Big Screens, Little Acts; transformations in the structures and operations of public address

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Big Screens as Playful, Productive, Punctual, Phenomenological, Participatory and Privatized

In this essay, we attempt to describe and theorize some salient elements in the transformation of the *structure of public address* at once incarnated and effected by the ongoing enthusiasm for big screens in urban spaces. Our key conclusions, alliteratively summarized in the heading above, is that contemporary big screen art at once tends to work to expose, exploit and exceed these forces, from the point of conception, through the process of creation, to the finality of circulation. At the same time, the regulatory processes that organise the uses of big screens are tantamount to the inculcation of certain controls on creativity, seeking to capture and canalise aesthetic affects for governmental and corporate ends by, above all, a kind of *fiscal moralisation of technology*. Economic and ethical concerns are here so tightly interwoven with administrative and marketing constraints that the art itself cannot avoid particular kinds of conformism without being abruptly censored or never appearing at all, thereby succumbing to new kinds of *prepublication censorship*. Notably, the actuality of such censorship entails a kind of de facto return to non-democratic forms of government.

Under these conditions, there is a new necessity for artists to anticipate possible consequences of adverse privatized publicity in order to continue to work at all. The rigours of working with big screens in public spaces thereby tend to run along newly emergent lines of separation between 'impact' and 'shock,' the former's desirability being measured according to a variety of quantitative externalised indicators (numbers of persons, attention from other media forms, official feedback mechanisms) and the latter's lack of desirability registering as unmanageable forms of risk (the attempt to preclude in advance any possible official complaints

regarding the legality, desirability, appropriateness, etc. of the event). In essence, this drives the uses of big public screens towards a form of *double domestication*: the domestication of public space according to what are too-quickly denominated 'family values,' and the domestication of 'art' as a form of light cultural entertainment.

In discussing these developments, we will methodologically deploy something that is today too often elided in the provision of information: broadly 'phenomenological' descriptions of the implicit structures of media address. What we mean by this is an attempt to outline the ways in which big screens, at the same moment that they are undeniably very complex assemblages of culture, technology, law, administration and economics, nevertheless establish aesthetic and functional limits that cannot be exceeded without encountering one control mechanism or another. A phenomenological approach, moreover, must today confront the fact that recent transformations in the structures of media have as one of their consequences the provision of information by means of quantitative statistical modalities as the primary, if not only, means of persuasion. In the current context, there are at least three interlinked, deleterious consequences of such a capture of rationale by quantitative methods.

The first is that quantitative analytics presume the absolute priority of certain kinds of numerical evidence. As such, they occlude the fact/value distinction in favour of maximization (efficiency, audience numbers, etc.); in doing so, they *a priori* discount possible questions about other, rival forms of optimization itself (for example conceptual contestation as politically desirable). In the regime of numbers, bigger *must* already be better. If there is no way of deciding upon a course that ensures such maximization, then the only rational decision to be made is to ensure that evidence will be at hand to justify for future third-party administrators that no such maximization could be ensured, and that therefore decision A was taken over decision B on justifiably supplementary grounds (e.g., that other comparable

agencies have also made comparable decisions when faced with comparable lack-of-assurances).

Second, such a domination of analytics by quantity entails that questions of *structure* tend to appear as "anecdotal," ungrounded generalisations on the basis of hearsay or personal experience, and therefore unacceptable as a basis for action. The point here is not simply that quantity trumps quality but, given that there has been a short-circuit of quantity with quality, any presentation that does not found itself on quantitative methods becomes merely 'subjective' or 'opinion.' Certain forms of evidence become either unwelcome or, even more strongly, completely unreadable: any attempt to analyse apparently variable constraints upon practice as having de facto identical outcomes can only appear as otiose opinion with no persuasive power.

The third problem is that success concomitantly needs to be more and more assured in advance. Hence the need for the administration of public venues such as big screens to look not only to already established 'track-records' (which can include factors ranging from a proven history of successful shows with big screens to a history of working with the agencies at hand or comparable agencies) but to produce "evidence" of "research" before anything further happens. Bureaucratic structures must attempt to ensure outcomes before even permitting a process to begin; on the other hand, since processes are always already in-train, much bureaucratic process then goes into a kind of fictionalizing of the process itself (e.g., presentations assuring stakeholders that nothing happened without so-called 'oversight').

As other contributions to the present volume clarify in their different ways, we are in the midst of a radical transformation of all sorts of established modern public institutions — the university, the museum, state bodies, and so on — which are now all explicitly being restructured according to new modalities of corporate governance exigencies. Such exigencies include efficiency-maximization through

employment flexibility, health and safety compliance in accordance with insurance imperatives, a new primacy of privacy and security concerns, accelerated receptivity to environmental variability, and so on. Some of the key *cultural* consequences of such changes include a new prioritization: of phenomenological over chronological motifs; of transnational or cosmopolitan concerns over national ones; of participatory productivity over critical reflection; and of seductive pedagogical play over orientation, unification and interpretation.

We will attempt to provide more concrete examples of how these consequences tend to cash out below; for the moment, suffice it to say that there is a radical restriction and acceleration of remediated experience available in contemporary public space. As Waleed Aly examines the acceleration in a recent article titled 'Speed and Politics' in the Australian cultural journal *Meanjin*, the total unhinging of information media from diurnal local, social time entails a kind of melange of solipsism and vitriol.[1] The 'local' space, then — or rather, the ever-mutating *glocal spaces* — is more than ever temporally-constrained and technologically-privatized. It is, morever, 'selfie-ish,' taking place under the directive of new forms of self-assertion. As O. Bradley Bassler puts it:

> when I enter the modern workplace — as, indeed, when I enter any
> modern condition — my capacity to assimilate makes it possible to adapt
> to the new needs and requirements implied by the modern opportunity
> for self-assertion — the capacity to assert myself and cause change in the
> conditions and outlook of my world. Self-assertion stands as both an
> opportunity and in many contexts a requirement, while efficiency seems
> more of a requirement than an opportunity.[2]

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[1] W. Aly, 'Speed and Politics,' *Meanjin*, 30 September 2013. <http://meanjin.com.au/articles/post/speed-and-politics/> Downloaded 2 October 2013.

[2] O. Bradley Bassler, *The Pace of Modernity: Reading with Blumenberg* (Melbourne: re.press, 2012), pp. 16-17.

Assertion-as-accelerated-assimilationism: we will see below how new media art accommodates itself (or doesn't) to these conditions, not least because its conditions of apparition are linked not only to expensive technical affordances, but to legal, insurance, and compliance conditions that, with minimal local variations, currently govern the use of public space in all major developed countries.

Three Ways of Looking at a Big Screen: A Small Typology
As can easily be verified by the proliferation and topical placement of big screens globally, these tend to reterritorialise existing public places according to different kinds of exigencies. Let us identify three different kinds of logics governing such up-scaling, which will not all be of equal significance in the current context: extensions of established entertainment; the supplementation of entertainment; the assimilation of new entertainments.

First, there are the big screens which simply rehearse an older tendency of cinematic address, such as the Imax chain, in which private enterprise draws on technical advances to create larger and larger screens according to a logic of spectacular address. In such cases, the business rationale does not seem to alter existing models: there is a private enclosure, at a particular site, to which one pays for access to see something whose special justification is simply that of scale: 'the third biggest screen in the world,' for example. This usage of big screens remains, therefore, in a familiar, well-established entertainment modality. One hears about, one goes, one pays, one enters, one sits, one sees and hears, one leaves. As such, the size of the screen is still essentially correlated with the level of a private decision, with a global mass-market factory experience, with sensationalised simulation. This is clearly the extension of established entertainment.

Second, there are the big screens erected as supplements to existing entertainment sites, whether temporary or permanent: the gigantic screens at sporting stadiums are probably exemplary of this development. Here, something new is certainly added to the initial organisation of site, bodies, business and technology. For a start,

the football match that you have gone to watch is now accompanied by close-ups, replays, crowd-shots, and advertising, as well as an arrhythmic aural barrage that interrupts and enhances atmospheric noise. In doing so, the screen immediately doubles, cuts and reorganises the real and symbolic divisions of the existing enclosure. The phenomenology of 'being-there' — already a complex experience insofar as where one sits, with whom, at what times and for what necessarily raises multiple social questions for the spectators themselves — now finds that a kind of 'being-there-not-there' has been explicitly introduced to the mix. The spectatorial problem of 'following the action' now requires, whether consciously or not, continuous shifts of decision as to whether it's best to look at the field or the screen; the screen thereby becomes a new authority and arbiter that overgoes and undercuts more traditional negotiations between players, officials and spectators. At the same time, big screens are explicitly billed as another way of luring more spectators to matches, insofar as such big screens allegedly 'enhance' the embodied spectatorial experience. Such enhancement is a clear and present response to the dominance of cable and other televised sporting events. To give a recent example: writing in the local Melbourne paper the *Herald-Sun*, Peter Rolfe reports 'Etihad Stadium to boost video screen size by 30 per cent.' 'SPORTS fans,' Rolfe writes:

> will get a bigger slice of the action at Etihad Stadium with plans in motion
> to super-size video screens at the Docklands venue….The size of two
> main screens at the stadium will be increased by 30 per cent to 90sq m
> each in a state-of-the-art upgrade worth about $1.1 million. The custom-
> made screens will beam sharper and larger replays to spectators as well
> as supplying more statistics and information during matches. Scores of
> smaller TV replay screens around the stadium are also to be replaced
> with bigger flatscreen models.[3]

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[3] Peter Rolfe, 'Etihad Stadium to boost video screen size by 30 per cent,' *Herald-Sun*, 11 September 2013.

Note how *size* is crucial to the marketing of the upgrade, along with the proliferation of screens and their higher resolution. Bigger, more, clearer screens: the triple drive of televisual media is also coupled with a kind of infophilia, as we have to have ever-escalating quantities of data to televise. The doubling and mutation of the on-field action therefore also requires the epistemological supplement of managed statistics, replays, marketing, supernumerary commentary. One of the paradoxes of this situation is that the alleged *object* of the attention itself becomes supplementary to the *organisation* of real-time data presentation.

Third, there is the new encouragement for assimilating non-standard modalities of aesthetic production into a big-screen format. This is where the role of 'big-screen public art' is most fraught. 'Art' now becomes part of a sequence of entertainment options, along with sport, selfies, animals, etc., on a flattened continuum for which no zone of appearance retains any autonomy, specific legitimation or privilege. On the contrary, all forms of appearance must be sucked up immediately into the regime of the big screen. It is this third modality that we will now discuss in more detail.

Selfie Culture and Big Screen Art

With the onslaught of *everything, everywhere, in real-time*, the mass of information that floods our networks is meaningless until it surfaces. Filters reign as contextualisers, modulators, and curators of data. Networked home screens – once wildly free of filters – are now dominated by capitalist constructs which are designed to filter on advertisers' behalf while being presented as empowering tools in the service of every individual. Age, gender, place, and likes compile targeted content purified for our unwitting consumption. Culture is being curated algorithmically and on-the-fly in order to create virtualised, quantified, versions of individuals with all possibility for change removed. These parodies of the individual are created in order to have them both produce *and* consume the same product. As Eli Pariser puts it in *The Filter Bubble*, these filters create a "kind of informational

determinism in which ... [y]ou can get stuck in a static, ever narrowing version of yourself – an endless you-loop."[4]

This is the disingenuous logic of digital capitalism - which the preemptive logic of quantitative public screens runs into head on - where the putative purpose, ie, the valorisation and empowerment of the individual (what we might broadly term *the selfie culture*), seductively masks the genuine goal of quantifying individuals into demographic clumps in order to advertise products or services that have been designed for just such clumps. If digital networks virtualise and balkanise the individual into a multifarious, temporally, physically and psychically asynchronous distributed agency, the imperative of digital capitalism becomes to *re*virtualise that distributed agency back into a reconstituted individual in order to advertise to it. To achieve this, digital capitalism builds a distributed empire by using thoroughly contemporary post-convergent algorithmic means to cynically appeal to pre-convergent bourgeois notions of privacy and individualism in order to force an individuation from unwittingly distributed agents, then beguiles these virtualised individuals into ceaselessly producing the content that manufactures the very demographic clumps that are then advertised to. At the same time that the cult of individual empowerment is promoted through the networks of digital capitalism, the only measure of success that is held up is necessarily an advertiser-friendly quantitative one of generifying demographics, the bigger and more generic the demographic group the better, 'it's gone viral', meaning millions of individuals are watching the same thing, retweeting, reblogging and reposting the same thing. "Yes, we are all individuals!" [5]

Faced with this outrageous logic, institutions that run public screens are forced to emulate this process by quantifying all possible viewers of the screen into one conservative, demographically idealised individual. Big screens are the giant

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[4] Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), p.14.
[5] Monty Python, *The Life of Brian*, dir. Terry Jones (Handmade Films, 1979).

cripples of their predecessors, legislated and locked down by departments. This, of course, is the opposite of the imperative of art, which appeals to the uncategorisable, the non-demographic, the outrageous anti-individual. Digital, networked art in particular exists to test and try the networks of digital capitalism, and therefore is constantly mutating and morphing algorithmically, programmatically and pre-emptively reconstituting itself, in order to stay one node ahead of digital capitalism and maintain its status as arrow and not target. Fundamentally incompatible, therefore, with the committee-generated quantitative parameters of acceptable content for public screens, the two careen into each other head-on when the committee, in thrall to the fake ideal of individual empowerment represented by selfie culture, goes searching for content that appeals to such a culture. Meeting such content, in the form of networked digital art, the committee screen then sets about removing any aspects of the artwork that do not appeal to the ultra-conservative ideal that it has pre-emptively constructed. It then ends up displaying the smoothest, most banal possible vision that offends nobody by appealing to nobody, creating a crushing intolerance in its quest for tolerance.

This pre-emptive self-policing often arises out of the context of the control of public screens lying in the hands of governmental departments, which creates the kind of self-generating conservative intolerance appealing to an idealised moral individual described above. This is the logic of the pre-convergent broadcast society – wherein centralised broadcasters, operating on a few-to-many broadcast model, were beholden to a governmental, centralised standards committee that dictated the confines of allowable content – displaced into the digitally networked 21st Century. Even though such a logic may seem anachronistic in an age where different legal bodies from the same governments have ruled that those providing the infrastructure in which illegal content may be distributed are explicitly *not* responsible, and therefore not liable, for that illegal content [6], it is precisely such

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[6] See, for example, the High Court of Australia ruling [2012]HCA 16, *ROADSHOW FILMS PTY LTD & ORS V IINET LIMITED*, available at

rulings that engender a quantitative approach in an attempt to pre-emptively inure against legal action.

This is a double privatisation of public space: first, the public space is now treated as if it were the family TV room, bringing out private uses into an existing public realm; second, in doing so, it's a monetization of the public space. This casts public screens in the role of actuators of the ideological practice of digital capitalism, taking private experience and *publicising* it, rendering it in the ersatz public space of logged-in displays. Of course, it must be this way since digital capitalism recruits all individuals as producers of both its actual content (private experience rendered public) and its ideological agenda, and in such a world the content committee of a big public screen individuates, phenomenologically by self-identifying via a twitter account and multiple other social network accounts, and instrumentally by qualifying for the only definition of an individual that digital capitalism really cares about: access to a credit card or bank account. Victimised by this inversion of the private/public equation, the content committee must seek out content that supports and reinforces the public of individuals' sense of participation in an individually empowering network by presenting itself as one of the individuals in that network and therefore, by definition, respectful of every individual's power as represented by their right to produce content for the distributed empire of digital capitalism. As explained above, because of the ultra conservative characteristics of the fictionalised individual as represented by the big public screen, the only art suitable for display is, at best, decorative design work characterized by formal divisions of the screen filled with tokenistic/iconic graphic appropriations and, at worst, purely didactic work explicitly reinforcing the ideology of digital capitalism. This didactic form is usually characterised by explicit manipulation of the concept of *realtime*, often involving textual and graphic display of data. It is at this point that the digital status of the content displayed on big screens comes into play. As Boris Groys notes in *Art Power*, with digital art, "the curator becomes now not only the exhibitor but

http://www.hcourt.gov.au/assets/publications/judgment-summaries/2012/hcasum16_2012_04_20_iiNet.pdf

the performer of the image."[7] Since all performances unfold in realtime, the performance of digital images become the perfect medium for digital capitalism to perpetrate its relentless realtime regime of the *right-now*, where history is erased so that difference may never be encountered, let alone examined and repetition is presented as innovation. [8]

Paradoxically, public screens often exist in close proximity to privately-owned 'public' advertising screens, whose operators often play out the radical inverse logic of public screens, filling the role that advertisers once filled in private screens – that of constantly testing the limits of the standards committees by displaying potentially illegal or offensive content without seeking prior permission, to see if chastisement arises retroactively. In this manner, it may be these privately-owned 'public' screens that represent the radical edge that is blunted when the genuinely public screens encounter art, but if so it is an illusory radicalness precisely because it radically reinforces the logic of digital capitalism. But this is the difficult paradox that faces all art that attempts to critically engage with digital capitalism, and especially art that would use public screens as its display medium. In the digital, we can enact the infinite series that the modernists hinted at, with time determining any instance that individuates itself from, and then returns to, the series, just as digital capitalist networks present an endless banal parade. Alain Badiou warns that "it is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognises as existent." [9] So how is it possible for art to engage with the networks and subjects of digital capitalism without reinforcing and promoting the values and practices of digital capitalism? The answer indeed lies in the concept of realtime performance, and the work of the digital artist becomes parameter selection; selecting the parameters for modulation from digital data into display is the artist's work. As we have seen, digital capitalist networks choose

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[7] Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p.85
[8] *ibid.*, pp.18-22 & 28-31.
[9] Alain Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art", *Lacanian Ink*, Issue 22, available online at http://www.lacan.com/issue22.php

parameters that ensure a smooth time, an eternal present with no reference to past or future, in order that repetition can be presented, and consumed, as innovation. Digital artworks must, therefore, be constructed using parameters that are aware of time as differentiator. Since time is the medium in the performance of the digital, self-assembling digitally networked artworks must incorporate, and present means towards, time in its role the constructor of difference. Time on networks, distributed and un-arrow-like, becomes a material in the construction of resistance against the entirely smoothing impulses of digital capitalism, which not merely brooks no resistance, but is incapable of understanding resistance, since its libertarian vision is to absorb everyone and everything into a smooth continuum of consumption in the eternal present, where differences in cultural nuance and time are simply problems to be overcome. [10]

Digital artists must select parameters that ensure that artworks modulated onto big screens draw attention to the underlying technologies and networks being used, that lay bare the crushing solipsism of predictive filters, that invite people to consider their position as slave-producer-consumers for a handful of giant libertarian capitalists and recombine the same tools into an individual production machine that teases apart and frays the all-too-shiny web of filaments that bond us in our narcissistic stupor. Again, this is a difficult task when the very networks of bondage are presenting themselves as the empowering liberators. But Groys is right to insist that the "logic of equal aesthetic rights" actually results in an autonomy of art that has a positive, affirmative imperative as its contextual specificity transcends the smooth parade of digital capitalism's *right-now*. [11]

Whilst Groys does acknowledge the fundamentally non-visual nature of the digital, he concentrates almost exclusively on images and the visual, as does digital capitalism. Big screens, public screens, are dominantly visual, and vision reinforces

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[10] Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2013), p. 19
[11] Groys, *Art Power*, p. 16

power by relegating the viewing public to the powerless status of *viewers*. The logic becomes that it is only those in power who have access to the means of visual *production*: CCTV, speed cameras, sporting event cameras and the technology that is able to display content to a big public screen. But it is a simple step to recognise that digital tools render everything generic and therefore everyone has generic power. That is why digital capitalism works by offering a simulation of this power to individuals, where the production that is carried out is entirely in the service of reinforcing and building the power and profit of the digital capitalist organisation that masquerades as a (social) network, with the individual producer sure that the organisation, unlike the individual, has access to the means of mobilising the produced content and therefore has ultimate power. This logic of production-as-power extends across all public screens, whether privately or publicly owned, constantly reinforcing the assumption among the public of individuals that there is a coterie of technical geniuses who are constantly working to make life better through higher resolution image production technology. Big screens amplify everything. Artists need to break the filter and threaten with scale.