Texting and Calling Public Spheres: Mobile Phones, Sound Art and Habermas

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1. Introduction

“The public sphere is not just there, but has to be invented.” (Schneider, 2002)

This paper is concerned with mobile sound art, that is, with the use of mobile technology in public sound art. Both, mobile technology on the one hand and public sound art on the other, have already been discussed in relation to public space. This paper instead investigates their relation to the public sphere. Can works of mobile sound art show ways of (re-) constituting public sphere(s)? Debates in contemporary art that do consider the relation of art and public space, such as the debates surrounding public art or locative art, have an almost exclusively visual focus. McQuire (2006), for example, examines large-scale public screens, as in his opinion these screens facilitate a collective form of media use in public space, whereas mobile technology, such as mobile phones, tend to be used individually. While individual use of mobile phones is certainly the most prevalent kind of use, it is not the only possible one. The three examples in this paper show how mobile technology can be used in a collective way. This still poses the question whether collective media use in public space constitutes a public sphere – a discussion that will be guiding this contribution.

The chosen case studies suggest ways of continuing the tradition of ‘New Genre Public Art’ (Lacy, 1995) and ‘Media Art’ in a mobile context. I additionally propose that Habermas’ work offers a relevant link between public art and communication art as his definition of the public sphere asks for communicative acts to constitute it. Habermas also suggests that art could be one possible link between the private and the public.

During the course of the 20th century, electronic media tended to be increasingly situated in private space, including broadcasting media such as TV, communication media such as the telephone, and networked media such as the internet. Those media and communication technologies that arguably enable people to participate in public debates or contribute to public spheres (Dahlgren, 2005) have been largely tied to the private space of the home. By now, mobile technology has started to reverse this development and allowed people to use (their own) media (devices) in public space. Both, non-mobile and mobile media, are not necessarily and not primarily used to constitute public spheres, but it is one of their...
possible functions. Bringing back this function to public spaces changes them – a process still in the making. At present, this happens mainly in form of private communication and consumption: phone calls, text messages, music listening. This paper challenges this use by looking at art projects that experiment with a different use of mobile media, with opening up private messages to a public debate. I suggest that artistic, activist and collective use(s) of mobile media might also be able to contribute to contemporary public spheres.

2. The framework

Habermas is the most widely read and criticised scholar in regards to the concept of the public sphere. This paper evaluates how far Habermas’ concept is productive for the broader debate surrounding the public sphere in sound art and mobile technology by focussing on ‘Between Facts and Norms’, and especially the chapters ‘Deliberative politics: A Procedural Concept of Democracy’, and ‘Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere’ (Habermas, 1996: 287-387). ‘Between Facts and Norms’ is mainly concerned with legal theory, making it less popular in cultural and social criticism than most of his other works. But in the two mentioned chapters he revises many aspects of his earlier concept of the public sphere and thereby opens up interesting ways to discuss public sound art. Overall, Habermas’ revised public sphere concept with its multiple public spheres, mobilised peripheries – and even “rock concerts” (Habermas, 1996: 374) – has become much more flexible in comparison to his earlier conception.

The growing discussion about ‘urban screens’ and interaction via mobile phones has attracted an increasing numbers of scholars. Projects with an acoustic focus, sound-based or musical, on the other hand, have attracted little sustained scholarly attention so far. Sound is a significant factor of the public sphere, but the debate around the public sphere has been largely overshadowed by a textual focus (with the exception of radio). Other auditory phenomena have only relatively recently attracted sustained scholarly attention within the growing fields of Sound Studies, Auditory Culture and Sound Art (e.g. Bull & Back, 2003; Seijdel & Melis, 2005; LaBelle, 2006). The selected examples add to this debate by exploring the auditory mobile public.

The examples discussed in this paper are taken out of the dedicated art institutions into the streets and squares of our cities. This move is more than about the setting though: one of the fascinations of public art and public sound art is that public space is also part of the work’s concept. The audience encounters a piece of public sound art in their everyday context, for example on the way to work. This often involves a surprise moment, an irritation of the daily routine, a curiosity for unusual sounds. It is up to the audience to stop and spend some time with the piece and possibly interact with it, or to just listen while walking past. Drawing on Augé and Flusser, Föllmer (1999) suggests that public space has lost many of its social and communicative functions to the media over time, but hopes that public sound art can be one contribution to a reviving of public space. This is where discussions of sound art usually stop – but the next step is the actually interesting one: Is the act of reviving public space also creating a public sphere? Using mobile
technology to bring back communicative functions to public space might be especially successful in doing so.

‘TextFm’, ‘Tool for Armchair Activists’ and ‘Contact’ all feature the mobile phone as the interface to interact with the work. I suspect it might lower people’s inhibitions to actually participate in a work of public sound art if they can use their own well-known mobile devices, and therefore potentially invite a larger audience to experiment with new forms of constituting public spheres. Habermas argues that shared knowledge in public spaces is eradicated by the private consumption of news through TV and radio (or its silent reception in movie theatres). He is also concerned about the professionalisation and routinisation of media production. My paper attempts to give some hope where reading Habermas might lead us to despair.

In the following, this paper introduces three case studies, three examples of mobile sound art: ‘TextFm’, ‘Contact’ and ‘Tool for Armchair Activists’. These examples are discussed in relation to Habermas’ concept of the public sphere as well as the role of media and art in this concept. The paper then explores some aspects of his modified concept of multiple and porous public spheres in more detail: the mobilising of dormant public spheres, agenda-setting on the periphery; as well as episodic, occasional and arranged publics; and finally the role of art in linking private and public. In conclusion, it brings the discussion of art, media and public sphere together to argue that the case studies illustrate the potential of contemporary public spheres by the very process of enabling communication, making a link between private mobile phone communication and public spaces and sonic broadcasting.

3. TextFm

The first of the three case studies is ‘TextFm’. In this interactive installation by the British artists Matthew Fuller and Graham Harwood text messages are transformed into a sound collage that is broadcast on radio. Participants are invited to send messages to a phone number that has been published in advance. In addition to the content of the message, people can add parameters concerning the style of the computer voice by adding a specific code: the language (e.g. English or German) as well as pitch and speed of the voice (both on a scale form 0 to 9). The text messages are then read out by speech synthesis software according to these parameters and finally broadcast on a local radio station. The work is constantly changing, depending on how many people participate at any given moment. When many people take part, the incoming text messages sequences of speech weave a seamless carpet of words, whereas during quieter periods only the a continuous background sound, (a mix of un-processed bird song) with the occasional messages in between were heard on radio (Fuller, 2004).
‘TextFm’ has been shown several times in 2001 and 2002.¹ Here, I describe two installations, one in London and one in Vienna. On May 10th 2002, ‘TextFm’ was broadcast live on Resonance FM, “London’s first radio art station”. The same broadcast was simultaneously fed into a life performance at a London venue. The audience in the packed London venue used the system to communicate with each other and with the performers: “An intense sequence of exchanges gave a great sense of the spatial and communicatory characteristics of radio being crossed with those both of the mobile phone and of a relatively raucous, tightly-packed phone-carrying crowd” (Fuller, 2004). For all installations of ‘TextFm’ the artists’ log of all the messages shows that the participants invented all sorts of uses for the platform: Some people used the system for “sloganising, conversations, insults, meeting arrangements, flyering for DJ sets, asking questions, setting up conversations” (Kasprzak, 2002). A very different use was more “reminiscent of concrete or sound poetry. Such users would send repeated clusters of characters. For instance a message might comprise of: ‘ugh a ugh a ugh a ugh a ugh a...’ et cetera” (Fuller, 2004).

In the summer of 2002 ‘TextFm’ was installed in Vienna for a second time, again in collaboration with ‘Netbase’. This institution put up a ‘Basecamp’, an orange tent in the streets of Vienna’s museums quarter, which was open for the public. At this particular TextFm installation, the sound was not broadcast on radio, instead, a PA was used for audio output. In addition, people could listen to the audio stream on the internet (and also send messages via a web interface). The internet access was the idea of the host institution that aimed to promote Vienna’s

¹ The first installation of ‘TextFm’ took place in June 2001 at the ‘Lustrum’ event in Amsterdam that was organised by ‘De Waag, Society for Old and New Media’ (Fuller, 2004). There seem to have been some more installations in Amsterdam (Mandl, 2002). In October 2001, the work was also part of the event ‘Interface Explorer’ organised by ‘Public Netbase Media Space’ in Vienna, Austria. There was a live broadcast on the local, non-commercial radio station ‘Orange’.
media culture and to locate it in a global context. The artists remained sceptical about the internet option: “This initiative effectively de-localised the installation” that was originally meant to “find out whether a rich interactive culture of use could – following the London pirate radio scene – be developed in an urban area restricted by the broadcast range of a radio transmitter, or other means of broadcast using the materials of “TextFm”” (Fuller, 2004).

The main focus of the artists was not the actual content of the messages. They were more interested in discussing the context of open media systems, including aspects such as censorship, legal issues, technological limitations (e.g. length of a text message) etc. The artists understand ‘TextFm’ as an open system that illustrates the term “Media Ecology”\(^2\). Fuller’s understanding of “Media Ecology” is that “all media be taken as mutational fields and aggregations of force, subject to change by multiple dynamics, conjunction with new devices, techniques and usages” (Fuller, 2004; see also Fuller, 2005). The work also illustrates Fuller’s concept of “speculative software [that] can be understood as opening up a space for the re-invention of software by its own means” (Fuller, 2003: 30). Harwood and Fuller’s TextFm (hard- and software) platform opened up a dynamic space that is played by the participants and their mobile devices. Later on, I argue that one could understand this dynamic space that is created as a public sphere.

4. Contact

The second case study for this paper is ‘Contact’ by Mark Bain, installed in 2003 in Amsterdam. ‘Contact’ consists of two identical units, each comprising of a microphone and a mobile phone, both linked to a bullhorn. These two units are strapped to lampposts “situated across a space but facing each other” (Bain, 2005: 104). The phone numbers of both mobile phones are advertised locally as well as on the internet, disguised as an opportunity to meet someone of the same/opposite sex, not as an invitation to participate in an art installation. If someone calls one of the mobile phones, the call is amplified and projected “into the outside location” by the bullhorn (ibid.). Ideally, someone is calling the second mobile phone at the same time, so that the two remote callers can have a conversation with each other via the bullhorns and microphones. This conversation is blasted across the space, audible for all passers-by, who can also join the conversation by speaking into one of the microphones (Bain, 2005: 104,108).

The artist explains the confusion of private and public communication this installation can initiate: “Here, private becomes public and the outsider becomes the interloper, witnessing and disrupting the personal conversation of unwitting participants. It can be seen as an act of strangers listening to strangers talking to strangers, an amplification of communication and confusion” (Bain, 2005: 107). Both parties are taken by surprise, the ones phoning in believe they are contacting a potential partner and the people in front of the units do not expect to hear an amplified phone call.

\(^2\) For a more detailed discussion of Habermas and Media Ecology (that does however not discuss ‘Between Facts and Norms’) see Grosswiler (2001).
From the artist’s written description I imagined the work was situated in a public space. The photograph on the other hand suggests that work was set up in the space of a gallery. The only other source about ‘Contact’ is by the Dutch writer and journalist Swenne (Swenne, 2003) and helps to clarify the location of the work: it was actually set-up indoors, in one of several rooms of the ‘Smart Project Space’ in Amsterdam. Swenne writes that the quality of the audio was so bad that she could not understand the phone call that is amplified by the bullhorn. She also observes that the caller being amplified (in this case) is actually in the same room calling from his mobile. Regarding my interest is in public sound art, the gallery setting is not an ideal location. The artist’s emphasis in the written account of the piece and his overall interest in the relation of sound and public space makes it still relevant in this regard. Though Bain is best known for his works that amplify the seismographic information of buildings (e.g. of the collapsing twin towers) (Oliver, 2004), I suggest that his other work exploring “Psychosonics and the Modulation of Public Space” (Bain, 2005) is posing equally interesting questions due to its (potentially) highly interventionist nature. The artist has an ongoing interest in the relation of sound and public space, especially in the “use of advanced sound technologies to control public space” (Bain, 2005: 95). In fact Bain’s work addresses the speculation about the use of sound technology by the military and the police in several countries. Following from this interest, Bain designed several “portable acoustic devices, which play public space in real time” and each of them
“incorporates the public as performer” (Bain, 2005: 104, 108). In the light of this interest of the artist, ‘Contact’ might have worked better in a public context than in a gallery space.

5. Tool for Armchair Activists

The ‘Tool for Armchair Activists’ is the third case study for this paper and was designed by the interdisciplinary art group ‘Troika’ (Sebastien Noel, Conny Freyer and Eva Rucki) in collaboration with Moritz Waldemeyer in 2005. It is a self-contained unit meant to be strapped to a lamppost “in front of pro-eminent buildings like the house of parliament, or other institutional buildings in front of which many protests occur” (Troika, 2005). Participants can send text messages to an advertised phone number. The unit receives the messages, reads them with a computer voice and plays them loudly via a bullhorn.

![Figure 3: ‘Tool for Armchair Activists’ by Troika 2005 (From: Troika, 2005)](image)

There seem to be few similarities to ‘TextFm (input by text messages, that are transformed into computer-generated speech) and ‘Contact’ (units strapped to lampposts and output of conversations via a bullhorn), but there is only one unit and no radio connection. Troika advertise as one of the main features of the tool that the activists can stay warm in their comfortable living rooms instead of the “hassle of sitting in the rain, waiting for your favourite MP to pass by” (Troika,
One of the main differences to the two projects presented earlier is the attitude of the artists: Troika regards the work as irony (Baker, 2006) and the group was amused when the work was featured on an activists’ blog (Debatty, 2006), they label protests are “rants” (Troika, 2005). Consequently, they do not see themselves in the tradition of ‘remote activism’ with its culture of online campaigning and hacktivism that has invented numerous new ways for remote (electronic) intervention.

6. Reflections on Habermas’ Public Sphere

All three examples juxtapose private communication via text message or phone call with public broadcasting of these private messages. The importance of the communicative action, the platform for communication provided is discussed in relation to how the public sphere is established via communicative action in Habermas’ concept, and some specific aspects of his revised public sphere concept are made productive for talking about these examples.

The main reception of Habermas (in the English-speaking world) has been around the 1989 English translation of his 1962 publication ‘The structural transformation of the public sphere’ in which he describes the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere. In this book, Habermas idealises the 18th century European bourgeois public sphere although this ideal model was only ideal for white middle class males, discussing politics in places such as coffee houses. “However, as it turned out, from the emergence of capitalism and liberal democracy onwards, the demands of the working class, women and colonial subjects for citizenship and self-determination were framed to practical effect by that contradictory amalgam between the ideal and the actual“ of the public sphere, as McGuigan observes (2005: 428).

In Habermas’ 1992 book ‘Between Facts and Norms’, he offers at least a partial reply to various critiques of his theory.

In complex societies, the public sphere consists of an intermediary structure between the political system, on the one hand, and the private sectors of the lifeworld and functional systems, on the other. It represents a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local and subcultural arenas (Habermas, 1996: 373).

Importantly, Habermas understands the public sphere as neither an institution or an organisation or a framework of norms nor as a system; for him it is “a social phenomenon” (Habermas, 1996: 360). Communication is central in establishing the public sphere: “The public sphere can best be described as a network for

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3 Troika also refer to the English tradition of ‘Speaker’s Corner’, an area in London’s Hyde Park where the tradition of public oral debate is kept alive, especially on Sunday mornings. There have been visual attempts of using mobile phones to create a modern ‘Speaker’s Corner’ version, e.g. ‘Speakers Corner’ by Matt Locke and Jaap De Jonge. This work offers a public forum for private text messages since 2001 at the ‘The Media Centre’ in Huddersfield, where the messages are being displayed on a large LED screen above the building’s entrance.
communicating information and points of view” or as a “social space generated in communicative action” (ibid.). One of the key features of the public sphere is the “ideal speech situation”, a space between two (or more) people who communicate with each other, constituting the speech situation by doing so: “Every encounter in which actors do not just observe each other but take a second-person attitude, reciprocally attributing communicative freedom to each other, unfolds in a linguistically constituted public space” (Habermas, 1996: 361). Speech acts have the goal to produce some sort of mutual understanding. Not in terms of a binding law, but in terms of trying to persuade the other person with the better argument.

Habermas’ public sphere concept has been criticized extensively, in particular demands for a consideration of multiple and diverse public spheres have been prevalent (e.g. Fraser, 1992; Calhoun, 1992; Crossley & Roberts, 2004), with Fraser’s 1992 account being one of the most prominent ones. Fraser values his concept as “conceptual resource” and necessary for any debate of critical theory and contemporary democracy (Fraser, 1992: 110), but rejects key assumptions of Habermas’ concept of the public sphere as inadequate for existing late-capitalist societies. Her four main points are: a) instead of bracketing inequalities they need to be eliminated, b) we need multiple public spheres, c) the private needs to be included and d) not only weak but also strong public spheres are needed. These four claims together form Fraser’s post-bourgeois concept of the public sphere.

7. Multiple and Porous Public Spheres

One of the main critiques of Fraser and others is Habermas’ idea of a singular public sphere. In ‘Between Facts and Norms’ it becomes clear that he has taken some of this criticism on board. His concept has become more fluid and he seems to embrace the idea of multiple public spheres: he observes a “substantive differentiation of public spheres” (Habermas, 1996: 373). Where he talks in the plural he seems to use the terms “publics” and “public spheres” interchangeably, e.g. when he names some publics to illustrate his point about differentiated public spheres: “popular science and literary publics, religious and artistic publics, feminist and ‘alternative’ publics, publics concerned with health-care issues, social welfare, environmental politics” (Habermas, 1996: 373-4). He still talks about a “universal public sphere” referring to it as “the one text” (Habermas, 1996: 374). But he then clarifies that within this overarching public sphere there are numerous “small texts” or “segmented public spheres” (ibid.). He is very insistent about the porosity of the boundaries between them; they “remain permeable” and small texts “can always build hermeneutic bridges from one text to the next” (ibid.); this is a main difference to systems theory with its auto-poietic systems (Luhmann, 1994). In Habermas’ theory, systems can communicate with each other, they do not develop a language of themselves; systems are not auto-poietic. All the various public spheres operate with “natural language” and thus “remain porous to one another” (Habermas, 1996: 374).

The question is how a dialogue, a communication situation, can be discussed as an aesthetic experience. There is no art object in a museum or a performance on stage to look at. Art is an open-ended process, a facilitation of communication as
art work that is produced through the process of communication on the side of the participants. The participants are collaboratively producing the piece by texting and calling; the artist could be described as a facilitator of this process. The participants are not speechless in front of an art object, nor are they trained art critiques talking about it. Rather, the very process of talking makes the art work. This process seems to bear similarities to Habermas’ public sphere concept, where the public sphere comes only into being through the process of communication between people. Mobile media allow for a distinct way of communication, and this is illustrated in the examples.

8. Mass Media and Habermas

This section gives a brief overview of Habermas’ understanding of the role of media, and then moves on to have a closer look at those three aspects that are most relevant in the context of mobile media and artistic practice. Overall, Habermas is very critical about the dominance of the 20th century public sphere by mass media (1996: 355-6, 367, 376) with mass media employing “strategies that lower rather than raise the discursive level of public communication” (Habermas, 1996: 380) and the depoliticisation of public communication being “the kernel of truth in the theory of the culture industry” (Habermas, 1996: 377). He points out that there is a discrepancy between the normative expectations or the ideal state of how media “ought to be” on one hand and the sociological descriptions of a mass-media dominated public sphere on the other hand.

For Habermas, mass media have the central role of channelling the exchange of communication between various public spheres: “The currents of public communication are channelled by mass media and flow through different publics that develop informally inside organisations” (Habermas, 1996: 317). In relation to the importance of the flow of communication in Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, it is surprising that for him the media are not the most important part of public communication:

The diffusion of information and points of view via effective broadcasting media is not the only thing that matters in public processes of communication, nor is it the most important. True, only the broad circulation of comprehensible, attention-grabbing messages arouses a sufficiently inclusive participation. But the rules of a shared practice of communication are of greater significance for structuring public opinion. (Habermas, 1996:362)

In Habermas’ opinion mass media are important, but not central. The “shared rules of communication” he refers to have the rational argument as their highest aim. The quality of the outcome of a controversy is related to the rationality of the argument and the exhaustiveness of the material taken into consideration. I would argue that the “rules of a shared practice of communication” that Habermas regards as more significant, are also largely formed by the media.

Several of Habermas’ observations regarding media – the asymmetry of the media landscape, the pressure of selection and the dominance of established opinions, for example – seem to be less relevant for those of us who are heavy internet users, but are still an issue for traditional mass media such as TV.
“Selectivity” by the producers together with an “unequal distribution of information and expertise” makes the media landscape asymmetric (Habermas, 1996: 325). And “[a]s the mass media become more complex and more expensive, the effective channels of communication become more centralized” (Habermas, 1996: 376). Habermas states that at both ends of the media food chain, “the supply side and the demand side” there is an “increasing pressure of selection”. For him, “this power of the media” is a new type of power that is developing through the “selection processes” (ibid.). He thinks that this new power needs more regulation: it is “not sufficiently reined by professional standards” but “is being subjected to constitutional regulation” (ibid.).

Habermas draws a picture of highly professionalized media in all its stages: production, feeding in (via press conferences etc.), personnel, financial and technical resources. He observes that most input into the media is “professionally produced” and also the way of feeding information into the media is professionalized with “press conferences, news agencies, public relation campaigns, and the like” (Habermas, 1996: 376). It is not only being outside these systems that diminishes the chances of being represented in the media, it is also the content of the messages. Drawing on Kaase, Habermas states that “electronic media” are dominated by “established opinions”, a “balanced” and “narrowly defined spectrum” (Habermas, 1996: 377). How is information being processed once it has been picked up by the media? All the various channels and programmes compete for the “scarce resources” of “public receptiveness, cognitive capacity, and attention”. This is the reason for designing news according to “market research” with its resulting mix of “information with entertainment”. He disapproves of this as a “syndrome that works to depoliticise public communication” (Habermas, 1996: 557).

After this general introduction to the role of mass media in Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, I would like to point out three aspects that seem to be especially relevant for artistic practice with mobile technology. First, the mobilisation of a dormant public sphere, second, the ability of topics to move from

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Some of these developments have arguably been changed by the internet. For a discussions of Habermas’ theory and the internet see for example Dahlgren (2005), Downey & Fenton (2003). Habermas (2006) himself only sees a very limited potential for the internet in balancing mass media developments, as this footnote from a 2006 talk shows: “Allow me in passing a remark on the Internet which counterbalances the seeming deficits that stem from the impersonal and asymmetrical character of broadcasting by reintroducing deliberative elements in electronic communication. The Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers. However, computer-mediated communication in the Web can claim unequivocal democratic merits only for a special context: it can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes which try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes the rise of millions of fragmented chat-rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large, but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics. Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, e.g. national newspapers and political magazines” (Habermas, 2006: 9).
the periphery of the public sphere to its core and third, levels of density of information.

9. Mobilising Dormant Public Spheres

The mobilisation of a dormant public sphere is explored as a way that might be relevant for mobile media and artistic intervention. Habermas introduces the idea of two different states of the public sphere, a dormant one and a mobilised one. In a “public sphere at rest” the influence of the civil society on the political system is rather small, but “in periods of mobilisation, the structures that actually support the authority of a critically engaged public begin to vibrate” (Habermas, 1996: 379). A mobilisation of the dormant public sphere takes place in a “perceived crisis situation“ (Habermas, 1996: 380). According to Habermas,

> the actors in civil society thus far neglected in our scenario can assume a surprisingly active and momentous role. In spite of a lesser organizational complexity and a weaker capacity for action, and despite the structural disadvantages, mentioned earlier, at the critical moments of an accelerated history, these actors get the chance to reverse the normal circuits of communication in the political system’s mode of problem solving. (1996: 380-1)

One of the first prominent examples for mobile media being used to mobilise a public was the use of text messages (SMS) to summon people for demonstrations in the Philippines in 2001 (Rheingold, 2003: 157). Mobile technology can facilitate two forms of mobilisation. As in the Philippines example, they can be used to gather people for ‘traditional’ forms of protest such as demonstrations. But devices, such as mobile phones, can also be used for remote forms of activism, where the mobilisation does not result in a physical gathering, as the ‘Tool for Armchair Activists’ illustrates. Gordon (Gordon, 2007) gives interesting case studies of mobile phones being used in moments of crisis (e.g. SARS, London bombings) but does not discuss the public sphere concepts.

10. Agenda-Setting on the Periphery

Habermas gives a detailed account of how issues can move from the periphery of the public sphere to its core in three different ways. To answer “the central question of who can place issues on the agenda and determine what direction the lines of communication take”, Habermas modifies a model by Cobb, Ross and Ross (Habermas, 1996: 379). These authors have three different models for how new topics can be pushed from first initiatives to decision-making bodies: “inside access model, mobilization model, outside initiative model” (ibid.), depending on who is raising the issue and how it is moved to the decision making bodies. If the initiative comes from inside the political system, and stays inside it without any influence or inclusion of the public sphere, they talk about the inside access model. If the “proponents of the issue must mobilize the public sphere” to successfully pursue an initiative that originated inside the political system, it is the “mobilization model”. The first two models are the most common ones because the power of agenda-setting is with government leaders rather than with the “parliamentary complex” (Habermas, 1996: 380), at least in times of relative stability. For the third
model – the “outside initiative model” – the forces of the initiative are located “at the periphery, outside the purview of the political system” (ibid.). As discussed earlier, the mass media mainly draws on sources by professionals that originate in the centre. Therefore it is much more difficult to “start and manage” issues from the periphery (ibid.), but Habermas gives a long list of successful examples that made this move, from environmental to Third World issues. This third model is the most relevant one for this paper’s examples. Habermas credits initiatives on the periphery as more normative, initiatives form “associations (...) and cultural establishments (...) to ‘public-interest-groups’ (...) and churches or charitable organisations” (Habermas, 1996: 355). ‘TextFm’, ‘Contact’ and ‘Tool for Armchair Activists’ can be regarded as examples for the “informal, highly differentiated and cross-linked channels of communication” that operate at the periphery of the public sphere (Habermas, 1996: 355-6).

Along this process of moving from the periphery to the core, the issues need to be taken up by institutions such as “newspapers and interested associations, clubs, professional organisations, academies and universities” (Habermas, 1996: 381). Here, the mass media have a crucial role; they are the main means of moving issues from the periphery onto the public agenda: “Only through their controversial presentation in the media do such topics reach the larger public and subsequently gain a place on the ‘public agenda’” (ibid.). Habermas describes various activities that can boost this process, such as “sensational actions, mass protests and incessant campaigning” (ibid.). I argue that art projects can be one of these activities that can help agenda-setting from the periphery.

11. Episodic, Occasional and Arranged Public Spheres

Habermas distinguishes three different levels of the public sphere – episodic, occasional and arranged – depending on the “density of communication, organisational complexity, and range” (Habermas, 1996: 374).

Moreover, the public sphere is differentiated into levels according to the density of communication, organisational complexity, and range - from the episodic publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets; through to the occasional, or ‘arranged’ publics of particular presentations and events, such as theatre performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the abstract public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers scattered across large geographic areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only through the mass media. (ibid.)

Habermas regards the abstract public that is constituted by the mass media as “isolated” and “scattered” and the only connection between them are the mass media (Habermas, 1996: 317). If ‘TextFm’ is successful in opening up private text messaging to the public sphere, would this public be a episodic one, an occasional one or a abstract public? I suggest that with mobile technology abstract publics might become less abstract and more occasional (participants in some sort of collaborative event in a physical location) and/or more episodic (chance encounters in public space). Users of mobile technology might be chance passers-by that decide to participate in some sort of collaborative event in that very physical location by using their scattered media device. This is what happens with the
participant in the presented examples; they participate in a collaborative event with others (who are possibly anonymous and remote), they might join this ‘event’ while on their journey through public space, in the streets for example, and they are participating via their mobile phones. Even though these levels of public sphere seem to become more fluid, they still present relevant terms for describing public sphere that are useful to talk about audiences of public (sound) art.

12. Linking Private and Public via Art

Art is part of the “‘literary’ public sphere”. Habermas had an ongoing interest in the acoustic medium radio, but predominantly as a mass medium. Music and art have in general been a bit of a pour cousin in Habermas’ theory. Habermas does not explicitly talk about art in the ‘Between Facts and Norms’ chapters analysed in this paper, but he mentions it twice to illustrate an argument (Habermas, 1996: 360, 365). On one of these occasions, Habermas argues that art can be a way to connect personal life experience and public spheres with its own ‘language’:

Besides religion, art, and literature, only the spheres of ‘private’ life have an existential language at their disposal, in which socially generated problems can be assessed in terms of one’s own life history. Problems voiced in the public sphere first become visible when they are mirrored in personal life experience. To the extent that these experiences find their concise expression in the language of religion, art, and literature, the ‘literary’ public sphere in the broader sense, which is specialised for the articulation of values and world disclosure, is intertwined with the political public sphere. (Habermas, 1996: 365)

Habermas makes an interesting link between art and the political public sphere. He describes art, literature and religion as “specialised for the articulation of values and world disclosure”. If art has the capacity to find a language to voice personal life experience, this is potentially quite a powerful position. Art can produce condensed versions of personal life experiences and then bring them out into the public sphere. If these experiences are problems that are situated at the periphery of the public sphere, art might take up a similar function as media in moving issues from the periphery to the core of the public sphere. For the case studies presented in this paper, this function is not centred on the content of the messages sent in by the participants, it is focussed on the very process of communication itself.

13. Communication as art

In ‘Conversation Pieces’, Kester develops a “concept of a dialogical aesthetic” and draws on Habermas to make a link between aesthetics and dialogue that is largely overlooked in art discourse. Kester uses Habermas because his model is a “model of human interaction that retains the emancipatory power of aesthetic dialogue without recourse to a universalising philosophical framework” as has been the case in Enlightenment era writings that made the link between aesthetic experience and

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5 For an overview of Habermas’ “scattered remarks” on the subject of aesthetics and the problematic of establishing an aesthetic domain of rationality alongside the other two domains of cognitive and moral rationality see Sitton (2003: 104-108).
its capacity for communication by relying on a transcendent authority (Kester, 2004: 14).

For Habermas, discursive communication is to generate a consensus that is not binding, but good enough for the moment. This communication, this striving towards a consensus, becomes necessary if the existing consensus in a group or community breaks down. The universality claim in his concept does not relate to the knowledge that is produced, the universality is in the process of knowledge production as such. It is important to note that this process is productive even if no consensus is reached, as the participants of the debate have honed their debating skills for future discursive encounters, and they have had to take a look from the other’s point of view; this makes the participants of a debate and, I would argue, of an art work, more critical and self-aware.

In one of Kester’s case studies – ‘Intervention to Drug-Addicted Women’ by WochenKlausur – the artists invited a diverse range of concerned parties to discuss the drug problem in Zurich during several boat trips on the lake Zurich. The participants were not listening and speaking as people with official roles, but as individuals, and the artists provided the space and time for this. Kester argues that this resembles Habermas’ ‘ideal speech situation’: “WochenKlausur was able to create a physical and psychological ‘frame’ around the boat talks, setting them apart from daily conversation and allowing the participants to view dialogue not as a tool but as a process of self-transformation” (Kester, 2004: 111). The project did actually lead to a local solution to the problem.

In the mobile media case studies introduced in this paper, the dialogue is not aimed at resolving a specific social problem, but they can be regarded as enabling by the very process of sending or calling, reflecting about everyday mobile media consumption and communication. In these case studies the frame is the sound, the noise of having these messages broadcast into the public. Kester also argues that the projects tend towards establishing their framework by the very process of communicating. This observation is relevant for ‘TextFm’, ‘Contact’ and ‘Tool for Armchair Activists’. The key is that you do not have to ‘like’ an artwork to start engaging, to open up your sense, to enter the process of self-transformation, because the very process of participating in the communicative encounter triggers the process of critical thinking, reflecting about self, others, space, media.

For Habermas, communication is central in establishing the public sphere, a “social space generated in communicative action” (Habermas, 1996: 360). If we read the act of participating in the works, e.g. making a phone call or sending a text message, as a communicative act, this would generate a social space. The messages that establish these works do not stay in the realm of private communication, as they would do in everyday mobile phone conversations, they are broadcast in some form, and reach a wider audience, and possibly also enable dialogue. The case studies enable more than just a two-way communication. In Habermas’ work, the public is constituted to a particular end, i.e. to hold the executive to account. In the art projects discussed here, the content is less relevant than the process, I would argue.
14. Conclusion

The examples have illustrated that artistic interventions do not need to be “eye-opening”, they can also be ear-opening (Habermas, 1985). Sound art breaks with the dominant textual culture and the visual paradigm of art. The presented examples feature a use of sound in public that is not commercialised (e.g. Muzak) and individualised (e.g. iPod). Instead the use of sound in these examples enables some sort of collaboration, a form of communication, where the process of communicating is the work of art. I argue that the art is in the process of communication, in the opening up of the private communication to a public exchange. At first sight these examples might appear not to be very political, not to facilitate a 'proper' debate. I argue that their strength lies not in the content people contribute, in the messages themselves being broadcast. They are not Habermas' ideal rational arguments, exchanged to foster a consensus. The projects rather illustrate the different potential of mobile media. While in everyday life and in their commercial applications they are used for communication between two individuals most of the time, this is not an inherent limitation of the technology. I argue that these art projects can open up our mind, they challenge our preconceptions of what mobile media can do. They make noise in public, they show how we could well use our mobile devices to participate in political debates, to exchange arguments, to reach an understanding. The focus on the artist being a facilitator of communication, of providing a platform for public debate, all these ideas strongly resonate with Habermas’ concept of the public sphere of always being in the making, and being established via communicative action. I argue that sound art in public, could take on similar functions as oral discourse, the speakers' corner, like noisy demonstrations and protests. To explore how mobile technology and art might be able to constitute public spheres is especially relevant with regards to a younger audience that can use the familiar and intimate technology of their mobile phones to interact with contemporary public art was the aim.

This surely is a slightly hopeful argument, hopeful that despite the ever more commercialised public space and (mobile) media, artists, projects, people find ways to open up a space, a process, a conversation. And the value is exactly in this process of opening up a space and time for exchange, the works come into being by the very process of communicating. No objects, no performance to look at, but sounds to contribute.

15. References


