PUBLIC SPACE, MEDIA SPACE

Edited by CHRIS BERRY, JANET HARBORE and RACHEL 0. MOORE Public Space, Media Space

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# Public Space, Media Space

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## Contents

List of Figures		vii
Acknowledgments		
Notes on Contributors		
Introduction Chris Berry, Janet Harbord and Rachel Moore		1
1	What Is a Screen Nowadays? Francesco Casetti	16
2	Multi-screen Architecture Beatriz Colomina	41
3	Mapping Orbit: Toward a Vertical Public Space Lisa Parks	61
4	Cairo Diary: Space-Wars, Public Visibility and the Transformation of Public Space in Post-revolutionary Egypt <i>Mona Abaza</i>	88
5	Shanghai's Public Screen Culture: Local and Coeval <i>Chris Berry</i>	110
6	iPhone Girl: Assembly, Assemblages and Affect in the Life of an Image <i>Helen Grace</i>	135
7	In Transit: Between Labor and Leisure in London's St. Pancras International <i>Rachel Moore</i>	162
8	Encountering Screen Art on the London Underground Janet Harbord and Tamsin Dillon	178
9	Direct Address: A Brechtian Proposal for an Alternative Working Method <i>Marysia Lewandowska</i>	199

vi Contents

10	Domesticating the Screen-Scenography: Situational Uses of Screen Images and Technologies in the London Underground <i>Zlatan Krajina</i>	220
11	Privatizing Urban Space in the Mediated World of iPod Users <i>Michael Bull</i>	248
12	Publics and Publicity: Outdoor Advertising and Urban Space <i>Anne M. Cronin</i>	265
Ind	ex	277

## Figures

3.1	Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion map	62
3.2	2 The GEO belt, Analytical Graphics, Inc. This is a map	
	of satellites in the GEO	71
3.3	Orbiting objects in the LEO and the GEO, NASA.	
	In this map, black dots represent orbiting objects	
	concentrated in the LEO (nearly obscuring the earth's	
	surface in the illustration) and the GEO (revealed by	
	the ring of satellites along the outer edges)	72
3.4	Eyes on the Earth, NASA. This diagram features 14	
	remote-sensing satellites by name	73
3.5	.5 Geostationary satellites, William Livingstone. This	
	long-exposure 2010 photograph taken from the Kitt	
	Peak Observatory reveals 38 satellites in the GEO	74
3.6	Screen capture of AGI satellite layer, Google Earth. This	
	Google Earth interface features a congested field of	
	satellite icons when the AGI satellite layer is activated	76
3.7	Stanford Torus cutaway view, Rick Guidice. This	
	NASA illustration of the Stanford Torus (1975)	
	envisions a public occupation of orbital space	78
3.8	"Big Brothers: Satellites Orbiting Earth," Michael	
	Paukner. "Big Brothers" is a conceptual map that	
	visualizes ownership of satellites and orbital debris by	
	nation-state	79
3.9	"Postwar Footprints," Lisa Parks and Marcus Schaefer.	
	This map reveals the changing satellite mediascape	
	after the war in the former Yugoslavia	80
3.10	GEO with chalk, rocks and paper, photograph by	
	Joanna Griffin. This image represents the results of a	
	collaborative satellite literacy workshop led by artist	
	Joanna Griffin in Bangalore, 2009	82
4.1	Mural depicting the martyrs of the Ultras Ahli football	
	team on Mohammed Mahmud Street	89
4.2	Walling, isolating, segregating	91
4.3	Photography in Tahrir	93

4.4	Mohamed Abla's painting, <i>Wolves</i> , January 28, 2012	95
4.5	Photographing each other in front of graffiti	97
4.6	On the walls of Mugama'	98
4.7	Blue bra graffiti	99
4.8	Ganzeer's mask of freedom, from http://ganzeer.	
	blogspot.com/	101
4.9	Graffiti on "the street of the eyes of freedom,"	
	December 15, 2011	102
4.10	Mohamed Mahmud Street, freshly whitewashed,	
	January 24, 2012	102
4.11	Freshly whitewashed, fresh graffiti, January 26, 2012	103
4.12	Gas mask graffiti after the gassings, December 15, 2011	104
4.13	Graffiti memorializing the Ultras in an ancient	
	Egyptian-style death ceremony	105
4.14	Mural at the AUC: Tahrir Square, by Alaam Awad	105
4.15	Filming the march, February 2012	106
5.1	Tickertape-style "walking word" screen at a store	
	entrance at Wujiaochang. The characters are red and	
	move from left to right. Here they display public	
	service advertising about the Shanghai World Expo	124
5.2	Slideshow-style text screen at the entrance to a housing	
	compound in Songjiang. Characters are red and	
	orange, bearing a message about security	125
5.3	Blackboard in Yangpu	128
6.1	iPhone Girl	136
8.1	Assumptions and presumptions by Stephen Willats	
	(2007)	184
8.2	Linear by Dryden Goodwin (2010)	186
8.3	Oil Stick Work by John Gerrard (2008)	189
10.1	Where to look?	230
10.2	Looking through the screen-window	233
10.3	"Zoned out"	235
10.4	The corridor-gallery	237
10.5	Advertising domesticity	238
10.6	Encounter with change	241
12.1	The messy reality of outdoor advertising	266
12.2	Urban perspectives on consumption	267
12.3	The city speaks to us in many voices	267
12.4	Material conversations	271
12.5	Visual sound bites	271
12.6	Three-dimensional commercial	272

12.7	Behind the commercial	273
12.8	Mimesis	273
12.9	Join in	274
12.10	Reinstated advert in regenerated urban zone	274
12.11	Addressing the public	275

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## Introduction

Chris Berry, Janet Harbord and Rachel Moore

The physical public space of the city is back on the agenda. Not so long ago, Rem Koolhaas wrote that "the street is dead" and "The Generic City is what is left after large sections of urban life crossed over to cyberspace" (Koolhaas, 1995, pp. 1253, 1250). Whilst an evacuation of physical space is both anticipated and confirmed in his commentary, the situation today presents us with a less clear division of online and offline worlds. After the 2011 Arab Spring, followed by the August riots in several cities of the UK, we can say with certainty that media, space and event are thoroughly imbricated. Public space is almost by definition contested, or at least negotiated, space in that no one person or company can unequivocally own and control it. Yet the privatized regulation of public space, or the current hybrid formation of privately owned public space, encroaches on such rights to contest and negotiate. What we understand as media networks and media domains are not to be imagined simply as counter-forums to regulated public space or prosthetic adjuncts to what occurs in cities; rather, they are part of the material and experiential formation of what now constitutes life in public spaces.

While "the event," both politically and philosophically, features largely in the contemporary re-focusing of public space, it is to the everyday and the habitual that we must turn to find its dynamic form, which today is inseparable from media. This collection, focusing primarily on the quotidian urban experience of public space in many of the world's cities, draws from and engages with previous work situated within a number of disciplines and sub-fields. Both pairings of "public space" and "media space," we may note, are situated at the intersection of a number of concerns, demanding different methods of research and frameworks of analysis. Perhaps the most prolific of approaches has emerged from political media analysis, where the role of social and network media in supplementing a demand for democracy in public space is critically debated. Whilst, for example, Zizi Papacharissi in *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* argues that the Internet has created a virtual public sphere accessed from the private space of the home or office, Matthew Hindman's *The Myth of Digital Democracy* challenges optimistic accounts of new media and public participation, as does James Curran, Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman's *Misunderstanding the Internet* (Hindman, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010; Curran *et al.*, 2012). The question of how social and network media create effects also subtends Lieh Lievrouw's *Alternative and Activist New Media* (2011), and *Blogistan* (2010), Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany's analysis of web 2.0 in Iran (Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010; Lievrouw, 2011).

If political approaches are drawn to social and network media, to pursue questions of publicness and democracy in particular, these are connected to a larger field of research that considers the relationship between specific individual media and specific public spaces. The site of the movie theater as an alternative public sphere was the subject of Miriam Hansen's Babel and Babylon, an historical account of how early twentieth-century cinema provided a participatory domain for migrant communities (Hansen, 1994). More recently, the tracing of TV across public sites, ranging from the doctor's waiting room to the airport, characterizes Anna McCarthy's Ambient Television (McCarthy, 2001). The effect of TV outside of the home is dependent on what she calls the "site specificity" of its disposition rather than its particular program content. And the sounds of media in public space are the subject of Charles Hirschkind's The Ethical Soundscape (2006), an examination of cassette sermons and the possibility of counter-publics in Mubarak's Egypt. The methodological problem that public space and public media present is then one of boundary – the difficulty of defining the spatial or conceptual edges to research. As these projects illustrate, either the singularity of the object has held the critical focus in a variety of contexts, or a site has provided the bounded space within which a number of media can be seen to operate.

The stable form of media objects and the boundaries of public space are, of course, radically under pressure. To take but one example of media object mutation, cameras (representation devices) become embedded in phones (devices for transmission), whilst the logic of regional, national and, to a certain extent, temporal boundaries is undercut by mobile networks of connectivity. The complexity of this situation is addressed from a geographic perspective by Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy in *Media Space: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age* (2004), and Lynn Spigel, Soyoung Kim and Chris Berry in *Electronic Elsewheres: Media, Technology and the Experience of Social Space* (Couldry and McCarthy, 2004; Berry *et al.*, 2010). If the extensive horizon of media connection is revealed in its unexpected forms in these edited collections, it is important to note how the notion of domestic space connecting to public space is transformed with the arrival of new generations of media in the home. In *Home Territories*, David Morley looks at the mediated formation of the homeland as well as the domestic home, whilst Lynn Spigel, in "Designing the Smart House: Posthuman Domesticity and Conspicuous Consumption", explores the promise of continuous communication between media devices in the home and its occupants as they move around in the external world (Morley, 2000; Spigel, 2010).

In foregrounding the everyday, this anthology gives emphasis to the habituated practices and enactments with media to produce the multifaceted subject of public space. To be clear about our understanding of the terms public, space and the everyday, it is worth outlining their key features and capacities before moving on to a discussion of the essays themselves.

#### Public

In a recent consideration of the term, Alistair Hannay distinguishes between "the public" and "a public," the latter referring to an audience, gathering or following (Hannay, 2005, pp. 26-32). On the one hand, "public" can simply mean "outside the home" or "outside private space." It can refer not only to the streets and squares of the town, but also to other privately or state-owned spaces that are accessible to the general citizenry, ranging from shopping malls to train stations. On the other hand, "the public" is often understood to refer to a very particular political formation associated with liberal and bourgeois democracy, whereby private individuals come together to discuss and deliberate upon "public affairs," or matters of common interest. This is what is sometimes spoken of as the "public sphere."<sup>1</sup> Whichever understanding of "public" is at work, negotiations of public space and public activities are most commonly imagined as face-to-face activities: jostling for space on crowded sidewalks, holding meetings and demonstrations, and the pleasures and perils of shopping all involve bodily encounter.

Further still, a rationally defined idea of public space is challenged by the dream-like experiences of the city, familiar to us through modernist writing. The stream of consciousness that inflected the city as psyche and vice versa is now conjoined in the contemporary moment to the experiential discourses of embodiment (Grosz, 1995; Blackman, 2008). Public space is a corporeal affair and, in the reciprocal feedback mechanism through which spaces and bodies are co-constituting, "environments actively produce the bodies of their inhabitants" (Grosz, 1995, p. 109). This is evident in the many ways in which we respond to media. It draws our attention (literally turning heads), or inscribes pathways by attracting or repelling us with images or sounds, or in suggestively affecting our appetite. Embodiment, as it is rehearsed in these public spaces, is the practice of subconscious and semi-conscious habituation, not simply a delegation of meaning to the body. We may well recall Gregory Bateson's warning that the "Anglo-Saxon epistemological tendency [is] to reify or attribute to the body all mental phenomena which are peripheral to consciousness" (Bateson, 1972, p. 320). Instead, a host of ephemeral sensual factors bring states of consciousness and the body together, and it is in this light that we consider our habituation to public spaces.

The importance of the discourses of embodiment and mental phenomena for any understanding of public space, as it is constituted with and through media space, lies not least in its departure from the rationalist project attributed to Habermas. In his theorization of publicness, the media has played a role in the constitution of the public sphere at least since the eighteenth century. Habermas famously contrasted face-to-face communication in the coffee shop with the manipulation of public interaction by mass media in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, first published in the original German in 1962 and translated into English in 1989. The role of the press is also crucial to Benedict Anderson's theories on the nation-state, elaborated in Imagined Communities (Anderson, 1983), which can be considered as another kind of public space. In each of these cases there is a profound ambivalence about the role of the media, regarded as representational devices, enablers of public consciousness and participation, or, as in Habermas, an impediment to direct face-to-face communication, idealized in such images as the Greek agora. Whilst the public sphere is not necessarily (and perhaps never has been) an empirical public space, it exists as a phantom of a past ideal that is imposed on the present.

Many of the essays here articulate a conceptual and experiential model of public space that runs counter to Habermas' rationalism. Thought processes and identity are the product of interactions between the individual and the crowd, tactile technologies and visual spectacle, bodily movement and media narration. These interactions have a rhythmic quality, whereby states of being or qualities of subjectivity are fluid, changing as their relations to the field of operation changes. Nonetheless, the subject establishes a marked vector through the city however contingent that might be (see Lefebvre, 1992). The public is thus subsumed under a number of contingencies, not least of which is space.

#### Space

The presence of media in public space has transformed our understanding of both "space" and "publicness" (Eckardt et al., 2008). The traditional idea of space as "enclosure"<sup>2</sup> has become fundamentally problematized by the presence of media distributing and redirecting data flows that transverse the boundaries of an enclosure. A more thorough critique of the concept of space, from the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari to the geography of Edward Soja, has corroded the traditional notion of space as the blank backdrop to human activity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984, 1988; Soja, 1989). Space as heterogeneous matter, comprised of diverse things and qualities, has become a philosophical concept worked upon in media and cultural geography, and in discourses of architecture and urban design (Hensel et al., 2009). The significant value of thinking space through heterogeneity is twofold. First, heterogeneity posits difference as difference, not as a deviation from a standard model (the town square, the badly lit alley) but instead as a proliferation of variegated spaces that overlap and transmute. Second, heterogeneous space is produced (rather than already existing) or, more explicitly, performed. The activities, events, small acts and transmissions in public space are a production of the environment, as Lefebvre argues forcefully in The Production of Space, which otherwise would not exist (Lefebvre, 1991). Space, in other words, is an imminent field of relations that are in constant flux as bodies, material forms and images come into contact.

We can posit media as components and constituent forms in the production of the spatial as a field of mobile relations. In a less abstract formulation, we can see this enactment of the spatial in the sphere of orbital space in the contemporary moment. The production of the orbital as space is a practice that has remained robustly resistant to official accounts of mapping (Parks, Chapter 3 in this volume) but is nonetheless the product of claims of ownership, the installation of satellite objects and infrastructures, and the processes of data exchange and image flow. Space emerges through practices that become consolidated in representational forms, such as televisual and filmic images or diagrammatic models. The unending need for space to be continuously reproduced also needs to be understood here, a point that opens onto the possibilities of contestation; space is never finally fixed but only stabilized at certain historical moments. If it is the case, as has been argued, that enactments of space inevitably involve media, then what we understand by "media" in this scenario also demands consideration. In Vilem Flusser's prophetic work, the definition of media in a post-photographic world is articulated as mobile units of data whose definition has been prescribed by programmers (Flusser, 1989/2002). This is not a media of chemical images but a protean form of code that can be reconfigured as image, sound or noise. It is a media that contributes to the "atmosphere" of an environment in multiple ways. The affective capacity of media in public space is one of the least visible and vet most significant features of its presence. Media (as news streams, broken "white noise" screens, recorded image loops, montages, ambient sound and multi-screen live relays) create moods, tones and reminiscences, as discrete as the humidity and volume of the air and yet as charged as the weather. Interacting with the particular conditions of a location, the meaning and experience of media is not knowable in advance; images, sounds and words are all changed by the contexts in which they appear.

#### The everyday

That screens are, as public entities, part of everyday life is obvious, and yet it is precisely the self-evident nature of the everyday that invites challenge. As Michel de Certeau writes in his introduction to The Practice of Everyday Life, the task is to make a discussion possible, in his case a discussion of " 'ways of operating' or doing things." His project was to make into an object of investigation what we otherwise understand as background activities to the "main business" of life (de Certeau, 1984, p. xi). The everyday is elusive, he notes, and we may add to that the untraceable immateriality of public media and their effects, which make for methodological problems. Yet it is not only the transient nature of public media that produces the difficulty of how to get hold of the subject, or indeed how to make it a subject of enquiry. This difficulty of transience is doubled in the recognition that our relation to the everyday (as domestic or public environment) barely registers as a conscious engagement. How then might we find out about our experience of public media when we are hardly aware of what we do as we move through public space?

Public space more than often functions as a space between the virtual and the real, between labor and leisure, between work and home. In urban public space, the technology that sends us off into virtual worlds and the embodied experience of physical and mental meandering all but collide, forming a mise-en-scène that is all montage. Cross-cutting between the technological voices, signs, billboards, iPods, faces, moving bodies and architectural facades characterizes our movement through the city. The technological and the embodied become just so many reified strips of perception whose arrangement is all but arbitrary. Long ago in his early considerations of the city, Walter Benjamin saw the reification of experience as either "a source of threat and insecurity or as the occasion for inventive response" (Caygill, 1998, p. 131). The environments that touch on our urban everyday extend now to the omnipresence of the virtual; because of this, labor can be seen to invade every moment of waking life. While technology and the virtual provide mechanisms for avoiding the "ambiguous and inauthentic experience of blockage which resists our comprehension" (ibid.), that is to say our daily montage, our labor practices today filter through in characteristically opaque ways.

While we are always betwixt and between those categories, nonetheless to step out in public is to risk the experience of the everyday. Despite the aggression of advertising and the privatizing devices that mitigate their effect, public spaces still hold the promise of the chance and contingency associated with embodied experience. We now turn to the essays to sketch how the intersections of publicness, space and the everyday are manifest in this volume.

#### The essays

At least four themes emerge across the essays included here. First, there is the question of how new media and new uses in urban public space are reshaping the dimensions of urban public space. Second, the public spaces in question are also places with particular historical, political and social configurations, defining the way in which media operate in these places. Third, patterns of labor and leisure, both in the making and consumption of media technologies, are changing and these changes put new pressures on media in public space. Finally, the subjective experience of everyday life and the urban environment is one in which people are at least temporarily away from home. This too affects the deployment of media in public space and the responses of individuals to them. The topics of the essays are spaces and devices both large and small, whose study here alerts us to the ongoing processes by which what was once remarkable becomes everyday.

#### Shaping space

First, there is the question of media and the characteristics of urban public space. Until recently, the media that characterized urban public space were less frequently connected to "electronic elsewheres" (Berry et al., 2010). Billboards, traffic signs, neon advertising and so forth might have arrived from elsewhere and might have beckoned to us with the delights of another place, but, once installed, their primary connections were to the site where they were located and the people in it. Now wireless technology and the media that use it have changed that situation, crossing and breaking down the boundaries of urban public space as surely as they do domestic space. Urban public space is connected to every other wireless-mediated space through the numerous mobile phones in people's pockets that facilitate everything from "flash mob" dance happenings to the marches and demonstrations in Cairo that form the context of Mona Abaza's essay (Chapter 4). The same mobile phones link up with closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras, cash registers, stored value cards of various kinds and other networked media to create a culture of surveillance that tracks us across the public and private spaces of our lives (Laidler, 2008). Traffic lights and signs are also modulated remotely according to changing traffic conditions, and moving image screens display TV programming and advertising images beamed down from satellites.

This newly connected quality of urban public space and its historical antecedents is the primary focus of three essays in this volume. In "Multi-screen Architecture" (Chapter 2), Beatriz Colomina examines how, in 1959, Charles and Ray Eames produced one of the first information spaces in their exhibit, Glimpses of the USA, produced for the American National Exhibition in Moscow. A multi-screen filmic "performance" of the American quotidian, the exhibit broke with the linear narrative of film by presenting what Colomina calls a mosaic of information. Despite the ideological linearity of the display, emphasizing the productivity of a nation, Glimpses evidences the role that architects played in creating multi-media environments. Similarly, in tracing the genealogy of public screens through the history of cinema and TV theory, Francesco Casetti argues that these screens are symptomatic of an ontological change. In "What is a Screen Nowadays?" (Chapter 1) he asserts that screens are no longer surfaces on which we project events that happened before in order to "represent" them; rather, they are sites where images circulate as signals in the air and are momentarily made visible to us. In a phrase that vividly captures the new connected and networked quality of urban public space today, he writes: "media have become devices for the 'interception' of information that saturates social and virtual spaces: they have become 'lightning rods,' if you will, onto which the electricity in the air is discharged."

The air is, in a sense, the subject of Lisa Parks' essay, "Mapping Orbit: Towards a Vertical Public Space" (Chapter 3). Although nothing in urban public space draws our attention to the realm of the satellite, its new, networked quality is entirely dependent upon satellite communications. Parks analyzes efforts to map satellite orbits and the space in which they operate as a discourse of competing possibilities for imagining and conceptualizing this space. By throwing the spotlight on this occluded realm of the satellites, she draws our attention to a host of new and unresolved conceptual and practical issues generated by orbital space. Not only does wireless networking connect public spaces to each other but also, Parks argues, their space now extends upwards to the realm of the satellites. Who owns this "vertical public space"? How should it be governed, given that it certainly exceeds the individual nation-state? By opening up questions about the vertical dimensions of urban public space, she challenges us to re-think what we want and can hope for from urban public space.

#### Spaces as place

The second theme that runs through many essays is public space as place – that is, sites that occupy historical, political and social ground. The distinction between space and place has been debated in scholarship since at least the time of Yi-Fu Tuan's Space and Place (1977). As the preceding discussion indicates, space is no longer understood as somehow inert or pre-human but as constituted through social relationships. Koolhaas' comment on the "Generic City" echoes a broad field of argument about the quality of post-modern and global city spaces, and reminds us that these qualities are produced and enforced rather than natural (Koolhaas, 1995). Another theorist whose arguments are particularly relevant here is Guy Debord. In his Society of the Spectacle, originally published in French in 1967, he proposes two modes of spectacle, both of which operated by occluding history (Debord, 1994). These were the dispersed spectacle of the market capitalist economies, epitomized by the consumerism of postwar America, and the concentrated spectacle, epitomized by the personality cults of both Hitler's fascism and Stalin's communism. Two decades later, and not long before his suicide in 1994, he published the French edition of *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Debord, 1998). Here he proposes the concept of the integrated spectacle, which combines the qualities of the two earlier forms.

Debord writes: "When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small part; today, no part. The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality" (Debord, 1994, p. 9). While his interpretation differs from that of Koolhaas, both of these visions of the city rest on the erasure of all trace of place, rendering a globally smooth space of flow and consumption (and occluded production). Yet, the implication of some of the essays here is that this may be a step too far. While the dream of consumption as the only form of endorsed aspiration may indeed animate many of the attempts to shape urban public space today, the media technologies deployed in the effort to realize them have to be installed in specific places with their own histories, habits, cultures, politics and more.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Mona Abaza's remarkable "Cairo Diary: Space-Wars, Public Visibility and the Transformation of Public Space in Post-Revolutionary Egypt" (Chapter 4). She witnesses a year in which citizens have struggled with the authorities over access to, and control of, not only the streets but also the walls that line them. These have been canvases for a vibrant media culture of graffiti, frequently white-washed by the authorities, only to be redrawn later. Combined with the use of online media, mobile phones and photography to mobilize, record, inspire and circulate, the result is a transformed urban public space whose local specificity has, at least for the time being, overwhelmed the blanket of consumerism.

Less dramatically but not less insistently, in an essay on the patterns of moving image screen use in Shanghai, Chris Berry's "Shanghai's Public Screen Culture: Local and Coeval" (Chapter 5) shows how these are taken up in locally specific uses. Site specificity here refers to the particular topography of the buildings, the patterns of their usages and the customs of the users in Shanghai. Moreover, the demands generated by such factors ensure that the installation and deployment of the screens in each public space under consideration are unique. In noting the prevalence of relatively small moving image signs in liminal spaces, for example, Berry recalls a long lineage of public signage going back to inscribed characters on mountainsides and, more recently, the blackboard culture of the Mao era. If Abaza and Berry's essays speak very directly to the uniqueness of place, contra the dream of smooth and homogenized flow animating neoliberal globalization, place specificity is also a significant dimension of a number of other essays in this volume.

#### Labor

Commuting, of course, is the task of the laborer, a task which new technologies have been deployed to both ameliorate and disturb. These devices – mobile phones, iPods and iPads, for example – have clearly divided labor trajectories. On the one hand, their development and branding are the product of "immaterial labor," while their manufacture belongs to a super-Fordist mode of production. Immaterial labor refers to the labor that produces cultural value and is characterized by its lack of boundaries in worker's lives, wherein the worker is finally self-employed and working, in so far as they are thinking all the time. That time is not paid for by the hour but rather by its value, which is difficult to assess. Rachel Moore makes the argument that London's St. Pancras Station is built for the immaterial laborer and looks for ways in which it might offer her solace in "In Transit: Between Labor and Leisure in London's St. Pancras International" (Chapter 7).

Super-Fordist labor takes up most of its workers' waking hours, although they are paid for these hours, however poorly. Super-Fordism was once meant to refer to Fordist manufacture on a grand scale made possible by robots. In practice, the manufacture of computer components and mobile devices in China, for instance, turns people into machines. It does this by controlling both their waking and sleeping hours such that they work 15 hours a day at the factory where they also sleep, dormitory style. These two forms of labor are both hidden, necessarily so, as Helen Grace sees it in "iPhone Girl: Assembly, Assemblages and Affect in the Life of an Image" (Chapter 6).

The effacement of labor is, of course, nothing new. The power it stores – so buried within its shiny product – emerges in its fetishized, branded afterlife as a consumer good, in this case as an iPhone in which a worker has secreted her image, an image that is first released by its surprised consumer and later becomes a viral Internet phenomenon. Effaced labor is normally part of the fetishized character of the commodity; in this case, however, when the laborer introduced herself personally, the fetish value of the product was surpassed when her image (albeit in virtual form) took on a social life of its own.

Siegfried Kracauer maintained that the ways in which we labor and the distractions such as cinema to which we attend are all of a piece. Formally, the legs of the famous Tiller Girls formed undulating surface patterns that matched the arms uniformly at work on the assembly line, shot for shot. These patterns are part of what he called a "mass ornament," whose surface splendor was the place in which one had to look for meaning, rather than at the dancers or individual workers. Thus, this essay looks now to the diffuse distribution of the image and the life it took on, rather than to the girl herself, in order to understand the current labor situation and our position in it.

#### Away from home

To step out in public means to risk experiencing things that are beyond the modicum of control one can maintain in the home environment. Advertisers call this "Out-of-Home" (OOH). This refers, in advertising terms, to the many media mechanisms available to reach consumers when they are not at home. Yet falling victim to the onslaught of advertising screens is hardly the experience one has in mind as one enters the urban everyday. Indeed, the proliferation of devices to create one's own microenvironment would suggest that we are almost immune to their advances. Despite the aggression of advertising, privatizing devices mitigate its effect, demonstrating how the experience of public space is continuously negotiated.

Marysia Lewandowska's contribution, "Direct Address: A Brechtian Proposal for an Alternative Working Method" (Chapter 9) alerts us to the fact that in the eyes of those who control the screens we encounter in public, we are just so many moving targets. Set against other visions of what it means to enter a public, it is no wonder that screens, billboards and graffiti feature large in the efforts of various urban citizens to influence the shape of public experience. Artists' interventions into the quotidian public domain are addressed in three very different contexts. Janet Harbord's interview with Tamsin Dillon, director of Art on the Underground, outlines the ambitions of various site-specific ventures of Transport for London over the years, and the more recent importance of screens, in "Encountering Screen Art on the London Underground" (Chapter 8). This is a very different conception of a public from the idea that an advertiser might have, continuing a near century-long tradition of commissioning artworks to embellish passengers' underground journeys.

Other ways of negotiating the OOH experience fall to the subject itself. Moving to the world of advertising of branded products made by the iPhone girl, Anne M. Cronin and Zlatan Krajina discuss how people treat posters and screens in the course of working through an average day. Based on empirical research consisting of observation and interviews, Cronin explores the many different mediatizations that occur in people's engagement with outdoor advertising (Chapter 12), while Krajina discusses the way in which those engagements are habituated during people's underground commutes (Chapter 10). Cronin's "Publics and Publicity: Outdoor Advertising and Urban Space" argues that we see billboards differently from the way their producers presume we will do. Krajina's empirically based study of the many ways in which underground commuters use advertisements to divert or direct attention, "Domesticating the Screen-Scenography: Situational Uses of Images and Technologies in the Tunnels of the London Underground," yields creative and unexpected results. Michael Bull's "Privatizing Urban Space in the Mediated World of iPod Users" (Chapter 11) addresses the privatization of public space through the iPod's ability to create a personalized world for the urban subject, which fills the empty spaces, times and values that the contemporary environment tends to foster. These essays document alternative strategies, as well as creative addresses by citizens official and otherwise to the subject when they are away from home and in Public Space, Media Space.

#### Notes

- 1. For a full discussion of the public sphere, see Calhoun (1992).
- 2. For a defense of space as the enclosure of chronological and historical time, preserved against the ravages of an instantaneous real time of media, see Virilio (1997, pp. 381–390).

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