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## **Pop-up ethnography at the Situated Cinema:**

**Confronting art with social science at the Winnipeg Festival of Moving Image**

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## **Abstract**

Temporary public art interventions are a relatively common sight in western cities, but whatever claims public artists may make about the social significance of their artworks, these are rarely documented or analyzed in any systematic social-scientific way. This paper presents our analysis of one artistic intervention, the Situated Cinema, a custom-made demountable structure (<http://vimeo.com/52432509>) that moved to a different public space each day for the four days of WNDX, Winnipeg's Festival of Moving Image, showing a loop of five two-minute films in the genre of city symphonies. Through the semi-serendipitous interview and observation methods of what we call 'pop-up ethnography', we critically examine the contrasts in perspectives of each group of social actors involved in the project: filmmakers, designers, members of the public and us, the urban anthropologists. We discuss 1) the tension between the social and aesthetic properties of the sites where the Situated Cinema was installed; 2) 'artistically literate' versus 'layperson' viewers' experiences of the Cinema; 3) the inspiration and constraints that filmmakers found in the Cinema's structure, and 4) the ways in which artists' and social scientists' goals, methods and expectations vis-à-vis urban public art can diverge, which call into question the compatibility of the two fields.

**(200 words)**

## Introduction

Temporary public art interventions are a relatively common sight in the landscapes of western cities, and increasingly seem to be mobilized to re-enchant urban space and keep cities high in the 'creative place' rankings. Yet whatever claims city-boosters or artists may make about public artworks, their social significance is rarely documented or analyzed in any systematic social-scientific way, although there are some exceptions (e.g. Hall, 2007; Hall & Robertson, 2001; Zebracki, 2011, 2012; Zebracki, Van Der Vaart, & Van Aalst, 2010). This paper presents our ethnographic analysis of one artistic intervention, undertaken as part of a broader interdisciplinary research-creation project combining art and anthropology. We discuss what happened when experimental film, architecture, and social science collided with the public and public space at the Situated Cinema (SC) in the WNDX Festival of Moving Image in Winnipeg, Canada, September 2012. Through the semi-serendipitous methods of what we call 'pop-up ethnography', we critically examine the contrasts in perspectives of each group of social actors involved in the project: filmmakers, designers, members of the public and us, the urban anthropologists.

### *The Situated Cinema*

The Situated Cinema was a 'demountable micro-cinema', designed and custom-made by two architect-designers and a coordinating curator. Basically a large black box, made of cleverly interlocking wooden panels, this semi-mobile structure that took two hours to build from its flat-packed state (<http://vimeo.com/52432509>) and about an hour to take down. The SC housed a 16mm film projector showing a loop of five two-minute experimental films, commissioned by the coordinating curator, which were contributions to the cinematic genre of city symphonies. The five films, by five different film-makers, each focused on one Canadian city (Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal). Members of the public (or, as we call them here, viewer-participants) entered the SC, navigated tight corridors designed to reduce ambient light and had to step through the projector's beam of light to reach an inclined table-top-sized screen onto which the films were projected. A system of mirrors magnified the beam of light so that it reached a sufficient size for projection within this 'micro-cinema'.

The SC moved to a different public space each day for the four days of WNDX, Winnipeg's Festival of Moving Image, a small but critically important annual festival of experimental film and expanded cinema. The program for the event described the SC as:

[a]n alternative cinema-going experience in which the interior of the movie theatre interacts with the city outside [...]. Through the mobility and permeability of the venue and the mingling of silent films and shifting contextual soundscapes, the project embraces the interactions and juxtapositions of the city and asks viewer-participants and five commissioned filmmakers to do the same. (WNDX 2013 program)

Thus, one of the artistic aims of the project was to disrupt the idea of the cinema as a secluded, protected, anonymous space in which the viewers forget their bodies and their surroundings and are transported to other worlds (Barthes, 1986). Instead, this tiny Situated Cinema would be inserted into the interstices of the city in the manner of 'pet architecture', a term coined by Japan's Atelier Bow-Wow (Tsukamoto, 2003), and would demand engagement with the sites in which it was situated.

### *Research objectives and methods*

The Situated Cinema itself and our ethnographic study of it form part of *Tracing the City: Interventions of Art in Public Space*, a broad interdisciplinary research-creation project funded by Canada's Social Science and Humanities Research Council, which combines art (mainly site-specific installations and expanded cinema) and social science (mainly urban anthropology) to investigate how art can intervene in the urban public and vice versa. The first author of this paper (Radice) and the commissioning curator of the SC, Solomon Nagler, are two of the three co-investigators of this project; Harvey and Turner are research assistants working on the project. However, as urban anthropologists, we (the three authors) had not been involved at all in the design, construction or curatorial processes of the SC. Rather, our goal was to analyze the interactions with the urban public — understood as both the people and places of the city — that the SC aimed to stimulate. To do this, we conducted fieldwork at the Situated Cinema during three of the four days of its installation. (Travel constraints meant that we missed the first installation in a parking lot outside the opening night of WNDX.)

Our main objective was to investigate viewer-participants' experiences of the SC by observing how people approached and interacted with the structure, and interviewing them as they left it. In all, we interviewed about 50 viewer-participants in about 30 interviews (several interviewees went to the SC in pairs or small groups). However, due largely to the technical hitches that disrupted the SC, we were also able to grasp opportunities to interview and observe the featured filmmakers, the architect-designers, and the coordinating curator, as well as viewer-participants. In this way, our ethnography 'popped up' in an analogous fashion to its object of study. It should be noted that as we were a constant presence at the SC, we became in some sense a feature of the installation ourselves, a point to which we shall return.

In what follows, we discuss four themes that our pop-up ethnography revealed, relating to 1) the contrasts between each site; 2) the divergent experiences of different types of viewer-participants; 3) the ways the material constraints of the SC shaped the films and their projection; and 4) the divergent aims, methods and expectations of artists and social scientists vis-à-vis urban public art.

### **1. The Situated Cinema sites: access and aesthetics**

Over the course of three days, the SC was erected in three locations in central Winnipeg: The Forks, a popular recreation and market area near the river; the University of Winnipeg, on the lawn in front of Wesley hall; and the Winnipeg Art Gallery, during Nuit Blanche, a city-wide night-time arts festival. The choice of sites was the product of negotiation between the festival organizers, site managers, and the designers of the SC, with the latter being motivated mainly by its aesthetic properties, in other words, how the SC would look in a given location. Each choice of site significantly affected viewer-participants' access to the SC, in terms of both its physical accessibility and its 'symbolic' accessibility (i.e. whether it seemed to be open to them or not), and therefore affected their experience of the SC.

#### *Thursday: The Forks*

The Forks is a site near downtown Winnipeg where the Red River and Assiniboine River meet. The convergence of the rivers and numerous recreation trails, as well as a marketplace area and

other cultural and historic features, make it a popular destination for both Winnipeggers and visitors. Because of this, the Situated Cinema was well-exposed in a high traffic area, making it accessible to a wide variety of viewer-participants who happened upon it either purposefully or accidentally. While many of the people who experienced the SC sought it out intentionally, having heard about through WNDX promotions or through friends, many in this location discovered it purely by chance, as they travelled through the area by bike, or dined at nearby restaurants. Couples and large groups were frequently observed enjoying leisure time here, taking in the sights or passing through to other destinations in the city. The SC was highly visible in this location and seemed to be well placed among the many cultural and recreational attractions at the Forks, which contributed to a greater willingness of passersby to incorporate it into their activities as they moved through the space. However, this 'fit' had been a point of contention for the designers, who negotiated to move the SC from one spot of The Forks where there were other 'kiosk'-type buildings to a space where it stood out as a more distinctive feature. They did not want the SC to become part of the architectural language of the "tourist trap", even if this reduced the number of people who would see it.

*Friday: University of Winnipeg*

At this location, the Situated Cinema was erected on a large lawn (often used as a sports field) in front of the Wesley Hall building, next to a well-travelled walkway through the campus and alongside a busy street, Portage Street, in the downtown area of the city. Large groups of people, presumably mostly students, were observed nearby, playing Frisbee or lounging on the grass, with many others passing by on the pathways and sidewalks. While there was a great deal of bustle nearby, the SC here was positioned behind thick shrubberies and ornamental grasses on one side, largely obscuring it from view of passersby on the campus walkway, and behind a low wall on the street side, which created a physical if not visual barrier from the city sidewalk. The SC was accessible via the lawn, but the lawn was not a regular pathway through the campus, so people did not pass by the SC that way. The University's site managers had proposed that the SC be built right next to the campus walkway, but the designers preferred the aesthetics of the site on the lawn, and also preferred the idea that people should have to out of their way to 'discover' the SC. Thus, although the SC was at the University of Winnipeg during a gloriously

sunny afternoon with throngs of people passing by, it saw the fewest visitors in this location, and the majority of viewer-participants we interviewed here were WNDX festival aficionados who had sought out the SC intentionally.

*Saturday night: Nuit Blanche at the Winnipeg Art Gallery*

At this venue, the Situated Cinema was constructed at the bottom of a concrete ramp at the rear of the building that had once been used for offloading bus-loads of school-children into the gallery. Although it was evening, there were enormous numbers of people gathered at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG) and on the streets nearby because of the festivities of *Nuit Blanche*, Winnipeg's annual night-long arts festival. Initially, it seemed that the SC was not very visible here either: the ramp was long and went below street level. However, a makeshift cardboard sign was fabricated and placed at the top of the ramp advertising the SC's presence. As well, a popular local coffee shop had set up a stall next to the SC at this bottom entrance of the WAG, and the allure of a hot cappuccino was enough to tempt many visitors down the ramp. This circumstance lent itself to a great many accidental discoveries of the SC, although many of the viewer-participants were intentional patrons of the *Nuit Blanche* festival and thus a likely audience for this sort of installation. It is also worth noting that while the large draw of the festival brought many visitors to the WAG location, in some cases it also appeared to limit the amount of time viewer-participants were willing to devote to experiencing the cinema before rushing off to the next spectacle, a sort of art-as-consumption scenario. Arguably, the SC was most aesthetically dramatic in the WAG location, where its sleek minimalist design nestled comfortably beneath the hard lines and stark concrete of the building's modernist architecture (see vimeo film), and its illuminated sign contributed to an alluringly warm glow in the dimly lit ramp location.

In sum, each of the SC's sites, selected mainly for their aesthetic properties by the designers, significantly affected how accessible the SC was to viewer-participants. At The Forks, the SC fit in with the touristy, marketplace atmosphere and therefore corresponded to existing uses of the site; interviewees commented that the SC was the sort of thing they would expect to encounter in that space. One couple noted that, "if you're going to launch something new in the city ... the

Forks would be a starting point” (interview S-3). In contrast, at the University, although a student mentioned that “it’s very common for U of W to have displays that are kind of drawing attention” (int. S-4), the specific site of installation of the SC — which was something of an intimidating structure already — meant that very few passersby took the time to come and investigate it. Thus, the aesthetic and social properties of a site did not necessarily coincide: sites could be aesthetically pleasing without being socially attractive.

## **2. The publics of public art**

Overall, we conducted roughly equal numbers of interviews with people who had deliberately sought out the SC, because they were interested in art, film or architecture, and people who had simply happened upon it during the course of their everyday activities or as part of their sightseeing in the *Nuit Blanche*. These two types of viewer-participants — which we could label as ‘expert’ versus ‘lay’ viewer-participants — engaged with it in somewhat, but not entirely different ways, suggesting different levels of inclusion/exclusion for different publics.

The ‘expert’ viewer-participants who sought out the SC had generally studied or worked in creative fields such as fine art or art history, design, architecture or film-making. Several mentioned hearing about the SC on the radio (int. S-8), or through WNDX (ints. S-10, S13). Some were filmmakers with a film in the festival, or friends of a filmmaker involved in the project. What was clear about most of the intentional visitors to the SC was that they were quite literate in art and likely to seek out new experiences of art, and because of their training or practice, these viewer-participants engaged with the SC in different ways. They were more likely to critically engage with the content of these somewhat obscure experimental films on show, and they also often made reference to the projection systems and the materiality of the films. Some noted that the films were shot on 16mm, or that the films were experimental in style, and were able to comment on this. A film-maker (not one whose film was showing in the SC) offered reflexive, critical analysis highlighting problems associated with the cinema itself — suggesting that it would have worked better with high-contrast images — and the ongoing research process (int. S-5). While all interviewees, ‘expert’ and ‘lay’, talked more about the material structure and design of the SC than the films on show, the ‘expert’ viewer-participants were more able to

'read' and discuss the films themselves.

That said, 'lay' participants found their own ways to interpret the qualities and content of the films, largely because cinema is a mass entertainment medium with which many people are familiar. When asked what memories or associations the films evoked, a considerable number of people referenced vintage or classic cinema. For some, this association was derived purely from the black-and-white or desaturated film and the grainy/scratched/blurry effects utilized by the filmmakers, while for others, the use of found footage or stills of old postcards and photographs and iconic imagery of their focal cities made the films reminiscent of vintage tourism reels (int. S-2). The familiarity of the landmarks of the cities on which the films were based allowed people to derive at least a basic understanding of the films as 'city symphonies', at least once the term was suggested to them (in one of our interview questions). One man said he saw "streets weaving and overlapping each other, like a tapestry" (int. B-5), but most people interviewed did not elaborate on the city aspect of the films to any great degree; this suggests that perhaps the 'city symphony' genre is not that recognizable to the average viewer, or simply that other elements of the SC were a greater point of focus for the majority of viewer-participants.

There were also other elements of the experience that evoked the association with vintage or classic cinema. One woman articulated it thus:

It made me feel sentimental for the excitement of original cinema and how that would have been such a different experience than it is now, because we're so inundated with media. Yeah, cuz I was thinking that it was older footage and that always makes me think about the beginnings of this thing that is now everywhere. It would have been so different, as an experience.

While for some viewer-participants, the communally-experienced spectacle of the SC recalled the golden days of cinema, for others, it was the unexpected discovery and private experience of the project that evoked a sense of cinematic history. One couple interviewed (int. S-13) called the SC "a magical secret show that you just happen to stumble upon" and said it reminded them of a kinoscope, an early device used for viewing motion pictures, which permitted only one viewer at a time, who would peer through a peephole on the top of the box. Kinoscopes

were often part of travelling shows and penny arcades, an early incarnation of the 'peepshow'. This reference seems to fit with other interpretations of the SC, with one person remarking that it felt like "your own private little booth" (int. S-6), and another wondering "Should I be paying for this? Where's the coin slot?" (int. M-2).

This feeling of trepidation and uncertainty about the contents of the mysterious box may have dissuaded some from experiencing the SC, especially if they encountered it while on their own in the city, but there was a definite sense of curiosity being rewarded for those who braved the unknown. One viewer-participant felt that the films were like, "a prize at the end of the maze" (int. S-3). Interestingly, this echoed the designers' desire to reward curiosity rather than imposing the SC on all passersby on a busy walkway.

For most, the unexpected nature of the SC ultimately made for a very positive encounter within their daily urban itinerary. Many we spoke with seemed quite enthusiastic about the idea of stumbling upon art or cinema in unusual places or unpredictable times in the city, the idea that art could pop-up like a "creative mushroom" (fieldnotes at The Forks). One person called it "a cute little adventure" and thought that installations of this type might draw people back into the downtown spaces that had been abandoned for the safety and conveniences of the suburbs (int. M-2). Similarly, another woman suggested that these sorts of installations make art more accessible to a wider variety of people, exposing them to ideas that are not always so accessible and bringing people together as a community (int. S-2). The vast majority of people that we interviewed, whether expert or layperson, and despite potential criticisms of particular aspects of the SC project, appeared enormously receptive to the idea of similar installations making an appearance within the fabric of their city and offering them the opportunity to experience something new and different in their travels through the urban landscape. As one man remarked, "I think it's good to come to expect these kind of things out of the city, you know? Maybe it could become more common. It's like 'oh, there's another box'."

The 'box' of the cinema itself, which exposed both the film projector itself (through a window, from the outside) and the beam of light projected from it (which people had to walk through inside the SC), therefore gave people a way into interpreting the SC, whether or not they were

familiar with experimental film or the idea of city symphonies. This leads us into a discussion of the film-makers' interactions with the SC.

### **3. The film-makers: Material inspiration... and constraint**

The film-makers who were invited to make work for the Situated Cinema are very preoccupied, like most artists, with materials and the technology available them, and the material limitations of the SC, as well as the curatorial focus on city symphonies, were a source of inspiration to them as they made their films. One film-maker gave himself certain constraints in creating his film that would resonate with the design of the Situated Cinema. Knowing that the films would be showing in a loop, he wanted his film itself to be like a loop, so he made it by making multiple exposures on the same reel of film of the same scene. He also chose his vantage point to reflect the unusual positioning of the screen in the Situated Cinema: whereas in most cinemas the image is projected far away, in the SC you are looking down at the screen. So he looked down on an iconic view of the city, zooming into it from above. He knew that the looper would “age” his film by adding its own scratches to it, so he kept the film to a vertical pan so that the scratches would complement the content. Lastly, the effects of his film were made entirely through in-camera work — no post-production processing or montage — echoing the near-obsolete technology of analogue cinema. In contrast, one of the other films took a great deal of montage and post-processing, as it incorporated archival footage and imagery with recent video shot with an i-phone in a digital-analogue mash-up that was then transferred to the 16mm medium.

Another film-maker provided a more explicit social and political commentary on his city, playing up the dark side of cities and the tension between nature and urbanism. While this film-maker deals very much with the materiality of film and projection in his work overall, this is perhaps less evident in the film he made for the SC. However, he found that the structure of the SC, with its exposure of the mechanism of projection, unexpectedly echoed his artistic aims: “they’ve come up with a really interesting, architecturally a really interesting shape that does something very similar to what I’m talking about, which is demand a recognition of the formation of the image, and how it comes to be.”

These interviews with film-makers had not initially been part of our research design, which

focused on the experience of members of the public. However, several of the film-makers were attending WNDX and therefore came to see the Situated Cinema in action, and one provided a great deal of technical assistance related to the projector and looper. What in fact gave us the opportunity to interview the film-makers were the various technical hitches that the SC encountered. These included a delay in being able to construct the cinema at University of Winnipeg (because the field was needed for a sports class first), and several delays caused because the loop of films broke. The projector in the Situated Cinema was left to run un-staffed in little box, visible from the outside through plexiglass but not easily accessible. This meant that the projector could get overheated, but also that focus could not be easily adjusted once the film was running. The technology of the looper that fed the films round and round (instead of going from reel to reel) scratched and put strain on the loop of films. Scratches, soft focus and light leakage thus made their way into the projections, rendering the experimental content even more obscure than usual to viewer-participants, and giving the film-makers unexpected aesthetic effects to think about. On the one hand, they could be seen as disappointing technical problems; on the other, they could be embraced as part of the continued interaction of materials, another layer in the development of analogue film-making and cinema.

Perhaps more problematically, due to time and budget constraints, the loop of films was not a reprint on projection-quality film stock but rather was a splice of the five films together on five different kinds of film stock. This led to the film breaking several times during the course of the three days, which meant that some viewer-participants who entered the cinema saw only the projection of flickering broken film, and several times the SC was shut down for an hour or more while the film and projector were repaired, reducing the potential for discovery of the cinema and its content by members of the public. (It also meant that only one film, the physically most robust, was actually shown at the WAG during *Nuit Blanche*.)

In these ways, the intentional and unintentional material constraints of the installation both inspired and confounded the film-makers, shaping the city-symphony films not only as they were created, but also as they were projected.

#### **4. Artists and social scientists: a curious engagement**

Our experiences investigating the SC threw into stark relief the ways that the goals, methods and expectations that artists and social scientists have vis-à-vis urban public art can diverge.

Firstly, there is the question of expectations around the location of sites. As social scientists who were mainly interested in viewer-participants' experiences of the SC (at least at first), we came into the project assuming that the 'best' location for the SC would be one that attracted the most viewers. However, we soon discovered that the SC's designers did not share that assumption. For them, what mattered were the aesthetic dimensions of the project. On the one hand, this meant the way that the SC looked in relation to its immediate surroundings. On the other, there was also an aesthetics of performance in the SC's design and execution. In a sense, the point was to create and install the SC itself, no matter how many people came to see it (or not); it was a performative gesture, which would be equally or even more beautiful, from an artistic point of view, if executed in an empty field as in a busy urban public space. It is somewhat difficult for social scientists — especially social scientists interested in the public's reception or experience of art — to accept that the effect of a given artwork on an audience is not necessarily as important to its creators as the act of creation itself. As non-artists, we perhaps want to believe that an artwork is designed to engage its audience in some kind of dialogue with the artist, but this is not necessarily the case. The dialogue that is important to the artist may be going on elsewhere, with fellow practitioners and other colleagues in the art world, not with the public (or with those social scientists who are so interested in the public).

Secondly, and relatedly, there is the question of whether our research methods appropriately captured the experience of the SC. Our presence at the SC undoubtedly affected, at times, the way that members of the public approached it. During periods with very low numbers of visitors, we may have had that air of market-researchers or charity-donation-seekers just waiting for their next prey, which may have put people off approaching the SC. More fundamentally, the technique of conducting immediate exit interviews is both a partial and an influential way to investigate viewer-participant experiences. It is partial in the sense that it only captures immediate reactions, whereas art often lingers in the mind as something that resonates and is mulled over for a long time following the first encounter with it. Our pop-up ethnography popped up to capture experiences *in situ*, but could not record the traces that encounters with

SC left behind in the longer term. The technique of the exit interview is influential in the sense that the very fact of being asked to reflect immediately on the artwork will shape the longer memory one has of it. For this reason, our role was critiqued by one 'expert' interviewee, who said:

to have to talk about it immediately after I come out, uh, also transforms the experience. So the situatedness of this discussion we're having completely changes my experience of it in some way because now I'm forced to reflect on it from a personal perspective and from a critical perspective and, you know, also from a kind of supportive, you know. And then I also have all these questions in my head of what it is that you're doing and what your role in this is and who's hearing my voice in the future that you're capturing right now. (int. S-5).

In another interview, a couple both involved in film were enthusiastic about the opportunity to analyze the SC immediately after they came out of it (int. S-13); they felt the interview added to their encounter with the SC as they were forced to reflect on their experiences quickly. While it is easy to see how those with expert knowledge might enjoy the opportunity to discuss the SC, several 'laypersons' who were initially reluctant to speak with us also seemed to warm up to the interview and were in the end quite delighted to describe and discuss what they had experienced. The observer's paradox was clearly in operation here; the urban anthropologists became as much as part of the art project as the films and the cinema structure were.

It remains to be seen whether our 'pop-up ethnography' of the Situated Cinema is relevant or useful to those who were involved in its creation. Not only is it technically tricky to study the effect that art actually has on its social and spatial context, it is also risky: what if the results are then used to gauge the quality or value of such art, or whether it was worth funding (Philips, 2004 [1989])? Our aim instead is to explore people's encounters with urban public art as a way to open up lines of inquiry into the sociality of the city. In this way, this paper contributes to the dialogue of our broader interdisciplinary research-creation project, and we look forward to seeing how it might feed into the next cycle of artistic production that we undertake.

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