

17 Days in Beijing: Screen of Consciousness on the Micropolitical

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August 2008
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- 闭幕式
- 田径
- 赛艇
- 羽毛球
- 棒球
- 篮球
- 拳击
- 皮划艇/静水
- 皮划艇/激流
- 自行车/公路
- 自行车/越野
- 自行车/山地
- 自行车/小轮车
- 马术/三项赛
- 马术/盛装舞步
- 马术/障碍赛
- 击剑
- 足球
- 艺术体操
- 体操/蹦床
- 体操/艺术体操
- 体操/韵律体操
- 举重
- 手球
- 排球
- 曲棍球
- 柔道
- 摔跤-古典式
- 摔跤-自由式
- 游泳/游泳
- 游泳/花样游泳
- 游泳/跳水
- 游泳/水球
- 现代五项
- 垒球
- 跆拳道
- 网球
- 乒乓球
- 射击
- 射箭
- 铁人三项
- 帆船
- 排球/排球
- 排球/沙滩排球
- FINALS

HomeShop is a commercial space turned sleeping-working-living studio located in the traditional city centre of Beijing. Based from this tiny thirty square-metre space, our interests as artist-researchers naturally stretch beyond HomeShop's glass storefront and into the old *hutong* alleyway shared with our neighbours: a representative blend of staunch old Beijingers, working class residents from the rest of China, and burgeoning hipsters quickly gentrifying the nearby *Gulou* district. The premise of HomeShop has thus been to engage its community by way of a varying program built upon observations of daily life in the *hutong* and a series of "minor practices" and interventions, which oscillate between the public, the private, and the relations of exchange therein.¹

During its first project, *HomeShop Series Number One: Games 2008*, the spatio-temporal framework of Beijing and the Olympic Games was revisioned as overlapping grids from which indeterminacies could appear, converge, and reappear anew. Each day of the Olympics marked an ironic countdown to the end of the HomeShop project, the passage of time marked by daily activities at varying scales of community engagement. From field recordings to a clothing collection, theoretical group readings to stoop-front discussions with locals—each of HomeShop's activities aimed to offer, amidst the daily routines of local residents, a minor-scale potentiality for our ways of engaging with the community and public space.²

In particular, the project series reached peaks with larger events centred around the shop front screen, which had been hung precisely at the threshold between private home space and the street out front. The HomeShop countdown began and ended with storefront screenings of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, and a party held in honour of the "losers," featuring Olympic-themed Wii videogame competitions projected on screen and played live in the street. An event in and of itself, *wii would like to play // we don't have tickets* became a small-scale metaphor of political possibility in the most improbable of scenarios: amidst the commotion of the party, Chinese and western participants came together in an awkward sort of eagerness, first to tackle the illegible Japanese interface of pirated games on a Chinese-hacked Wii console, then to one another in one-on-one sprints via the 100-meter dash of *Mario & Sonic at the Beijing Olympics*.

Continued reflection upon our *Games 2008* project has begun a process of deconstruction of what was initially quite a straightforward initiative. Organizing outdoor public screenings is as simple a matter of drawing a screen and turning on a projector. But to examine the project from the perspective of its screens brings into consideration a much more complex layering of scales, spaces, times, and sociopolitical contexts. For bystanders who were old enough to recall the days of the Cultural Revolution,³ such an activity held nostalgic value, while for the police and *chengguan* keeping an eye on us it was an uncertain and potentially dangerous threat.⁴ Such juxtapositions of meaning were certainly not a complete forethought at the outset of the project, but these have, nonetheless, possessed a latency we have come to discover, work through, and upon which we continue to reflect.

The build-up in Beijing towards 08.08.08 was, on one hand, to be expected, considering the incredible diversity of attentions and energies invested toward the mega-spectacle. Yet, if we are to examine these as elements of a layered *deconstruction* within this village-in-city scenario, would it be possible to discover something more? Or, at the scale of the micro political, something *less*? Here, on *Xiaojingchang Hutong*—the street of the "Small Sutra Factory"⁵—can we imagine the emerging conditions for an alternative engagement with public space and politics itself?



Layer of space | viewings private (home), public (corporate), and private-becoming-public (HomeShop)

Two of the most prominent features of contemporary Olympic spectacles were both introduced in conjunction with the Berlin Summer Games of 1936: the invention of the torch relay as an exhortation toward a strong German fatherland and the introduction of live television viewing areas around Berlin, both of which leveraged some of the most innovative media technologies of the day to help entwine the sporting events with the National Socialist Party's quest for power. And, though such media coverage has transformed dramatically from its humble beginnings in 1936 Berlin to the audiovisual feast on display at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, the basic premise of public viewing areas and the underlying desire to streamline a burgeoning nationalism have remained largely the same.

However, China's unique blend of communist politics and increasingly market-based economics provided a highly complex backdrop to the context of Beijing's urban sporting screens. The build-up to the 2008 Olympic spectacle was amplified by the intense glare of instantaneous global television distribution and the proliferating images from its own partisan torch relay. In turn, Beijing witnessed ubiquitous LED countdown

boards throughout the city climax into omnipresent viewing monitors aboard most public transport vehicles, as well as two dozen Olympic cultural squares, featuring large-screen public viewing areas sponsored by some of the world's largest transnationals. Following Paolo Virno, we might suggest that these attempts to leverage the sporting popular into urban spaces via the public viewing screen were intended to consolidate and homogenize the people into the "One of the State" (or at least, the "One of the Target Market").⁶

Generally speaking, one's options within Beijing on 08.08.08 was to either to watch the event on television in the privacy of one's own home, at one of the state-controlled, corporate-sponsored public viewing areas, or not at all. It is through these historical and contemporary screens that we viewed the 2008 Olympic Games, both as spectators and critical observers. How we engage such spectatorship is the coming-together of the HomeShop *Games 2008* project.

Layer of transaction | exchange and gift

The outdoor, quasi-public viewing area in the *hutong* in front of HomeShop offered an alternative to these options, and, as a completely independent venture, there is a subtle politics of difference that turns an offering into an intervention. The hours prior to the Opening Ceremonies and the HomeShop launch were a hectic time that we spent shopping, carrying, sweating, and cleaning—all met with a blend of curiosity and indifference from the local residents of the neighbourhood. *What sort of invasion was being prepared?* A few who had heard about the HomeShop screening of the Opening Ceremonies called to ask what sort of "facilities" and "perks" would be available at the venue and were quite dissatisfied to hear that there would be neither reserved seats nor a full bar, as promised by many of the other viewing parties. *What kind of lame gift was this?*

But as we set up an indoor projector to beam *through* the screen to the street and as neighbours subsequently realized what was unfolding, the Opening Ceremonies at HomeShop became a very collaborative do-it-yourself event. Many wanted to contribute in some way, whether it was in buying beer for the party, sharing marinated peanuts brought from home, serving watermelon and tidying up afterwards, or performing a very local history of the *hutong* for the others in attendance. What began as personal initiative grew from this initial encounter via the optics of familiarity (television) to a haptic and supple molecular form, as simple and positive as *getting to know you better*.

The juxtaposition between an expectation of consumable experiences and the intimacy or "poverty" of a grassroots endeavour is one that we must consider renegotiating. In our scenario, exchange and collaboration emerged as an "economy without tabs," as in, *no one is counting*. And perhaps here the latent becomes visible once again. In contrast with the public viewing areas scattered around the city, which were grounded in variable forms of symmetrical exchange, our endeavours were a humble offering, or put differently, acts in asymmetry: trivial, perhaps, but ripe with potentiality. *If the possible* is to fully unfold, one cannot offer a gift so large that it closes off the potential for reciprocity. And since we cannot count or calculate, we need to approximate: at what point does one *give too much* and, thus, exert a power over the other? To answer this requires a negotiation in all the multi-sensory potential of the word: through language and the verbal, through the visual and bodily gesture, but also through the tactility of flesh, motion, and affect.⁷ In this negotiation lies the zone of potential between commercial exchange and the power-burden of gratuity, the space for approximation, and the implicit risk of the gift.

Words like *initiative*, *participation*, *approximation*, and *potential* become powerful here because they are positive constructions that are not easily quantified. While it is evident that the intimate nature of HomeShop's

public viewing events served as a catalyst for what might be described as a temporary autonomous zone,⁸ there is a need to interrogate this micro political space on a sliding spatio-temporal scale from global to local—not smaller or larger, but *both/and*. This is a stereoscopic layer,⁹ whereby the experience of a spatial *here* and a networked temporal *now* becomes a collaborative, emergent construction.

Layer of time | the *now* of global synchronicity against the *here* of *Xiaojingchang Hutong*

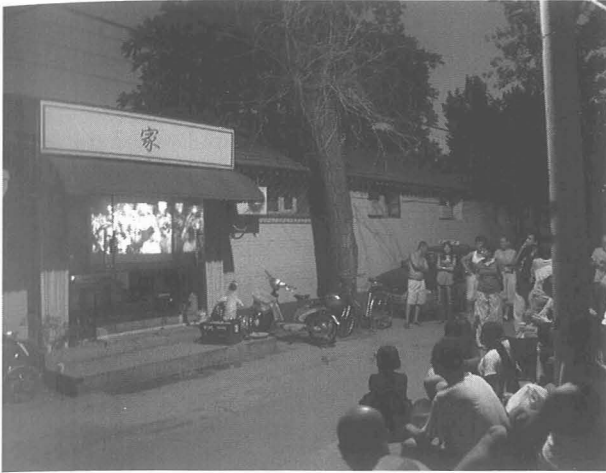
This stereoscopic approach implies that the scale of the HomeShop public viewing cannot be disconnected from the fact that the Beijing Olympic's Opening Ceremonies was one of the most-watched television broadcasts in history. A theatrical logistics of perception to captivate each member of a worldwide audience, it presented one of the most elaborately crafted exercises in mass perception and narrative ever constructed—the Four Great Inventions, Parade of Nations, Torch Relay, and Olympic Flame Lighting as tele-colonial play. Such an act exists as a temporal singularity and a very clear message,¹⁰ but what entirely divergent narratives are possible when one's focal distance from the screen varies as much as the cozy VIP booths at the Bird's Nest stadium and the newspaper-lined patch of asphalt in front of HomeShop?

The earliest call for participation and proposal for the HomeShop project,¹¹ made explicit through word and image the desire to juxtapose the formal timetables of the Olympic Games with the more rhythmic sense of time and indeterminacy found on *Xiaojingchang Hutong*. And in that modest attempt lies quite a significant interrogation of power. For example, the exorbitant sum paid by the American television network National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) for Olympic telecast rights provided NBC the bargaining power to demand certain events in Beijing conform to quantitatively-optimized audience timetables in the United States. Swimming was of such importance to the American viewing public (Michael Phelps questing for a record eight gold medals) that NBC demanded the swimming finals be held first thing in the morning Beijing local time, so that they would be available live to a prime-time audience in the United States, notwithstanding the biorhythmic implications for the elite swimmers who normally contest final events in the evening.

On the other hand, we had the very local movements of *Xiaojingchang Hutong*. Not only was the timetable of the HomeShop Games series very loosely arranged and articulated, with Beijing-based artists and local community residents arriving for formal events or dropping by for an informal chat, but the biorhythms of the interpersonal were also more presently at the fore, tacitly engaged in the negotiations and approximations of co-emergence. This may have been manifest in any number of ways: through the weather, the heat, and the sharing of water or *suan mei tang* (traditional Chinese plum juice); through the lighting of cigarettes for another or the musical stylings of DJ Mellow Yellow; through the staccato hesitations of translation between Chinese and westerner or the frustrated haltings in absence of such translation. Temporal singularity yielded to the nonlinearities of local time and rhythm.

Layer of embodiment | screen as television, screen as videogame, a body+politic

The synchronicity of a globalized relay (understood in terms of Olympic torch or video signal), with the immediacy of localized, collective intimacy in the public sphere, was made possible by a communion before the surface-altar of television. And while the message of McLuhan's screen may still exist¹² (audience perception, corporate sponsorship and the International Olympic Committee as a machine of sporting capital), visual theorist



Giuliana Bruno suggests a more qualitatively haptic dimension that both a filmic space and our lived experience of the city can occupy:

Film and the city share a dimension of living that Italians call *vissuto*, that is, the space of one's lived experiences. They are about lived space, and the fantasy of habitable places. They are both inhabited sites, and spaces for inhabitation, narrativized by motion. Such types of dwellings always construct a subjectivity. Their subjectivity is a body that occupies narrativized space, and leaves traces of her history on the wall and the screen. Crossing in-between perceived, conceived and lived space, the spatial arts thus embody the viewer.¹³

There is a certain congruency here between film and city, on the one hand, and videogames and the city on the other, which allows the player to toggle between first- and third-person perspectives. Vilém Flusser discusses the difference between line and surface and its implications for perception and thought, but, writing before the videogame revolution, neglects to consider the volumetric.¹⁴ All three modes appear to the viewer in planar form, but since Flusser distinguishes between perception proper to line and surface, or text and image, it seems equally important to understand that the videogame is also of a different character, *for one actually enters its non-space to control the avatar during play*. While the screen appears as a site of reduction, there is literally a three-dimensional non-space that has been mathematically modeled “in behind,” which demands the continual monitoring of multiple points-of-view, particularly as our somatic expertise increases in these ludic environments.¹⁵

Sprint heats of the 100-metre dash against a local, embodied competitor were an explicit engagement with Bruno's *vissuto* during the *wii would like to play // we don't have tickets* event: players literally moved their bodies in real space while seeing themselves animated back on the screen. The volumetric understanding of embodied subjectivity as read in the filmic context thus became more perceptible and fully realized in the move to the videogame medium. Such embodiment reflected a different sort of flow—not the regulated flow of the Olympic timetable and its conduits of tourist passage, public transit, and commercial exchange, but the micro-flow

of the neighbourhood, those swirling eddies in the liminal space where public and private bled into one another, and whose nonlinear dynamics created the potential for threshold events to occur.¹⁶

Such indeterminacy was the backdrop of throwing a party in honor of the Olympic “losers,” and it was here that *wii would like to play // we don't have tickets* found its niche. Quite unintentionally, *Xiaojingchang Hutong* was busy playing to determine the *most average* competitor at the very same time that Usain Bolt ran the fastest 100-metre sprint in human history (which can only be considered sacrilege to the political economy of speed!).¹⁷ This juxtaposition of timetables and alternative use of measured race times created the athletic biorhythms from which a temporary community emerged.

Relayering, unlayering

Brian Massumi suggests that the virtual, the zone from which embodied potential emerges, is itself unrepresentable save for the multiple and necessarily incomplete part-attempts to render it in image form. As such, it “can perhaps best be imaged by superposing these deformational moments of repetition rather than sampling differences in form and content. Think of each image receding into its deformation, as into a vanishing point of its own twisted versioning.”¹⁸

And so we begin here parallel processes of relayering and unlayering the virtuality that was HomeShop: the former to once again understand each of these discrete layers as part of a rhythmic, emergent whole, and the latter as a means to *smooth the space of emergence* and destratify these layers, not necessarily through negation, but instead by giving and receiving through each one.¹⁹ While it is tempting to simply consider these and other layers at points of intersection on scales from global to local, to propose the (now clichéd, perhaps, but still significant) possibility of “thinking globally, acting locally” requires exactly this sort of unlayering and thinking-through in the call to emergence. To act as such is a “means without ends” in the style of Agamben, an idea towards a political philosophy whereby the multitude presents itself within the individual, and systems—despite their imposition from above or all sides—can be framed at any given moment.²⁰ The experience of *here* and *now* thus becomes a layering of context and one's own initiative, a *making-do* in self-reflection, a turning of the screen as both pivot-point and filter—on the precipice of potentiality and full of momentum.

Our attempt with the *wii would like to play // we don't have tickets* event is a metaphor for such a potentiality. The Wii console system provides an interesting example, in its own right, of activating embodied forms of participation within a networked sphere, and playing it as we did on the street amidst a lively and engaged crowd of people made for a very dynamic potentiality. Logistically, it was competition that honoured neither the winner nor the loser but the “most average” race time, while, in the same instant, allowed for the very real and visceral experience of playing with another. A micropolitics of interpersonal relations, inevitably linked to power and space: each became the other, contingent upon the attempt. Rather than *risk society*, then, the contemporary condition presents itself as one in which we must literally *risk the social*.

Arguably, were it not for that initial risk and encounter with the screen during the Opening Ceremonies on 08.08.08, the subsequent events hosted by HomeShop during its seventeen days would not have had the same traction with the local neighbours—either in explicit participation or as a tacit acceptance of outsiders occupying local space. Does this serve as a screen for something, for how we can re-imagine ourselves moving with/in society and human-scale progress? Is it a filter for something larger or smaller? Can applicability be located in approximation? And in relayering and unlayering anew, we wonder: does the *opening* always require a ceremony?

ENDNOTES

- 1 The term “minor practices” derives from the work of the Cybermohalla project, based at the Sarai program in Delhi. They describe their often poetic, social, and geographic experiments in the city as, “ways through which a city can be understood. Often, the texture of our daily life does not find the space or the medium through which to find expression and be in circulation.” See <<http://www.sarai.net/practices/cybermohalla/minor-practices>> for more information.
- 2 See <<http://www.homeshop.org.cn>> for full details about the HomeShop project.
- 3 During Cultural Revolution China, outdoor projection rigs and public screens traveled throughout the countryside, as a common medium for information transmission and entertainment.
- 4 The City Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau of China is an administrative department independent from Chinese police departments, with focus upon local bylaws, city appearance bylaws, environment, sanitation, work safety, pollution control, health, municipal affairs, and migrant activity. There is a great deal of controversy over the activities of the *chengguan*, as they are known, for taking advantage of authority and being neighborhood bullies, sometimes resulting in unlawful violence. See <<http://www.cgj.suzhou.gov.cn/english01.shtml>> for more information.
- 5 Intriguing parallel relations between public and private may be witnessed in the history of *Xiaojingchang Hutong*. The first documents using this name date to maps of the Qing Dynasty during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (middle-late 18th century). Rumor has it that the lane, much larger at the time, was designated as such because of the sutra scrolls (Buddhist scriptures) that were brought there from nearby temples to be aired and dried in the sun. As the sutra texts were kept solely within temples to be accessed exclusively by monks, they often became subject to moisture and mold, and this history of *Xiaojingchang* witnesses the incredible significance of the rare (yet very pragmatic) act of the sacred leaving its private confines and being laid bare to the public eye.
- 6 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 21–6.
- 7 Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- 8 Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003).
- 9 Paul Virilio, *Open Sky* (London: Verso, 1997), 35–45.
- 10 Jeroen de Kloet describes the public display of national pride evidenced during the Opening Ceremony as China’s “world-witnessed, cheerfully massive and collective act of coming out of the closet.” See “Pyjamas, Nylon Stockings and Other Olympic Dreams,” *Wear Beijing: HomeShop* (Summer Autumn Winter, 2008): 24–9.
- 11 From the call for participation text, *HomeShop Series Number One: Games 2008*: “Starting with a grid and a timeline, a certain series of Events align themselves on a planar network. These Events have been a topic of discussion for quite some time now, and in the downward ticking of imminent certainty, it becomes calm again; preparatory activities come to a close, exteriors are hastily shined and construction sites moved to interiors, or we ourselves have left the premises, fearing the heated Spectacle to come. Yet despite the structure of the grid and the timetable and the past years of meticulous planning, there is still something a little more than abstract about these Eights, and that little something rests for most of us on the issue of accessibility. Are you going to the Olympics? And to turn the question around, whether or not we are granted access, what has the imposition of the Games taken from us?”
- 12 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
- 13 Giuliana Bruno, “Site-seeing: Architecture and the Moving Image,” *Wide Angle* 19:4 (1997): 8–24.
- 14 Vilém Flusser, *Writings*, ed. A. Ströhl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 21–34.
- 15 Admittedly, an entire history of static versus scrolling versus spatial gameplay environments needs to be told here, but suffice it to say that the emergence of the ludic subject from the primordial digital ooze of 8-bit videogame surface to become volume may constitute the most significant challenge to perception and thought since the invention of photography.
- 16 Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).
- 17 Though wii would like to play // we don't have tickets was part of HomeShop’s “Loser’s Party,” simply awarding its prize of two Olympic event tickets to the worst participant of the 36 contestants might have provided the incentive to deliberately lose. The solution? Find the most average runner—the Everyperson—by calculating the median time of the group, and then locating the individual time closest to that median.
- 18 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 133.
- 19 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- 20 Giorgio Agamben, *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).