
Surrey Urban Screen: A collaborative initiative between artists and the Surrey Art Gallery

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Abstract

Surrey Urban Screen is Canada's largest non-commercial projection screen venue, dedicated to presenting digital art forms. It offers an opportunity for collaboration between its host, the Surrey Art Gallery, invited artists, and residential/commuter audiences. Launched in 2010, this venue is sited in context to a recreation centre, a diverse demographic ranging from refugees, university students, and affluent workers. *Transience*, created by Kenneth Newby and Aleksandra Dulic, used a massive database of sound and images. The artwork both performed and transformed over time using a trigger of the passing SkyTrain, and included broadcast audio on a local FM radio frequency.

Keywords

Urban screens, surrey art gallery, surrey urban screen

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Misc. J.5 Arts and Humanities, Fine Arts, Music.

General Terms

Documentation. IxD Design, Experimentation

Introduction

Surrey Art Gallery launched Surrey Urban Screen as part of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad and as the public art feature of the Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre. This initiative was triggered by the Gallery's consultation with artists about their needs in presenting digital art. Technology has enabled imagery that resists the limitations of a computer monitor's rectangle, and artists encouraged the creation of an architectonic urban screen that would situate a changing program of artwork within a community of interest. The recreation centre would provide a fixed point of contact for the pedestrian community to discover more about the artwork, and to host artist talks and other events that furthered the intention of the urban screen exhibitions. Generally it is hoped the venue will engage not only artists, but also youth and young adults, and offer them content that would be meaningful in a community that is increasingly experiencing the effects of globalization.

As with the Gallery's other ongoing initiatives to support digital art, such as TechLab, the principle of collaboration with artists was fundamental to Surrey

Urban Screen. Artists were consulted on its form and functionality and continue to inform the vision and governance. Artists specializing in digital technology form the majority of its advisory committee, have contributed to its terms of reference, and informed the direction of its programming. Artists, who participate in exhibition development for the venue, are also asked to provide input on the artist's manual, as well as the technical capacities of the venue.

Context

Surrey is 40km east of Vancouver and is BC's second largest city. It is creating a high density urban core aligned with the SkyTrain - a rapid transit system that connects much of Metro Vancouver. This emerging downtown is the neighbourhood where Surrey Urban Screen is sited. Surrey's demographics are very young and culturally diverse. Key characteristics include: over 40% of Canada's government assisted refugees locate to Surrey, the province's largest school district, and a 460,000+ population growing by around 1000 people/month, with almost 50% identifying a mother tongue other than English.

Figure 1 Transience
(installation detail)
by Kenneth Newby
and Aleksandra
Dulic, Surrey Urban
Screen: September
2010-April 2011
(photo: Sharon
Doucette)



Artist's Perspective

Producing a work of art for a large-scale audiovisual public screen poses a set of issues for the artist that are quite distinct in many ways from a work prepared for exhibition in a traditional gallery context. In what follows we hope to articulate several of these differences in the hopes that they might act as useful guides for those artists who are encountering this distinctive form of presentation for their work for the first time. In preparing the Transience project for exhibition with the Surrey Urban Screen we encountered four main areas of concern. These are questions concerning venue, audience, content, and relationship with presenters / curators. We will outline these in what follows in some detail.

Venue

Given the public nature of the venue, as well as its large scale, its audience is distinct from a typical gallery context. In the case of a gallery exhibition the audience is present with the express intention of experiencing the works of art being exhibited. One can assume openness to the experience on the part of the gallery visitor. The audience of a large-scale public artwork such as the Surrey Urban Screen, on the other hand, is not necessarily so prepared for the experience being presented. We can expect an element of surprise in the first encounter of the work given that it is an unusual way to present art in the community. We can also be confident that many more people will encounter the work than would normally experience such a work in a gallery context. Like so many other of the features of an urban setting the work becomes part of the urban ecology that is given and, in a certain sense, imposed on the community.

Audience

Surrey Urban Screen has two distinct audiences. The first are the thousands of commuters on the SkyTrain rapid transit system that passes directly in front of the Urban Screen. The other is the long-term residents of the towers near the Urban Screen. Given the projection system, exhibitions are presented after dusk. This is an advantage as the evening hours are traditional times for people to relax and enjoy activities such as cultural events. The two distinct communities served by the Urban Screen experience the work in distinct ways based on the amount of time they are exposed to the work. For the residents in the nearby towers the artwork has been on their experiential horizon every night for most of 8 months. They have the luxury to decide when to pay attention and to have a relationship with the work based on many previous experiences from night to night. This is in stark contrast with the SkyTrain commuters who whisk by the Urban Screen within a matter of seconds. The experiential envelope of this community is strictly limited by the transit mechanism that controls the amount of time given them to have the experience. The existence of these two modes of reception complicates the conception and creation of the work for the artists.

Content & Situatedness

Art created for a large-scale public audiovisual screen is by its very nature one situated in a particular place in time. There is an opportunity for the artist to respond to the place, situation, community and history of the community served by the Urban Screen in some way and to allow for a form of playful interaction to increase engagement in the work. In the creation of Transience this was reflected in an effort to link the two communities through an interaction mechanism that

used the passing SkyTrains to both disrupt and guide the work through its various audiovisual states. On one hand, this was a way to make the otherwise transient travelers aware of their presence. They could witness the large-scale image of the Urban Screen break up and reconfigure into totemic characters floating in the screen (and watching the passersby) accompanied by musical changes of tempo and intensity. On the other hand, for the residents of the towers nearby, the interaction mechanism becomes a kind of theater in which the physical events of the urban process — in this case the operation of a transit system — are linked to the audiovisual media flow of the Urban Screen.

The content of the work is structured into six sections of correlated audiovisual materials with an active transitional section triggered by the passing SkyTrain. This transitional section, A), is composed of images of the diverse community of Surrey in the form of collage characters formed from a large database of fragments of photographs of people drawn from the local community. These characters are accompanied by a playful set of animations that are correlated to the musical structure being broadcast on the FM radio channel. The remaining five sections are directed towards the long-term audience for the work and include B) walking figures, images of travel, trains; C) ink splashes, hands; D) transformations of the collaged characters; E) animated concrete typography; and F) visual references to the architecture of the screen. The temporal form of the work is in the musical form of a rondo as follows: A B A C A D A E A F A B A C etc. Within each section a large database of materials is selected from via a shuffling process so that the content and arrangement does not repeat and the work has an open nature. The tempo of the work is

modulated by the tempo of travel within the community, slowing as the evening progresses until the work partially closes down at midnight with only the ambient musical broadcast continuing through the night

Artist-Curator-System Admin Relationships

From the outset the nature of the Transience project was distinct from the artist's previous experiences working with curators and galleries as the technical form of the work was, to a large extent, pre-determined. This increases the need for a close and supportive relationship. Surrey Urban Screen provided a technical manual for the artists to reference, detailing the operation of the media diffusion system. Questions about the range of the FM broadcast was important as nearby residents would be able to tune in to the audible portion of the work. Other technical details such as the precise character of the architectural surface used for the projections was helpful in being able to produce images that engaged in a visual dialog with the building itself — another form of potential situatedness available to the artist. Another very fruitful aspect of the artist-curator-community relationship was the opportunity the artist's lecture on the nature and objectives of the work. In summary then, the creation of a work for a large-scale audiovisual Urban Screen provoked creative and collaborative strategies based on new forms of presentation, reception and the situatedness of the work. The opportunity to conceptualize and create a work for such a venue has been a welcome challenge to our interest in the creation of situated works of media performance and installation work and, in the ways outlined above, has brought into greater focus the process required in adapting a creative process to this new form of community-based media.