

Mobile Connections

The Mobile Connections strand of the Futuresonico4 festival explores new horizons in wireless and mobile media, and looks at the diverse ways in which artists and technical innovators are pushing the limits, and soliciting unexpected or unforeseen results from communication media past and present, from the radio to mobile telephony and wireless LAN. The aim is to look beyond the technologies themselves towards issues to do with participation, perception and process they raise, through the exhibition, live events, conference, workshops and interactive experiences in the city streets.

Just as recording enabled sound to be heard apart from the place and time of its creation and radio made possible remote listening, so a new generation of communication technologies are now reconfiguring geographical, cultural and perceptual space, and transforming the nature of the art object and the art event. Mobile Connections seeks to sketch the outlines of emerging artforms that are coalescing around artists, programmers and DIY technologists who are responding to new technical tools by asking what can be experienced now that could not be experienced before, and that force us to reassess the ways of representing, relating to and moving in the world that have gone before. Some are exploring how the mobile phone might be transformed into an instrument in the way that radio and the turntable were in the 20th Century, examining how wireless technologies affect our daily lives, or seeking to make visible and audible the signals and transmissions that fill the air around us. Others are looking at how mobile technologies can take art out of the galleries and off the screen, the potential of interfaces unfettered by wires and cables for performance or interaction, and the kinds of communication and creative expression that emerge within networks with no fixed centre, but rather multiple, mobile nodes.

The rapid uptake of the mobile phone, both in the West and increasingly in the global South, the proliferation of wireless networks, and the promise of pervasive computing in which networked devices become embedded in the environment around us has created a space that increasing numbers of people are starting to explore. But unlike the internet, which promised unlimited potential before being colonised by commercial forces, wireless networks are centralised and proprietary, access to DIY innovation denied. Highlighting the artificial scarcity that underlies the telecoms market, and the absurdity of selling off bands of the electromagnetic spectrum for short term gains, the Free Networks movement empowers people to build their own wireless networks, its goal not just to leak bandwidth but to establish an independent and free wireless infrastructure.

The marketing of commercial wireless networks and third generation mobile phones has a now familiar hollow ring, but outside the corporate technology push, grass roots movements are opening up horizons not foreseen by the marketers, often setting the pace in technical innovation. The area that is perhaps generating the most excitement, and that has caught the imagination of a new generation of artists, is the emergent field of Locative Media. Rather than distance becoming irrelevant, the ability to determine location has emerged as central with wireless and mobile technologies, for the delivery of contextual information, or to engage in proximity and co-location. Assigning data with spatial coordinates so that it can be accessed from particular points, Locative Media explores how networked mobile devices, when combined with positioning technologies such as GPS, may be used for social communication and organisation, or for artistic interventions in which geographical space becomes its canvas.

The question of location within art is by no means new. All art engages in location to some degree, in the way that it articulates contextual meaning – even the found object is marked by the absence of the location from which it was drawn – or that it responds to the space created by gallery and frame. Locative Media explores social applications and the expressive trace as well as the straight forward placing of data through a prior abstraction, reducing location to a set of abstract digital coordinates. Mobile Connections will also explore how location is approached in other artforms, to investigate how Locative Media's concern for place and location may inform or be informed by issues such as material embodiment and the resonant qualities of a space. It will feature sound and media art projects that enable place and the urban environment to be experienced in different ways, including the Location site specific sound installations, and projects that enable the city to be navigated through sound.

Drew Hemment
April 2004
www.futuresonic.com

Mobile Connections themes

Mobile Connections seeks to balance artistic visions that open new perspectives on the technologies and their social implications, hands-on tool building sessions, and discussions of the processes involved in producing art for wireless environments. The artists and projects featured explore a number of interrelated themes:

Radiation is all around us

In SIGNAL_SEVER! - TRANSIGNAL 1 musicians, visual artists and high frequency and satellite telecommunications experts explore the radio zones of the electromagnetic spectrum, and Telenono by Rupert Griffiths brings the radiation that is all around us into view by creating a negative image - an installation built to look like a phone box that is sealed off from all radiation, offering true radio silence.

Wireless World

Disembodied Voices by Jody Zellan is a web based project examining the connected - but disembodied - voices that populate modern telecommunications, and Auto Mobile by the Center for Knowledge Societies is a short film that tracks changes in the use of mobile phones by autorickshaw drivers within the urban culture of Bangalore.

Art Unplugged

the-phone-book Limited and Tim Cole of the Tao Group explore the mobile phone as a creative medium - taking the limited technical resources as a creative starting point, or pushing the frame to generate high quality live sounds on-the-fly - while Katherine Moriwaki explores ad hoc networking, where connections are made directly between individual devices, so that data can hop from one to another without needing to be routed through a central point.

Wireless Interface

Come Closer by squidsoup explores how wireless technologies offer non-restrictive interfaces that enable interaction free from cables and physical connections, Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau discuss the use of magnets to introduce a sense of tactility and touch at the interface between the body and the nearest node, Schminky explores gaming in wireless environments, and the Soundbeam sensing technology - also featured in the futureDJ event - offers a gestural interface for composition and performance.

Free Networks

Free Networks pioneers Consume demonstrate how to build your own wireless network, while RICHAIR2030 by TAKE2030 and Wi-Fi Hog by Jonah Brucker-Cohen explore the boundary between open and closed nodes, and the limits placed upon access to the supposed panacea of openness and accessibility, one through a performance set in a fictional future in which bandwidth is a scarce resource sought out by renegade roller girls equipped with homemade lunchbox chiputers, the other by enabling people to gain complete control over a public access wireless network and create localised and temporary user groups.

Locative Media

The Locative Media Lab road test some locative tools, hot on the heels of a ground breaking session at ETCO and part of a series of events and workshops during 2004. (area)code is a themed locative project that enables passers by to leave their own digital graffiti through simple SMS, InterUrban offers an interactive narrative in the city streets, and Aura explores how a soundscape is composed by the relative movement of participants.

Sonic City

Streetscape by Iori Nakai is an interface that enables the user to trace a journey in sound through the city, Sonic Interface by Akitsugu Maebayashi alters the way the city is perceived by processing sounds heard as you wonder through the urban environment, and The Central City by stanza offers the chance to remix the city.

Location Based Sound

Colin Fallows curates live sound and sound installations that explore place and location, featuring Lee Ranaldo, John J. Campbell, Max Eastley, Colin Fallows, Russell Mills and Ian Walton, Mathew Gregory, Vergil Sharkya', Phil Mouldycliff and Colin Potter, and Glide by Echo and the Bunnymen's Will Sergeant.