise production and surveillance camera footage of the mass audience venue. Thus, the audience’s voluntary activity and their physical presence and movement in space become a significant element in terms of content creation. Thematically, this refers to the similar conditions in the urban space: with our actions, presence and movement we all affect the social webbing of the city - moulding the urban experience as a whole. It is us, the users of the public space who give significance, meaning and interpretations with our actions to the other dwellers of the city.

This is what we aim for with RE/F/r.ACE - to activate our spectator/participants through a magical, surprising, chaotic event that challenges their every expectation for the everyday space they are in. RE/F/r.ACE is more related to other performative traditions, such as happenings, street processions and rave culture rather than following simply generic media art traditions. As artists we prefer raising puzzling feelings and evoking questions rather than providing simple answers. In our view, art has other value propositions which cannot be reduced to measuring instrumental usability for emancipation or as a solution provider for deep social problems. But art does have the power to wake up, touch and make people feel and think differently.

**Art Historical Context**

RE/F/r.ACE is naturally not created in an art historical or cultural vacuum. The piece has been inspired by numerous media art works and genres of popular culture which explore and test the possibilities of interactive media technologies in order to develop new forms of audio-visual content. The general motivation amongst these artworks has been to expand the delivery mechanisms and aesthetics of art to work outside the normative limitations of the institutional museum context which would allow them to address the contemporary audiences directly in the raw - the urban environment.

RE/F/r.ACE is a performative urban media art event where the format and the aesthetics build on long traditions starting from medieval mystery processions to contemporary rave culture. From the aesthetical viewpoint including the desire to explore innovative uses of algorithmic image manipulation, RE/F/r.ACE bears some similarities with works like Modell 5, a four channel video performance by Granular-
Synthesis (Ulf Langheimrich and Kurt Hentschlänger, 1995) ("GRANULAR~SYNTHESIS" 2013), Rafael Lozano Hemmer’s Under Scan (2005) ("Rafael Lozano-Hemmer - Project ‘Under Scan’" 2013), Stelarc’s performances with the robotic arm and video camera tracking audience reactions ("Stelarc // Miscellaneous" 2013), 3D video mapping projections to public buildings ("World Design Capital Helsinki 2012 Starts on New Year’s Night | World Design Capital Helsinki 2012" 2013), Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz’s Hole in Space (1980) (Net 2013) and Tony Oursler’s Influence Machine (2000) ("The Influence Machine / Public Projects / Exhibitions / Tony Oursler" 2013) which all set up strategically different approaches for employing technology and audio-visual art in public spaces. At the other end of the spectrum of artistic urban strategies is Graffiti Research Lab that concentrates on providing open source technologies for the use of graffiti artists for visual communication in urban locations ("Graffiti Research Lab" 2013). Another contrasting example of a public spectacle is provided by The Sultan’s Elephant, a public performance created by the Royal de Luxe theatre company which comprised of a huge moving mechanical elephant and a giant marionette of a girl. In this project the presence of technology and the sheer size of the puppets produced a sense of community in the audience consisting of tens of thousands of people around a slowly unfolding magical narrative during the hours-long performative procession in the centre of London during 4–7 May 2006. ("The Sultan’s Elephant Is Coming to London, Thursday 4 - Sunday 7 May 2006" 2013)

An Artistic Experience

Despite our socio-political and research related ambitions, RE/F/r.ACE is not an attempt to visualise a theoretical, technological or political agenda. It is an art work. With RE/F/r.ACE, we bring the individual members of the audience together as a collective through a shared experience of a magical and surreal urban ritual which reaches beyond the repetitive expectancy of the thoroughly banal and commodified experience of the public space. This artistic experience acts as glue which bonds the individual members of the audience around a temporarily shared, re-possessed and transformed property – the urban landscape.

Through art as its means and end, RE/F/r.ACE is a performative happening which aims at a temporary but critical transformation of the mental qualities of urban space at the level of the audience experience, in which the passive consumer and bystander role changes to the role of a self-reflective and actively participating co-author in a mass event. The most subjectively identifiable part of one’s body, the viewer’s own face, becomes part of the artistic experience of refracing the city by layering virtual imagery of the art work over the fixed and given city structures. RE/F/r.ACE therefore disturbs the virtual but imaginary safety of the city experience as designed around consumerism, as well as the reassuring presence of continuity of power and selected narration of historical events as represented through design, material choices and portrayed symbols of power.
In Summary

The Spectacle is the all-consuming reality of everyday life in our contemporary, neo-liberal society. Some artists, such as the author, regard that it is possible to activate citizens towards social empowerment through poetic interventions in the city space, while others regard that the role of art is to provide an antagonistic foil to society. Both strategies can be seen to be successful within certain contexts. Following Chantal Mouffe’s arguments, one might say it is necessary to have this agonistic opposition within the art world in order for art to continue to be critical and relevant in today’s society.

Bibliography


Habermas, Jürgen. Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action.
Jackson, Shannon. Social Works.