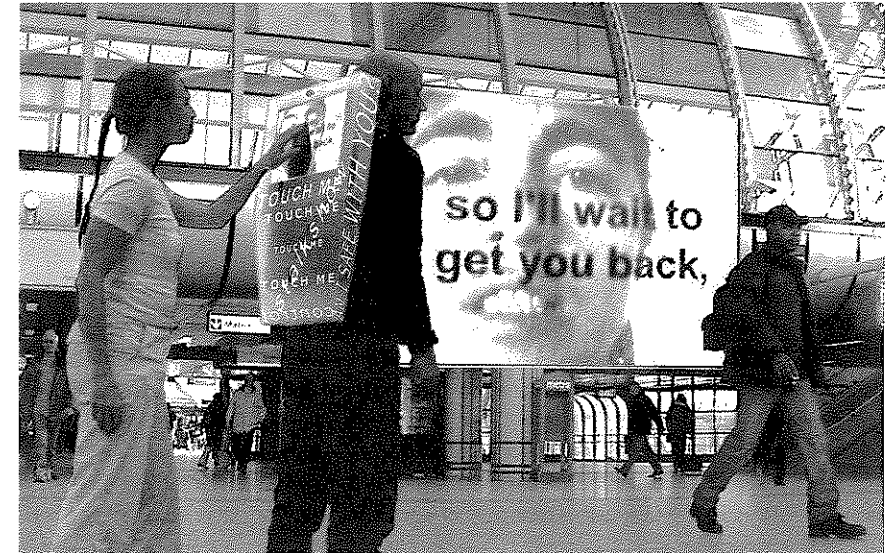# STALKSHOW

KAREN LANCEL AND HERMEN MAAT

Fig. 1: *StalkShow*, Amsterdam-Sloterdijk train station, 2004.

'What is rejected and refused in the symbolic order reappears in reality. Specters, ghosts and phantoms haunt the world'. [1]

StalkShow is a screen-based, wearable performance and installation, which deals with the threat of insecurity and isolation in public spaces. It is exhibited in spaces where people are in transit, such as train stations, underground stations, museums, theatres, plazas and shopping malls. *StalkShow* is designed to be a meeting place, accommodating the vulnerable process of balancing fear and desire for the 'other'. In a visual and poetic way, *StalkShow* explores the emotional and social tensions between visibility and invisibility, privacy and trust. A performer carries a backpack, containing a laptop with a touch screen, a wearable billboard, to which a webcam is attached. Individual audience members are invited to touch the screen and navigate through an archive of statements on the subject of 'safety'. As participants touch the screen the webcam records their faces, which then appear instantaneously on the screen as portraits.

The statements used in *StalkShow* derive from agora-phobia-digitalis.org, a web-based

1.   Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne and Peter Weibel (eds.) *CTRL [SPACE]: Rhetorics of Surveil-*

project where we invite socially isolated people, such as prisoners, nuns and asylum seek-ers to contribute their reflections on their personal strategies for negotiating sociability. [2] By navigating through these statements, the participant triggers a montage of social strategies and renders them visible on the urban screen. In their visual format, the statements resem-ble advertising jingles. However, by amplifying and rendering these expressions of insecurity interactive, we endeavour to make it possible for these reflections and reactions to be re-experienced and reinterpreted in the public realm.

Portraits of participants appear via webcam and wireless connection as backgrounds to the statements on large-format screens in the same public space, so participants can see them-selves 'watching' through a text-window. Other participant's statements are linked to each personally rendered image, and hence an interpretive space is created, which accommo-dates the threat of difference.

From Agora Phobia (Digitalis) to *StalkShow*

In *Agora Phobia (digitalis)* the audience is invited for an intimate dialogue. *StalkShow* makes an opposite move: it exposes these intimate dialogues to the outside urban space, and projects them on urban screens. In *Agora Phobia (digitalis)* people are invited as 'specialists' on 'a safe and unsafe space'. All participants are the authors of the dialogue texts. Their saved dialogues show a way of 'communicating in circles': they show a personal, 'logic' form of communicating, on the subject of 'rejecting communication'. For *StalkShow*, we transformed this circular form of communication into circular texts. We call these texts 'mind-loops'. As a reference for this format we used R.D. Laing's *Knots*, which contains circular texts like: 'Jill is afraid that Jack is afraid. But Jack is afraid that Jill is afraid that Jack is afraid. So Jill is afraid…'. [3] These texts result in evermore complex, self-confirming *hallucinatory* structures. Every line in the texts seems logical and begins with 'because', 'so', 'but' and 'that's why'. We selected parts of the circular com-munication of *Agora Phobia (digitalis)* and formatted them as they are in *Knots*. In this way, we created series of statements that together form a script. At the end of each script the audience is invited to a next script, with the question: 'but do you want to feel safe again?'

A Critical Play Zone

StalkShow is performed in public spaces where urban screens communicate news items and are used for crowd control and advertising. It aims to re-activate the role of urban screens in social space and hence, audience interaction is vital. As Renee van de Vall has argued in relation to interactive art, 'what affects you is presented in the reflexive experience of your own actions … By performing the act, you discover something about yourself, the world around you and your relation to and presence in that world'. [4] Through interaction with the installation, notions such as control and manipulation become objects for reflection, and the participant re-personalises public space.

The urban screen in *StalkShow* is a critical play zone designed to rethink the dynamics of over-regulated behaviour, mental projection, and the desire to eliminate violence. *StalkShow* is inspired by Michel Foucault's texts on panopticism and power structures. Foucault de-scribed enclosing and excluding disciplinary systems such as family, school, factory and prison. [5] However, in the contemporary panopticon of ubiquitous digital networks, notions of 'inside' and 'outside' in relations of power are shifting, as are the notions of 'insider' and 'outsider'. In our longing for safety and attempts to control the self and the potential 'other' we increasingly demand total transparency in our public spaces. However, this very fear is self-perpetuating – we are constantly expecting a potentially present, threatening, but (still) invisible 'other'. In this context, Paul Virilio writes about the speed by which 'others' appear in virtual space, as visible or invisible information, creating the paradoxical expectation of the unexpected. This potentially present stalker or terrorist can be everywhere – in physical and virtual space. Virilio describes this social experience of fear and desire we create together as 'panic, as a social event'. [6]

StalkShow attempts to intervene in this space by posing the questions: Where is the invisible 'other'? Where is the stalker? Can we use urban screens to project and meet the stalker – as social platforms for dialogue? To understand the projection of the 'invisible other' in our so-ciety, we turned to Julia Kristeva's famous essay, 'Powers of Horror'. [7] Kristeva describes the potentially present, invisible 'other' as a mental projection that is continuously reconstructed as a phobic object by means of hallucinatory projections.

The urban screen in *StalkShow* is designed to be a home of these Kristevan hallucinatory projections. In *StalkShow*, the 'other' is absent, replaced by projections on the urban screen. Here the 'invisible others' in society – prisoners, homeless people, people living illegally in the city – inhabit the screen with their stories, haunting public space like stalkers. However, by interacting with *StalkShow*, participants can both identify and play with these stalkers. Participants in *StalkShow* play with all the roles of Kristeva's phobic system. All participants, including the projected 'other' on the urban screen, are invited to play the role of object, vo-yeur and stalker. Together, these roles render visible the phobic dynamic of the contemporary panopticon.

Conceptual and Technical Development

The technical development of *StalkShow* commenced in 2003, and has involved intensive screen and user testing in close collaboration with V2_Lab for Unstable Media in Rotterdam and Foundation DasArts in Amsterdam. [8] At this time, of course, we did not have ubiquitous wireless technology and there were very few truly interactive urban screens in public space. Indeed, until 2005 we brought our own local wireless networks to each performance, and

2.   http://www.agora-phobia-digitalis.org

3.   R. D. Laing, *Knots*, London: Penguin, 1970.

4.   Renee van de Vall, 'Interactivity: Between Interpretation and Bodily Performance', Lecture at
Netherlands Media Art Institute, December 15, 2006; http://www.montevideo.nl/en/nieuws/detail.

5.   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Har-mondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

6.   Paul Virilio, *Art As Far As the Eye Can See*, trans. Julie Rose, London: Berg Press, 2007.

7.   Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York:
Columbia University Press, 1982.

projected on the walls in such a way that the projection seemed to be integrated in the architecture of the (commercially oriented) public spaces. At the same time, we 'duplicated' this projection onto the wearable, interactive billboard screen. In this way, we made the projected screen on the wall accessible and interactive for the audience.

Fortunately, cities and technology developed within the frame of *StalkShow*'s conceptual development, and in 2006 in Moscow for the first time *StalkShow* used a semi-live, interactive urban screen. Festival Outvideo invited *StalkShow* to perform at Sverskaya square, a busy shopping boulevard in Moscow near the Red Square. The Outvideo organisation had made an arrangement with the commercial urban screen company for a one-minute timeslot every seven minutes, across a two-day preriod. The portraits, and the statements (in Cyrillic) formed a compelling juxtaposition to the repetitive advertisements in which they were embedded.

Interactivity

In order to invite active participation with *StalkShow* we created a mobile, wearable billboard with a touch screen interface. The mobile nature of the project is extremely important, in that it emphasises the ubiquitous character of the 'stalkers' in the project. The experience of fear and desire for stalkers also inspired the development of a touchscreen in the billboard. 'Touching' creates a specific physical awareness of presence, in juxtaposition to the absence of the character of the stalker. Through touching the touch screen, the participant (indirectly) touches the urban screen, and hence, 'touches' the stalker.

Our desire for a tactile and mobile interface resulted in a wearable billboard with touchscreen. The body of the host of the wearable billboard plays an important role in this touch-interface. When touching the screen the participant starts a tactile relation with the back of the stranger carrying the billboard, initiating an intimacy with the vulnerable body of a stranger. This generates alertness, attraction or repulsion. In this way, the intimacy of the body plays a compelling role in the use of the interface. When touching the screen, participants often
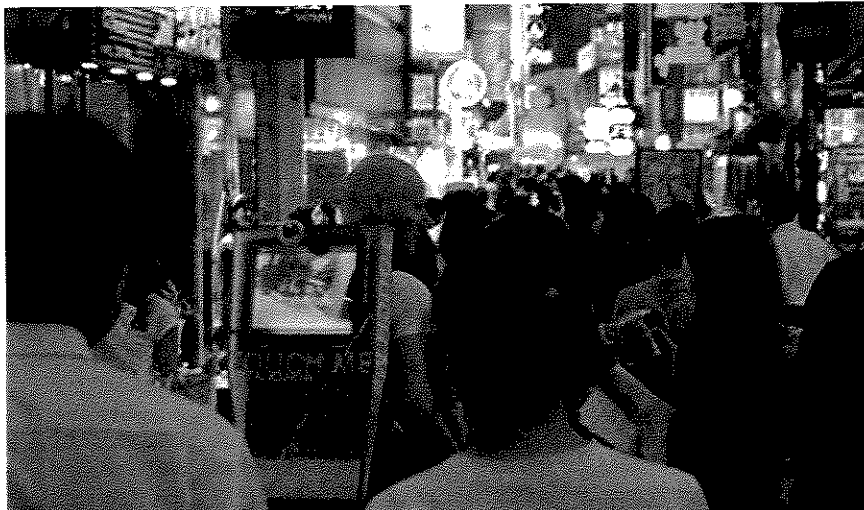
ask: 'Am I not hurting him?' This sensitivity to the well-being of the host becomes part of the interface-experience.

To make this body-touch-interface as accessible as possible, at each different site a local is asked to carry the billboard. However, touching, and touching technology, mean different things in different locales and contexts. For example, in Seoul, technology and media is ubiquitous and

Fig. 3: Diagram for *StalkShow* Interactive

usually commercially related. So, while the spectacle of two Europeans carrying the billboard through the streets may have distinguished the project from the commercial mediascape, Korean participants seemed much more comfortable interacting with the touchscreen when it was carried by a local.
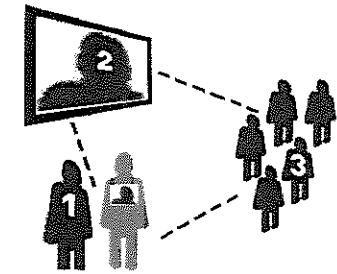
The interaction in *StalkShow* comes about as soon as a spectator sees someone else participating. The spectator sees the image on the screen, reads the text, sees the performance and comes closer. Some people contemplatively read all texts. Some play collectively with the billboard, watch, read, choose, exchange. Others participate superficially and leave. Some do not touch at all, but stay to talk with the host and watch endlessly to see what's happening. All these reactions together form the audience of *StalkShow*.

As a spatial scenario for the audience gazing at each other, *StalkShow* uses a triangle model. The gaze of the participant of the billboard, the projected gaze on the urban screen and the gaze of the surrounding audience intersect and haunt each other. This triangle confronts the public space as a 'triangle gaze', generating a playful and confronting, voyeuristic relation. Who is the Stalker? One could argue that the participant of the billboard is stalking a stranger. Or that the participant on the public screen is the stalker. Or that the surrounding audience is the stalker-voyeur. Or, that the carrier of the billboard is stalking the surrounding audience.

StalkShow Around the World

In 2007, *StalkShow* was developed further in Seoul due to the relatively advanced wireless technology in South Korea. In an inspiring collaboration at Art Centre NABI with Director Soh Yeong Roh and curator Dooeun Choi, we were

able to activate the facade of the high-rise building of SK Telecommunication, designed by OMA architects. Its facade incorporates a series of urban screens, so it was possible to animate the skin and interior of the building with live projections.

The cultural specificity of each public space where *StalkShow* takes place determines the reception of the project and the particular codes of the audience participation and interaction. Over the years, we have presented the project in a number of different locales that have generated very different responses. In Helsinki, for example, *StalkShow* met two audiences. One the one hand, the international audience that had come for ISEA04 were concerned with the socio-technological and media-theoretical context. On the other hand, local Helsinki inhabitants reacted in very emotional ways to the installation, and conversations where often related to the social-psychological tensions around notions of alienation and desire anchored in the texts and the *StalkShow* personas.

In 2005, *StalkShow* was shown in Beijing on video in a museum context because of a prohibition on the display of critical art in public space. Consequently, most of the conversations generated by the screening concerned censorship and what it is about the content of *StalkShows'* texts that might mean that they were not permitted to be shown in public. These conversations in turn led to reflections concerning conceptions of individuality in China, on insiders and outsiders, and the ways in which social structures are changing in China due to the rapid transformation of Chinese cities. It is instructive to reflect, however, that as recently as 2003 when *StalkShow* was to be screened at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, negotiations faltered in the context of the events of 9-11. Management's attitude was that, '*StalkShow* deals with being unsafe. Schiphol Airport is not unsafe'. Other art works, such as Jenny Holzer's text-based projections, were also cancelled.

StalkShow was received very differently in Hong Kong, where it was treated more like a kind of social game, with large numbers of people playing collectively. Closely pressed to one another, audiences followed the participant in front of the touch screen. They even added another media layer, making pictures of each other with their mobile phones, while using *StalkShow* and while appearing as a portrait on the urban screen. Hong Kong Arts Centre director-curator Conny Lam told us that in Hong Kong there is no such thing as a public space because urban space is so pervasively privatised. Subsequently, Hong Kong Island inhabitants do not experience danger in the same way as in Europe, where public space is relatively more democratised. Hence, *StalkShow* became in this context a catalyst for reflection. Added to this, Hong

making people more concerned with protecting a small physical space to themselves, than exploring the space around them. Here Lam invited *StalkShow* as a social experiment for personal physical space – in relation to public exposure on the urban screen of *StalkShow*.

StalkShow's most recent presentation was at Urban Screens 08 at Federation Square in Melbourne Australia, on a screen of 65 square meters, which displays largely non-commercial cultural content. Because Federation Square occupies a central and dynamic position in Melbourne it offers the potential for artists to deepen the social meaning of urban space and explore the possibilities of the new networked socio-spatial dimensions of public space.

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