

SOFTBODIES/SOFTIDENTITIES

T R A N S A C T I O N S

In the background the contemporary city, the place (or the stage) of our everyday performance. A contemporary city, which is becoming more and more continuous, with no boundaries. Sites of encounters, transactions, and unfolding drama. Cities within cities, assembled through habits, expectancies and customs of its urban subjects.....*softbodies*.

How does the identity of corporeality change in our contemporary, media-affected, globally linked environment? Already in the seventies, anthropologist Edward T. Hall was regarding computers, telephones and other technological devices as way to extend, or to enhance, the human body, a way to improve and specialised various functions: “the computer is an extension of part of the brain, the telephone extends the voice, the wheel extends the legs and feet. Language extends experience in time and space while writing extends language. Man has elaborated his extensions to such a degree that we are apt to forget that his humanness is rooted in his animal nature. Man has shifted evolution from its body to its extensions and in doing so has tremendously accelerated the evolutionary process.”¹



A simple remote control or a cell phone can be seen as an extension of our body, as an exterior organ or a second nature, which change our perception of the exterior world

¹ Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, Anchor Books, New York, 1969

Today all kind of prostheses, internal or external, physical or metaphorical, make it possible to alter the bodies we are born with, changing in this way the architecture of the body, our perception and, by extrapolation, what form architecture may take in response to such a body.² The body thus becomes a surface to mold, to alter; it becomes a border zone of identity between one and the other, between one culture and another, between real and virtual. When the body is no longer a given physical, social or political measure, “the relationship of subject to place changes, and does the relationship of body to building.”³ In this scenario the body becomes a battlefield, itself a place of change, hybridization, be it scientific or anthropological-cultural. A body that presents new analogies with the social body in which it develops and changes.

And if the themes of the mutation which takes place around and inside our bodies are technology, physical or metaphorical prostheses, genetic engineering, global structures of communication, fragmented and multiple identities, the physical place of this mutation, besides the virtual space of the computer, is the contemporary city.

Summary of our proposal

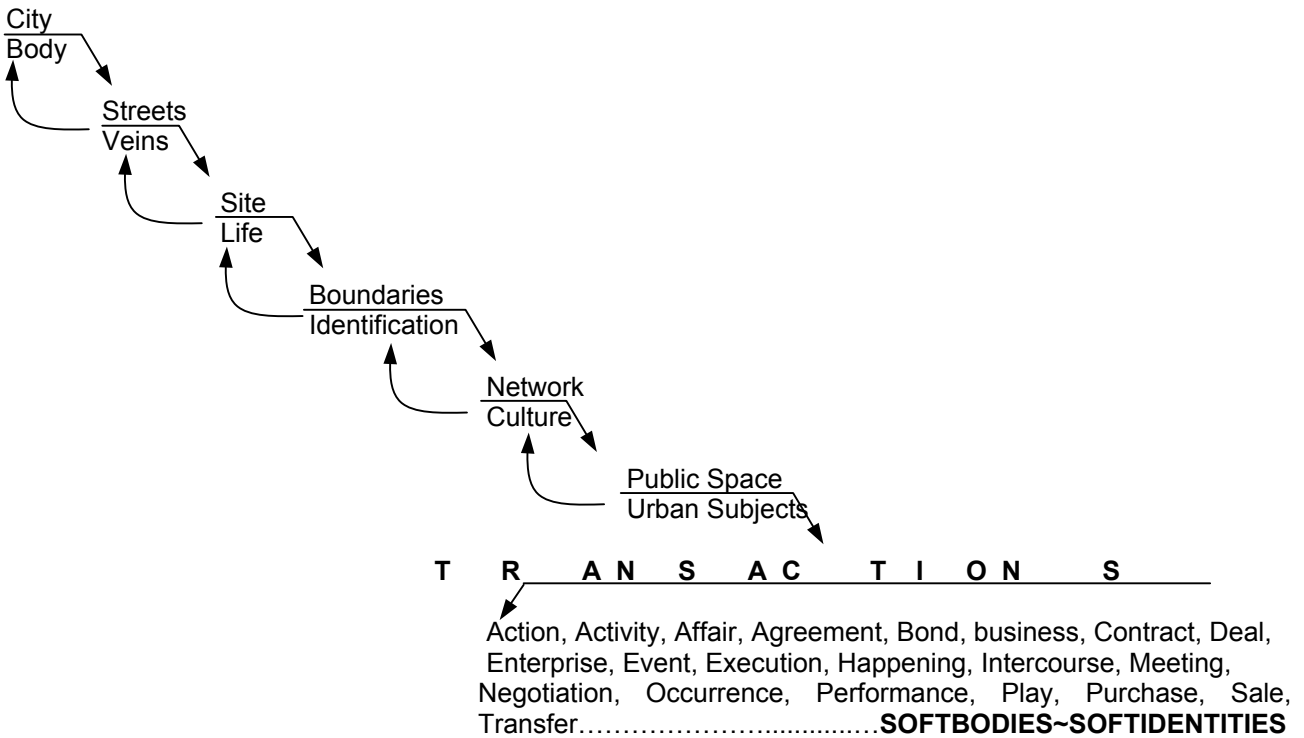
A prosthetic skin applied to a building (ideally a site-specific passageway on several levels). You can walk inside as you can see people walking inside. Some panels will be movable and transformable by the users. This mechanical transformation will also affect the result of the projection in the same way as the projection affects the “physical” part of the installation. In this ways it also becomes a sort of theatre, the theatre of the everyday, where you can be both performer and viewer. It also can be seen as a sort of electronic/changeable/dynamic billboard, so it could also be placed somewhere else in the city.

² Davidson, Cynthia C. *Anybody*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997, p. 8

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8

City within City —————> **SoftCity**

Our proposal is of transactions from the city. The city is the place where the shifting identity of the human body changes. It is also the place where the body becomes a social body. A city within city.



Physical boundaries, walls and architectural space have been transformed by transactions in time and technology. To the city of enclosure, more static in its nature, has been superimposed an ‘open’ city of communication defined by multiple temporalities, flows of frequencies, interruptions.

“Every surface is an interface between two milieus in which a constant activity prevails, taking the form of an exchange between two substances placed in contact with one another. This new scientific definition illustrates how contamination is at work in the concept of surface: the surface-boundary becomes an osmotic membrane, a

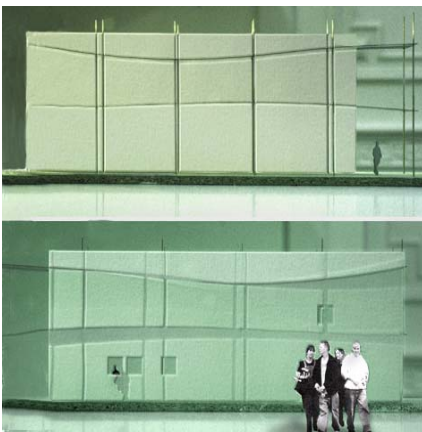


Two phone calls sweep the planet, another one runs along the city, a teleconference ends and database is downloading into a machine, while a television screen broadcast a real-time war...

blotter.”⁴ Paul Virilio moves away from a static reading of the city, and analyzes it in terms of rhythm, speed and movement in order to understand its complexity. The very notion of boundary is challenged by information, communication and technological time, which pass through physical boundaries - “the urban wall has given way to an infinity of openings and ruptured enclosures...”⁵

A montage of temporalities therefore, which are the expression of the power, cultural identity, and that of *softbodies* which organize temporal urbanism.

The idea of an “identity” (or post-identity) related to action, to performance, in a society where we are more and more passive spectators than active participants triggered the exploration of different imagery related to human transactions, from understanding the diversity of our body to the idea of hybrid culture and events, from transparency and continuous surfaces in the streets to what is the stage of our everyday performance: the contemporary city; a city within city, expressed by soft identities and soft bodies, a city which is becoming more and more continuous.



Two sides of the installation with transformable panels

ISEA2000_The Project

In describing the relationship of human body to the city and the objects of urban living, we present a new geometrical purity, unlike the city planner's reduction of city into hard abstraction in our installation the hard city streets with their statistics, demography, architecture, and structured surfaces are momentarily transformed to boundaries for transacting *softidentities* of illusions, myth, aspirations, nightmares, and circumstances, which are as real as the streets themselves.

⁴ Virilio, Paul. *The Overexposed City*. In Zone 1-2, Edition Urzone Inc., New York, 1986

⁵ Ibid.

Softbodies in a nut shell

The ISEA 2000 is an opportunity for the proposal of a softwall structure in Paris or any contemporary city, which is an attempt to dilute the hard edged streets with depiction of softidentities of a cross-humanist nature. Images of remote bodies transacting through their habits. The new softbody archetype is a hybrid instance of ourselves.

Through the aid of existing global video watch such as Web cams the almost real-time representation of such remote bodies are transformed to a public site. The actual form of the installation is site specific, and depends to variety of locations; thus, we present two instances. In the first, the installation involves a sort of see through fabric material stretched onto a make shift scaffolding, hence yielding a new dynamic building of soft structure; moreover, the video imagery of remote cultures are projected onto the surface from behind, creating a monumental electric theatre. After sunset, and through out the night, the movement, shifting light and colors will be seen from distance, adding to the real-time dynamic of the structure. The subject of projection can be from a far away land, where the culture, customs and physical body in addition to the time of the day are completely different, creating a new and divers hybrid of our habitat. The

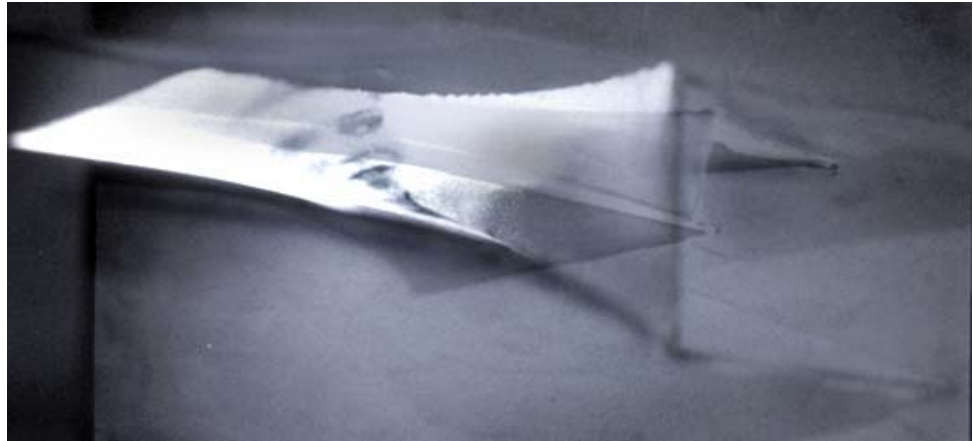
skin-like surface doubles as a *softbody*, forming what we call a *softidentity*. This installation can be done in various spaces such as an already existing construction



building where the scaffolding is readily present, a passageway, or as a new temporary facade of an existing building/urban space. The materials and construction tools for this fairly simple installation is vastly available in the market.

This installation can be interpreted as a stage for an interactive theatre, the remote imagery is combined with local scenery. In the second version of this setup, the scaffolding is smaller and more accessible, where the public can interact with the structure by passing through it and open/close some panels. In addition, their silhouettes and body outlines could cross the projected softbodies as they pass through the projection

line. The structure will promise to inhibit bodies of local identities, which are momentarily molded by images of remote identities in a soft and temporal form.



Material list

LCD projectors___ number of the projectors depends to the size of the installation.
Internet connection___needed for networking the remote images to the site.
Computers___needed to drive the projectors.
Scaffolding___can be constructed from wood or metal.
Stretched fabric___a see-through construction grade material.
Fasteners___to anchor the surface to the scaffolding structure.

Funding resources

San Francisco Art Commission.
National Banks and corporations.
NEH, National Endowments for Arts.

Time schedule

The construction is fairly simple and requires limited labor and resources. It is estimated that it requires approximately 5 days for its construction and one day for disassembly.

Softbodies/Softidentities: Transactions
An street scene installation

www.metrowave.co.uk/ISEA2000.htm

ISEA2000@metrowave.co.uk

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Amir Soltani, Nicola Probst