Repopulating the City:
Introducing Urban Electronic Wildlife

Greg Nijs

Urban Species, Dept. of Architecture, ULB

contactgregnijs@gmail.com

Guillaume Slizewicz

Urban Species, Intermedia, LUCA School of Art

Guillaume.slizewicz@luca-arts.be

Abstract

The artworks put forward in this presentation draw upon the idea of the cyborg from an ecological perspective. [1] In addressing the question of bio-extinction and electronics [2], we propose the introduction of 'urban electronic wildlife' in public space as a way to induce wonder and awareness in human urban dwellers. To that end, we introduce newly cre- ated hybrid species – i.e. physical devices with zoomorphic and spectral traits packed with ma- chine learning algorithms and exhibiting auton- omous behavior – as an act of 'applied' specula- tive fabulation. [3] [4] We currently have two projects in development in our studio: *Capricious Ghost* and *Stray Peddler.*

Capricious Ghost is an installation which asks passers-by to show them an object and reacts to what it sees thanks to object detection algorithms. It is made of a raspberry pi with a camera running a detection algorithm trained on the COCO dataset, a button, a speaker, a RF emitter and a RF-connected plug socket. [5]

The artwork "speaks" to the user using an e-speak and asks to see a certain type of object. The detection is triggered by the push of a button. Once the button is pushed, the computer will describe what it sees and if the object is present, it will turn on the plug socket with Radio Frequencies. This plug socket can be used by any electrical device. The way the set-up is presented, what action it triggers and its appearance in public space are variable (much like ghosts' apparitions).

Whatever form it takes on, *Capricious Ghost* resonates with concerns both about ubiquitous technology, the sentient city and animism as well as extinction, radiation and ecologically haunted humanity. [6] [7]

The *Stray Peddler* is a small robot that roams freely in the city and delivers messages to ur- ban dwellers. It was inspired by different experiences we had in the field, a public place in the center of Brussels. It is a mix between a Jehovah Witnesses' trolley, an abandoned, quivering circular saw, stray dogs and small electric devices sold by street vendors. It also draws on the idea that peddlers helped create public spaces by conveying ideas, discussion, controversies and stories in cities and between cities.

The peddler is made of a simple, off the shelf, autonomous robot based on an Arduino micro-controller, with an added bluetooth speaker to give him a voice. A raspberry pi is mounted on it to give it the ability to detect and follow people to deliver messages to them.

In order to change the meaning of their pres-ence and enhance its zoomorphic attributes, we camouflage it with fake fur and fake eyes.

We believe that both projects have the potential to question the relationship city dwellers have with now ubiquitous technology, while the underlying idea is to advocate for technologically generated life-forms as critters in their own right and existence, not opposing natural and technologically generated life-forms, but reinforcing their bonds in their struggle for survival on a damaged planet.

References

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Biographies

Guillaume Slizewicz is a French designer working at *Urban Species* (Intermedia Lab, LUCA School of Arts), an interdisciplinary research group focusing on citizen participation in the city of Brussels. His work is at the crossroad of political sciences and interaction design. Having completed Politics, Philosophy and Economics at the University of Kent in Canterbury and Sciences-po Lille, he specialized in Product development and design at KEA Copenhagen School of Design and Technology and followed a course in Machine Learning at CIID taught by Gene Kogan and Andreas Refsgaard. He is interested in the interstices offered by electronic objects in the urban spaces, the unexpected behavior that glitches provoke and the surprise created by misused hardware systems and hijacked algorithms. With his team, he is thinking on how to repopulate the city via new breeds of urban electronic wildlife.

Greg Nijs is a sociologist working as a researcher at *Urban Species* (Dept. of Architecture, Université Libre de Bruxelles), an interdisciplinary research group focusing on citizen participation in the city of Brussels. He is also curator and co-director at c-o-m-p-o-s-i-t-e, a Brussels-based non-profit art space. By staging exhibitions Greg tackles questions of knowledge production in its widest sense, in the field of art and society at large. His particular inter- ests revolve around issues of human and other- than-human relations, im/materiality, affect and cognition, identity politics, the question of nature and technology, and a/biotic multispecies entanglements. In his approach, he draws on a range of social scientific and philosophical sources such as science and technology studies, design studies, cultural studies, cognitive sciences, HCI, pragmatism, and the like. Currently, he is conducting research on the development of smart tools for civic engagement with a participatory design approach.