In the Air Tonight: An Uncommon Interface for Common Concern

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In The Air, Tonight:
An Uncommon Interface for Common Concern

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ABSTRACT
This paper is concerned with addressing social concerns with large-scale, multi-modal media art that uses digital networks, reactive architecture, and the city as semiotic resources. As artists and designers who are involved in socially engaged practice, we see an important role in foregrounding political and social issues through networks and architecture, negotiating and furnishing access to both while shaping compelling interfaces that allow people to contribute by amplifying an area of common concern. We discuss some previous work by Davila and Colangelo and focus on our latest project, In The Air, Tonight, which aims to visualize local wind patterns combined with fluctuations in the conversation around #homelessness through Twitter on the LED façade of the Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto.

Author Keywords
LED façades; reactive architecture; public space; public art; socially engaged art.

INTRODUCTION
This paper is concerned with the application of social engagement and concern to large-scale, multi-modal media art that focuses on the connection between online Twitter conversations, reactive architecture, and the city. We focus on a specific example, In The Air, Tonight (2014), which connects a reactive architectural façade in Toronto with local weather conditions, and the ongoing conversation around #homelessness (as well as related issues of housing, poverty, mental health, addiction, etc.) on Twitter through the LED façade of the Ryerson Image Centre (see Figure 1).

As artists and designers working with large public displays, we see an important role in foregrounding issues through networks and architecture, negotiating access to both, and providing an interface that allows people to engage with and contribute to amplifying an area of common concern. A key component of this project has been seeking out experts in the field to help populate and seed the Twitter feed during the duration of the installation. Another main component has been making connections with drop-in-centres and homeless shelters that provide computer and Internet access in order to allow those directly experiencing and affected by this issue to participate on relatively equal footing. We believe that a socially engaged arts practice that is cognizant of the various points and modes of access, is sensitive to the representation of marginalized communities, and uses the reactive potential of architectural façades to amplify an issue helps to inform the development of interactive systems for social engagement.

PROJECT SYNOPSIS
“From Feb 5 – Mar 5, 2014, the LED façade of the Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto will be animated by a sweeping blue wave representing local wind speed and direction. A red pulse will be triggered by any Twitter post related to the ongoing conversation around #homelessness. You can participate by visiting intheairtonight.org where you will be able to choose from a set of tweets about #homelessness addressed to politicians and policy makers or compose your own message. This project asks all of us to foreground issues of housing, homelessness, and poverty by transforming a building into a beacon of common concern.”

Figure 1. In The Air, Tonight (2014).

TECHNICAL INFORMATION
A commercially available home weather station located on the roof of the Ryerson Image Centre provides local wind speed and direction data which is visualized as a blue wave on the building. In addition to this, the frequency of the term #homelessness is parsed from Twitter conversations...
using Twitter’s API and visualized on the building as a red pulse. An application server at the Ryerson Image Centre translates data from these sources and sends the data to the Real Time Interface (VVVV) to be passed on to the e:cue system in order to animate the façade in real-time [1]. This information is also used to populate and animate a website (intheairtonight.org) which simulates the live visualizations seen on the building with a responsive page background and allows people to view and compose tweets.

TECHNICAL AND ARTISTIC CONCERNS
The approach with In The Air, Tonight reflects an ongoing inquiry into the creative and critical use of large-public displays such as LED facades, urban screens, and public projections. We see these as richly expressive surfaces charged with great significance due to their scale and public visibility. In many ways they are our new monuments, collectivizing experience, organizing the performance of rites and rituals of remembrance and belonging. Too often, these canvases are merely used for advertisements and decoration thereby re-inscribing capitalist ideals and political apathy. As artists, researchers, and activists in this field, we see it as our responsibility to negotiate access to this expanding collection of highly visible surfaces of public address in order to create compelling and critical interfaces between citizens and information that can be experienced publicly and collectively, challenging prevailing ideals in both form and content.

Figure 2. E-TOWER (2010).

Davila and Colangelo have probed the artistic and critical potential of these sites with past projects such as E-TOWER (2010) [2], a large-scale interactive cell-phone based interface with the CN Tower for Toronto’s Nuit Blanche 2010 (see Figure 2). E-TOWER visualized the collective energy of the city on the most visible symbol of the city by asking participants to text the word ‘energy’ to a specific number, making the lights on the tower grow faster and glow brighter. This project was critical in form, allowing participants a modicum of access to an otherwise inaccessible monument and city symbol; however we felt it lacked in creating conditions for critical debate and discussion.

Since then, we have attempted to sharpen this aspect of critique in our latest projects. The Line (2013), a two-part installation presented in Markham, Ontario, as part of Land|Slide: Possible Futures [3], included a massive outdoor projection which was mapped onto a displaced 200-year old barn in the heart of one of the fastest growing communities in North America (see Figure 3). The Line created a highly charged space by combining light, architecture, and image in order to address issues of land-use, food security, and sustainability. By building a large wooden snow fence and filming it along various linear forms of development in the suburban and exurban landscape and then projecting it onto a massive antique barn which was itself displaced by development we showed how the lines that we inscribe and re-inscribe on the landscape direct and displace bodies and built forms in ways that have deep social and political implications.

Figure 3. The Line (2013).

With our latest project, In The Air, Tonight [4], we are focusing on the LED façade of the newly constructed Ryerson Image Centre [5]. This building, somewhat hidden behind the outer-ring of the Ryerson University campus, is just a block away from the centre of the city, Toronto’s Yonge and Dundas Square. It also lies roughly at the centre of one of the highest concentrations of drop-in centres and homeless shelters in the country [6]. As such, it represents an excellent opportunity to push the potential of the medium of site-specific installation with reactive architecture. Picking up on key themes of disconnection, lack of shelter, and the state of being hidden or ignored while remaining pervasive and ubiquitous, we seek to contrast the relative shelter and disconnection from the elements guaranteed to most by the urban environment with the ongoing plight of the homeless and poor for whom this is not always a guarantee. There are over 5,000 homeless individuals in Toronto; over 400 sleeping outside on an average night and both of these numbers continue to grow [7]. We want to draw attention to our ongoing struggle as a society to provide access to the basic provision of shelter, particularly during the cold winter months. Our bid to enhance awareness of this issue is sought through an urban
THEORETICAL CONCERNS

In addition to our work as artists and designers, we are also academics and educators. As such, we draw a great deal of inspiration from the ideas of critical and social theorists. With this work, we have drawn inspiration from the work of Bruno Latour [8] and Jacques Rancière [9]. With In the Air, Tonight, we are adopting Latour’s notion of “making things public,” which is, quite simply put, an appeal to create the conditions for a richer public sphere and thus a more democratic society by creating spaces for the collective consideration of the imbrication of political issues, environmental concerns, and technology. We also draw upon Rancière’s notion of the “politics of aesthetics” which asks us to question who gets to speak and where, and emboldens us to find ways to amplify what might otherwise be muted, sheltered, or hidden, to the detriment of greater social awareness and political equality. The use of reactive architecture is one way to create a space that engages current conditions in which technological issues of access are also political issues. It can also create a space that activates the expressivity and liveness afforded by such displays to engage in an emerging and important practice of public data visualization [10]. The visibility and monumentality of architecture is important in that the power it affords can be harnessed and redirected. With programmable LED façades, buildings can become semiotic resources for socially engaged practices, provided of course that the proper permissions are negotiated and that consideration is given to representation. As such, a key consideration for In the Air, Tonight is to include information about the project at drop-in centres and shelters in the city that provide computer and Internet access.

With In The Air, Tonight we have also drawn a great deal of inspiration from the work Alfredo Jaar and Krzysztof Wodiczko. Both artists are heavily invested in highlighting the plight of the underprivileged and persecuted, and often do so on powerful public symbols and buildings to create a scenario in which these critical issues are made visible and amplified by their architectural scale and significance. For example, Wodiczko’s The Tijuana Projection (2001) involved the projection of video feeds of the faces of abused and exploited women in the local maquiladora industries on the façade of the city’s largest art gallery. Wodijzko’s work uses public projection to draw attention to traumas that affects entire cities and confronts viewers with this information to spark the important ongoing processes of social justice which must be a collective and compassionate endeavor. Again, the power of often inaccessible monuments is displaced by the application of technology and media assemblages.

Alfredo Jaar’s work is similar to Wodiczko’s in that it does not shy away from difficult subjects, namely genocide and poverty, and seeks forums outside of the gallery to reach a wider spectrum of society with messages of common concern. His work for Montreal’s Mois De La Photo, Lights in the City (1999), asked the homeless population in the city to press buttons located at downtown shelters in order to trigger lights installed by Jaar in the Cupola of the Marché Bonsecours, a landmark in old Montreal. When these buttons were pressed at various shelters around the city, the lights shone a bright red, reminding citizens of this ongoing plight and the state of emergency that many of our citizens still find themselves in. In many ways, In The Air, Tonight aims to update Jaar’s efforts, augmenting and refining them based on the increased expressive capabilities in architectural lighting and communication technology that have emerged over the 13 years that have passed since he presented his work. It is our opinion that artists and designers engaged in socially engaged practice must see as their primary objective the furnishing and harnessing of technologies and points of access which include public space, architecture, various fixed and mobile sensors, and networks, to facilitate and amplify collective conversations around issues of common concern.

REFERENCES

2. E-TOWER. http://www.etower.ca/.