URBAN SCREENS AND PUBLIC SPACE SEMINAR
September 28 through 30, 2009. Medialab-Prado, Madrid (Spain)

Final Conclusions, by Paloma Blanco, PhD in Contemporary Art

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION:

Social participation, data visualizing, game and interaction, three titles for three presentation sessions, idea-sharing session and debates that clearly show the close relationship between these three spaces for reflection.

Aiming to apply everything spoken and confronted in these days to the specific situation of the screen located in Medialab-Prado, we consider that is crucial to first focus on the analysis of the socio-politic context of the Plaza de las Letras (public space), Medialab-Prado (screen manager) and the Barrio de la Letras (possible recipient and active participant). So the three basic subjects came out immediately when considering the role that the new screen would play in these environments.

In the first place, the screen's future contribution to the urban regeneration and gentrification of the Barrio de las Letras, where the screen is located, was mentioned. This is a neighbourhood isolated from traffic that is being changed into ʽan artistic neighbourhood with all its consequences. It is inevitable to ask ourselves what are the role and the cultural content for this type of mass communication during a process of regeneration offered as a chance for the future, to improve the image of the city, a symbol of modernity? Which will be the role played by the screen during the current process of recapitalization of urban spaces, a process of urban remodelling/speculation orchestrated by The State and Private Capital that are creating a new urban landscape?

In second place, and closely related to the first point, the strong need to analyse the role of the digital screen in "creating a community" and giving shape to the public space where is located came up. This is even more important when taking under consideration that the people living in the neighbourhood have been unaware of Medialab's activities for the past two years. For three days, concepts like interaction, creation of a community, of a social fabric, a social network, give a voice to minorities, create a local identity were mentioned. In this aspect, we stressed the necessity to GO OUT, inform the people that live in the neighbourhood about Medialab and its activities and create a social fabric that is, for now, non-existent. Let them know about how urgent it is to create cultural exchanges and to use the screen as strategic tool to create a community, taking advantage of its potential in supporting and creating new forms of social interaction and community building. Overall, to attract them and make them feel as participants in the possible uses of this new medium that is now part of their daily environment, a public space that is, by the way, so small.

This could be directly connected to possible levels of social participation: What's expected from the public, locally and globally? In our round table there was a special emphasis in the need to start creating bonds with the community and trying to make the plaza where the screen is located, a living organism that welcomes the neighbourhood and makes it a participant. It is important to bring new participative forms of art that go beyond the role of the citizen as a spectator, a passive consumer of information and messages, as a backdrop or an inspiration for the works to exhibit.

In third and last place, it was considered crucial to evaluate the possible consequences that this digital surface (one of the high peaks of the extension of Medialab's installations in conjunction with the renovation of the building in Serrería financed by Madrid s city Council) will have on the working process of Medialab itself. It was also pointed out that the installation of the screen is now bringing a change in Medialab's working strategies and in its production of open projects, even more so if we take under consideration that the screen will become a window-screen through which passers-by can get to know and judge the works that are created.

At this point and after analysing the challenges and opportunities that this new device offers, we try to examine the possible strategies and tactics to follow and to know of. What can we do with that big black hole that Susa Pop referred to which one has to supply with contents? From the beginning it was important to stress that this was not a temporary intervention financed by a private corporation, cultural institution or similar, as it has occurred in some cases in these conferences, but it is a permanent official medium that will be part of the neighbourhood ˙ s daily life, a digital surface integrated in a project financed by an official entity that, from the beginning, will have to operate with cut programming, censorship (no sound, limited hours of projection, etc.)

Different possibilities were raised: Julian Oliver considered the screen as a medium for writing, a platform for public expression, as we could see in Plazanimada's work; an element to get closer to the neighbourhood by introducing open calls for projects and temporary fun activities that democratize technologies, a way of visualizing projects that connects MedialabŽs inside with the public space and the outside, the neighbourhood, etc. Even the possibility of creating automatic contents has also been contemplated. All the possible projects and interventions that came up referred to the integration of the public and to an active participation with the screen. It was also suggested to let the user turn the screen on and off by pushing a palm button that would disconnect the screen, Why not?

Lastly, it should be reminded that when talking about public space, we should not forget that ˙ public is, above all, social, a space of conflict and resistance, the fundamental ground for political activity, and, as the people from Medialab state in their website there are so many ways of using an urban screen as many ideas are presented everyday. The clue is to try to follow a series of patterns that remind us that this screen IS OURS AND FOR ALL OF US. A screen in which we will see what we are, globally and locally. A great challenge.