

# Navigating Variable Urban Densities

*Eric Kluitenberg*

Column – November 2, 2013

**After witnessing “2011”, a year marked by intensely mediated popular protests and public square occupations around the planet, we no longer need to speculate about “how wireless media mobilise public space”, or what kinds of “webs of interhuman relations” may eventually develop here.**

Architects Frans Vogelaar and Elisabeth Sikiaridi, in their 1999 essay *Translocalising Identities*, refer to media theorist Vilém Flusser when they describe the city as a communications network, or, as Flusser referred to it, “an intersubjective field of relations”. Flusser’s image reconstitutes urban space as a problem of interconnection and ever-varying densities. In the process, the idea of a built and planned urban space is dematerialised entirely to give way to purely processual structure that varies not only from place to place, but also from moment to moment. In other words, the two fundamental registers through which human experience is organised – space and time – are called into question. The stability of physical structure is replaced by the malleability of information structures that change and disappear continually.

Vogelaar and Sikiaridi include a citation from Flusser’s essay *The City as Wave-Trough in the Image-Flood*, which provides a remarkably prophetic image of the variable densities of contemporary hybridised urban spaces, permeated by wireless media and information flows, and the “webs of interhuman relations” that unfold within them.

*The new image of man looks roughly like this: we have to imagine a network of interhuman relations, a “field of intersubjective relations”. The strands of this web must be conceived as channels through which information (ideas, feelings, intentions and knowledge, etc.) flows. These strands get temporarily knotted and form what we call “human subjects”. The totality of the threads constitutes the concrete lifeworld and the knots are abstract extrapolations. ... The density of the webs of interhuman relations differs from place to place within the network. The greater the density the more “concrete” the relations. These dense points form wave-throughs in the field. ... The wave-throughs exert an “attractive” force on the surrounding field (pulling it into their gravitational field) so that more and more interhuman relations are drawn in from the periphery. ... These wave troughs shall be called “cities”<sup>1</sup>.*

Flusser’s ideas were at the heart of the “Hybrid Space [[www.onlineopen.org/hybrid-space/](http://www.onlineopen.org/hybrid-space/)]” issue of *Open* (Seijdel / Kluitenberg, 2006), when we explored the question of how wireless media mobilise urban space and the problem of agency in such hybridised spaces. As is so often the case in these circumstances, much of what was discussed in the issue was still unfolding at the time, and consequently needed to be treated in a fairly speculative manner. Besides the contributions from various disciplinary perspectives, including architecture and urban planning, (urban) sociology, and media and design theory, the artistic contributions played a particularly important role in the issue as a way of exploring a space that is in the process of “becoming” – i.e., a form of “incipience” that had as yet not been properly articulated.

After witnessing “2011”, a year marked by intensely mediated popular protests and public square occupations around the planet, we no longer need to speculate about “how

wireless media mobilise public space”, or what kinds of “webs of interhuman relations” may eventually develop here. As contemporary media subjects, we have all been inundated by the endless flows of reports, grainy images, sounds, (remediated) live streams, and social media feeds of moments of outrage and anger, euphoria, tragedy, despair, uprising and a curious dissolution of energies. We could call what I am referring to here as the “movement(s) of the squares”, but I believe we can only legitimately use this tag as a temporary placeholder. The big question is what to make of all this? Another question that should be asked is whether these “movements” actually exist. If all this sounds too “Baudrillardian”, I accept this description, because perhaps we are being confronted here with a media simulacrum consisting of copies without originals.

The analysis we attempted to develop for *Open* in 2006 can, in retrospect, be criticised for being too preoccupied with a predominantly spatial analysis. The merging of physical urban space with disembodied media and information flows was treated as a functional spatial structure that allowed and constrained particular forms of interaction from occurring or not occurring. Flusser’s image, however, makes it possible to imagine something different, ensuing and beyond this spatial analysis. It allows for a seamless integration of the intersubjective relationships that unfold in the ever-varying densities of hybrid urban space, where not just the technical but also interhuman “connections” continuously appear and fade away. The latter is a dimension of Flusser’s constellation that requires our full attention if we are to understand what happened in “2011”.

The points where the threads of interhuman relations get tied up in knots are the human subjects, which are constituted via the human body. The “affectedness” of the human body constitutes the actualisation of these relationships. In recent accounts of the “movement(s) of the squares”, much attention has been paid to the role of emotions in the staging of protests, and in the gathering of “outraged” citizens [[www.onlineopen.org/affect-space](http://www.onlineopen.org/affect-space)]. The most important of these are Manuel Castells’ *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2013), and Paolo Gerbaudo’s *Tweets and the Streets*. However, while both accounts stress the importance of the broader realm of “feelings” as being essential to the unfolding of intersubjective relationships in the variable densities of hybrid urban space, they both fail to recognise the crucial role of nonconscious affective intensities as incipient connective forces, which are famously differentiated from the capture and closure of these forces in emotion (conscious articulation) by philosopher Brian Massumi in his book *Parables for the Virtual* (2002). The “wave-through” fields described by Flusser are formed by the ability of affective intensity to transcend a particular body.

Exploring the realm of affective intensity, always and necessarily beyond consciousness, can help us to navigate the variable densities of hybrid urban space and the webs of interhuman and intersubjective relationships that unfold there.

## References

- Castells, Manuel, *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (Cambridge and Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2013)
- Gerbaudo, Paolo, *Tweets and the Streets (Social Media and Contemporary Activism)*, London and New York: Pluto Books, 2012)
- Flusser, Vilém. "The City as Wave-Trough in the Image-Flood", translated by Phil Gochenour in: *Critical Inquiry* 31 (1988; transl. by Phil Gochenour, Winter 2005) pp. 320–328
- Massumi, Brian (2002). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press. In particular: "The Autonomy of Affect", pp. 23–45
- Seijdel, Jorinde and Kluitenberg, Eric (eds.), "Hybrid Space: How Wireless Media Mobilize Public Space", *Open #21, Journal for Art and the Public Domain* (Amsterdam: SKOR / NAI Publishers, 2012)
- Vogelaar, Frans and Sikiaridi, Elisabeth, *idensifying™ translocalities*, Logbook NRW.NL (catalogue, Amsterdam: De Balie, 1999)

**Eric Kluitenberg** is an independent theorist, writer and educator, working at the intersection of culture, politics, media and technology. He was head of the media and technology program of De Balie, Centre for Culture and Politics in Amsterdam (1999–2011), and taught theory of interactive media and technological culture for a variety of academic institutions, including the University of Amsterdam, the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and Academy Minerva Postgraduate Studies in Groningen. He was also a scientific staff member of the Academy of Media Arts Cologne. Currently he teaches media and cultural theory at the Art Science Interfaculty in The Hague. In 2013 he was a research fellow at the Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Publications include: *Techno Ecologies* (2012); *The Legacies of Tactical Media* (2011); theme issues '(Im)Mobility' (2011) and 'Hybrid Space' (2006) for *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*; *Delusive Spaces – Essays* (2008); and *The Book of Imaginary Media* (2006). He is working on the preparation of an international anthology on Tactical Media co-edited with David Garcia, to be published by MIT Press in 2017. Projects include *FREE!? – A one day journey into the cultures of sharing* (2013), *Economies of the Commons* conference series (2008–2012), *ElectroSmog – International Festival for Sustainable Immobility* (2010) and *Next 5 Minutes 3 & 4 – Festivals of Tactical Media* (1999 / 2003).

## Footnotes

1. Flusser, 1988. site indicates many discrepancies in text

## Crosslinks

Hybrid Space: [www.onlineopen.org/hybrid-space](http://www.onlineopen.org/hybrid-space)

Affect Space: [www.onlineopen.org/affect-space](http://www.onlineopen.org/affect-space)

## Tags

Activism, Media Society, Urban Space

This text was downloaded on July 27, 2024 from  
*Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*  
[www.onlineopen.org/navigating-variable-urban-densities](http://www.onlineopen.org/navigating-variable-urban-densities)