Metropolitan citizenship, critiques of everyday life and artistic intervention: connecting art and sociology

Cidadania metropolitana, críticas do quotidiano e intervenção artística: ligando a arte e a sociologia

Alexandre Cotovio Martins
Escola Superior de Educação – IPP
a.martins@esep.pt.
Catarina Mota[*]

Abstract

This proposal suggests an interdisciplinary approach encompassing the combination of urban sociological research and artistic intervention in urban settings. We will consider the integration of digital artworks in public spaces, chosen for their ability to generate engaging and innovative experiences as well as extending a virtual layer of meaning over real spaces. It is our premise that the aptitude for critical analysis and research of objects and tendencies within daily experience normally invisible through habitual perceptions that certain artistic interventions carry, might contribute to the development of an enriched relationship between art and the questioning processes typical of sociology, more specifically concerning its objective of deconstructing reality for analytical purposes. We will thus seek to demonstrate that such a critical analysis of daily existence, which can be found both on the artistic and sociological productions, might become a fertile ground for an emerging conscience and reflective appropriation of mundane social contexts (namely in urban settings), as well as give rise to a more engaged civil participation.

Keywords: art; sociology; urban settings; everyday life; critique

Resumo

Esta proposta sugere uma abordagem interdisciplinar combinando investigação na área da sociologia urbana e intervenção artística em espaço urbano. Consideraremos a integração de obras de arte digitais em espaços públicos, escolhidas pela sua capacidade para gerar experiências inovadoras e mobilizadoras, assim como para estenderem uma camada de sentido virtual sobre os espaços reais. É uma premissa nossa que a aptidão para a análise crítica e a investigação de objectos e tendências no quadro da experiência quotidiana que certas intervenções artísticas envolvem, pode contribuir para o desenvolvimento de uma relação enriquecida entre a arte e os processos de questionamento analítico típicos da sociologia, mais especificamente no que concerne o seu propósito de desconstruir o real com propósitos de análise. Procuraremos assim demonstrar que tal análise crítica da existência quotidiana, que se pode encontrar quer no âmbito da arte, quer no âmbito da sociologia, pode tornar-se um campo fértil para uma consciência emergente e uma apropriação reflexiva dos contextos sociais mundanos (nomeadamente contextos urbanos), assim como dar azo a uma participação civil mais aprofundada.

Palavras-Chave: arte; sociologia; cidades; vida quotidiana; crítica

---

[*] Is currently a PhD researcher at The University of Austin, Texas. She was a research fellow at the New York University.

0. Introduction

Systematic mistrust towards social forms as they are experienced by social actors is a classical and widely diffused approach in some theoretical traditions of sociology. Its roots, on the other hand, are long and profoundly embedded in some social and philosophical thought traditions, as Paul Ricoeur (1996) points out. For Ricoeur, this kind of approach to social life is founded on a *hermeneutic of suspicion*, quite probably indebted to three great late 19th and early 20th century thinkers: Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. Common to these three major works, on this particular point, is the idea that there is something more to be found, and it's this something more that is determinant for action, *beneath* or *behind* the reasons or motives individuals give for their actions. From this viewpoint, thus, individuals tend to be seen, as Nathalie Heinich (1998) states, as *social idiots* instead of competent and skillful social actors. Extending our analysis to a wider perspective, we can thus say that theories which depart from a completely and exclusively suspicionist theoretical standpoint are more socio-ideologies than social theories (in the scientific sense), as they are incapable of seeing in social life more than *alienated*, *unconscious* beings, which, as several social thought currents have already noted (authors such as Schütz, Garfinkel, Goffman or even Max Weber), is not the case of human social life.

This doesn't mean, on the other hand, that social action and its conditions are completely *transparent* to social actors: saying that social actors are *competent* for social life and that they can mobilize *socially acquired knowledge* and experience to often creatively act in social contexts isn't the same as saying that they are always aware of social life's conditions, possibilities, and so on. In fact, we would rather say, as Bernard Lahire (1996) does, that social actors may relate to action in several different ways: more or less reflective, more or less plural, more or less involved, according to their socio-historical contexts of socialization and action. In this sense, one of the major sociological tasks consists precisely in engaging in a *differential analysis of a plurality of forms of individuals and individual forms of relating to action* that social life makes possible, particularly in modern settings. This is to say that sociology is subjected to the same epistemological regime as history, as Jean-Claude Passeron (1991) accurately observes, and should recover the old weberian precept synthesized in the German expression *Verstehen*: the ability a sociologist must master in order to empathically understand social actors and thus, in combination with other methodologies, offer a causal explanation of social action that incorporates social actors' views of their own actions and contexts of action.

If we are to take this debate seriously, when dealing with the relationship between art and sociology, we must also recognize that art—and this follows directly from what we've said—as far as it can be considered a form, or a set of forms, of condensing social experience, might well provide the sociologist with a wide range of materials to capture social experience as it is lived by social actors in general and artists in particular.

Moreover, art, as it is often the case, tends to condense social experience precisely by *questioning* it. In fact, this might well be, in part, something that art and artists share with other social actors in the frame of modernity. Faced with the extreme complexity and fragmented shapes of modern experience, individuals tend to engage in a daily struggle for individual *identity* which is often a questioning process (Kauffman 2006). Artists, on the other hand, may adopt these questioning processes as the basis for their artistic activity. But what is interesting to us, more than these observations, is precisely the *questioning* practices artists often engage in, as these are somewhat common to what

sociologists do—even if they aren't looking at social life from a distant, superior, suspicionist perspective. In fact, sociologists, as any other social or natural scientists, cannot cease to question reality, or at the very least, try to identify what social actors do, and to understand what social actors think about what they are doing. In this specific sense, we identify here a common trait, both in artists' and sociologists' works, which may well provide us with a fecund field for interdisciplinary work. This is, thus, our departing point.

Finally, we must point out that our own questioning process will not be a purely theoretical one but, as we will provide a specific *example* of an artwork that engages directly in what we might call the act of questioning urban social experience. Our intention is to focus on artworks that critique urban social experience and thus open up a whole field of possible relationships (theoretical and practical) between urban sociology and digital art. In this particular field, we sought to identify a work that may, in our opinion, help urbanites engage in modes of action that lead to the questioning of one of the major regimes of action in today's cities: what Laurent Thévenot calls a "*plan regime*" (2006). In this context, we will address specifically an *industrial* form of dealing with urban individuals and objects that are associated with advanced modern mobility.

It should be pointed out that the artworks we will put forward as examples might not be directly shaped by sociological achievements or intentions. Nevertheless, they are clearly informed by some central aspects of urban social life and metropolitan experience that intersect many of the urban sociologists' concerns. This might be partly due to one of the "theory-effects" Pierre Bourdieu referred to when he noted that, as time goes by, social scientists are more likely to find their own research results expressed in the social contexts they study (as it eventually happened with concepts like "social class", which modern actors use and even take for granted in their own everyday life).

1. Regimes of engagement in action and metropolitan life: some aspects.

Throughout the 20th Century, social urban experience has become one of the most stimulating fields of work for sociologists and social theorists. Authors as distinct as Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Louis Wirth or, more recently, François Ascher, Manuel Castells, Guido Martinotti, Pierre Bourdieu or Zygmunt Bauman, tried, departing from very different and sometimes even conflicting points of view, to grasp urban phenomena from a sociological perspective.

The forms of social urban organization and its comparison with rural communities; the types of social bonds that urban experience tends to privilege and the ways in which they differ from other types of bonds; the relationships between societary bonds said to be typical of urban experience and modern societies, and between communitarian bonds said to be typical of rural experience and traditional societies; the forms and consequences of mental experience in urban settings; the phases of urbanization and, more recently, metropolization and its connections with different kinds of social formations, such as classes or just specific populations; the domination over populations through space and the place of power in the cities; the mixture of different cultural and social populations within cities; the major cities as nodal points of worldwide socioeconomic systems of trade and the emergence of urban identities of resistance against dominant social orders… The list could easily be extended, but our

purpose is only to stress that urbanity has become one significant source of interest for sociologists across the board (and not just for urban sociologists).

Despite this long and complex list of themes and perspectives from which urban life can be sociologically interpreted, one of them seems to be particularly prolific for a socio-urban analysis: the theme of mobility.

2.1 Action in plan and the industrialization of urban space in metropolitan contexts

As agents engage in everyday actions, they use reference points to determine the most *convenient* access mode and subsequent course of action (Thévenot, 2006). These access modes, though dependent on the agent's ability for recognizing them, are hard-coded into most daily situations, in the sense that they present an overwhelmingly integrated code of unequivocal meaning for socially integrated agents. As such, a socially *competent* agent should have the ability to recognize the code, as well as the determinants central to any situation, in order to select the appropriate demeanor and mode of action with only a very slight conscious or deliberate effort. Such codes and determinants display, in most cases, a posture belonging to the regime of plan and organization (even on the street), be it in terms of their degree of codification or of internal determination (such as injunctions or logic and moral rules). This is the case of the major metropolitan areas of our time, urban realities whose central property lies in the recurring human motion streams between more or less distant points, usually classified as "center" and "periphery."

We suggest that, in this case, the plan regime (Thévenot, 2006) through which the agents engage in their daily motions is often shaped by normative industrial mechanisms, in the sense that they incorporate the determinations of past historical actions which have contributed to the development of a *cité* (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) in an industrialized world. Thus, in certain urban contexts, the groundwork of everyday life is based on injunctions etched on objects and made recognizable to people, who in turn adjust to each situation as they are steered towards an idea of good associated with symbolic operators such as efficiency, productivity or optimization. A valued space is one that propitiates the attainment of these operators. As expressed by Bruno Latour (1996), though not exactly in this context, we're faced with a kind of symmetry between the world of humankind and the world of objects and technique, as this latter element of symmetry embodies what Latour calls "the mass that is missing," just like the mass astrophysicians lack to accomplish their dream of calculating the total mass of the universe. Latour tells us that the "moral that is missing" on the speeches of the great and not so great moralists of our time lies right in front of our eyes, in the technical world. We can find it, for example, on the seat belt and its automatic warning systems, which configure an entire moral mechanism as they originate from notions of safety, brought to existence by the engineers who designed and built the system, in order to make it clear to the driver that if she doesn't put it on she'd be ignoring a concept of personal safety that a *general other* expects of her. Taking this problematic further, we verify that, in many cases, an agent is the more competent in her daily life as she avoids questioning the meaning of the plan action activated on a daily basis (routine), and becomes incapable of recognizing objects as the product of human activity and historical moral choices. In this sense, when the agent thinks (abandoning the normalized state of daily automatisms), she finds in herself only a mechanical or *logical* need, not a moral need, leading to a naturalization of the human.

2.2 Naturalized functional mobilities: the perception of the connected

A central aspect of a "globalized" metropolitan life, as Manuel Castells (1996) points out, lies both on the insertion of urban-metropolitan centers within global networks of exchange, and on the articulation of this "global" facet with the daily existence of "local" territories between which metropolitan populations flow.

One of the central demands within this urban-metropolitan existence framework is related precisely to the daily mobility of people between their places of work and residency, now turned into distant and territorially dispersed points. In the words of François Ascher (1996:10):

> The lengthening of day-to-day urban dislocations which characterizes the growth of metropolitan areas, witnesses also that such growth operates less by an addition of new subsets and more by a change of scale and by the formation of wide basins of habitat and employment, more or less polarized around one or several main cities.

Nevertheless, this growing mobility does not progress in a linear or homogenous way, as Ascher (1996:11) notes:

> The details of the structure of pendular migrations allow to verify that the growth of metropolis isn't made only by concentric dilations, but also by the integration in its daily functioning of more and more remote territories, sometimes by the absorption of part of the population of distant cities and villages. One can thus speak in a "metastatic" metropolization (though this is a rather unpleasant and negative image), through the emergence of elements of metropolitan nature in non-contiguous and non-metropolitan territories.

For the commuter, i.e., the one who travels daily between several points within a metropolitan area, the metropolis appears as a gigantic archipelago-like mechanism. The archipelago's "islands" and the forms s/he uses to move from one to the other make up the heart of her/his daily motion routine. João Ferrão (2002) builds on this perspective, stating that we are currently living the organization of territories as archipelagos with many islands interconnected by many networks.

Thus, the daily existence of the metropolitan territory as an archipelago tends to generate a perceptive map of the metropolis which, for major population groups, results in an obfuscation or even obliteration of the spaces and territories that lie in between and beyond these "islands." There seems to be an organized (though not necessarily intentional) ignorance of the interstitial or extreme spaces of the "islands", nodal points of functional mobility and urban productivity, now elevated to a legitimatizing ideology defining *proper* ways to organize and use the urban space. In the connectionist and binary language of networks, the islands represent the nodal points of a network, in between which circulates what's "in", as opposed to what's "out." By way of Erving Goffman's old metaphor we might say that the new ways of organizing metropolitan space tend to produce many and diverse "backstages" as opposed to the "stages" of urban everyday life occupied by the most "productive" and "globalized" populations, the *connected* ones.

We are thus looking at an advent of the perception of metropolitan space as *functional*, in face of the demands of global competition, which tends to reify certain uses of space by presenting them as self-evident and unquestionable. Even the frequent bouts of criticism by the city users tend to focus more on the system's "malfunctions" (occasional failures on the system of public transportation, potholes on the road…) than

on questioning the basic foundations of its construction. We're referring to an inevitably moral set of choices aggregated within a metropolitan society, which is unevenly positioned to impress its own point of view and thus to *build* its space. In this context, to critique the mundane or "naturalized" perception of the functional spaces of urban life might contribute towards an increased democratization of daily existence in contemporary metropolises.

3. Deroutinizing art and critiques of everyday life

It is our premise that the aptitude for critical analysis and research of objects and tendencies within daily experience normally invisible through usual perceptions that certain technological artistic interventions carry, might contribute for the development of an enriched relationship between art and the questioning processes typical of sociology, more specifically concerning its objective of deconstructing reality for analytical purposes. We will thus seek to demonstrate that such a critical analysis of daily existence, which can be found both on the artistic and sociological productions, might become a fertile ground for an emerging conscience and reflective appropriation of mundane social contexts (namely in urban settings), as well as give rise to a more engaged civil participation.

In the preceding sections of our text, one particular theme traversed our analytical frame: that of the *urban experience* and, under its umbrella, that which we might call an *industrial urban experience*, deeply associated with the metropolization processes. This was not, of course, a hazardous choice. As a matter of fact, this theme is the exact momentum we need to set forward our view of a possible connection between art and sociology. Deconstructing social experience(s) with analytical purposes is a classical and rich form of epistemological approach on which many sociologists and artists base their work. Thus, when we mention *critique* in this paper, we are referring to *epistemological critique* regardless of its particular mode while emphasizing, by providing this text as an example, the methodological power of crossing art and sociology. All in all, we're recovering the old axiom by which generations of artists and researchers, both in the field of art and in the field of sociology, guided their work: by changing the world's representation we may change the world itself.

3.1 Technological art: a critical approach

This concern with the thoughtless acts that repetition and social ideologies drew out of consciousness, and the ways in which, to borrow Shklovsky's (1917) words, "Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war," led us to look into the artistic process of exposing and subverting dominant (or just habitual) points of view in order to facilitate the emergence of alternative perspectives.

For this purpose we will look specifically into contemporary technological art. Even though the insertion of technology into public spaces has been mainly associated with surveillance issues, there is a reverse side that carries the promise of a more liberating relationship with everyday life.

In this context we've identified, within technological art, an approach that seeks precisely to draw attention to unnoticed social and cultural issues by creating objects of enquiry and examination that capitalize on one's pragmatic relation with the physical

world, not to disappear into the background of consciousness, but to challenge their own nature and the context in which they came to be.

As digital artists become increasingly aware of both the influences that permeate their work and the impact of technology on its sociocultural context, technological art shows signs of becoming what Huhtamo (2003:116-117) calls a "meta-art that engages in a dialogue with the cultural representations," and responds to a crucial demand for self-consciousness and critical understanding.

The fertile border between the physical (with its embedded social aspects) and software worlds is an ideal space for this critical examination of the part technological art can play in transforming everyday, mundane experience. To the extent that it resides halfway between the world we physically inhabit and cyberspace, it may serve a double purpose: as technological interfaces embedded in the world extend a layer of virtual meaning over their physical contexts, they carry the ability to both draw attention to unnoticed characteristics of that very reality (be it architectural, social, political, or simply mundane) and promote the emergence of alternative perspectives. Thus, exploring the boundary space where physical and virtual meet may encompass both a metacommentary and a critical approach to its context.

This critical attitude is particularly noticeable on the creations of select digital artists such as David Rokeby, a key figure in contemporary digital art, whose work stems precisely from a fundamental reflection on how technological mediation may (re)shape perceptions of reality:

> My personal experience that the task of simulating vision and speech can reveal hidden things about human function inspired the notion that the computer can function as a sort of philosophical prosthesis. We are not very good at perceiving ourselves, being so deeply invested. And our imagination invisibly fills in conceptual gaps and flaws much as our vision system papers over gaps in our visual field. Rigorously externalizing our models of ourselves can dramatically clarify the limits of our self-understanding and open those hidden conceptual gaps to inspection. (Rokeby 2003a).

In order to convey alternative perspectives and thus open 'hidden conceptual gaps to inspection' select artists resort to the deroutinization logic of imparting *strangeness* to the routinary. This is mostly achieved through a carefully orchestrated oscillation between transparency and opacity or, as Bolter and Gromala (2003) prefer to call it, between a window and a mirror, and is particularly evident in interfaces that return a distorted version of reality (or, at least, reality as seen by a video camera).

In Rokeby's installation *Watch* a double projection is fed by surveillance cameras placed in a public area outside the exhibition space. This video feed is then processed in real time as the computer monitors the images for stillness and motion. One half of the projection reveals only static elements, such as a pedestrian waiting to cross the street, a homeless man sleeping on the ground, or a woman reading a newspaper. On the other half only moving objects are visible. Inside the exhibition space sounds of a watch ticking, a heart beating and light breathing can be heard.

Watch evokes a sensation of displacement as it reveals a nearby real space through a filtered perspective, replacing our unmediated vision of this physical space by the computer algorithms' perception. *Watch's* unconventional balance resides in the mechanism of simultaneously hiding and revealing the inner workings of code and machines while making us look at reality from a different angle. In Rokeby's (1995) words:

The system has embedded itself into the feedback-loop of perception, transforming the process of looking. What is most interesting to me about this transformation of looking is that it invariably also involves a transformation of the apparent 'meaning' of what is being watched.

The adjacent layers of *Watch*, revealing two sides of the same reality, also allow for a very direct re-interpretation of what is unfolding outside the window as the artist's separation between movement and stillness brings to the front a social phenomenon that has become somewhat 'invisible':

... And on the street, there happened to be many homeless people and homeless people tend to stay there on the corner and maybe hold their hands out for some money they were the only people who were still. So on that side of the image, you see all the people who are very busy, important, and shopping and going to work are invisible, and the people who are doing nothing are visible. This was particularly interesting to me because when you live on a street with many homeless [people], you create your own filters and you do not see those people any more. I was interested in the way a simple technology could turn these filters that we develop inside down upside down. (Rokeby 2003b).

As demonstrated by *Watch*, but also by *Seen* or *The Giver of Names*, Rokeby's work looks at the visible world 'literally' and offers an alternative view of the socially perceived reality, revealing things anew by way of engaging experiences where very familiar images are shown through a poetic and somewhat playful lens that makes them appear fresh and strange.

Thus, deroutinizing interfaces open up hybrid spaces where carefully designed combinations of hardware, software and reality seek to simultaneously draw attention to the beauty of the objects (both the represented objects and the artwork itself) and create a window for discovery. While still offering remarkable experiences, avant-garde digital artists challenge normal perceptual outlooks, as their unconventional or 'strange' perspectives force viewers/participants out of everyday comfort zones, inviting them to re-think not just technological mediation but their very real relationship with the physical socialized world.

4. Final Words

The term "conclusion" appears to us as somewhat excessive in the context of this paper, so instead we have chosen to think in terms of "final words". This is mainly due to the fact that our work has been entirely organized around a *questioning process about questioning processes,* which we believe to be central and similar in various artistic and in sociological exertions. Therefore, we will take the good advice of Wittgenstein (whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent) and won't say much more than we already have.

This paper was written precisely within the fertile and overlapping space opened by the critical and questioning attitudes that characterize both artistic and sociological works. As mentioned earlier, the critique of social life as experienced by social actors is a form of *epistemological critique* which, to us, appears quite clearly as a common ground upon which several artists and sociologists build their work and which seems to, so far, have lacked proper expression on both sides.

We also believe that by entering directly into this space, through exemplification a part played here by the theory of social action, urban sociology and digital art in urban public space, we have been able to take this problematic further than if we had opted for an overwhelmingly theoretical and systematic approach.

Finally, we suggest that these sociologically-informed-emerging-artistic-practices, might give rise to in the words Lanham (1993) uses to describe Christo's work "a new liberating art that could offer art's defamiliarizing power to a wider audience," and thus promote a reflective appropriation of mundane social contexts and a more engaged civil participation.

References

Ascher, F. 1996. *Metapolis – Acerca do Futuro da Cidade*. Oeiras: Celta Editora.

Boltanski, L. and L. Thévenot. 1991. *De la Justification. Les Économies de la Grandeur*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

Bolter, Jay David and Diane Gromala. 2003. *Windows and Mirrors: Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Castells, M. 1996. The Rise of the Network Society. In *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol I. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ferrão, J. 2002. Portugal, Três Geografias em Recombinação. Espacialidades, mapas cognitivos e identidades territoriais. In *Lusotopie,* 2002/2: 151-158.

Heinich, N. 1998. *Ce que l'Art Fait à la Sociologie*. Paris: Minuit.

Huhtamo, Erkki. 2003. "Web Stalker Seek Aaron: Reflections on Digital Arts, Codes and Coders." *Ars Electronica: Festival Catalog 2003*. Retrieved November 21, 2007. Available: http://www.aec.at/en/archiv_files/20031/FE_2003_huhtamo_en.pdf

Kaufmann, J. 2006. *A Invenção de Si: Uma Teoria da Identidade*. Lisboa: Piaget.

Lahire, B. 1996. *L'homme Pluriel: Les Ressorts de l'Action*. Paris: Nathan.

Lanham. Richard. 1993. "The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts." http://www.rhetoricainc.com/eword4.html (October 29 2007).

Latour, B. (1996). *Petites leçons de sociologie des sciences*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Lozano-Hemmer, Rafael. 1999. "Vectorial Elevation Reading."

http://www.alzado.net/reading.html (May 28 2008).

Passeron, J. 1991. *Le Raisonnement Sociologique – L'Espace Non-poppérien du Raisonnement Naturel*. Paris: Nathan.

Ricoeur, P. 1995. *De l'interprétation – Essai sur Freud*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Rokeby, David. 1995. "Watch." http://homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/watch.html (October 29 2007).

Rokeby, David. 1998. "The Construction of Experience: Interface as Content." http://homepage.mac.com/davidrokeby/experience.html (October 29 2007).

Rokeby, David. 2003a. "The Computer as a Prosthetic Organ of Philosophy." *Dichtung-digital 2003/3*. Retrieved October 29, 2007. Available: http://www.brown.edu/Research/dichtung-digital/2003/issue/3/Rokeby.htm

Rokeby, David. 2003b. "David Rokeby's interview at Theater Marcellis, Brussels, 14 December 2003" http://www.imal.org/drokeby/archives/interview.html (May 4 2008).

Shklovsky, Viktor. 1917. "Art as Technique."

http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/Shklov.htm (October 29 2007).

Thévenot, L. 2006. *L'action au Pluriel – Sociologie des Régimes d'Engagement*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte.