**#Occupying Public Networks**

Geoff Cox & Joasia Krysa

Public art has been much debated in terms of its ability to reach beyond the institutions of art and engage wider constituencies. Commentators on “new genre public art”, such as Miwon Kwon, have expressed concerns about “socially-engaged” art operating as a form of social work.[[1]](#footnote-1) The well-meaning artist unwittingly becomes part of a cynical strategy where communities and social relations are effectively commodified. Through such means, critical arts practice is subsumed into a neoliberal agenda that corresponds to the social inclusion agendas of governmental public policy that attempt to gloss over social inequality and results in the exclusionary practices of urban regeneration.[[2]](#footnote-2) We are reminded of the uncompromising message of the public art billboard poster by the art collective Freee, that recursively states: “The economic function of public art is to increase the value of private property.”

Figure 1: Freee billboard poster, 2004.

So if, in general, this leaves public art as neither really serving the interests of the public or art, then where do we find alternatives? Even Freee’s billboard poster ultimately renders political art as part of the same machinery that turns dissent into value. Critique is indeed an essential part of capitalist production and the ability to express opinions in public allows the system to verify itself as democratic and open to people acting and speaking freely. But what kind of freedom is expressed here? If the political realm arises from acting together, in the sharing of words and actions in public, as Hannah Arendt stated in *The Human Condition* (1958),[[3]](#footnote-3) then it is no wonder that this has become a battleground and that communications technologies appear to contribute to our inability to speak and act freely in public. We should become concerned that commodified technologies have appropriated collective speech acts and social intelligence. If Twitter has become the technology of choice for political mobilization then what does this indicate about politics today?

Is it still possible under these conditions to imagine public art, whether online or offline, as anything other than soft control? Certainly the pseudo public space of the internet has long since been subsumed, not least inasmuch as the private monopolistic practices of social media and cloud computing dominate online spaces. It is questionable whether it is possible to conceive of public space at all? F.A.T.’s parody of the Occupy movement, *Occupy the Internet!* (2011), resonates with this problem, suggesting revolution from the comfort of your private home computer by “force-occupying” a chosen website.[[4]](#footnote-4) All you have to do is paste the following JavaScript into an HTML file, and an “animated GIF army” appears on the webpage: <script src="http://occupyinter.net/embed.js"></script>

Figure 2. F.A.T., *Occupy the Internet!* (2011), screenshot.

But even with the apparent triviality of this project, other possibilities are registered that might encourage wider interpretations of what constitutes public action, and more encouraging conclusions than those presented thus far. Furthermore the Occupy movement serves as an interesting example of the way that public space has been reappropriated in places where power is centered (initially to express indignation about the handling of the financial crisis since 2008 as Occupy Wall Street, leading to #Occupy more generally).[[5]](#footnote-5) #OccupyGezi unfolds in Istanbul as we write, as yet another more positive instance of the public reappropriating its ability to speak and act freely.[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps we might claim that publicness has itself been ‘occupied’ in such examples.

If a few years ago the very notion of public space seemed to be subsumed into tightly controlled urban plazas for commercial activity, recent events have tended to revive publicness. In *Two Bits* (2008), Christopher M. Kelty argues that the free software movement is an example of what he calls a ‘recursive public’, extending Arendt’s definition of a public through speech and action, to incorporate technical and legal infrastructures.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus publicness is constituted not simply by speaking, writing, arguing, and protesting but also through modification of the domain or platform through which these practices are enacted. A good example of this might be the trend for artists to occupy public networks, to expose how connectivity increasingly operates in the tensions between corporate-owned telecommunications infrastructures and community-owned networks. For example, Linda Hilfling's *A Public Domain* (2011) does just this, parasiting existing network structures and filtering content accessed via that network.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Figure 3. Linda Hilfling, *A Public Domain* (2011).

Kelty’s argument is that free software is a special kind of speech act, underwritten by the freedom to be able to modify the discourses and infrastructures through which it operates. Yet sharing and releasing source code represents a number of ambiguities in representing both a belief in openstandards and yet at the same time a business move to capitalize on the ethic of sharing and free labour. Furthermore the analogy to freedom of speech that the free software movement promotes – *free as in free speech (and not as in beer)* - is problematic in other ways too. As we know the very notion of free speech is enshrined in hypocrisy: and is used both to legitimate state power through allowing diverse voices to be heard and to promote the fantasy of individualised freedom of choice. Similarly, free speech by-technology is subject to covert and overt regulation, and further compromised by the increasing use of filtering software and surveillance practices when running on proprietary platforms. Under such conditions, social media offers the freedom to speak and act but paradoxically only through the neoliberal logic of the so-called free market. Indeed if the liberatory claims for free software seem exaggerated nowadays, this is partly explained by the ways in which speaking, acting, and running code have become incorporated into the mechanisms of domination, especially in the extreme case of service-based platforms where code is locked down and simply not available to be shared in public.[[9]](#footnote-9)

If the concept of the public has lost some of its efficacy and its actions have been largely nullified, it is because the rationality of the market as an organizing force tends to offer choices, experiences, and subjectivities that suit its own narrow definitions. Instead alternatives need to be posed that explore the many paradoxes over open/closed forms that arise when code is invaded by economics – for it is the recognition that all language is inherently paradoxical that reveals the political realm. If lived experience is ever more prescribed through scores, scripts, and programs, then a reconceptualization of political action might be developed through running code inasmuch as arguments can be run by speaking, acting and coding freely in public. To conclude we present an example.

*Export\_friends.py* (written by Alex McLean, in 2012) destroys each of your Twitter friendships in turn, so you are left following no one. Yet before ‘unfriending’, the program script also sends a message, asking each friend to meet one of your other friends in the same public space. The social network that relates to the proprietary space of Twitter is replaced with an embodied social network of a quite different character. The script responds to a paradoxical situation in which the human capacity to speak and act in the world remains restricted despite the proliferation of devices and software that seemingly allow for increased communication; with the pervasiveness of social media like Twitter as case in point. The *export\_friends.py* script indicates something of this possibility as well as the enduring capacity of the public to modify preprogrammed scripts that delimit their actions and speeches. Could this be a way of conceiving public art?

#!/usr/bin/env python

import twitter, random

api = twitter.Api(consumer\_key='xx', consumer\_secret='xx',

access\_token\_key='xx', access\_token\_secret='xx')

friends = api.GetFriends()

for friend in friends:

friendName = friend.GetScreenName()

friend2 = random.choice(friends).GetScreenName()

message = "%s wants to meet in the main public square tomorrow" %

(friend2,)

api.PostDirectMessage(friendName, message)

api.DestroyFriendship(friendName)

1. #  Miwon Kwon’s One Place After Another: *Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A good account of this can be found in Josephine Berry Slater and Anthony Iles, *No Room to Move: Radical Art and the Regenerate City* (London: Mute Books, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arendt. There has been much recent interest in revisiting Arendt’s ideas, in particular in relation to a reconceptualization of publicness: ref. Virno and Kelty. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Occupy the Internet! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://occupywallst.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See http://www.opendemocracy.net/ali-gokpinar/neither-turkish-spring-nor-velvet-revolution [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kelty ref. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Linda Hilfling, *A Public Domain* (2011), [www.skor.nl/eng/site/item/netartworks-linda-hilfling](http://www.skor.nl/eng/site/item/netartworks-linda-hilfling). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Speaking Code* (MIT Press 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)