Screen grab:
Digital graffiti attacks DOOH
Screen grab

The use of digital displays as a medium for marketing is exploding. Some of you will work in this arena; many of you will benefit from the growing business. But not everyone is happy with developments. Anna Mitchell talks to activists that are fighting to reclaim the screens.

Christian Zöllner and Patrick Tobias Fischer founded VR/Urban in 2006 in an effort to “reclaim urban screens for the public”. The pair had both provided input to a Fraunhofer project on user interfaces and, despite never working directly together, heard of each other through the research. Tobias wanted to work with Christian on a project for the Berlin media façades festival and they finally met face to face in a bar in Berlin.

“Ideas were discussed and somehow our ideology matched,” recalls Tobias from this first meeting. The duo wanted to tackle what they felt was an invasion of public spaces by advertising screens.

“People should have a tool to argue on the same scale that big advertising agencies do,” argues Christian. “So the idea [behind VR/Urban] was to give the people this tool, give them a voice and a chance to say what they want. It’s a basic democratic approach.”

A solution started to take shape. A device, called the spread-gun, was constructed that allowed users to type their own message and then fire it onto a display. The message was transformed into a projector input and fired onto the chosen façade.

Christian and Tobias continued to perfect the project working with Sebastian Platza, who Christian credits with the design of the physical device and Thilo Hoffmann, “the man behind the software code”.

“We started to make the SMSlingshot in 2009 after a from an arts and cultural hub in Latvia,” explains Christian. SMSlingshot uses the same principles as the spread-gun but the device is formed to firstly look like a slingshot and second to be independent of wires, sensors and an external power supply. On a technical level the battery powered SMSlingshot is connected to a computer via an ultrahigh frequency radio and works as an embedded system. It requires a projector or a digital signage hack to project the splats onto the chosen façade.

But for Christian and Tobias the development was more than just a technical upgrade. “We insist on embedment, whole body interactions and try not to avoid complicated menu structures and regulated interaction flows,” they write in a document detailing the concept. “The most impressive and poetic image to us is the slingshot. The biblical story about the victory of the young David against the huge Goliath is one of the oldest and most known stories about the use of a slingshot.

“The sling is a simple, cheap and low complex instrument, consisting of everyday materials that are accessible to nearly everyone. It displays its power in its use, not in its size, which makes it a good metaphor to the contrast of media façade and uprising recipient.”

Christian discusses the development of the project saying: “There are two backgrounds on this one. While I was studying at university I was getting more and more involved in interaction design: tangible user interfaces, portable devices for controlling virtual content. Tobias came more from the virtual reality area. It was at this level that we met but there was an artistic background too. I come more or less from the graffiti movement and thought it would be perfect to get a rebellious touch on the technical stuff.”

“The field of arts also allows us to be political and subjective in contrast to research,” adds Tobias. “Often art is also much more progressive than the ‘real world’. Similar to science its outcome looks more into the future than the commercial domain. Art is like a sensor or radar that seeks for what is coming up in the future. And it is often original like science. So art and science go well together.”

And the project isn’t just about the technical aspect. Tobias and Christian now travel the world with their concept and, whilst their audiences always want to get involved with the SMSlingshot and interaction with the screens, a large part of the project is the talks the pair give at these events. “The
INAVATORS

Christian Zöllner & Patrick Tobias Fischer, VR/Urban

SMSlinkshot raises questions about the problems [from advertising screens]. And, then we can start talking about what’s happening because the whole urban environment is capitalised and everything has to work under market circumstances and so on. So then we explain about how the whole image industry in cities works. It’s more the educational aspect that comes from talking to the people and my work gives me a platform to talk about those issues,” explains Christian.

The SMSlinkshot has, in many ways been a huge success. It’s escalated to a level that Christian and Tobias probably couldn’t have dreamed of when they first met in that bar in Berlin. It’s attracted great media coverage from South America to Japan and they’re in demand at art fairs, museums and attractions across the globe.

Technically it’s interesting and draws very well on each of the people’s fields of interest. Artistically it’s powerful. And whether you agree with their ideology or not, they’ve got their message across.

They’re both intensely passionate about the project but faced with the massive machine of marketing, advertising and ever more powerful technology, it would be understandable if the pair felt frustrated by the futility of their efforts.

I asked them if they felt they had realised their goals. “No,” answered Tobias. “The process always creates something new. If you do something, something new adds.”

And, Christian voiced his sense of frustration: “We thought we could reclaim the screens, that you’d go for a big media screen and overshoot the content that is displayed but it’s not really tricky to do so. The screens are so secure, they have surveillance systems and private security. The content and the virtual content surrounding them is so expensive because every second it’s on it costs money. If you [infiltrate] this and are caught they can make you pay for years.

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“So we changed our approach with the projection stuff. This is a point I had to struggle with because I really wanted to get on that digital signage. In Madrid we were going to get on one of these screens. But, their access parts are so secure it’s not possible to hack them in a certain way, we thought of many options to actually change the content but it’s very dangerous.”

I think VR/Urban have made their point effectively. And I believe their work has provided them with a great platform to get their message across. But, despite the massive exposure and undoubted success of the VR/Urban collective Christian sadly sums up their efforts, quoting author Kurt Vonnegut “Okay, you have success, but you don’t have any impact.”

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